

THE SILENT VICTOR REVISTED

J. Druga-Marchetti

This book is dedicated to my father, and his memory, for without him the character of Joe would have never been born.

And special thanks to . . .

The Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, for continuously answering my questions. I know you were afraid for a while that I was actually a terrorist. Steve--you really gave me the encouragement. To Terri, and Trish, for the words of permission that gave me confidence to re-write AGAIN. Denise, I really gave a lot of thought to what you said about the first book. It stayed with me and I used your criticism wisely. I hope you agree. Bridget, for the critic's corner emails. I am so grateful you liked the new version. Moe and Lynn for the medical help. To my father, Ron. All of your mannerisms, way of speaking, and those corny white shirts, went into the character of Joe. A little bit of you will always be alive as long as this story is read. And finally, to F., you were the reason behind my drive when I re-wrote this story. The world needs to know you. You'll never leave my thoughts.

*Thanks,
J.*

PROLOG

The Garfield Project - Beginnings, Montana

It was a small sector of their civilized lives that stood as a daily symbolization of what the world had become beyond their protective walls. A building known as containment. A place where every attempt was made to tame those who had forgotten how to be human. If those attempts were futile, they were returned to a place long since gone bad. And for those who worked inside of containment, it became a place that was a constant reiteration of the immortal words of Doctor Forrest Caceres, *‘From animals we evolved and we built a civilized world. When civilization falls, so shall we evolve into animals again.’*

The loud, long buzz precluded the double click of the silver security door of containment and it opened with a hard swing. Dr. Dean Hayes and Ellen Calaway walked through the door. They could have passed for brother and sister in appearance; both of them short, thin, nearly the same height, and their dark blonde was hair a perfect match. They moved in a quick determined stride, side by side down the long corridor.

“How old is he again, El?” Dean asked.

“Fifteen.”

“And Joe knows about this?”

“Some of it.” Ellen spoke as rapidly as they moved. “Not all.”

“He knows about today?”

“No way, Dean. I came to you first on this. You’re the doctor.”

“Is it medical?”

“I hope.” Ellen paused at the end of the corridor before a set of double doors. “We can’t take a chance that it isn’t. He’s just a kid, Dean. He needs an excuse.” She pushed open the right side of the double doors.

Dean had momentum, but he stopped the second he stepped into the over sized recreation style room. Four men were there, burly, straggly, sitting around a table. All of them stared long and hard when Dean walked in.

“El?” Dean’s eyes shifted. “Why do I feel like I just walked into a bad movie?”

Ellen saw Dean’s hesitation. “Dean.” She tugged his arm. “Forget them. Jason is over here.”

“How do you work in here?” Dean asked, leaving the eye contact with those who stared at him like hungry wolves. He followed Ellen, and then Dean saw Jason.

Curly blonde hair, Jason was thin. He huddled in a corner, arms crossed and shaking. He just stared blankly out.

“Jason?” Dean’s voice softened as he neared the boy. “Hey.” Quickly Dean looked at Ellen. “Did he get hurt?”

“No.” Ellen shook her head moving with Dean. “He just snapped again. Shut down. Dean, we have to help him.”

Taking a deep breath, Dean took another step. He wanted to reach Jason, and not just physically. “Jason.” Dean lowered to a squat before the teenager. “Hey, guy. Did something happen? Did someone ...” Dean noticed it and it sent a warning signal through him. Jason’s heavy shifting of his eyes. “El, Something is wrong.”

“What? Is he sick? Is he hurt?”

“No.” Dean began to stand at the same time as Jason. “No, something is wrong. Get ...” Before Dean could finish his sentence, with a vengeance, Jason swung out his leg nailing Dean in the side of the face, sending Dean’s small frame body flying back and landing on the floor with a slide. He lifted some, on hands and knees, to see blood pour from his split cheek down to the floor.

“Dean!” Ellen shrieked out and raced for him only to be halted abruptly when Jason snatched her from behind, and with a grip of her hair, nearly lifted her off her feet. In her struggles to get free, she watched one of the four men stand up lunging for Dean with a chair. Ellen swung out with all of her might, hitting Jason in the gut and releasing the hold he had on her, but not in enough time to stop another attack on Dean. The chair pummeled to his back sending him crashing down to the floor.

Like a baseball player, Ellen slid on the floor to Dean. She reached for him in some sort of protective mode, hovering over him. Her trembling hand felt for the radio and lifted it from her belt at the same time she shook Dean and never took her eyes off the men, all four of them, that slow and tauntingly began to encircle them “Dean, Dean, get up. Dean, this is not good.” One hand on Dean, eyes on the engulfing men, Ellen depressed the button on the radio and released one single call for help just as an arm swung down at her. “Frank!”

From the clipboard, Frank Slagel’s dark eyes raised when he heard

Ellen's frantic call through the earpiece of his radio headset. He quickly glared to his father, Joe Slagel who stood across from him. "Shit. Containment." He tossed the clipboard Joe's way and without missing a beat, spun and raced his towering body at an urgent speed. He moved with everything toward center town.

With a 'slam' his hands met the main door to containment flinging it open in his heavy barge in. Barely did the second door buzz and Frank was through it, racing down the corridor to the double doors. The second Frank opened those doors he saw Ellen being struck. She spun fast and hard to the floor. The four men were so engrossed in their game of overpowering, that they never saw Frank enter the room. Just as the one man reached again for Ellen, Frank reached for him. With a tight grip, Frank's huge hand grabbed the back of the man's head and lifted him off his feet. Like a freight train with emotional speed, Frank pivoted his body, charged forth with a grip on the man, and he rammed him face first into the wall. Blood splattered outward against the shattered plaster. The man dropped lifeless. Frank didn't stop. With a standing turn, he pulled his revolver from his shoulder harness, clicked back the hammer, and extended his arm. In his view, two of the men were open. Quickly Frank fired the first shot, shifted his arm and fired the second. Both men dropped, but the third fast approached Ellen from behind as she stood.

Frank held the revolver firm with two hands, raising it up, seeing his safety scope disappear by the split second. Time was short, the shot was tight. With a slight twitch of his right eye, Frank clicked back the hammer and fired.

Ellen actually swore she heard the close bullet sail by her ear, and instantly she felt the warm blood spray against the side of her face as her assailant met his end.

Frank watched the man fall, just as Jason leaped on his back, searing his teeth into Frank's shoulder. Ignoring the pain, Frank reached back, grabbed the shirt of the boy, and flipped Jason over his shoulder. Dropping him to the floor, Frank clutched the front of his shirt, yanked him forward and aimed his revolver point blank in Jason's face.

"No!" Ellen lunged forward, pulling Jason from Frank's hold. Hysterically she blocked the boy with her body. "No! Don't shoot him, Frank. Don't. He's a kid! Please." Her head dropped when Frank's arm did. "He's just ... a kid."

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He could have been considered a large man, but next to his son, Frank, Joe Slagel looked small. They barely resembled father and son. Joe's features were in total contrast to Frank's dark appearance. Unlike Frank, whose face held lines and scars that displayed every instant of hardship he had endured, Joe's age failed to show. Despite age and appearance, Joe was one thing, and that was why he lead the community of Beginnings. Joe was the meaning behind the word strength.

He paced about his small office, making his way to his desk around Ellen who sat center-room. Before sitting, Joe looked quietly to Henry Kusakari, a thin Asian man with long coal-black hair, then to George Hadly, older, stout and wise. Both men sat off to the side observing.

Joe let out a heavy breath and ran his hand his hand ran down his face just as he lowered into the chair. But he shuddered and jolted when the door of his office opened with a bang and in walked Frank.

Joe slammed his hand down hard on his desk. "Must you make an entrance every single time?"

"Yes." Frank's deep raspy voice reverberated in the quiet office. "I must." He shut the door and marched towards his father, eyes shifting to Ellen.

"How's Dean?" Joe asked.

"Awake now." Frank looked at Ellen. "Dad, I hope you made a decision, because the kid has to go."

"No!" Ellen sprang up defensively. "This is such bullshit." She spun around to Frank. "He's a kid."

"He's a kid that started this shit." Frank blasted back. "Dean is down. He took a chunk out of my shoulder ..."

"Oh, yeah, Frank, I'm sure that hurt."

"Then what about you?" Frank reached out placing his hand on her chin. "Look at your face." Ellen flung her head to the right shunning his hand. "You think you can handle him if that happens again?"

"Yes."

Frank made a buzzing sound. "Wrong!" He faced Ellen glaring down at her. "Just like you think you can handle everything else? Well, it's a different world now, El, with different rules. When you gonna learn that, huh? When it's too late?"

"He's a kid." Ellen raged her only line of defense.

“He stopped being a kid the second he became an animal!” Frank’s face was red. “Tell her, Dad.”

“Ellen.” Joe whispered out as he rose from his chair.

“Joe.” With such desperation Ellen turned to face him. “Please.”

“The kid goes. I’m sorry. Frank?” Joe motioned his head with a twitch. “Take the kid out the back.”

Ellen with glare and hostility, said no words, her anger conveyed itself through a grunt and she barged past Frank bumping into him as she flew from the office. Frank, hands on his hips, closed his eyes at the slamming door and shook his head. He took a moment before he too left Joe’s office, but only to do what he had to do.

Silence. It was over. Another round in the battle of moralities. With eyes that searched for an answer, Joe looked at Henry and George. “How ... how did we get to this point?” With no response to be given, Joe slowly lowered back down to his chair.

THE BEGINNING

*No one said life would be easy
No one said life would be fair
No one said life wouldn't end
With one simple breath of fresh air*

FIVE YEARS EARLIER

**MONDAY, MAY 4 - 11:50 a.m.
Reston, VA**

His hands were large and strong, and so was his stature which seemed to hide the age behind his fifty-two years. Joe Slagel leaned some toward the trunk of a black car, the protective vest her wore barely fitting. His one hand rested on the back of his neck, the other smoothed out across a map. He explained with authority to the six men who stood behind him, "Davis, you take the rear porch, and hold up there until you get my signal. Brian, you ... Where in the hell is he?" Joe turned around, his head looking back and forth for his partner. How hard would it be to spot a six foot four, skinny, red haired 'pup' as Joe referred to him. "Brian, get over here!" Joe scolded.

"Sorry, Joe." Brian hunched some in his walk over to join the others at the car. "My uh ..." He held up a paper cup. "... coffee."

Joe continued, "We have all bases covered. We haven't seen any action or movement from within that house for over fourteen hours." He indicated two blocks down the street to the small white and blue frame house. The were blinds drawn. "Now we can go in as soon as our immigration guys show up." He lifted his head to the sound of two cars pulling up. "Which they just did." Breaking free from the huddled group, Joe hurried his way to the first suited gentleman who stepped forward. "Joe Slagel, CIA." He extended his hand.

"Daniel Kennedy." Daniel removed his sunglasses. "We're ready when you are." He called his four guys in. "What's going on?"

"Basically, we believe in the house are eight members of a terrorist cell. We've been tracking them for years. Unfortunately, we have been unable to bring them in on anything, not even a traffic violation. For months, threatening faxes have been sent to the CDC, we feel it's them. Yesterday we got a tip from the Jensen Manufacturing Group that they sent a shipment to the house. A shipment that did not contain anything illegal, nor anything by law they were not allowed to send. However, the contents, if combined correctly could be used to make an explosion device."

Daniel Kennedy listened with a nodding head. “That’s where we come in correct?”

“Correct. Your people confirmed this morning that one of the eight, an Izan ...” Joe cringed as he looked over his notes. “...something or other, is not registered with the department of immigration and naturalization. There’s our ‘in’ to enter the premises. We surveillanced this house for four months. At zero, three hundred hours yesterday, all eight were in there. However, as of nine-twenty yesterday morning, they haven’t so much as turned on their cable television. So, Agent Kennedy, if you lead the way, the CIA and the FBI will be more than happy to escort you in and help with any resistance you should encounter.” Joe spoke with a smile.

Daniel Kennedy opened his suit jacket removing his revolver from his shoulder harness. Checking his weapon, he signaled his men forward.

Joe gave his signal to his brigade. Quickly, quietly and armed, they all took their position. Joe stood armed in a ready position, with Brian present, holding open the screen door for Daniel Kennedy. With a nod, a signal, Daniel raised his free hand.

Three knocks, firm and loud: “This is immigration. Open up.” He paused. “We know you are in there, Izan, open up!” Daniel took a firmer tone. “Open up or we are coming in.” Still nothing, Daniel stepped back. “All yours, Agent Slagel.”

Looking pleased, Joe reached for the doorknob—locked. He adjusted his headset radio and spoke softly into it, “On my call.” Stepping back, he held his weapon high, signaling to Brian with his head. “Now!” Joe gave one powerful kick to the door; it blasted open, sending splinters of wood flying. Barreling forth, Joe extended out his revolver as he entranced into the living room. The immediate sound of the back door smashing was the only other noise in the silent house. When he witnessed the scene, Joe did not flinch, nor did he moan loudly in disgust like the others. He covered his nose with the back of his hand and placed his revolver away. “Christ.” He sniffed outward, casting the smell of death from within his nostrils. He moved forward, peering around the living room in angry annoyance at a failed attempt. Eight men lay dead. Their faces blue, eyes wide open, bodies reeking an odor he was unable to ignore. Seven lay scattered about in no particular order, dried gray and brown vomit spewed forth on and around them. Their suicides evident by the open empty bottles of drain cleaner that laid upon the coffee table.

The eighth man was their suicide note. Rather the sacrifice in the writing of it. He sat in a chair, legs extended, head slumped to the right, his

long brown hair covering his face. His right arm hung down, the wrist cut deeply, and below his lifeless hand was the pool of blood that the other seven had used for their ink.

Joe looked to the note, written big across the far wall of the living room. Clenching his jaws, he faced his entourage. “Pick it up gentleman, we have our work cut out. Brian?”

“Yeah Joe?”

“Let’s get some pictures of this wall, and find me a handwriting analyst. I want to see if this matches what the CDC has been getting. I doubt it though.” Emotionless, Joe once again read the note on the wall. Their final words, their warning. In big brown letters, slanted upward, it simply and eerily read: “This is the end. Get ready ... Be prepared.”

WEDNESDAY, MAY 6 - 11:15 a.m. EST
30 miles southeast of Hawaii, Carrington Research Island

Doctor Catherine Donovan snapped her fingers along with orders to the Center for Disease Control assistant that walked alongside of her. She had exited the large gray research building that could be seen from the shore. The flowers fresh, alive, tailored the path that led to the small grade that took her and Jan to the beach below. A cool ocean breeze swept through her dull, short blonde hair. Her flowered polyester dress was somewhat wrinkled from just dropping it in her bag. But she was glad to have it on in replacement of the biohazard suit she had been wearing. She walked awkwardly in the flat shoes she wore, like a man would. In fact Dr. Catherine Donovan was built much like a man, big, stocky. However, she found herself attractive and that was conveyed across to everyone she met.

Catherine paused before heading to the beach. Such an ideal place to work and live as all of the Carrington employees did. Catherine would have been jealous of all of the doctors there, if it had not been for the reason for her visit. A distress signal sent by the research island to Carrington main office. A distress signal that brought the CDC.

A place perfect, yet now quiet, not even the sounds of birds were heard. For they, like the inhabitants of Carrington research island, had dropped, seventy-two hours earlier, in the midst of their life. The feathered creatures lay on the beach, walk ways, and anywhere they fell in death. The people of the island--the same. Such horrificness that had struck them. Quickly, painfully and at the same time. Suddenly and abruptly death hit them, and their bodies lay at desks, fallen from bikes, on the playground and even in the showers. The CDC and Catherine were just getting to that phase of everything, the accounting and removal of the bodies.

Whatever it was, remained a mystery. Catherine and her crew determined though, it was something Carrington was working on. It released itself into the air, the water, and like a time bomb it exploded, taking all but two lives. Leaving shells of bodies, shriveled some, blistered and drained of all fluids. Fluids that had made their escape from them one way or another. A chemical agent, not a trace of it left. No where. Not even in the air. That revelation was what allowed for Catherine and her crew to now walk the once beautiful island, free from the restriction of the protective gear they had previously worn.

Catherine took another step toward the beach to wait for her people to bring the bodies. The closer to the sand she drew, the more in focus they became. Or rather *he* became. Shielding her eyes from the sun, Catherine studied him—the new comer in an army uniform. He barely could be seen hunching in a squat to the water's edge. His hair blew around. "Jan?" Catherine called curiously. "I see the army has arrived."

"They have." Jan stood next to Catherine.

"Who's ... who's the kid?" She pointed to him at the beach. "I can't believe they sent a kid to do a man's job. He'll screw up all our work." Perturbed, Catherine headed toward the man. One of ten that had arrived.

"Catherine ..." Jan tried to stop her marching superior.

Catherine ignored her assistant, calling out to him. "Excuse me." She approached the younger appearing man. "Excuse me ..."

"I'm Lieutenant Hayes." He stood looking up to the woman that towered over him.

"I'm sure you are." Catherine placed her hands on her hips. "I know why you people are here. I want you to know that my people have worked very hard."

"I've read your research, thank you." Lt. Hayes placed his water sample in a box. "Now if you'll excuse me."

"No, I won't. Do you know what you're doing?"

His silent laugh produced a smile, a bright smile across the boyishly handsome face. "I thought you said you knew why we're here. If you do, then you know the United States government has every right to be here. You've done your job, Doctor, thank you." He started to walk from her, his soft spoken voice suddenly taking on edge. "Hey!" He called out to two men who carried a body bag. "No you don't." Lt. Hayes ran to them, halting them. "Take that body back. Take that body back now. I don't want a single body, specimen, culture or sample leaving this island without my viewing it. Understand?"

Catherine and approached him. "I'm afraid you don't understand the importance of our part in this."

"No." Lt. Hayes faced her, more serious. "I'm afraid *you* don't understand the importance of *our* part in this. Now you either stop your people or my men will." Lt. Hayes walked from her a few feet to one of his own team. "I need to review everything. Do not let anyone leave this island at all." Returning to his things on the beach, he saw Catherine still standing there. "Now, Doctor." He spoke to her. "We can work together on this or apart."

“I don’t work with children.”

Biting his lip, and closing his eyes tightly, Lt. Hayes twitched his head to the left. Refraining himself from insulting the woman, he grabbed his things and walked away.

Jan, Catherine’s nervous assistant, rushed to her. “Catherine, do you know ...”

“Who was that arrogant little shit?” Catherine pointed as Lt. Hayes barked orders on his route to the research building.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. Do you know who that was you were speaking to? That was Lt. Dean Hayes. *The* Lt. Dean Hayes. The virologist, DNA specialist, top mind in his field Dr. Hayes. Ring a bell?”

“Oh shit.” Catherine turned stunned, her mouth dropped open. “*That* was Lt. Dean Hayes? You’re kidding?” Her eyes shifted back to Lt. Hayes who was fading from view. “God, he looks twelve.”

**Thursday, May 28th - 10:33 p.m.
CIA Headquarters - Washington, DC**

The chair squeaked loudly as Joe plopped down. He had the same beat up brown chair for so many years he was beginning to use duct tape to hold it together. But it was his favorite chair and Joe swore, other than the commode, he did his best thinking there.

Exhausted mentally, he leaned as far back as he could in that chair, rubbing his eyes. Possibly trying to rub away the tiredness of a case that was far from over. A case Joe feared wouldn't be over for a very long time.

Zero progress had been made in figuring out why eight men were dead after leaving an ominous message in blood on the wall. The same message that had been sent over and over to the Center for Disease Control. He had tips, yes, but they went about as far as a cheap ball point pen.

Snapping from the memory of his eventful day, Joe sprang forward in his chair at the same time a folder dropped upon his desk before him. Raising his tired eyes, Joe glanced to his partner, Brian.

"Christ, what now?" Joe asked when he saw the look on Brian's face.

"Centers for Disease Control received another fax while we were in Reston."

Taking a deep breath, Joe hesitated before opening the folder. "Just tell me. Same message?"

"Yep. Little warning like always. Saying the same thing we saw today. Get ready. Be prepared." Suddenly the corner of Brian's mouth raised in a sneaky manner. "But he made one mistake. He used the same copy store in New York."

Joe's tired eyes opened wide. "Tell me. Tell me we got someone that saw him."

Brian's smiled. "We got a lead."

DAYONE

**Friday, May 29th - 8:15 a.m.
Fort Suix Research Facility - Nebraska**

The folder set before General Green was thick. A black man in his late forties, strong and tall, allowed a smirk smile to pass across his thick lips as he glanced up to Lt. Dean Hayes in uniform.

A sweep of his index finger across his military mustache and General Green, hand on folder, leaned back some in his chair. "Carrington's done, Lieutenant?"

"Unfortunately. And I, um ..." Dean cleared his throat in nervousness. "I apologize for my error, sir."

"Error? The 'I'm the best at what I do and never make a mistake' Lt. Hayes admits an error?"

Dean tilted his head while holding up two fingers an inch apart. "A small one. Not a complete error. I dismissed it too soon."

"Give me what you got."

Dean pointed to the folder. "May I?"

"Be my guest."

Turning it to face him, Dean pulled out the top sheet. He handed it to General Green. "Carrington Research Island. Isolated. Located about one-hundred-twenty-five miles north of Kauai. The residents of the island are those who work for Carrington and their families. Dedicated solely to the research of biological growth formulas. So ... why do we have this?" Dean walked over to the television, pressed in the tape that waited, turned on the set and stepped from General Green's view.

The tape began to play views of the island. Documentary style footage showed dead birds, shriveled bodies, remains lining parking lots, beaches, and even playgrounds. All seeming to have lost their lives on the midst of whatever they were doing.

Dean shut off the tape. "Everything on that island was wiped out in a matter of seconds. Not a trace of anything was found in the air. Nothing. Chemical agent? Hardly. Try biological agent spewed out into the air when

their ventilation system reversed during the accidental spill.”

“Biological?”

“Synthesized version of the Bubonic Plague.”

General Green leaned back in his chair. “Any thought to a connection between this and those threatening faxes to the CDC?”

Dean lifted his hands up and roped them. “Could be. Couldn’t be. Carrington is a private corporation. Why they are recreating the bubonic plague is beyond me. Someone has them doing it. But the ‘why’ is not my job. Anything more than what the germ is would be matter of personal opinion.”

“Then let me hear it.” General Green folded his hands. “Give me your personal opinion.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Dean stated firmly. “Doesn’t matter if there is a connection between Carrington and the faxes to the CDC. I have said it from the get-go. If the Centers for Disease Control are receiving terrorist threats, then, in my opinion the situation should be taken as seriously as if God himself wrote the same message to the pope. They both could mean the same thing if the warnings are legitimate ... Armageddon.”

**May 29th - 10:20 a.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut**

Happy little cartoon animals and bright red balloons graced the lab coat of Ellen Calaway. Ten years she had worked in the same doctor’s office, and she still managed to portray cheerful and happy. She surfed the radio for a better selection of music in the small examining room. With her fingers adjusting the knob, Ellen head banged to the rock beat; she wanted to find something to soothe the worried and wiry little patient that waited on the doctor. “Better?” Ellen asked turning around.

Mrs. Edith Conrad’s hands gripped tight to her own bony knees. She shook her head and puckered her ninety year old face. “No. Oh, Ellen. No.”

“Really? Seems like something you’d go for.” Giggling, Ellen turned around and tried again. “Better?”

“Something softer. Please.”

“Kind of need something to get you into that striptease mode. Huh?” Ellen found an instrumental. “There.”

“Better.”

“I thought so.” Ellen grabbed the chart. “Well, I’ll just go tell Doc Breyer you’re all ready and he’ll be right in. He looks forward to these yearly breasts exams you know.” Ellen winked and while still looking at Mrs. Conrad, opened the examining room door and nearly pummeled over Doc Breyer.

“Pardon me, Ellen.” The silvery Doc Breyer aid his hands on Ellen’s shoulders.

“That’s all right. Here’s Mrs. Conrad’s chart.” She moved to leave.

“Ellen.” Doc Breyer called her in a whisper. “She’s still dressed.”

“Let’s just say she believes in that x-ray vision of yours.”

Doc Breyer shook his head, paused then: “Oh, Ellen.” Doc Breyer called her again.

Ellen nearly skid to a stop in the doorway. “Yes.” She turned around with a smile.

“Pete’s on line two.”

“Pete.” Ellen drew up an odd look. “Pete. Pete.”

“You’re husband.”

“Oh, yeah. Pete. Thanks, I’ll take it in your office.”

“I’d really rather you ...” Before Doc Breyer could finish, Ellen was gone and the examining room door closed. “... not.” He placed on an old smile, chart in hand and faced Mrs. Conrad. “Edith, you’re looking good.”

“Did did... .” Mrs. Conrad pointed to the door. “Did you ever wonder if Ellen is really all there.”

Tacky, paneled and smelling like cigars was the atmosphere of Doc Breyer’s office. Every other aspect of the building was redone and modernized except for that office. Ellen hated it, but it was private and she needed to use the phone.

Like a warning sign, that blinking red light flashed at her. Cringing, then taking a breath, Ellen picked up the phone, and depressed the button. “What!”

“Whoa,” the deep male voice spoke with a hint of a chuckle. “Easy. Why are you yelling?”

“Frank?” Ellen smiled and slowly sat down. “Why are you

pretending to be Pete?”

“El, please. I wanted to talk to you. The old guy wouldn’t tell I was calling. What’s he call us? Immoral.”

“That’s because he goes in to that lecture on how you’re married to my best friend and ...”

“Hold it. Fifteen years Babe, retract that last statement.”

“I stand corrected.” Ellen played with the phone cord. “Kelly is married to my best friend.”

“Thank you.”

“So you told him you were Pete?”

“Yeah. I’m not immoral. So I lied.” Frank smiled over the phone. “How are you?”

“Good. Now. Seeing how it’s ten-thirty in the morning over this end of the country. And seeing how I’m getting a call. Tell me. You’re not coming home, are you?” There was a long breathy silence from Frank that seeped over the phone. “Frank.”

“El. I can’t. I have detail.”

“Don’t give me the shit, Frank. I’ve known you too long. You are getting worse. It’s getting longer and longer between weekend leaves.”

“I know. But I can’t ... I can’t stand being in the house with her. I can’t. And I can’t stay at a hotel, money’s short.” Frank huffed. “I obviously can’t stay with you.”

“Frank. I know you and Kelly aren’t each other’s favorite people. But, what about your kids? You have four kids that need to see you.”

“I know.” Frank sounded humbled.

“You have to come home for them.”

“I will. Next weekend.”

Ellen closed her eyes. “Promise me, Frank. You’ve never broken a promise to me.”

Frank only hesitated for a moment. “I promise you I’ll be home next weekend.”

“Good.” Ellen let out a slight breath. “Now, serious talk over.” She kicked back in the chair, putting her feet up on Doc Breyer’s desk and swiveled left to right. “Tell me about this new Staff Sergeant that answered the phone yesterday. Is he cute?”

**May 29th - 2:10 p.m.
New York City, New York**

“Something’s not right.” Joe spoke to Brian covering his own mouth with his index finger as he did. “Look at him.”

Brian turned his head to the right to peer at Agent Johnson. He stood at the counter of the crowded copy store talking to some manager that looked as if he barely was out of high school. “Nah.”

“Yeah.” Joe placed his hands in the pocket. “Donna Devlin is the name of the woman we are supposed to meet here. Sorry, that doesn’t look like Donna ...” Joe cleared his throat when Agent Johnson headed his way. “Here it comes. Bill.” Joe raised his head. “Donna in the lady’s room?”

“Um ... no.”

“No?”

“No.” Bill shook his head. “She isn’t here.”

“What the hell do you mean she isn’t here?” Joe asked with edge. “You told her we’d be here right?”

“Right. She was really agreeable because she couldn’t take the time to miss work.” Bill told him. “But, it seems Ms. Devlin is at a uh ... tanning appointment.”

“Tanning appointment.” Joe raised his eyebrows bouncing from heel to toe. “You mean to tell me, two years I have been chasing this guy, trying to get anything even a traffic violation on him. And now, now I have what could be my best lead and I have to wait until some minimum wage copy store clerk gets her tan?”

“I believe so.” Bill nodded. “Yes.”

Joe had a less-than-subtle snicker to his tone. “Oh, I don’t think so.”

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The male receptionist at Harold’s Hot Tans wasn’t the least bit amused when a serious Joe walked in, flashed his badge, insisted on Donna Devlin’s booth number, and then laid his gun on the counter in an intimidation tactic. After screaming ‘I know my rights’ The receptionist humbly pointed Joe in the right direction.

The rooms were small and smelled of disinfect. A dark with a purple hue of light seeped forth when Joe slid open the bi-fold white door. The lid

to the long booth was open some and Ms. Devlin's nude body was partially exposed. Turning off the radio, Joe walked to the booth, hunched down some, knocked on the hood and extended his identification through the bed's opening. "Ms. Devlin. Joe Slagel CIA. I have some photos for you to look at."

