

**GREEK ISLAND**  
**By**  
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## **Dedication**

*To the brothers that inspire and represent fortitude, strength, and heroism. Also, to my husband for making me love the end of the world even more.*

*And as always, to F.*



# GREEK ISLAND







## CHAPTER ONE

In a hell bred world with little left, who would need an office. Apparently me. Perhaps it was my addiction to always being in charge.

My office wasn't much. It probably could be better. But it was my office and living space. I made it that way. Building a counter top against the wall for my computer and work things, instead of a desk allotted me the room for a bunk and a cabinet for my clothes. But it was cool. However, sometimes being that close to the boiler room made it unbearable.

I was lucky that the temperature rarely exceeded 78. A person of my size in that closed in of space wasn't comfortable. Often my wife would joke I sucked the oxygen out of a room. Christ, I wasn't that big, an inch or two over six foot. It was the bulk I carried. It made me perspire easily. In fact, as I sat there that day I had a line of sweat just behind my back hairline, and it wasn't from the temperature. I knew it was coming. It was time. I tapped the pencil in anticipation. I could hear his footsteps approaching. He was like clock work, every month, same date, same time.

Knock-knock-knock.

A single strand of my hair fell forward and I swiped my hand across the top of my head pulling it into the ponytail I wore. I didn't want to look frazzled. I swiveled my chair and called out, "Come in."

Marcus entered. Not fully. He kind of stood in the door frame, holding on to the door. He was thin man,

early thirties, and fortunate enough to have an olive complexion. He never looked sick, tired, or pale. "Hey, Captain, it's the 26<sup>th</sup>. What's the word?"

"Davidson hasn't even been in yet. I'll get a hold of him to do it."

"Then you'll come to the rec room and tell us?" he asked.

"As I always do."

Then Marcus did something he rarely did upon exit. He smiled ... widely, too. "I have a good feeling today, Captain," he said. "A really good feeling. This is the day."

"Last month ..."

"Yes, but it showed promise. Right?"

I nodded.

"And it's the 26<sup>th</sup>."

I chuckled. "You've said that."

"No, it's August 26<sup>th</sup>. Today's the day." He hit his fist against his chest. "I feel it. I really feel it."

I only nodded with a forced smile, and then Marcus closed the door.

I lifted the radio from my counter-desk top, and depressed the button. "Ray, come in, over."

"Yeah, Captain, I hear you." Ray's voice was husky and raspy, so unlike his physical appearance.

Static.

"It's the 26<sup>th</sup>, Ray, over."

"Yep, I know. I was waiting for the call."

Static.

"Did you take care of it? Over."

"Not yet. Was waiting for you to give the go ahead."

Static

“You got your go ahead. See me when you’ve got it. Out.”

For some reason I held on to the radio, tapping the top of it to my lips. It was the 26<sup>th</sup>. August 26<sup>th</sup>. Perhaps by some miracle, Marcus would be right. One would only hope. I doubted it though. I was too educated to believe that.

Of course, five years earlier, my educated self would never have believed I would be sitting in a little office next to a boiler room.

August 26<sup>th</sup>.

The anniversary.

## CHAPTER TWO

Five years before, it was just an out of control day. The heat was unbearable, humidity high. I was on a long, deserved leave from the Army. In fact, I planned it that way. I wanted to take time to work on and possibly finish my novel. Four weeks would be perfect.

I had always been a writer, prolific, too. Even when I was in combat, I pulled out my tablet and pen and wrote. Whatever I could. When I could. While other's slept, I sat, light in my mouth, etching my thoughts on paper.

But when I was moved to a command position in the recruiting, I never realized the difference in pressure between that in infantry.

Suddenly my days grew longer. I felt guilty for wanting to devote a few hours in the evening to penning my creative endeavors. I hated the thought of taking that time away from my family, when I already spent so much time away from them.

Although I would proclaim my writing never took a back burner position, it certainly became something I didn't do as often. An hour in the evening, sometimes more if my wife wanted to watch a movie or television program. A couple hours on Sunday, and lots of car writing.

I longed to dedicate some time to my passion.

When my wife, Jade, suggested lumping the leave to do so, I jumped at that. I looked forward to the writing leave and anticipated it with so much enthusiasm; one would have thought I was planning an exotic vacation.

In a sense I was. I was escaping, even if it was to the regions of my mind.

Of course, the novel I was writing wasn't paradise.

It dealt with nuclear war.

One of my favorite subjects to read and write about, I researched as if I didn't already have the knowledge. I loved to research.

It was during a simple search that I discovered it.

'Greenbrier opens its door to the public'

Holy cow, I had forgotten about that. Project Greek Island. A complex underground bunker big enough to house 1,000 people for six months in the event of a nuclear holocaust. The structure was built in the sixties, kept secret, and revealed in 1995.

I couldn't believe it.

Ecstatic, I broke the idea to Jade.

"A day trip?" she asked.

"Yes, it'll be fun. Me, you, the kids. Three hours it will take. What do you think?"

"Where are we going?"

"A bomb shelter."

At first she laughed, and then she tipped that smile. "You aren't joking."

I told her all about it. How it was built, when, all the facts. I uttered the words with child like enthusiasm.

She was silent, then her smile returned. "Hal, I can just see you there with your camera. Oh, my God, what a great inspirational tool. Let's do it. I can't wait."

Jade was perfect. So supportive. I grabbed her and kissed her and immediately went to tell the boys about our impending trip. They weren't quite as excited as Jade or

me. Then again, Brad and Jimmy were only twelve and fourteen.

But they presented well.

We were supposed to go on the eighteenth, but Jimmy ended up chipping a tooth while wrestling and we canceled. We tried again on the twentieth, but Jade had to work. The twenty-first didn't pan out. It was pushing the start of school and I grew fearful we would never make the trip. Finally, the 26<sup>th</sup> came, no major problems, the car was packed, and the boys were waiting outside. Where was Jade?

"Jade, come on, I want to make the ten o'clock tour," I said, walking into the living room.

She was perched before the television.

The newscaster was saying something like, "China has made its push ..."

I shut off the set. "Let's go." I grabbed her hand.

"Hal, this is important. I want to watch."

"So is this, sweetie." I laid my fingers to her cheek, speaking in my best persuasive voice. "We can listen to the news in the car if you want." I leaned into her and kissed her gently.

She shook her head. "No. No news. This is a family day."

That surprised me. Jade was such a news hound. But it made me happy. I grinned, clutched her hand tighter and we left the house.

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I would like to say the road trip was inconsequential.

Unfortunately, anyone with children, even teens and preteens can tell you no road trip is easy. Even the short ones. We had to stop for restroom breaks three times, because no one could ‘go’ at the same time. It was a three hour drive. The boys didn’t fight or argue, they brought their miniature pocket music players. Jade and I played this stupid game called ‘Yellow’ where you call out when you see a yellow car and keep score. There aren’t many yellow cars in West Virginia.

For her and I, it was a nice drive. No music. No radio. No bickering.

We pulled onto the drive that led to the hotel property. You could see the roof top of the resort, buried in the lush trees of the mountains.

“Say, Captain,” Brad leaned between the front two seats. I raised my eyes to the mirror and caught his reflection. He could have been me at that age. Pushing thirteen in a month. His hair rebelliously long to his shoulders and blonde, like mine was at that age. He may not have been my biological son, but he looked like me. So much so, people swore he was my offspring. I loved him no less than if he were, and I championed him at times because he reminded me of the youth I loved.

Following his typical, ‘Say, Captain’, I did my stock cringe. Though I found it funny that after four years he still called me ‘Captain’.

“How come we aren’t staying at this place?” he asked. “It looks cool.”

“It’s expensive,” I replied. “Too expensive.”

“What’s too expensive?”

“Over four hundred a night for the cheapest room,” I

replied.

“So.”

“So? Brad. That equals over eight hundred because we’d have to get two rooms.”

“Why do we need two rooms?”

After a sigh, I replied, “Because I like to take advantage of your mother.”

He groaned. I smiled. That did it, he sat back. No more questions. I watched him intermittently in the mirror, doing what I thought he’d do. Seek ‘grossed out’ support from his brother.

“Hey, Jim, did you hear what he said?” Brad nudged his bother.

Jimmy removed one of his earpieces. “What?”

“He said he wants to take advantage of our mother.”

“He can be so foul.”

I fluttered my eyes in my typical arrogant fashion as I looked to Jade and mouthed the word, ‘foul’ in question.

She laughed.

Typical. She found amusement at my expense.

We arrived a few minutes early for the tour, it was pushing it. After I paid the astronomical fee, I filled with excitement and readied my camera.

The intent of the facility constructed in 1958 was in the event of an all out national emergency. Where senators and leaders could go and run the government. 112,000 square feet, it was huge.. It had its own generator, meeting room, dorms, a cafeteria, hospital ... you name it. A virtual city underground. They even had a television room for broadcasting and for receiving news.



The site had been maintained by the government for thirty years before the need for it became a novelty. The hotel then took it over. Updating, refurbishing, rotating supplies.

They did it more so for the tours rather than the need. Even adding rooms named after the senators who were in charge during the construction.

I had heard about it all my life, read about it, but it was a reality and I was grateful for the chance to see it.

I was like a child in a chocolate factory. Even my family seemed enthused. Brad posed for a picture in one of the hospital beds. We all got a chuckle out of that until the tour guide scolded us for ‘touching’.

There were twenty-five of us on the guided tour, and it was supposed to last ninety minutes.

One third of the way through I had already taken close to a hundred shots.

Halfway through, alarms started sounding.

The tour guide, Madeline, who had been so assured in her guiding with her, ‘this way, follow me’ looked quizzically up to the flashing red lights.

Her phone rang and she lifted it.

She turned her back, gasped, and lowered her head.

Within seconds a security guard flew past us, his radio blasting, ‘three minutes to lock down’.

Buzz-Buzz-Buzz.

Flashing red lights.

“Hal?” Jade questioned with concern, grabbing my arm.

Smug, I tapped her hand and whispered. “It’s part of the tour. Watch, she’ll bring us to another room.”

Madeline ended the call. "If I can get you folks to follow me, please. This way."

"What's going on?" someone asked. "Is this part of the tour?"

"Just follow me." Then she turned and started walking.

We followed and I felt the sigh of relief from Jade.

"See?" I whispered. "They have to add some excitement for twenty-five dollars a pop. I'd do the same thing."

No sooner had I said that another security guard rushed by. That was the only thing that irritated me about the little 'show'. The guards seemed so reckless. Surely they were taking into account that people would be hurt.

We were ushered toward the news and media room. As we were doing so, I could see people running into the vault from the tunnel.

I paused.

"This way, sir," Madeline said.

"Hal?" Jade questioned.

I looked back. The door began to close. As if automatically. And three security guys fought diligently to keep it open.

To no avail.

It slammed, locked and a light went off above it. My guess to alert that the door was secure.

I thought, and maybe it was my imagination, but I thought I heard people pounding.

But I didn't get to stick around and find out.

We were brought into the news and media room.

Jade huddled close to me and I brought the boys into

our private group.

“Calm,” I instructed. “This has to be part of the tour. Like visiting a haunted house. Remember Brad when we went and they made it seem as if zombies had taken over.”

Brad nodded.

“Same thing.”

“Hal,” Jade said. “I don’t get that feeling. What happens if this isn’t a fake thing?”

I secured my arm around my wife and tugged her into me with security. “Then we couldn’t be in a better place.”

“Listen up,” Madeline called for attention. “Please. Please.” She held her hands out. “I’m ... I’m just as confused as you. This is Jenkins Brown. Director of the shelter and resort.”

Jenkins looked frazzled and that was putting it mildly. He ran his hand through his thinning hair as he took place in front of the wall of monitors.

He held up a hand to the emergence of voices, silencing them with a wave or two. “We’re going to be putting these on for as long as they stay,” he said. “I assure you this is not an act. This is real. More than myself, the television can say explain. I will say this. You are safe in here and secured. No one else can get in or out. Even though we are privately funded we are on automatic and linked with the government. The doors are secure and can’t even be manually opened for seventy-two hours. Now, I’ll just ...” Nervously he grabbed a remote and placed on the first television.

That was all I needed to see. It wasn't an act. It wasn't a set up. The CNN news broadcaster was trying to maintain their calm.

But how could they? How could they deliver the news, and tell people what to do? It was impossible Just as it was impossible for the next fifteen minutes in the shelter. Impossible to stay calm, to not hold your breath. To not be scared as hell as we watched the reports of attacks and the names of cities, that one by one, were disappearing and being destroyed by nuclear attack.

### CHAPTER THREE

The attacks began on the United States soil roughly around ten-thirty AM, but six PM, we were running on generator power. EMP pulse had knocked out electricity, even in our remote location.

There were forty-two of us in the shelter. Only several made it from the rooms. And I couldn't tell you how many waited outside the vault door. They had three days.

The television stopped playing, but the emergency broadcasting system came on every half our. Most of the time it was the same reports. Stay inside. Stay below, blah, blah, blah.

Jenkins may have been the director of the shelter, but he was of little help. For the most, people were panicking. They were upset, tired, hungry, and confused. Things began to get out of control with hysteria nearly right away. Only a select few kept their wits. People cried. They cried a lot. They had questions, with no one to give them answers. The select few who were in check, were the ones I called upon.

Ray and Marcus were two of them.

Ray was a maintenance man with the bunker. He knew it inside and out. No family to talk about so the circumstances of the war were the least of his worries. He barely seemed phased.

Twice he said to me, "I knew this was coming. I knew it. It had to."

Marcus was a school teacher. He taught troubled teens and had this remarkable ability to turn a hysterical

person into a calm one. I asked him to handle that aspect of everything while Ray and I worked out other details.

It was about an hour after the televisions stopped playing, around two PM, that the thereof us formed the team. It wasn't on purpose.

"I can't just sit here," I told Jade.

"What are you gonna do?" she asked. "You can't leave."

"No, we can't. So we might as well prepare for the stay. Why aren't they doing that?"

"Because it's still early."

"Sweetheart, some assimilation of organization will give these people some essence of structure and structure brings calm. We have to calm them down." I sighed out and walked toward the door of the media room.

"You can't leave," Jenkins called out from his chair, "I want everyone to stay put."

I nodded. "OK, then can you tell me when the plan goes into effect?"

"The plan?" he asked.

"Yes, in case of emergency plan. When does it go into effect? There has to be some sort of plan in the event that this happened. A plan of action."

Jenkins shook his head. "The only plan is to stay right here."

"In this room?" I asked.

He nodded.

"And for how long?"

"I don't know."

"OK, well I do know this. The effects of global nuclear war are going to keep us in this bunker for longer

than a few days, so we might as well start preparing for that.”

“We will.”

“When?”

“When I can sort this out. Think.”

“Well, Good God man, put the thinking cap on now. These forty some people can not eat, sleep, and stay in this room. It’s unhealthy, mentally and physically.”

“What do you expect me to do?” he raised his voice some.

“Organize.”

“I will. When I can think clearly. My wife... kids... family ... they were out there.”

“And all of us have family out there, too. You need to focus on now. These people need something to hope for and sitting in a hot sardine packed room isn’t hope.”

“I will in time. I just... I just can’t do it now.”

“I understand. So I will.” I turned and walked to the door.

“And do what!” he blasted.

“Organize, find out what we have. What we will need. Start a structured plan. We are survivors and we were fortunate enough to be here when this happened. We must start thinking outside the immediate survival box into long term. And they way to do that is to find out what all we have and start from there.”

Jenkins laughed an emotional laugh. “Well, good luck to you. This is a big place with a lot of stuff. Find me when you give up because you won’t know where to start.”

Ray stood up. “But I do. I’m the maintenance

engineer here. I know every square inch, where the plans are, the inventory. You name it. I'll help ya' out, Captain."

I cocked an eyebrow. He had called me Captain, later I found out Brad told him I was with the Army and Ray had been in the service his entire adult life as well.

"Thank you," I said. "Let's go start this."

"Can I help?" Marcus stood and walked to us. "I'd like to help."

"Yes," I laid a hand on his shoulder. "I saw you calming that woman, if you could try to keep it calm in here. Also, see if you can find some paper. I need everyone's names, ages, and are they here alone, with someone? And if you can discover their one skill that could be useful."

Marcus nodded his agreement.

"When we get back, we'll organize and get these people assigned to rooms and fed."

"Got it, Captain." Marcus nodded.

I made eye contact with Jade who sat with our boys. She all but facially conveyed to me, 'go on, do what you need to do'. I winked, smiled, and left with Ray to get things in motion.

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I had discovered there were two nurses in the midst. I sent them immediately to our medical section to organize and see what we had. Ray and I organized the inventory list and did a quick look through. There was enough food for a thousand people for six months. Surely,



we were good. The eighteen dormitories provided enough space and privacy, and I designated sections to people. There was a stock pile of clothes and I picked two individuals to start working on it first thing in the morning.

Everyone was concerned about the people in the tunnel way outside of the vault door. I was too. But there was nothing we could do about it.

A few people said they would leave when the door opened. I told them that was their choice, but they would not be allowed back in.

Hard. I know. But under the circumstances, I had to be.

Jade led two women in the cafeteria and by nine pm, the Emergency broadcasting had gone off the air and Jade had a meal.

She didn't make a big one. No one was really hungry, but enough was provided.

People did eat. But they exhausted. Emotionally wiped out.

The first day, that horrific day had come to an end.

We dimmed the lights in the bunker. Some people slept. Some didn't. I was one of those who couldn't sleep. I just couldn't. Too much had happened, and there was too much to do. We had to plan. We had to survive.

## CHAPTER FOUR

It was brought to my attention early on, actually, that first night that privacy was going to be an issue. Especially if we let more people into the shelter. In some of the dormitories the bunks lined up like they were on a submarine. A few dorms allowed quartered off sections of four bunks.

I thought for sure, privacy wasn't a problem until my wife brought up to me she had a hard time sleeping with a stranger in the same room. I had divided everyone up. Made sure there were plenty of space in between where people slept.

Still, she was unsure.

I informed her that after we let the others in, and were more sound in our numbers then cots could be arranged, blankets could be hung, walls of privacy could be built.

"Three hundred and forty rads," Ray informed me, that first evening, rather late. I was sitting in what would eventually become my office; Ray came in and joined me.

"That can't be right," I said.

"It is. I did the reading myself. I don't see or think there as any blast damage above, the shaft opened enough to allow the carriage to rise for readings. I'd know better if I went out there. Found the Geiger counter and bio suits."

"They'll come in handy," I said. "Three hundred."

He nodded.

Roentgens or rads were the amount of radiation in

the air. The human body could only tolerate 100 roentgens without showing any ill effects. A body could repair 100 hundred roentgens per hour.

Per hour, meant how many rads you were exposed to in one hour's time. At three hundred and forty. If one was out there for two hours they would have absorbed enough radiation to die in a few days to weeks.

One thousand in one dose was instant death.

It was a numbers game, but to no avail, the higher the dose the more chance you stood of dying. If you didn't die, you'd be awfully sick with long term effects.

Clearly, with the outside air being at three forty, it wasn't safe.

"How about in here?" I asked.

"Fine."

"What about outside the vault door?"

"I assume fine, as well. But up there." Ray pointed. "Death."

"And you don't think we were hit?"

Ray shook his head.

"What made you think to do a reading?"

"I was monitoring the security cameras and it scanned past the air test area. That's when I thought it. We're pretty remote, blast damage would be nil. We're catching the fall out cloud."

I stood and started to pace. "Theoretically it shouldn't be that high."

"Not with the rule of seven."

The rule of seven. One we were always taught. Every seven hours the radiation drops seventy percent of its last reading. For example say it is at 1,000 RADS per

hour, seven hours late it had to be at 300. Theoretically.

But we were looking at fourteen hours. It should have been in the double digits. It wasn't.

What happened? Why was that panning out?

"Maybe it's just lingering," Ray said. "We'll check tomorrow. We'll check every day."

"I am eventually going to want to go out there. Check, see what happened."

"I think everyone will. Maybe look for family."

I nodded.

"There's a M-93 Fox in the south tunnel."

"Why is there a reconnaissance vehicle there?" I asked.

"Well, from what I learned, there always was. They just updated constantly. A reconnaissance vehicle to go out and scout. That would work if the levels fall below a hundred. We'd be able to safely be out there for hours. Maybe make trips?"

"It's what it's designed for," I explained. "NBC. Nuclear Biological and Chemical testing unit. It has everything we need to do readings and take a look."

"Did you hear what I said about trips?"

"I don't think it's wise, if it's dangerous out there to take everyone out. But, setting up scouting trips for people may work."

"A little too early to be planning, though. Don't you think?" Ray asked. "I mean. It could only be part of the country. Part of the world. Hell, we don't even know who started it."

"This is all true."

"I mean, we could emerge to just a few hits," Ray

said.

“And we could go topside to find our selves face to face with Fu Man Chou, eating rice cakes and using chopsticks.”

“Ouch.” Ray winced. “Someone has a chip.”

“No, someone has a good idea who has these capabilities.”

“So you don’t think it’s targeted. Or random. Or localized.”

“No, I don’t.” I replied. “The way the news shut down. It’s everywhere.”

“Then it’s over up there.”

“Pretty much so, yes.” I sighed out. “Pretty much so.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

Jenkins had killed himself the second day, well almost the third. He had an issued gun from before the bunker closed down. A small pistol and he used it to blow out his brains.

It was just after 2 am when he did so. Clean up was tough, but disposing of his body was not. The bunker had a crematorium and Jenkins was our guinea pig try out.

No one really noticed. Not even the next day did anyone ask.

From the time rooms were assigned he locked himself away, spoke to no one. I don't think a soul knew.

The only reason I knew was because I heard the shot. Ray and I found the body.

I believe another reason for the lack of concern was because all of us were too thrilled about the door opening. We were counting down the minutes until the seventy-two hours mark.

Out of forty one remaining, three said they were leaving when the doors opened. The rest vowed to stay until it was safe and or we knew exactly what was going on up top.

They put their trust in me that I would do everything in my power to find out while keeping them safe and structured.

Ray took a reading just fifteen minutes before the door was schedule to open.

It was extraordinarily high.

One twenty-two.

Still unsafe.

It didn't make sense.

Clothes had been issued, but there weren't enough. Ray suggested the decontamination room to sterilize and decontaminate clothing brought in from the hotel.

I needed clothes. The ones in the shelter were too tight.

The radiation suit fit, and like Ray I was going to be one of the there who went into the hotel for supplies.

Surely we could be up there long, and neither could those in the shelter.

The door was going to open and over half the people in the shelter waited patiently as if some celebrity were going to be there.

Jade wasn't around. I wondered why.

Brad was; he went with me to seek her.

Ten minutes and counting.

"Where is your mother?" I asked.

"In the room. Cup washing."

The 'cup washing' comment made me pause. We had a shower timer. To conserve on water we had people who timed the showers. In order to not run out of water with a hundred people in the shelter, Ray and I deemed a two minute shower; every other day would keep us in supply for an infinite amount of time. That was based on a hundred people. Not forty. And on the off days you were given a 32 ounce cup of water to wash and brush your teeth.

Jade was on her cup day.

"Do you think there's a lot of people out there,

Captain?" Brad asked as we walked.

"I don't know."

"Bet me there's a hundred. Then you have to recalculate."

"I guess I will."

"There has to be a ton."

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

"Because the hotel was full. Packed to capacity. Four hundred beds. So four hundred people. Two hundred were there for some conference. Dude, they're like all outside waiting. How we gonna fit them in here."

"If there are four hundred people, we'll fit them. Don't worry."

We arrived at our dorm room, and I could hear the soft humming of Jade's voice echoing in the hollow room.

"Wait here," I instructed, and I walked in. The room as empty, the other family wasn't around and I suspected that was why Jade chose that moment to use the bathroom and wash up.

She was in the bathroom, the door ajar. I could hear the wash rag squeezing. Water dripping.

It had been since earlier in the morning, hours since I had seen her. I was so busy getting ready for the arriving survivors, I hadn't checked in.

It made me feel guilty. But I was secure that Jade understood.

I knocked once on the door and pushed it open.

I was speechless. My wife's long blond hair was now short and croppy.

"Jade?" I questioned. "You .... You've cut your hair?"



She nodded and smiled. "It's hot Hal. And with two minute showers every other day, long hair is not gonna cut it. It won't. Maybe once everything gets settled, water is better, and then I'll let it grow. You don't hate it do you?"

"Not at all. It's beautiful." I reached out and touched it.

"Felix did it. He's a barber you know."

"Really?"

She nodded.

"I like it."

"I do, too."

"Jade, the door is opening. Aren't you coming?"

"No, Hal," she said softly. "We don't know how many are out there. Plus, everyone else is hanging around. One more body is only gonna add to the confusion. You'll fill me in."

"I will."

"Plus, I want to use this time."

I reached out and touched her face. "I understand completely. I'll be back." I kissed her and then left her to her privacy. After rejoining Brad in the hall we went to the vault door.

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The hallways of the bunker were thick and wide. Even though food was stockpiled in boxes against the wall, there was still plenty enough room for people to stand by.

Ray had the Geiger counter in hand, and I stood by

the door.

What to expect?

Would there be many like Brad suggested or would there be few.

A buzzing sound caused me to jolt and my eyes stayed glued to the door.

It buzzed. Hissed. Then the light turned green.

“Go on, Captain,” Ray nodded. “Open it.”

The fifty ton door was a lot easier than I expected. I turned the wheel of the vault, and pushed. It slid.

I gasped.

So did Ray.

A few of the people who were close by jumped back when the odor pelted us like a chemical weapon.

My eyes watered from the stench I could not place.

Vomit. Urine. Feces. Old blood ... death.

I coughed out a gag, and huffed through my nostrils.

The sound of moans carried to us.

How many were there?

Fifty perhaps? It was hard to tell. They lay on the floor, on their sides, moaning, crying, and coughing.

Only a few, very few were healthy and attending.

“Give me a reading, Ray,” I requested.

The machine clicked. Ray shook his head “Not even hitting one, Captain. This area is safe.”

“Then how in God’s name?”

He shook his head.

“Is this a flu?”

Mary Agnes, an elderly woman, maybe seventy, stood up. “It’s radiation poisoning. And we need to get these people some comfort. Can you help?”

What choice did we have?

She was an Army nurse for many years, and I can't say I wasn't glad to meet the matter-of-fact, Mary Agnes Boyle. I was very glad.

At seventy-three she was feisty, strong, and healthy. And smart. Smart as a whip. She told of how the door closed on them. And they had two choices, stay put or go topside.

She herself was confident that they were in no immediate danger of a blast, but she was also pretty confident in the effects of radiation.

She suggested, hitting the hotel for food surplus and going into the hotel basement, blocking out windows.

There was a lot of mutiny and ignorance, she described. Chaos, fighting, disagreements.

"People, just didn't want to think that anything would happen," she told us. "That they were safe because they were deep in the woods. I tried to tell the fall out shows no prejudice on remote areas."

In conclusion of her story she told of mayhem, and being given only minimal amount of food. She put water in pans, and her and only five others went in the basement. They locked their doors.

There wasn't a person in the tunnel by the vault door when she left.

Having heard about the seventy-two hours mark, Mary Agnes and the five others emerged from the basement, took the west wing route to the main vault tunnel, and that was where they found the ill.

Her guess, they were exposed to too much for too

long and found solace in the tunnel, waiting for help.

## CHAPTER SIX

The Lawson family, which consisted of a grandmother, mother and three children had to be moved to Dorm room seven. They had the smallest of the dorm rooms and it was needed for the ill. All sixty beds.

The small twelve bed clinic wasn't going to cut it. We had fifty-three people with acute radiation sickness. Most of them said their symptoms had just started twenty-four hours earlier.

It was only going to get worse.

The room wreaked. It was by far the worst odor I have ever experienced. We were swimming in a pool of Vomit and diarrhea, involuntary release of bodily functions and I worried about the individuals who were aiding. Sure they wore protective clothing, but working with the discharge made me concerned. Radiation poisoning wasn't contagious, malaria, cholera they were.

Pretty soon the expulsion of gross liquid would be accompanied by the loss of hair and open wounds that would seep.

When Ray suggested we seal off the room, release a chemical in there, and let them all die, I have to admit, I thought about it.

Was that so horrible?

How could I be responsible for the lives of fifty people, when another fifty people threatened them inadvertently.

Just after we brought them in and organized them, there were several individuals who were expressing concern and, some anger about bringing them in.

“I don’t have a problem helping people, but this is a bit overboard,” one said.

Another one commented, “It’s one thing to let people into our shelter, another to let sick ones in.”

Marcus, the peacekeeper played devils advocate. “I can see their point,” he said. “And I see yours. Can’t we find away to appease everyone?”

In a picture perfect world Marcus no one would be upset.

Hating to say it, I too, wanted to dispose of the ill but it wasn’t the humane thing to do. So said Thirty-five people in our vote. Majority won. We cared for the sick.

They stayed. I assigned no one to the task, I accepted only volunteers.

But that was only fifty-some.

At their rate of deterioration they wouldn’t be around long anyhow.

But according to Brad and to Mary Agnes the hotel was full. Where did these people go?

This was a question on our minds. Would they come to our vault door? Had they left and gone out into the world.

We still needed supplies. Mostly clothes for everyone. We planned a trip topside to get items to decontaminate. After settling our newest temporary residents, Ray, Marcus, and I went to the decontamination room and grabbed the radiation suits.

It was time to go up.

I would be lying if I said I wasn’t excited at the prospect of seeing somewhat of a doomsday environment. After all, it fueled my passion in writing. And I was about

to see the true pictorial of my many fiction words.

\*\*\*

I suppose the main tunnel way still held the odor, even though we had sprayed it down. Stains of bloody vomit graced the concrete floor. We spoke through radios in our suits, the oxygen tanks full. We were like spacemen. Ray held the Geiger counter informing us of any increase each fifty feet we journeyed.

There really wasn't much of an increase in radiation levels until we neared the exit of the tunnel.

Basically signifying that the tunnels were a safe place against fall out.

When we emerged, we emerged outside instead of in the west wing. Ray wanted an accurate reading.

He got one.

One hundred twenty rads per hour and holding steady.

Even though we monitored the outside noises through the speaker in our suits, the feel was eerily quiet. Almost as if the song Eve of Destruction sang its melody mentally to us. Carrying in a dead breeze we could only see. Not hear. Strange.

The world was silent. Even in this remote sector of West Virginia, it was just too damned silent.

It looked as if a light dusting of snow had fallen on the grass and trees.

No blast damage, I didn't think there would be, but I was amazed at how far the beta particles had traveled.

Surely, Charleston was hit and hit bad.

But it wasn't just beta particles.

Snow?

It came down steadily and light. The skies were gray. It didn't look like August at all, more like January. The dead of winter.

"Thirty degrees," Ray called out. "It's pretty cold."

Marcus sputtered. "Nuclear winter."

"It has to be bad," I said. "For that much dirt and debris to fill the atmosphere and block out the sun?"

Ray shrugged. "You never know. Could be just the east coast. I say we make plans to take the Fox out soon."

"Will we be safe?" I asked.

"In there, yeah, that's what it's for. Charleston isn't too far. We'll wanna make note of gas stations not destroyed either."

"Good idea."

I looked to Marcus who was strangely quiet. And rightfully so. He was taking it all in.

We approached the front of the hotel. Cars were spewed about. Doors open. As if people just ran inside. Golf Carts parks and some on their sides.

I kept thinking, 'An ounce of knowledge'. If the folks at the hotel had once ounce of knowledge they would have known that they were ninety percent safe from blast damage. The only thing they had to worry about was radiation. Which, obviously, a lot of them didn't think about.

The lobby was empty. I don't know why I expected it not to be. The darkness took me back, after living in the light. A drew forth my flashlight.



Marcus said, "There's still a lot of cars in the parking lot. Where are all the people?"

"They obviously didn't drive. A lot probably went to Charleston on foot," I replied. "Poor bastards. We'll probably see them on the road."

"This way," Ray called out.

I looked. He had made it from me and Marcus across the lobby. He was waving his flashlight down a hall.

"What do you see?" I asked.

"Tables set up in the hall," he replied the looked to the plague on the wall. "The ball room."

Someone tried. Someone really did try to organize the group. Tables with snacks, water and food were set up on the hall. Papers were spewed about.

The sign indicated 'main ball room'. At the end of the hall were four sets of double doors.

"You want to take this Captain?" Ray asked.

I stepped forward and reached for the door.

I was grateful we couldn't smell anything, because I could only image what that room smelled like. If the tunnel was bad with fifty people, the ballroom had to be atrocious with the hundred plus that were in there.

They all gathered together. I assumed not all, because there were over four hundred registered with the hotel. But there were massive amounts of people.

I watched Marcus gag.

"Keep it in check," I ordered. "If you can't handle it, go into the hall."

Marcus shook his head. "I'm fine. Now."

I know why he gagged.

The faces. The bodies.

They huddled together on the floors with blankets. Body fluids, dried, laced their mouths. Their eyes were wide and mouths open. The skin black in sections, sores gracing them. Hair gone in splotches.

They were exposed big time to radiation, and a good culprit of its deliverance was the huge windows that weren't even blocked.

Their poisoning came in the form of light. An invisible killer that ravaged through them without their knowledge.

We walked through the bodies, stepping over them, shining their faces with our flashlights.

One at a time.

These were the ones who got sick fastest and didn't have the strength or the sense to go below when they started feeling the effects. They just stayed there, getting exposed, absorbing it all in.

"This one's alive!" Marcus called out.

"This one, too." Ray added from the other side of the room. "In fact ..." He shined his light about. "A lot of these people are alive. Barely moving but alive."

I jumped. I almost screamed by the shock of it. No sooner did Ray say that a hand shot up and grabbed my ankle. I looked down to the man whose mouth moved. A thick, yellow saliva was like a paste in and over his mouth. Thick strands moved with each movement of his lips. I freed my leg and stepped back.

"Captain," Marcus made his way over. "What do we do?"

Ray arrived. "I count at least twenty. There's

probably more.”

Again, Marcus asked. “What do we do?”

I thought for a moment, but not very long. “Let’s go.” I turned.

“Captain?” Marcus questioned. “Let’s go?”

“Let’s go.”

Ray didn’t question, he just followed me.

When we arrived at the door Marcus said, “Captain, you just want to go? Leave them here to die?”

I rested my hand on Marcus’ shoulder. “As cold as it sounds, yes. There’s nothing we can do for them. Nothing. We can’t chance bringing them into our shelter. We’ve already chanced enough bringing the others in.”

I saw it in his eyes. Marcus understood. With a closed mouth look, he nodded once and walked by me.

Waiting until both Marcus and Ray left, I was the last one in the ball room.

The standing buoy in a sea of vile death.

After taking one more look around, confirming my decision, I, too, walked out, and closed the door.

\*\*\*

The hotel resort was exquisite. A plush resort where those who wanted a pampered existence for a few days would go for a few days or a week.

We found no ‘well’ survivors. There were several people in their rooms that were just as bad as those in the ballroom.

Like those in the ballroom, we left them.

It was quick decision, but a tough one. One I would

have to deal with for the rest of my life. But life is why I made that decision. I had people down below that I was responsible for. Bringing in more ill would only endanger them. Plus, we just didn't have the manpower to administer the round the clock care needed.

Our oxygen tanks were running low and it was time to finish up. We had plenty of tanks for plenty of other trips, but for that moment we were there to gather clothing. We did.

We loaded up the Bellhop carts as if we were bag people. Heaps of clothing and suitcases balanced on the carts we each had. We located the South Tunnel entrance, which was outside the hotel, and made our way to the bunker.

That entrance afforded us the privacy to enter unknown. Only someone monitoring the video feed would know. And since Marcus and Ray were with me. No one was the wiser. We didn't want them to be. We didn't want to answer questions. We had to decontaminate everything including ourselves and wait another hour in a post decontamination room with the surplus.

Once Ray, using the Geiger counter, gave us a radiation free thumbs up, we went into the bunker.

That portion of the bunker was ghostly. Not many people ventured there. If we ever gathered more survivors, I suppose that would change.

But the hour wait in the post decontamination room was productive. Not only did we sort through the clothing, we talked and planned.

"Bout an hour and a half to Charleston and the same to Roanoke," Ray said. "Both reachable by the Fox."

“My God, Roanoke, I didn’t think of it. We had fall out from all ends,” I stated.

Marcus added. “And we’re not too far from Washington DC either. Can the fox make it there?”

I looked at Ray. My thoughts were that would be a four hour trip, so eight hours of mountain driving. Were we safe for that long? Could the Fox make the journey?

Ray rubbed his chin. “Probably. But do we want to use up our air tanks.”

“Won’t the Fox give us protection from radiation?” Marcus asked. “Didn’t you say that’s what they were designed for?”

Ray nodded. “Yeah, but they haven’t been tested in the real thing. Nuclear war, I mean.”

“Then let’s test it,” Marcus suggested.

Ray turned to me.

I agreed. “That’s not a bad idea. We should test how much radiation gets into the Fox.”

“OK,” Ray nodded. “I’ll do a test tomorrow. Take out the Fox, do a reading from inside. If it gives us a good bit of protection, even allowing say fewer than four rads in, we’re good for the trip to DC. We’ll suit up once we get there.”

As sadistic as it sounded, the idea of visiting Washington DC annihilated by nuclear weapons was enticing. The writer of apocalyptic novels in me was curious and wanted to see it.

The Ray said, “We still don’t know if DC was hit. Heck, we know nearby was hit. We know this.”

“Come on, Ray,” I argued. “You know DC was one of them.”

“But they never mentioned it,” Marcus said. “On the news. They listed cities, DC wasn’t one of them. I have the list.”

I looked at Marcus quickly. “You made a list of the cities hit?”

He nodded. “Yep, as they named them right before the TV went out. I suppose that was when Los Angeles got hit. Cause you remember they were broadcasting from New York until that, well, was no longer an option.”

I snapped my finger. “We should review that list.”

“You know,” Ray spoke up. “We have that communications room. Hell, we should fire it up in a few days. I figure one week post attack, people are gonna be getting their wits back and scurrying for radios. We may find survivors. People who need help. We’re in there watching for trouble on the video feeds, might as well fire up those radios. Raise the Antenna. Use the Fox for a good cause as well.”

“Take shifts,” Marcus suggested. “Make calls out and listen say every hour on the hour.”

It was a remarkably good idea and good thinking on their parts. We continued sorting the clothes while etching a few plans in stone. Those were plans for things we’d implement a few days down the road. We still had to set up a inventory of items we picked up, store them, distribute some. But first thing was first; when we emerged we had to deal with the reality of the newest members of our shelter. That was a gruesome reality and task none of us wanted to face.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Margot Ridder sent an immediate bolt of jealousy into Jade. I couldn't even mention Margot's name after our initial conversation regarding her. I suppose that was my fault, I praised Margot's knowledge of medicine and dedication to nursing. Margot had volunteered to set up and maintain the clinic.

There's was nothing especially attractive about Margot. OK, so maybe to other there was. When Jade asked if I thought she was attractive, maybe I should have responded, "If you like the Julia Robert's from Pretty Woman type."

My tiny wife didn't have the shapely Hollywood body, and was always self conscious, I don't know why.

She said since there weren't as many men, and the women outnumbered us two to one, that the competition would be fierce to have a man.

I was positive that Marcus and Ray would love to hear that. Neither was married.

I was.

But, as insecurity goes, my spoken dedication to my wife didn't make a dent.

Onward and away from this.

I brought this up as some sort of explanation for the immediate guilt I felt for going to speak to Margot.

It was a professional, medical visit, yet, I felt racked with guilt, as if I were doing something wrong. I shucked it during the conversation, but felt it right afterward.

Women.

Sorry.

Our bunker departure, tour, collection, and everything else took us way for four hours. By the time we had returned and I checked in with Margot at the clinic, she and the others had the patients organized.

“Severe radiation sickness,” Margot explained, “They’re already bleeding internally. We’re not longer dealing with bodily functions we’re dealing with straight blood. I don’t know how they are living this long.”

“It’s only been a few days.”

“And there exposure had to be astronomical. I don’t know what to do, Captain.”

“What do you mean?”

She sighed out. “There’s really no treatment that we can give them. We can only make them comfortable. They are in amazing pain and the sickness is overwhelming. But our supplies of comfort, such as pain killers and morphine are limited. Do we ...” she looked over shoulder and whispered. “Do we want to waste it?”

I nodded. “I see. No. No we don’t want to waste it. Just do what you can.”

“Which isn’t much.”

“Then that’s all you can do.” I reached out and gave a pat to her arm. A pat and squeeze of assurance. “But do not ... do not wear yourself down for this. Understood.”

“Yes. Captain?” After hesitation, she motioned her head and drew me into the hall. “Have you fired up the crematorium furnace yet?”

“No, we haven’t.”

“Then can I suggest you do? We’ll need to utilize it.”

“Ray and I will get on that right away.”



“Thank you. We have several I feel are going to go. It’s a good thing they received a high dose instead of a medium dose.”

That made me curious. “Why do you say that?”

“A medium dose, 400 to 600 rads, would be deadly. But ... not at first. They’d get sick initially, get well, then bam, in this stage after a few weeks.”

“Seriously?”

She nodded.

I ran my hand down my face. “It could have been worse.”

“We wouldn’t have seen it coming. In all cases of radiation, mild, medium, high, the symptoms start out the same. In the high doses they progressively get worse. In the low and medium dose they have reprieve. But, to distinguish low from medium takes weeks.”

“I very glad you are informed.”

“Me, too.” She breathed out. “I have to get back.”

“Let me know if you need anything. I want to check with my family then start distribution of clothing.”

“How did it go in the resort?” she asked.

I just shook my head.

“I figured. Talk to you soon, Captain.”

“Good luck.”

She went back in the ward and I turned. To my surprise Jade was at the end of the hall.

Great. Swell.

\*\*\*

How did I know it was coming? Years of being with her?

"I can't believe you go back and went straight to see her." Jade snarled.

I took her aside, out of the hall, to my office. It was more private.

"I didn't go directly to see *her*. I went to see how it was going with our sick."

"Which she was in charge of."

"Actually, no, Mary Agnes is."

"Then why weren't you talking to Mary Agnes?"

I tried to contain my frustration. "Because she was busy attending to some one."

Jade gave that look. That 'yeah, I'm sure' look.

I hated that.

But it wasn't the time and place.

"You should have found me first, Hal," Jade said. "I needed to know you were back and all right."

"But I really needed to check on the sick."

"What the fuck, Hal, they're gonna die anyhow. We aren't. Me and the boys."

"That was cold."

"Sorry." She lowered her head. "I'm just stressed."

"I know." I ran my hand over her new cropped hair.

"I really like this. It's ..." I brought my face closer. "Sexy."

Jade smiled.

That was it. I wanted that.

"I'm sorry," I told her. "You're right. I should have come to you first. Check on you and let you know I was all right. I'm just wrapped up in ..."

“In taking charge?” Jade interrupted.

“May I finish my own sentences?”

“Go on.” She folded her arms.

I cleared my throat. “In taking charge. But ...” I lifted a finger. “I look at it more as leading.”

She closed her eyes.

“Jade there is so much to do. We’re only just touching the tip of the iceberg in organization. We have to think long term and we are. We have to get everyone in that mode. We have to survive. Plus, we want to surveillance as well.”

“Why does it have to be you? Why?” she asked.

“It doesn’t. But sweetheart, can you think of another person down here, you’d want it to be. You’d trust with the responsibility.”

She drew silent, closed her eyes and stepped into me. “No,” she said. “I can’t. You’re right.”

Taking Jade into my arms, I buried my lips close to her ear. “I didn’t choose this. It chose me.”

Jade pulled back.

“What?” I asked.

“You are so full of shit.”

“What?” I chuckled at her ‘sad to sarcastic’ switch. “I didn’t.”

“Please, Hal.” She moved back into my chest. “You’re so Slagel, you didn’t just choose it, you made sure no one else had a choice.” She chuckled as she snuggled.

I chuckled too. But more so as a response. She said my last name. Slagel. And with that, she bombarded me with thoughts of my family. I pulled her closer and shut

my eyes. I hadn't truly, deeply thought about them until that moment. And when I did, it was the first time I can honestly say, since the bombs fell, that I felt fear for them.

\*\*\*

"Goddamn it, Hal, pay attention," My father had said to me.

I could still hear his crass voice in my mind, the way he yelled at me. I found solace in my office after Jade and I parted, and I needed some time alone.

Time to reflect and think about my family.

Possibly even mourn.

No. No I couldn't think that way.

That one particular day was over one of our family meetings. However, we didn't have normal family meetings like everyone else. We had survivor meetings.

"Goddamn it, Hal, I mean it."

My father in all his sadistic, war is inevitable; glory trained us to be survivors.

"Father," I told him. "Really, what are the chances of us ever facing a nuclear war?"

"More than you realize. Count on it, Hal, in your lifetime."

I was thirteen. I chuckled.

He was right.

He talked us through every scenario imaginable. We had a contingency plan to meet up.

The contingency.

In the event of an all out national emergency, where civilization as we knew it had come to an end, we were

supposed to meet up. When it was safe, we'd meet.

Good God, it dawned on me the place we were supposed to meet in the event of nuclear war.

West Virginia. Not far from where I was.

But my family was smart. There was no way any of us would venture out while the rads per hour were high. I would have to make it to that cabin when the rads dropped.

My father lived in a small town outside of Washington DC. Chances were his home was no longer there. But last I spoke to my father only a few days before the attack, he was heading north to visit my brother's wife and children.

Yes. My brother's family. They lived in a small town in Connecticut.

But my brother was in Indiana, stationed there.

My other two were across the country.

What a time for us to be separated.

We were a close family. My father had a series of wives after my mother passed. None of them stayed too long. Pretty much so he raised us four boys all on his own and did a good job.

In a way we all were apocalyptically insane. We all geared ourselves to it, thought about it, planned, joked. Hey, I wrote about it.

Robbie my youngest brother had extensive training in NBC's. How I wish he were with us. He'd know everything about the Fox.

Jimmy, ironically, was a nuclear technician on a sub. Navy. We won't talk much about that.

My brother Frank bought ten copies of my first self-

published book because one of the post-apocalyptic characters was fashioned after him.

I chuckled and smiled when I thought of Frank. He was the perfect entity and man for a nuclear war ravaged world. He was the proverbial mad max. Sick, demented, and good at what he did.

I could see him walking in ruins. Taking charge. Saving lives.

But were they alive? Were any of them alive?

There was a chance those questions would remain unanswered, possibly forever.

And I wasn't quite sure I could live peacefully with that.

Never knowing what happened to my father and brothers.

One day I would. I'd make certain I would.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

It was about nine days post attack, or PA as we started to call it, that the last person died of radiation sickness.

Most of the fifty some succumbed six days into it. It took us two days to burn them, and while we did that, more died.

It was never ending. Non stopping. Body after body we burned.

One person from that entire tunnel crew survived the illness. They were making progress, miraculously. A forty something man who had yet to give his name? Actually, he was just starting to talk. He had lost all of his hair, his sores were just starting to heal, and he still vomited. There was not much left of his frail body. But he was indeed showing signs of improvement.

But that didn't help the viral infection that spread throughout the shelter. Just as the fifty started to die, we started to get ill. Thank God it wasn't a stomach virus; I don't believe any of us could take any more shit. No pun intended.

By the Twelve days PA, I don't think there was a person who didn't catch the bug. It seeped through the ventilation system. It started with sneezing, and runny nose, and before long the entire shelter sounded like a tuberculosis factory. Hacking coughs, sometimes rattling. Only a few were spared the harsh symptoms.

At first we all feared some sort of plague had descended upon us, or a biological weapon was used. But by Sixteen PA, and people started to get better. We put

our fears to rest.

Mary Agnes called it a stress cold. Told us that the same thing happened after the September 11 attacks and then again on the 1010 attacks. The country was stressed, and the forty percent of the nation came down with cold an flu symptoms, ejected the country into a full fledged flu season a month early.

I just believed that stress worsened the cold. Adjustment to new air, diesel fumes, and so forth caused it.

I felt horrible, but there was little I could do.

I can say that was the most soup consumed in al the time I the shelter.

“40 rads,” Ray said. “Holding steady now for days.”

“Not a fluctuation?” I asked. “One or two rads?”

“Nope.” He shook his head. “It has been steadily decreasing. Even though the decrease isn’t much. This is the first time it stayed steady.”

“Forty rads?”

“Except after sun down. It goes to 32 RADS.”

“Jesus Christ. This is wrong. It seems so wrong.”

“Tell me about it. Theoretically we should be able to walk outside for at least half a day at this point.”

“It’s been two and a half weeks. Seventeen days. This isn’t hopeful.”

“No, it’s not,” Ray said.

“And you’re sure we’ll be safe taking the fox out.”

“Absolutely,” Ray replied. “When radiation was at a hundred, the readout in the fox was ten rads per hour. Even at that, we can go out for several hours in our suits. I



checked this morning. Needle barely moves. We'll be good."

"Fuel?"

"Full tank gets us there and back to Roanoke, and another trip to Charleston can be another day."

"DC?" I asked.

"We can make it there and back. Five hundred mile range plus it has a reserve tank."

"When do you want to make the trips?" I asked.

"Well, things have settled. We're all settled. Sick have died. I'm pretty bored now since we stopped burning bodies. Let's take a trip a day. You up for it Captain?"

"Yes. Yes. Absolutely. Let's start making preparations. We need to see what has happened."

"Maybe we'll get lucky and find out it's just some lingering nuclear cloud."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what if we just have a lingering cloud. No air flow. We might go to Charleston and find the levels lower. Who knows. Only going out there will tell."

We were in the cafeteria having our conversation, watching the two women prepare the meals and waiting for their usage so we could mark it on the ration sheets.

It was a quiet afternoon. Most people were in the Television room watching Titanic. One of the DVD's we brought from topside. I heard footsteps. Running. At first I thought it was my boys again, but then Marcus blasted into the room.

"Captain." He called to me out of breath.

"Marcus, what's wrong?" I stood up. "Why are you running?"

"I was monitoring the video feed." He caught his breath. "I saw them approaching outside."

"Who?"

"Looks like a family. A group. Maybe ten. There are some kids."

"Where are they now?" I asked.

"Making their way down the tunnel."

Curiously, I turned to Ray. "How the hell?"

"Two way," Ray replied. "Either they knew about this place a head of time. Or ...." He scratched his head. "We have been burning a lot of bodies Captain."

My eyes widened. "Smoke signals."

"If you send them, they will come." Ray smiled.

"Hmm." I gave him a disgruntled look at his attempt of bad movie humor. But according to Marcus, humor or not, whatever the reason, there was a group of people headed our way. I secured my weapon—just in case, and then made my way to the main vault door with Marcus and Ray.

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We still had a few minutes until they arrived at the secured Vault door. I no longer worried about someone stealing our food surplus, because we had moved the rows and stacks of food to the other tunnel and sealed that from anyone coming in from the outside.

I passed Jimmy, my oldest, in the hall as we made our way from the cafeteria. He was counting medical supplies. He had been quiet; of course, he was always the quiet one. Telling me the night before he had never read

so many books as he did the past couple weeks.

Books. Jimmy. What was with the name? My own brother Jimmy was an avid reader.

“What’s up, Captain?” he smiled as I approached.

“Staying busy, I see,” I told him.

He nodded.

“You’re not wanting to watch the movie with everyone else.”

He crinkled his face and shook his head.

“Could you go there now for me, please?” I laid my hand on his back. “We have some people approaching the main vault door and I’d like to keep everyone away, until we check them out. Especially your mother.” I started to walk away.

“Mom’s not there.”

I stopped. “Where is she?”

“She said she wasn’t feeling well again.”

I let out a breath. I’d have to check on her later. “Jim, can you go find Mary Agnes and have her check on your mother?”

“Sure thing.” He put down the supplies. “Let me know about the people.”

I winked. “Sure thing.”

Brad was the enthusiast and was waiting by the vault door when I arrived.

“Heard people are coming,” he said.

“How did you hear that?” I asked.

Brad pointed to Marcus. “Heard him tell you. I followed him when he was running.”

I grumbled. “Brad, until we check them out, can you

stay back.”

“Aw, come on, can’t I watch.”

“Watch form a distance,” I instructed and waited until he stepped back.

Not like we expected them to knock or anything, and since the monitoring room was close by, Brad went an checked the feed, calling out upon their arrival at the door.

Ray moved to the side, holding his revolver, and I slid open the door.

A gentleman, about fifty, all bundled up led the pack of people that, too, were bundled from head to toe, very little skin exposed.

My eyes shifted to the children. There four were standing and one was in his mother’s arms.

The leader, Stan, saw my weapon and raised his hands. “We don’t come in any harm. He said. You can check us. All I have is this rifle. I’ll pull it forward and set it down.”

I nodded.

Eyes connected with mine, Stan pulled forth the rifle and laid in on the floor. “We’ve been hunkered down in my house about ten miles from here,” he said. “I was hitting the well for fresh water when I saw the smoke.”

Immediately upon hearing that I looked at Ray.

Stan continued. “We’ve been rationing what was down there. Four of us aren’t feeling well. Not real sick. Don’t think we got hit too bad with radiation. No sores, see.” He lifted his sleeve. But we’re hungry and sure would appreciate you letting us in here.”

“How did you know about this place?” I asked.

“Everyone round here know about this place. We figured folks would have made it down here after the attack. I just couldn’t take a chance with my family and neighbors, trudging through the fallout. I couldn’t.”

“The radiation is still high.”

He nodded. “I know that. Made a home made counter with a bucket. Learned it from my grandfather. Got a reading of fifty. Figured. Fifty units in an hour still ain’t much. Didn’t take us an hour to get here.”

He paused then continued. “This place is supposed to be a haven. A place for survivors. We’re survivors. Are you gonna let us in? If not the adults, can you take the kids?”

There wasn’t any hesitation on what I was going to do. Obviously Stan was intelligent when it came to warfare and survival. He took care of his pack. Ensured they ate and were protected.

I gave him an absolutely, and that they were welcomed.

Ray took them back down the tunnel to the other entrance and to decontamination. While they waited there I prepped for their stay and made room.

The arrival of these people filled me with excitement. Though some were reported ill, overall they were well.

Alive and well.

Other than us, there were survivors out there. We just had to find them.

In the form of a two farmers, three women and five children a very clear cut sign arrived.

Live prevails.

## CHAPTER NINE

It didn't take long to get the new people into decontamination. While they were there, with their belongings, we found a place to put them. I was grateful that we planned ahead for incoming survivors.

Stan and his wife had no children. We put them in dorm four with other couples without kids. The other eight people were two families.

I got a little concerned letting them in. Again, I was approached by two of our residents about this. I had to explain my position. We are a survival shelter. It isn't about locking the world out; it's about keeping the world going. If we have and we can help, then that's what we should do.

I hope that as time goes on, the greenbrier originals will be more open to new survivors.

While the Stan crew was in decontamination, I stopped in to check on Jade. She was sleeping. I left a note telling her I was there, kissed her, and went back to my duties.

In the hall I passed Mary Agnes who was going to examine her.

"I'm sure it's just the bug remaining that's all," Mary Agnes assured me and went to our dorm room.

Ray and I were making space in Dorm Four when Marcus came up with an idea. It was something that could actually keep people busy.

I was all ears, and willing to go along with it if it would work.

"Wood," Marcus said. "Remember when we were

down on the basement of the hotel they had all sorts of storage rooms. Those walls were separated by wood. What if we made it a project, go tear down those walls? They should be pretty rad free. Tear down the walls, bring the wood and nails in here and start sectioning off the dorms. We may lose bed space, but I don't think we'll ever have 1800 people in here."

"Such as what?" I asked.

"Huh?" Marcus scratched his head.

Ray explained. "I think the captain means what kind of sectioning. Some of the dorm rooms already have section walls between each bunk."

"Yeah, I know and we could take them down and widen the sectioning. People have done that, but that's not just what I mean. Hell, each dorm room is huge. We could section off and make this place livable and leave room for expansion. Even when the radiation falls, for safety sake, me may stay here."

I immediately grabbed my note book. I began to do the math, calculating, and drawing. They watched me as if I were mad.

"How about we plan for roughly six hundred. If we need more room, we'll make adjustments," I explained. "There are eighteen dorm rooms. All of them the same size. What if we section each dorm room off by six? Each dorm is 60 feet by eighteen." I pushed forward my notepad for them to see my initial sketch and numbers. "Creating a three foot walk way or hall way would leave a room length of approximately fifteen feet. In each dorm room we could do, four eight foot wide sections that sleep four, one twelve foot wide that's sleeps six, and twelve

foot section that sleep eight for bigger families. That's 30 people per dorm as opposed to a hundred, which works out to about 500 people."

Ray looked at the paper. "Sounds complicated. I'd just six room, ten foot wide, sleep six."