May 29th - 2:55 p.m.
Centers for Disease Control - Atlanta, Ga

She appeared impatient. Pacing some, looking at the time on her watch then pacing some more before she sat behind her desk. Catherine Donovan, administrator for The Centers for Disease Control was an intelligent, strong woman. But patience was not her virtue and she firmly believed that anyone that said that to her or used that quote often were people, that by nature, were too slow for her to associate with anyhow.

A taller woman in her forties, Catherine was a contrast of fashion when one viewed her. Make up--subtle but there--always graced her average face. Her hair was plain and simple, and she wore feminine clothes, sometimes expensive ones to hide her semi masculine figure.

After about the tenth time of lifting the phone to see if it worked, and after numerous games of intercom tag with her secretary to see if that worked as well. Catherine was throwing in the towel. She opened her top desk drawer and pulled out a white business card. She chuckled in the irony of the card. On the front was a pizza shop number and some little guy holding a box, on the back was the number of some little guy that held her answers. With the card in her hand she began to dial.

May 29th - 3:30 p.m.
Fort Suix Research Facility - Nebraska

Dean wore civilian clothes. Baggy Levi jeans that bunched over his high top tennis shoes. It sounded like a mini basketball game in his lab, the way his shoes would skid across the floor when he would stop. He moved quickly; racing about, tossing things not only into a box but an open briefcase as well.

“Why do you do this every single time?” Molly, Dean’s research assistant and a motherly woman of fifty, sat at a desk watching him. “You know every time you do a lecture you take too much.”

“I know.” Dean tossed another folder. “But if I don’t take it, what if I need it. Then I’ll look stupid.”

“I doubt it.” Molly turned her chair when the phone rang and answered.

Dean scratched his head, peering at his things, trying to check off from his mental check list. “Photos, scans ... ah, yes.” He rushed off across the lab.

“Dean.”

“Molly, barring any breakdown of society as we know it I will be back Monday.” He brought a small box to his briefcase. “Any problems, call my dad’s or reach me at the hotel. And don’t forget to fax those Haiti Results of to General ...”

“Dean.”

“Yes?”

Molly held up the phone. “Dr. Donovan, CDC.”

Dean’s whole body cringed in a dramatic way. He bobbed his head and tossed the last folder in the briefcase. “Put her on the speaker phone.” Dean ran his fingers through his hair. He waited for the signal from Molly. “This is Lt. Hayes, how can I help you Dr. Donovan?” Dean continued to gather up his things.

“Since your jotting away on vacation, I guess its safe to assume Carrington’s done.” Catherine spoke over the phone.

“Not a vacation a lecture. And yes. It’s done.”

“And?”

“And that is highly classified information. You know that.”

“I also know that Carrington was my baby and you stole her from me. And ... And Lt. Hayes, you promised me you’d send me our findings.”

“And I will.” Dean closed his briefcase. “As soon as I get the clearance from General Green. I can’t do anymore.”

“Yes you can. You can ease my mind and tell me Carrington is not the CDC’s domain. This thing scared me, Lieutenant, and not much has in all

the years I've worked here."

Dean, hand on his hip, shook his head and walked to the phone. He picked up the receiver. "This goes no further than this call. All I will say to you is that Carrington is more your jurisdiction than mine."

"It was viral, wasn't it?" Catherine asked with a tad of fright to her tone.

"I have to go, Doctor. Have a good day." Dean hung up and grabbed his things. He pointed to Molly who gave him a disappointed look. "Don't ..." Dean backed up. "Don't say it. See you Monday." With arms full and a quick spin, Dean hurried from his lab through the double glass doors.

**May 29th - 3:30 p.m.
New York City, New York**

"Oh, Joe." Brian cringed covering his face, as he turned away from the window that looked into a small office. "She's ... she's pissed."

"I know." Joe reached for the door to the office.

"I knew you were wanting to rush questioning her, but ..."

"Brian, she made me wait. All she had to do was be there, right?"

"Right."

"Well, serves her right. Let's get this over with." Joe pushed opened the office door. Ms. Devlin, sat wearing only a towel turned, and not looking very happy. Joe just smiled at her, so carefree, walking around to the desk and dropping his folder. "Sorry it took so long. Let's get started." Joe plopped down to the chair, letting out a sigh of exhaustion. He then swiveled some.

"Agent Slagel, I ..."

"This is a nice chair." He hid the snicker he felt creep over her huff of disgust. "Now ..." he flipped over the folder. "Before we begin, and before you get your bare ass in an uproar, let me explain a little thing to you called ..." Joe winked. "Obstruction of justice."

^^^

Barat Ashrad wanted his apartment to be that way. Dirty. Dingy.

Dark. All the blinds were pulled as he worked around a small beat up kitchen table that set in the corner of his living room. The television played, while Ashrad worked. A small framed man, long dark hair and a dark complexion to match. His hands shook as he fiddled with a small metal box. The anchorman's speaking of the name 'Center's for Disease Control' caught Ashrad's attention for the first time all afternoon. He picked up the remote control and pointed it at the television with the horrible connection.

"... sources close to the investigation say the threatening faxes to the Centers for Disease Control are pretty much an attention grabber in wake of the recent vigilante movement against terrorism. President Hadly, a man known for not mincing words had this to say about the wave of mysterious attacks against numerous terrorist camps ..."

"Terrorism has pretty much been a pain in my ass from the day I started working for the government." President George Hadly, rough, raspy, loud, spoke in the interview. *"If it was up to me, I'd forego judge, jury and conviction, but we have laws. If people want to take it upon themselves to wipe out terrorism, and they can do it... God bless them."*

The barrage of reporter voices annoyed Ashrad and he heard all he needed to hear. He turned the television back down and continued his work on the hand held object. He raised his eyes only once after that interview from his work. And that was to the other box on the table. A mid-size box graced with a bright yellow bio-hazard sticker.

^^^

Visually, Peter Calaway would have been the perfect *Ken and Barbie* match with Ellen had the two of them ever gotten along. Tall and striking, perfect dark hair and fashion model features to his face. Peter approached his very busy secretary outside of his office. "Mare, I think I want to cancel my appointment with Jonathan Quayle, could you find him for me?"

"Where?"

"I don't know, don't you?"

"Mr. Calaway, Mr. Quayle is from Philadelphia, where do you propose I start, US Air?" Mare responded sarcastically.

"Try his home office, it's here in New York." He ran his hands through his always perfect black hair. It still looked good even after his fingers finished his ruffling of it.

"I'll do it." She returned to her letter.

"Now."

“All right.” She checked her Rolodex and began to dial. “Are you going to watch me?”

“You were getting ready to blow me off for a letter. Yes I’m watching you.” Peter stood above her and eavesdropped.

“Hello, yes could I have the secretary in engineering please, thank you ... yes, I’m looking for one of your Philadelphia-based engineers that is in town, I was wondering if you could direct me to who would know his whereabouts... Jonathan Quayle... oh really... Will he be checking in?... Thank you.” Mare hung up the phone. “She said you missed him by fifteen minutes. He is now sight-seeing before his meeting.”

“Swell. Get my wife on the phone. On second thought, never mind, she’ll just bitch.” He went back into his office, stopped and looked back at his secretary. “If Ellen does call, tell her I’m in that meeting already. I’m supposed to make it to my son’s ballgame. Shit ... he’d better be on time.”

^^^

Jonathan Quayle bounced nervously back and forth from heel to toe as he glanced every three seconds at his watch. He looked around at the herds of people on the subway—standing and sitting. He tried desperately to find a friendly face to help him. In the station he had approached three people. Not one could direct him or rather would direct him on the right train. So, Jonathan took pot luck and guessed, taking the lottery approach and jumping on the first arriving transportation vessel. But time was running short. If he remained clueless of his whereabouts, he would surely miss the six-fifteen flight back to Philadelphia, unless he his meeting was over in a couple of minutes. That was of course, if Peter Calaway didn’t leave.

Then he spotted her. If instinct served him right, she would be the one. His salvation.

‘What a friend we have in Jesus ...’ was the song her elderly fragile quivering voice hummed as she stepped onto crowded subway car 418. Mabel Owens, a petite black woman carried a purse nearly as big as her to an empty seat she knew she could squeeze herself into. She smiled, sitting down, ignoring the grunts by the two passengers on both sides of her. She passed off their sounds of irritation as them just having a long say. She reached into her purse and pulled out the only thing that she would eat until she got home

from her second job. Mabel had been doing the same thing for forty-eight years. One job to the next. Work was never an option in all of Mabel's poor life, it was a must. And Mabel worked hard, never once complaining that it was too much.

She slipped the bag of chocolate pieces out and opened the paper bag. Smiling, she offered the treat to the man on her left. He just shook his head at her. She turned to her right and offered some to the man on her right. He too, declined. "Just didn't want to be rude." She spoke to them though they didn't want to be bothered.

Jonathan approached her. "Excuse me ma'am, can you help me?"

She looked curiously at him for a second, casing him up and down before answering. "What's wrong?" she spoke soft and slow. "Did you wants some candy?"

"Um, no, thank you. But I do need something. I left my directions at the office for a meeting, and I'm lost. I need to get to a building called the Barton Building. I thought it was 47th street, I was wrong. I'm thinking it's 53rd. How far out of the way does this subway take me?"

"Well, young man, any subway will take you. You just have to get off on the right spot," she said. "However, you ain't gonna find the Barton Building on 53rd. It's on 57th."

"Are you sure?"

"I oughta be, I've been cleaning offices there for eight years. I'm going there now, you can follow me if you like. Who you goin' to see?"

"Peter Calaway."

"Oh, Mr. Calaway, he's on the ninth floor, nice-looking family he has."

"Oh you know him?"

"No, no, no, I clean his office. You just stay right by me. We should get there 'bout ten minutes or so."

"Thank you, ma'am." Jonathan smiled.

"Mabel, my name's Mabel. Best make sure you stand by with me, and get by the door when I do. Most of these folks gettin' on aren't gettin' off in the city, so they may block you in."

"I'll do that."

Mabel again extended her bag of candy. "Sure you don't want some." When he declined with a shake of his head, Mabel settled in, sliding down some and she picked one piece of candy out of the bag, crunching and enjoying them while she rode to her next destination.

**May 29th – 4:05 p.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut**

A single beep and Ellen disconnected the call she had just finished on her cellular phone. She smiled dropping the phone in between the front two seats. She looked next to her at her ten year old son Josh, who just gave her one of those ‘Mom you’re so weird’ looks. A smaller boy like his mom, only with curly darker blonde hair that was just about ready for his summer crew cut. “Good huh?” Ellen nodded. “That ought to do it.”

Ring.

Ellen giggled. “Maybe not.” She picked up the phone. “Watch.” She let it ring again while she peered in her rearview mirror to Taylor, her five year old daughter who was the spitting image of Ellen. “Ready.” She beeped the phone on and deepened her voice. “The ... cellular phone customer you are trying to reach has traveled outside of the calling area. Please try your call again later.” With another beep, she hung up the phone, laughing.

“Mom.” Josh shook his head and looked to the phone when it rang again. “Who are you doing that too?”

“Um ... no one. Don’t worry about it. Watch.” She lifted the phone again. “El-lo? El-lo?” She added a high accent to her voice. “Who is it you are trying to call please.”

“Ellen!” Peter, Ellen’s husband, blasted. “You know goddamn well who I’m trying to call.”

“El-lo? I no understand you. Thank you.” She hung up.

“Mom, why don’t you just shut off the phone?”

“Josh, no way. It’s much more fun. Here.” She handed him the phone. “Call Johnny, tell him we’ll be right there.”

“Mom, we’re at their ...”

“Oh!” Ellen shifted in her seat with excitement. “New gravel. Taylor make sure you’re buckled up. We’re gonna piss Pap-pap Joe off when he comes up in two weeks. Josh, call Johnny.” Not fast, but at a higher than she should be going speed, Ellen pulled into the gravel driveway of Kelly Slagel’s home. She hit the breaks causing a skid on the nicely laid stones; dust flew up and Ellen laughed.

Taylor giggled from the back seat. “Mommy, you’re funny.”

“Pap is gonna yell.” Josh dialed the phone. “It’s ringing.”

“There’s Kelly.” Ellen opened her door waving. “Hey.”

Josh listened to the rings. “Johnny, we’re outside. Come on out.”

Kelly Slagel’s arms were folded tightly to her thin body as she walked down the path of her home to the driveway. “Why do you do that every time Joe orders us new gravel.”

“Because I know that means he’s coming.”

“Two weeks,” Kelly said.

“Where’s your son? I want to get them fed before the game.”

“Thanks for taking him.”

“No problem.” Ellen looked up to see Johnny Slagel in his baseball uniform running toward the jeep.

Johnny stopped dead center in front of the vehicle. He looked down at the driveway. “Whoa. Pap is gonna get mad. They just brought this today.”

Ellen rolled her eyes. “Pap doesn’t scare me. Get in the car.” She pointed back and moved to her driver’s door. “See ya at the game Kel.”

“Ellen, wait.” Kelly moved to the door.

“What’s wrong?”

“Frank ... Frank isn’t coming home again this weekend.”

Quickly and at her best, Ellen drummed up a look of surprise. “Oh, no. You’re kidding. Maybe next weekend.” She leaned to get in the car again.

“I could care less if I see him. But the kids, El. They want to. I was wondering if you talked to him lately.”

“Frank? Oh, God no. I have talked to Frank in ages. I talk to Joe everyday. That’s who you should talk to.”

“I was hoping you would.”

“Why me?” Ellen asked.

“El, come on. He’s been like your father forever. You can talk to him. He doesn’t respond to me. He’ll give me the speech about what am I wanting him to do, drag Frank home by his ear.”

Ellen snickered and covered her mouth. “Sorry. I’ve seen Joe do that to him.” Ellen paused to get serious. “But really, Kel ... I’ve known Frank for many years, when he doesn’t want to do something. He doesn’t. No matter how much of a dick move it is.”

“Can you talk to Joe? The kids need to see him, El.”

“I know,” Ellen said solemnly. “I’ll talk to Joe.” She slid in the driver’s seat and hesitated before closing the door. “And Kel, I have a feeling, just a gut feeling Frank will be home next weekend.”

“Let’s hope you’re right.” Kelly shut the door for Ellen and backed

up. Folding her arms again close to her body she turned and slowly walked back toward her house.

Ellen held her hand on the gear shift for the longest time watching Kelly go into her house. Just watching. As Kelly disappeared into the small home, Ellen closed her eyes.

“Mom,” Josh called her. “You all right?”

“Um . . . yes.” Ellen snapped back. “Yes.” She threw the jeep in gear. “Let’s get a pizza.” Slower than she pulled in, Ellen backed out of the driveway, reaching for the cellular phone and turning it off. She had lost her mood for games.

May 29th - 4:20 p.m.
New York City, New York

Barat Ashrad, slowly zipped up his jacket half way as he pulled the door to his apartment closed. He failed to make eye contact with the old woman he passed in the hall. He just lowered his head and moved to the elevator. He kept shifting his eyes as if someone were watching him, bouncing nervously from heel to toe waiting for the elevator to arrive. And it did, Ashrad let out a breath, stepped inside and prayed no one else got in.

Screeching tires and stopping breaks filled the street outside Ashrad’s apartment building as six agency cars pulled up, some even on the walk. People backed up but not too far out of their curiosity to what was going on.

Joe jumped from one of the cars wearing a black bullet proof vest. “I want this building surrounded!” He ordered out to the other agents who ran bout. “Seal off all exits, and stairwells, front and back. I don’t want ...”

Boom!

Joe’s words were silenced when the first explosion rang out. Loud and deafening, it rocked the ground they stood on. The top floor of the apartment building, bellowed out with flames and black smoke. No sooner did Joe peer up to what was going on that simultaneous explosions of each sequential floor occurred. One at a time, a split second apart, all the way down from the top to the bottom. Glass and debris shattered out, and people

ran amuck to try to find cover.

Lifting up from his shield of his head, Joe began to run, focused, toward the mayhem. “It’s a diversion!” he cried out motioning his revolver in his move. “Keep your eyes peered. He’s out here.”

Brian, arms moving people as if he were swimming, lifted his tall lanky body on to tipped toes, scanning about the abundance of people. Then he spotted Ashrad down the sidewalk and moving away. “There!” Brian pointed his long arm, wedging his way through the people. “I’ll chase him by foot, Joe.” Brian said, peering over his own shoulder in his running, then he spun and began to chase full speed.

Ashrad must have sensed him because in his casual walk, he slowly looked back to see Brian pursuing him. Zipping up his coat all the way, Ashrad took off running.

Seeing this, Joe moved to his car, signaled for back-up, jumped in his vehicle, peeled in reverse and decided the best thing he could do was try to get ahead of them by car.

^^^

“Well.” Mabel crumbled the brown wrapper to her candy in her hand. “Our stops a comin’, Johnny Boy. I think we best go stand by that door so we don’t get stuck in here.” Slowly she stood up looking to the two gentlemen who had sat on both sides of here. “You boys have a nice day.”

“You too, ma’am.” The one looked up.

Mabel smiled, gripping her large purse, along with Jonathan, and she made her way through the crowded subway car to the side door. They had to get off in the city, and didn’t want to take a chance with all those getting on, that they would get stuck having to ride to the next stop.

^^^

Ashrad headed towards the main street, darting his way in and about the crowded streets. Brian, who was much larger, had a hard time as he chased Ashrad for four blocks, and lost him to the crowd. Angry at his own inability to catch him, he was relieved when he spotted Joe pulling up on the sidewalk.

Jumping from the car, gun in hand, Joe pointed to the steps in front of him. “Brian, he ran down the subway.”

Against the grain and flow of people coming up, Joe and Brian ran down the steps. When they reached the bottom they stopped cold. Rush hour. Herds of people jammed in the station. Waiting, pushing their way through turnstiles.

“You see him?” Joe asked.

Brian stood on tiptoes. “Yeah, there he is.”

Ashrad stood near the edge of the tracks as the number 418 rounded the bend.

“Shit.” Joe took off. “We have to stop him before he gets on that train.”

“Wish me luck.” With a slight twitch of his head, Brian charged forth, veered to the left and leaped the turnstile. He knew he only had a moment as the subway neared to a complete stop; he was so close to him, but was separated by many people. In a desperation move, he drove himself into the crowd, and hurtled through the air, aiming his body face forward at Ashrad. Chest first, Brian landed on Ashrad like a wrestler coming off the top rope. Taking him by surprise, and from behind, Ashrad fell to the ground just as the subway train screeched to a halt and the doors flew open. Amongst the noise and commotion, no one, except Ashrad, noticed the small glass container that flew from his zipped up jacket and broke between the platform and train. Nor through the chaos did they notice the small amount of smoke that emerged from the broken container as it lay on the gravel near the tracks.

“Oh, my!” Mabel exclaimed as she stepped from the subway. Ashrad and Brian right at her feet.

“Back on the train, ma’am!” Brian yelled up to her.

“No sir, We’re already late.” With the attitude she always had, not a care in the world, Mabel stepped over them, tugging Jonathan, and pushed their way through the growing crowd of on lookers.

“Wow,” Jonathan said. “You’re tough.”

“Been doin’ this a long time, Johnny. Now let’s move. So you won’t be too late.”

Joe caught his breath as he stood above Brian, who was still semi on top of Ashrad. “Way to go Hercules.”

“Joe, get these people back.” Brian felt Ashrad, “I think I knocked him out cold.” He placed his revolver back in his shoulder harness and

turned Ashrad's body over. "Yeah." He looked at Joe. "He's out cold."

"Brian watch out!" Joe saw Ashrad's eyes open.

Ashrad quickly grabbed Brian's gun and scurried to his feet. His whole body trembled and it showed in the gun as he pointed it aimlessly at Brian then at the people surrounding him. He began to back up amid the screams, until he backed in to a wall. With his shaky right hand pointing the gun, he felt his own chest with his left. Ashrad's face turned pale, his eyes widened and he let out a shriek of horror. Shouting out words in a language no one understood, Ashrad looked at Joe, then at Brian, then at the gun. He placed it to his temple, pulled back the hammer and fired.

May 29th - 5:05 p.m.
The Barton Building, New York

For the first time in years, Mabel's cleaning cart didn't squeak as she pushed it down the corridor of the Barton Building. It didn't squeak because Mabel didn't push it fast. Slow she moved, her head pounding with every step she took. She had to pause mid hall to catch her balance, feeling herself grow a little dizzy. Leaning on the cart, Mabel pulled a tissue from her pocket and dabbed the small beads of sweat that formed on her forehead. She was going to steal a resting moment before she started to clean the offices.

^^^

Peter wrestled with some papers as he sat across from a blank-staring Jonathan in his office. "Now, Jon, that's basically what... Jon?"

"Huh?" Jonathan snapped back into reality.

"Now come on, I was fair about understanding why you were so late, the least you can do is pay attention." Peter continued, rattling at a fast pace. "As I was saying ... Mr. Wilson said he would handle on your end. But your Mr. Wilson stutters. Not a good impression. They barely understand us as it is. I know it's mean, but it's the truth." Peter finally stopped rambling and looked at Jonathan. "Are you OK?"

"Oh, I'm sorry." Jonathan rubbed his bloodshot eyes. "I just got the

worst headache, I mean it just hit me.”

“You don’t look so good.” Peter put down the papers.

“I really don’t feel so good, it hit me all at once.”

“Maybe you got some kind of bug or ...” He stopped when his phone rang. He pressed the speaker phone button. “Peter Calaway speaking.”

Ellen’s mighty, throaty voice blasted so loud it could have cracked the speaker. “What the hell are you still doing there?! Josh’s game starts in two hours!”

Wide eyed, Peter with quick action, picked up the receiver. “Was that necessary?” He cringed. “El, El. Ellen!” He screamed and turned his back to Jonathan. “Listen ... will you listen to me goddamn it! Yes! I’ll make it home. No, I’ll make it home!” With a slam, Peter swung down the phone and crashed it into the receiver. “I hate my wife.”

“No you don’t.” Jonathan said with a sickly chuckle. “How late are you for the game?”

Peter looked at his watch. “I can still make it.” He exhaled, and looked at Jonathan who slumped. “I’ll tell you what.” Peter handed him the stack of papers. “I want to make that game, you’re sick, so ... Put these in your briefcase, I’ll call you on Monday, and we’ll talk on the phone.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.” Peter grabbed own briefcase and jacket from his coat tree. He moved rushed.

Jonathan placed the papers in his briefcase, shut it, and looked at his watch. “I can still make that flight, and be home in bed by eight.”

“Well, let me give you a little advice, take a taxi.”

“I will.” Jonathan tried to smile as he stood up. “Thanks, Peter, I appreciate it.” He extended his hand.

“You’re welcome.” Peter shook his hand and opened the office door. “Shall we?”

On exit out, Jonathan paused as Peter pulled his office door closed. “You know, what, I’m gonna hit the men’s room. You go on.”

“Then in that case, I’m hustling.” Peter spun in his move down the corridor, calling out as he walked quickly backwards. “Get well.” Turning blindly around in what he thought would be a mad dash or the elevator, Peter barreled into Mabel who stood at her cart. He caught his balance as his feet entangled with hers and he fell into her sending Mabel forward into her cart. “I’m sorry.” He stood straight up.

Mabel shook her head with a ‘quite all right’ look.

“You O.K.?” Peter laid his hands on her shoulders helping her up.

When he received a dazed nod, he removed his hands, backed up, turned again and sped down the hall. A split second after he pressed the down button, the elevator doors opened and he stepped in. Reaching to choose his floor, Peter felt the moisture on his hand, he raised his head to Mabel then back down to his palm that held the residue of her perspiration he had touched. Cringing in disgust, Peter wiped his hand on his pant leg, picked his floor and the elevator door closed.

^^^

Two men with ‘coroner’ written on the back of their jackets carried a body bag past Joe in the subway station sealed off with yellow police tape. No more subway patrons, only officials buzzed about, taking photographs and cleaning up. Joe made his way to Brian who squatted down near the track’s edge. Brian stared at the chalk outline and blood stain where Ashrad’s body once lay.

“Hey,” Joe called to him. “You know we not only have to finish up here, but back at that apartment building as well. I’d like to catch that nine O’clock flight.”

Brian’s head swayed still engrossed in his stare of the ground. “Where did I go wrong, Joe? Where? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“None of it does. Something smells foul and it isn’t just that dead rat behind you either.”

With a peep of a shriek, Brian sprang to his feet, spun and kicked the hard rat carcass away. It flew out, over the edge and down to the tracks. Just as Brian tried to look at Joe, he swayed to his right.

“Whoa.” Joe caught him. “You all right?”

“Yeah.” Brian shook his head. “Got up too fast.”

Joe took a step closer to the tracks. “Well, you shouldn’t have been playing Babe Ruth Footsie with that ...”

Brian waited for the end of Joe’s sentence. It never came. Joe became consumed with looking down on the tracks. “Joe?” Brian neared him. “What’s wrong?”

“Those.” Joe pointed down.

“What?”

“By your buddy. They weren’t here an hour ago.”

Brian peeked down. On the tracks were six dead rats. The one Brian himself obviously kicked, lay a foot from the pack. “So.” Brian shrugged.

“Why are we concerned with a bunch of dead rats?”

“Brain, rats just don’t come up and die within an hour. Unless they were poisoned and ... shit.”

“What?”

A grunt escaped Joe. “Brain. Why were we chasing Ashrad?”

“For sending threatening faxes to the CDC?”

“And exactly does the CDC handle?”

“Shit.”

“That boy shot himself out of fear. Fear of what?” Joe motioned his head to the rats.

“Want me to get them or you?”

“I think the younger of us should ...”

A thunderous roar of a train cut off Joe’s sentence as a subway car barreled around the bend and sped by them.

When the silence of the train’s passing was over, Joe, hands in pockets, looked back over the tracks. He whistled. “Well ...” He cleared his throat. “I don’t think we have to worry about whose getting *those* rats.”

MAY 29 - 7:15 p.m.
Flight 609, en route to Philadelphia

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is the captain speaking. We are making our approach into greater Philadelphia airport. At this time we would like you to fasten all seat belts, and place your seats in an upright position. I apologize for any delays, and we hope you had a pleasant flight.”

“Sir, sir.” The stewardess leaned in towards Jonathan Quayle, who was sleeping. “Sir!”

Jonathan jumped up, startled. “Huh?!”

“You have to put your seat up.”

“Thank you.” Jonathan placed his seat upright and stared out the window. “Home, thank God.” He wiped the sweat from his eyes. He then focused in on the air sickness bag perched half way from the pocket in the seat in front of him. He grabbed it, opened it, and vomited.

**May 29th - 7:33 p.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut**

A high piercing whistle precluded the spinning lit cigarette that Ellen tossed. She clapped her hands loudly and whistled one more time. “Yeah, way to go, Josh!” She laughed as she looked to Kelly who stood next to her. “Josh got walked.”

Kelly cringed still holding her ear. “Where did you learn to whistle like that? Joe?”

Ellen laughed again. Just as she watched Josh doing something he rarely did—get on base—her maternal radar kicked in. Through the corner of her eye, a split second before saw the concession stand, and then she saw Taylor fall. She took off running in the direction of her daughter, arriving too late to stop the shrill crying. “Hey.” Ellen softened her voice as she crouched down to her. Reaching for Taylor’s skinned knee, Ellen’s focus caught the sight of a pair of faded jeans. Legs that soon crouched down to Taylor as well.

“Hey, Sweetie.” Peter smiled his bright smile to Taylor. “Want Daddy to kiss it and make it better?”

Ellen watched Peter bring his lips to just above the cut. “You know that holds no medicinal value what so ever.”

“Hello to you too, El.” Peter lifted Taylor, and at the same time he and Ellen both rose to their feet.

“I see you took time to go home and change your clothes,” Ellen said. “Jeans, Josh’s game. I know where your priorities lie.”

Peter let out a sarcastic little laugh as he balanced Taylor who clung to him on his hip. “You’re the one to be talking about priorities.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ellen folded her arms.

Staring at her, Peter reached behind him to his back pocket and pulled out an envelope. Harshly he shoved it in between Ellen’s folded arms. He stepped to her, leaned close and whispered. “Learn to hide your love letters.”

Ellen swore her heart dropped to her stomach at that second. Slowly she reached to the letter and unwrinkled it, exposing the left hand corner and enough to explain Peter’s comment. Clearly the return address of M.SGT. F. Slagel was seen. Holding the envelope, Ellen raised her eyes. Peter walked off with Taylor.

“Everything all right?” Kelly asked as she approached Ellen from behind.