"Or that," I said. "I was just thinking privacy for the couples."

Ray chuckled. "They aren't many."

"Ok. True."

With enthusiasm Marcus said, "So it's a plan. Can I organize it? I really think getting people together to do this, to build, would give them a purpose and a focus. Complete one dorm room, move people in, then start on the next."

Ray suggested, "We could put a table in each room as well. There are a ton in the cafeteria."

"Little apartments." I snickered. "Why not. Let's start this." I turned my head to the clearing of a throat to see Mary Agnes standing there. "Yes, Mary."

"Captain, if you have a moment. I need to speak to you."

Having the knowledge that she was just visiting Jade, my stomach fluttered with worry. I immediately excused myself and left the cafeteria with Mary Agnes.

\*\*\*

Mary Agnes' question of, 'Is there somewhere private we can talk,' sent more concern though me.

We went into my little office and I closed the door.

"This is very difficult to present you with," said



Mary Agnes.

My thoughts were, 'oh God my wife is very ill'

"Why?" I asked. "Is it painful?"

"Could be for someone like you."

I titled my head, and refrained from asking a question like, 'Painful for me? Is it a sexually transmitted disease?'

"Captain, you're a very strong man. Very proud. By me telling you this two things are going to occur. One you'll not completely understand it, and two, you'll question yourself."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Your wife is depressed."

"Oh." I fluttered my lips and flung out my hand. "Is that all?"

"Is that all?"

"Yes. I laid my hand on my chest. "I was worried. I thought it was something worse. Everyone is depressed. Good Go, the world ended."

"You're depressed?"

"I get depressed, yes."

"Hmm."

"What is this 'hmm'?"

"I didn't think you'd get it. She is depressed. It is affecting not only her mental being but her physical being as well. This is why she won't get out of bed. She doesn't have the energy. She has feelings of despair, less self worth, unimportance ..."

"And you got all this from a five minute examination?"

"I'm giving you text book and standard symptoms."

“No what you’re giving me is a diagnosis based on a five minute exam.”

Mary Agnes huffed.

“What? What?” I lifted my hands. “You huff at me, why?”

“You’re goddamn hard headed. I didn’t need anymore than five minutes. When I physically examined her and found nothing wrong, and when Jade said to me, “I don’t feel like it”, I knew. The way she stared, laid there.”

“She’s ill.”

“Yes, she is. But not physically ill.”

“She’ll get over it.”

“Captain, are you that insensitive or just ignorant of depression. It has set in.”

“What makes her depression different than what everyone else has experienced?”

“She’s not bouncing back. It’ll keep getting her further and further down.”

“If she’s so depressed, then why hasn’t she come to me?” I asked.

“A .... You’re hard headed and strong. You see depression as a sign of weakness. Plus, Captain, you are running about all the time. She sees you at night. By then she is ready to sleep. When is the last time you spoke to her about her family?”

My head lifted.

“Her parents, siblings. This is a loss, she needs to talk about. Her life. Her job. Everything is gone. Some people cope. Some do not. Your wife is not coping.”

I sighed out and ran my hand over my mouth. “So

what do I do?"

"I don't know."

"Good God, woman, you come in here and tell me my wife is depressed. Give me shit. Insult me and then tell me I don't know."

"Look." She pointed at me. "Don't get smart with m, you hear? I'm the last person you want to go one on one with. Respect."

"Sorry."

"Now ..." She took a breath. "You know your wife better than anyone. Since we have no medication that will help. You'll need to focus on what you think will bring her out of it. What positive there are for her to look at."

I chuckled. "We're in a bomb shelter during a nuclear holocaust. I can't think of a positive."

"Then try. Get the boys together and try. Because if you don't. She'll sink until you can't get her back. She won't just snap out of it. She needs therapy. You have to be that therapy." Mary Agnes stood. "Think about what you will do. Put a plan into action like you do with everything else."

I nodded. "I will. Thank you."

"I'll check on her and I'll try."

"Thank you."

Mary Agnes opened the door and paused. "And for God's sake be sensitive. Don't be a prick."

I believe my mouth was still agape when she walked out. Was I insulted? Or did she speak the truth. No, it wasn't truth. How could I be anything less than sensitive when it came to the woman I loved most on this earth.

\*\*\*

The journey to our little dorm section took my on a journey of confusion. I went from leaving my office confident that I could snap Jade out of it to questioning if I were sensitive enough.

It seemed as if everyone I passed knew what I was en route to do. Each staring at me as I walked by.

Sensitive.

Sensitive.

I was positive I could do it.

I just didn't know where to begin.

I planned in my mind what I would do. How I would approach, I would sit on the bed, lay my hand on her hip, kiss her gently, tell Jade I loved her and that I was there for her.

I would explain than I was concerned about her mental well being. OK, I would put it a bit more tactfully than that. Encouraging her to talk, open up, and I would attempt to make her laugh. Somehow.

Yes. I could do it.

Then I walked in the dorm room.

Jade was lying on the bunk as I figured. On her side, facing the wall.

I took a deep breath. Ready to step to her, I paused.

"Jade," I called to her.

No response.

"Jade, I know you're not sleeping."

"I don't feel like talking, Hal."

I opened my mouth to speak to make my way to my

wife, and suddenly I noticed it wasn't there.

Where was it?

I Searched. Yet, I didn't feel any compassion.

What was wrong with me? It was there, it had to be.

Where?

"Jade."

"Go away, Hal," she said.

There was something wrong with her. I guess Mary Agnes was right when she said she didn't need more than five minutes. The just as I searched my inner being for the vat of compassion I boasted, I found something else.

Irritation.

Suddenly, I wasn't concerned for her, I was irritated. She lay in a bed, soaking in self pity of loss, when she of all people should be rejoicing? Her children were alive. The two precious gifts she loved most in the world were alive and well and she was wallowing.

"What's wrong with you, Jade?" I asked, and then cringed. Perhaps that wasn't the right phrasing.

"You wouldn't understand."

"Probably not."

Silence.

I sighed out. "Jade. Jade."

After calling her three times, I decided to call it quite. Risking saying something I'd regret in response to my irritation was not something I wanted to do.

One more time.

"Jade."

She only breathed heavily.

Pissed and thinking 'pathetic', I turned and left.

At that moment, the way I was feeling, there was

nothing I could do.

\*\*\*

Beef stew was on the dinner menu and Stan's wife, Luella, made biscuits. Their warm aroma carried through out the complex. I was amazed. Most meals that we had, were already prepared. Soup. Beef stew. With the exception of rice and beans, most people didn't feel like preparing the meal. They merely wanted to warm it.

We now had fifty-two mouths to feed.

Luella was a blessing. She asked to see me once they were situated. Stating she really didn't have any nursing duty, or teaching skills, she had other skills to offer our shelter that may come in handy.

I didn't ask to see her or Stan. I would have spoken to them eventually after they were situated, But both of them figured, since we were putting a survival plan in action, we would want to know how they could contribute.

Stan was a farmer. Thank God. But he also had a passion for building and rebuilding old cars. Little did I know that skill would come in handy later.

Luella, she claimed she was the best seamstress in White Sulphur Springs West Virginia, and then she added, "I know the best jobs are always taken, but I know how to run a kitchen."

Best jobs? Was she insinuating that the cafeteria position was a 'best job'; I had to pull teeth to get volunteers. When she noticed that there as a cafeteria, she asked if that was how we operated. Does everyone eat

together?

I told her ‘yes’, and she said, if she was needed she would love to work in the cafeteria.

Handy in a kitchen was an understatement. Stan told me she worked for twenty-three years as a high school cafeteria supervisor at a small private school. Preparing meals for two hundred students, menu planning, and getting it down on limited resources and a shoestring budget.

Fifty people was nothing for her. She’d need some hands for serving and possibly shifts. But she suggested that in order to run the food supply efficiently, menu planning was needed. She could utilize the supplies.

I told her we were rationing. Not a problem.

“There’s ways to fill a belly,” she said.

The three women who were working the cafeteria were glad that Luella wanted the responsibility. And handed it over with glee.

They had already opened the two large cans of Beef Stew. A heaping spoonful a person worked, and was plenty.

Luella pointed out to me that there was such a surplus. She was positive she could stretch it out longer than I estimated. Especially since there was plenty of wheat, barley, and rice.

She commenced to making biscuits with the stew. Said she would have served a desert, but didn’t want to over cook.

She baked over 150 biscuits and there wasn’t a single one left. A spoon of beef stew over a biscuit, people were in heaven.

I was fortunate enough to have a biscuit before dinner. I savored it and thanked her.

After the meal I was playing scrabble with Jimmy and Brad in the cafeteria.

“So we’re gonna have more privacy?” Jimmy asked. “I’d like to hang out o a bunk without feeling like someone is watching me.”

“Soon, I told him, soon. You can work with the construction.”

“I’d like that,” Jimmy said.

“Say, Captain,” Brad interjected “You think that’ll snap mom out of it?”

I shoo my head. “I don’t know. I don’t even know why your mother is like this. But she is. I guess we have to be sensitive and understanding.”

“I can be sensitive,” Brad said. “I know you can be.”

I smiled. “I try.”

The, as I placed down my impressive word of ‘turmoil’ my head cocked at the call of my name.

“Captain!”

It blasted unexpectedly. I would have never expected Mary Agnes to have it in her. I stood.

“You are unbelievable!” she barked as she stormed to the table.

“What? What did I do?”

She folded her arms, and tapped her feet.

I looked to my boys. “I believe that is a female way of conveying she needs a moment.”

Again, arms folded. Tap-tap-tap.

“Give us a minute boys,” I requested.

Reluctantly they agreed asking if we’d finish our



game. I told them yes, wanting to add that they stood a better chance of beating me after Mary Agnes was done. But I held back. She didn't look as if in the mood for sarcasm.

"Please. Sit." I held out my hand.

"Oh, I don't need to sit."

"Ok. What's up?"

"Pathetic," she said calmly.

"Who me."

"No, your wife?" she asked.

"Mary Agnes. I realize dealing with Jade in this state is frustrating. I know. I was there. But for you to call her pathetic."

"Why not. You did."

"I did not."

"You did, too."

"No. I thought it."

"Well the she reads your thoughts, because she told me right before you left you called her pathetic."

"Fuck."

"Language."

"Sorry." I ran my hand over my mouth. "I didn't mean for that to slip out."

"Well, then you have some making up to do. Why would you even think that?"

I sat down.

"Captain?" she scolded my name.

"She's just lying there. Unresponsive. I don't get it."

"What is there not to get? She is depressed about everything?"

"Yet," I held up a finger. "She has everything to be

happy about. Her children. Her children are alive.”

“But her family is ...”

“Oh, bull. She barely communicated with her family. This wouldn’t cause this. Not at all.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I know her best. There’s something else.”

Mary Agnes scoffed a laugh. “You don’t think nuclear war would cause it.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t think. But my gut is telling me she is shutting down for a reason that just isn’t valid.”

“It doesn’t matter what you think is valid or not.”

“True.”

She huffed again at me. “It doesn’t matter at all the reason. She needs help. She needs talked and talked through this. She needs understanding. In a group this small, this is not good for morale.”

“She needs to just get out of that bed and focus.”

“It’s easy for you to say. That’s you. It’s not her. Captain, are you giving up?”

“No. Don’t be ridiculous. I’ll keep trying. Me and the boys will try again. I’ll think of something.”

“You better,” she said. “That ‘pathetic’ comment was a set back. As someone who has taken on the medical responsibility of this camp, I want this handled. As her husband, not as leader, I want this addressed. Now.” She turned.

I couldn’t help it. I started to chuckle at her giving me an order.

Wait. She gave me an order.

“Mary Agnes. When you were in the Army Nurses

Corps, what was your rank?"

"You don't want to know."

"Yes, I do."

"Thirty-three years, Captain. I was hands on, in there, no matter what my rank. I was with my nurses through it all. I worked many combat zones, and probably seen more combat casualties than you. I did so until I retired ... a general."

My mouth dropped open. "A general?"

"Fix it." She turned and walked away.

And in instinctual response, probably from years of training, I stood and replied. "Yes ma'am."

\*\*\*

The boys and I discussed the depression situation over our game. I was glad to hear they, too, were having a hard time believing their mother was being like this.

When I first met Jade, she was this amazingly strong independent woman who was holding down two jobs and raising her boys on her own. I couldn't believe the odds she had faced.

She loved when we got married and she was afforded the opportunity to quit working. She worked a part time job, two days a week just to keep busy.

Her parents lived in Omaha, and she had moved to Pittsburgh with her first husband. Her mother and father were not warm and fuzzy people, bible thumpers, and Jade, kept her distance. She claimed years of biblical oppression and abuse.

Her sister, well, she hadn't spoken to her sister in ten

years. That was when she found out her sister had an affair with her husband.

Her brother Bobby was in prison.

Jade for the better of her life, kept her distance. Especially since her parents blamed her for her sister and husband's fling.

Jade was strong. I didn't get it.

The boys and I went down her list of fiends. She didn't have many. Not one person that could cause the reaction.

"What about our dog?" Brad asked.

This flipped a switch in me. The dog. Although I wasn't one of those people who became massively depressed over animals, Jade loved that dog. She went everywhere with it. Dressed it up. Adored it. Yes. The dog.

My heart actually even sank for a moment thinking of 'Old Faithful', Harry, our mutt of a pet, in the house when it was blown apart.

That was it. That could be it. The dog.

If indeed the dog was the reason for Jade's depression, then we would have a foundation to work on, to discuss.

We needed something.

I sent the boys on the first mission to talk to their mother, and to also find out what her state was with me. I obviously wasn't going to go visit her if she was going to blast me. Her blasting me would only make me angry and then we were back to square one.

While they did that, I had a construction meeting with Marcus. We planned out that getting the wood and

supplies would take precedence over visiting Charleston. The construction of privacy rooms would focus our camp, while we went out.

After our meeting and after getting the ‘she’s cool with you Captain’ from the boys, I headed off to see Jade.

\*\*\*

Let me tell you a bit about Ray. One of the most predictable men I ever met in my life, yet he was still able to surprise me. Considering that I hadn’t known him too long, I would venture to guess that he would continue to occasionally pull something out of character.

“I heard the old broad was a general,” Ray’s voice carried to me down the hall.

Just as I stopped walking, and just as I was about to think, ‘did he just spew forth that loudly’, Mary Agnes’ retorted from the library, “Yes she was NCO.”

I cringed.

Ray rolled his eyes and offered the ‘bird’ to an unknowing and unseeing Mary Agnes. He held something behind his back, peeked in the library, and then picked up the speed to me.

“What do you have?” I asked.

“I know you’re on your way to see your wife. Thought I may give you some assistance.” He brought forth a bottle of wine.

“Merlot.” I took it. “Where did you get this?”

“Basement of the resort. Whole shit load of booze buried pretty damned deep.” He winked.

“You suited up and went out.”

“Nah.” He waved out his hand. “I just went out. At 32 Rads, my exposure was minimum. I decontaminated. I’m good.”

“You did this for me?”

“Sure,” Ray said. “And then I picked up a bottle of bourbon for me.”

“Bourbon?” Mary Agnes seemingly leapt from the library. “Did I hear someone say bourbon?”

Ray twitched his head and whispered, “At least we know her hearing aid don’t need adjusted.”

Hands behind her back, Mary Agnes strutted to us as if she were up to something.

“Ma’am,” I said.

“Cut the shit with the Ma’am.”

“It’s respectful.”

“OK, fine.” She shrugged. “What you got there?” she asked.

Ray breathed out. “Isn’t really any of your business, now is it?”

She crinkled her face at Ray. “I just want to know because I sure as shit would love a drink. And .... I sure as shit deserve a drink with all the .... Shit, pardon the pun; I’d dealt with in his camp.”

“She does,” I said.

“I’ll share,” Ray replied. “You wanna go down a few shots toots?” “Toots?” she questioned.

“Ray,” I spoke like a kindergarten teacher scolding. “A little respect.”

“What? You want me to call her Ma’am?” Ray asked. “I’ll call her Mrs. Whatever she is but I won’t ...”

he stopped when he caught me glance. "Fine. Ma'am."

"Toots is fine, too." Mary Agnes smiled. "I know it sounds strange, but my husband called me toots all the time."

Ray asked. "Did he pass in the recent war or the civil war?"

I withheld my chuckle.

Mary Agnes opened her mouth and released a mock airy laugh. "Asshole," she called him. "Actually, my husband died about ten years ago. Never remarried."

"Really?" he asked. "That surprises me."

Why was Ray sarcastic with her? And mostly, why was she enjoying it.

Mary Agnes chuckled. "Always thought you reminded me of my husband, Ray. Now I know with that picking on me sarcasm. I like you. Let's go have them shots."

"You ... you aren't gonna make any unwanted sexual advances on me, are you?" Ray questioned.

Mary Agnes just laughed. "No. Why would I? You may remind me of my husband, but I'm betting you ain't hung like my husband was."

I coughed, almost dropped my merlot.

"I'm ..." I pointed back. "Gonna open this and go talk to Jade."

Mary Agnes said, "Alcohol is a depressant. You think that's a good idea?"

"Oh, my God." I blurted. "Can I do anything right? My wife used to get giddy on wine. This is perfect."

"In all seriousness, Captain," Mary Agnes said. "I know I came down on you. It's only because I want you

to do the right thing. I'm thinking of the camp, you know. But I also can sympathize with you. I probably wouldn't be patient either if she was my wife."

"Thank you," I said.

Both her and Ray wished me luck, walked away to go get sloshed, I suppose and I returned on my journey to see Jade.

\*\*\*

The boys had adhered to my wishes and afforded Jade and I some privacy. When I arrived back at the dorm, Jade was sitting up on the bunk. Her back propped against the pillows, knees close to her chest, arms around her legs, and chin on her knees.

I sat on the bunk and offered her a glass of wine. "Here. Merlot. Courtesy of Ray."

She was reluctant, but Jade took it. At first she sipped, and then she gulped. I freshened her glass.

"Talk to me."

She shook her head.

"Please?"

"Hal, I can't."

"Is it ... is it because you don't think I'm sensitive enough?"

"No." She shook her head. "It's because .... It's because ...."

"I won't understand?"

She glanced at me.

"How about I talk?" I asked. "I have been giving it a lot of thought. A lot. I know what has happened to this



world is tough. I know this. I'm trying with everything I am to understand where this depression and extreme sadness is coming from. I'm correct, aren't I, by assuming it is not your family?"

"It's not my family."

"I know what it is." I stared at my wine.

"You do."

"Yeah, I believe I do. And I believe I can be mature about it." There that sounded good. Knowing me, she probably thought I'd make fun of her about being so upset about the dog.

"You can?" she asked.

"Absolutely. With all that happened. I believe I can understand anything. My God, how you must have loved him."

Jade burst into tears.

"That's it then, isn't it?"

Jade nodded.

"Oh, Jade." I ran my hand down her face. "I'm better than that. Please understand I am better than to abandon you when you are so down. When you grieve so deeply. I'm here. No matter what the reason."

"Oh, Hal. Thank you." She rested her hand against mine.

I smiled gently. "I know you spent a lot of time with him."

"I did."

I took a drink of my wine, set it down, and faced her. "Talk to me. Talk to me about it."

"I love him. I love him so much."

"I know. I can see that. I didn't think it was possible."

But I can see that now. The turmoil you must be going through.”

“I am. And I was shamed, too. Embarrassed to let you know I was so upset and sad about this.”

“No need to be embarrassed.”

“I’d thought you’d be so angry at me for being so weak.”

“Do I look angry?” I gave a reassuring look. I was proud of myself. Sensitive. Understanding and keeping a straight face.

“No, and this helps. It does.”

“So go on. Talk.”

“I didn’t realize how much he meant to me until I thought about him. The attack. Him being alone when it happened. Was he afraid? Was he brave? Did he think of me?”

“I’m sure he did. And Jade, I’m sure he never felt anything.”

She nodded. “That doesn’t help though. He was there for me. When I was sad, he made me laugh.”

“Yes, I know.” I pictured her playing with our Harry, smiling. Yes. He did make her smile. “I would wonder why you were so happy sometimes when I came home from work.”

“It was him. When you weren’t there, I talked to him. I talked to him a lot.”

“Of course.” I smiled. I remember how many times she vented on the dog, “You bitched to him, too.”

“More than you realize. And he listened. He was good to me. I need you to know that.”

“Of course.”

“It was years together.”

“I know.”

“And Hal, I need you to know. It was more than just sex.”

“Of ....” My mouth froze mid sentence. Sex? My eyebrows cocked. The playing, the smiles with the dog, the talking to the dog.

“It was. Yes, we were intimate ...”

“Oh my God.” My hand shot to my mouth. Had I been away from home so much? Had I been out of the loop so far that I drive my wife to obscure, bestiality behavior? “Jade. Forgive me. But .... When did you start having sex with our dog?”

“With our dog?”

“Yes.”

“Hal! I never had sex with the dog. That’s sick.”

“Well, you ...” I stood and held out my hand. “You just said you had...”

Stop.

My entire being and heart sunk to the pits of my soul.

My revelation became Jade’s revelation.

“You were talking about the dog?” she asked.

“And you weren’t.”

“No.”

I swallowed. I swallowed the huge lump in my throat. After which, I reached for the bottle of wine and took a long drink. I wiped the back of my hand over my mouth, handed the bottle to Jade, and turned.

“Hal! Hal! Stop.”

“Jade. No. you stop.” I halted her. “I can’t be

sensitive about this. I can't be understanding about this. You la ... you were .... You la..." I couldn't even bring myself to say it. I choked on the word. "You ...another man?"

She lowered her head.

"Maybe someone else should be listening to you. I'm sorry. I can't. "I shook my head. "I can't."

\*\*\*

The walk to find Ray was an interesting one. I went not only down the hall, but through a series of emotions and not a single one was predominant.

My wife had not only cheated, she had an affair, and not only that, she was in love with another man.

I was angry at her and at myself. Sad because I had failed. Hurt because she had crushed me. I felt vindictive and spiteful. I wanted to tell her, who the hell cares if you are depressed. Curl up and die. I would have liked to have said that in my bitterness, but I couldn't. As much as those words wanted to spew forth from my mouth, I didn't want her to die. The boys loved their mother.

The boys. Would I tell them, allow them find out. I didn't know. I examined my life with Jade and the five years we had been together. Could I have prevented it? Did I cause it? I was bombarded with questions and thoughts en route to see fray and the route wasn't that long. So imagine how my mind went.

Despite the fact it was late, I just wanted to tear into something. Killing the man who had been sleeping with my wife was not an option. He was more than likely dead

and that delivered a sense of no resolution.

Tear into something.

Construction.

The walls and wood in the basement of the resort.

I offered that suggestion to Ray and he offered me a drink. I took it, then another.

I was pretty glad I did, because perhaps that helped me handle Mary Agnes, who laughed when I told them what had happened. I poured my heart out. Told every detail and she laughed.

“Woman,” I said.

Ray snickered. “Have another drink.”

I did then turned to Mary Agnes. “Why are you laughing at the fact that my wife cheated on me.”

She shook her head. “I’m not laughing about your wife cheating Captain. I’m laughing at the fact that you thought you were talking about the family dog.”

I closed my eyes.

“She said she loved him, you understood,” Mary Agnes said. “She laughed with him. Talk to him. You understood. And when she mentioned sex ...”

At that moment Ray, couldn’t help it, he burst into laughter.

“God.” I closed my eyes tighter. “It’s not funny.”

“Not the affair,” Ray said. “But the dog thought. I can only imagine what was going through your mind when she said it wasn’t the sex.”

“I thought of a picture I saw on the net with a Dalmatian have sex with this woman. That’s what I thought of. Only I pictured Harry. Our Mutt, Benji, terrier mix dog in ...” He cringed. “How could I be so stupid?”

“About what?” Mary Agnes asked. “The affair or about thinking it was the dog.”

“Both,” I replied.

“You trusted your wife. You love her. Why would you even think it was another man when you had it in your mindset it was the dog. I would have thought the same thing.”

“Thank you.” I said then waited. Both her and Ray were in a mood to be sarcastic, and I expected some sort of remark. But she didn’t. She sipped her drink/

“Anyhow ...” She gasped out. “Did you just leave when she told you?”

“Yes. I couldn’t be compassionate. I couldn’t listen. I ... I didn’t care at that moment how depressed she was. Now, blast me again.”

“I’ll do no such thing,” Mary Agnes said. “You’re human. And I’m ...going to go see her.” She set down her drink. “Ray will finish that talk later.”

Ray nodded and raised his hand.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“Like I said, to see Jade,” Mary Agnes. “Right now, she started to open up. Poured her heart out. Is in a massive state of depression. You don’t want or need to be there. Nor do you want or deserves to have to listen to it.”

“You feel sorry for her,” I stated.

“No, not really,” Mary Agnes said nonchalantly.

“Then why are you going?”

“I’m jus that damn nosey.” She walked to the door. “I want to know. Want me to give you the les painful cliff notes when I’m done?”

“No. No. Absolutely, not. No.” I shook my head.

But the second she was almost gone, I called out. "Mary Agnes?"

She turned around.

"Yeah. I do. Just spare me sorted details."

She gave me a reassuring smile. "Good. You'll need some resolution in this, captain. And I need some excitement other than death. See you in a bit. And for God's sake don't kill the bourbon."

When she walked out, I drew silent, cupping my hands around my drink. Ray didn't say anything, poured me some more, and just sat there as a sense of support. Support I appreciated.

\*\*\*

A whistle?

Mary Agnes Whistled when I asked her about things and the talk with Jade.

Whistled.

Ray had returned for the evening's lightly sloshed on Bourbon. I handled my alcohol well, and could consume a ridiculous amount before feeling the effects. I guess that's a family trait.

With a message of. 'Tell M.A. finish it if she wants, I'll get more.' Ray stumbled back to his dorm. A partitioned off section, he made in the boiler room.

"How long you been together?" Mary Agnes asked.

"Five years. Married four."

Again, she whistled.

"What! What is with the whistled?"

"She's been with Greg three."

I winced and cringed, facially showed my disgust in a dramatic way. "I don't want to know his name."

"Sorry."

"Three years?"

Mary Agnes nodded. "Met him at the Annual Training conference."

My eyes widened. "She met him at ATC? Is he a soldier?"

"I believe so yes. He was actually moving out soon."

Again, even wider my eyes went. "Greg Fields?"

"She didn't give the last name."

"Oh, it has to be. I made him Station Commander last year. I introduced them. God, I was the cause. I had a domestic dispute to handle at ATC and put Greg in charge of my wife."

Mary Agnes snapped her finger. "That's the one. They danced all night."

I rubbed my eyes. "Son of a bitch."

"That's the scoop. Very close."

"Wait a second. How did he have time? He was a station commander and recruiter."

"Phone calls. Day visits while the kids were in school. You went away on training a bit." She cocked an eyebrow.

"I'd kill him if I didn't think he was already dead."

"This was too far gone. If we hadn't been nuked, you would have."

"What do you mean?"

"This fella was suppose to ship to another Battalion in three months."

"Phoenix."



“Guess what?”

“She was leaving.”

Mary Agnes nodded.

“Then I would have had him court martialled for adultery.”

“Plausible deniability, Captain. You and I know that. She leaves you. A month or so later she’s involved. You can’t prove anything if those two deny being together. Unless they brought in a third.”

I cringed.

“I’m sorry. I don’t think there’s any getting your wife back emotionally now.”

“You think this depression will sink her?” I asked.

“No, No, she’ll snap out of it. I mean of rekindling. She’s committed.”

“I thought she was committed to me. Did the boys know?”

Mary Agnes shook her head. “No. They didn’t.”

“This is painful,” I said then exhaled.

Mary Agnes reached over and laid her hand over mine. “You know, this is painful. But, you Captain, have a lot to keep you busy, to keep your mind occupied, and ... you have proof that things can and are worse than learning about an affair.”

She was right. But it still didn’t ease the pain. I did have a good bit on my plate and I wasn’t giving up on that. The best thing I could do was stay busy and stay focused. But I would allow my self one night. One night of diving into alcohol and sulking over my marital failures. Then after my one night. I wouldn’t look back. I’d move forward.

## CHAPTER TEN

I had a dream the night after I found out about the affair. An alcohol tainted dream. I dreamt that Jade told me it was all a joke. Ha-ha.

To my dismay, not only did I wake up with the world's worst hangover, I woke up feeling worse about the reality of it.

I thought, I really thought Jade would try to speak to me. After all, she was the one who erred in our marriage. She cheated. She strayed. She fell in love with another man. Damn it, where and when was I the bad guy.

She ignored me as if she were pissed.

At first, I was like, fuck it. Who cares? But the more she avoided me, the angrier I grew.

Then it dawned on me, perhaps she was just ashamed. So I approached her, big mistake. I figured it had been three days.

She said, "How dare you talk to me now. You abandoned me."

I .... I abandoned her? At that moment I realized she was as nuts as she was putting off that she was.

I went about my day.

Luella was a bright spot. She made homemade noodles and a gravy from soup base. It was delicious and a hearty lunch that filled us all through out the day.

Marcus went topside and into the resort to do a supply count and steal another bottle of bourbon. We decided that the three of us would be in charge of getting the supplies and controlling the alcohol. Yes that was greedy, I know. But no one else seemed to care about it.

I called a camp meeting. The bunker was originally designed so that congress would and could operate in the event of a nation tragedy, so of course there was a room for congress. A theater style setting and I summoned everyone there just after lunch.

I knew it was coming. The question. Peter asked it. I answered.

“We’re at 30 rads per hour.”

“I’m not good at this radiation stuff,” Peter said. “When can we go out? When can we get air? We’ve been here like three weeks.”

I realized at that moment that people were just listening to they had to do and didn’t even know the whys of it all. Agreeing without the knowledge. So I informed everyone that Mary Agnes was going to take over after I was finished and educate everyone on radiation.

She was a feisty broad and she flipped me off with a smile.

Questions were being tossed out to me about a long term survival plan and I informed them of some of the ideas we had. I told of how we were putting together a definite plan of action and would present it to the camp or discussion and vote.

It seemed to go over well.

I then informed them of the project. That was so well received, even I was surprised. They anxiously waited.

A project to keep them busy and it was for them.

Ray presented the lay out for everyone to see. The specs, if you must. We would start with Dorm one. Those who lived in Dorm One would move to Dorm two during

construction. Since Dorm one would then house six families. When Dorm one was done, we would move those from one and two into one, and move on to construction of Dorm two.

This gave them a sense of focus and privacy was more important to them than they originally let on. I told them the project would begin in a few days after we had gotten the first round of supplies. The supplies we would start getting that day, while Dorm one residents moved out and the section walls were dismantled.

The partitions would come in handy.

I excused myself and turned the meeting over to Mary Agnes.

Ray did a radiation readout of the tunnel and it was clear. There was a door off the north tunnel that led to the basement of the resort. It was sealed closed, and we spent over two hours opening it. We had never tried it before only because we never had that much stuff to bring into the compound.

Immediately, Ray put a lock on the door, and we had easy access to the supplies and booze. The booze we'd hide in the compound, the wood, nails and so forth would be stacked in the tunnels.

The tearing down walls, removing nails, collecting supplies was exhilarating and therapeutic.

Getting my hands dirty, working, sweating, doing those things did wonders for my self esteem and mental state. I even chuckled at the jokes Ray threw out there once and a while.

Five hours later we had enough supplies to start on Dorm one or at least planning it the next day.

We laid out an agenda. Which residents would tear down the partition walls, which would carry them to the tunnels, who would carry new supplies in, and who would erect them?

Marcus had a list of men that had those qualifications and skill to build. Stan was one of them. How did I figure that?

I was grateful that upon return we didn't have to decontaminate. Very grateful.

We had just entered into the main portion of the bunker when I heard the frantic call of my name.

"Captain!"

I looked up the hall to see Jimmy running toward me.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

Jimmy caught his breath. "She's gone."

"Who?" I asked.

"Mom," he said panicked. "Mom is gone."

\*\*\*

I don't need to tell you that my mind spun during that first initial conversation with Jimmy. "What ... what do you mean gone?" I asked, fearful.

"Left. Gone. No where to be seen."

I took a deep breath. He had to be mistaken. He said he checked all over, and I assured him, that Jade wouldn't leave.

"Did she leave a note?" I asked.

"No. Not that I found." He said.

"Did she say goodbye?"

Jimmy shook his head.

“Then she didn’t go anywhere,” I stated. “She wouldn’t leave without saying goodbye. I am positive. She loves you boys too much.”

“Captain, she hasn’t been herself lately. She’s not in the right frame of mind.”

“I know.” I took Jimmy into my arms and embraced him. The I panicked myself. “Where’s Brad?”

“Looking about.”

I sighed in relief.

Aiding Jimmy in getting focus, I reiterated that the bunker was two stories high and very large. In fact, we organized a group search of the compound immediately. Everybody was willing to help.

We searched up and down. I would be lying if I said I wasn’t worried she had taken her own life and the boys would discover her.

I kept telling them and myself. She wandered and fell asleep.

I actually started to believe that, so did they, until Marcus came and found me in the lower floor boiler room.

“Captain.” He called me name with a cracked voice.

“What’s up, Marcus.”

He saw I was with Brad and waved me to the hall.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Stop ... stop the search,” he said.

“Why?”

After a deep breath, Marcus shifted his eyes.

“What?” I beckoned. “Spit it out.”

“I just reviewed the video feeds,” Marcus said. “I

went back. She ... she left. She left the bunker, the compound, the tunnel. She hasn't returned."

"Dear God." My insides churned. "How long?"

"It's gonna be difficult Captain," Marcus said. "Rads are at 30. The human body starts feeling effects at a 100 ..."

"When?" I questioned harder.

Another hesitation. "Four hours ago."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

I knew right away.

But somehow my head would not succumb to what my gut and heart were screaming. And they screamed it right away.

Jade was not coming back.

I knew I was trying to ease the boys and convince myself more than them. I kept telling them that she would come back. She would come back.

Alas, after five days. No Jade.

Immediately after Marcus revealed she had left the bunker, we gathered up a search of the resort. That was logical. Each person took a half hour shift and it took us a good part of a day to check every room in there.

It was gruesome for some, and a dirty task.

Jade was not at the resort.

Where did she go? How did she get that far?

Marcus and I took the Fox and scoured the areas. Nothing.

It wasn't until she was gone almost five days when I realized Ray had been going out and looking for her on his own. He didn't tell me this; Mary Agnes did, when she questioned why he was showing signs of radiation sickness.

She estimated that he was exposed to roughly 250 rads. Not enough to kill him, but enough to make him sick.

Ray had all the classic symptoms down to the fact his hair was falling out.

Sores, as well.



He was out of commission for a spell.

Ray was a mess.

And so were the boys.

They were devastated and rightfully so.

I didn't know what to say, do, or offer them. All I could do was keep them busy. Brad started angry at his mother, disrespecting her name, infuriated at what she did.

Jimmy defended her and this made the boys fight.

I just wanted it all to stop. All of it.

Finally they found some focus on the project.

But it didn't stop the looming feeling of loss and despair they carried over Jade.

What did feel?

I was a plethora of everything I should be and didn't want to be. There was so much I wrestled with. I didn't have resolve. No resolution, I blamed myself, despite the fact that I knew better. I thought about every detail constantly. Finally, I convinced myself through a self written poem. That clicked and flipped a switch. Writing. I focused on that and not on Jade. I couldn't dwell on it. Life held different circumstances and all I could do was concentrate on the boys, on our camp, and move on.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

“Why do I have to play secretary?” Marcus asked, pulling up a chair to the side of Ray’s bed.

“Because I said so, that’s why,” I told him.

“Where do I start?”

“At the top,” I instructed. “Put the date. 29PA.”

“Holy fuck,” Marcus wisped out. “It’s been a month.”

“Unfortunately,” I said.

“And I’m taking meeting minutes.”

“I want to type them up and post them so people know.”

Marcus grumbled.

“Shh,” I hushed then nodded my head to a point.

Ray entered the room, with Mary Agnes at his side.

She had taken a liking to Ray. Not in a romantic way, but a buddy way, and I really think Ray enjoyed it. She was almost motherly to him.

“All clean and ready for visitors,” Mary Agnes said and pulled down his bed covers. “Hope in.”

Ray rolled his eyes. But felt it was more for our benefit. He had just, the day before, made a remarkable turn and was finally feeling better.

He scooted into bed. “Don’t know why I need to be in this bed. I said I feel fine.”

Mary Agnes shook her head. “Well, pacify me., give me one or two more days then you can run about with the Captain and his Corporal.” She tucked him in. “I allowed for this meeting.”

“You allowed.” Ray scoffed. “I’m behind. I was on the leadership team and now I’m behind.”

“Actually,” Marcus interjected. “We have been waiting on you.”

“Great. Now I’ve made you behind.”

Marcus laughed. “Behind on what? We’re in a bomb shelter.”

“I know,” Ray said. “I need to take a reading. How long has it been?”

“Few hours,” Marcus replied. “I took one.”

“You went out?” Ray asked.

“No. I sued the ventilation readout.”

Ray fluttered his lips. “Horse shit. The readings aren’t consistent. You have to go out. It’s been nearly a week; I’d say we’re about 20 some. Won’t know until I o out.” He needed his last word looking up at Mary Agnes.

“Like you need any more radiation,” Mary Agnes snapped.

I cleared my throat to break the sarcastic tension and possibly move on to business. “I think you look great. The sores are healing and the bald look works for you.”

Ray grumbled. “Yeah, well, I don’t think the bald look works everywhere. I lost my chest hair and my ball hair.”

“You lost your pubic hair?” I asked.

Ray nodded.

“I didn’t think you lost pubic hair.”

Mary Agnes added, “Hair is hair. Pubic or not. It’s gonna fall out.”

“Should this be part of the meeting minutes?” Marcus asked.

“Ha, ha, ha.” I shook my head. “Anyhow. Progress is going great on the Dorms. We’ve moved to dorm room two.”

“Good, glad to hear. Have you given any thought to long term survival plan?”

I nodded. “Stan said we are going to have to replenish the land. Scrape top soil and replant. But that’ll have to be after we leave. When that’ll be I don’t know. He did give some encouraging news. A few farms about a mile away have well water.”

Ray drew in a bright look. “Well water. We just need to clear the pump for a few minutes and we should hit the good stuff. We better keep using it to keep the pumps in order.”

“I figured it would take a half an hour to get the water. Suits could be used.” I added.

Marcus raised his pencil in question. “People have been asking me about going out. And, to be honest, I can’t blame them. They’ve been trapped down here. You guys constantly talk about the body being able to recover from radiation if it’s fewer than 100 rads in a few weeks. What about we log people leaving and going, time them, estimate their exposure and stop them when they get too close. Let them recover.” He faced Mary Agnes. “Will that work?”

She rubbed her chin. “They might. It would certainly help spirits.”

I agreed and told Marcus to mark that down. “I have an idea and I don’t know how well this will work.”

They all gave me the ‘go ahead’ look.

“We have the artificial sun room. It has a concrete

floor, right? What's under the concrete floor? Dirt. What if we break up the floor, get to the dirt and try our hardest to plant in that room. I don't know that it would work, but the artificial ultra violet rays in there can't hurt. We can try."

Ray pointed a finger. "Now that's good planning ahead. Have you spoken to Stan?"

I shook my head. "I wanted to approach you with it first."

Ray exhaled. "I don't know about farming, Stan and his wife seem to be the jacks of all trades. I'd talk to him. If he thinks it might work, he may know what plants and vegetables we stand a good chance with."

I nodded. "Luella said there is plenty of flour and barley on hand. More than we'll use in years. If we could get something that could go with that we'd be good."

"Gonna have a meeting?" Ray asked. "I think the people need a meeting to hear this."

"Even just a little?" I asked.

Ray nodded.

After a exhale I spoke, "So we'll gather up, tell about the plan to go outside. Tell about the well water. If Stan gives the OK on farming in the sun room, we'll get volunteers for that."

"What about long term?" Marcus questioned. "And I'm not talking farming. Have you given any thought to that?"

"Yes," I replied. "We have a great community property right above us. Some cabins, a great resort. A lake. We can fish in that lake you know. Fish that survive and swim close to the bottom are not contaminated and if

they were, they'd die. We can test them. I also want to give people long term responsibilities too. We have folks meandering. Responsibilities for the future."

Ray looked at his watch. "Ten minutes. Pretty damn impressive."

Curiously I stared waiting for an explanation.

Ray gave it. "You hashed out some stuff in ten minutes time. Now I can nap."

"So you think it will work?" I asked. "You think it sounds good enough to have a meeting with."

"Actually," Ray said with a smile. "It sounds like a plan. And a damn good one."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It was absolutely, without a doubt amazing. People clung tight to the plan for the future and even cheered about going outside.

All were agreeable to the limited exposure.

It was going to work.

Ray, once given the 'go ahead' to go back to work, was truly rejuvenated. Although there was something about his appearance that was faulted. He wasn't himself. Thinner, baldness that would never go away, discoloration of his skin, and healed sores.

He was nothing compared to the soul survivor of the tunnel people.

Tunnel people was the name given to the fifty three that waited and were sick in the tunnel.

Brad gave them that name.

John was the soul survivor of the tunnel people and was making progress. Mary Agnes said the true test would be if he went another week without an episode, if so, he recovered.

Amazingly enough, I found out that the older you were the more tolerance you had to radiation. John was sixty-five, his age helped him.

But both John and Ray were one other thing. They were a visual testament to the fact that radiation was harmful.

I don't think people truly understood the effect of radiation or the impact of it. I know I was educated, but not knowledgeable if that makes sense. You can't see radiation, smell it, or feel it. So you face an invisible

deadly enemy, that you can't see. When you can't see something you can't fathom it.

Almost is if the ability to not sense it at all made us all feel slightly invincible to its effects.

Ray would attest to that.

Now he and John would attest to the opposite.

People would see them and know, this is what happens if they don't follow the guidelines.

Brad and Jimmy started doing better. They adjusted to the fact that their mother wasn't coming back, ill words ceased and reminiscing ones replaced them. I was worried about them for a spell, but they were strong boys.

Jimmy had a knock for using his hands. I believe he made it that easy so he could work hard and not think.

He and another man were the ones who started the shelter greenhouse.

The broke the concrete floor, lifted it, and started working the soil. But that wasn't in the sun room. The id so at a tunnel.

Stan said the idea was a good one and we'd fare better with a hydroponics system. We could grow peppers, tomatoes, sprouts. A hydroponics system is a self contained system with lighting, dirt and water.

Stan and Jim recreated one. At 33 days PA, they were nearly completed.

The shelter had seedlings so we were ready to go.

Brad stayed busy in the medical division. Agnes was teaching him every day. He learned to take blood pressure, and he learned to take blood. Which was quite painful since he practiced on me.

Yes, things were looking better.



We learned that Suzy could sing and Bill played guitar and keyboards. There was a piano in the meeting room, and Marcus went up into the resort and got a guitar.

They practiced constantly.

Check this out. Stan knew how to make moonshine, and I found out he wanted to build a still.

Sweet.

The proverbial jack of all trades was at it again.

Boy was I grateful he saw our smoke signals.

Marcus and I took a trip on Day 33 to the well water pump at a near by farm. We released some water then filled a pail.

We brought it back with us and tested it. It was fine.

We signed up people to do well water trips.

Stan said it was ridiculous to suit up. They would add time and hinder people. He could take his pick up truck, hit two farms, and fill ten barrels in less than an hour and a half. He and two others. Once every three weeks. Others could fill in the gap.

Mary Agnes calculated and said that was fine.

I didn't go with him that first trip. I wish I would have.

He left just before dawn when radiation was at its lowest. The fall sun had moved back from our planet and we prayed for a break in rads.

It hadn't happened.

Stan and two others, a woman and a man left.

I went to the kitchen and watched in amazement as Luella made pancakes for breakfast.

We only had breakfast once a week. It wasn't because of supplies, but more so because no one really

ate.

Luella made home made granola and that was what people munched on in the mornings.

Sundays were breakfast days.

She'd make pancakes or something. We'd have a quick service and then we'd all eat as a community.

The plan was in motion. Stan went out at five; he'd be back by six thirty. Service was at seven, we'd eat at seven thirty.

It was just about time for service and I was enjoying a cup of coffee while watching Luella.

"Had ya ever done Chaplain work before Captain?" she asked, mixing.

"No, Ma'am I haven't." I imaged as I watched her the type of mother she was. Doting, dutiful, always there. She had one son who was killed in the war. But she didn't speak of him in past tense.

"I hear you do well," she said. "I try to listen, but it's hard. With cooking and all."

"I know and we are al so grateful for what you do."

"I do what I love."

"It shows."

She smiled. "So since ya never was a chaplain, how does one prepare for the new role?"

I shrugged. "I was catholic. I don't know. I just pick something out of the bible each week and hope it teaches a lesson."

"I like how ya got everyone to have faith. Good for you. Your parents are proud."

I smiled. "I'm sure. Well, I better get ready ..." As I stood, I stopped, Stan had stepped in.

There was something about Stan that was different. I immediately knew by the way he solemnly removed his hat that something had occurred.

“Stan?” I questioned. “Did you get the water?”

“Yes, sir, we did.” Stan nodded. “Not all. We had to stop.”

“Was there a problem?”

“You ... you can say that. More of an emergency.”

I stepped to Stan, focusing on the seriousness on his face, making eye contact with him with each step I took. “What happened Stan?”

“Captain ...” He cleared his throat, nearly choking on the words. “Captain, sir ... we ... we found your wife.”

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As with anyone, I immediately thought the worst.

‘We found your wife’ said a lot to me.

My heart wanted the best, my head told me differently. All I knew is that Stan, a man who stood tall, slumped. His gray hair tossed as if he had been running his fingers through it.

Was he in debate?

I sighed out immediately after he had told me. I expected him to say he had found her body, not ...

“You need to mentally prepare yourself, Captain.”

Good God, what had occurred?

He told me that they were pumping water at the second farm when he heard a barking. It didn’t sound like a dog, yet it didn’t sound human. They halted what they

were doing to investigate and there, inside the house they found Jade.

She must have made it to the farm house.

Jade must have believed it to be safe.

She was wrong.

When they discovered her, she was laying on the couch. She had left our shelter ... without shoes.

Sores graced her feet, and the skin was black and peeling.

Jade a beautiful woman, in the course of just over a week had exposed herself to so much radiation, her hair as thin and balding. Her teeth were falling out, her body bloated and encrusted with vomit and blood.

I rushed to the medical room to see her and Mary Agnes asked me to wait until she cleaned her.

When the boys and I entered, Jade was out of it.

I could see it on the boys' faces and knew what it was. I felt it, too. Despite how ill Jade was, we were able to have closure to the whole thing.

"How?" I asked. "How did she get this bad?"

"She wasn't sheltered," Mary Agnes replied. "Plus, no shoes, Captain. She walked on the beat particles.

"What's her prognosis?"

"Not good. Had she worn shoes, had on a coat, and stayed inside, something. But she must have been outside continuously for days."

I nodded. I understood. "How long do you think?" I asked.

"A couple days. A week at the most. But I'm guessing," Mary Agnes answered. "This is all new."

We accepted that answer. It was painful, not matter what occurred to watch Jade suffer. The boys anguished over the vision of her.

But we didn't leave Jade. We Huddled her bed, spoke to her, though she never responded, and stayed by her side gaining every remaining moment, and absorbing the resolution we prayed for.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I couldn't believe it was October 3<sup>rd</sup>. Despite the fact that we created a calendar, and marked off each day, I still couldn't believe it. 38 Days PA.

It stayed amazingly warm in the shelter, but we knew that would be short lived. It started snowing, hard and fast above us and unseasonably early.

Jade passed away fairly fast. In her sleep, she smiled partially, gripped onto Jimmy's hand, tilted her head and passed.

The boys had mourned her for a week before she was found, and the mourning process, though difficult was a bit easier.

We had hoped with the first snow on the first of October that we'd see some sort of change in radiation patterns.

We did.

They went up.

Nearly ten rads an hour they rose.

The RADS fluctuated more than a floating gas gauge.

We determined we would stop taking daily readings and resort only to weekly readings.

A man named Clearance Greene joined us on the last day of September. He was a science teacher at the local school, and his battery power ceased. He also ran out of food. He remembered the shelter, and made his way there in hopes of finding salvation.

We welcomed the lone man.

His scientific knowledge would come in handy.

He theorized why the radiation patterns fluctuated and it made sense.

All the dirt, dust and debris thrown into the atmosphere was blocking out the warmth of the sun, not only causing a mini ice age, but a sealant on the radiation in our atmosphere.

This was troubling.

“Remember how they said when the meteor hit the dinosaurs, dirt and debris went into the air and blocked out the sun?” He asked in explanation. “This is the same thing. All that stuff tossed in the atmosphere from the bombs is working like a Tupperware lid right now. Sealing everything inside.”

“For how long?” I asked.

“Years. A couple.”

“It’s going to seal it in for years?” I couldn’t believe it.

“Could be worse,” he said. “We’re only fluxing between twenty and thirty rads. I’d venture to guess, the bigger cities are higher.”

We held a camp meeting, and Clearance created charts as a visual for everyone, so he could explain what was happening.

If his theory held true, we were truly stuck below with limited outside exposure. And that could be for years.

We were plentiful on food and water. The hydroponics were taking nicely. People in the camp had an ‘it figures’ attitude about he sealed in radiation, and knew there was nothing they could do about it.

Nothing but wait, hope, and bide their time.

But there was one other thing.

With all the talk about the bigger cities having higher doses of radiation, my curiosity piqued, as did Marcus and Ray's.

At the events unfolding, the arrivals, Jade's illness, Ray's illness, the construction ... we had put it aside.

It was time. It was time to venture out, leave the mountain, head into civilization, and see for ourselves what really had become of the world.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“This is Project Greek Island, October 5<sup>th</sup>, if anyone can hear this transmission, please respond.”

Pause.

His name was Greg, a silent young man who was studying broadcasting in college. It took for him to finally open his mouth and with the help of Clarence they were able to create a SSB, single sideband Modulation. A technique begun in the 1930's and used by amateur radio operators during WWII. It enabled broadcasters to effectively use a bandwidth without waste and broadcast over numerous channels and frequencies at one time.

The nuclear winter and radioactive particles in the air actually helped.

Greg had the technique down pat. His voice didn't waiver, no emotions. He wasn't a short wave radio operator, but he learned.

He was one of the men on shift.

Every hour, on the hour call out for five minutes, then monitor to see if a signal could be picked up. Checking as many frequencies as possible.

“This is project Greek Island, October 5<sup>th</sup>, if you can hear this transmission, please respond.”

Static.

Pause.

They were not broadcasting a location at all. Just that that we were alive and searching.

I watched, at least every other hour I checked in to watch. Once a day, Greg or whoever was on duty at 5 PM would broadcast the radioactive atmosphere readings. We

thought perhaps someone was listening without the ability to respond. Eventually, they'd figure it out.

I stood in the silence of the radio room. Watching, waiting, and hoping. Everyday I hoped someone would come on the airwaves.

'hey, what the heck,' they'd say. "We're alive and well in California. Yeah, dudes, everything is fine here."

Of course I knew that was a fantasy.

I was so engrossed in the mundane nature of the radio calls, that I didn't hear Marcus enter.

"Done," Marcus announced.

With a start I turned. "Excuse me."

"The computer, in your office. Done. Hooked up. I gave you a printer, too. We'll worry about the ink later. Now you can write your novel."

"Thank you," I said with a smile. My novel, this was a bright spot.

"There are more computers in the hotel. Decontaminating them isn't a problem. Most still work, I'll guess. Some may not from the EMP effect. We'll have to try. We'll see if there's a demand. Right now, you have yours. Now you can write and make a good log of events, as well."

"A good log?" I asked. "I'm not keeping a good log."

"I'm sure what you're writing is good, but your handwriting leads a lot to be desired. I'll be more than happy to type it up for you."

With a 'hmm' of thought, and a cross look to Greg who snickered over the bad handwriting remark, I nodded. "That would be bad. I'll probably be batter at the

log if I am typing it.”

“Look what else I got.” Marcus held up a camera. “Actually, picked up a bunch. We can download the pictures. I’m thinking of creating a history book of events, hat do you think?”

“I think that’s a splendid idea. Don’t you Greg?”

Greg only nodded. He was too busy wit the radio.

“I also thought,” Marcus said. “With the computer I set up for myself, I can create a power point presentation.”

“Good lord, of what?” I asked.

Almost embarrassed, Marcus lowered his head. “People here, they know were going out. They’re gonna ask questions about Roanoke or Charleston, wherever we decide to hit first today. They’re gonna ask what we saw.”

“And you want to show them?” I asked.

“Yes,” Marcus replied. “They need to know as much as we do. If they don’t want to see, they don’t have to.”

“The new news network,” I mumbled.

“Excuse me?” Marcus asked for clarification.

“Nothing, just thinking. Are we ready to go?”

“Suits are waiting, so is Ray.”

With a nod, I plaid my hand on Greg’s back. “We’ll be communicating with you as well, checking in. Let us know of any problems.”

“Roger that, Captain.” Greg gave a thumbs up.

I listened to him call out again over the airwaves, and with a nervous sigh of what we was about to face, I left the radio room with Marcus.

We were about to embark on phase one, the first documentation of the new history in the making.

\*\*\*

In 1969 Elvis Presley was in a movie called, Change of Habit. It dealt with three nuns who were sent into society, without their respective nun outfits. The church sent them into the community to see if they could do good as women and not just as nuns. They had to work with Elvis.

They truly, without their habits, felt out of place.

They were awkward, and the basic city was like a foreign land to them. Taking it all in, and approaching it as aliens.

Dressed in our radiation suits, I felt that way as we pulled from the driveway for the resort. Like aliens landing in a foreign land. Out of place. A new world. Suddenly, as we drove, I heard the song in my head that Elvis sang in that movie.

Immediately as Ray drive, I jotted down the words to the song. I was going to get together with Suzy and see if I sang the song, could they learn it.

After all I was in charge of church services. It was a religious song, and I was inspired by actual events.

Perhaps I'd even explain where the song came from.

It was probably the strangest assimilation I ever made in my life. The three nuns from that movie. I was thinking of it. My eyes focused on the thin opening of the Fox and I muttered, Mary Tyler Moore.

Ray asked what I was talking about and when I told him, he chuckled, recalling the movie.

Marcus on the other hand thought I was nuts.

I explained the movie and why I was thinking of it. Ray understood. Marcus did not.

But the conversation about the movie did one other thing. It passed the time.

We were on the highway before we knew it.

Taking the mountain road from the resort was uneventful, other than the dusting of ash on the trees, everything looked normal. Until we arrived at the highway.

I know my stomach fluttered, trying not to envision a destroyed city. I also know that I had hopes that somehow, we would emerge into some sort of civilization.

The highway told me that that was a hope that would be lost.

Ash sprayed outward in the air, creating a dust cloud as we rolled down the highway. Charleston was seventy-seven miles away, and about mile twenty we started seeing them.

Cars.

They were randomly on the road, stalled, I suppose when the EMP effect hit. We never felt the EMP effect. The only thing we ever felt was a slight rumble. Safely guarded underground.

In the Fox we didn't wear our head gear. Levels were good inside, and Ray kept the counter going.

About mile 40 I saw a body.

Bodies became more predominant as we drove on.

"This can't be right," Ray said.

“What?” I asked.

“Levels are dropping.”

Why it occurred, I don’t know, but I hit the break, slowing down. The shock maybe of hearing that.

“Levels are dropping?” Marcus asked.

“Yeah, we’re at 14 rads.”

The Geiger counter clicked.

“Fourteen?” I asked in shock.

A few miles later, Ray announced we were at eight.

“You know what this could mean, don’t you?” I stated. “This could mean, somewhere in this country, there’s a safe level.”

Ray shrugged. “It could be a moving cloud. It rained around here. Who knows? But how are we supposed to find out where in the country it’s safe if we can’t find where in the country anyone is alive to answer.”

“True,” I said.

The rads held steady at eight. Which was really surprising considering we were closing in on Charleston. I’d say the mountains protected the air, but we were embedded in a mountain at the resort.

Six miles outside of Charleston, I saw the first one.

A military truck. It was parked on the side of the road. And then I saw other things. Things that made me stop.

“Captain?” Ray questioned.

“Suit up, gentlemen,” I instructed.

They gave me quizzical looks, mainly because they couldn’t see what I did.

“What’s going on?” Marcus asked.

“We need to see this outside of the fox,” I told them.

I grabbed my head gear.

“How long we gonna be?” Ray asked. “We don’t need the head gear. Trust me. Readings are good.”

I debated, but then decided not to take my headgear. It would hinder me, and we really weren’t going to be outside for longer than twenty minutes.

The moment we all stepped from the Fox, we all stopped.