Instinctively, Ellen’s hand closed folding the letter. As she turned to face Kelly, she reached behind her shoving the letter in her pocket. “Um ...” She blinked several times. “Yeah, everything is fine.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.” Ellen placed on a nervous smile. “Yeah. Let’s uh ... let’s go watch the game.” Over her shoulder she looked to Peter who was all smiles holding Taylor by the bleachers. Then Ellen slowly walked off with Kelly.

May 29th - 8:50 p.m.
John F. Kennedy Airport - New York City, NY

“Pork rind?” Standing in the boarding line, Joe extended the bag of snacks under Brian’s nose.

“Oh, God no. They stink.” Brian quickly pushed them away.

“What’s wrong with you, never bothered you before.” Joe handed his ticket to the woman and showed her the bag as well. “Pork Rind?”

She smiled with a shake of her head and handed Joe his ticket folder.

Munching, and walking, Joe stopped mid corridor when he noticed Brian at a turtles pace behind. “Brian, Christ, Come on. You’re moving like you’re going to a funeral.”

“Sorry, Joe.” Brian’s head swayed. “I have a killer headache.”

“Well, it’s the tension, excitement.” Joe waved his hand to Brian to hurry him along.

“I don’t think it’s tension and excitement Joe.” Brian finally caught up. “I mean it’s a killer headache. I can barely see.”

“You look a little flush.” Joe, in a fatherly manner, reached his hand up to Brian’s forehead.

Brian quickly swiped it away and looked to see if anyone saw. “Joe, knock it off.”

“You’re a little warm.”

“Joe.”

“No, and I know fevers. I nursed my four boys alone through many of them.”

“I’ll ... I’ll be fine.” Brian tried to pick up the pace.

“Well, you’d better be fine. Because this day is far from over pal. As soon as we land it’s back to work and to a stack of papers three inches high. No Tylenol time-outs here.”

“You’re a real humanitarian, Joe.”

“Never bragged compassion was my forte, now did I?” Joe shoved another pork rind in his mouth, and just to be irritating, snuck the bag under Brian’s nose, watched him wince, then Joe, snickering, stepped on to the plane.

**May 29th - 9:10 p.m.
Atlanta, Georgia**

Her inhale of the aroma was so deep, Catherine Donovan risked asphyxiation by French fry via the nostril. “I swear I never thought we’d get out of there. I’m starved.” She smiled over the basket of bar food Dr. Jeff Morrows set before her.

“You were always on to dine in the finest of establishments, Catherine.” Jeff, a tall but thin man, with balding hair, set his little basket down and joined her at the table of the small local bar. Cigarette smoke lingered, the television played loudly and the patrons, already inebriated, tried to talk over the news.

Reaching for the ketchup, Catherine shoved a fry in her mouth. “We need you talk you and I.” She squeezed the ketchup on her fries.

“What about?” Jeff retrieved the squeeze bottle.

“Get this.” Catherine leaned into the table. “Carrington was viral.”

A large blurt of ketchup sprayed out onto Jeff’s food as he instinctively squeezed the bottle. “How ... how ...”

“How do I know?” Catherine calmly reached for the salt. “I annoyed the hell out of Lt. Hayes. Too bad my persistence doesn’t pay off on Agent Slagel. My imagination keeps taking off.”

“I fail to see the connection.” Jeff grabbed a napkin to wipe of his hands.

“How can you not?”

“No. How *can* you?”

“Jeff.” Catherine took on a matter of fact tone. “If you were a terrorist based country. And you wanted to build a strong biological weaponry. Would you risk doing it in your own country with President ‘I’m a lunatic’ Hadly in office. No. You’d contract out. Whoever is sending the faxes, could have contracted Carrington. Did you think of that? I have.”

Jeff had to laugh. “Catherine, please. That theory is like taking the long way around the block. It’s almost like your mind has these two problems and somehow you just want to find a connection so you only have one thing to worry about.”

“Oh, that’s stupid.”

“So is your theory.” Jeff chuckled at Catherine’s dramatic gasp. “Listen to me. First of all ...”

“... *for disease Control investigation* ...” The newsman’s words caught their attention.

Both Catherine and Jeff turned in their seats to view the television when they heard the name.

“... *has finally come to an end, tragically with the destruction of this ninety-six unit apartment building in New York.*” On the television, shots of a smoldering building, firefighters and workers were seen. “*Authorities believe the explosion originated in the apartment of Barat Ashrad, suspect in the threatening faxes to the ...*”

Jeff stopped watching and continued in his eating. “Well. You should be happy. There’s an end to one problem.”

“That still leaves Carrington.” Catherine indulged in her food again. “What if it’s *the* one.”

Suddenly Jeff stopped eating. He pushed his greasy food basket slightly aside, and folded his hands on the table. His high forehead crinkled with concern. “May I say something without upsetting you?”

“Probably not, but go on.”

“All right. Carrington was viral yes, ... uh-uh-ah.” Jeff held up a finger to silence Catherine when he saw her mouth open. “Listen to me. Viral yes. But also, you must remember, not only is the incident isolated, but so was the location. You’re worrying far too much.”

“May I speak now?” Catherine swiped away Jeff’s finger. “Thank you. It shouldn’t matter how isolated the incident or the location Jeff, it’s viral. When there’s something that unknown to us, that kills that fast and that vicious then we shouldn’t stop worrying. Because if it could happen on some tiny little island, it could happen anywhere.”

“You aren’t hearing me correctly. Never did I tell you not to worry.”

“Yes, you did.” Catherine argued.

“No, Catherine, I didn’t. I told you that you worry too much. You do. You over dramatize everything.”

So offended Catherine was and the round openness of her mouth showed it. “I do not. I’m a doctor. A scientist. My fears and concerns are always validated.”

“Eighty-percent of the time. If you don’t dramatize it. Which you do. You always have. Since the day we started working together. How long has it been? Seventeen years?” Jeff raised an eyebrow. “There’s always one person and that one is you. You’re the one who has always waited for that big virus to come. The virus that wipes us all out. Well Miss Morbid, I have news for you.” Jeff spoke assuredly. “Carrington is not it ...”

“Jeff, you seem to ...”

“No.” Jeff reached across the table laying his finger across Catherine’s mouth to quiet her. “Carrington is over. It’s dead.”

**May 29th - 9:33 p.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut**

‘Once again, President Hadly is under a barrage of criticism following his comment, that the explosion at the ninety-six unit apartment building in New York, wasn’t an act of terrorism, but an act of another dead beat alien trying to get out of paying their rent ...’

Chuck, probably Ashtonville’s burliest bartender, shook his head as he retrieved two beers from the cooler. He looked back up to the Cable Network News station that always bored his patrons, then set the two bottles on the bar. “Four bucks.”

“You rob me.” Ellen laid the bills on the table. “When do I get a free one?”

“Never.”

Ellen snickered and glanced to the television. “Look at Hadly. You have to love him. He’s so crass.”

“He’s an asshole.”

“Having a good ...” Ellen interrupted her own sentence with a loud, shrill, scream and point.

“What?” Chuck asked annoyed.

“My father, did you see him. There!” Ellen pointed again to the television. A shot of Joe so briefly was seen at the destruction of the apartment building. “Wow. I’ll have to call him.” Ellen grabbed her beers, without tipping, and moved away from the bar to the pool table. She handed one of the beers to Connie, an older woman whom everyone in Ashtonville knew as the woman who would be anyone’s friend for a drink. To the men, Connie was that *special* friend. To the women, she was that listening ear. To Ellen, Connie was the one person that made her feel like a pool shark.

“I heard you scream,” Connie said as she took the beer Ellen handed her.

“My father was on television.” After setting her beer down, Ellen chalked up her cue stick.

“I thought your father was dead.”

“He is. Joe was on T.V.” Ellen bent over the table to examine the shots.

“Thanks for the beer.”

“Thanks for listening and hanging.” Ellen took her shot. The cue stick slid across the felt and she cringed. “I screwed up, can I do that again?”

“Sure.” Connie took a drink of her beer. “So, how long are you keeping me out?”

“Not too long.” Ellen took another shot, this time she actually hit the cue ball and it ricocheted nicely across the ball filled table without hitting anything but banks. “Just until I get drunk enough or nerve enough to go home and face the music.” Ellen walked from the table and grabbed her beer. “Or until Pete gets tired of waiting and goes to sleep.”

“You didn’t mention. What exactly was in that letter.”

Slowly Ellen brought her bottle to her lips, and raised her eyebrows a few times. “Enough.”

“Oh boy.” Connie set down her beer, getting the feeling that it was going to be a long night. Even though she could put them away with the best of them, she knew her alcohol tolerance level wasn’t high enough to handle putting them away until it was safe for Ellen to go home.

**May 29th - 9:45 p.m.
The Bronx, New York**

Mabel couldn't recall it ever happening to her. Was her head pounding that bad? Was she feeling that sick that not only did she fall asleep on the subway going home, but she failed to wake up until the conductor, changing evening shifts found her in the back.

But even after three hours of sleeping, Mabel still felt tired. Never did she feel as bad as she did as she struggled in the walk to her apartment she shared with her daughter, Diane and four year old granddaughter, Tara.

She thought she would feel a sense of relief when she hit the red brick building. But instead, Mabel felt a sense of loss. She stepped into the foyer and started up the steps as if they were a mountain she had to climb. To her, with the way she was feeling, they were.

One at a time, slowly and with a slant, Mabel took the stairs. Gripping for dear life to the railing for fear the dizziness she felt would cause her to tumble backwards. With each raise of a foot to the next step, Mabel's head pounded more. Her throat burned and she could barely swallow. All the ailments that she felt, failed in comparison to the sick knot that formed in her stomach with contents that waited to emerge involuntarily.

"Mom?" Diane, Mabel's daughter flung open the door. "Oh, my God. Where have you ..."

Mabel walked by her daughter only holding up a hand. She grunted when her rambunctious granddaughter flew into her legs wrapping her arms around her. "No, no sweetie." Mabel gently and weakly took the little girl's arms from her. "Grandma's sick. Don't want you to catch it."

"Mom?" Diane shut the door. "What's wrong? We were worried. Did something happen?"

"I got sick and fell asleep on the subway." Mabel kept moving toward the hall that led to the bathroom. "I'll be right out."

"Are you all right?"

"Fine, baby. Just fine." Mabel tried to smile as she walked into the bathroom. "Could you ... could you just make me a nice cup of tea."

"Sure." Diane blinked in a stare of worry to her mother. "Are you sure you're ..."

"Fine." The door closed.

Diane's hand reached up to knock, but she slowly withdrew it. She turned from the bathroom door and in her walk to the kitchen she heard a loud 'thump'. The noise made her heart skip a beat and Diane knew where it had come from. Quickly without hesitation, Diane flew to the bathroom and pounded on the door. "Mom? You O.K.? Mom?" There wasn't an answer.

“Mom?” Not wanting to wait anymore and feeling the urgency, Diane turned the knob and opened the door. She screamed when she saw her mother on the bathroom floor near the commode. Mabel laid motionless, face down, one arm draped over the toilet and a thick long line of blood smeared from the seat to where a puddle formed and grew at Mabel’s mouth.

MAY 29 - 8:20 p.m.
Philadelphia, PA

Jonathan Quayle awoke on his bed scared and confused. He had no idea how he made it home in one piece, or how he even managed to drive home from the airport. He knew he was very ill, he had stopped six times to vomit on the way home, not including the two times he never made it to stop. Jonathan’s eyes could barely focus through the pain, he needed help, but since his wife was not home, he could only call. Why he didn’t go directly to the hospital, he didn’t know. With every bit of strength his weakened body could muster, he tried to lift himself from the bed. A dampness held him there. He had messed himself while he slept, he thought. Jonathan touched the base of his lamp to turn on the light so he could find the phone. As the light brightened the room, Jonathan’s eye’s focused in horror as he discovered he was laying in a pool of blood—his blood. Weakly, he stretched for the phone, fumbling and knocking it to the floor. Jonathan reached for it, but before he could dial, he, too, fell to the floor. Laying there next to a buzzing receiver, Jonathon lifted his head in one last final attempt for help, but died before he could get it.

May 29th - 10:00 p.m.
CIA Headquarters - Washington, D.C.

“Thanks. We’ll take care of it.” In the doorway of the large office, Joe took a thick folder from another agent, then turned and headed back to his desk. He could see the back of Brian’s head as he neared. “Christ,” Joe ran his hand down his own face. “I don’t recall being this tired. Here.” He

dropped the folder on the desk in front of Brian. “Take a look ...”

“Huh.” Brian’s head sprang up in a sort of shock.

“Were you sleeping?”

“No.” His words were short.

Joe walked around the desk and hesitated before sitting down when he saw Brian’s face. Pale, pasty, and the darkness under his eyes seemed to match a bruise like ring that formed around his swollen neck. “Brian. Are you all right?” Joe didn’t sit, he walked back to Brian.

Brian twitched his head and blinked his eyes trying to focus. “I can’t ... got ...” He spoke in a delirium.

“Brian?”

Slow, so slow and deep Joe’s words were and Brian panicked. He jumped from his chair. “No.” He held out his hands.

“Brian.” Joe reached out grabbing for Brian’s arm. The second his hand touched upon the skin, Joe retracted his reach. “Christ you’re on fire.” Spinning, Joe reached for the phone. “We got to get you to a doctor.”

“No!” Brian shouted again backing up. “I just need to throw up. I just need to ...” In a turn to get out of the office, Brian bumped into a neighboring desk, tried to grip it for a balance and in his useless struggle, he swayed and toppled to the floor.

The receiver dropped from Joe’s hand and he rushed to Brian’s aid. “Someone!” He called out as he slid to the floor with Brian. The moment Joe hit that floor, Brian’s back arched drastically, his arms flung out in a rigid movement and he began to violently convulse. Reaching for Brian while reaching for the buzzing receiver became an impossible feat for Joe. “Someone!” Joe screamed out again. He grabbed onto Brian and as soon as he did, Brian’s head jolted back and forth and like a volcanic eruption, bloody projectile vomiting shot out across the room. Grabbing Brian under his arms, Joe lifted him upright. Struggling to hold the shaking big man, Joe braced Brian’s back to his chest and wrapped his arms around him to hold him upright. Red faced he cried out as loud as he could. “Someone call 911!”

May 29th - 10:05 p.m.
County General Hospital - New York City, NY

A loud *bang* of the double doors from the emergency area to the treatment area announced two rushing paramedics. Moans of pain emerging, eyes rolling, a convulsing Mabel thrashed up and down on the cart. The emergency workers moved her at a rapid pace as vomit still spewed from her mouth. In their rushing, Dr. Thomas Levin, a young resident at the hospital, ran right long aside of them. Two nurses, stopped what they were doing to join.

“Jean,” Thomas visually examined the situation as the cart rolled down the corridor. “We’re going to start a Dilantin IV. Fifty milligrams of Valium. Clare, run me a gastrointestinal work up and get a hold of Dr. Morgan, this is right up his alley.”

“Yes, Doctor.” Clare took off running back to the nurses station, and Dr. Levin, the paramedics and Jean, continued to move down the hall and into a room.

May 29th - 10:20 p.m.
Memorial Hospital - Washington, D.C.

Brian echoed a gurgling scream as his body violently arched and flung high in the air. Up and down he bounced on the table. A doctor and three nurses frantically worked to help him. The examining table rattled and tipped from each movement of Brian’s body.

The physician’s forearm dug deep into Brian’s chest, but it didn’t help. Even Dr. Everett’s body weight didn’t stop Brian. “Someone help me hold this man down! I can’t tube him!”

Joe felt as if he were watching some sort of television show. He stood in the back near the door; Brian’s blood covered his arms, face and chest. He watched, not knowing what to do, feeling helpless as the doctor tried with desperation to insert a tube into Brian’s mouth. Brian was literally choking to death on his body fluids that kept wanting to seep out. Then Joe watched as Brian, arched up high again and fell hard to the cart motionless.

Silence.

“He’s crashed!” Dr. Everett cried out. “Get the cart! Epi! I need Epi! Nurse bag him.” Dr. Everett hurried, jumped on the side of the table and took a resuscitation position over Brian. He immediately began

compressions.

It was happening so fast. One second a nurse flew out of the room past Joe, then back in, nearly knocking into him with the crash cart she pushed.

Dr. Everett's stepped from the table. "One amp atropine, one amp epinephrin." He grabbed the paddles to the defibrillator. The nurse injected Brian and Dr. Everett's readied the paddles and brought them close to Brian's exposed chest. "200 ready and ... clear."

A click, a touch of the paddles to Brian. He jolted up and fell back down.

"Nothing. 300 and ... clear." Dr. Everett hit him again and raised his eyes to the heart monitor. "Still nothing. 360 and ... clear."

Joe's bloody hand ran slowly down his own face as he backed up even more in that room. Nothing happened to help Brian. Each futile attempt of the valiant medical staff who wouldn't quit, went through Joe with as much pain and shock, as if he too were getting hit with the machine that failed to bring back the life it was designed to.

Saturday, May 30th - 11:33 p.m. Chanute Air Force Base - Rantoul, Illinois

Frank swore it felt like he had been waiting an hour. Eyes going from his watch to his night stand alarm clock, truly thinking that perhaps one of them was wrong. But they were perfectly synchronized and it hadn't been an hour it was only a few minutes.

He laid on his bed, on top of the covers staring at the reflection the moon made on his ceiling. Pillows behind his shoulders propped him up. He rested on arm behind his head. But Frank didn't rest. His foot, crossed over at the ankle tapped the air in a nervous anxiousness. His views kept shifting. Clock. Watch. Phone. Clock.

Ring.

It shot through Frank, scaring him even though he waited for it to happen. With a smile, he hurried and picked up the receiver before a ring was complete. He roughened his voice. "You're late."

There was a long pause that came from the other end. Then Ellen,

weakly spoke, “He knows.”

“El. I can barely hear you, babe. What are you talking about?”

“He knows,” Ellen said softly.

“About what?” Frank asked then heard the long heavy breath. It went through the earpiece of the phone directly to his chest. Losing his own breath for a second his relaxed nature left, Frank swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood up. “Shit, El. When?”

“Frank, I’m just gonna ...”

“When?”

“I don’t ... I don’t want to talk about it. Right now I’m drunk, I’m tired and I’ve been crying.”

It took all of Frank’s concentration to hear Ellen. “El, listen. O.K., listen to me. I’m glad.”

“What?”

“No. I’m glad this happened. It has been too long. Let’s just get this out. Let it out. I’m so tired of hiding behind a bad marriage. I am. We’ve been doing this for so many years. It’s time that you and I ...”

“End it.” Ellen finished his sentence. “It’s time that you and I just end it.”

“I won’t accept that.”

“You have no choice, Frank. I can’t ... you can’t. Too many people will get hurt. Just let it go.”

“El ... El, wait ... El!” Frank heard the click of the other end of the line. Slowly he pulled the phone from his ear and stared at it. Dead air. Immediately, consequences to be paid or not, he dialed the phone. Busy. In a fit of rage, he spun around slamming down the receiver to the base and so at a loss of what to do.

**May 30th – 11:35 p.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut**

On the floor of her dining room, Ellen sat huddled in a corner. Her legs bent up and brought close to her chest. Her arms wrapped tightly around them, holding them closer to her like some type of security blanket. She was grateful that the buzzing of the phone had stopped. She stared at it, receiver

off the base, still where and like she dropped it the second she hung up on Frank.

Slowly, she cringed in a burning pain. She brought her two fingers to the corner of her lips and pulled them away to look at them. Blood graced her fingertips from her bruised and swollen mouth. Wiping her hand on the side of her jeans, Ellen shed a single tear, rested her cheek against her knees and closed her eyes.

May 30th – 11:45 p.m.
County General Hospital - New York City, NY

Mabel laid upon a tilted table in the intensive care unit of the hospital. Her small body swollen beyond recognition, intravenous tubing flowed from her and the respirator clicked with each breath the machine helped her to breath.

Like an anxious new father waiting on an impending birth, Dr. Levin stood just by the nurses station. He watched Dr. Wesley, an older physician at the hospital. A man whose word Dr. Levin wanted to hear, as if he were some sort of priest and his knowledge were gospel. Dr. Levin could have gone in there with him, but he didn't. He felt it wasn't his domain, more so, he felt it was his lack of experience and perhaps that lacking was the cause that a healthy woman went bad.

Dr. Wesley closed the chart and carried it from the small cubical style room. He moved to the nurses' station and by Dr. Levin.

"Dr. Wesley. Tell me you have our answers."

"I wish. In fact ..." Dr. Wesley turned his body to face Dr. Levin, his arm rested on the counter. "I can tell you right now, it is definitely not her digestive system."

"What do you think it is?"

Dr. Wesley tossed up his hands. "I haven't a clue. All I know is that we have a seriously ill woman who won't make it through the night at the rate she is hemorrhaging." Dr. Wesley paused with total seriousness. "And I also know something else. I think ... I think it may be time to call the health department in on this one."

Quickly, Dr. Levin looked up. "The health department?"

“Yes. And not only them, but everyone she’s been in contact with.” Dr. Wesley lowered his voice and leaned closer to Dr. Levin. “We may be looking at a possible quarantine.” With those words and a quick raise of his eyebrows, Dr. Wesley walked away leaving a very quiet and staring Dr. Levin.

**May 30th – 11:55 p.m.
Gaithersburg, Maryland**

Joe wished that scrubbing away the pain and confusion he felt was as easy as scrubbing away the dried blood on his arms. Blood that remained from Brian. Over the basin in the bathroom of his home, water pink, Joe washed up. Hands, face and arms. He shut off the water and reached for a hand towel that hung on the rack next to him. Bringing it to him, not only did Joe dry his face, but he buried it as well. The closing of his eyes brought back the vision that he knew he’d not soon forgot. Brian. Sheet covered. Gone.

How long they had worked on Brian. Trying with so much hope and faith to save a man who was only days from his twenty-eight birthday. Even going as far as to cut open his chest and massage his heart by hand. But to no avail, all attempts were in vain. Brian was not destined to live. He never came back.

There were no answers from the doctors. None. Joe’s persistence afterwards with the doctors didn’t breed the results he wanted. Instead of getting answers that he thought they kept from him, he received lost looks from professionals who just didn’t know what went wrong.

But a part of Joe did. Too fast and too violently the illness raged through Brian to the point of death. Nothing like Joe had ever seen before. To him, it was almost too frightening.

Tossing the hand towel in the hamper, Joe moved slowly from the bathroom, down the hall and to his living room. He paused to look at the sofa table and the pictures spread out there. His eyes caught glimpse of his favorite one. A photo taken not long before, of him and his four sons. Standing outside, smiling. All four of Joe’s sons, Frank, Hal, Jimmy and Robbie were in the service. Joe chuckled every time he looked at that picture because he never knew if it was his imagination, but somehow it looked as if

Jimmy stood just a little off to the side. Pushed there by the other three who never let Jimmy live it down that he chose the Naval branch of the service instead of the Army as they did.

So proud Joe was of his boys. A family he raised on his own after his wife died when Robbie, the youngest, was four. How close he kept his family. But it was the first time ever, that his boys were at their farthest distance apart from each other. That bothered Joe, especially with the way he was feeling, what he had witnessed and what he began to worry about. His heart and mind screamed that it was time to pull them all together.

Not once, during the entire heartbreaking episode with Brian, did it not cross Joe's mind that something unnatural and amiss had gone down. He never let it slip far from his consciousness why they were in New York, who they were chasing, the subway, the dead rats, and Barat Ashrad so frightened over something, that he took his life without a second thought. Perhaps that was what he was supposed to do. Perhaps not. But Joe also knew where it all began and that was the Centers for Disease Control. Their faxes. The abundance of what he thought was 'useless information' Catherine Donovan dumped upon him during the investigation. Information that became puzzle pieces he never knew were missing until he watched what happened to Brian.

Joe didn't know why he felt the way he did. He wanted to chalk it up to the death of his young partner, but he couldn't. Joe had always been a man of logic. That logic helped him draw upon the keen foresight that had made him so successful in his career.

Picking up the photograph, Joe walked across the room and picked up something else as well, the telephone. He knew it was late and he knew he'd get an answer service. But Joe had to call and leave a message anyhow. He just couldn't, with a clear conscious do what he was thinking about, without letting someone know. Someone Joe was certain would not doubt him.

"Yes. I need to speak or leave a message for Dr. Catherine Donovan." Joe rolled his eyes in irritation. "Yes, I realize she isn't in, that's why I gave the message option. Thank you. Joe. No last name, just Joe ... now it is important that you write this down exactly as I tell you. Got that? Tell her that Joe called and he believes that Carrington arrived in New York." Joe paused contemplating the last bit of his message. "And tell her, possibly ... with a vengeance."

Saying no more, no goodbye, Joe hung up the phone. He carried his photograph, not to the table but to his chair. He sat down, picture in hand, staring at it and settling deeper into thoughts he wished he wasn't having.

THE UNDOING

*In one moments notice, in one moment's despair,
a pass in the night and you're no longer there.
How long will it take, until everything's gone?
One day or two? Does it matter how long?*

DAY TWO

May 30th - 8:15 a.m.
Fairfield University, Stamford Connecticut

His longer coal black hair swayed in his happy walk as Henry Kusakari moved at a swift pace with Dean Hayes to the building where the auditorium was located. A tall lanky man, Asian by race, twenty-eight years old. Henry had worked for Fairfield since he mopped floors at sixteen. He made his way through technical school and his dedication to his work earned him the job as Head of Engineering services. That and the fact that there wasn't anything Henry couldn't fix. If he didn't know how, he'd never admit it, he would just steal time until he could figure it out. Henry always did.

Henry helped Dean carry his things across the long yard and to the path, claiming it was because he was just that type of helpful guy. But the truth was, Henry hadn't anything to do yet and he was nosey by nature. Curiosity caused him to carry those boxes, and hopefully idle conversation with the little Lieutenant slash doctor would afford him the opportunity to see what was in them. After all, to Henry it had to be good or why else would Dean Hayes charge a hundred and seventy-five dollars to hear what he had to say.

That was Henry's theory. Henry had a theory for everything.

Toggling the box he held, Henry unlocked the auditorium door for Dean and hit the light switch brightening the room.

"I appreciate this." Dean told him.

"No problem. So like, do you think you're gonna pack this place?"

"We're expecting a full capacity." Dean set his box on the table next to the podium.

"Are you really a doctor?" Henry asked setting his box next to Dean's.

"Yes."

"So why do they call you lieutenant?"

"In the military your ranking comes first."

"That's sucks. I would think there is more prestige to being a doctor rather than an lieutenant. Unless you're a general, then I can see saying, General Hayes first. Do you think you'll make general?"

“Um ...” Dean snickered. “Probably not.”

“Not a career choice huh? I wouldn’t want that either. They have a stigma. Pictorially speaking, Generals get a bad wrap. I mean, they usually are bald and heavy and ...” Henry paused to case Dean. “... tall.” Henry watched Dean unpack the boxes. He moved even closer. “It’s funny.”

“What is?” Dean noticed Henry keeping his eyes on what was taken from the boxes.

“You don’t act like a doctor. I mean, you don’t look like one. Of course that uniform throws it off. But you don’t talk like one either. Will you talk like one at you expensive lecture?”

Dean’s head spun some from the fast rambling young maintenance man. “I’ll probably sound like a doctor today, yes. But when I’m not lecturing, I attribute that to my father. He always said if you want to reach people you have to be what they are.”

“Good theory. I like theories. I would think you’d want to talk on people’s level so you don’t bore them. You don’t want to do that. Especially when they are paying so much to hear you speak. Why is that? Never mind, you don’t have to tell me. I heard they don’t pay a lot in the military. That’s probably why.” Henry reached for a photo from the box. An object was on there and Henry tilted his head in wonder. “Weird. What is this?”

“A virus.” Dean took the photo from him. “Henry, if this interests you, you are more than welcome to sit in on the lecture. I won’t even make you pay.”

Henry snickered. “Yeah. Um ...” He backed up. “You know what? I’m sure it’s gonna be a kick ass lecture, but I’ll wait until you release it on video, then I can watch it in the privacy of my home.”

“The invitation will remain open.”

“Thanks.” Henry walked to the door. “I’d better get back to work, or at least let someone in authority see me doing something.”

“Thanks again for your help.”

“If you need anything. Let me know.” Henry walked through the door.

“I will.” Before Dean could get out a second ‘thank you’ Henry was out the door. Moving as rapidly as he spoke. Dean shook his head as he finished unpacking his lecture supplies, not only in wonder, but in an attempt to jar his thoughts back together after Henry rambled them off track.

May 30th - 8:33 a.m.
Chanute Air force Base - Rantoul, IL

About the only abuse Frank Slagel ever took was verbal and that was about his choice in music. He had a thing about the band, *Journey*. Their entire collection of music was in his pick-up truck. Without being aware, Frank would be heard humming it as he walked about. Denying it at all costs, stating that nothing even remotely musical escaped from him in a form of a sound. He always had to hear snide comments about it for as long as he could remember. Mostly because the type of music Frank listened to and hummed, just didn't seemed to go with his personality. In fact music all together didn't go with Frank's personality. But even people who razzed Frank tended to watch what they said to the towering, intimidating man who considered himself a visually misinterpreted sensitive guy.