In the distance, not far, the skyline of Charleston was seen. But it wasn’t the skyline I had seen before.

Small nuclear weapon, maybe 12 kiloton like was dropped on Hiroshima. Some buildings still stood, but were blackened by the residue of fire. Others were crumbled.

But that wasn’t why I stopped.

The tents were.

Twenty feet off the road, at a rest area, a huge military set up was erected. Trucks parked about, a canteen. On the road were cars parked and people had set up make shift camps.

Had.

The silence was eerie. A slight breeze caused the only noise around. The flapping of the tents.

From a distance it appeared as if people were soundly sleeping in on blankets and sleeping bags. But as we drew in, their putrid remains, made all of us gag.

Families huddled together on blankets, their bodies decomposed, decaying together. Flesh melting into flesh. It was hard to see what killed them, we could only guess.

I asked Ray and Marcus if they wanted to go with me to investigate.

They did.

We walked to the aid station. The rest area was cleared out, and a look in the first tent was all we needed to see. Hundred upon hundred of cots were line up. The bodies of the once ill still lay upon them.

But now everyone was silent. Dead.

It was sickening.

My stomach formed a knot I just wanted to vomit. All those people. Children. All dead. I had written it many times. Maybe that was why I was able to handle it.

Ray wasn't.

He did throw up. He moved with haste away from the tent, and vomited. I could hear him, and could only offer a glance of condolence.

"Captain." Marcus called my name and snapped me out of my stare. I released the flap of the tent and turned.

He was standing by a long table and I walked to him.

"These were meant to be found," He said, indicating to the many clipboards with inches after inches of paper. The clipboard were secure with a brick. "This was an aid station set up on September 6<sup>th</sup>. One month ago."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"Dates. Look." He pointed. "We can get a really good idea of what happened. And someone left a note."

"A note?" I took the paper. The note was long. I was more taken with the fact that some individual actually took time to record things for the benefit of someone finding the info in the future. "Let's take this stuff. We can review them back at the compound."

Marcus nodded.



While Marcus gathered up the clipboards, I summoned Ray, and then gathered a few M-4's, ammunition, and gas canisters. Things we didn't have at the compound. Aside from that valuable information, they were things you never know if we'd need.

\*\*\*

Jennifer Anderson.

I don't know who she is or what she did before the war, but she left a note.

Basically, she had begin to get ill, and just incase she didn't make it, she wanted to make sure that someone in the future found the names of all those people who had died.

She worked the check in line at the aid station.

The aid station was set up on the fifth of September. A few days later they realized that the levels were not falling and people were just getting worse. Those who were well enough moved on. Those who were ill, they left behind.

'The united States government, under the rule of the President, who was still alive in a bunker somewhere, made every effort to rise above the ashes. But people and circumstance made it difficult and it faltered. Last I had heard, stations across the country were folding.'

God be with us all was the last line she wrote.

Was Jennifer alive? Dead? We didn't know.

Charleston West Virginia was rubble, debris, burnt bodies and a charred existence. The only remains we brought back were the weapons and that list.

We had to create a sign up sheet for that list, people wanted to examine it. See if there were names they recognized. It was on loan as much as a library book.

Over a thousand sheets of paper, all names, handwritten in no order.

It took each person hours to go through. Lord knew how long it would take every person.

I myself debated on whether or not I wanted to see the list.

I realized that it didn't matter, in time my curiosity would get to me, and I like everyone else would look at a long list of names.

How fortunate those people on that list were. Not for dying, but for being marked. For being listed. For being more than just charred bones and decaying flesh. They were a name. And somewhere, somehow, someone would want to know what happened to their Aunt Marry or brother John. And they'll find solace know a resolution, by seeing their name on that list.

I just hoped to God that I'll find a list out there with the names of my family. So I, too, one day can be at peace.

\*\*\*

As if I shouldn't have guessed. Luella recognized at least twenty names from that list. None family, just friends. One was even the principal at the school. A lot of people recognized names.

The sound of a sob, or burst of tears, told me that a family member was recognized.

Although we all knew and expected the worst, it

hurts just the same to get confirmation.

I logged the expedition in my log book, adding some colorful descriptions. I could do that, I was typing. When I wrote by hand I kept them minimal.

After that, my day was done.

Jimmy, ended up being Mr. Construction, and earned the nickname Spike. Spike. I guess I'd prefer to call him that; Jimmy made me think of my brother.

Brad was learning to knit, courtesy of, you guessed it, Luella. He was working on a scarf; I was watching him do so when the radio call came in.

"Captain," Greg called.

"What's going on, Greg, over."

Static.

"Can you come to the Radio room, over?"

"Roger that, out." I placed the radio back in the waist holder, grabbed my coffee and stood. "Keep up the good work," I instructed Brad.

"Thanks, Captain. You think everything is all right?"

"At the radio room?" I nodded assuredly. "Absolutely."

I may have answered that, but I was certain. I wasn't certain of much anymore.

Ray, who had heard the call for me, was nosey and waiting in the hall outside the radio room.

"Something going on?" he asked. "I heard him call ya'."

"Then you know as much as I do."

Ray shrugged. "You could have switched channels."

I gave him a 'yeah, right' look and walked in.

“Greg, what’s going on.”

Greg, seated in a chair, swiveled, gave a look of acknowledgement, and waved me in. He returned to facing the radio, flipped a switch for speaker, and spoke into the microphone. “This is Greek Island, respond, over.”

I exhaled in the silence and a jolt of hope shot through my being when I heard the rush of static.

“Life,” I whispered.

Greg smiled.

Ray smiled.

Greg said, “I was scanning and they were scanning. They aren’t doing a universal. He said they tried and couldn’t. So they are going channel by channel. They finally got a signal last week. Been calling out ever since, we finally crossed lines.”

“Did we lose him?” I asked.

“I don’t think so.” Greg replied. “It was funny, Captain. When we connected, when he heard our call. He said ...” Greg chuckled. “Goddamn tell me you are in the West Virginia Bunker, and not across the ocean.”

I, too, chuckled. “He recognized the 1950 code name.”

Greg nodded.

Ray asked. “Why aren’t they responding now?”

“Try again,” I requested.

Greg called out. “This is Greek Island, respond. Over.”

Finally, the man on the line spoke, “Sorry for the delay. My goddamn radio operator was scanning the channels. I’d told him you were getting back. Over.”

My eyes widened. That voice. Did I recognize it,

honestly? Or was I just wishful thinking. No. No. No wishful thinking on my part. I was a realist. It never crossed my mind. "Greg ....where ... where are the transmitting from?"

"Connecticut," Greg answered.

"Oh my God." I stumbled back.

Ray looked at me curiously. "Captain."

"Ask him ... ask him to identify himself, please."

"Hey Connecticut, I have the Captain here, can you identify yourself. Over."

"Sure," he said. "Slagel. Joe Slagel."

I stumbled back, bumping a chair. Ray spun my way with wide eyes. Greg turned so fast he knocked over the microphone.

They both looked at me. Waiting, Wondering.

My lips moved without words. I exhaled, ran my hand down my face, and caught my bearings. The corner of my mouth rose in a partial, but most peaceful smile. "My father."

\*\*\*

My father.

I couldn't believe it. I really couldn't. Overwhelmed was an understatement. It took a few moments after hearing his name for it to sink in. I muttered, 'I must be dreaming, pinch me.' And when Ray did, I got slightly perturbed. But the shot of scotch and reality took that away.

But I was nervous.

I still had to tell my father it was me. I was alive.

After he said his name, and Marcus told him to ‘hold on’, we debated.

Ray grew aggravated, snatched up the microphone and said, “Mr. Slagel, would you be related to Hal Slagel.”

Just as my father whispered out, “Captain.”

I grabbed the microphone. “Dad.”

There was silence, then my father’s breath of relief.

“I knew it,” he said. “I knew it. I knew. I felt you were alive, Hal. And when they said Captain .... I knew it. Especially since Ellen told me you were planning a trip to that bunker.”

I could hear Ellen in the back ground, saying, ‘didn’t I tell you Joe? Didn’t I? Oh my God, let me talk to him.’

“No,” my father said. “Later. Shush.”

I laughed.

“Ellen’s alive?” I asked. “Then her children, Pete? Over.”

Pause.

“No. Details later, OK? Over.”

“What about Kelly, you went there to see them all.”

“Details later, Hal.”

I nodded a nod of understanding he could not see. “Dad, have you heard from Frank?”

“He was down in Jackson so it’s hard to say. I haven’t heard, though.”

“Dad, how did you guys survive? What did you do? Tell me. Over.”

“Christ Hal, you may have unlimited power there. But we don’t up here. Now that I know where you are. I’ll

be there. I'll; check in tomorrow to give you progress. But right now I'm gonna save power and end this and let Henry figure out a way to get us there. Over."

"Have you done a reading?" I asked. "Over."

"Henry made a Geiger counter. Holding tight about 20. Over."

"Same. Then ... then I'll speak with you tomorrow. Dad, it's so good to know you're alive. Over."

"Same here, Hal. Same here." Pause. "Out."

I peacefully set down the microphone. There were congratulatory smiles and a pat to my back.

I basked. I truly did. At my luck and fortune.

My father was alive. Ellen, too. She was a lot like my wife, but in a feisty way. A nurse, but last we spoke she was just assisting some doctor in Ashtonville. Her and Frank were life long friends, although I swore they were more, even after they both married others. She however, because of her long standing and early friendship with Frank, became an honorary member of our family. The daughter my father never had.

My father said they were going to come down. Henry had to design a way. I didn't know who this Henry person was, but it didn't matter. I'd find out soon enough.

All that mattered was my father and Ellen were alive.

I was blessed. They would arrive soon.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

October 8<sup>th</sup>.

It took three days for Henry to build the vehicle that would bring my father, Ellen, and a few others to our bunker. My father said that Henry could have done it faster, but didn't want to be exposed too much because he didn't want to lose his hair.

An armored vehicle from the bank was converted to have a periscope type vision. It was insulated with insulation until he couldn't get a reading on the Geiger counter.

They weren't sure how long it would take them to get to the Bunker because they hadn't a clue what the destruction level was like and where.

It was a guessing game.

Both my boys were ecstatic about the impending arrival. They both asked and assumed that since my father and Ellen were alive and well, then so were Ellen's children, Frank's wife and kids. All the people that lived in that small town where my father had taken a vacation.

But the truth was, for some reason, I didn't think so. My father's reaction said a lot.

It was a wait and see situation.

Unnerving was an understatement, especially since my father had made contact with a farming town in Indiana, and those folks were reporting a lot of looters, and criminal running about. Saying it was a Mad Max society.

I worried my father would run into that. But



knowing my father, he was prepared.

Sometime late evening, after hours of nail biting, nervous twitches, Marcus spotted the vehicle arriving.

I shot from my seat and raced from the bunker meeting them in the tunnel. They pulled in until they saw me. The vehicle was impressively constructed. It stopped and my father stepped out.

My heart dropped. We embraced with gratefulness, long and tight.

"This is Henry," my father introduced me.

Henry was a younger man of about twenty-eight, maybe thirty, it was hard to say. He was Asian. Tall and thin, actually very tall for an Asian man. His black velvet hair was long and immediately I knew why he was fearful of losing it.

He smiled as we shook hands, and my eyes shifted to the scream of delight that came from Ellen.

I hugged. Oh God did I hug her. They had idea what their arrival meant to me.

Frank's oldest son was with them, Johnny; the twelve year old was alive and unscathed. Actually they were all in excellent condition.

I was alone in the tunnel, I wanted it that way. Call it selfish. I walked them down to the entrance, my family and the few others that came with them.

They were tired from the trip. That was obvious. Luella had prepared a special late night meal for everyone to eat together. Everyone in the camp.

And it seemed everyone in the camp was a welcoming wagon. Ray was at the vault door and I

introduced him to my father. As the newest members of our community entered, they were bombarded.

It was then I noticed Ellen had slipped back.

She and Henry were at the back of the group.

“What’s wrong with Ellen?” I asked my father.

He shifted his eyes back, gave that typical ‘who knows’ look and moved further inside.

I went back to find Ellen.

“Hey, Hal.” Ellen said nervously.

“What is wrong?” I asked her. “Are you afraid?”

“Me? No.” She shook her head.

“Upset?”

“She’s upset,” Henry said.

“You’re upset?” I asked again.

Ellen nodded.

“Ellen, I don’t now how to broach this. I don’t your children. I am very sorry ...”

“No. Hal. No.” she held up her hand and stopped me as I went to hug her.

“What is it?”

“I really wish you wouldn’t hug me. Not yet.”

“Me either,” Henry said. “Not that I don’t want you to hug Ellen. You can. I meant me. Don’t hug me yet.”

My mouth slightly opened and I faced Henry. “I have no plans to hug you.”

“Oh, that’s a relief.” He grabbed his chest.

“Ellen, may I ask why?”

“I’m dirty. I’m so dirty compared to your people.”

“D ... dirty.”

She nodded. “We’ve been washing with baby wipes, sanitizer and the occasional bit of water Joe gave us. We

tried to stay clean. Being clean is hygienic and hygienic is germ free.”

Henry added. “I agree.”

“Hal, Joe said you’re pumping from a fresh well. Every day.”

“We are. A lot of our people go out there to take showers. Stan hooked some ...why am I telling you this?”

“Can I get cleaned up first? Please? I have clothes I didn’t touch so they’d be clean. Please Hal?” She begged.

“Wait a second. Are you telling me you don’t want to come into my camp because you’re being vain?”

She nodded.

“Good God, Ellen it’s the apocalypse. No one cares.”

“I do. I would.”

“She would,” Henry said.

“What are you her interpreter?” I snapped.

“Hal!” Ellen barked back. “Don’t yell at my friend. He’s been very supportive with me.”

“Elle, get your ass in the bunker. I’ll assign you a room and you can take a shower.”

“Oh my God, did you just yell at me? You have never yelled at me.”

Henry said, “Joe yells at you, El.”

I closed my eyes. I actually felt relief when I heard my father’s voice.

“Crying out loud. Get in here,” my father ordered. “Now.”

Ellen and Henry scurried toward the door.

“It’s no wonder I haven’t had a stroke. See what I’ve been dealing with?” my father asked. “You run this place,

right Hal?"

"Yes," I nodded making my way to him.

"Good." He gave a grip to my arm, and smiled.  
"They're your problem now."

I stood alone in the tunnel after my father went back in the bunker. My problem? I'm sure later I would think it a problem, but at that moment, I laughed about the remark.

\*\*\*

The purple dinosaur, or rather man dressed in a purple dinosaur suit, was cuddly, large, cute and welcome to many children. Many mothers believed him to be the babysitter while they cooked or did dishes. Some, like me, found him annoying and his songs stroke inducing.

Frank's wife, his three daughters and Ellen's two children went to a morning matinee, live performance of his dinosaur at Madison Square garden.

Peter, Ellen's husband was meeting them there since he worked in New York City. Ellen stayed behind to take care of Johnny who had an ear infection. My father told me he was somewhat offended, he was there, he could take care of Johnny, but Ellen was insistent.

Trust me it wasn't the Good Samaritan in her that made her stay home; it was the hate of the dinosaur.

Although we don't know the fate of Kelly, the girls, Ellen's children and Peter, we can only guess considering they were in the heart of New York when the bombs went off.

My father had worked for the CIA for many years,

and obviously, in his positions received information or at least bits and pieces. It was such information that made him take an emergency vacation.

“Something was up,” he said. “I knew it.”

En route to Ashtonville he bought supplies; items he knew would be needed. He had even purchased a Geiger counter, but it ended up not working.

He was convinced something was going to happen in that three weeks.

He was right.

They were arguing about Starbucks coffee, he and Ellen that morning. Ellen wanted to take the hour ride into Stamford to get one, and my father was telling her she was ridiculous.

It was about quarter to nine in the morning that Johnny informed them about a news interruption.

Reports were sketchy; my father said the news broadcast. Limited nuclear exchange in the mid East. Between troops.

He didn't waste any time, he called his office

And that's where his survival story began ...

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*“Not good, Joe,” his partner told him on the phone. “The president's been evacuated. He's out of Washington. We're on our way out too. Congress, Senate ...”*

*“When?” Joe asked.*

*“About an hour ago.”*

*“Is this just a precaution? What?”*

*“Lid's on it. Not even the press is being told about*

*this. No, I think this is the real thing."*

*"Any other indications."*

*"High alert. Launch systems are on stand by."*

*"Dear God." Joe closed his eyes. "Get out of there, Brian. Now."*

*"Trying Joe. They aren't predicting anything for about an hour."*

*Joe shook his head. He disconnected the call, wishing Brian luck. He looked at the back of his phone, the battery, and made a mental note to remove it.*

*"What's wrong?" Ellen asked.*

*"We have about an hour?"*

*"Until?"*

*Joe turned to Johnny, "Johnny I need you to run home, get some things in a bag, Things you'll need. OK? Toss your toothbrush there."*

*"Ok, Pap, no problem." Johnny stood.*

*"Joe?" Ellen questioned.*

*"Ellen I need you to do the same. I need you also to try to get a hold of Kelly ..."*

*"No. Joe. This is a joke. Nothing's gonna happen."*

*"Kiddo," Joe laid his hands on her shoulders. "It's looking bad. Why else do you think I came here?"*

*"But my kids ... my kids are in New York."*

*After a long blink, Joe nodded. "I know. Call Kelly. Peter. Try to get a hold of them. Tell them to get out of the theater... now. They'll not make it out of the city in time, but if they can get to the outskirts, get underground, they'll stand a chance."*

*Ellen's eyes watered, a single sob came from her.*

*"Now is not the time, Ellen, stay strong. Got that?"*

*“What are we going to do?” she asked. “I can’t stay strong. You’re telling me something’s going to happen. Bombs, something. My kids are in the worst place imaginable and you want me to stay strong.”*

*“Yeah, I do. Now I have to finish packing the car, and I need to find us a basement. One that’s strong. Concrete...”*

*“What about my basement?”*

*“I’m fearful of the frame structure Ellen. Fire, radiation can seep through. I just want to find a safe place. What about the clinic?”*

*Ellen nodded. “Yeah, we have a ...no. It’s a frame.”*

*“We need almost a vault type ...” his speech slowed down. His eyes met Ellen as they both hit a revelation. “Vault,” he said.*

*“The savings and loan.” Ellen whispered.*

*“We’ll head there when Johnny gets back.”*

\*\*\*

*“I stayed pretty calm,” Ellen told me, sipping on her coffee, savoring it I should say.*

*My father fluttered his lips. “Please. Calm?”*

*“No, Joe,” Ellen said. “At the house I was.”*

*A shift of his body and my father faced me, “Hal, she was upset at the house. Right fully so. She cried. But did what she had to do. Calm? No. Especially when it came time to leave.”*

*I watched Ellen’s head lower.*

*“She kicked and screamed as I took her from the house. It got worse. I was at the liquor store ...”*

“Stop.” I held up my hand. “You stopped for booze?”

“Go figure,” Ellen added. “Slagel trait.”

My father continued, “While I was there I got a call from Brian saying we launched. Which meant we had anywhere from seven minutes to a half hour tops before a SLBM’s or ICBM’s arrived. I kind of knew blast wise were we safe in Ashtonville, but fallout. No. So we high tailed it to the bank.”

Ellen interjected “Actually, Hal, the bank story is pretty good. Very action hero like.”

My father asked ‘Is that why you saved the surveillance disk?’

I quickly looked at Ellen. “You saved the disk?”

“It’s good,” she said.

“Do you have it?”

She nodded.

My father cleared his throat. “Anyhow ... outside the bank, I had loaded up the flat dolly. You can imagine how weird I looked lugging all that stuff. We were in the lot next to the bank. I removed the car battery. When it was time to go in, Johnny started helping me move the dolly, and that’s when she freaked.”

“I freaked,” Ellen said.

“She freaked. Kicking, screaming, crying, and yelling out ‘No’. It was not becoming.”

Ellen gasped. “It was a traumatic time.”

My father waved his finger at her. “I taught you better under stress, didn’t I?”

“Wait,” I said. “How did you get her into the bank?”

My father continued his story ...



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*There were several factors that played into the pandemonium that erupted in the bank when Joe and Johnny pushed in the over stocked dolly. But the number one thing wasn't his calling out, it was more than likely the fact that Joe had Ellen secured to the dolly and her mouth duct taped.*

*"Shut and lock that door," Joe told the guard. A guard about seventy.*

*"But you have ... you have ..."*

*"That's my daughter, don't worry about it. "Lock the door."*

*"I can't ..."*

*Joe pulled his revolver and at the same time flipped out his badge. "CIA. Lock the goddamn door. Now!"*

*The guard did, hurriedly.*

*The tellers must have spotted his gun, because panic screams ensued.*

*"Silence." Joe ordered.*

*"Every shut up!" he fire a single shot. His eyes shifted to the teller. "Pres the panic button. Go ahead. No one's coming. Where's your manager?"*

*She sobbed and pointed.*

*Joe winced. "Quit crying. I'm not hurting you. Some one put on a radio."*

*He noticed the thin Asian man, Henry, making his way to the door. "Where are you going?"*

*"I'm ... I was just getting a deposit slip. I don't ..."*

*"Stay," Joe instructed. "Where's the manager?"*

*A nervous man named Ed, stepped forward with his hands up. "I'm ... I'm the manager."*

*"What's your name?"*

*"Ed."*

*"Listen, Ed. I'm not here to rob you, put your hands down." Joe yelled out louder. "Someone put on a goddamn radio. Now!"*

*Ed lowered his hands and nodded to a secretary.*

*"I need you to take this boy," Joe instructed. "And the dolly to your basement."*

*"What about the woman tied up?" Ed asked.*

*"Take her as well. You can leave when you're done, I don't care. While you're there, shut off all the water intake valves and gas lines. Got it?"*

*"Why?"*

*At that second, finally, the radio played, and the broadcasters voice announced. "Two ... we believe Nuclear warheads have exploded over Andrew's air force base in California ..."*

*"That's why." Joe said.*

*Screams. The four tellers screamed.*

*Joe closed off one ear. "Enough." He shouted. "Listen, if you want to go. Go. If you want to stay I don't care. Ed, take that dolly now. Do you have a water cooler?"*

*Ed nodded.*

*"Supplies? Extra bottles?" Joe asked.*

*Again, Ed nodded.*

*"Good then just show them to the basement, and get back up here to help me with the water. You ..."* He turned to Henry. *"Help them with the dolly into the*

*basement. You're in charge of shutting off the water and the gas."*

*Henry didn't hesitate, he rushed the dolly, asked Ellen if she were all right, and, he, Johnny, and Ed took the dolly to the back.*

*Joe nodded to the bank guard. "You can open the door. Anyone want to leave? Go now. Anyone who wants to stay. I can use help with the water, and locking this place back up."*

*Two tellers and the secretary rushed out the door, the other two, along with the guard stayed.*

*As he and the tellers were pulling together the water surplus, Henry returned with the dolly. He had removed the items from it as fast as he could.*

*"Vases taken care of," Henry said.*

*"Good. Good. Ladies to the basement. We'll finish up."*

*"Eight bottles, Henry loaded one on the dolly. "You think that'll be enough."*

*"These are pretty large amounts," Joe said, he and Henry loading them fast. "We have these, the water tank, the water I brought."*

*"Food?"*

*"Got it. Grab an end," Joe began to push the dolly with Henry's help. High tailing it, they neared the elevator.*

*Henry reached for the bottom. "Do you ... do you think we'll even feel anything?"*

*Just as Henry asked that question, the entire bank turned white encompassing them was a blinding white light, silent. The electricity went out.*

*"Oh my God, they did it," Henry said. "Steps?"*

*"No. help me get these to the vault."*

*They ran with the dolly, water bottle juggling. As they neared the vault of the bank, the ground rumbled. It rumbled hard, louder, and stronger. Shaking them in their task.*

*Both men used everything they had, and shoved the dooly into the vault. Henry dive inside, and so did Joe, pulling the door closed just as the winds of destruction began.*

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"When they didn't come back," Ellen said. "When we felt the bombs, I thought Joe was dead. I lost it again. The bank manager duct taped my mouth."

"But made it there in a half an hour," My father added. "It took time making sure the stairwell was clear and carrying the jugs of water."

"What happened to the guard?" I asked.

My father shook his head. "He died right away. Heart attack."

I nodded. It made sense and didn't surprise. My father was actually surprised that we hadn't lost more people to panic.

I filled him and Ellen in on all that occurred on my end, but the time drew near for me to stop 'hogging' my family and share them.

The stories of survival were told. It was time to integrate them into my camp. I foresaw no problems in

that aspect.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Ray chuckled when he came into my office. I had planned on doing it eventually, but with my father arriving, my nervous energy went into making my office my room. I removed the desk, built that countertop and the old tin armoire fit nicely next to my bunk in the far corner.

“Bet the boys are glad,” Ray said.

“Somewhat.” I replied. “They’re sharing a four sleeper with Johnny now. They know I’m not far off.”

Ray pulled up a chair. “Busy?”

“Writing?”

“I am very glad for you, Captain. Very.”

I nodded. “Me, too.”

“That Henry guy seems as if he’s gonna work out well. A little annoying, but he’s got an inventor’s instinct. I like it.”

His remarks made me smile.

“I tried to talk to your father some more, but he went to sleep early. Ellen was getting the run through of the clinic with Mary Agnes.”

I winced. Ray must have seen it.

“What?” he asked.

“I just don’t know if those two will hit if off.”

“Nah, they’ll be fine. They seemed fine. You know her well?” Ray asked.

“Very.” I sighed out. “Very well. Her and I ... we were very good friends. I can recall as a teenager, her and I staying up all night watching old John Wayne movies.”

“So now you have family and a friend returning.”

Ray took a breath. "I'll let you get back."

"Ray is there something you wanted?" I asked.

"Ah, gees, yeah." Ray laughed at himself. "Marcus wants to take the Fox in town tomorrow. Hit the school for some books. He wants to start teaching the kids since we have eight now."

"That's a good idea."

"So it's OK I take him out tomorrow?"

"Absolutely. First light?"

"Just before. You want to go as the third man. We always like to have a third man."

"I can do that or ..." I smiled. "Ray, ask my father. He may enjoy that."

"Will do, Captain." Ray opened the door. "Good night."

I nodded my goodnight, and just as I returned to the computer I heard Ray say in the hall, "Oops. Sorry. He's in there." I looked up. Ellen was there.

"Marcus told me you had a computer." She smiled. "Are you writing?"

I smiled in return. "Yes, I have a computer. Yes, I am writing."

"Want me to leave you alone?" She asked.

"Don't be ridiculous. Come in."

Ellen closed the door. "What are you working on?"

"A story. It's a bit longer than I thought it would be. I think its going well."

"Can you read it to me?" she asked.

It took a moment because the request felt really good. "I'd love to do that."

"Good. Oh!" She pointed to my bunk. "I'll kick

back there, while you read.”

“Ellen, did you need something. Surely you didn’t come here to discuss my writing.”

“Actually, Hal, I did.” She sat on the bunk. “When Marcus told me about the computer and you writing, I was so happy. My life has fallen apart, Hal. I have wanted something normal again. And reading your stories is just that for me. Normalcy. So here I am. And I brought you a gift.”

“A gift.”

She lifted a disk. “The bank scene.”

A grin wide and genuine hit my face as I reached for this. “Can I watch it on computer?”

She nodded.

“Wait.” She called out when she saw me ready to load. “No, Hal. Read.”

I set the disk down, stared at her for a second, watched her get comfortable on the bed, and then, with a pleased look she did not see, I faced my computer and pulled up my story.

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“And he took the gun ...” I read aloud. “Firing the single and final shot into his head.” I breathed out. “And that’s all I got.” I clicked on the keyboard. “Are you sleeping?” I swiveled my chair.

“Not at all,” Ellen sat up. “I’m not understanding why he killed him so quickly.”

“He was dying anyhow. He wanted to put him out of his misery.”

She nodded.



“What?”

“OK, don’t get mad. But you never led me to believe his injuries were so severe his brother would shoot him in the head.”

“I didn’t? Good God, Ellen he was shot in the chest.”

“So. What side?”

“This is the nurse in you.”

She cringed.

“I’ll add more deadly description to let you know the brother is dying and suffering.”

She smiled. “Cool. Well ... I better get some sleep. Johnny and the boys have to be in the one meeting room at 8:30 for classes.”

“My boys?”

“Who else.” She smiled. “I promised them we could all have breakfast together.”

“I’d like that.”

“Oh.” She blinked.