Carrying a clipboard and his tin mug of coffee, Frank made it down the corridor to his duty office. He stopped, tilted his head and huffed out a grunt when he saw the boxes still stacked in front of his door. So, Frank, in his 'sensitive' way, decided to speak to the two privates who had loaded them there and maneuvered them. "Do you think, it's even a possibility that you gentlemen can have these boxes moved by say ... sometime before the end of the fuckin' century?"

"Yes, Sir," the one replied. "We're trying, Sir. Captain Lewis said to leave these here. He'll tell us what to do with them in a few minutes."

"Which brings us to another problem," Frank stated. "How tall is Captain Lewis, Private?"

The private thought. "Five-eight, Sir."

"How big am I?"

"Big."

"Exactly. Now I have two feet to squeeze this body through to get to my door. I will make an attempt because ..." Frank lifted a finger. "I'm a nice guy." Walking sideways and reaching for the knob first, Frank slid his body in between the boxes to his door, grunting then groaning when his coffee splashed up at him in his attempt. "Now, see what you made me do. Fuck." Shaking his head in disgust, Frank heard the ringing of his phone. "Saved." He told the privates. "For now." With another squeeze into his office, and a slam of the door, Frank hurried to the phone. "Duty office, second battalion, infantry division, Sergeant Slagel speaking, how may I help you, Sir?"

“Frank.” Joe’s voice seeped softly over the phone.

“Dad?” Frank was surprised at the call, he walked around his desk, set down his coffee and slowly lowered to his seat. “What’s wrong?”

“I need to talk to you.”

“You aren’t calling to bitch at me, are you?”

“No I ...”

“Because I’m really not in the mood to hear a lecture,” Frank said.

“No, Frank, I’m calling ...”

“Boxes are stacked outside of my office and I spilled fuckin’ coffee on my ...”

“Frank.” Joe snapped his name over the phone. “Can you shut up and listen.”

“Dad, God, yell at me.” Frank huffed. “What is it?”

“What do you remember about the contingency plan?” Joe asked.

“Why? Did you forget?”

“No, I didn’t forget.” Joe spoke with irritation. “I’m asking you. What you remember about it?”

“About what?”

“The contingency plan.” Joe said sharper.

“Oh, yeah.” Frank snickered at his lapse of short term memory. “Sorry. Everything. I remember everything. Dad, I mean come on, when most kids were watching television, you were drilling us about what we would do, and how we would all meet up if the world ended.”

“Exactly.”

“So I passed?”

“Frank.” Joe took a second. It wasn’t a time to get upset, or aggravated with his hardheaded son. “Frank, I need you to listen very carefully to what I am about to tell you. You have to go home. Make the arrangements. Do what you have to do, but get home, to your home ... now.”

Suddenly, and finally Frank felt the air of seriousness hit the conversation. With elbows, leaning on his desk, phone clenched tight, and head down, Frank listened to every word his father spoke.

May 30th - 9:15 a.m.
Centers for Disease Control - Atlanta, GA

"I can have the usual team assembled in about two hours." Catherine moved into her office, Jeff behind her. "Packed up and on their way. My guess from what you described is that we're probably looking at a case of amoebic dysentery." She picked up the stack of messages on her desk and began to shuffle through them.

"That was my first guess," Jeff said. "But we'll move on it now so we can get it out of the way by the beginning of next week."

"We're good as long as ..." Catherine paused and drew up a quirky look as she held a message.

"Something wrong?"

"Here." She handed it to Jeff. "Mr. Carrington called me. Weird."

Jeff reviewed it. "Were you supposed to meet him or something?"

"Not that I know of."

"So why is he mad? It says he's mad."

"Haven't clue. I didn't even think Joe was his first name. Now ..." Catherine folded her arms. "Where are we sending the team?"

"Oddly enough." Jeff handed the message back. "New York City."

Catherine's eyes moved steadily down to the message as Jeff rambled on words she didn't listen to.

"And I spoke to Mel Crimson of the Health Department." Jeff said. "He has some concerns about it. He's thinking obscure illness. I'm thinking about the fact that this is a sixty-eight year old woman who never left the country or ... Catherine?" Jeff noticed the far off look in her eyes. "Are you still with me?"

"Viral." Catherine stated in a dazed mode.

"Could be viral. Doubtful, I mean ..."

"No, Jeff. Carrington was viral."

"So you said. I thought we ended this topic last night."

"Jeff." Catherine quipped his name.

"What?"

"Listen to me for once. Read this again." Before handing the message to Jeff, she tapped him on the head with it in annoyance. "New York. Our woman, her illness ... Mr. Carrington didn't arrive there, his little island virus did."

Before a scoffing laugh, or any words of ridicule could escape him, Jeff was pelted with thoughts of how frightening of a situation it could be, if Catherine, in her wild notion thoughts, was actually correct.

**May 30th - 10:00 a.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut**

“Here Mommy.”

Ellen’s wet finger tips grazed against Taylor’s as she took the empty breakfast plate from her. “Thank you.” Ellen stood at the sink, her views straight ahead through the window before her.

Taylor did a giggle and a skip, making her way from the kitchen. “Bye Mommy. Hi daddy.”

Upon hearing those words from her daughter, the dish slipped from Ellen’s hand into the soapy water. She picked it back up and continued in her washing.

The silence was something Peter expected. It was a normal ritual the morning after a fight. And he and Ellen did fight the night before. A fight that paused when he walked out and continued when he returned at two in the morning. “I thought you had that lecture to go today.” Peter commented as he walked to the coffee pot.

“Ler’s just say, I’d rather not show my face.”

He stopped in his reach for any morning beverage and moved closer to the sink. Hand extended, Peter grabbed onto Ellen’s face. He felt her tenseness, fighting him, but he prevailed. Fingers gripping her chin, Peter turned her face into his view. “El.” He was speechless. The effects of what he had done, clearly visible in the form of a huge mark gracing the corner of her mouth. “El, I am so sorry.”

“You were wrong.” Ellen roughly pulled from him. “Dead wrong.” She shut off the sink, grabbed a dish towel and moved away.

“And you weren’t?” Peter reached out and snatched her back by her arm. “You weren’t the innocent here El. How many years did you say it was ...”

“Drop it!” Ellen spoke strongly. “Just drop it! What needed to be said was said last night. You made your point. I heeded your warning and I ended it.” Her hands flew about as she spoke and moved backwards. “I ended it. But heed my warning, Peter. If you ever touch my again, I swear I’ll put a fuckin’ gun to your head and kill you.” No more words. A strong storming essence and Ellen barged out of the room.

“Ellen.” Peter raced after her. “We are not finished yet. Get” In the doorway of the kitchen Peter stopped. He had to. An abundance of dizziness took over him and he literally lost his balance and gripped on to the archways so as not to fall. Immediate thickness seemed to fill his head. In the fog, heavy, and unable to move, Peter just stood there waiting for the side effect of what he figured was his anxiety, to subside.

May 30th - 11:22 a.m.
County General Hospital - New York City, NY

Two men on the street stopped what they were doing when Andrea Winters walked by them on her route to the emergency entrance of the hospital. At forty-seven years old, Andrea still had an air of youthfulness and ‘beautiful’ that surrounded her. She smiled, always did when she walked. So slender she was, but looked tapered in her nurses uniform. She was an African-American woman, who looked for the most part all natural, with the exception of the occasional lipstick she would wear.

She approached the double doors, spotting Lynn, another nurse out front. Lynn smoked a cigarette while hunching some from the air that was just a little chilly.

“The cavalry arrives.” Lynn smiled. “They pulled you in early I see.”

“Have to come in.” Andrea swished her head in a motherly, disappointing way. “Girl, I thought you quit smoking.”

“Sort of. But even if I did, I would be smoking again after this morning.”

“Oh, come on.” Andrea waved her hand at her in such disbelief.

“You think I’m kidding. Why else do you think they called you in so early. Wait. Wait until you get up there and see. We had seven admissions in the last hour.”

Andrea chuckled. “Sure we did. And I believed you last week when you said the same thing.” Smiling, she moved by Lynn through the glass double doors.

Andrea stopped cold. Her walking ceased, her expression dropped and the smile left her face when she looked around her. If the noise level alone wasn’t enough to jolt Andrea, the sight of what was before her was.

Screaming babies, children crying, adults moaning. All vocal sounds that emanated from the massive amounts of people. Not only were standing, sitting, and laying in the waiting room, but they spilled into the hall and well into the entrance way. The nurse at the reception desk looked as frazzled as Andrea felt confused. She turned with a questioning look on her face to the double doors and back out to Lynn who was lighting a second cigarette. Figuring she would find out soon enough, Andrea made her way to the elevator, shifting and squeezing through all those who seemed to be waiting for help.

**May 30th - 12:10 p.m.
Atalanta, GA**

Catherine appeared ready to pull out her hair as she moved at a quick pace with Jan Connors, her assistant. They walked for the sixth time away from the private Centers for Disease Control plane that waited on the runway, still being loaded up by eight or so people who stood around more than worked.

"I can not believe how far behind schedule we are." Catherine shook her head.

"Set backs. We had to wait to bring in more supplies and equipment."

Catherine stopped walking. "What on earth for?"

"He didn't tell you?" Jan asked.

"Who?"

"Dr. Morrows. He said he'd tell you."

"He's an asshole. He didn't. Tell me what?"

"Take a look." Jan opened then extended a folder in front of Catherine.

Catherine's eyes shifted about the information. "This can't be right. I spoke to Dr. Crimson a couple hours ago. He said it was only the one woman."

"Yes, well, Dr. Crimson faxed this up twenty minutes ago. They have one hundred and fifty now and Mercy Hospital is sending more over."

"How in God's name did ..." Catherine stopped when she heard the

yelling of her name in the distance. She turned to see Jeff running toward her. “Catherine.” He caught his breath when he made it to her. “Care to tell me what you’re doing.”

“Leaving.”

“I know that. Why? You can not go to New York. You have work here.”

“No, Jeff.” Catherine shook her head. “I have work there. It doesn’t look good. It’s getting worse. Fast too. Did you see this? I mean really see this.” She handed him the folder. “The newest developments don’t look good.”

From the distance again, another male voice called out to her. “Catherine!”

Feeling annoyed at being interrupted, Catherine felt better when she saw Hugh, another one of her assistants running her way. “Hugh. Tell me you found it.”

“I hope,” he said. “You may be in luck. There are six Joe Slagels listed in the phone book under that spelling. One of which lives about forty minutes from Washington D.C.” He handed her sheet of paper.

“Excellent.” Catherine looked down at the number. “Hopefully this is him.”

Jeff was curious. “Why are you calling Agent Slagel?”

“Because I have a feeling, that the Joe who called last night, and Agent Joe Slagel are one in the same. A feeling.” Ignoring Jeff’s routinely rolling eye of her theories, Catherine reached over to Jan and snatched the cell phone that rested on top of Jan’s things. “Thanks.” Holding the number in her hand, with her teeth, Catherine lifted the antenna and began to dial. “Let’s just hope I’m right. If I am, with those figures in New York. We have to find out what he knows.”

**May 30th - 12:15 p.m.
Gaithersburg, Maryland**

It looked as if it should have been illegal, all the hand guns that Joe had stashed in the briefcase on the bed. After loading just one more, he closed the case, locked it and lifted it from the bed. His bedroom was

emptier, no more pictures of family graced his wall or dresser. Picking up the large duffle bag on the floor, Joe carried that and his briefcase with him to the living room.

Setting them by the door, he checked out the time, let out a breath and moved to the phone. Thinking, just one more time, Joe dialed, let it ring and winced when he heard the answering machine pick up.

“Hey, this is Robbie.” The machine projected the voice. “You know what to do, leave a message. I’ll get back to you.”

After a click and a beep, Joe broke down and opted for the message. “Robbie, this is Dad. Listen, you’re my last kid to call. I spoke to Frank, Jimmy and Hal. Things ... things are gonna get busy for you Robbie. Real soon. I wish I could have spoken to you. But” Joe breathed heavily. “Just remember the contingency plan, son. Remember it.” Joe lowered his hand down to hang up the phone, but stopped. He brought it back up to his ear. “Oh, and Robbie. I love you.” Feeling better about ending the call like that, Joe hung up the phone and walked to the door. He had his keys, bearings and a plan of which to follow. He even had the note he would place on the front door incase any of his sons or anyone he knew for that matter came to his house. A note that read, ‘Went to Ashtonville, 5/30, DAD.’ Reaching for the front door knob, the telephone began to ring. Hoping against hope that Robbie was just in the room screening calls, Joe raced to the phone and picked it up. “Robbie.”

“No.” Catherine spoke. “Is this ... is this Agent Slagel?”

“Who is this?”

“This is Dr. Catherine Donovan from the CDC.”

“Dr. Donovan.” Joe spun in surprise. “Why are you calling?”

“You can say I’m returning your call.”

“Excuse me.”

“I need to know Agent Slagel. Did you leave a message for me last night?”

Joe paused long and hard. “Yes, I did.”

A breath of relief escaped Catherine. “Tell me why you mentioned Carrington. What brought that up?”

“You know what happened on Carrington island. I was using it more figuratively. The people there died fast and violently. Chemical, biological agent, whatever the cause of it. Correct?”

“Correct.”

“Well, something is up, or something happened in New York. Your fax boy shoots himself in the subway after we chase him. One hour later we

have dead rats appearing. Eight hours later my partner dies fast and of a death like I have never seen. And let me tell you, I have seen a lot. After witnessing that, I'm convinced that something was released in that subway. The CDC wasn't getting warnings of a bomb, it doesn't make sense. They were getting warnings of something *they* would have to deal with. A virus. And when your fax boy was chased, he had it on him and he released it."

"You think your partner died of this virus?" Catherine asked.

"I can't be sure. I do know it wasn't natural. What happened to him, how fast he went, and also, what he looked like."

"Agent Slagel. If you thought this last night why didn't you tag the message urgent?" She questioned.

"Because I'm going on nothing but gut." Joe answered. "I have no hard core facts. Just going on instincts."

"Well, I'm going on something else right now." Catherine said. "I'm staring at a folder from County General that states we have a hundred and fifty people admitted with flu-like symptoms moderate to severe. More are coming in and many are waiting to be seen. Sounds to me, your gut and instincts may be right."

"You would know." Joe told her. "You hold the facts."

"No, Agent Slagel." Catherine spoke softly. "I hold something very frightening."

**May 30th - 1:00 p.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut**

It was the combination of a few things that made Ellen feel as if she jumped a foot in the air. Staring and listening intently to the news while she chopped vegetables on her island counter. The door slammed just as the knife slammed down and Kelly Slagel screamed out upon her entrance in.

"God! El!"

Ellen quickly looked down to make sure her fingers were all there, figuring she wouldn't feel anything had she amputated them and did nerve damage.

"I wondered if you were alive," Kelly said. "You're line has been busy for hours."

Ellen turned her back so as not to face Kelly. “Josh has been on the Internet.”

“Well Joe’s ...” Kelly slowed her speech when she made it to Ellen. “What happened to your face?”

“Oh.” Ellen brought her hand to her lip. “Connie got me drunk last night. I tripped up the steps.”

“That looks bad.”

“What about Joe?” Ellen changed the subject.

“Well.” Kelly huffed out. “He’s pissed. He’s been trying to reach you. He called and said to tell you, he refuses to stop at another goddamn payphone to talk to you. He’s on his way up.”

“Here?” Ellen stopped cutting. “Why didn’t he just call my cell phone?”

“I asked him that. He said he knows you’re cheap and have it off right now.”

Ellen giggled. “I do. So he is on his way?”

“Yeah. Can I borrow your deep fryer.” Kelly pointed to the pantry and Ellen nodded. “I want to grab it and hit the stores ...” She went into the walk-in pantry and emerged with the deep fryer. “I have to run. Are you sure you’re O.K.?”

“Yeah.” Ellen, confused, faced Kelly. “Why is Joe coming up here all the sudden? Odd.”

“All Slagels are odd. He said vacation.” Kelly shrugged. “Wanted to get away for a few weeks.”

“A few weeks? Is everything all right?”

“Yep.” Kelly hurried to the door. “But fair is fair El, you have to keep him half the time. He drives me nuts.” Kelly opened the door. “I’ll talk to you later. Get Josh off line.”

Ellen nodded as the door shut, still in thought and wonder on why Joe was making a sudden appearance. She only wished she could have gotten the call then she would have known. Setting down her knife, Ellen wiped off her hands and walked to the dining room. Josh was sitting at the computer, totally engrossed. “Josh.”

“Yeah.”

“Fifteen more minutes then you ...” Ellen tilted her head when she caught glimpse of it. Peter on the couch. “Josh, what’s wrong with your father?”

“I don’t know.” Josh shrugged, lost in his own dimension.

To Ellen it caught her off guard, because Pete didn’t look like he was

napping. He didn't have his usual, arm above the head, passing off that he was watching television look. Slowly she walked into the living. Pete laid on stomach, his arm dangled from the couch as well as part of his leg. "Pete?" Ellen neared him. "Peter are you all right?" Hunching down, Ellen reached out her hand for his shoulder. Just as she shook him, she quickly retracted her hand when she felt the hot feel of his body seeping through his clothes. "Pete?"

Peter moaned and rolled over.

Ellen gasped when she looked upon the pastiness of his skin color and the darkness of his eyes and neck. She touched his arm. The feel of his skin was so unlike anything she had ever experienced in all her years of nursing, she had to pull her fingers away to look at them. The dehydrated state of his skin was extreme. Ellen had to visually be certain that she wasn't imagining what she swore she felt on her fingers, and she wasn't. Rubbing her fingers together, she stared in horror at the particles of skin that laced her finger tips as if some sort of dust.

May 30th - 2:20 p.m.
County General Hospital - new York City, NY

Mel Crimson recognized Catherine out of the group of Centers for Disease Control workers that barricaded through the door with authority. She looked strong, eyes focused around, taking everything in. He just knew it had to be her. A distinguished but tired looking man who dressed down to earth, extended his hand to Catherine upon his approach to her. "I'm Mel Crimson of the Health Department."

Catherine shook his hand. "Catherine Donovan." Her eye shifted about the extremely crowded hospital. "Has it gotten worse?"

"Unfortunately, yes." Mel told her as he led her through the waiting area toward the back where the emergency treatment area was located. "Doubled."

"What about our people in quarantine?" Catherine asked.

"We have a rise in temperature and they have become symptomatic." Mel saw the desperation look hit Catherine. "Which as you know, confirms it is contagious. However we're at a loss. More are coming in and we haven't a

clue on which direction to turn.”

“Yes we do.” Catherine explain. “While we get set up, you get a crew together and I want you to begin questioning each and every admission and patient waiting to be seen. See if they were on the subway yesterday.”

This stopped Mel. “The subway?”

“Yes. We believe that is where it started. We’re assembling a special CDC team to comb a specific station. But until we confirm or deny what we’re dealing with ...” Catherine looked over her shoulder to the waiting room before disappearing in the back. “... we shut down the entire hospital.”

**May 30th - 2:45 p.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut**

The water splashed upon her hand when Peter swiped it away in his delirium. Ellen closed her eyes briefly, switched hands and dried her damp one on her leg as she crouched down by the side of the couch. “Peter. Pete.” She tried to call his attention.

Peter tossed to his left and then his right, moaning with each movement.

“Peter, you have to take this.” She extended her hand with pills in it. “Doc Breyer said you have to. Come on, Peter.” Ellen kept trying to get him to respond in some sort of way other than in his own daze. “Peter, I want to get you up to bed. Pete ...” Another extension of her hand to him when she swore his eyes focused on her. She grunted in when again, he hit her hand away. “You don’t ...” Huffing out Ellen stood up when the phone rang. She set the glass and pills on the coffee table and walked to the phone, barely taking her views off of Peter. “Hello.”

“Ellen.” Frank spoke soft on the other line. “I need to talk to you.”

“Now is not a good time, Bill.”

“What do you mean Bill? This is Frank. El, I need you to listen to me. There’s a situation and it’s ...”

“I have to go, Bill.” Ellen looked back to a moaning Peter.

“No.” Frank sounded angry. “No you don’t.”

“I can’t talk.”

“The hell you won’t. And none of this hanging up on me shit!”

Frank's voice squeaked with his emotions. "Listen. I'm coming home tomorrow. Things ... things are gonna happen, babe. But before anything goes down. I'm settling my life. *Our* life."

"Bill, this is not ..."

"Ellen! Listen!" Frank blasted out. "This has to be done. Now. We're getting this out and in the open. We may never ..." Frank's voice dropped to a near whisper. "We may never get another chance. I love you." He spoke the words powerfully. "I have loved you forever and ..."

Ellen pulled the phone from her ear, closed her eyes and hung up. Solemnly, she returned to Peter.

May 30th - 2:27 p.m.
Chanute Air force Base - Rantoul, IL

"Fuck." Frank slammed down the receiver and spun in an angry huff. His face was red and he breathed heavily in a vain attempt to calm himself. Alone in his office, and as if he were speaking to someone there, Frank held up his hand, took one more breath, relaxed, picked up the phone and dialed.

Busy.

"Fuck." He slammed the receiver down for the second time in an immediate schizophrenic switch of emotions. "She did it again." In his reach for the phone once more, Frank's eye caught glimpse of the paper and he brought it up into his view. His approved request for emergency leave. It was effective the next day. To the phone and to the paper his eyes moved, then Frank withdrew his hand in his reaching attempt for the phone. He wasn't going to aggravate himself or Ellen any further. He would see her and his children soon, in person, and in twenty-four hours. Frank folded the request and placed it in his pocket, feeling relieved and taking comfort in the fact that twenty-four hours was not that long, and nothing so drastic could possibly happen that it would inhibit him from making it home.

May 30th - 2:35 p.m.
County General Hospital - New York City, NY

It was like nothing Andrea had ever seen in her twenty-three years of nursing, patients, on carts, lined the halls of the seventh floor where she worked. Her five-foot six height was nearly hidden behind the stacks of folders and charts that laid on the counter. There was a lot of noise, most of which came from the patients. It certainly didn't come from the full nursing staff, because Andrea didn't have that.

She kept her cool, closing her eyes briefly to get her bearings after opening up another admissions chart. She called out to Carol, a nurse who was zipping by. "Carol. Here. Can you handle these admission?"

Carol's mouth dropped open.

"I know." Andrea held up her hand. "I don't know what to tell you to do with them. Just make them comfortable until we figure out what's next." Watching Carol agree, hesitantly, Andrea looked at Lynn who was on the other side of the counter on the phone. Grabbing a stack of folders for her as well, Andrea walked around and waited for Lynn to hang up. "Ready?" Andrea said, engrossed in flipping open and shutting the charts. "I need you to ...". Through the corner of her eye she saw Lynn's expression. Staring out, holding on to the phone. "What's wrong? Are the sending more up?"

"We've ... we've been quarantined." Lynn spoke dazed.

"Sweet Jesus." Andrea's hand slammed on the stack of folders. "Like I need this now. The last time this happened I was here for three days." With a quick twitch of her head in disgust, Andrea moved to behind Lynn, reaching around her for the phone. "Well, I might as well call home and tell Jake I won't be there tonight."

"This doesn't concern you?"

"Annoys me." Andrea finished dialing and covered the mouthpiece. "I have been here too long, This is nothing. Trust me. No worries." Andrea smiled gently. "No worries." She turned her back some to Lynn and began to speak on the phone.

**May 30th - 3:15 p.m.
The White House - Washington, D.C.**

“What the hell is going on?” President George Hadly minced no words as he moved with haste down the corridor toward the oval office. He was a man who looked perturbed, still wearing tan pants, and green golf shirt. His right hand still sported the old tattered lucky golf glove as well. From his thinning, yet slicked silver hair, miserable daily expression, and burly build, everything about the president screamed crass. He moved quickly walking side by side with his aid, Jason Locks. “Why in Christ ...”

“This way, Sir.” Jason took hold of President Hadly’s arm and led him into the oval office.

“Answers Jason. I want answers. So, care to tell me why I was pulled from the seventeenth hole when I was shooting a eighty?” President Hadly asked with aggravation as he was led to the back. “Get airlifted, arrive here. Get screamed at by a bunch of annoying reports. I can’t understand them. No one tell me anything. I’m the goddamn, president for ...” President Hadly stopped cold the second he stepped foot into the meeting room. A meeting room filled with people. Men in suits along with three generals sat around the table. “Did someone forget to tell me about this party?”

So serious, Jason handed President Hadly a document. “We have a situation sir. We think you should take a look at it.”

President Hadly began to read the document as he blindly made his way to his seat at the head of the table. When he had finished, he dropped it from his hand and looked at the faces in the room who stared at him for answers. Slowly, he lowered himself down to his chair, took a deep, heavy breath, picked up the document, and began to read it again.

**May 30th - 4:45 p.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut**

Doc Breyer had collected what he believed was everything he needed to make it through the weekend. On the reception counter in his clinic, he organized the box, his briefcase and a list of house calls he had to make, all

while balancing a phone between his ear and shoulder. An accomplishment of sorts to Doc Breyer. It had been so long since the last time he did that many physical things at once, Doc Breyer would have wagered the coordination portion of his brain was probably in a stupor.

“Ellen.” He spoke to her, tossing things in his box. “I’m telling you. It’s the flu. Yes. I’ve seen seven cases today alone.” Doc Breyer paused and rolled his eyes. “Now, how long have you known me, am I that dumb ... well ... all right, but I did notify the health department. I’ll check with you later on this. Yes. Bye.” Grunting and extending his arm, Doc Breyer hung up the phone. He visually checked everything he had. Figuring he could always come back if he missed anything, Doc Breyer closed his briefcase, took hold of that, hit the light switch and grabbed the box off the counter. In his walk across the darkened waiting room, he heard the familiar sound of the fax machine ringing. Opting to ignore it and wait until later, Doc Breyer left his office. Had he waited until that paper emerged just slightly, he would have seen the heading ‘Centers for Disease Control Health Bulletin’ and under that in big, bold letters, the word ‘WARNING’.

May 30th - 7:05 p.m.
Roadside Diner - Connecticut

Country music, Joe’s least favorite type, played when he walked into the small restaurant. Pretty packed, one or two waitresses moved about, but Joe wasn’t there to eat. He was there for a simple cup of coffee, large and enough to hold him over for the rest of the drive. He made his way across the diner to the counter area equipped with stools. He slid himself down to sit on one and pulled a cigarette from the chest pocket of his shirt. He grabbed his lighter and snapped it open, igniting it. The flame rose up high and wild from his old Zippo, and as he closed it with a clank and placed it in his pocket, the waitress approached laying a menu down in front of him.

“Nothing.” he told her. “Just a large coffee, cream and sugar to go.” After a nod and a smile, Joe never saw her take that menu back. He was too engrossed in looking at the light and smoke of his cigarette. He even chuckled some when he used to think the cigarettes would be what killed him. As that thought passed his mind, the words ‘New York’ and ‘illness’

came from the news. It grabbed his attention, and with cupped hands, holding the smoldering cigarette, Joe raised his views to the set.

“ ... and while the quarantine has shut down County General, authorities speculate that it should be lifted by morning. There is indication that a local food chain is responsible for the outbreak of ailments caused by tainted food. In other news ...”

Joe shook his head with a smile, turning from the television to see the paper cup being set in front of him.

“Not us,” the waitress said.

“Excuse me?” Joe asked.

“Not us.” She pointed to the television. “Local food chain? Outbreak. Tainted food. Um, joke?”

Joe released a short fake chuckle just to pacify the older woman who thought she was funny, and he picked up his coffee. After leaving a ‘what the hell’ tip of ten dollars on the counter, Joe left the diner.

May 30th - 9:45 a.m.
57th Street subway Station - New York City, NY

“I found something!” A man wearing biohazard garb waved his hand from down on the tracks.

The other two who were combing the area also ran to him.

“What is it?” the one asked.

“It looks like glass, broken glass, I’m gonna bag this and some of the surrounding dirt.”

“Good idea. Watch you don’t slice through the suit.” the third man added. “I think that ...” He stopped and was startled by a tug on his sleeve. He turned to face an elderly woman, her face was dirty, she was dressed as if she lived on the street.

“Excuse me,” she spoke weakly. “I know those outfits you are wearing.”

“Then you know, ma’am, you should clear the area.”

She shook her head. “I can’t. I need to know if any of you are doctors?”

Tim Clamp, the garbed man collecting the glass on the track, stood up. “I am, why?”

“Can you help us?”

“Who, ma’am?” Tim questioned.

“A group of us, we live about ten feet down the in an opening in the wall.” She pointed down the tunnel. “I’ve been out for hours looking for help, but no one takes me serious.”

Tim looked down the tunnel. “Can you show us?”

She nodded. “You walk down there, these two men can follow me on this ledge.”

The three men reluctantly followed her the ten feet or so to what appeared to be an abandoned storage facility.

“In here,” the old woman said.

Tim jumped up from the tracks to follow her, and waited in the opening until his two co-workers joined him. As all three began to enter the wall, they heard the woman scream. Tim grabbed his flashlight from his belt and turned it on, and hurried to where she was. Her bellowing cries echoed in the large room. “Ma’am! Ma’am!” Tim called out to her. The room was dark and damp, and a foul odor engulfed him. “Ma’am!” Tim froze in horror as the thin beam of his flash light lit the end of the room where the old woman stood crying. Quickly he turned his back to face the other two men, away from the sickening sight that lay before him. Tim calmed himself, he waited for his stomach to stop churning in nausea. Slowly, he turned back around. Twelve bodies lay before him. Twelve bodies, over lapping, holding on to one another, as if in some desperate attempt to cling to life. Across their blood and vomit smeared faces, lie the look of terror.

Trembling, Tim pulled from his gear bag a camera. As he aimed, his emotions gave way, and Tim handed the camera to another man and flew out to the tracks. He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t look through that camera and face what may be an inevitable fate. Tim knew that he would be plagued by this vision. Not so much the vision of the ten adults. But of the two small children, helpless, curled up in a fetal position, dead in the laps of those who tried to care for them.

**May 30th - 10:00 p.m.
Stamford, Connecticut**

Dean Hayes contemplated visiting the hotel lounge for a drink before bedtime. But since he didn't drink alcohol nor socialize, that contemplation lasted about ten seconds, and he undressed down to just his boxer shorts, readying himself to get into bed. He never bragged about having an exciting life. To Dean, on some nights, even Saturday, getting to sleep was exciting. He loved to sleep and he loved uninterrupted sleep even more. So when the phone rang just as he swept his legs under the covers, Dean grunted. He had to answer it. "Hello." Dean huffed when he heard the voice speak his name on the other line. It was a voice he recognized well and heard many times before. It also added to his annoyance because it was a voice he had just heard not one hour earlier. "Dad?"

"Are you watching the news?" William Hayes asked.

"No."

"Watch the news," William told him.

"Dad, I don't watch television."

"So what. Put it on. You should see this. There's a quarantine going on at a New York Hospital. A virus of sorts."

"Don't tell me you're worried about this." Dean rubbed his eyes. "Dad. Please. You're a doctor. And, really, if it were all that bad, I would know about it. Right?"

"Dino, maybe that high and mighty attitude of yours is why they didn't call you. Perhaps they picked now to humble you."

"Dad," Dean stated his name. "Come on ... I'm trying to go to bed here."

"Bed?" William chuckled. "It's ten o'clock on a Saturday night."

"What else am I going to do? Go on a date?"

"You could try. They sell women for men just like you. I heard ..."

"Goodnight, Dad."

"Dino." William's tone changed. "In all seriousness. Watch the news."

Dean let out a breath. "I'll tell you what. I'll watch it, and if I make anything of it, I'll call you back. Sound good?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"Night." Dean, shaking his head, hung up the phone. He looked at the television, then to the remote on the night stand. Somewhere in between his look back to the television, feel of the soft pillow on his back and reach for the remote, Dean's hand went to the light. He shut it off, slipped further into bed and went to sleep.

**May 30th - 10:10 p.m.
Country General Hospital - New York City, NY**

“Twelve dead bodies.” Catherine tossed a folder with photographs down to the already cluttered meeting table. Cup filled, paper spewed, and seated around it were six exhausted health care workers. “Seventy-two rats. A broken vial on the tracks. We have nine-hundred and forty-two of our ill directly connected to the subway. Something was released there. We know it. They are working on that as we speak. Now my guess, it’s still alive. We have a shot of containing this if ...” Catherine paused when she heard the meeting room door open. John, another one of her assistants, nervously slid inside. She made eye contact, then continued. “As I was saying. We have a shot of containing this as long as we run into no one who isn’t connected to our victims or the subway. If we do. It means it’s airborne. Which means we’re screwed.” She turned her head to the right. “Is there something you wanted, John?”

Clearing his throat John stepped forward and handed Catherine a chart. “We’re screwed. Twenty-three confirmed cases all admissions here at County prior to the outbreak. It’s airborne.”

Catherine’s head dropped at the same time the chart slipped from her hand and onto the meeting table.

**May 30th - 10:25 p.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut**

Had he been a dumb man, Joe would have bought the fact that Ellen was asleep or busy. But he wasn’t a dumb man, and Ellen failed to use any common sense allotted to her in her lifetime. The lights on were a clue she was home. So after the first knock, he thought perhaps she was in the bathroom or shower. The sound of the television blaring said she was awake, and he passed off the second knock as something she just didn’t hear. But the sight through the windows by the front door of Ellen’s moving about in

the foyer confirmed she was avoiding him.

Thinking, ‘What? Does take me for an idiot?’ Joe slammed his fist against the door. “Ellen!” Finally, a creak, and the door opened so slightly, exposing only Ellen’s eyes. “Finally.” Joe tossed his hand up. “Are you gonna let me in?”

“Um ... Joe. Gees.” Ellen yawned. “It is really late.”

“Ellen, do you think I care. I just drove all the way up here. I’d like to see and speak to you for five minutes.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Joe. Maybe tomorrow.”

“Ellen.” Joe said calmly.

“Yes.”

“Open the goddamn door!” He screamed.

Ellen cringed, then she opened the door slowly, stepping to behind it.

“Thank you.” Joe stepped inside and closed the door. “Kelly said you weren’t feeling well. What’s the ...” Joe saw her. His hand reached out and to her chin. “What happened to your face?”

“See.” Ellen fake chuckled. “It is so funny. Last night I was drunk and ...”

“Oh, don’t bullshit me. Who hit you?”

“Joe, see ...”

“Goddamn it.” Joe said with such disgust. “Did Peter do this? He did.” He released her chin and immediately began to move about the first floor of the house looking around. “Where is he? Son of a bitch bastard.”

“Joe.” Ellen raced to him, grabbing his arm. “Look. We fought. He got mad. He found out about me and Frank.”

Joe pulled from her grip so angry. “I don’t give a shit what his reasons were or why he was mad. He doesn’t lay a hand on you. You hear me? I’ll knock his ass through a wall. Now where is he?” Joe demanded.

“He’s upstairs in the guest room. He ...”

Joe bolted to the steps.

“Joe.” Ellen flew to him stopping him. She laid her hand over his on the railing. “It won’t be any fun for you. He’s sick.”

Joe said nothing, he looked once more at Ellen, pulled his hand from hers and barged up the steps. Such a raging feeling burned through Joe as he faced the closed guest room door. “Pete.” He knocked once on the door. “Pete.” So strong he spoke. “You and I have to talk.” When Joe didn’t receive a response, he waited about as long as his patience would allow and he turned the unlocked knob on the door stepping in. “Peter.” He saw Peter

on the bed. “Get up.” It only took another step into the room and not only did Joe sense something was wrong, he smelled it. There was a scent in the room and it wasn’t pleasant. A mixture of illness and the foul odor of expelled body fluids lingered in the air. Saying no more Joe moved closer to the bed. He could here the wispy breathing of Peter. “Pete.” He called his name and his voice finally got through. No verbal response came to Joe, only a moan. Joe reached to the lamp on the night stand and flicked on the light. Eyes focused on Peter, Joe heaved in the air of his shock. Peter, sweaty, pale, eyes partially opened and rolled back, purple splotches, like bruises, covered him. “Christ.” Joe didn’t touch him, or say anymore. He shut out the light and left the room.

May 30th - 11:20 p.m.
The White House - Washington, DC

“Airborne virus. There’s no doubt.” Catherine’s words came through the speaker phone in the back meeting room behind the oval office.

President Hadly’s eyes instinctively closed for a moment. He brought his folded hands to this chin, then gathered himself to talk. “You are absolutely sure.”

The men and one woman in the room sat quietly staring at the phone, waiting to hear every word Catherine had to say.

“Confirmed,” she said. “And reconfirmed again.” Her manner of speaking was so matter of fact. It was as if her life long fear of the situation actually occurring made her strong enough to handle what she faced. “Airborne. Twenty-four hour incubation period. Maybe less. This thing moves fast. Deadly.”

“I’ve pulled in FEMA,” President Hadly said. “Preparations are being made as we speak to shut down New York.”

Catherine couldn’t help it. If asked, she would have said she never intended that laugh to seep out. But it did. “In hopes to do what, Sir?”

“Contain it. My advisors believe that if we can shut down the city we ...”

“Your advisors are full of shit.” Catherine drew up silence. “Pardon me. But listen to what I’m saying and take it all in. It is airborne. This thing

will circle the globe and claim its territory. Containing it is no longer a possibility. I know of two cases that left the city ... by air. Both dead. One in Philadelphia, the other right where you are. DC.”

“Well, then what are you suggesting we do?” President Hadly asked with edge.

“Issue a national warning. Go public.” Catherine told him.

“And then what?” President Hadly snapped. “Ma’am? You said yourself it’s airborne. It’s deadly and moves fast. I’m about to tell the American people that a deadly virus is about to wipe them into extinction. Do you realize what kind of panic, what kind of chaos that would cause.”

“Then you instill Martial law, but get the word out. Warn them. Keep people in their homes. Their cities. Keep them out of the way while we try to beat this.”

“Can we?” President Hadly asked. “Can it be beat.”

There was a slight hesitation before Catherine answered. “In my professional opinion there is only one man who has the skills and the knowledge to do it. If it can be done at all.”

“And that is?”

“If you want a shot in hell of beating this, you have to bring in Lt. Dean Hayes. Bring him in now.” Catherine softened her voice. “He could very well be ... our only hope.”

May 30th - 11:45 p.m. Hotel - Stamford, Connecticut

The steady pounding at his hotel room door not only stirred Dean from his deep sleep but from his bed as well. With a jolt awake, and a loud ‘thump’, Dean found himself, shaking his head and laying on the floor by his bed, the covers entangled with him. “Just a minute.” He called out groggy, kicking out his feet to free himself from the entrapment of the blankets. Stumbling to a sloppy stand, Dean turned on the light and patted down his hair which stood on ends.

He staggered to the door afflicted with that ‘bright light’ blindness, adjusted his boxers and looked through the peep hole. Distorted and through scope vision he saw military men outside his door. With a ‘what’ and a look

of confusion, Dean rubbed his eyes and opened the door.

A colonel stepped forward and the other four soldiers, armed, moved in closer behind him. “Lt. Hayes?” the Colonel questioned.

Dean blinked drastically clearing his focus. “Oh, shit. What did I do?”

^^^

Dean knew the instant, General Green stepped in his hotel room with a cup of coffee—for him—he wasn’t going back to bed.

“We have a situation.” Green handed him the coffee.

“What is the situation, S?”

“A virus, level four.”

“Where?”

“New York City.”

Dean paused. He didn’t mean to but the words seeped out, “Oh my, God.” Dean ran his fingers through his hair. “This ... this could be a nightmare.”

“It already is.”

Silence.

“I need to sit down.” Dean did. “What do we have?”

“Airborne virus confirmed. Similar to a supped up Bubonic plague meets Ebola.”

Dean wisped out, “Carrington.”

Green blinked long an ‘I know’, then spoke, “Incubation period is about twenty-four hours. Initial victims died within eight. The first contact victims hospitalized now, at the current rate of deceleration, have a prognosis of 48 hours. The virus in second and third contact victims, is showing no signs of weakening.”

“Which would tell me, that the initial victims all caught it at the same time from the same source ...”

“Or possibly standing at ground zero,” the general interjected.

“Do you feel it was deliberate?”

“Evidence is pointing that way, yes.”

“What are the CDC and WHO saying about containing this?” Dean asked.

“For the record they’ll tell you yes; off the record, not a shot in hell.”

“That bad? We must be talking one hell of a window.”

“Twenty-eight hours.”

Dean stood up and began to pace. “No wonder they don’t think they can contain it. Do they realize how many people have left the city in twenty-eight hours?”

“We know of three, all by plane, two of them are dead already. Lieutenant Hayes, this virus affects everyone it comes in contact with.”

“Not everyone.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s inevitable that there will be people immune. People that, no matter what, will not get the virus. In what division of this am I working on?”

“What else?” Green shrugged. “Cure. A lab is being set up for you as we speak, complete with samples and everything you need. Items from your Nebraska lab can be shipped here once you tell us what they are.”

“I suppose I’m going to New York?”

Green shook his head.

“No. But if that’s where ...”

“New York ... we feel, may ...” Green paused. “No. New York is out of our control.”

“Define ‘out of control’, Sir.”

“Hospitals are not taking patients. Special AID camps are being set up, resources brought in.”

“Holy hell, we’re talking thousands upon thousands ill already. Aren’t we?”

“By eight AM tomorrow morning, they are projecting tens of thousands. We can’t count those not seeking help.”

“But wouldn’t I best serve being in New York?” Dean asked.

“We can get you in ... there’s no guarantee we’ll get you out.”

Dean looked confused.

“Preparations to shut down New York have already begun. Airports, bridges, tunnels, roadways. Anyway in or out. They’re going to try to do the impossible, shut in millions of people. By noon today, it will be a war zone. You don’t want to be there.” Green stepped back. “I’ll leave you to get ready.” He walked to the door.

“General, you do realize, with that many ill, the window, CDC is right. There will be no containing this.”

“We can try.”

“Try yes. But it’s airborne. New York a war zone? Wait. With an airborne virus of this magnitude, it’s not going to matter where you are. In forty-eight hours this thing will *be* the air, it will circle the globe and claim its territory.”

“Then I suppose you and I both have our work cut out for us. Don’t we, Son?” With those words, General Green walked out.

Dean stood in disbelief staring at the just closed door. “What work?” he whispered. “It’s over.” He plopped down on his bed. “God help us.”

DAY THREE

Sunday, May 31st - 4:45 am.
New York City, NY

It had rained and the remnants of the thunderstorm fell in the form of a light drizzle. The slick of water glazed over the George Washington Memorial Bridge, giving the eerie and dramatic effect needed for what was happening.

They rolled in loud. Military truck after military truck. Soldiers armed and wearing gas masks walked in front, alongside and behind the barricade. With diligence and determination they moved. Like soldiers seizing a city, and they were. The United States Armed forces were taking New York but not with nearly as much vengeance as their unseen foe, the virus.

May 31st - 5:00 a.m.
Interstate 95 - Connecticut

“... at four forty-five a.m, eastern standard time, authorities began what they describes as a protective blockade of New York City. Military posts have been placed on all access roads in and out of the city ...” The newscaster spoke on the radio.

The windshield wipers of the car added that rhythmic serene feel as Joe drove just a little faster than the speed limited on his way to Stamford. He had counted only three other cars he had passed, but didn't think much of it seeing how daylight hadn't even broken.

“... rumors ranging from a viral outbreak to a possible terrorist siege of the city are cited as reasons for the barricade. Thus far, no further information has been given.”

Joe lit his cigarette with the car lighter. He tapped the lighter on the ashtray to rid it of the amber cigarette particles then replaced it. Mid returning of his hand to the steering wheel, Joe turned off the radio. He had listened only briefly to the news, he heard all he needed to. It was just what

he expected, another confirmation of his fears.

May 31st - 5:10 a.m.
Chanute Air force Base - Rantoul, IL

The sky had just hit that bluish-black phase of day when Frank tossed his duffle bag in the back of his pick up truck. He was readying to leave, to go home. His leave was in full effect and in a few minutes time, Frank thought he would be out of there.

Moving to the driver's door, Frank heard the call of his name through the darkness. It echoed not only in sound but through him as well. He knew something was not right.

"Sergeant Slagel."

Frank turned from the door to see Specialist Alder racing his way. "Damn it," he whispered and stepped to Alder.

"Sergeant. Glad I caught you before you went AWOL."

"AWOL?" Frank had a hint of chuckle to his voice. "I'm not going AWOL, I'm on leave. Emergency leave. I'm heading home."

"Not any more." Alder handed Frank a clipboard. "Take a look. C.O. just left these for you. All requests for leave have been revoked. We're now placed on standby for possible martial law. Our battalion is being deployed to Chicago. Looks like you're in charge."

"Shit." Frank cringed and rubbed his buzzed black hair.

"Shall I start to get things ready for you sir?"

With a huff Frank nodded only and Alder ran off. Frank, disgusted, shook his head and angrily grabbed his duffle bag back out of the truck.

May 31st - 6:15 a.m.
County General Hospital - New York City, NY

"And the best part is." Catherine rattled off to Mel while stirring her coffee. "Get this." She smiled. "I have to get congressional approval on what

I'm going to say at the press conference. Congressional approval." She shook her head, looked at Mel without looking at him and sipped her coffee. She winced in disgust at the strong bitter taste. "Anyhow. Vermont says we can detect early exposure of the virus. I'm going to start looking at our workers. Give us some hint as to the man power we'll have when things start getting bad.. No exposure. Possibility of immunity." When Catherine looked up again, Mel slowly stood from the chair. "Mel?"

"Don't waste your test on me."

'Crash!'. The coffee mug slipped from Catherine's hand and fell to the counter. Steam rose from the spill. "Mel."

Off balance, Mel moved from that room and to the door ignoring Catherine who made an attempt to follow him. She stood in the door frame watching Mel hold the wall for support as he walked away. When did it happen? When did he turn? Catherine had many conversations with him and constantly over the last twenty-some hours. Had she been that wrapped up that she failed to see it slip upon him? Or did the virus kick in so fast, no one, even the best in the field, could see it coming. Head lowered, and sunken heart, Catherine whispered a prayer of desperation. "Dear God. Please don't let us have lost control. Please. Not yet."

May 31st - 6:30 a.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut

There were two things that woke Kelly up from a sound sleep that morning. One was a sinus headache and two was the crinkling sound she heard coming from the basement. Painfully annoyed she rubbed the eyes that felt as if they were going to explode, and she made her way to the kitchen and then to the basement.

Opening the basement door she saw that the light was on. That for one told her it wasn't a prowler. And if it was, he came bearing edible gifts. Spewed across the basement floor were plastic bags from a grocery store whose name Kelly didn't recognize. She slowly made her way down, the cool of the outside air that flowed through the basement door hit against her exposed legs. The creak she made on the wooden steps alerted Joe to her presence. "Joe?"

“Kelly,” he said surprised, dropping three bags and closing the door. “What are you doing up?”

“I should be asking the questions. Why ... why are you grocery shopping at six-thirty in the morning. I just went to the store yesterday.”

“I know. I wanted to get there early this morning. Things were needed to be bought.”

“Things? You don’t like what I got you?” Kelly asked.

“No. That is not it. Kel ...” Joe took a breath, dusted off his hands and walked to the steps. “We need to talk you and I. Can we sit?” He motioned his hand to the stairs.

“Sure.” Kelly sat down, then Joe sat next to her.

“Let me ask you a question. What has Frank told you about the contingency plan?”

“The what?”

“The Slagel Contingency plan.” Joe saw the tilted head, clueless look on her face. “That’s what I thought.”

“I don’t understand. What’s going on?”

“Let me see if I can explain.” Joe grabbed her hand. “The plan is ... the plan. No. Let me try another way. I’m going to see if I can be tactful about this.” Joe took a moment, stared at his daughter-in-law and breathed out after a long pause of silence. “O.K., I can’t. Tact is out. Kelly ... the world is gonna end.”

Kelly laughed. “You’re joking.” When Joe said nothing the smile fell from Kelly’s face and was replaced with more of an open mouth look. Her eyes moved to the grocery bags then back to Joe. She slipped her hand from his. “Oh, my God. You’re not.”

MAY 31st - 7:00 a.m.
New York City Harbor

Ashley Bennett slept soundly in the sleeping quarters of her boat. Her long, dark hair flung over her face. Her legs crept out of the blue satin sheets. The room was filled with burnt candles and empty champagne glasses. Her wedding gown flung over the bench at the side of the bunk. She slowly opened her eyes only to stare at her brand new wedding ring in a daze. Her head hurt some, probably all that celebratory drinking. The odd sound of the

engines, startled her; they weren't suppose to set sail until after noon. Had she slept that late? Ashley looked at the clock.

"Ash, get dressed come on." Rick, her new husband, a burly, bearded man, rushed in the room.

"Rick, what's going on?"

"Just get dressed, hurry!" Rick reached under the bunk and pulled out his rifle. He opened a drawer and retrieved his bullets.

"Oh, my God, what's wrong?"

Rick loaded his rifle. "I'm getting us out of New York."

"Why, what's wrong?" Ashley started to throw on a pair of pants.

"I just heard on the radio, New York is quarantined, some sort of virus, and we're booking."

"Rick, maybe we shouldn't." Ashley moved her hair from her eyes and pulled it in a ponytail. "Maybe we should just wait on the boat until it's over. We're away from people here."

"Ash, listen to me, the virus has to be big, or why else would they quarantine an entire city? No, besides the fact that we don't want to get what's going around. What if they can't stop it? If we don't get the virus we'll be dead anyway. Because if they can't stop it, they'll cancel New York, trust me."

"My family, what about them? Your family?"

"You're my family." With the rifle in one hand, and Ashley's hand in the other, he tugged her up to the deck. Rick placed the rifle down and threw the boat into gear, and proceeded to drive the boat quickly.

"Rick, slow down."

Rick paid no attention to Ashley nor to the two Coast Guard boats ahead of them, he sped in between them.

Within seconds a helicopter appeared over head. "Attention below, you are in a quarantined area, do not attempt to leave."

Rick kept driving.

"We repeat, this is a quarantined area, if you do not turn your vessel around, we will stop you!"

"Rick, stop the boat."

"They're bluffing, Ashley."

"THIS IS YOUR LAST WARNING. STOP OR WE WILL SHOOT!"

"Rick!"

"They're bluffing, Ashley."

The helicopter flew away.

“I told you, Ash, they weren’t going to shoot at us.” Rick put his arm around her and smiled, but the smile quickly left his face when the sound of a jet overhead made him look up.

The Air Force jet streamed by, and with one single missile, fired Rick and Ashley’s boat out of the water.

**May 31st - 7:20 a.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut**

The hot feel of his hand against her bare arm made Ellen immediately spring up from her snuggling position in bed. She cleared her hair from her eyes to see her son, Josh, standing there. “Josh, what is it?”

“Mom.” His voice cracked. “I’m really sick.”

Ellen swung her legs over the bed and stood up. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know.” His glossy eyes looked at her, his face was pale. “I’m just sick.”

Ellen’s hands went to his face and then his neck. “Shit. You’re burning up. Let’s get you some Tylenol. O.K.” Getting her agreeing nod from Josh, Ellen, hand on Josh’s back, led him from her room to the bathroom. She filled the cup, handed it to him, then opened the medicine cabinet and pulled out a bottle of pills. “What hurts you? Head, stomach, what?”

“Yeah.”

“They all hurt?”

“Yeah.”

Ellen handed him the pills. She ran her hand through his hair so motherly as he took them and swallowed with almost a gag. “You O.K.?”

Josh nodded weakly.

“Let’s get you back to bed.” Arm on Josh, Ellen started walking him to his room. She stopped when she could hear the weakened sound of regurgitation coming from the guest room. She kept moving, taking Josh into his room and helping him into bed. She covered and kissed him. “I’ll check on you later.” Running her hand over his head, Ellen left the room. She paused by Taylor’s open door and giggled at the sight of her daughter. Covers off, legs spread, arms out. Shaking her head, Ellen stepped inside and pulled

the covers up. She leaned down to Taylor and placed her lips to her forehead. Ellen's heart dropped. "No." She kissed Taylor again. "This is ridiculous. You're warm too."

Upset at her family's all coming down with this flu Doc Breyer seemed none too concerned about, Ellen walked to her bedroom to give Doc Breyer call. If for nothing else, then to bitch at him. She picked up the phone and placed the receiver to her ear. Her dialing finger stopped and Ellen pulled the receiver from her and stared in oddity at it. Instead of the dial tone that should have greeted her, a busy signal, fast and deep was heard, blocking out any open lines of communication Ellen could get to dial out.

May 31st - 8:10 a.m.
Fairfield University - Stamford, Connecticut

It was a special two room lab set up and Dean buzzed about it in his usual mad scientist fashion. Crates were spread out. Some unpacked. Some sealed. He would take things from them. Lay it on the counter then move to his computer, the first of equipment he got up and running.

"Hey," Henry called into the lab, carrying yet another box. "Some army guy just dropped this off."

"Over there." Dean pointed, eyes fixed on the computer screen. He shook his head and stood straight looking at Henry. "I appreciate all your help."

"Oh, no problem. I'm the helpful guy. That's why they called me."

"I'm sure."

"I can help you even more if you'd like." Henry followed him. "Oh!" He called out startling Dean. "I know. You should let me be your assistant, Captain Dean."

"Lieutenant."

"I can be a lieutenant. Sure."

"No." Dean chuckled. "I'm a lieutenant. And yes, I would like to recruit you."

"Excellent." Henry peeked in boxes. "This is too cool. I'm gonna be a great help. As long as I don't get too dirty. Or grossed out. I gag easily, you know. I would have been a scientist had it not been for all the schooling. I

hated school.” Henry watched Dean move about. “Maybe I can be a scientist of Mechanical things. What do you think. Dr.... Henry.” He stated so proudly.

“Molly.” Dean stopped moving.

“Oh, no, Dr. Dean. I can’t be a Molly.” Henry snickered.

“Molly.” Dean grinned and moved to the door.

Molly stood there. “Ready for some help?”

“God, they pulled you in too?” Dean asked, taking hold of her arm and bringing her further into the lab.

“Dragged me right out of bed.”

Dean smiled. “I’m glad you’re here. Henry.” He waited for Henry to look up. “This is Dr. Molly Walters. My lab assistant.”

“Swell.” Henry shifted his eyes from Molly to Dean. “So like, does this mean I’m out?”

May 31st - 8:42 a.m.
County General Hospital - New York City, NY

“Did you see the news?” Catherine asked as she placed a tourniquet on Andrea’s arm.

“I’ve been avoiding listening and watching. Why?” Andrea asked.

“They said rioting, bad too is going on near the barricade.”

Andrea shook her head. “Did they think it wouldn’t? Sweet Jesus, you lock two million people in a city with a deadly virus. They are not going to be celebrating.”

“Guess not.” Catherine inserted the tube.

“Bet me the rioting causes more deaths than our virus today.”

“You’re probably right,” Catherine spoke with exhaustion.

Andrea watched Catherine pull the tube of blood from her arm.

“Why are you doing this?”

“You haven’t been exposed.” Catherine laid a cotton ball on Andrea’s arm. “I want to see if you’re immune.”

“Well, I certainly hope I’m not.” Andrea rolled down her sleeve as she stood up.

“Andrea?” Catherine called as Andrea began to leave. “Why? I don’t

understand.”

“Take a look at this floor. This hospital. My nurses. So fast and deadly. There is a wrath of death ravaging our world and I for one do not want to be around when it’s all said and done with. I don’t want to watch all things I love disappear. Do you?”

Catherine hadn’t any idea what to say, how to respond. She stood speechless as Andrea left.

May 31st - 9:00 a.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut

Electricity. Filtered water. Food conservation. Sewage. Growth. Protection. Kelly flipped through the pages of the notebook she found on her kitchen table. Her head pounded with each plan, notes or idea written under every category hand written there. She couldn’t believe her eyes. Why was she reading this? Her hand lifted and the notebook closed when she heard the clearing of the throat. She turned to see Joe standing in the kitchen.

“Kel.” He stated her name, ran his finger over his top lip and returned to the table.

Kelly watched him sit down, open the notebook and grab a pen. “Joe. There is something wrong with you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“That.” Kelly pointed to the notebook. “I looked through it.”

“I’m just taking notes.” Joe lifted his glasses from the table and placed them on.

“Notes on what to do when the world shuts down.”

“It’s planning ahead.”

“It’s morbid,” Kelly argued. “This is so typical of you. All of you Slagels are morbid. All of you. You’re probably loving this. I think you’re overreacting.”

Joe had enough of being calm, his hand slammed the notebook shut. “Overreacting? How in Christ name can you say that? They shut down the entire borough of New York. Barricaded it. That is not overreacting Kelly, that is reality. And the sooner you see that, the sooner you will stop moping around the house and get up the goddamn strength you are gonna need to

face this.”