“What?”

“Are you joining us?” she asked.

“I’m not invited?”

“Of course, you are.” She smiled. “Anyhow, get some rest or get that scene done. I really, really like it Hal.”

“Thank you.”

“See you for breakfast.” Ellen leaned forward, and gently laid her lips to my cheek then slid closer to my ear and whispered, “I am so grateful you are still in my life. So grateful.”

Before she could leave, I closed my eyes, brought

my hand to her head, holding her closer, returning the whisper in her ear. "So am I."

She pulled back, smiled, then stepped away. "I enjoyed this, Hal." She opened the door. "Can we do this again?"

"Any time."

"Tomorrow night then?"

"We can make it a routine, if you like."

"I'd like," she said.

"Me, too."

"Goodnight, Hal."

"Night, Ellen."

I watched the door close. The moment absorbed into me, and I turned my chair to face the words on my computer. My story. It was going to be hard to write, to get back into it. My mind raced. I was basking. I truly was. The evening was peaceful, and sharing it with Ellen along with my writing was rewarding and fulfilling. How long had it been since I felt that? Every night I prayed for my family. Every night I fell sleep with worry in my heart. A sick feeling I couldn't shake over the losses I knew I suffered but was unsure of. And sleep wasn't restful; there were the nightmares I didn't share. Then, I realized why I felt so good in the moments following Ellen's departure. The day's end. A new day. A new future. My God, I hadn't just been given the gift of having my family reunited, but a burden of worry had been lifted from me and a pocket of emptiness had been filled.

For the first time in months, I would welcome sleep.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The days seemed to be going smoother. At first I wondered if it was my imagination, but then I realized it wasn't. And it wasn't just the arrival of my family. Construction was clicking. The daily agenda started moving like a fine piece of machinery. People knew what they were going to do when they woke up and how their day was going to go.

I believed the crucial adjustment phase was ending for everyone.

We were adapting.

In the five days since my family had arrived, I had also been more prolific as a writer. I finished another short story, updated my log regularly, and began a novel.

The people in the camp needed entertainment. That was evident by much they watched the bank disk of my father.

It was always being played on the DVD player. Marcus had burned me a copy for myself, since I was never able to get it.

In fact, I had the disk on my hand, waiting for a opportunity to return it to my room. Twirling it on my finger, lost and shuffling in thought between listening to my father speak to Ray, and a new scene I wanted to share with Ellen.

"Hal, are you listening?" my father caught my attention.

"Yes," I replied then cleared my throat.

"What did I say then?"

My mouth dropped open. "Are you ... are you quizzing me?"

"As a matter of fact, I am. What did I say?"

I paused. Cleared my throat again and replied, "I don't know."

Ray laughed. "This is great."

"Where are you, Hal?" my father asked.

"Thinking, that's all."

"Well, put those thoughts on hold. Pay attention here."

I nodded.

"I went up to the resort this morning. Looks like we've been having some intruders up there," my father said.

"Nonsense, we haven't picked up anything on the monitors."

Ray shook his head. "Doesn't mean anything Captain, they aren't coming down here."

My father said, "This is where my concern lies. The resort is pretty far out. Why are they coming here? Unless they know about us. And are waiting and planning to get in. We're a gold mine in a poor country. We have to protect the gold mine. We've heard stories about what's out there. You need to assign and train some men for security."

"Our men are on construction."

"They can do both. You have twenty two men. Thirty two women. You got about sixteen able bodied men. This isn't good." My father said.

"How many?" I asked.

"Five or six should suffice. Give your camp a once

over and see who you come up with, then we'll figure out a training schedule and shifts. I think you should have men on guard 24/7."

I agreed. "I'll get on that."

"Hal, I don't want you to think I'm taking over or anything."

I shook my head. "No, I appreciate the help and the break."

Ray added. "It's been a lot of pressure on the Captain and me. We're glad to have someone else. Glad you're helping, Mr. Slagel."

My father gave Ray that look I love, that closed mouth, assured look.

"Well," My father looked at his watch. "I'm head on down to my little project and help with construction. Ray?"

"Right behind you. Break's over." Ray stood up.

"Hal?"

"I'll be there shortly I want to check the clinic, the school, and make my rounds." My focus returned to the shiny disk, as my father and Ray departed.

I did have my rounds to make, check to see if everything was fine, if anyone needed anything. I also had to work on that security team. And with what I had to work with as far as capable men, I was a bit worried. But I would fret too much.

First stop for me was the clinic.

There were three people in the clinic. One was our residential radiation patient and the other two were ailing with some sort of chest cold. I truly believed Mary Agnes

and Margot were so bred, if you had a sniffle they admitted you. Look out when a woman gave birth. Odds were, we'd revert back to the days before insurance companies decided a woman should go home in forty-eight hours.

The clinic smelled disinfectant fresh when I stepped inside.

"Captain," Margot said pleasantly and with smile. "How are you?"

"Very good. How are things here?" I asked.

"Smooth." She tucked her hair behind her ear.

"Where's Mary Agnes?"

Margot pointed to the window. I could see Mary Agnes sitting at her desk. Mary Agnes lifted a 'hold on' finger to me and I nodded my acknowledgement.

"Is there anything you need?" I questioned.

"I would like to say more patients but that would be awful." She snickered. "So your father says The Fallout is done."

"Excuse me?"

"The Fallout?" she asked. "The camp bar?"

It took me a second and it dawned on me. My father for his first order of business decided to take one of the smaller meeting rooms and make it into a camp lounge. He and Ray fished all the alcohol from the basement of the resort and secured it. They stole the bar, the juke box, dart board, and tables. It looked good. The idea was a good one, too. A place for people to relax and kick back. I just forgot that my demented father named it, 'The Fallout.'

"Ah, yes," I said. "It is. Grand opening tonight."

“I hear he has karaoke.”

I fluttered a laugh. “I didn’t hear that, but I wouldn’t doubt it.”

“Are you going?” she asked.

“Yes, I suppose I’ll have to. Seeing how it’s my father’s baby.”

“I was wondering, if you’d like, we could go get a drink together?”

I gave a closed mouth nod. “I’m sure I’ll see you there.”

“I mean .... I mean we can have drinks together. Talk. Hang out.”

“Well, seeing how we are a small community, how can we not?” I smiled.

She returned the smile. “I’m not sure where you are in your progress. But know Captain, under the circumstances, it is all right to move forward. To want to have that company.”

“I’m not quite sure ...” My eyes shifted when Mary Agnes approached us.

She cleared her throat. “Margot, the RR is semi awake, can you see if he needs anything.”

“Really? He’s awake?” she said with some excitement.

Mary Agnes nodded.

“Greta. Thanks. Captain, I’ll see you tonight.”

I nodded to Margot as she left the main room and noticed the look Mary Agnes gave me.

She stood, arms crossed, staring at me so motherly.

“What?” I asked.

“Are you that naive or are you being that nice?” she

asked.

“I’m always nice.”

“Hmm,” she said. “I mean about Margot.”

“What about her?”

“Christ. She was trying to tell you that it is all right to move on. To enjoy the company of someone else.”

“I realize that now. I really don’t feel hindered in moving on. I know Jade has just passed, but under the circumstances.”

Mary Agnes raised her eyebrows. “So continuing, in case you didn’t get it. She was saying it was all right to enjoy company. Maybe share that company at The fallout.”

“A date?” I asked.

Mary Agnes nodded.

“You know, not that I would call it a date ...” my mind immediately lit up. “But to go there with someone and share it with some one would be nice.”

“That’s what Margot was saying.”

I smiled. “Isn’t that nice of her to look out for my interest.”

Mary Agnes huffed. “You are naive. She was asking you out on a date, Captain.”

My eyes widened. “She was.”

Mary Agnes. “She’s attracted to you. Why I don’t know.”

I gasped.

She laughed. “But if you aren’t interested in her, that would explain why you didn’t pick up her subtleties.”

“She’s a lovely woman. Very nice. But ...”

Mary Agnes winked. “Not interested?”



“Sorry.”

“Why are you here?” she asked.

“I was checking on things and ... I see it’s fine.” My eyes shifted about.

Mary Agnes gave a peaceful smile. “She’s not here.”

“Excuse me.”

“Ellen is not here. She’s at the class room. She’s working second shift.”

The smile dropped from my face. “Tonight?”

“Only till ten. Still enough time to enjoy... The Fallout.”

“I wasn’t thinking of asking Ellen to...”

“Oh, your ass is itchy.”

I mocked a silent, “my ass is itchy?”

“You were thinking it. Go ask her. She’s someone you know and are comfortable with. You’re lucky.”

I wanted to say I was, but I refrained. I only gave a look of gratitude for her advice, and turned.

“Oh, Captain, before I forget. Can you make a note that I could sure use one more volunteer in the clinic here, just incase.”

I pulled out my notepad from my back pocket and lifted the pen from the spiral. “Noted.” Writing, I turned and left the clinic.

It was weird, the sound of it as I made my way down the corridor to the classroom.

The senate room was its original purpose, but it had been converted.

I could hear laughter from the class room. I could also distinguish it. Brad, Jimmy, Johnny ... Ellen.

At the doorway I paused to watch, staying out of

sight. They were laughing about a book called *Of Mice and Men*. In fact from what I picked up, they were casting the book with people from the shelter.

Ellen had said my father would be the perfect George. I couldn't agree more, and chuckled at her rendition.

Marcus instructed the class to move onto Chapter two. "Now you have a good pictorial of George," he said.

Ellen added, "And as you guys move on more into the story, you'll see hoe George-like Joe is. Especially with him opening the *Fallout*."

The class of weight teens opened the books, and I saw my chance to enter. Ellen moved from the front of the class, and I took a step forward.

"Speaking of which," Marcus said, approaching her. "Ellen you going?"

"After my shift."

"Wanna meet up there?"

"Sure. Sounds great."

It was then I stopped. I felt a rush of something. Multitudes of emotions over that. I don't know exactly what I felt, but I could have sworn I felt jealous. Jealous? Good God why? That was absurd.

Seeing how I really had no point in being in the class other than to make sure things were fine—and they were—I tucked my notebook back in my pocket and moved on.

\*\*\*

Dear God, they had karaoke.

My father has The Fallout scheduled to open at eight PM, and people were line up in the hallway waiting.

I had checked the progress of the finishing touches, and to my surprise the were sampling moonshine.

I didn't try any. Stan had created that still he had spoke about and had it in the East Tunnel. I could see it. When we ran out of 'stocked' booze, the entire camp would get wasted on homemade and potent moonshine.

Barry ran the karaoke. He claimed he wasn't really sure exactly what he was doing, but he'd guess. He set everything up and I was certain in time he'd have it down pat.

The small meeting room transformed to look like a neighborhood bar was packed.

My father had a 'Joe Seat', marked and reserved for him and there was one for Stan. No one questioned the saved seats.

Both men were there when I walked in.

Ray was bartending.

"Don't get too used to this, Captain," Ray said. "I'm not doing this all the time."

He poured me a drink.

"Kick one up, Raybie." Mary Agnes put a glass forward. "I'm perched."

"Mary Agnes you lush," Ray joked and filled her glass.

"Waiting?" Mary Agnes asked me.

"Excuse me?" I questioned.

"Are you waiting for Ellen?" she repeated, clarified.

Before I could answer, Marcus did.

"I am," he said. "She's meeting me here."

Mary Agnes turned to him. "Why?"

"Why?" Marcus chuckled. "Um, I don't know. Thought it would be nice to share this with someone. Hang out. She's nice."

"Yeah," Mary Agnes nodded. "She already has someone to share this with. The Captain."

I winced. "Good Lord, Mary Agnes."

She hushed me.

Marcus looked around her. "Captain, I'm not meaning to stop on your toes or to interfere, I didn't know."

I started to wave my hand in a don't worry manner, but Mary Agnes intervened.

"He didn't know until recently either," she said. "But don't it make sense? They've known each other twenty years."

Marcus nodded. "Captain, I just wanted to hang out. But if you had plans ..."

"He had plans," Mary Agnes said,

I huffed. "Mary Agnes. It's fine. Have another drink. You seem to be on a roll."

"Are you saying I'm drunk?" she asked.

"Yes." I finished my drink. "Marcus, you are not interfering. Hang out with Ellen. She's a good woman." I handed my glass to Ray. "Can you set this behind the bar; I don't want to cause any more washing."

"Sure thing, Cap." He took the glass.

"Where you going?" Mary Agnes asked.

"To check on the boys. I'll be back." Pivoting my body, Margot stood there.

"Are you leaving?"

“For a moment,” I replied. “I want to check on my boys.”

“See you in a bit?”

I nodded, and side stepped to get out. As I did, I paused when I heard Mary Agnes say, “Hey Marg, ever really get to know Marcus here?”

That made me chuckle. In leaving I took in the view. Everyone having a good time, music playing, people looking in karaoke books. It may have been a bomb shelter. We all may have been living an end of the world existence. Loss of life, happiness, and hopes. But for the time being, for the evenings, right there in the Fallout, life was thriving again. People smiled.

It was all worth while.

\*\*\*

The boys were fine. Johnny was reading out loud while Brad and Jimmy played a video game. Even though Johnny told me he was reading to them so they all could take it in for their assignment, I highly doubted Brad or Jimmy were paying much attention.

Marcus was showing the film in a few days, I knew they’d enjoy it.

I decided to make my way back to The Fallout, but I did so via the clinic.

The door was open; I slowed down my pace just a little, and saw Ellen walk by.

She stopped, back tracked, and waved.

I stepped inside.

“Hey, Hal,” she said brightly. “Visiting?”

“Actually, yes.”

“Who? It’s not the rad patient is it?” she asked.

“The rad patient?”

“Yeah, the sick guy with no name?”

I chuckled. “No actually ....” I didn’t finish my response Henry emerged from the back. “Henry?”

“Oh, hey, Hal. How’s it going?” he waved.

“Good. Good. You aren’t at The Fallout tonight?” I asked.

“Not yet,” Henry replied. “I don’t want to drink too much. Plus, I’m training.”

“Training?” I questioned.

Henry nodded. “You posted for a clinic volunteer, I’m it?”

“You are our new volunteer?”

“Yep. I’ll do pretty good. I’m very compassionate. Aren’t I El.”

“Yeah, you are Henry. But you gag.”

“I do.” Henry nodded. “Pretty easily.”

“Very easily,” Ellen added. “So we have to watch him with gross patients. Like the Rad guy.”

“Uh.” Henry grunted, “The Rad guy is gross. I did gag.”

“But you didn’t throw up.”

I blinked at the back and forth. “So are you going to the Fallout after your training?”

Henry nodded. “Yeah, El and I are going.”

I asked. “Ellen what about Marcus. He’s meeting you there.”

“Oh, shoot.” Ellen cringed. “I forgot.”

“El?” Henry asked. “It isn’t a date is it? You aren’t

dating are you? I don't know about this Marcus guy."

"What do you mean you don't know about Marcus?" Ellen asked. "He's nice."

"Exactly. Too nice."

"I see what you mean," Ellen said. "Could be suspicious."

Good Lord my neck hurt from the ping pong talk.

"And you're going out with him," Henry said.

"No, Henry, it's not a date. If I was going to date anyone, I'd date Hal."

I smiled.

Henry gasped.

My smile dropped. "Why did you do that?"

"Isn't that kind of incestuous?" Henry asked.

"I beg your pardon," I stated. "We're not related."

"We not related Henry," Ellen said. "We're life long friends."

"Oh," Henry said. "In that case. It probably isn't incestuous."

"Not at all," Ellen said. "Look Henry, fifteen more minutes."

"I hope there's room for us in the karaoke line up. I want to sing that song with you."

"I bet there is, Henry," Ellen turned to me. "Hal is there room in the Karaoke line up?"

I opened my mouth to respond.

Henry did, "El, if there was, there may not be now. He's here. Not there."

"True."

"Are you going to sing Hal?" Henry asked me.

"No, I won't ..."

"I bet you sing good," Henry said. "Does Joe sing?"

"Old songs," Ellen said. "I think. Not sure. Hal?"

I tried to answer, but couldn't.

"Maybe singing will help his mood," Henry said.

"He's always like that, Henry," Ellen said.

"But he yells."

"He talks loud. It's a family trait," Ellen commented.

"Hal doesn't talk loud. Or do you?"

I bit my lip, made a 'T' with my hands and smiled. "You two will drive me insane trying to keep up with your conversation. I'll see you at The Fallout." I made my turn to leave.

"Hal?" Ellen called out. "Was there something you needed?"

"Yes. But ...I for the life of me can't remember now. I see you two in a bit." I bid them farewell with a smile, and I left. I could hear that chattering about Mary Agnes even as I made it down the hall. Hearing them go back and forth in one, nonstop, endless stream of conversation made me wonder if they were like that in the shelter with my father. And it was then I wondered, if they were like that, how did my father handle them?

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If there was one thing my father was good at was taking control. A natural born leader, he would just assume that rule. I often wondered how we would coexist as leaders in one camp.

He acknowledged me as leader here, yet, knowing



my father would overrule me simply based on genetic right of seniority.

I lead my camp, but he led me.

A family trait of talking loud was not as predominant as the family trait of drinking.

We enjoyed our drink. Even Jimmy, my brother and he was the mild mannered one. The navy will do that do you.

By the time I returned to The Fallout, a measly one hour later, it had transformed into a party atmosphere.

Not everyone was lined up to sing, but there were quite a few.

And somewhere in my absence there was a turning point.

From having a good time, smiling, and laughing, to down right partying.

I was asked to talk to Mary Agnes about hogging the microphone. It wasn't her turn in the line up, and she kept rushing the stage area. Plus, our new resident Disc Jockey was fearful of letting her sing her next song.

Which was?

I Touch Myself.

Good Lord.

I feared that, too, and in conveying it to my father, he laughed.

"Ah, that would be goddamn hysterical, Hal," my father said. "She's drunk imagine."

I winced. "No. I'd rather not."

"So you just want to what?" my father asked. "Remove her from the line up or lose her song."

I snapped my finger. "That's it. Thank you."

I informed the DJ of what I was going to do, and then I walked over to Mary Agnes. She handled the fact that the track was messed up, and said she'd pick another. I was relieved.

The DJ was not, but I had to admit it was funny and entertaining when Mary Agnes got up and sang, 'Hit me Baby One More Time.'

Our stern, effective, straight forward retired General Nurse was so intoxicated, I basked in the thought of the next day when she would physically and emotional feel the results.

I wasn't responsible for The Fallout, yet everyone approached me and thanked me as if I were.

'Thank my father,' I told them. "This was all him." they'd respond that they already told him their thanks, but were telling me thanks for allowing it.

Not allowing it wasn't even a consideration.

The entire energy lifted.

I talked to everyone. I made my rounds around the place, drink in hand. I wanted to drink more but a part of me felt that wouldn't be right. Someone had to maintain control.

"You're back," she said.

I turned. Margot stood there.

"I'm back."

"This is so great, Captain," she said. "Everyone is having a good time. Are you?"

"Yes, yes I am."

She sipped her drink. "I've been watching. You're playing Captain and keeping an eye out."

I nodded. "Yes, I am. Guess I'm still on the job."

“Hinders your fun.”

I tilted my head. “It does.”

“Would you like to ...have a little more fun?”

“Absolutely, who wouldn’t?” I shrugged.

“Do you like surprises, Captain?”

“Who doesn’t?”

She giggled. “I was thinking of pulling a surprise later on. What do you think?”

“Would it be a surprise that is enjoyable?”

“I think so and fun. A lot of fun.”

“Then do it. I look forward to it.”

“Great.”

I saw the look on her face. Margot produced an ornery smile. I wondered what she was up to, especially since she needed my permission. I’m sure in her slightly intoxicated state, combined with everyone else’s great mood, whatever she planned to do later in The Fallout would go over big time.

Perhaps she was going to sing I Touch Myself.

The DJ wouldn’t have complaints, then, I bet.

Like I said, everyone was having a great time. Everyone ... except Ellen.

Oh, sure she put on that smile, but I watched. She sat at the small table by the dart board, watching Henry and Marcus play darts. She smiled, but then her eyes cast down to her drink and her face changed.

I made my way to her.

“Hey, Hal.” She glanced up.

“What’s going on?” I asked her.

“What do you mean?”

I pulled the chair over and closer to her, sitting

down. "I know you. That smile is fake."

Ellen cleared her throat, cupped her drink, looked at Henry, then at me. "I want to have a good time. I thought I would."

"And?"

"I can't stop thinking. Thinking about my kids. That last song was Taylor's favorite. It just makes me miss them. It makes me miss life."

"Life goes on right here, Ellen. Look around."

"I am. I see. But not my life Hal. I just feel ... at times I feel alone. You know?"

I did and I conveyed that through a compassionate nod. "And I'm sure, El, missing Pete doesn't help."

From her drink to me she looked quickly. Her demeanor changed briefly. "Hal, please."

"El, that was your husband."

"And you know better."

"You're right." I sighed out. "Can I help?"

"You do."

"I do?"

"When we read. When you discuss your characters. When we get into those long talks. I feel comfortable. I forget. You, Hal, are my return to life."

"Wow." I exhaled. "I feel honored."

"No, I do. I'm glad you're sharing that with me again."

"I've always shared with you, Ellen. It's just great to share up front and personal."

"Yep. I know. And ... you aren't getting tired of it."

"Are you kidding me?" I asked. "Heaven's no. Why would you say that?"

“Because it’s like a drug right now. It makes me feel good, so I seek it out. Why else do I find you during the day to ask?”

“I thought you were into my new story,” I said.

“Oh, God, I am.” She laid her hand on her chest. “But now I have to wait until tomorrow to find out what happened to Steven and Link.”

“Why do you have to wait until tomorrow?” I asked.

“First, look around. Second ... when I spoke to you earlier, you hadn’t finished the scene. I know how you are about reading it before it’s finished.”

“Agreed.” I finished off my drink, set my glass on the table and stood. “First, this doesn’t matter. I want to get out. Second .... I’ve got about a page left.” I returned the chair. “Give me a half an hour?”

“You gonna finish?”

“Absolutely. And If I don’t. We can work on my log book again.”

She did it. She genuinely smiled. “See ya in a half an hour.”

I bid goodbye to Henry and Marcus, though I didn’t think they noticed. On my route out, Margot stopped me.

“Are you leaving, Captain?”

“Yes, I am,” I replied.

“For the evening?”

I knew what she was getting at. Her plan. She wanted me to stick around and watch. “Margot, your surprise ... are you still gonna pull it?”

“If you want.”

“I do. And ... I am positive it will go over.”

“Oh, yeah?” she smiled. “Are you leaving because

you can't wait?"

"Yes. I just can't wait. I feel compelled to get back to my room and get creative right away."

"Don't worry, I'll be creative too, if you want."

"I'm sure just pulling the surprise is enough. Good luck."

She gave me a smile and thumbs up.

Settled. My father didn't see me leave, and I'm sure he would mind anyhow. I left The Fallout enjoying the ever growing quiet hallways as I distanced myself from the noise of the music and party.

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I made it back to my room and was immediately motivated and inspired to finish that scene. I knew I didn't have as much left as I told Ellen, but I wanted enough time to get it down.

I had just finished, in a record twenty minutes, and I was reading the last line when there was a knock on my door.

"Come in," I called out, thinking 'perfect timing'.

"Captain."

I blinked and turned from my computer. "Margot."

"I came about the surprise," she said.

"That's great."

"I'm glad you think that way. So do I." She took in a huge breath, lifting her shoulders as she did, then she undid her shirt. Perhaps I should have noticed when she walked in, but I didn't. I was looking at her face. A button down shirt that was once a man's, seemed to be all she

was wearing. Unless she wore shorts underneath. She held a pleased and determined look on her face.

My mouth opened to speak as she lowered the shoulders of the blouse over her arms, exposing her breast. Breast that were large, and too perky, screaming out 'look at the breast job'.

"I know it's been awhile for me," she said seductively. "I think it's been a while for you. I'm yours. Tonight. Tomorrow." She dropped her shirt. "Whenever."

"Margot, I ..."

"Hey, Hal, I'm ..." Ellen burst in the room.

I looked at Ellen. Immediately, stunned, Margot turned completely around in her full-naked glory.

After a shocked pause, Ellen's eyes widened. "Oh my God. I am sorry. I am ... so, sorry." She backed up. "Sorry." The door closed, she was gone.

"Ellen." I stood. My eyes shifted to Margot and I bent down to the floor, handing the shirt to her. "I'm sorry. I mislead you somehow. I'm... sorry. Forgive me." After a hand exchange of the garment, I flew out of my room. Ellen was walking down the hall. "Ellen," I called out to her. "Stop."

Ellen did. She backed against the wall and covered her face. "Oh my God, Hal, I am so sorry. I thought we were getting together. I thought."

"So did I." I grabbed her wrist. "Look at me."

"I should have knocked. I am so embarrassed right now."

"You?" I lowered her hands. "Me. I was just as shocked as you El."

She looked at me, and then looked away.

I thought she was angry, until I realized Margot had approached us.

"I'm sorry," Margot said. "I had no idea. Ellen, I had no idea. I thought ... Captain, I just thought."

"No." I stopped her "It was crossed signals. I'm sorry."

She nodded. "Ellen, again ..."

"Don't apologies to me," Ellen said. "I'm fine."

"I'm embarrassed," Margot said.

"Why? You have great breasts."

The nervous tension and humiliation we all felt broke at that second, Margot chuckled, and shirt back on, she walked away.

"That was awkward," Ellen said.

"Tell me about it." I motioned my head toward my room. "I finished the scene. Shall we?"

Ellen followed.

We stepped inside, and she stayed close to the door after she closed it. I didn't notice until I was just about to sit at my computer. I hesitated before sitting. "What's wrong?"

"It just feels weird. That was a weird thing to see."

"I know. I'm sorry."

Ellen giggled.

"What?" I asked.

"When I walked away, I thought ... I thought that you had turned the women here into your sex slaves. Briefly I thought that."

My mouth dropped open. "Good God, Ellen. That's horrible."

"Yeah, but Hal, there was a naked woman here."



"I didn't ask her to come." I walked to Ellen. "I have ... I have a terrible problem with miscommunication when it comes to women."

"You? No."

"Is that sarcastic?"

"No. I'm serious."

"Before jade died, we broke up."

"I didn't know."

I shook my head. "Not important."

"You ... you broke up after a nuclear war?"

"She was upset, depressed; I thought it was about the dog. I was talking to her about the dog. She agreed she loved him and he was the reason she was depressed."

"Oh my God. She was that bad?"

"Yep." I nodded. "Then she said she wanted me to know it wasn't just the sex."

Ellen shirked. "Jade slept with your dog."

"See. See." I pointed. "I thought that first. She was confessing she was having an affair."

"Oh." She didn't seem phased.

"That doesn't shock you?"

"What? Jade having an affair? We all knew. At least suspected her and that Sergeant that was always hanging around."

"You all suspected and didn't say anything?"

"Hal, what if we were wrong? Huh?" Ellen asked.

"No. You had to find out on your own."

"Was I that stupid?"

"No, just proud," Ellen said.

I exhaled. "You're right. But do you see. I have this miscommunication with women. I think they're talking

about one thing, and they're talking about another. Reflecting back on my conversation with Margot, I should have known. But I was blind, uninterested and it didn't even cross my mind when she said she wanted to pull a surprise. I thought she was going to do a bold karaoke song."

Ellen laughed. "You're a good guy, Hal. But a guy."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means, someone like Margot, and you didn't go for it."

"I have morals, Ellen. I never have slept around. You know that."

Ellen nodded her agreement.

"And ... you have to be careful. In a community this small. You make one physical commitment; you might as well be committed. No room for head games or break ups, or stuff like that."

"You're not ready for a partner."

"Oh, after the hurt I felt over Jade, yes, I believe I am. And I'd love to have the companionship, both physical and emotional. The company at night, the person I can count on to be there. I want that, just not with her. I want companionship, and I want to be comfortable with the person."

"So does any woman stand a chance with you, oh, Great one?"

I shook my head at her sarcasm. "Yes." I laughed, exhaled, and then noticed how close we were standing. "Yes."

"Hal ... do you realize, do you realize we ..."

"Yes."

Ellen laughed. "You cut me off. That may be a reason you have miscommunication problems with women."

"I'm sorry; I just thought you were going to say something."

"What did you think I was going to say?"

I shook my head.

"Hal?"

"Fine. Barring further embarrassment to this night, I thought you were going to say we would be a good connection or partnership."

"No, that wasn't what I was going to say."

"Fuck."