Kelly heaved out an emotional breath. “There will be nothing to face. It will be over soon. You wait.” Not wanting to be witness to Joe’s plans for the apocalypse, Kelly, angry, spun and stormed from the kitchen. She could feel herself getting hot, flush, the skin of her face burning. Near tears and wanting to just calm down, Kelly flew into the hall powder room and slammed the door. She moved to the sink, turning it on full blast and she bent over splashing her face frantically. Lifting her face, Kelly reached for a towel. Her hand shook out of control. A shaking that vibrated through her entire body, knotting her insides. Just as she grabbed the towel and slid it down her pale face, Kelly’s head ached more, her insides turned like she had never felt, and she dropped to the floor by the commode, lifted the lid and violently vomited.

MAY 31st - 9:00 a.m.
George Washington Bridge, New York

Automobiles, trucks, vans and many other vehicles lined up in a barrage to escape the city. Where they thought they were going was incomprehensible. They were told that once there, they were to abandon their vehicles and walk on foot back to where they came from. There was no turning back, there was no going forward. Some people even resorted to bringing food and camping out until the wait was over. These were the smart ones. The thousands of onlookers watched as many thought that they would be the one to cross and get away, only to be arrested or shot.

The Bristle family was not from New York, they were from New Jersey. Yet Peg and Harry Bristle and their two teenaged children, sightseeing for the weekend, sat in their Lexus amidst the turbulence. Harry, Jr. had been sick since last evening and Harry Sr., Peg, and Lucy were just beginning to feel the flu. They wondered, like many others, if this was a deadly virus. Would their last painful hours be sitting behind a beat-up Jeep? Or possibly someone would come to their aid.

Their only means of entertainment for the past three hours was watching and counting in terror how many people were killed trying to break the barricade.

Peg jolted a bit as she witnessed the shooting of a motorcyclist.

Harry Sr., munching on Planter's Peanuts, chewed and commented. "Stupid asshole, how many does that make?"

Lucy checked her note book. "Forty-eight."

"Forty-eight?" Harry Sr., shoved another peanut in his mouth. "I guess they'll be moving them out soon."

"I don't think so." Peg shoved her hand in the bag. "They still have lots of room."

They watched as two military men wearing respirators hoisted the body of the dead biker into the back of a dump truck, brushed off their hands and went back to their post as if nothing had happened.

Harry Jr., moaned from the back seat.

Lucy checked him out and reported to her parents. "He's getting worse, and he's waking up."

Peg opened her purse. "Here." She handed Lucy a yellow pill. "Give him another Valium."

Harry Sr., looked in her purse. "You have enough for the rest of us when we need them, don't you?"

"Of course I do, remember I have Xanax, and Perks for when things get really bad." She looked at her watch and pulled a bottle of water from the cooler. "It's time for me to take another nerve pill, anyone else?"

In order to remain calm, both Harry and Lucy held out their hands.

May 31st - 9:10 a.m.
County General Hospital - New York City, NY

' ... It's difficult at this time, with airspace closed off to our eyewitness news choppers, to determine if the insurmountable amount of reports are indeed true ... '

Catherine sat in a chair, flipping through the note cards of her prospective news conference.

' ... the shooting of civilians at the barricade points are at this time the most disturbing. Once again authorities are urging those of you who live in the Metropolitan New York area to stay inside. Do not make an attempt to leave the city at this time. Frustration is high and Bell Atlantic has confirmed that phone service in the New York City area region is disrupted. Today at ten, a special informational ... '

From the news to the shaking hand Catherine's eye shifted. Jan

extended in front of Catherine a sheet of paper. Catherine's eyes cased up the trembling arm, and she gripped it as she stood. "Jan." Catherine's hand went to Jan's cheek. "Oh, my God."

Jan stepped back. Her skin was ill-white. "I needed you to know ..." Her head twitched. "I need you to know. We have reported cases in ... in ..." Jan swallowed harshly and as if in pain. "In seven other countries. Please." Her eyes closed. "Please think about what you'll say today at the ..." Jan never said anymore, her head went back and forward she toppled with a loud bang to the floor. Catherine flew to her aid, sliding on the floor the moment Jan began to convulse.

May 31st - 9:22 a.m.
The White House - Washington, DC

Dust particles floated in the beams of sunlight that seeped through the windows of the oval office. Dark, quiet and solemn was the feel of the office. Not a light was on. President Hadly sat behind his desk, his chair turned so as to face the window. His feet were planted firmly on the floor. His hands gripped the arms of the chair. No expression, not even anger graced his stone cold face as he just stared to the window.

Jason Locks inched his way to the President's side. His voice was soft, matching the feel of the room. "The evidence is mounting, Sir. We're talking about a massive terrorist retaliation. We have confirmed twelve simultaneous releases of the bug. It's time ... it's time that you read that again."

From the arm of the chair president Hadly's hand moved slowly. He brought it to his lap and on to the blue bound manuscript that rested there unread. He slid his hand across the crispness of it as his eyes read the black, bold title, 'CLASSIFIED: THE GARFIELD PROJECT'. It was something in his entire presidency he never thought he'd have to read. Because President Hadly knew how desperate the situation had to be if he was forced to open it. The situation was not something he was ready or wanting to face. Not yet.

**May 31st - 9:30 a.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut**

Ellen thought that Peter was getting better, maybe just a little. His eyes were open, he responded to her, and he held in the water she gave him for over a half an hour. That was the longest Ellen could recall he had gone without throwing up. She dipped the wash cloth in the basin and brought it over his face again. She looked in the glossy eyes that stared like a child, so hurt up to her, so helpless. She ran the cloth across his cracked lips and down to his neck.

“I don’t know, Peter. I just don’t know what this is.”

“El.” Peter spoke so weak, and his words trembled as much as his body. “I’m so sick. I think I’m dying. Help me.”

Ellen pulled her hand back clenching the wash cloth tight. She dropped it in the basin. “I’ll try to call again.” She stood up, taking the basin into the guest bathroom. She looked back at Peter as she left the room. He laid on his back, shaking, his eyes open and staring out. A look of searching was in his eyes. Peering outward as if looking for answers, help, relief.

She pulled the door closed and moved to her bedroom, pausing to peek in Josh’s room, he was asleep. Taylor was too. Of course, Taylor had not even made the attempt to get out of bed. Too sick, she told Ellen, and her little head hurt so badly, she was in tears. Saying a short begging prayer, Ellen picked up the phone and gasped in relief when she heard the dial tone. It was something she had been unable to get for hours. Quickly she dialed, her lips moving rapidly as she beckoned softly for someone to answer.

The operator came on. “You have reached the Fairfield County Regional ambulance dispatch center ...”

Ellen peeped out a moan of excitement. Finally help. “Yes, I need an ambulance. For Ash ...”

“... at this time, all emergency services have been suspended until further notice. Please try your call later.”

The long high pitch beep rang in Ellen’s ear. She slid the phone from her ear across her cheek, dropped her forehead to the ear piece, and closed her eyes. A feeling of desperation and helplessness, so overwhelming, hit Ellen, that she just wanted to break down and cry. But like that phone she clenched in her sweaty hand, Ellen held on tight to the strength she needed.

May 31st - 9:47 a.m.
Fairfield University - Stamford, Connecticut

It was a contrast of reality to Dean. On his right, Molly stood, suited up behind a glass wall working on something in the lab, smiling and waving to Henry who was adding a sealant around the window frame. Then to his left the speaker phone. Catherine Donovan, shaken but trying to be strong, her voice hard to understand through the static of the phone.

“I’m sorry, Catherine, what was that again, I can barely hear you.” Dean said as he sat at the counter reviewing notes.

“I’m sorry this connection is bad. I’m on my cell phone. I was saying we stopped taking patients. The numbers are through the roof here. Everything we have tried has failed. This thing moves too fast. How did it get out of control so fast?”

“Out of control fast?” Dean questioned. “Catherine, you’re talking a twenty-eight hour window before this thing was discovered to be airborne. The incubation period alone is shorter than that. We lost control the second it was unknowingly released.”

“But all the studies I have done show ...”

“Show what? To circle the globe it would take weeks, months? Highly doubtful when you’re speaking about a killer virus that ends a life in forty-eight hours or less. Also keep in mind the last time this planet faced a plague, we did not have intercontinental air travel.”

“True.” Catherine agreed.

“So lose the tone of blaming yourself.” Dean told her then added a little compassion. “Even if you were Superwoman you wouldn’t have been fast enough.”

“Is there hope?”

“There’s always hope.” Dean answered. “And we are not out of options yet. Even if we take it to the wire, we won’t give up. In fact. I’m waiting for a prototype right now to arrive from my lab. A viral block I’ve been working on. Works with the DNA and the RNA.”

“Yes, but working with the DNA and RNA, wouldn’t the patient have to have some sort of genetic immunity link for it to work?” Catherine

questioned.

“Don’t know. Different viruses breed different results. My research is not complete, but at this point it is worth a shot. Right? We’ll know in about an hour.”

“An hour.” Catherine sounded disappointed. “My news conference is before that. I was hoping you could have given me something.”

“For?” Dean asked. “For you to say? I thought you knew what you were going to say.”

“I do and I don’t. I know what I have to say and I know what is the right thing to say, the question is what ...”

Dean looked up from his notes. “Catherine?” He called out. There wasn’t a sound coming from the speaker phone. No static. Nothing. Dean stood and lifted the receiver from the base. “Catherine.” He clicked the base several times. No dial tone. No busy signal. The phone was dead.

May 31st - 9:55 a.m.
Interstate 80 - Outskirts, Chicago, IL

It was a small mall complex, the parking lot had been cleared for the last hour of any vehicles there. Plowed out of the way as if the cars were snow and replaced with tents and military trucks. The small outdoor mall was located about a mile off the main interstate and Frank, on his break ran there. Trudging down the congested highway where traffic crawled and making it there in no time flat. There weren’t many military personnel moving about. A few men and women did the work cut out for multitudes more. Frank believed the reason for the lack of personnel had less to do with the virus and more to do with the fact that so many had left their posts and gone AWOL. Just as he himself contemplated on doing, but stayed where he had to be.

He had to return to his post before he too was considered absent without leave. But not before trying that payphone one more time. All the change he had went into the phone. Dialing the number, being told the outrageous amount, even borrowing twenty-five cents off a soldier to complete the long distance fee and after inserting the last dime, the phone rang. It rang only once. Even worse than a waste of money, Frank’s time, and efforts, that phone call ended up being a waste of Frank’s hopes when a

recorded voice came on informing Frank, ‘the phone call could not be completed due to the disruption of phone service in the state of Connecticut.’

May 31st - 10:00 a.m. EST
Seattle, WA - City Limits

The large hand slammed down three times on the hood of the mini van that stopped at his barricade. “Move it out!” Sergeant Robert ‘Robbie’ Slagel ordered to the scared looking woman driving the van with three small children. “Ma’am, move it out now!”

“I’m going through,” she spoke with emotional insistence.

Robbie didn’t raise his weapon, he merely let the pumping of the chamber be heard. “Ma’am, you will back up this vehicle now. Now!” Standing firm and with intimidation, Robbie stared coldly at her until she gave in, backing the van up only to let another who made an attempt to get out, move forward. Robbie signaled for another man to handle it.

It all was making sense to him. His father’s phone call, the mentioning of the contingency plan. Stepping back to get a drink of water from the canteen set up in the closed fast food restaurant parking lot, Robbie spotted it. The pay phone.

Taking off his gas mask and scratching his sweaty blonde hair, he brought his glass of water to his lips, keeping his eyes on that phone. Unsuccessfully he had tried to get a hold of his father since the day before. With things being the way they were now, what would it hurt if he attempted it just one more time.

After looking around he walked to the lone pay phone, remembering his calling card number he lifted the receiver, dialing his father’s cell phone number. The line was crackling and filled with static, but it rang. “Come on Dad, answer. Answer.” He beckoned.. “Dad . . .” Robbie stopped speaking when he realized it was the voice mail. “Shit!” He slammed down the phone so harshly it dropped and dangled bouncing against his tall body. Finally giving up, he picked up the receiver and laid it on its base. He rested his head against the phone, eyes closed taking in the frightening aspect of what was going on. After a brief moment, he regained his composure and returned to his post. He’d try again later. Robbie needed to speak to his father. However, if he didn’t get through on that attempt, he would leave a message.

May 31st - 10:01 a.m.
The News Conference

Joe covered Kelly with a blanket as she curled up in an easy chair, laying more to her side. He moved to the television, turning it up, then walking by little eleven-year-old Johnny Slagel as he laid in front of the television watching.

“Joe,” Kelly called out, a weakness had hit her. “I don’t want to watch this.”

“We have to.” Joe stated matter-of-fact. “If we listen to anything, I believe we’ll listen right now to the truth.” Backing up away from the set, Joe sat on the couch in between his two granddaughters. He pulled them close and watched.

Catherine nervously fiddled with her index cards as she approached the podium in the conference auditorium of the hospital. It was crowded; cameras flashing at her, clicking, a mumbling of voices came from what Catherine believed was every single reporter stuck in New York. They awaited what she was going to say, but not with patience. Catherine stared to the many faces, and leaned into the abundance of microphones. “Good Morning. I’m Doctor Catherine Donovan of the Centers for Disease Control.”

A hush took over the room and everyone’s attention was grabbed. There was no introduction of her, nothing to forewarn the reporters this unlikely looking woman was the doctor with powerful information they had been waiting on.

“I’m here today, not to answer questions, but to inform you. Hopefully, I will tell you exactly what you need to know.” Catherine stared down at her cards again, her perspiring hands dampened them. “We here in New York are dealing with a virus. A virus deliberately released in a subway, two days ago. I know a lot of you are experiencing the caring for ill right now. I know from what I have been doing here, that it’s a task to handle. So we’re going got try to relieve some of that burden.” She cleared her throat. “Aid stations, relief stations, whatever you would like to call them, are being set up as we speak. You are encouraged to seek medical care if you or a

family member is ill. Following this info-conference, do not be alarmed, stations will switch to the emergency broadcasting system. A list of locations for relief stations will continuously be run.” She paused to take a breath. “This virus is centralized in New York. It is under control, and this crisis will be over shortly.”

President Hadly smiled to Jason Locks, a smile of relief as he watched Catherine deliver her speech on a wall of television sets just outside the oval office.

Catherine set down her index cards and gripped the podium with seriousness. “That is what I’m supposed to tell you. This ... is what I’m not.” Catherine waited for complete silence. No cameras. No voices. “It’s airborne ...”

Immediately upon those words, President Hadly sprang from his chair.

“... It’s deadly. And it is hitting us faster than we ever feared in any of our worst nightmares.”

Such rage filled President Hadly. His arm swung out hitting the air. “Son of a bitch, she did it!”

Catherine held up her hand to the mumbles of concern. “Right now a list of virus stages and symptoms are being faxed to every health care facility in the country that is capable of receiving them. We will also run the symptoms at intervals of every half hour over the emergency broadcasting system. What you receive, what you know, is all that we know. But understand, please ...” Catherine swallowed the lump in her throat. “We are doing everything humanly possible to stop this. To end this. Hopefully, with God’s great intervention, the prayers of the world, and with the brilliancy of our scientific technology, we will overcome this tragedy that has now embraced us so strongly. Thank you.” Catherine stepped back, nodded sadly and ignoring the shouting of questions, walked off.

Every single television monitor that President Hadly watched, turned off the second the beep of the emergency station began. Slowly President Hadly, Jason at his side, walked to his oval office. He moved to his desk and lowered himself down to his chair. After briefly closing his eyes in thought, he folded his hands on his desk top and looked up to Jason. “O.K., it’s out.

We know what we have to do now.”

**May 31st - 10:25 a.m.
Interstate 80 - Outskirts, Chicago, IL**

Both sides of the highway were jammed with cars all going in the same direction. Out. Up the bane of the road and in the center strip cars all moved at a turtles pace. Off to the highway’s side, military trucks were lined up. In a tent, amongst all that, Frank stood. He held the army mobile phone to his ear, while closing off the noise with his finger. He nodded, handed the phone to the corporal and holding his M-16, he stepped from the tent. All it took was for Frank to lift his arm high in a motioning wave. All eyes were waiting for it. The second after Frank’s signal, soldiers placed on gas masks, grabbed roadblock horses, and marched with them across the highway. The big military trucks made their own room as they followed the soldiers out. All traffic was immediately stopped.

Martial law was officially in effect.

THE CHAOS

*Every fear that's had, every heart that beats,
every corner that we take, leads to another street.
Will we give our hand to a loved one or a friend?
Or fight only for ourselves, until the bitter end.*

**May 31st - 12:10 p.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut**

Through her cell phone, finally working, Ellen heard the words she didn't want to hear. She wished it was the bad connection, maybe the constant clicking made her hear wrong. But there was no way around the truth and the male voice telling her, 'Were sorry ma'am, Sgt. Slagel has been deployed.'

Ellen turned off the phone, sliding it down to her lips. She closed her eyes and a single tear rolled down her cheek. Quickly she turned when she heard the front door open. Joe walked in. Nearly dropping the phone as she set it on the foyer table, Ellen raced to him and into his arms. "Oh, Joe."

Joe stepped back from the embrace and placed his hands upon her face. "How you holding up?"

"I feel like I'm falling apart. My whole family is sick. My kids, Joe. My kids." Ellen started to cry. "And there's no help to be found. Nothing. Only what I can give them. This isn't happening. Tell me this isn't happening."

Joe leaned into her and gently laid his lips to her forehead. "I wish to God, with all my heart, that I could tell you none of this is real. Unfortunately, Sweetheart, it's happening."

"That's why you're here. That's why you came up. The contingency plan. You knew, because you were there."

"You're right." Joe moved back, sliding his hand from her face. "I called my boys. But ... they're all military. My guess, if they planned on coming home, they can't now. Martial law has gone into effect."

With a gasp, Ellen stepped back covering her mouth in shock. "What do we do?"

"Right now, we gather up all our strength. We'll be there for those who need us and ..." Joe walked up to Ellen and took her again in his arms, holding her like the father he had always been to her. "And we hold out hope. We hold out hope."

**May 31st - 12:15 p.m.
Fairfield University - Stamford, Connecticut**

It wasn't Dean to show emotions, or show when anything really effected him. He always chalked it up to the scientist in him. But it was hard for Dean to hide. His jaw twitched and his head lowered when Molly spoke to him.

"I'll be fine. How can I not be. You're working on this," Molly said.

"When ... when did you start feeling it?" Dean asked finally noticing the drawn look Molly had to her.

"A couple hours ago I started to feel bad. I'm not gonna quit. I won't leave you alone. I will work until I can't work anymore."

"Molly," Dean said her name with such a loss. "My God, that is not my ..."

A knock on the door, a single knock, brought in Henry. "Dean."

"Not now." Dean told him.

"No, Dean, I need to speak to you. Just for a minute." Henry sounded desperate.

Dean looked to Molly who gave a single nod of approval and he looked Henry's way. "What's up?"

"Can you come into the hall?" Henry questioned then stepped out.

Reluctantly Dean followed, pulling the door closed. He saw a woman standing there. Tall, slender, young, but everything about her yelled 'frazzled'. From her pulled up hair that dangled strings, to her dirty and wrinkled business suit.

Henry held out his hand. "Dean, this is Emily Chancellor, she's the hospital administrator."

"Lt. Hayes." Emily extended her hand. "Our Henry tells us that you are a doctor as well as a research scientist."

"I am," Dean said. "Why?"

"We've run into a bit of a problem." Emily explained. "Most of our staff left, and the ones who remain, well, they're getting ill. And ... maybe it's best if you follow me." She began walking down the hall and then to the steps that led to the main floor.

"What do you need from me?" Dean asked as she neared the entrance.

"We've been designated an aid station," she replied. "But I'm kind of

hoping I can get a helping medical hand from you. At least until help arrives.”

“Why?” Dean asked.

“Our station has been announced.” Emily moved forward to the doors and pushed them open.

Any ability to breath on his own left Dean the second he looked out into the lawn area. People had gathered in masses in an attempt to make it to the hospital two buildings away. They sat on the grass, they stood in herds, and they fought. But they were there for help, tons of them, and they spread out for as far as the eye could see.

**May 31st - 1:40 p.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut**

Arms crossed, Ellen watched the paper come out of her printer. She turned her head when the vision of her cellular phone extended to her. “No.” She looked to Joe as he handed it over. “Please don’t tell me we lost that too.”

“No.” Joe shook his head.

“Did you have any luck?”

“None. All I could get was that Frank was somewhere outside of Chicago.”

“It didn’t help telling them Kelly and the baby were sick?”

“Didn’t make a bit of difference,” Joe said. “Ellen, you do realize that Frank may never get here if he ...”

“No.” Ellen ceased his sentence. “Don’t say it. Don’t. Frank getting sick is something I don’t want to think about. Right now, my kids, Kelly, the baby and even Pete, have to be forefront.”

Joe watched her remove the sheets of paper from the printer’s tray. Her address was on there big and bold. “Ellen, I know you told Doc Breyer you would help him out. But, do you understand what you’re doing? Giving medication here is making your home a relief station. People will come. They won’t leave. Do you really want to take that on?”

Collating the papers, Ellen looked at Joe. “No. No I don’t. But what choice do we have? We aren’t sick. If we don’t help them. Who will?” On tipped toes she kissed Joe on the cheek. “Thank you for watching my family.

I won't be long. Just our office here and in Harmer, also the pharmacies."

"Ellen." Joe grabbed hold of her. "Wait." He reached into his shoulder harness, pulled out the revolver, checked the safety grabbed her hand and laid the gun in her palm. "For your protection. Be careful out there."

"I will." Ellen softly winked, laid the gun on her stack of papers, picked up her keys from the table and walked out.

Joe, hands in his pockets moved to the living room. He stood staring out the window, watching, until Ellen had pulled out her jeep and disappeared from his sight.

May 31st - 2:05 p.m.
County General Hospital - New York City, NY

Seven years earlier, Andrea sported a little patch on her arm. It helped her quit the habit Jake, her husband had long since complained about. Smoking. But on the rooftop of County General, Andrea smoked again. If for nothing else but as an excuse to take the break that was long over due. She hadn't slept for longer than a twenty minute stretch, yet she didn't feel the exhaustion. She felt the sadness of the pain she watched people suffer through and the hopelessness of her unanswered prayers.

Gunfire rapid and lone shots, rang out in the city afoot as if a new rhythmic beat that could end up being the last song she would ever hear. Black smoke rose up from smoldering buildings close and in the distance, and the screams and cries of people carried up as well. There was no solitude as Andrea stood on the rooftop alone. Not like she had hoped for. She realized, it didn't matter whether she was in the hospital, on her floor, hiding in the lounge, or on that rooftop, agony surrounded. It was everywhere. Every radio, television, hallway and patient's face. There was absolutely no escaping the bitter truth, that she Andrea, was witnessing the heartbreak of the world's end.

May 31st - 2:10 p.m.
Fairfield University - Stamford, Connecticut

Henry bobbed a lot. Back and forth, up and down all in nervous anxiety. Before a military truck, one lone military truck, he waited. Two or three soldiers, all wearing gas masks were to his left. They stood armed and arms crossed, watching out as if they were protecting that truck from all those people. They were.

Relief hit Henry when he finally spotted Dean walking his way through the people. He wasn't alone, an older man, towering over Dean with gray hair walked with him. Henry raced from the truck, hoping he wouldn't get shot for leaving his unofficial post. He ran straight to Dean. "Thank

God!” Henry laid his hands on Dean’s shoulders. “Oh, Dean.” Henry twitched his head back. “I don’t think this one truck is going to be enough. And ... Emily booked. I’m alone here. Help.”

“Henry, calm down.” Dean hid his chuckle caused by the frantic man. “More trucks are coming. I promise you this is going to be an aid station. But right now, I have to get back to the lab.”

“But Dean ...”

“Henry.” Dean held up his hand. “I brought help. This is my father, William. He’s a doctor. He’ll be helping you out.”

Henry shook William’s hand but kept his eyes on Dean. “Helping me out? What do you mean. With setting up, right?”

William shook his head. “No, Henry. With the ill.”

“The ill?” Henry stepped back. “Oh, no, I can’t. I can’t help with the ill.” He rambled. “I can do other stuff. I can. I can guard the one truck. But not help with the ill. These people ...” Henry dropped his voice to a whisper. “These people are sick. They’re vomiting. Violently too. Not a good ...”

“Henry.” Dean halted him. “Sorry. You’re recruited. I’ll check back in a bit.”

“But, Dean.” Henry called out as Dean hurried away. “Dean. Shit.” Henry watched Dean move through the masses of people, totally ignoring those who grabbed for him. When Dean was gone, Henry placed his hands in his pocket, whistled slightly and started to back away. He didn’t make it far. William snatched him right back.

**May 31st - 2:30 p.m.
Interstate 80 - Outskirts, Chicago, IL**

Frank Slagel stood in the midst of the barricade blocking an exit out of Chicago. His job was to ensure he and his men stopped all traffic from leaving the city. It had been difficult so far. People just weren’t taking no for an answer it that irritated Frank. They didn’t understand that he was just doing his job and if up to him personally, he’d let them all through. After hearing what he did on the news conference there really wasn’t any reason to keep them in.

“Sarge.” A fellow soldier also wearing a gas mask grabbed his

shoulder. “Major Nelson is on the radio, he needs to speak to you.”

“Thanks.” Frank harnessed his rifle over his shoulder, he needed the break even briefly. Staring at the cars all trying to go somewhere made Frank feel that he himself wished he could do the same thing. But the only way he could get home would be on foot and that could take a while. Even then, if he did just decide to jump ship and go AWOL he stood a chance of getting shot. If protecting his family was what drove Frank to get home, then he had to justify it in his mind that he was doing that by holding the lines. He had too or else he’d drive himself crazy. “Sergeant Slagel speaking, Sir.” Frank grabbed the microphone to the radio. He listened to the major ramble something about needing a few of Frank’s men. Frank nodded as if the major saw him, agreeing to give up the men, knowing full well it wouldn’t do any good. So many of the soldiers were already ill. “Yes, Sir.” Frank finally verbally responded and the Major left the airways. Setting down the radio, Frank turned to go back to his post when he saw it. A struggle between a man who stood holding his motorcycle and two soldiers who diligently argued with him. Perturbed that this man was giving his men such a hard time, Frank stormed over to the scene. “What is the problem!?” Frank spoke loud and bellowing to the man nearly his height. “Sir, you are to back your ass up or *we* will back you up.”

The man glared at Frank. “This is bullshit.”

“Well this is the way it is. Back it up!” Frank ordered.

The man stepped back and with that, mounted his bike. Revving up his engines he placed his bike in gear. “Fuck you.” With a screech he sped forward.

Without a hesitation, without a second thought, Frank spun forward his M-16, lifted it up, pumped the chamber and fired a single shot that sent the man flying from his bike and the motorcycle crashing in a skid twenty feet further. Lowering his weapon with a stone face, Frank swung it behind his shoulder, walked strongly and without emotion, to the man’s dead body. Reaching down he grabbed hold of the man’s shirt, and drug his body across the ground ten feet or so to an awaiting truck. With ease, Frank lifted the body and tossed it in with others who had dared to try make it through. Thinking no more about it, Frank returned to his post.

May 31st - 3:55 p.m.
County General Hospital - New York City, NY

Covered in blood as if she worked in a MASH unit instead of a hospital, Andrea worked on a patient, whose place to suffer was found on a cot lined up in the hall. Holding a syringe in her mouth, Andrea checked the intravenous of the man.

“Andrea.” Catherine approached her from behind. “I’m heading down to the lower floor. If Lt. Hayes gets through will you ...”

“Find you?” Andrea leaned her body on the man. “Yes, I will.”

“Thank you.” Drawn out, Catherine slid her hand over Andrea’s back as she moved down the hall. Passing the lounge she heard the oddness of it. No rattling of city names. No drab male announcer’s voice coldly stating symptoms, but a hiss. Wondering if they lost television communications, Catherine stepped into the doorway of the lounge. On the television, the static came, but a picture was shown. A picture of a digital timer and it was counting down.

May 31st - 3:58 p.m.
The Speech

The note simply read, ‘Medical relief available at 5567 Elks Drive’ and Ellen hung it on the front office door of Doc Breyer’s Ashtonville Clinic. Many people had gathered there, hoping to find help, some relief from a building that would not open its doors. She made her way, boxes in hand to Joe’s car, which had become surrounded by people. Ellen blocked them out. She couldn’t let their questions, the begging for help slow her down. She had one more stop to make and then she would be able, to the best of her ability, administer the care she could to them.

Loading the box in the already packed backseat. Ellen with her shoulder, nudged a man from her way and slid in the car.

Silence.

She leaned back, ran her hand down her face and took a breath. She brought her hand forward to the ignition and started the engine. Fists banged

to get her attention. They swung loudly on the door, the hood and trunk. Surrounded by the noise Ellen only wanted to move on. Tossing the car in gear, she put the radio on.

In Ellen's home, Joe had carried Taylor with him to the living room. He thought of Kelly and how Mrs. Peter's the next door neighbor had gone to Kelly's house to help care for them while Joe stayed with Josh and Taylor. Center living room in a rocking chair, Joe held Taylor on his lap. He waited and watched counting down to himself with the clock on the television. Lips placed firmly to Taylor's forehead, Joe gently rocked the little girl who cried in such a painful whimper, and there was little comfort his strong arms could give her.

The count down of the timer on the television ended. A camera man, with one finger extended, pointed to President Hadly who sat behind his desk. He fiddled with a pencil and looked up to the camera with red, saddened eyes. "Now?" he simply asked, then sat straight up, slowly as if in no hurry to do what he was about to do. His voice stayed strong, yet soft. Filled with emotions, President George Hadly, addressed his nation ...

"I come to you today with a heavy heart. This great nation of ours, planet, is faced with a crisis parallel to no other we have ever faced ..."

Frank could have gathered around the table with the other remaining soldiers listening to the president's speech. But he didn't need to. Facing the barricade line, stern expression, Frank heard every word of President Hadly, blaring like a symphony through the multitudes of car radios.

'... A great miscarriage of fate has been dealt, and we as brothers are at arms against an unseen foe that dares to test the destiny of humanity. Selfishness is a word we must dismiss. Those of us who can, must deliver the care and compassion to those who so desperately seek our help ...'

The syringe came down hard and fast into the thigh of the man, who fought to stay alive. Aided by a soldier who held the man down, Andrea retracted the syringe, stepped back into the wall and lowered her head, hearing vividly through the corridors, the president's speech.

'... my heart and prayers go out to you. For I am no different than you in this crisis. I am with you ... I feel every ounce of pain you do. I share your sorrow. Your grief ... But in our darkest hour, heroes shall emerge. Hope stands forefront ...'

It amazed Dean on how the second the president spoke those words he was filled with a sense of faith, because at that exact moment, from the

machine he watched, came the results he needed to see. He smiled slightly as he read them.

George stared with intensity into the camera as his fist clenched and pounded with each of his powerful words. “Yet, we have not given up. Every second of this day, every scientist, every dreamer is out there working with their hearts and souls to stop what now strives to conquer us. And if it is God’s will that defeat shall befall us. Then when this silent victor has run its course, those of us who emerge from the ashes will emerge with our heads high. Through losses and pain. Through suffering and sorrow. We will right what went wrong. We will forge ahead. We will not give into extinction. We will ultimately prevail. We will ... live. Good luck.” George’s voice dropped. “May God be with you all.”

The sincerity, the hurt. Catherine witnessed it all on the president’s face. But she also witnessed his despair as he so much as said goodbye to the weak who were losing their battle. With the hiss of the emergency Broadcasting system’s return, Catherine folded her arms tight to her body, turned and placed her forehead into the doorframe she leaned against. Having just heard the president’s farewell to all hope, Catherine could do nothing at that moment but cry.

May 31st - 6:05 p.m.
Fairfield University - Stamford, Connecticut

William Hayes treated every patient as personally as he could. Not like the other two medics who had long since left their posts. In the four hours since he started helping, William estimated he had seen well over two hundred and he guessed that number would seem low when it was all said and done with.

“Suction, Henry.” William held out his hand, his fingers holding open the mouth of a woman. He felt the instrument hit his palm. “Thank you.” He inserted the tube into the woman’s mouth.

“Two days.” Henry spoke dazed.

“Excuse me?” William adjust the suction.

“Instead of a couple hours it seems like days.”

William looked over his shoulder to Henry who was assisting him. Henry for the most part moved patients for the aid station. That was his job. “Henry, you could say, a lifetime of learning can be found in one instance of a heartache.”

“There’s more than an instance here, William.” Henry looked around. The tents were filled to the capacity. “Where did they all come from?”

“Their homes, neighboring towns.” William shrugged.

“Yesterday the world was fine.”

“I highly doubt the world was fine, Henry. There’s talk among the soldiers that it was released in more than this country. The world wasn’t fine yesterday, the world was sick. They just didn’t realize it yet.” He turned off the suction machine. “Next one.”

Henry pushed the machine for William as he moved to the next person. “But how did they get sick so fast?”

“I suppose it wasn’t fast. I suppose all of these people were feeling it sometime last night. But like you or I would think of a common headache. They thought nothing about it until, well, they found out.” William smiled gently to the young woman patient. He lifted her name tag and all he saw was a number. He looked at her. “I’m Dr. Hayes, dear. I’m going to try to help you feel more comfortable.” He watched her cough. A trail of vomit seeped from the corner of her mouth. “Henry, suction please.”

Henry handed him the suction. “I’m sorry for asking all these questions.”

“I don’t mind answering them. But I may not be the one to ask. Have you tried my son?” William opened the young woman’s mouth.

“I tried and he rattled off something I didn’t understand. All I wanted to know was how it got to the finish line before we realized we had even started the race.”

“That was good.” William suctioned the woman.

“I mean, William. I had a virus once. We all have. But like, I was sick for a week. Not like this. William ... I saw eight people die last half hour alone.”

“And that number will grow. Rapidly too.” William said. “Henry, think of viruses as forms of transportation. Each virus looks different. Acts different. Moves different. The rate of speed in each is different also. Saying your body is the United States. The start of the illness is Los Angeles, the end is New York. If a normal virus is a car, then this virus, created to be strong, is

the concord jet.”

“Too fast.” Henry swayed his head.

“Look around, Henry.” William worked on the woman. “Would you rather take a week to watch the world die like this, or have it be over in a blink of an eye.”

Before Henry could say anything else. He heard the call of his name.

“Henry!” The man yelled. “We have one more to be moved!”

“I’ll be back, William.” Henry moved from the tent and toward the check in line. There was a long table with three men wearing gas masks. They took names, gave numbers and moved people into tents. The line of people before the men was congested and people shoved to move through.

“Take her to stage three.” The man with a gas mask handed Henry a wrist tag. “Number 4563.”

Henry nodded and looked to the woman who stood before the man on the end of the table. He was surprised. Most stage threes did not stand. “Ma’am, you want to ...”

“No ...” The man interrupted. “Not her.”

“Who?”

“Her.” The man only extended his arm pointing out and down to the other side of the table.

Someone was laying on the ground? Where? Henry thought. He didn’t see her. The people that waited to get help were so concerned with themselves, they couldn’t wait until 4563 was moved, they merely stepped over her and stood around her. “Excuse me.” Henry moved around the table and cut through the far right line making it center the crowd. “Excuse ...” Henry’s heart broke right there, he clenched the number in his hand and dropped to his knees angrily shoving people out of the way, sick or not. They didn’t care, and at that moment, Henry didn’t care much for them. On the ground, on her side was a little girl. No older than six, eyes closed, white as a sheet, shaking and covered with dried blood. “Oh my God.” Henry scooped the little girl up into his arms. Her little body flopped, head flung back. He closed his eyes briefly, breaking through the people and as he emerged, he turned to look back. The gap he had caused in the line closed quickly. They never noticed he carried a child out. The ill that waited never even cared. Henry, cradling the girl closer to his chest took her to the tent William was in, even though it was not stage three. “William.” Henry called out in a soft voice. “Please.” He laid the child on an empty cart. A whimper of pain escaped her. He slowly unfolded the blanket over the child.

“Well.” William spoke as he approached. He noticed the look on

Henry's face as Henry just stared down to the little girl. William caught eye contact with the girl and spoke tenderly with a smile. "What have we here?"

"A number." Henry quivered his words in sadness. "Just a number."

As William looked up from the girl, Henry was running from the tent.

Dean banged the cellular phone off the palm of his hand. "Hello?"

"I hear you." Catherine spoke. "Barely. I was told not much longer on the satellite communications."

"Hopefully we will accomplish something by then. Getting back. A freeze. Not long, but I have achieved a forty-five minute viral freeze. And that Catherine, is fifteen more minutes than we had last batch."

"Can you give higher doses?" Catherine asked.

"No. No. Anything in higher volume could be as deadly as the virus.."

"What about more frequent doses in the early stages?"

"I thought of that." Dean said. "But that's where we're screwed. No matter what stage given, the virus freezes, but when it returns and breaks the blockade, it's ten times stronger. So an early stage could fly in the latter stage prematurely. I'm thinking ..." A loud crash of glass and thump caused Dean to jolt his views to where he heard them come from. He saw Molly on the floor. "Shit. Have to go." He disconnected the call to Catherine without a second thought and raced over to help Molly on the floor. Never realizing the conversation he abruptly ended with Catherine would be the last one. Dean didn't think of that. He just thought of Molly.

William finished cleaning up the little girl, propping her on pillows and medicating her to make her comfortable. He readied to move on to the next patient, but grew tired of hearing the call of Henry's name. Constantly he was being beckoned. It wasn't that Henry was no where to be found that irritated William, it was the fact that the men who called him failed to see that Henry, didn't have to be there. He didn't have to help. He could have disappeared like many other had done. But Henry stayed. And he wished they would stop calling and treating Henry as nothing. William had to stop himself from wondering when the annoying little military tyrants would fall victim to the plague as well, ending their insidious order barking.

William wanted to search out Henry. Curious as to if he was all right or if Henry just had enough and left. There weren't many people well enough to ask of Henry's whereabouts, and it amazed William how many people Henry had helped, yet none of them remembered his face.

Carrying around the easy description, William asked several people if they had seen a tall Asian man in need of a hair cut. Some told William he had gone off to the main building. Some said they never saw him. William knew when he made it to the main building, finding Henry inside would not only be a task, it would be next to impossible. The building was taken over. People had sought shelter there so as to be close to the medical help. They laid in the lobby, on the furniture, floors and they lined the hallways like sardines in can. William called out loudly, twice maybe three times, Henry's name and received no response. Figuring it was time to return to his patients, William left the building. If it wasn't for his own simple sneeze, William wouldn't have stopped walking, his head wouldn't have tossed to the left, and he wouldn't have seen Henry sitting alone on the side of the building.

Against the wall Henry sat, legs brought up, his head was down against his knees, and his long hair dangled in what William believed was Henry's own personal cover from the pain. Henry needed to get away, even for a little, from everything that was happening. If that was what Henry needed, then William wasn't going to interrupt him. After looking one more moment at Henry, William walked away.

May 31st - 6:30 p.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut

Ellen had moved both of her children into her room and onto her queen size bed. There she could see them both at the same time and do what she could to help them. She was taking time from giving medical relief to those who had gathered outside her home, lining up and waiting for help. She needed to take time with her children. She laid in a sitting up position on the bed, Josh next to her, his head on her legs. Taylor on the other side of Josh, curled in a fetal position. Ellen, arm draped across, lifted and dropped Taylor's hair in between lightly tickling her forehead.

"Kiddo." Joe called out quietly after opening the door. "I have to get

back to Kelly's now. Maggie Peters needs to leave. Her husband is sick now, Johnny just ran over to tell me."

"How's Maggie?" Ellen asked.

"Not sick. Not yet."

Ellen lifted Josh's head from her legs and slipped off the bed trying not to disturb her children who had just fallen asleep. She covered them both back up, kissed them and stretched as she walked to Joe. "Have anymore showed up out there?"

"I think ..." Joe hesitated. "I think it's getting ahead of us now."

Ellen's shoulders dropped. She brought her hand to her head and held back her bangs as she walked from the bedroom with Joe. "What are we gonna do. We can't do this alone, Joe." So confused, Ellen sounded. "I wiped out every pharmacy I could and still that medication is not gonna last. And ... and there are four people I don't think will make it through the night. Three are on my front lawn and one is in my guest room."

Joe paused before going down the steps. He looked back at the closed guest room door. "Is he that bad now?"

"Oh, Joe." Ellen gasped out. "He's that bad."

"I'll tell you what." Joe walked with Ellen down the steps. "There's an aid station in Stamford. Let me talk to Maggie. Let me see if I can get her to check in on Kelly and the girls tonight. You man the fort here, I'll take Pete and the others to Stamford. It shouldn't take long. A couple hours maybe."

"Joe, it's not gonna help them." Ellen stopped before the front door.

"No, but it might help us. Maybe if I take them I can get us some help. At the very least, some supplies."

"No. I can't let you do that. You go back to Kelly. We'll manage." Ellen opened up her front door. "Oh my God."

"You were saying?"

Ellen quickly looked to Joe then back out to her front lawn. In the hours that passed since she first set up, the numbers more than tripled. People were everywhere. The amount grew like rash and they spread into the neighboring lawns. And not only did the people stand, sit and lay outside her home, they also formed a line from her front door that extended across her walk and down the street for as far as she could see.

May 31st - 7:15 p.m.
The White House - Washington, DC

One dim light was all that illuminated the oval office. How long had President Hadly sat there? Hours maybe? In contemplation? Thought? Prayer? Slumped in his chair. Hair no longer neat and combed. It couldn't be for as many times as he had ran his fingers through it. The news never got better. In fact, it began to only trickle in. He knew for the first time, the old saying 'no news is good news' didn't hold true in a situation such as he faced.

Jason entered the room a bit apprehensive about disturbing President Hadly. He had put it off for an hour and it was something--disturbing the president or not--he had to do. "Sir." Jason walked slowly in front of President Hadly. "Sir, it's ... it's time."

President Hadly's eyes lifted to Jason, then without any words or question, he slowly stood up.

The steel elevator doors opened on the sub-basement level of the White House. President Hadly holding a small briefcase, stepped from it with Jason and one other man. They moved down a long corridor with concrete walls painted bright white. At the end of the corridor was a metal door, to both sides of it, a guard held a gun. The guards stepped aside and Jason stepped forward. After inserting his security card into the keypad at the door's right, Jason moved, and the door buzzed open. Through the door, the president, Jason and the third man walked. The door slid closed and clicked as it locked.

The guards stepped back and resumed their post.

May 31st - 8:10 p.m.
County General Hospital - New York City, NY

Mabel's family.

Andrea charged into their room. The hospital scrubs she wore were completely covered in blood, and her mouth grasped a syringe. As she bolted

through the door her feet slid across the floor and she landed hands first at four-year-old Tara's bed.

Tara's body jerked and trembled, her head convulsed back and forth and blood flowed from her tiny mouth.

"O.K., baby, hold on." Andrea covered Tara's body with hers trying to hold her down.

"My baby." Diane awoke and saw what was happening. "Help her, please." Diane began to cough and choke, and spit her own blood with every word she spoke.

Andrea could not maneuver the IV to administer the medication. As Tara's heart monitor beeped out of control, Tara began to scream.

Quickly, Andrea removed the syringe, and with one swift motion, her body still on top of Tara, injected the dying child in the left thigh. She stayed on top of her for a few seconds, then stood up.

Tara's heart monitor slowed down, then flatlined.

"NO!" Diane reached for her. "What did you do to her? My baby, my only baby." At that moment Diane began to jolt, her body almost flinging itself from the bed. Before Andrea could reach her, Diane fell to the floor and died.

May 31st - 9:00 p.m.
Interstate 80 - Outskirts of Chicago, IL

Screaming, fighting, glass breaking, and gun shots were the sounds that filled the dark night on that jammed packed highway as multitudes of people tried to break the lines. Lines that were held by few soldiers and a wall made out of military vehicles.

Frank stood in the tent on the phone. He turned to the gunfire and watched a civilian drop. He tried to speak again when through the corner of his eye, he watched one of his men drop in illness. The security of the lines went minimal as another soldier removed the one that had fallen. Like a game of eenie-meenie-miny-mo, all evening long Frank watched people just drop. Head back, knees buckling, down they went. In the crowd or on his side of the barricade, the virus showed no favoritism.

"No sir!" Frank shouted into the phone over the noise. "I lost

twenty-seven more men to his bug not one hour ago. I can't ..." It caused Frank to lower the phone and turn his head. The sound of an explosion and shattering glass. Frank's face lit up by the roaring flames that shot from a truck near by. "Shit we have ..." Another blast entailed as another truck ignited. The bodies of four soldiers flew up in the air from the explosion and Frank's eyes widened when he saw the truck door speeding his way. Dropping the phone, Frank dove to his right, feeling the heat of its near miss if him as the door whizzed by. On the ground, Frank rolled to a stand. Forgetting the phone, Frank swung his M-16 from his shoulder, gripped it, pumped it and bolted in the direction of the screaming charging mob who violently broke the barricade.

May 31st - 9:15 p.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut

It was like Ellen's street was the Yellow Stone Park of the dying. People camped out everywhere. Tents were erected, fires lit, sleeping bags laid scattered about. The noise level was high, filled with moans and cries of all those who gathered there.

Ellen wasn't alone anymore in help. Jenny Holmes, a seventeen year old neighbor showed up with her parents, and healthy, Jenny was asked to help. She hadn't a problem with it, her naivety and innocence kept her filled with hope that somehow, if she just helped Ellen out, all the people would eventually get better.

Joe's car was moved as close to Ellen's home as he could get it. Jenny finished loading the three people for Stamford into the back seat. Getting ready to close the door, young red haired Jenny saw Ellen and Joe approaching with Peter. Peter barely walked. His feet dragged more on the ground than moved. His face had taken on a gray purple look and his head flopped to the side. She opened the passenger's door for them when they neared.

Joe gave a quick appreciation smile to Jenny. "Thanks. Are they all situated in the back?"

"Yes, all ready." Jenny answered him.

Joe took the weight of Peter from Ellen and carried, more than led,

Peter onto the front seat. Shutting the back door, Joe then faced Ellen. He laid his hand on her cheek. "I got Maggie to make checks on Kelly all night. I may be a while. I don't know about traffic, or what that station is gonna be like ..." Joe looked around the street. "If this is any indication of what that relief station is like, I can be in for a long wait. I'm grabbing a short wave radio on the way back. If they don't help us, we'll get it one way or another. I promise." Joe kissed Ellen on the cheek. "Be good." He slid his hand down to hers and squeezed it. "Stay strong."

Ellen nodded sadly and looked at Peter, barely sitting up in the front seat.

"Buckle him in." Joe said as he walked around the car.

Ellen moved to the open door. She knelt down reaching over Peter for the seatbelt. As she brought it over his lap, Peter grabbed her hand.

"El," he whispered out her name. "I need to talk to you."

"No. You need to go." Ellen fastened the seatbelt.

Peter shook his head. So out of control of himself, his head moved drastically. His words were breathy and short. "I have to."

"Peter."

"El." Peter swallowed. "I want to say I'm sorry. I'm ... sorry for all I did wrong." Peter's shoulders moved rapidly as he fought to speak. "I'm sorry."

"Peter." Ellen gripped his hand. "I'm sorry too." She leaned closer to him. "I'm sorry too."

Peter rested his head back. "I love you. I have no regrets. I never ... I never regretted marrying you."

Ellen's voice cracked, her words started to weaken. "I have no regrets either. How can I?" She whispered. "How can I regret our years? We have Josh and Taylor."

"El ..." Peter's other hand lifted sloppily and he pulled at her, bringing Ellen even closer. It took everything he had, but Peter brought her hand to his mouth, his lips grazed her fingers and both his hand and hers dropped. "El, don't let our kids get this sick. Promise me you won't let them get this bad."

Ellen closed her eyes then after a moment opened them. "I promise you." Lifting Peter's hand, Ellen softly kissed it, then looked to Joe and checked Peter's seatbelt again. "You better go. Get well. I'll see you in a few days." Ellen looked into Peter's eyes and she knew it would be the last time. Her hand ran down his face and in her mind she said goodbye to the man she had been married to for twelve years. She leaned to him, kissed him on the

cheek, stood up and closed the door. She kept eye contact with Peter until Joe pulled too far for their eyes to connect. Then Ellen, standing with Jenny, pulled the teenage girl closer to her for support, as they both stood there and watched Joe drive away.

May 31st - 9:35 p.m.
County General Hospital - New York City, NY

It had been the first time Catherine had stepped out side of the hospital since the day she set foot in it over two days before. She had to stop. Her eyes shifted about trying to determine what had happened to the city she remembered. Bobbed wired surrounded the hospital as a protective means to keep people out. The same people who quietly camped, and now were dying on the other side of that wire. A dump truck with bodies was parked in a distance. How many bodies were in there was a task for Catherine to determine. Smoke from fires all around lingered in the air like a bad cloud.

“This way.” One of few soldiers who remained, took Catherine by the arm and led her to a tent.

A sergeant was there, pale, and slumping. He raised his glossy eyes to Catherine. “Dr. Donovan.”

“Yes.”

He lifted the mobile phone. “It’s the best connection we can get. We’re having signal difficulty. It’s a Dr. Cheng.”

Catherine didn’t recognize the name at all, but she took the phone. “This is Dr. Donovan.” She heard the voice. It mixed with static and broke up. “Sir, please speak up. I can barely hear you.” Catherine raised the volume of her voice. “Sir, what was that you just ...” Catherine’s expression dropped. “Oh my God.” Quickly she reached out and snatched the clipboard and pencil from the sergeant. “Repeat that ...” Catherine shook her head and started to write. “Which stages?” She wrote down again. “Are you sure.” She smiled. “You are sure. Doctor, what are you Doctor, what are you giving them.” Catherine prepared to write and the pencil dropped from her hand. “What? I never heard of that. What is that Say it again slowly and loud.” One letter at a time Catherine wrote. “Where do I get this?” She nodded. “And how much does it slow it ... sir? Sir?” Catherine grunted and handed

the phone back to the sergeant. “We’ve lost him. You have to get him back.”

“I don’t think we can. Even if the connection was strong enough, we don’t know which aid station he was calling from.”

“Well find him.” From the clipboard, Catherine ripped the sheet of paper she took notes on. “Find him. You have to. I’ll have to try the phones again.” She moved backwards with enthusiasm and energy. “We may have just gotten our fighting chance.” Holding the paper in a victory clench, Catherine spun around and raced into the hospital.

May 31st - 9:45 p.m.
Interstate 95 - Connecticut

The hand painted sign read ‘Aid Station’ as Joe drove by it on the highway not as jammed with traffic as he thought it would be.

“Couple more miles people, we are almost there.” Joe told his passengers.

Moans seeped out as the form of response from them.

Joe turned his head to Peter. “How ya’ doing there Pete.” Just as Joe reached his hand to tap Peter on the knee, Peter began to violently convulse. Thrashing and shaking, his hands out, neck arched. The seatbelt struggled to keep him in. Joe extended his arm to hold Peter back, at the same time Peter ejected from his body, what seemed like his insides. Blood filled vomit shot from him splashing out across the window making it impossible for Joe to see.

The car swerved as Joe tried to drive and hold on to Peter. He pulled off to the side of the road, trying to stay collected amongst the loud screams that entailed from the back seat. “Quiet,” he said calmly as he looked at Peter who coughed and choked out one last bit of vomit. Removing his arm from Peter and shaking off the dripping regurgitation, Joe cringed at the screams that made his ears ring and he looked over his shoulder to the back, losing all calm. “I said shut the fuck up!”

A hush took over the car.

“Peter.” Joe breathed heavily.

Peter's head flopped Joe's way. "Help me. Please ... help ... me."

Joe closed his eyes and nodded once to Peter. He shut off the car, opened the door and walked around to Peter's side opening that door as well. The second Joe undid Peter's seatbelt, Peter slid to the side and into Joe. Gripping him under the arms, Joe lifted Peter some and pulled him from the car, dragging him away. Fifteen feet from the car, Joe laid Peter in the grass. Peter's pause of agony was over and once again he began to convulse and scream. Taking a deep breath, Joe reached into the pocket of his coat, pulled out his revolver and clicked back the hammer. "God forgive me." Joe whispered. He blessed himself with the sign of the cross, extended his gun in an aim at Peter's head, and Joe fired only one shot. Peter stopped moving. With a single, small outward sigh, Joe's arm and head dropped at the exact same time.

May 31st - 9:50 p.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut

The hot water felt good on Ellen's face, soothing as she stood at the bathroom sink washing up. She was covered with so many different substances, she didn't want to think about what they were. Turning off the sink and shaking her hands, Ellen reached for a towel. A barking sound caught her attention and it only took a second for her to realize it wasn't a dog.

Steady and high was the barking and Ellen raced from the bathroom into her bedroom. Her fears were confirmed. Josh was having an asthma attack. The boy struggled with his breath, choking. His face was purple from the blood vessels he broke in his straining to breath. "Oh my God." Knowing an inhaler wouldn't cut it, Ellen flew from the room and to the hall closet. Why she placed it on the top shelf she didn't know. Josh's breathing machine. Jumping up, Ellen grabbed it by the cord and the machine dropped down to her. She caught it before it hit her and she set it on the floor. She spotted the box of medication on the shelf and she lifted it. Her heart dropped at the lightness of it. She flipped open the lid to see one small vial. Clenching the vial, dropping the empty box and lifting the breathing machine, Ellen raced back into the bedroom sliding to the floor by the bed's side.

“One second baby.” Her shaking hands lifted the tube of the machine and unscrewed the cup. Being careful not to spill her only vial of medicine, Ellen poured it into the cup, tossed the empty vial and reconnected the breathing hose. She rapidly plugged in the machine and started it at the same time she stuck her arm under Josh’s back and raised him up. The steam poured from the Nebulizer and into Josh’s nostrils. Ellen caught her breath, praying his coughing would cease.

The medicine cup gurgled and Ellen tapped on it ensuring every bit of medicine got sucked through and went to Josh. He needed it. In the final seconds of treatment to Josh, Ellen leaned toward the open bedroom window and yelled her loudest. “Jenny! Jenny come up!” Ellen relaxed on the floor, Josh’s coughing had silenced enough for him to breath normally. Running her fingers through Josh’s hair, Ellen heard the thumping footsteps of a running Jenny.

“Ellen.” Jenny, out of breath flew into the room. “What’s wrong?”

“Josh’s asthma. It’s bad. I’m out of Albuterol and he needs it and another treatment or his lungs will collapse.” Ellen stood up and lowered her ear to his chest. “He’s still wheezing.” She kissed him. “Josh. Josh, can you hear me?”

Josh opened his eyes some and coughed. “Mom?”

“I’m going to get some medicine. I’ll be back. We’ll get you breathing right. O.K.” She kissed him again and stood straight. “Jenny, I need you to watch him. I’ll be right back. I have to get him that medicine.”

“Where ... where are you going?” Jenny asked watching Ellen start to leave.

“To the pharmacy. I won’t be long.”

“But they’re closed.”

Saying no comment, Ellen raced from the room, down the steps and out the front door. At first she had to catch her bearings, then realizing getting her jeep out of the driveway was impossible, Ellen started running again. She leaped over the people who laid around as if they were small hurdles, nearly tripping once or twice, but it didn’t stop her. She kept going. Making it though the maze of people, Ellen hit the empty, dark street. Alone, footsteps steady and echoing on the pavement, she ran straight towards town never once losing any speed.

May 31st - 10:02 p.m.
County General Hospital - New York City, NY

“Finally. Here.” Catherine’s index finger came down hard with a point to a line in the yellow page phone book. She turned it some to Andrea who stood across the counter from her. “Here. Do you know *this* location? I mean this street sounds familiar to me.”

Andrea peered down. “About six or seven blocks from here.”

“Yes.” Catherine’s head flung back and she heard the tromping of combat boots. She turned her head and saw Carl White. A big brawny soldier who had aided them since the beginning. “Carl, any luck?”

“No ma’am.” He spoke deep. “Phone lines are down and radio signals are jammed. We couldn’t reach Lt. Hayes.”

“Damn it,” Catherine said. “All right, I guess I’m going to have to get to this store and try to get it to Lt. Hayes myself.” She gripped hold of the corner of the phone book, ripped the page and slammed the book shut.

Andrea grabbed Catherine’s arm. “You can not do this.” She spoke with passion but with sharp words. “You are chasing down an herb at a nature pharmacy that may or may not slow the virus? That’s ludicrous.”

“But it’s a shot we must take.” Catherine pulled her arm from Andrea. “Anything right now is better than nothing. Maybe, just maybe this herb combined with what Lt. Hayes has, is the combination we are searching for. But we can’t stand here second guessing while the world dies. We are out of time. I’m going.”

“Out there?” Andrea’s arm went out. “Alone? It’s a war zone.”

Carl stepped forward. “I’ll go with you.”

Catherine exhaled out a short sigh of relief. She glanced at Andrea then Carl. “Let’s go then. We haven’t much time.” Folding the page from the phone book, Catherine started to walk backwards. “Wish us luck, Andrea.”

“The best of luck only.” Andrea spoke softly. “Be careful. You have my prayers.”

Nodding her head in gratitude, Catherine spun around, and with Carl they hurried off the floor.

Andrea walked from behind the nurses’ counter, her hand grazing over the closed phone book. She took a deep breath listening to the fading sounds of Catherine and Carl’s running footsteps. Amidst the patient filled halls, weakened moans and cries from the ill, gunshots from outside, Andrea

stood alone. Completely alone.