She laughed. "I was going to say do you realize we are already doing that? Sharing, being companions, it was natural. The only thing we aren't doing is ... well." She cleared her throat.

"I worry. That could be awkward."

"It could be, yes." She nodded. "But I don't think you have a clue how good it feels when you hug me."

"I do." I stepped closer. "The simple touch of someone ..."

Ellen inched to me. "Kiss me, Hal. Just see what happens. If we don't spark, we don't spark. If we do..."

I silenced her and stopped her sentence with a soft kiss. Simple.

"You interrupted me again," she said. "Miscommunication."

I smiled and this time, I brought my lips to hers, kissing her just a bit longer. Keeping it soft, and pulling away only slightly. It felt so good. "Are we

miscommunicating?”

Ellen shook her head and moved against me.

I took her tightly in my arms, bringing her up and into me, readying to deliver a better kiss. My insides swirled with nervousness and excitement. I swore she felt my heart beating as her chest pressed to mine.

“Hal?” she whispered. “You’re not thinking of Margot’s breasts right now, are you?”

I laughed and after that laugh, I pulled Ellen in and kissed her the way I felt I should and the way I wanted to.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

It wasn't supposed to go that way, not at least at first. Am intimate kiss, embracing ...in short, Ellen and I made love.

Neither of us would call it earth shattering, mind blowing sex. But it was deeply fulfilling and emotionally resurrecting.

We fell asleep in my room, on my bunk, latched in a tight cuddle in a small space.

I was dreaming of the encounter, reliving it in my mind when my alarm went off. Before I opened my eyes, I thought of how I didn't want to wake Ellen and I reached to shut off the alarm.

Ellen was gone.

I can't even begin to tell you the thoughts that raced through my mind. Forefront was the fact that she may have regretted what occurred. I got out of bed, cleaned up, brushed my teeth, got dressed, and headed to the cafeteria. Figuring, I'd get my coffee and wits about me, then seek out Ellen. If only to find out why she departed without saying goodbye.

The cafeteria contained about only half the people it usually did. I figured as much, the partying crowd was sleeping in and hung over.

Visually evident was my father. He sat at a table by himself, sipping on coffee and rubbing his temples. He didn't look pleasant. I grabbed my coffee and cup of oatmeal and headed his way.

"Hey, ya' Captain," Mary Agnes gave me a pat to my back. "Heck of a party last night. Ya' missed the end."

“How are you feeling?” I asked her.

“If you mean, am I hung over. Nope. Doesn’t happen. I was married and in the military my whole life. Can drink like a fish? Oh, oatmeal. Great. Helps with regularity.”

I winced, but smiled as she went to the line.

“May I sit here?” I asked my father. “Or are you wanting to be alone.”

He waved me to sit. “Don’t expect much conversation.”

“I won’t.”

Half way through my oatmeal, Ellen walked into the cafeteria with Henry. She waved. A good sign. They sat at the table behind us. Not a good sign. Excusing myself from my father, I sat at their table.

“Henry,” I said. “Can I have a moment alone with Ellen?”

“I’m sitting here, Hal.”

“I know. Can you sit with my father?”

Henry leaned to the right examining my father. “No. He’s looks mean.”

My father then said, “I don’t need Henry to sit with me right now. I’m not in the mood.”

“See.” Henry said. “Go on talk. I won’t listen.”

I huffed. Ellen giggled, and I leaned closer. “What happened to you?”

“When?” she asked.

“Last night. This morning. Whatever. You left without saying goodbye.”

I noticed Henry’s eyes shift to us. I gave a scolding glance.

“Hal,” Ellen chuckled my name. “What did you expect me to do?”

“Um ... stay in bed.”

She laughed again. “It as very crowded. I’m sorry. You needed your rest. We didn’t get much sleep.”

“Oh, my God,” Henry said. “Did you guys ...”

“Henry,” I snapped. “Eat your breakfast. The oatmeal will make you regular.”

“Oh, that’s gross. That’s private.”

“So is this conversation,” I said.

“Fine.” He retuned to his meal.

“Hal,” Ellen smiled. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think you’d mind. We aren’t very far away.”

“Just ... tell me you aren’t feeling awkward or regretting.”

She shook her head. “No. Not at all. Looking even more forward to our reading nights.” She winked.

A wink. Great sign. Then she kissed me on the cheek. Even better sign.

“I’ll let you eat. I’ll stop by and talk to you later.” I stood up.

“I’d like that.”

I reached down, gently resting my hand on her shoulder before leaving. I was almost to the door when my father called my name.

“Got a minute?” he asked.

“Absolutely, what’s up?”

“That’s what I’d like to know. What’s going on, Hal?”

“I don’t know what you mean?”

My father turned his head, looked at Ellen, then

returned to me. "You know exactly what I mean."

"Dad, look, things have been progressing with Ellen. I know it sounds soon."

My father shook his head and placed his hands in his pockets. "The time line doesn't concern me."

"It's fine, then. Actually. Good."

"Uh-huh," He nodded. "And uh, what exactly are you gonna do when Frank arrives?"

That question took me aback. "Dad, *when* Frank gets here? Do you know something I don't?"

"I feel it. Trust me. I feel it."

"I don't know what you mean, then. I would think Frank would be glad for me and Ellen."

"Christ, Hal, you aren't that dumb."

"They're best friends," I said.

"Yeah, sure. You know better. We've all known better for the last fourteen years."

I sighed out heavily. "I don't want to sound pessimistic, but Frank returning, and arriving here... I just ..." Pausing, I gathered my words. I didn't want my father to think I doubted my brother's survival. "I know you're concerned about Frank's feeling regarding this if he returns."

"No, Hal, I'm worried about you. You know how those two are."

My nod was my agreement. "I'll be fine."

"Will you?"

"I'll be fine. I'll cross that bridge when I come to it."

That was all that was said, a few exchange of glances and then a goodbye, I was on my way to my daily duties. I didn't think ill of my fathers speaking to me



regarding the matter. He was being a father. Although my response probably wasn't what he wanted. It was the best one I could give and the only one I could think of.

I'd cross that bridge when I got to it.

Knowing how slim the chances were of my brother even being alive, I knew it was a bridge I more than like, would never have to cross.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

A mere three weeks, the first of November and so much had changed.

Something happened in the world outside our little camp. People were getting smarter.

In that short period of time we had heard from four other communities across the country. I wasn't sure if it was Henry's tweaking of the radio or their awakening and calling out. Either way we were making daily contact, and grew hopeful of other people.

The day would come where we would all meet up. The day would come when the radiation dropped enough to live outside.

The rounds for water and retrievable from the well kept us from even considering the possibility that we'd run dry.

Henry devised a trap fishing box that went to the bottom or near bottom of a lake, opened, and acted as a fishing rod. Although the first few tries were not successful, each time he went out, he caught more fish, all safe from radiation because they swam near the bottom of the lake.

Henry though wouldn't go out more than once a week for an hour.

His hair was too important.

Rad levels were in the teens, which was good. But still not low enough to live in.

In Montana they were hitting the single digits. Slowly but surely. But the camp we spoke to in Southern California, they were still at thirty rads.

On the Ellen and I front, things were going very well. We didn't hit a kink, we connected. It was so natural, it was frightening. We laughed a lot, shared a lot, and were intimate partners.

I was enjoying that part of my life.

When the day was done, I looked forward to my evenings with Ellen. And it didn't matter what we did, I enjoyed it.

Now a meeting with my father, Ray, Stan, and Marcus ...was sometimes headache inducing.

One of my father's responsibilities was to do morning check ins with our contact camps, and maintain contact.

He also liked to plan a meeting to occur every few days. He felt they'd keep us organized, and help us plot what was needed. At these, we'd discuss what was happening at the outer camps, scouting trips future and past, division reports. Ah, yes, my father had people writing reports of activities in their divisions. Mechanical, medical, entertainment, the every growing popular and successful, agriculture, and the other divisions. There was an entire list of divisions in our small camp.

On the particular morning of our planned meeting, he also did all the other daily check ins for me. Ray and I had gone out for our weekly scouting trip. We had just returned with the Fox from another neighboring town, and our surveillance was as bleak with that as it was with Charleston and Roanoke.

Long decontamination was no longer necessary, so after our misting—as we called it—Ray and I gathered our notes and photos, and headed to the meeting room.

He and I didn't speak much before the meeting. We never spoke much after a scouting trip. They were depressing. We both hoped that the meeting would give us some sort of 'up' and boost that we needed.

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"And Kyle ..." My father exhaled. "Says they've tapped into a pipe line that feeds to a well and they have running water. Plenty of it."

I nodded that and pointed my pencil. "Kyle is Montana."

My father nodded. "Surprises the hell out of me about the radiation there. So low. I know damn well they probably got hit bad north of Montana. Tons of silos there."

"Maybe they didn't," I said.

"Maybe. In any event. Some scientist from Nebraska has joined their ranks. They are currently testing how far down they have to go in the soil before the contamination stops. They're hoping only a few inches, they don't know."

Ray said, "A few inches is still a lot of soil to remove."

"Yeah, but it's better than a few feet," my father said.

"true." Ray nodded. "What spur combined population at now? Do we know?"

I exhaled prior to answering. "Sixty-two here, Montana ..." I flipped through my notes. "Fourteen." Quickly I did the math adding up the four other camps

and ours. "One thirty four."

Ray whistled. "Getting up there. I'm sure there's more."

"Speaking of survivors," My father said. "What's the scoop on the scouting mission today?"

Sadly, I shook my head. "Nothing." We hit two small towns and about six farms. Although we found more sources for water, we also found more people who had died of radiation. Bodies are just everywhere. The roads, homes, you name it."

After writing something down, my father turned a page, opened his mouth to speak, but stopped when the sound of running footsteps drew nearer.

Greg, out of breath, raced in the room. "You guys have to come quick. I got a signal."

We rushed to follow.

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All of us arrived at the radio room in the same amount of time. Henry was handling the microphone when we walked in.

"Still got them, Henry?" Greg asked.

Henry nodded, then pressed the microphone. "Can you repeat that for our Captain, over?"

"Roger that, this is the SSBN Georgia, First Lt. Hawkins acting as Captain."

My eyes widened.

My father jolted a quick look my way. "An SSBN, Nuclear sub, Hal. They're designed to survive a nuclear war. Henry, ask where they are."

“Georgia, what is your position? Over.” Henry asked.

“About three hundred miles off the coast of South America. Over.”

I stepped forward, “May I?” I inquired of Henry.

Henry passed the radio responsibilities to me.

“This is Captain Slagel, what are your radiation readouts right now?”

“Down south here about eight rads per hour. Lower readings further south. Zero rads.”

I clenched my fist in excitement. Somewhere was radiation free. There was hope. “Lieutenant, what are your directives right now? Over.”

“We’ve been in constant contact with the president of the United States. He has given us directives. Over?”

I looked about the faces in the room, then returned to my radio call. “The president? Over.”

“Yes. He was moved. They are secure. The president Vice president and few members of congress. They’re trying to get things back on track, but it’s hard to do so since the levels are still high. Over.”

“Do they have a contingency. Over.”

“Not yet. Our directives were to stay in the southern Atlantic until we were told to port. Over.”

“Were?” I asked. “Over.”

“We asked the president if we could disembark. He gave permission if we could maintain contact. But the problem remains, disembarking safely. Over.”

“Is the military still operational. Over.”

“For the most part. Captain, can I ask where you are at. Over.”

"I'd rather not disclose that information over the airwaves. But we have room. And I'm sure you have provisions to add to what we have. Over."

"We do. And I understand not disclosing. Over."

"How may re on board? Over."

"Total 135, sir. Over."

"And you're positioned in the Atlantic? Over."

"Yes, sir. Over."

"How long will it take to get you north. Let's say Washington DC. Over?"

"No more than a week. Over."

"Lieutenant, can I get right back to you? Over."

"Yes, sir. Sir? We really need to get off this sub. Over."

"I understand. Out." I moved my hand from the radio and swiveled my chair around. "What do we do?"

My father replied. "We get them. Period."

Ray added. "We can use the men, and theoretically they can pull into the Potomac River."

I pointed. "I saw that movie."

Marcus said. "But that's a lot of miles to carry a lot of men and supplies. That's a three to four hour trip."

I added, "Not counting problems with the city, or roads there."

Ray said, "Rads are too high to be out that long exposed."

"Simple," My father said. "We get them into DC. We go..." he paused. "As painful as that may be. We go to DC. We pick them in vehicle or vehicles designed to protect from radiation."

I questioned. "Where are we getting those?"

“School buses,” My father replied.

“They aren’t safe from Radiation,” I said.

“No, but they can be made to be. With a little imagination, creativity, knowledge and work.” My father smiled and looked at Henry.

Henry’s eyes widened. “What? No. That’s a lot of work, I can’t do it, Joe. I can’t.”

“Henry. You can.”

“But Joe...”

“Henry that’s a lot of men who can use your help.”

Henry huffed. “Fine. I’ll do it.”

“Good boy,” my father said. “You have one week.”

“What?”

Ignoring him, my father looked at me. “Hal, tell them we’ll pick them up in DC. We just need an estimated time of arrival, and once Henry knows how he’s going to fix the buses, we’ll set up a meeting time. Until then, let’s try to maintain contact with them.”

“You got it.” I gave my father closed mouth smile, took a moment to enjoy Henry’s perplexed look, and then I contacted the SSBN Georgia to tell them we were bringing them in. We were bringing them home.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

November 9<sup>th</sup>.

It was taking Henry a bit longer than anticipated to complete the project. He had to alter two buses. A huge task. He would have had help, but he was such a perfectionist, people quit helping him.

Henry didn't seem to mind.

The sub was just outside of Washington DC waiting word from us that we were on the way.

Another day, Henry told us, and it would be finished. If all went as planned, we'd be picking up our new residents in no time.

Dorm quarter arrangements were made and we still had room to spare. The acting Captain of the vessel gave me a run down on supplies, and that he had spoke to the President about joining us.

I thanked him and didn't think too much about it until we received a radio call from The President himself. We didn't get much from the president, except that he would keep us all abreast, and let us know the full contingency plan.

He seemed frazzled. I don't know. Maybe it was just my imagination. I had been talking to a lot of people over the airwaves, including a lieutenant who took ship responsibilities when the captain ... jumped ship.

Odd. I thought the navy trained their men better.

Admittedly, I was hopeful about my brother Jimmy. He, too, was out on a sub, and although the Georgia hadn't made contact with them, that didn't mean much.

There was a possibility.

Mary Agnes was thrilled to find out the ship's doctor would be joining us. He was bringing more advanced medical supplies. It eased her mind that she had someone else to share the burden of diagnosing.

Of course, her and Margot were both thrilled over the fact as well that ten of the crew had pneumonia. A heating problem with the sub caused a respiratory illness, which worsened a few of them.

I was making my way to the clinic when Ray called me on the radio. "Got some good news, Captain."

"Henry's finished?" I asked.

"Looks that way, we're taking them out for a test. Over."

"Excellent, keep me posted. Out." I hooked my radio to my belt and entered the clinic.

The volunteers were in there, the floor was being scrubbed, it looked as if they were planning on inspection.

Margot had gotten over her bout of embarrassment with me. Rather quickly, too. Hooking up with Marcus helped.

She faced me with a smile. "We are so pumped up, Captain."

"I can tell," I said.

"I mean, ten patients, all with pneumonia. Wow, it'll sound like a TB clinic in here, but we'll be running."

"Margot, these are sick men."

She grinned. "Yes, I know."

"Should you be happy about this?"

"Probably not. But I can be excited about it."

My signature inherited 'hmm' was greeted by a

mocked ‘hmm’ from Mary Agnes.

“Just the man I want to see,” she said.

“What did I do?”

She curled her boney finger in a ‘follow me’ fashion, and turned. “We have a problem. OR rather you have a problem to deal with. Maybe not a problem but a situation that ...”

“Good God woman, spit it out.”

In a spin of her heels she huffed and glared at me. Her eyes could have turned demon red, I swear.

She continued to walk. “Here.” She stood before the bathroom door.

“We have a plumbing problem?”

“No,” she sneered. “Listen.”

I did. Obvious sounds of regurgitation emanated from the door.

“Ellen,” Mary Agnes said.

“Oh my God, does she have radiation poisoning.”

Mary Agnes shook her head. ‘Sperm poisoning.’

“Excuse me?”

“She’s pregnant. Tested her this morning. Looks like you’re gonna be a pop.” She smiled and walked away.

To say I was stunned and speechless was an understatement. I rattle in my mind the news and allowed it to absorb. I finally calmed down and was pretty excited when I heard the water running in the bathroom. I stood there, leaning against the wall.

The door opened and Ellen stepped out. “Hal.”

“El.” I smiled. “Something you want to tell me?”

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Ellen cried when she told me and they weren't tears of joy. She was worried, concerned, and fearful the baby would be born with deformities. I had to assure her it was a good thing, the pregnancy, and that whatever happened, happened, and we would face it together.

She was able to smile some, especially in lieu of knowing about the impending patients. I told her they'd be arriving in twenty-four hours. But her enthusiasm was hindered due to the morning sickness.

Mine wasn't. I was going to be a father.

That thrilled me.

In leaving the clinic, I got two more congratulations and it dawned on me, how long it would be before the news spread throughout the camp.

A baby was good news. New life. I was pretty certain my father would be glad to hear it, but was also pretty certain he'd rather hear it from me than through the preverbal grapevine.

I sought him out. He was in the radio room.

"Jesus, Christ Henry." He bitched over the radio. "Test the goddamn air." He noticed me and gave an up motion of his head. "If you don't get this goddamn project done soon, we're putting you on the sub. Over."

"Probably be a lot safer, Joe. I can feel the radiation seep through me body. Over."

"Henry, the rads aren't that high."

"They're still there. Over."

"Out." My father shook his head. "What's going on? How was the clinic?"

"Buzzing. Excited," I replied.

“Yeah, I know, I stopped by. I want to keep that energy, Hal. Henry ahs to get moving.”

“Do you have a second?”

“Is something wrong?”

“Actually, I think something is right.”

“Then I have more than a second.” Just as my father reached out his hand to pull me a chair, over the radio, Marcus called.

“Captain, come in. Urgent. Over.”

I lifted my radio. “Marcus, what’s up?”

“I’m in the monitoring room. We got an intruder coming down the South tunnel. Heavily armed. M-4, grenade belt, looks like a flame thrower. Over.”

“Just one?” I asked. “Over.”

“One man. Large.”

I gave a nod to my father that I was handling it and began to leave the radio room. “Where is he now?”

“Fifty feet inside. Over.”

“I’m on it.” I switched my radio to speak to my father as I bolted into Armory. “Dad, Ray is over the other end. I’m coming up the west entrance, and coming in behind the intruder down South.”

“Good idea, I’ll alert Ray and get him as a back up. Be careful. Over.”

“Thanks, Out.” I hooked my radio at the same time I swiped up a M-4 and locked the cabinet. I checked the clip, secured the armory and ran.

The intruder hadn’t reached the vault door, and that was good. I was pretty positive he couldn’t blow his way in with grenades, but if he had c-4, we were in trouble. I had to admit, my adrenaline pumped and I was gearing

for some excitement myself. I wasn't worried, not at all. I was certain I could handle it.

Marcus kept me abreast. I ran up to the resort and out. I still had time.

"Captain, he stopped, he's sitting down and checking out his weapons. Over." Marcus announced.

That was good news. I worried that my running would be heard in the echoing tunnels. The intruder's pause gave me the chance to get down there quietly, and I did.

Sliding back against the wall, I saw him about twenty feet from the vault door; I darted behind the old crates. I prepared my weapon, aimed, and waited.

He wore all black, including a black hood and sunglasses. When the intruder stood, I stepped out.

"Hold it!" I called out. "Stop or I'll shoot."

The intruder stopped.

"Hands in the air," I ordered. "Now."

Half assed, and seemingly with attitude he lifted his hands.

"Higher." I stepped into view and walked to him.

He huffed and lifted them higher.

Sarcastically, I said. "I'm sorry this is such an inconvenience for you."

One hand raised, his other reached for his head. I dismissed him reaching for a weapon when he pulled at his mask.

He lowered it to expose his face.

My rifle nearly toppled from my hand.

"Can I put my hands down now, Asshole?" he asked.

The fast running footsteps rushed to me with a worried, "Captain," from Ray. "Is everything all right, Captain?"

I didn't respond.

"Captain? The intruder ..."

"He's not an intruder," I said with shock. "It's my brother ... Frank."

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My father's reaction was not one of shock, mine may have been, but his wasn't. It was more like, 'he knew it', and glad you finally arrived.

Frank wasn't shocked either that we had survived. He knew. He had been monitoring radio signs via an automated net control device using precision lightweight GPS receiver. This enabled him to listen in. Once Henry tweaked the radio, Frank was able to hone in on us. He said he recognized our father's voice right away, and mine.

That helped him when he learned of his wife and daughters. Of course, he had figured because he knew they were in New York City. After a brief reunion with Johnny, we spoke to Frank on the way to the clinic. We didn't say why or where we were going, I believe my father wanted Ellen's survival to be a surprise to Frank.

"Fuckin; figured," Frank said.

"Good lord Frank," I said. "How did you get burned?"

"Where?" he asked.

“On your neck.”

“Here.” He touched the burn on the side of his neck.

“Ow.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Fuckin asshole Mad Max wanna be’s. They hit the base. If Rod and I would have left a half hour sooner, we probably would have run into them on the road.”

“The looters?” My father asked.

“Just wild survivors,” Frank said. “You know how you watch all those sci fi movies? And you got, no fuckin way are people gonna be like that.” Frank winked. “We thought wrong.”

“What happened to this Rod?” my father questioned.

“He got caught in the cross fire. I was busy putting out a fire.” Frank paused in a reflection. “Once I knew it was you, I packed up a Fox and headed up here. I remember you telling me about this place. We’re not far from the contingency cabin, anyone check it out to see if Robbie and Jimmy showed up.”

I shook my head. “Not yet. Not with levels still high.”

“What the fuck is up with that?” Dad, you taught us the levels would go down.

“Yeah, Frank I did. But I never had experience in nuclear war.”

Frank bobbed his head. “True. Where are we at?”

I waved him into the clinic. Ellen was working on a patient. I looked at my brother’s face, finally shock. Every ounce of color escaped him. But before he could call out to her, before anyone could or alert of our presence, Ellen did something odd. Something that took me aback.



Slowly from her patient, she lifted her head, and it was almost as if she sensed him standing there. The expression on her face, the way she turned around.

The moment she saw my brother, told me more than I wanted to face.

To be honest the reunion of the two, the emotional impact of Frank's return on Ellen, was hard for me. It truly was. I rare look of compassion my father gave me, and I stepped back. I couldn't watch. I let them have their reunion, and I quietly slipped away.

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Frank's return.

What was wrong with me?

Yes, I was gleeful and happy that my brother had returned. That he was alive and well. But I justifiably feared that what I had been building with Ellen was about to come to an end. Not to mention the fact that she was pregnant... to me.

Frank and Ellen's relationship was tricky.

They were roommates at 18, and best friends. Frank went into the service, dropped out of college, and Ellen went on to nursing. At 20 Frank met Kelly and Eloped. According to Frank, he wanted Ellen, but she wouldn't cross that line.

While at Frank's wedding in Vegas, Ellen, drunk, met Pete and married him.

Both Ellen and Frank stayed with their marriage partners, but we as a family believed that both Ellen and Frank were more than just best friends, and were for

years.

Undeniably they had a bond that not a soul could touch.

That worried me.

The entire day they reunited, hung out, talked. I didn't interfere, although I'd be lying if I said, it didn't bother me.

I told my father, I would cross the 'Frank' bridge, when and if it came to that, and against what I believed, I was about to cross that bridge.

Two things had occurred that were right up Frank's ally. My father had expressed concern for us to have a security force, I would never deny my brother Frank was the best for the job. While taking the bus for a test run, my father saw more evidence that people had been in the resort. People he believed were scoping or waiting for a moment to break into the bunker. He wanted to show Frank the evidence and see what Frank thought. Second, the transmission dropped on the bus when they took it for a run.

Just like the two things that occurred, there were two things my brother shined in. In many aspects in life, reading, writing, arithmetic, reason, my brother was, well, I wouldn't say he was the sharpest knife in the drawer. But militarily, my brother was a genius. When it came to fixing cars, he was the best mechanic I knew.

So he was out with my father at the resort, and then he was hitting the bus. I had time. I also had time all day to think.

Be chivalrous or selfish.

I sought out Ellen. I, was going to be the gentleman I was raised to be, and place it in her hands.

She was working in the clinic.

It was a tough speech to make, but I did. I conveyed to her that I didn't think Frank had survived, that I knew they had a bond, and I would be more than willing to step back, without hard feelings, if she wanted to pursue and or continue with Frank.

Ellen stared at me.

"El?"

"Let me get this straight," she said. "You are in a predicament. You think you stole your brother's girlfriend."

"I didn't say that."

She nodded. "Good, because you didn't. I'm not gonna lie to you, Hal. For many years, Frank and I had ... well; we were more than the friends we projected."

Hearing her say that, whether I knew it or not, made my stomach drop.

She continued, "But he had a wife. A wife. I was not his."

"But, surely, El, if you knew he was a live, you wouldn't start a relationship with me."

"Let's establish something, Hal. OK? I never shed a tear for Frank, because I knew, like Joe, Frank was alive. I knew it."

"Because of the bond."

"Yeah, because of the bond. But that didn't stop me from continuing on. I'm sorry; I have been, by choice, second in Frank's life for many years. I'm not second string where I automatically jump to the field when the

starting quarterback is down. That's not the way it works. If your brother thinks that way he's wrong. I never thought that way. And this ... chivalrous act of letting me go for Frank's sake ... it's pissing me off."

"El, I just ..."

"I'm having your baby, Hal."

"I know."

"I like being with you. No, I love being with you. What do you want to do, let me go, say 'here Frank, and by the way she's pregnant, but don't worry about it.'"

"El ..."

"Were you even going to tell him it was your baby, or were we gonna keep everything hush-hush and a lie."

"Elle, I was just ..."

"Or don't you want me; Hal and you're using this as an excuse not to ..."

"Hold it." Finally, I had to silence her. "If you'd let me answer a question."

"Go on," she said with impatience.

"I don't want to stop what we've started. I have been enjoying it, loving it, too. And the baby is icing on the cake. I am ecstatic. If the world hadn't blown up, I wouldn't be happier."

Ellen snickered. "You know really, you Slagels are so morbid, I would think the apocalypse was on your list of things to make you happy."

I tilted my head. "Maybe for my father."

"So, you're not ending this."

"I don't want to. I won't if you tell me that you want to keep this going."

"I do."

“Good.” I exhaled and embraced her. “But we do have a problem. Frank is not going to handle this well.”

“Please, Hal, sure he will.”

I gave her a look.

“Ok, maybe not.” She folded her arms. “I’ll tell him.”

“No, Ellen.” I took a breath. “I think it’s best it came from me.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“I am.”

“What will you tell him?” she asked.

“I’ll set him down, possibly pour him a drink. And say... Frank ...”

“Hal...”

“Ellen and I have been involved....”

“Hal ...”

I continued, “We didn’t intend on things to happen. They did. We are a couple and...”

“Hal ...”

“Then I’ll ease into letting him know you’re pregnant,” I said. “What do you think?”

With a wincing, uncertain expression Ellen pointed behind me. “I think it’s too late.”

I looked.

My brother stood in the doorway of the clinic.

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“You suck, Hal.” My brother always had a booming voice, but for some reason, walking down that hallway to

the lounge, and not wanting people to hear, his voice sounded even louder.

“God, Frank.”

“No, Hal you suck.”

“So I suck. So what. Why?”

He growled and stepped into The Fallout. “Whoa.”

“Whoa what?”

“Fucking nice in here.” He walked to the bar.

“Yes, Dad did a great job.”

“Speaking of Dad, where is he?”

I looked at my watch. “He should be here any second, we just called for him.”

Frank poured us both a drink. “I can’t believe you did this.”

“What did I do? I honestly did not set out to be with Ellen. Things happened. Circumstances were extensile.”

“But, Hal, you knew. You knew about me and El.”

“I suspected. And that means what, Frank? Ellen told you that didn’t not mean that because Kelly was gone, Ellen is yours by default.”

“It should.”

“No, it should not.”

“But it’s a brother thing, Hal. I was with her.”

I cupped my drink and nodded. “You’re right. You’re absolutely right, Frank, that is the one thing I have a problem with.”

“So why’d you do it?”

“Frank, I didn’t have a problem with it before you returned.”

“Why not?” he asked.

“I thought you were dead.”

My brother at that moment looked more perplexed than I ever saw him look. "Why would you think that?"

"Uh, maybe because there was a nuclear war."

Fran fluttered his lips. "And you think a nuclear war would kill me."

"Um, yeah."

"Hal, please, it's me."

"Frank, please, they're nuclear warheads."

"Like they're deadly."

"You're an idiot." I shook my head.

"Ah, brotherly love," my father said as he entered the lounge. He closed the door first, stating that he needed it to be private. "What's going on, boys?"

"Fucking Hal." Frank said. "Did you know he was with Ellen?"

"Yes, I did."

"Did you know he thought I was dead?"

"Well, Frank you'll have that when nuclear bombs are exploding all over the place. People tend to think they kill."

"Hmm." Frank nodded. "That's what Hal said."

"Hal's smart."

"He stole Ellen."

"He didn't steal, Ellen you asshole," My father barked. "Steal her from who? You? You were married last I knew."

"Still."

"Still my ass. You're ridiculous. At least he's keeping it in the family."

My mouth dropped open. "I can't believe you said that."

"It's true." My father poured himself a drink.

Frank exhaled. "At least it's, Hal, she moved on to. It could have been someone else here."

I raised my drink. "That's true."

"It could have been that Italian guy," Frank said.

"What Italian guy?" I asked. "Marcus?"

"No, Henry."

I looked at my father then back at Frank. "Henry?"

"Henry?" My father repeated. "Why would you say he's Italian?"

"Um, his last name. When I asked him what kind of name it was, he said Italian."

My father huffed. "Did you get a good look at him, Frank?"

"Yeah."

"And he looks Italian to you."

"I can't say, Dad," Frank replied. "People from Italy look different ways."

"Yeah, but they don't look Asian." My father snapped.

"And you're point?" Frank asked.

"My point is, he's not Italian, he's Japanese."

"No, he's Italian."

"Frank, look at him."

"Dad he said."

I don't give a rats ass what he said," My father grew irritated. "He probably was being facetious with you for asking such a dumb question."

"So you're saying Henry is a liar," Frank said.

"No I'm saying you're a moron," my father tipped his drink and brought in a gulp.



“At least Hal is moral,” Frank said.

“Thank you Frank.” I smiled.

“Yeah, if it was anyone else, they’d be sleeping with her.”

My father choked on his drink. “Did you know she was pregnant?”

“Yeah.” Frank nodded.

“How the hell did she get that way, Frank?”

“Pete.”

My father shook his head. “No.”

“Who?”

“Who do you think?” my father asked.

“I don’t know, that’s why I’m asking.”

“Your brother maybe?”

Frank laughed. “He doesn’t have sex. So how did he get her pregnant?”

I saw it. My father’s face. The my father drew up that sarcastic look. “Wow. I don’t know. That’s a tough one. Hal, you have a problem.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Anyhow ...” My father continued. “Can we move on for this meeting?”

I nodded my agreement and OK to move forward.

My father explained, “Frank and I were up there again, and it is evident, we’ve been having visitors. They aren’t camping out and leaving for a reason, Hal.”

“I agree,” I said. “We’re secure.”

Frank said. “Not enough and you know it. C-4 will blow these doors off. If they hit any remaining installation, got any gas, a good grouping of them can hit each door and infiltrate. You know that.”

“So we post a man on each door?” I asked.

“We can put Frank in charge of that,” My father said. “If that’s all right.”

In my mind that was more than all right, there wasn’t a better person for the job. “Absolutely,” I said. “Do we know who they are?”

Frank replied, “Has to be the types roaming the countryside. Causing more destruction to get what they want.”

“Do we think they’re connected?” I asked.

My father answered, “Should we assume they aren’t. Hell, we have radios, they can do. Right?”

“Right.” I took a moment to think “Frank, first plan of action.”

“Name them.”

Both my father and I gave him odd glances.

After rubbing his temple, my father said. “I know I’m just gonna kick myself for this, but why are we naming them, Frank?”

“So we know what we’re talking about.”

“Christy.” My father mumbled.

“No, Dad, hear me out. It’s easier to just give them a name. That way when we’re over the radio, we know what we’re referencing. If they are monitoring our transmission, we don’t want to say. Hey we spitted a gang of those Mad Max Wanna’ be’s. Or Men on Bikes. They’ll know we’re talking about them. Be on to our plan.”

“Not if we use a secure channel,” I said. “But, what do you have in mind.”

Frank took a thinking breath, and rubbed his chin.

“What about Mobs. Men on Bikes.”

“So you think an acronym?” My father asked.

“Yeah. But ...” Frank shook his head. “No. Mobs are just as bad as saying what they are. Oh! Oh!” he snapped his finger. “I got it.”

“What?” my father asked.

“fags.” Frank nodded proudly.

“Fags?” I asked. “Fags.”

“Fags. Forceful aggressive gang.” Frank replied.

“What do you think?”

I repeated. “Fags.”

“Yep.”

“No.” I said.

“Why?”

“I’m not gonna go on the radio and say we have Fags up ahead.”

“Yeah, Hal it means something else, too. Get it?”

“Yes. But unless you don’t realize it Frank, that’s derogatory for gay.”

“Yeah, Hal, I do. I’m not stupid. That’s why it was so good,” Frank said. “But, uh, like you said. We had a nuclear war. There aren’t any gay people left. So it won’t work, they’ll know there aren’t gay people infiltrating us.”

My father saw me ready to speak, and he held his hand to me. “Frank.” He spoke calmly. “You honestly think the nuclear warheads killed all the gay people.”

“It’s possible.”

I closed my eyes “Father you assured me he did not ride the short bus in school.”

“I lied.” My father said. “Forget it Frank. We’re not calling them fags. Let’s just take time ...”

“Oh, I got it. This one’s brilliant.”

My brother was using the word brilliant to describe his thinking. It was going to be good. “Go on, what now?”

“Ok. We want an acronym. We want a name that would throw them off. Ready.” Frank held out his hand in a marquee fashion. “Killer Individuals Driven for Survival. Kids.”

I was about to say something sarcastic. But I refrained.

“Kids. They’ll never know,” Frank said. “Never. If we do run into a bunch of children. We’ll say children. But if we say over the radio we have kids in scope. They’ll be fucking clueless.”

I had to give it to my brother. It was a good one. In order to move on, we settled on the name for the time being. We had more to discuss, we had the rebels, or KIDS to deal with. Because by the evidence my father and Frank told me about in the resort, they were gathering above us more frequent.

Trouble wasn’t just possible it was brewing and imminent, and I had no doubt, that we would be ready.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

There was something about my family. We all had this internal, gut instinct that was rarely wrong. Each of us had it in a different field. My father saw the tiniest bits of evidence that our resort was being visited.

He had that gut instinct.

Frank immediately implemented his safeguard plan for the bunker.

He secured off the North, South, and East tunnels, making it impossible for anyone to access them from outside, yet easy for us to use as an escape route should it be needed.

He allowed the West tunnel to serve as our main tunnel. There was a reason for it. The outside entrance was two wooden door at the end of a long concrete driveway hard to hide, and it led to the main vault. We used that tunnel for leaving. Mainly because in case we were being watched we didn't want them to see a secondary way in.

Finally the buses were ready to roll, and I was going to drive one, my father the other. Frank and Ray would come along as back up security.

Henry had just rolled the first bus outside when he spotted something suspicious in croquet area of the resort.

Within minutes of him calling it in, from all angles, at least fifty men on motorcycles arrived. All of them armed, all of them headed in the same direction. The West tunnel.

Henry called it in.

"We have kids heading west," Henry said.

That's when I truly got to see it. My brother in his hero glory. Calm and cool, Frank had a plan. He handed me my weapon in the armory, stating, I probably wouldn't need it.

He had a twinkle in his eye, almost as if it were Christmas. He had one rifle, but as we left he handed me a gas mask.

‘You know the routine,’ he said.

Actually, I knew the military routine. I didn't know Frank's. I also did know my big brother had it all planned out.

He led me out the main vault door. I could hear the motorcycles coming. It was seconds. Maybe.

He ordered Henry to secure the outer door, then he told Marcus to ‘hit it’. Upon his command, the lights in the tunnel went out, all emergency lights failed to work, and we were in the dark.

“Hal, mask.”

I secured my mask over my head.

“Against the wall.”

What wall?? I couldn't see. I backed up until I hit something.

Headlights.

Motor noises.

They were coming full force to our front door. As I knew they would have to stop. They couldn't break down the vault door with motorcycles.

Where was Frank?

Just as the first batch of cycles hit, I heard it.

Pop. Pop. Pop.

The sparks lit up the tunnel with a green

illumination, and I could see the smoke.

“Watch out!” Frank ordered.

And I knew what he met. In the glowing of the explosions I saw one cycle plow to its side as the driver passed out. The bike skid my way and I had to back up quickly.

I could hear, bikes dripping, squealing, crashing.

“Ready!” Frank called out. “Now, Marcus.”

The lights went on, and Frank open fired. I joined him.

We had taken out about fifteen motorcycle riders, before there were no more coming. I followed my brother in his rush of charge into the remainder of the tunnel.

I would be lying if I said I didn’t question why he killed them straight away. He made the decision to take them out.

What if they weren’t there for malice?

Frank simply stated, if they were there for a good reason, they wouldn’t have stormed the tunnel.

He was right.

The situation was under control in less than ten minutes.

It was then I realized, my Frank was the best person to insure our sanctuary stayed just that. A sanctuary.

Even though it was time to leave to get the submarine occupants, because of the sneak attack, Frank stayed behind, just to be on the safe side. My father joined us on the rescue just in case there was trouble.

I hoped not. But we didn’t know.

The trip to Washington DC would take about two hours. It was going to be a very long two hours. Not only

did we have miles of barren highway to drive, but we had the uncertainty of what could be riding on those highways. Not only that, there was an unsettling feeling about viewing Washington DC. After all, it was our nation's capital. A symbol of our democracy. Seeing it in less than all its glory was probably one of the most disturbing thoughts I had.

It was a music I had no choice but to face.

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I thought it was a twisted irony that America's new wonder bomb was the type of bomb used to wipe out our nation's capital. Perhaps it was the enemy's way of saying something. Or maybe the enemy wanted to preserve the capitol when they tromped our soil.

We all could think pushing the button would lead to the ultimate victory, but there was no winning this war. No land invasion from a foreign country, when the bombs stopped, they stopped. Destruction complete. In my opinion, which was just based on what I witnessed, both sides were too consumed with their own damage to think any further about war.

We destroyed ourselves, now we had to concentrate on rebuilding ourselves and our countries.

I knew it would happen.

The highways around Washington DC were crammed.

We took the back ways into the city, as we planned to. I knew as soon as I saw the top of the Washington Monument what had happened.



Henry's comment of, "It wasn't hit," was ignorance of weapons.

"The bodies," Ray said over the radio. "You had to see the bodies in the car."

The bodies in the cars.

People leaving the city. There were very few car doors open, most cars were crashed dint each other, driven off the side of the road. The bodies had progressed so far in decomposition that it was hard to tell how they died.

I thought immediately it was a chemical weapon. Until I saw the Washington Monument.

The top of the towering object was black.

Black from being burned.

No other structure had it. In fact, no other structure was destroyed.

It was obvious that a thermobaric bomb was used. A high concentrated. I thought it was the Air Force's bad boy, obviously others had it.

The bomb exploded above its target, and the fire ball sucked all oxygen out of the air without causing too much structure damage.

A few black spots here and there, but DC remained intact.

Driving through it was evident an evacuation had taken place, but it still didn't stop us from seeing the bodies. Bodies that had just dropped in the midst of what they were doing.

Hating to admit it, but if DC was going to be hit, the way it was done, was perfect.

It was in a sense preserved.

We radioed the sub when we entered into the city. We expected the crew to be ashore, we didn't want them in the radiation too long. What I wasn't ready for, was the sight of them.

Multitudes of men.

You don't realize how many people 100 is until you haven't seen that many in a long time.

We greeted them with enthusiasm as if they were long lost family.

We welcomed them.

They were truly a sign of hope and a sign that we, as Americans, like the crew of the submarine, would rise above it all.

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The entire retrieval process took six hours and brought us back quickly to the bunker. Processing on the other hand, took some time. Although, we were pretty organized. Marcus and I had taken all the crew names, rank, and divided everyone into Dorm rooms, so they had room assignments when they arrived.

But even with how organized we were, it still took a long time. They had their belongings, their supplies.

Luella again was a bright spot, looking forward to working with their galley man on rationing, cooking, and being creative.

She definitely couldn't do it alone anymore; we were pushing 200 people in the bunker. She had her own crew. All she asked was that I informed the submarine cook that it as her kitchen.

He chuckled, said he'd happily work under her command, and the two seemed to pair off nicely.

I figured a woman with as much experience as Luella had a lot to teach the young man.

Stan worried. He was concerned about water. But, we did as he asked and secured two huge tanks to the tops of the buses. He would fill them with water and that would help.

Long term planning though, he said.

The hydroponics system would need to be expanded.

Frank had looked over the crew sheet while we were out. After complaining about my handwriting, he broke it down and claimed his men before meeting them.

I thought he was ridiculous needed twenty men. He picked thirty and dismissed ten.

Twenty men.

But after hearing him out, and seeing what he had in mind for schedules, again, my brother was right on.

It was a long day. I stayed so busy; I barely spoke to my boys or Ellen. Truth be known, myself, my father, Frank, Stan, Ray, and Marcus were just overwhelmed. But it was a good feeling.

Luella saved us all dinner, and we dined with the submarine's new captain. A late night meal that was followed with an night cap.

The parties were still at it. Not as strong as the first night, but there, singing karaoke and drinking.

Now they had even more people.

My father wanted to expand The Fall out. After all we weren't using the room next to it either.

My body ached, my head buzzed a little from

drinking too fast, and I returned to my room.

I was surprised to find Ellen there.

"I hope you don't mind," she said. "I was doing some corrections for you." She sat in front of my computer.

"No, not at all."

"Oh, good." She exhaled. "I figured with all these bodies, you Hal, right now are the only source of new reading material."

I smiled.

"But, I'm finished. I'll do more tomorrow. How are you?"

"Exhausted," I told her, kissing her softly. "Everything is done. I think."

"If it's not, you'll get it done tomorrow."

It wasn't Einstein advice, however, I was thrilled over it. There was something about that moment that I loved. I reached out and squeezed her hand. She was there. I came home to someone, and it felt good.

We talked a bit more and then we retired. Ellen surprised me by staying in my room with me. She said she was cold, I think she used that as an excuse because she just wanted to stay.

We laid together in exhaustion and in mostly quiet. Ellen fell asleep first, and I spooned up behind her. My hand rested on her hip, and as I pulled her closer, sliding my hand across her abdomen, I paused.

My fingers spread across her belly.

I couldn't feel anything. But I swear at that moment, I could sense our child.

Our child.

The thought of that comforted me and I brought her in closer.

We were nearly three months into the post war. Three months. There was still a lot to do, but a lot had occurred. More than I imagined in a post nuclear war world.

It was a good day. A day that gave a bright outlook to a better tomorrow.

The rescue of the submarine crew, them joining us, the organization, the structure building, the buzz of work, and the woman I loved in my arms.

All of them were deep reiterations that it didn't matter what happened, life prevails and life goes on.

I closed my eyes and went to sleep.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I couldn't help but overhear them talking. Ray and Frank. It was always amusing, but on this day, it was unnerving.

"But would there be one," Frank said. "Seriously."

"What?" Ray snapped. "Of course there'd be one. What kind of society would it be if we didn't have a memorial day?"

"But should hit be now?" Frank asked.

"Uh, yeah," Ray said. "Tomorrow is the last Monday in May. May 28<sup>th</sup>. That would be Memorial Day. When else should it be?"

"August 26<sup>th</sup>."

I looked over as I sat there on that chair, placed in the hall with two others for my benefit outside the clinic. Ray even paused.

"Good huh?" Frank asked with a nod.

"No. Memorial Day is Memorial Day. We can have August 26<sup>th</sup> be something else. We'll call it something else."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Just ..."

"Can..." My one word stopped Ray. "Can you two have this inane conversation another time or at least another place?"

"What's wrong with you?" Ray asked.

I just answered him with a stare.

"What?" Ray asked again?

"Have you been hanging out with my brother too much?" I shook my head.

“Captain.” Marcus called my name, and walked down the hall. “From Greg.” He handed me several sheets of paper. Seven more. Makes fifteen all together.”

“I can count,” I said.

“What’s wrong with you?” Marcus asked.

Ray answered. “He’s pissy.”

“Ah.” Marcus nodded his understanding.

I read the sheets. “How the hell did they know what was going on?”

Marcus replied, “Greg made an all call out to all of our outer camps.” He smiled proudly. “Captain, Ellen is giving birth. Do you realize this is the first child born? This is big news everyone’s waiting to see if the child is fine.”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” I asked.

“Well, Hal,” Frank said. “It is your kid. Anything could be wrong with it.”

“You’re an asshole, Frank.” I shook my head, elbows on my knees and saw my father walk from the clinic.

“Coffee,” My father said and walked down the hall.

I huffed. Watching him disappear. “This is retarded.” I stood up.

“Yeah,” Frank said.

“What is this? 1950 where the father must wait in a pseudo waiting room?”

“Yeah,” Frank repeated.

“I’m going in there.”

“Me, too.”

In my first step, I stopped. “No.” I told him. “You’re the reason we got thrown out.”

"I'll be good."

"You'll stay here," I ordered. Confident and I suppose, Naive, I walked to the back area where they had Ellen.

She was in labor.

For the first time she was alone.

I don't know what I expected; perhaps Ellen would be glad to see me. Maybe it was the pain that caused the sneer she delivered.

"Where's ... where's Joe?" she asked.

"Getting coffee," I said and stepped to the bed. "How are ..."

"Out." She ordered.

"El?" I was shocked, and then I noticed her directive wasn't to me.

"Out." She repeated.

I looked behind me.

Frank stood there.

I spun. "Why are you here?"

"Man, she's having a baby and I'm just concerned." He stopped in further. "El, fuck, was your stomach that big an hour ago."

Ellen gurgled a scream of frustration, then blasted. "Out! Help! Joe!"

I was trying to calm the situation, but before I could, Frank had lunged to the bed and placed his huge hand over her mouth.

"Good God, Frank." I reached for his hand. "What is wrong with you?"

"She'll get us thrown ... ow!" he whipped back his hand. "She bit me."



As if she were possessed, Ellen sprang forward. Her throat veiny, face red. "I'm having Joe shoot you." She glared at Frank.

"Why?" he asked.

"Out." She repeated.

He waved her off. Waved her off and looked at the monitoring system. "So the higher the numbers go the more pain? Fuck"

"Joel!" Ellen cried out.

Before I could interject or Frank could cover her mouth again, my father stormed in.

"Goddamn son of a bitch bastard. Both of you out!" he ordered. "How many times do you have to be told? Huh?"

Innocently I asked. "I don't understand why I am being punished for Frank's big mouth."

"You're not," my father replied. "You're being punished for doing this to her. Out. Or do I have to call Mary Agnes?"

The sound of the name Mary Agnes didn't frighten Frank, or me, but I didn't want to deal with her, so I left wishing Ellen the best before I did.

Frank did leave with me. It was my father pulling out the revolver that did that.

We passed Dr. Parsons in the hall, the submarine doctor; he snickered at us with a shake of his head.

Frank called him an asshole.

And like two punished children we returned to the makeshift waiting room in the hall outside the clinic.

Two hours later, the hall was packed; it seemed everyone was lining up, waiting for the news.

I wanted to be in there. I really did. But a part of me wanted to wait in the hall.

The event was significant. It was the first child born. In the near nine months since the attack, 17 different camps emerged with survivors, we were all in constant contact, passing information back and forth and making plans for the future.

But the future was beginning right there in our bunker.

When I saw my father emerged wearing hospital scrubs, I knew.

He had a proud look on his face, a gloss over to his eyes, and a grin wide. "Ellen is great. Mary Agnes said to wait here till she gets us." He walked to me and embraced me. "Son of a bitch, Hal. You have a daughter."

My hand shot to my chest. "A daughter?"

"Little thing. Five pounds. Early, but good. Healthy as a horse."

I shrieked and grabbed my father, then my brother. "I have a daughter!" I shouted.

My father then said, "And a son."

I stopped. The cheers in the hall ceased immediately, and I spun to my dad. "A son?"

Frank questioned. "Which is it a boy or a girl?"

"Yes," Joe said.

"A boy or a girl?" Frank asked again.

"Frank ..." I tried to interject.

"Yes," My father repeated. "Both."

"You can't tell if it's a boy or a girl?" Questioned Frank.

"Frank," my father snapped. "It's both."

Frank's eyes widened. "Fuck," he wisped out. "Fuck. It's both."

My father seemed distressed by his comment, as was I.

"Frank?" I asked. "What's wrong with that?"

"It's both."

I nodded.

"It's a mutant. Fuckin nuclear war. Fuck. I'm sorry, Hal."

It took me a second. "What? Frank. No it's both. It's a boy and a girl."

"And you see nothing wrong with that?" Frank asked. "Wait. Stop. Neither do I."

"Thank God," I exhaled.

"Yeah," Frank nodded and gave me a hug. "I'll love it no matter what. It's family. Right Dad?"

My father stared at him, and then calmly said "You're a moron Frank."

"What?" Frank sputtered in his clueless manner.

My father barked. "It's not a hermaphrodite, you asshole. It's twins."

"Twins? Who. Two?" Frank held up two fingers.

After a roll of my eyes, I answered, "That's usually what twins means, Frank."

"Two." Frank grinned. "Oh, Hal, let me have one."

"What!" I snapped. "No!"

"Come on, please. You don't need two. Let me have one. The boy."

He was serious. "Frank. No."

"Dad, tell him." Frank insisted.

My father shrugged. "Hal, I think you should."

I blasted a repeated, 'what' at my father until I saw him grin. He was joking. But the joke didn't help matters, Frank considered that permission from our father, how in Frank's mind outranked me all the way around, even over my own children.

'Dad said,' he kept repeating.

It was annoying, yes. But even all the annoyances of my dense brother washed away the second I saw my children. They were tiny and perfect. We as a family, my father, myself, and Frank, brought the babies into the hall to show them off.

Why not.

The first post war generation. The first newborns to cry out in a different world.

My instant love for them overwhelmed me. And as I held my children for the first time, I knew I had it in me. I would fight, struggle and strive, I'd do it. Whatever it took. I held all the reason in the world to do what I could to make a better future for us all.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### *Five Years Later ...*

It was hot.

August always was. The Navy pilots that were aboard the submarine seemed to fly regular planes like they did their jets. Fast and out of control.

One would think after five years they'd get better at it.

Then again, they flew all the time. All six of them.

They were the big source of transportation between the main provinces.

Provinces. The United States of America was broken down into provinces. Five to be exact.

Admittedly, I didn't think that would occur. Just after the first anniversary of the war, we lost all contact with the president of the United States. Only to find out a month or so later, he had died.

The seventeen survivor camps scrambled and a lot of them started to panic. Wondering what would become of them.

Up to the plate stepped my father.

Like I expected anything less.

He was able to get in contact with the Chief of Staff, and together, they assured the camps, that we would emerge and continue on as a nation. It would just take time.

Time.

Within another six months, the remaining subs were located and called to port.

Called home.

They made contact with several military survival stations that were awaiting word, as well.

It took two years for radiation to cease and desist. Two years.

When that occurred, we emerged from our shelters, our ashes, and emerged to a reorganization plan that my father had already started to implement.

Everyone had a job and everyone did their part.

My part worked out best for me.

I began a wonderful life with Ellen and our children, one that my brother made impossible. He'd interfere and against what I had wished, he demonstrated how much control he had over the woman he stated he had loved his entire life.

The stress of it all caused Ellen and me to stop as a couple.

We remained close, and friends, I wished it would have turned out better.

She moved on with my father to Montana to the main 'City' as we called it. The new Capitol. I went out there frequently, courtesy of our airlines. I would eventually move out there myself when my job was done.

I stayed behind in West Virginia and did that job.

In fact, Mary Agnes, Ray and Marcus stayed behind, part of the skeleton crew, who worked the radios, monitored communication, and looked for survivors.

We were the Survival Retrieval station. Working out of the bunker and living in sections of the resort.

Search, rescue, and cure if needed.

We determined where they would go, and did that

by how they best could contribute to society.

We had to work with a lot of survivors. Retrain them to live in society. That was part of our job.

We did it well.

For post war years three and four, it was non stop. A day didn't go by without locating someone. Either by the radio or by a search crew.

But the last year went slow.

We awaited the word and the day when we could finally pack up and leave.

Leave the bunker and go to our new home.

When that would be, I didn't know. My father would give the word, and my father just wasn't giving up on finding people. Even though it had been six months since we located a single survivor. He just didn't want to concede to the fact we may had found all that were to be found.

I had just returned from our Colorado camp, and was a bit queasy. The heat and bad flying didn't help.

I just wanted to be left alone, but I knew that wouldn't happen.

Knock-Knock-Knock.

I looked up,

Marcus walked inside, "Hey, Captain, it's the 26<sup>th</sup>. What's the word?"

"Ray hasn't even been in yet. I'll get a hold of him to do it."

"Then you'll come to the rec room and tell us?" he asked.

"As I always do."

Then Marcus did something he rarely did upon exit.

He smiled ... widely, too. "I have a good feeling today, Captain," he said. "A really good feeling. This is the day."

"Last month ..."

"Yes, but it showed promise. Right?"

I nodded.

"And it's the 26<sup>th</sup>."

I chuckled. "You've said that."

"No, it's August 26<sup>th</sup>. Today's the day." He hit his fist against his chest. "I feel it. I really feel it."

I only nodded with a forced smile, and then Marcus closed the door.

I lifted the radio from my counter-desk top, and depressed the button. "Ray, come in, over."

"Yeah, Captain, I hear you." Ray's replied.

"It's the 26<sup>th</sup>, Ray, over."

"Yep, I know. I was waiting for the call."

"Did you take care of it? Over."

"Not yet. Was waiting for you to give the go ahead."

"You got your go ahead. See me when you've got it. Out."

I tapped my fingers in an arpeggio manner. I hoped in my mind, but felt in my heart that it wasn't going to happen.

I ceased being the one to ask my father. He was more prone to get annoyed and yell at me. Ray handled it, because when Ray asked if it was time, my father politely responded. "Not yet. Give it another month."

When I asked, he told me, "Christ, Hal, patience."

Patience.

It was running thin, but then again, I volunteered for the mission.



I just wanted to leave and live with my children.

How long did I sit there staring at my fingers, listening to the sound of my own finger-tapping drum beat.

Longer than I thought.

Another knock at the door.

I wanted to blast Marcus for knocking again, but I didn't.

"Come in," I said.

The door opened and Ray stepped inside. He was catching his breath.

"Ray?" I stopped rocking in my chair, and stood up.

"I ran all the way here," Ray said and heaved in a breath. "Captain, I just spoke to your father."

"And?"

Ray smiled.

I didn't need to hear anymore, a shouted out the biggest; 'Yes!' that ever emerged from my mouth. Ray and I embraced as if our team had one a championship game.

I, too, had to catch my breath.

"Joe said to get out shit together, fuel up the plane ..." Ray smiled again. "And come home."

"Home." I repeated the phrased and tried to slow my heartbeat. "Let's tell the others the good news shall we?"

Ray nodded.

I placed my arm around Ray and gave a jolt of enthusiasm as we left my office.

We walked taller down the hallway. We arrived at the recreation room to our skeleton crew who all stood when they saw us.

Marcus stepped forward. "I was right, wasn't I?"

My answer was a nod.

"We're leaving?" he asked.

I gave another nod.

Exuberant cheers filled the room. It reminded me of the day we informed everyone that radiation levels had fallen.

We celebrated, but didn't waste any time. Why would we? We had been there five years, living in a constant reminder of all that happened to the world. Staying behind while the rest of our country rebuild, grew, and thrived.

Kept in the dark, kept in the past.

Not for long.

Once and for all, we were leaving.

And like everyone else we knew and loved, we were moving forward.

Once and for all.

A new beginning.

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## About the Author



Jacqueline Druga-Johnston is a native of Pittsburgh. She is founder and Editor in Chief of LBF Books. She is a prolific writer, and currently resides in Pittsburgh with her husband, Chuck, and their abundance of children.