May 31st - 10:22 p.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut

There wasn't a part of Ellen's body that didn't burn by the time she made it to center town. Her face, chest and tops of thighs felt the effect of her race in the cool night. Coughing while catching her breath, Ellen bent over holding her knees while standing in the business district of the small town. Dark, no sounds. She raised her head to the pharmacy on the corner. She took one more breath and hurried to the front door. Knowing it wouldn't be open, she tried the door anyhow. Locked. The big glass front window called for her and Ellen turned about looking around the street for something to break it with. She spotted an older model car and she ran to it. Lifting her leg, she began to kick the side view mirror. Over and over she nailed her foot at it in determination, grunting with every hard hit she delivered until the mirror popped off and fell to the ground. She picked it up and raced back to the pharmacy. In her charging run and with all of her strength, Ellen hurled the mirror forward into the large pane of glass. She ducked and covered her head with her arms when the bits of glass flew out from the shattering window. The crashing sound ended, the street went quiet again. Ellen stood straight, headed to the window, cleared the broken glass with her foot and climbed inside.

May 31st - 10:35 p.m.
Fairfield University - Stamford, Connecticut

If medical attention was needed, then privacy had to be relinquished. Especially at the aid station. But Dean did his best to keep Molly near help and within the realm of privacy. A corner of a tent was given to her and draped off from everyone. It was the best he could do.

Teetering between an awake state and drug induced, Molly laid on a

cot. She had grown progressively worse over the hours. Slipping further and faster into the later stages.

“Mutated.” Dean explained to his father and Henry who stood by Molly. “We were working on that aspect of it when she fell ill.”

“Mutated?” Henry questioned. “That means it moves faster.”

“Not in all viral cases, but most certainly in this one.” Dean nodded.

“So, someone that was exposed say yesterday could be in the same stage as someone exposed Friday?” Henry asked.

“The virus mutated more with each wave of exposure,” Dean answered. “It’s tricky. I have to get back to the lab ... Dad?”

William, in a stare of Molly, snapped his views up. “Yes?”

“You’ll take care of her.”

“Of course.” William smiled. “Henry and I both will.”

“Thank you.” Dean backed up and left the draped off area. As he stepped from the tent itself, he wanted to go back to the lab building, but arguing caught his attention. Joe stood at the table with the three check-in men. Dean could see the seriousness of Joe’s face, a man he didn’t know, and a man who didn’t look sick. This made Dean curious and instead of to the lab, Dean made his way to the check in table. If for nothing else but to see the angry man blast the three men Dean had found so unnerving.

“Medicine?” Joe asked of the three men in the middle of his body being jolted by the crowd behind him.

The men ignored him.

“Hello!” Joe called out again. “This is a relief station correct? Let’s try this slower. Can I get medicine?”

“Sir.” The man looked up at him from his paper work. “We have sick people in line ...”

“Yeah, and I have sick people where I’m coming from.” Joe’s body moved forward again and he spun in anger to the man behind him. “Mister. You shove me one more time and you aren’t gonna have to worry about relief from the goddamn plague, because I’m gonna knock your ass out.” Red faced, Joe looked back to the men. “Now ...”

“Sorry.” The man shook his head. “We can not effort you help of any kind.”

“I’m not asking for a miracle here. Screw you people!” Joe stepped back, bumping into the man who had pushed him several time. “Move!” he blasted, stopped, spun around and took off his jacket. “Hey.” He called to the check in man who had turned him. “You look cold.” When the man finally looked up, Joe tossed the jacket, it smacked the man in the mask, and

the man grabbed it. “It’s still damp.” Joe chuckled when he saw the horrified look on the man’s face. “Night.” Joe made his way through the crowd in a storming way.

Two fingers over his top lip, Dean hid his snicker, then chased after Joe. “Mister. Mister, wait up.”

Joe turned around. He would have seared Dean vocally, but since he didn’t recognize him, he wasn’t going to blame him for how he was treated at the check in line. At least not yet. “Yes.”

“I couldn’t hear,” Dean said. “I just heard the jacket part. What is the problem?”

“The problem.” Joe felt the heat hit his face. “I’ll tell you what the problem is.” He began to ramble with outraged emotions. “I got a small town full of people showing up at my daughter’s door for help by the second. We have hardly any medication. She’s the only one who knows how to help them. Her kids, my grandkids are dying. And those assholes, who should be grateful I’m not dropping off the entire goddamn Ashtonville population at their door, won’t give me a hand.” Joe pointed to the three men, let out a huff, waved his hand in disgust and turned to walk away.

“Sir, wait.”

Joe stopped again.

“Ashtonville isn’t that far right?” Dean asked.

“No. No it isn’t.”

“Well, I can’t make any promises, but I can see what I can do. I may know someone who might be able to go and lend a hand.”

Finally a swing and not a miss. Joe breathed outward. “Anything. Any help you can give. Even trying will be appreciated.” He realized he had done his anger stint, and it was time, if he wanted this stranger to help him, Joe had to use tact. He swallowed. “We’ll fall apart by tomorrow afternoon if we don’t get some relief.” Joe looked around the station. “We’ve got about a third as many as you and we have nothing.”

“I’ll see what I can do. I’ll do my best.”

“Thank you.” Reaching into his chest pocket of his shirt, Joe pulled out a sheet of paper. “Here’s the address. Well, actually, this entire street has become the gathering place.”

Dean looked at the address and folded the paper. “I’ll try.”

“I’ll be grateful.” Joe extended his hand to Dean and stepped back. “Slagel, Joe Slagel.”

“Dean Hayes.” Dean noticed the twitch in Joe’s look as he retracted his hand. “What’s wrong?”

Joe pointed at Dean as he stepped back. “I just know your name. Where, I can’t think right now. It’ll come to me. But I have to get back.” He kept moving backwards. “Thanks again.”

As Joe left his sight, Dean, looked once more to the address, re-folded it, placed it in the back pocket of his jeans and headed to his lab.

May 31st - 11:05 p.m.
New York City, NY

Carl stood like a body guard outside the natural pharmacy on a main street in a cross residential, commercial area. Arms folded, standing tall, M-16 draped over his shoulder. He raised one eyebrow as he made eye contact with the stare that came from the dead black man who laid before Carl’s feet. The man had been dead for a while, Carl figured. The blood that surrounded the body that laid face down, didn’t have the shiny look of fresh flowing blood. The dead man’s hand still clenched the torn grocery bag. Torn and empty. Carl had to wonder, what was the last thing that went through the man’s mind—aside from the bullet—before he died. Was he scared? Was he angry? Was he out there to get food for his family? If he was, what would happen to the people that were counting on his return?

Small fires of buildings burning lit the street. Windows broke and bodies laid everywhere. Carl also prided himself on being one to want to defend his country. He always said he would go to war for his land. Never did he imagine, he would be fighting a deadly war on his very own soil.

The vials were glass. Tiny, maybe an inch tall, and they were brown in color. They looked illegal, but they were exactly what Catherine searched for. The herbal name, *Eupatorium perfoliatum*, was recognized by Catherine and it was printed on the homemade labels that adhered to the vials. There were fifteen in all and Catherine took them. She shoved them all in a small duffle bag, snapped it, tossed it over her shoulder and raced outside. “Carl. Got it.”

“Excellent.” Carl told her. “Now let’s get you back to the hospital and airlifted to Hayes. Hopefully without being target practice.”

That thought had crossed Catherine's mind. But she couldn't dwell on it. She couldn't worry about getting shot, or having the helicopter blown from the sky. Her main thoughts were in getting to the hospital. She and Carl were doing everything carefully and one step at a time. So stepping over the dead man on the sidewalk, Catherine moved with haste to the hospital with Carl down the ravished streets.

**May 31st - 11:20 p.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut**

The tray that held the dwindling medication slipped from Ellen's hand and toppled on the floor when she walked into her home. She'd pick it up after a few minutes. Closing the door, Ellen, moving with such exhaustion, walked over to the steps and just plopped down as if those stairs were an easy chair.

She leaned her back against the wall, closing her eyes and blacking out all that she could. Nearly eight hours had gone by since Ellen started giving medication. Never didn't she expect to have so many people show up, and never did she think, all those supplies she loaded in the car, would be used so quickly. There seemed no means to an end, and Ellen was curious as to whether there was a means to a break. She received her answer in the form of a child's cry, Taylor's cry to Ellen for help. Ellen stood up from her seat on the steps and hurried up the stairs. Her short momentary break was over.

**May 31st - 11:28 p.m.
Interstate 8 - Outskirts, Chicago, IL**

Frank no sooner opened his eyes and he felt the warmth of the liquid drip across his eyelashes and blurring his vision. He knew the sky was still dark. How long he had been passed out, he didn't know. Rubbing his eyes only smeared the wetness. He brought his fingers down to see, but it still was far too dark. Even the amber glow of flames coming from the distance

didn't give him light enough. But Frank didn't need to see to know the fact that his head was cracked open some where. His head pounded unbelievably and he tried to lift his body, which lay in the thick weeds far from where he remembered being. He rolled himself to his knees, then lifted to a stand. As soon as Frank gathered his balance a buzzing hit his ears, the pressure filled his head and everything around him—dark or not—began to swarm. A thick nauseousness hit his gut, and after teetering to his left then to his right, Frank's eyes rolled behind his head and he fell face forward back down to the grass.

May 31st - 11:34 p.m.
County General Hospital - New York City, NY

On the roof of the hospital Catherine's shorter hair whipped around and into her face from the spinning helicopter blades. Holding her hair back, she stood with Andrea a little distance from the chopper.

Carl in a hunching run, made it over to Catherine. He tapped her on the shoulder. "We have to go!" He shouted over the noise. "The pilot isn't well." Getting a nod from Catherine, Carl took her knapsack and raced back to the chopper.

Catherine inhaled and laid her hands on Andrea's arm. "We're off. I'll be back for you."

"Please do. And be careful."

Before Catherine stepped back, she embraced Andrea whole heartedly. "You've done so well. Let's end this."

Andrea nodded as she moved back from the embrace, and Catherine, in a low run made it to the helicopter.

Carl helped Catherine into the chopper and closed the door. He jumped in the passenger's seat and turned his head to Len the pilot. Len looked pale and if his appearance was any indication of how he felt, Len wasn't doing well at all. "Len," Carl spoke up. "How you doing?" He asked to be cordial and safe. They were lifting up far into the air.

"Good." Len reached up to the controls.

Catherine leaned forward. "Len, if it gets too much for you, just land."

We'll find a way there. Just get us out of this city."

"I'll be fine." Len tried to smile. "Don't you worry."

Catherine returned the smile and when she felt the jolt of the helicopter as it lifted, she laid her hand on her chest, let out an anxious breath and sat back. They were on their way.

Andrea folded her arms close to her body. Warming herself from the air that was not only cold alone, but chilled even more by the whipping blades. She knew she had more patients down below her, but Andrea couldn't leave the rooftop until she saw Catherine and Carl lift safely into the air.

May 31st - 11:36 p.m.
Fairfield University - Stamford, Connecticut

Such seriousness graced William's face as he stared down to his son Dean. William was on his way into a tent when Dean made a surprise little visit from the lab to make a request of him. There they stood, a few minutes later, still outside that tent. Only William shook his head slowly.

"You know, Dino," William said. "This is a repeat of the third grade. You volunteer me for things..."

"Dad ..."

"You want to get rid of ..."

"Dad, come on that's not ..."

"But." William held up a finger. "But just like in the third grade when I ended up being the world's tallest elf, I'll be your Florence nightingale, Dino. I'll go to Ashtonville for you."

Dean closed his eyes. "Thank you." He gripped his father's arms. "I don't know why I feel strongly about this ..."

"You want me out of here that's why." William joked. "Jealousy always did that to you."

"You are absolutely right." Dean smiled. "I'm jealous. I'm also in the middle of something up at the lab."

"Of course."

"I'll have things ready for you to leave in the morning," Dean spoke

as he backed up. “I have the address.” He patted his tee shirt pocket, stuffed his hands in his front pockets of his jeans. Then drew up a bright look when he remembered where he put. “Got it.”

“Good.”

Dean turned quickly and darted off.

“What do I get myself into.” William spoke to himself in a mumble and walked into that tent he had been trying to get to. For the first time, the terror of that tent actually made him smile. Laying on the cot by the door, as if on display, was one of the check-in guys. Giving a tap to his leg, William grinning at the check in man, whispered that he’d be back shortly, and moved on to someone else.

May 31st - 11:38 p.m.
New York City, NY

From the air, the reality of it was seen much better than what Catherine picked up from the news. The massive amount of chaos that had occurred in the city afoot. She knew there had always been traffic, but not like she witnessed below her. Cars were lined up on ever street that could be seen. Trying to make their escape from a city that had no exit.

Seeing New York fade more, Catherine, smiling and excited, turned forward in her seat. “We’re out of there. Now how much longer until we get to Stamford?” So pleasant she asked Len. “Will it take ...”

It wasn’t supposed to happen. Not there. Not then. Loudly and long Len grunted and his body fell forward into the helicopter controls. Catherine screamed and dove forward at the same time as Carl and the helicopter, fast and mindless, headed in a nose dive straight to the ground below.

“Catherine!” Carl tried to free Len’s heavy body. “Grab the stick. He’s on the pedals!” Carl pulled on Len.

“What do I do?” Catherine reached over Len’s sideways body and grabbed the stick.

“Pull back.” Carl tugged trying to free Len and maneuver him from Catherine’s way in the small space. “Pull back.”

“I’m trying!”

The helicopter began to spin, and pinned for space, Carl kicked his

feet to free Len's heavy boots from the pedal. "Got him. Pull back. Pull ..."

The helicopter lifted but it wasn't enough. The site of the small wooded area came faster into their view. Releasing Len, Carl leaped to help Catherine pull on the stick. But despite their valiant efforts, the helicopter kept going forward into the woods. The top of a tree high and big clipped them, causing the helicopter to bounce and spin to its side. The screams that came from the cockpit were short, the helicopter careened down with a vengeance to the tree filled area and hit with a loud crash. The flight for life ended seconds later with a bellowing explosion.

**May 31st - 11:44 p.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut**

Johnny Slagel may have only been eleven, but he was a lot wiser than most boys his age. He was wise enough to see something was going on with his mother. Sick all day, then after Mrs. Peters had left for what she said would be a night interval, Johnny watched his mother perk up as if she weren't sick at all. But clearly, even eleven year old Johnny could see she was.

"Did you drink your juice?" Kelly had a dazed tone to her as she asked Johnny. She wandered into his bedroom as he lay on the bed.

"No," Johnny answered. His eyes stayed glued to his baby sister, Amanda, cradled in Kelly's arms. So close to his mother's chest he swore Amanda couldn't breathe. Amanda was quiet and still, yet an hour before, screamed in her illness. "What's wrong with the baby?"

"She's sleeping." Kelly peered down. "Drink your juice. You'll need it to fight this flu. Your sisters drank theirs."

"I will. I want to play my game first." Johnny picked up the video game control.

"It's the last drink before bedtime." Kelly neared the bed keeping Amanda close to her chest, "Please drink it." She leaned over and kissed Johnny on the forehead. "I love you."

"I love you too, Mom. I hope you feel better."

"I will. Thank you." Kelly stood up. "I have the water running. I'm getting in the bath now, then I'm going to bed."

"Night."

“Night.” Kelly slowly moved to the door, looked back at Johnny and watched him put on his headphones. She pulled his bedroom door shut and walked with Amanda down the dark upstairs hall. She turned into the next room. Lindsay and Megan, Kelly’s other two daughter’s were tucked in their beds, eye closed, and Kelly carried Amanda to the crib. She laid the still baby, six months old, down in the crib on her side. Pulling the covers up on Amanda, Kelly leaned over the crib. But before she kissed her baby daughter goodnight, she brought her fingers to Amanda’s wide staring eyes and closed them. Kelly kissed Amanda and left the room, pulling that door closed as well.

Kelly started undressing before she hit the bathroom. Unbuttoning her pajama top, sliding it from her and dropping it to the floor right outside the bathroom. She went inside the tiny bathroom, shut the door and turned to her left to turn the water off in the tub. It was close to overflowing, and Kelly tested the water. It was hot. She stepped from her pajama bottoms and underwear and then into the tub. She let her ankles adjust to the hot feel of the water and then she sat down enamoring in the warm relaxing feel that surrounded her. She lifted the water in her hand a few times, then Kelly, with her nerve up, lifted the razor blade she had sitting on the edge of the tub. There was no contemplation on Kelly’s part. She had done all the thinking she needed to do. Taking a long blink, Kelly brought the razor to her right wrist first, inhaled deeply and pressed the sharp edge of the blade hard to her skin, pulling it fast in a slicing motion. She cringed and clenched her jaws from the burning pain. She breathed heavily watching the blood pulsate from her wrist. After only a moment, she took the razor blade into her weakened right hand, and without hesitation, slit her other wrist. The razor blade dropped from Kelly’s grip and onto the floor and her bleeding arm dangled over the side of the tub. Then Kelly leaned back in the water and closed her eyes.

May 31st - 11:58 p.m.
Westchester County, New York

The combat boots tromped and crunched the ground of the wooded area as the legs staggered in a run behind a flashlight beam. The yellow light,

smoke and dust flickering in the beam, illuminated a black knapsack. Picking up speed, Carl, face bloody ran to the open knapsack and dropped to his knees before it. The knapsack was torn and saturated with blood inside and out. Carl shined his flashlight around seeing only bits of broken glass. Just as his head dropped and the flashlight fell from his hand, Carl raised his eyes. The wayward beam caught, in the distance, one lonely brown vial. Carl leaped out for the flashlight and dove his body on the ground for the vial as if it were is breath of life. His bloody hand not only picked up the vial but an abundance of earth as he clenched the last little bit of hope. He slowly opened his hand, blew away the dirt and smiled when he saw the perfect and unbroken vial. Making sure it was safe, he placed it in his chest pocket, staggered to a stand and with more energy, he headed out of the woods.

He emerged not long after and moved toward the highway. He stopped at a clearing ten feet away where Catherine laid on her side, in the grass, not moving. Blood seeped from her head and stomach. Papers, torn, burnt and blood spewed, laid in a semi pile by Catherine's head. Carl grabbed the stack of papers, shoved them inside his shirt, then bent down to Catherine. He extended his strong arms under her and gently lifted her up as he stood. Catherine moaned slightly, her arm dropped and her head fell into Carl's chest. After adjusting Catherine better in his arms, Carl, injured himself, began to walk down the highway.

THE FINISHING

How quickly does time go when things start to fade away?

Minutes turn to hours, hours into days.

Will we cry, will we anger, when those we love are gone?

Will we close our eyes, pretends it's a dream and try to carry on?

DAY FOUR

Monday, June 1st - 4:45 a.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut

Nearly a block from Ellen's home is where Joe had to park. He probably could have pulled closer but by doing that he risked driving over one of the many that made the street their home. The small campfires had burned themselves to mere flickering ambers of light. Joe, carrying a short wave radio walked down the street to Ellen's house.

It was dark with the exception of one light. When Joe walked into the foyer, he could see Ellen in the only lit room, the dining room. She sat in front of booted up computer. He closed the door, and set down the radio walking to her. "Hey."

Ellen looked quickly at him then back to the computer screen. "Hey, Joe. How did it go?"

"Made it to Stamford fine. Got ..." Joe paused before telling her anything yet. "Got everyone checked in."

"Peter?"

"He's ... um he took a turn for the worse. I'm still trying to clear my head." He stood behind her. "What are you doing?"

"Take an escape break. Yesterday morning I retrieved my Email but I never read it. I was hoping to find a letter from Robbie. And ..." Ellen clicked the mouse. "There it is. He wrote this right before being deployed out. He was bitching."

"Son of a bitch." Joe smiled reading his sons words on the screen, looking at the time it was sent, 5:30 a.m. Robbie's time. "Will you look at that?"

"I have." Ellen looked peacefully at the letter. "Then I found myself reading some of his past mail to me to take my mind off of things."

"I would like a copy of that."

"Without a doubt."

Joe watched her click again and the smile fell from his face. "My God Ellen." Joe seemed taken aback by what he read. "That's pornographic. Why is my son sending you pornographic messages?"

"Because he's Robbie." Ellen smiled. "He always has. He's funny."

“Yeah a pip. Well, do you feel like taking a less indecent form of escape with me? I want to go get Kelly and the girls and bring them here.”

“I think that’s a good idea. Let me shut down.”

Joe watched her maneuver the mouse again. “Wait. Before you close that thing down, can I can I see that last letter from my son just one more time?” Joe leaned further over Ellen’s shoulder and closer to the screen as she retrieved Robbie’s last email again for Joe. No matter how complaining Robbie’s words, they were still Robbie’s words. Joe wanted to take them in, especially since Robbie was the only one of his sons he never got a chance to speak to personally.

June 1st - 5:00 a.m.
Interstate 95 - New Rochelle, New York

On the ground outside the standard military jeep, the bodies of a man and woman soldier, both plague victims, lay on the ground. Catherine was in the front passenger’s seat. Her body slouched and the seatbelt did little to help her sit up.

Carl, damp with blood covered clothing, shut the passenger’s door and walked around to the driver’s seat. After sliding in, he placed his rifle in between the two seat and started the jeep. “It runs.” He smiled at Catherine. “We’ll get you there yet.”

As the Jeep began to move, Catherine, head slumped to the side raised her eyes to Carl. She reached her hand to his but as soon as she gripped it, she lost all strength and her fingers slid across the back of his hand, leaving a bloody trail. Having a direction and a means to get there, Carl forged ahead on the journey that he and Catherine not only wanted to take, but had to.

June 1st - 5:10 a.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut

A hint of daylight was all the brightness there was on Kelly's street. No porch lights, no street lights. Dark. But it still wasn't too dark for Joe and Ellen to see Maggie Peters, the elderly next door neighbor, standing outside of Kelly's home. They could clearly see, something was amiss.

Sending gravel up from the quick stopping jolt of the car, Joe tossed it in park and hurried to Maggie. "Something's wrong. What?"

"I ... I came to check on them. I said I would." Maggie's eyes were red. "I ... just wanted to check on them." She lifted her hand and in it was a small piece of cream-colored paper.

Joe saw the dazed, confused look on Maggie and he snatched the paper from her hand. It took a split second to read it and for his total expression to drop. Note slipping from his fingers and floating to the ground, Joe bolted into the house.

Ellen looked at Maggie then to the note. She picked it up and then she too, raced in. "Joel!" Ellen called out.

"Kelly!" Joe's voice charged out as he stormed about the first floor of the house. "Kelly!" he moved to the steps.

Ellen stopped him. "Joe. Just wait."

"Ellen, I have to see what she did."

Ellen pulled on his arm. "Listen. Her note said *she* didn't want to face this. The last thing we need to do is wake those kids and have them find what Maggie saw."

"I'm sorry. You're right." Joe ran his hand down his face to calm himself. Just as his fingers glided over his chin, a tapping noise caught his and Ellen's attention. Steady, soft, tapping. "Do you hear that?"

"What is it?"

"I don't ..." Joe turned his head. "Oh, my God." His eyes saw it and his heart dropped. A red wet circle of blood was on the ceiling in the hallway. Saturated so heavily, the blood dripped down onto the carpet before the powder room, forming a puddle. "The bathroom."

Ellen was closest to the steps and she flew up first. Joe close behind her. She rounded the bend upstairs and as soon as she did, both her and Joe saw it. Seeping out from under the bottom crease of the bathroom door was blood. Without stopping and ignoring the call of her name from Joe, Ellen charged to the bathroom door. The momentum of her run did not stop and she turned the knob, barging through. The second her full speed moving body hit the inside of the bathroom, her feet slipped on the thickened blood laced floor as if it were ice. Ellen flew up in the air and landed hard on the red surface. With a quick turn of her body to try to catch her balance and get

up, Ellen found herself face first with Kelly's white corpse.

Ellen's mouth opened to scream, but nothing came out. She tried to get a grip on the slick surface and get out, but her hands and feet slid and Ellen fell back down again. Horrified, she started to quiver and shake, wanting only to get out of there. A fast clasp of her wrist and a tug from Joe, brought Ellen out with a slippery slide. Hyperventilating, Ellen rolled onto the carpet and Joe helped her to stand. Every part of her was covered in clotted and sour smelling blood.

"Joe," she stuttered his name out.

"Listen." Joe closed his eyes painfully before speaking. "I'm getting the kids out of here. But you have to get out of here too. Run home, they can't see you or any of this."

Ellen, hysterical nodded rapidly.

"Go." Joe told her reaching back and closing the bathroom door.

Again Ellen nodded and turned to the steps. She only made it half way down when she stopped. The sound of the single gut wrenching cry out from Joe told her, Kelly had done more than taken her own life. Hearing Joe's repeated 'nos', Ellen went back up stairs, moving slower and with apprehension into the girls' room. When she stepped in she immediately saw the reason for Joe's heartbreak. Lindsay and Megan were tucked in their beds, eyes open, faces blue-gray and a small amount of pink fluid, apparently dried, seeped from the corners of their mouths. Her views turned to Joe who held Amanda in his arms. The baby looked the same as her sisters.

"Ellen." Joe's saddened eyes looked up to her. "What did she do? What did she do?" A sob came from Joe and he dropped his head down to the baby.

It was the first time, in all the years she had known Joe, that she could recall seeing him cry. A strong virile man who hadn't shed a tear, sobbed in his sadness while holding his dead granddaughter.

Joe sniffled long and wiped his eyes, laying his lips to the baby before placing her back in the crib. He raised his eyes to Ellen again. "I have to see Johnny."

"Should you?" Ellen asked.

"Yeah." Joe answered sadly and walked from the bedroom. "Can you ... can you cover them?"

Ellen gave her agreement as Joe left the bedroom. She guessed it was the shock of everything, it had to be, because Ellen just didn't know how to feel at that moment. She glanced at Megan and Lindsay, children she had known and loved since birth and then she moved to Megan's bed. Ellen

grabbed the blanket, but she had turn her head and close her eyes as she lifted that blanket. Her throat closed up, she felt herself choking on her emotions, then she felt her heart stop when she heard little Johnny's voice.

"Pap?" He sounded so curious. "What are you doing here?"

Ellen's eyes widened, her hands released the blanket, her head sprang up and she raced to the bedroom door slamming it shut. She couldn't be seen. The girls couldn't be seen. Not by Johnny. Not at his age. She started to tremble in fear, her heart nearly pounded rapidly from her chest. She prayed that Joe would only whisk the boy up without any words, without seeing anything.

Joe did.

Into his arms, Joe lifted Johnny. He laid his hand on the back of Johnny's head, pressed Johnny's face into his chest and flew to the steps.

"Pap? Pap what's going on?" Johnny asked. "What about my mom? Pap? Where you taking me? Pap? Can I say goodbye to my mom?"

Ellen, back leaning against the bedroom door, listened to the fading of Johnny's voice. A voice that picked up confusion and fright with every word he spoke.

Slam.

Ellen's shoulder's dropped when she heard the front door close. They were gone. Moments later she heard the closing of the car door and the starting of the engine. As soon as the relief for Johnny hit her so did something else. The silence of Kelly's home. Then blasting to Ellen came the realization that she not only stood in the middle of one of the most heartbreaking and horrific scenes she had ever witnessed, but she stood at the beginning of a hellish nightmare that was far from being over for her.

June 1st - 5:40 a.m.
Aid Station - Outskirts, Chicago, IL

It was the noise level that brought Frank to. In an aid station, under a tent, jammed packed with cots, Frank opened his eyes. He hadn't clue where he was, and everything was completely out of focus. His head still pounded, throbbing as if with each beat of his heart. Frank discovered he

couldn't breath through his nose. He brought his fingers to his nostrils, pulled then away and saw the blood. He touched the bridge of his nose and cringed a little in the pain. Surely he had broken it.

He couldn't recall in his entire life feeling as bad or as weak as he did right there. He didn't even remember being brought to where he was. His whereabouts were something he needed to learn. With a grunt, Frank shifted his body and lifted himself to a sitting position. His head spun with everything around him. He could hear cries, screams and moans. He could smell sickness. Situating his equilibrium, Frank stood up from the cot he was laying on. His body started to sway again, and the spinning of the room, made his stomach flip. He took control of his body, trying not to fall and hoping not to pass out. Arms extended some, Frank balanced. He'd tilted forward then back and when he finally felt a firm stand, it was then Frank felt the reality. Everything came into focus. The tent he was in. The number of cots too many to count. The sick that laid upon them. The dead that laid there too. Frank may have questioned why he stood post on that barricade, but he knew right there he wouldn't question why he stayed in that tent. Because he wouldn't. Feeling the lightheadedness hit him, Frank lowered himself back down to sit on that cot before he passed out again. He would take a little time to let his dizziness subside, but after it did, which wouldn't take long, Frank wouldn't waste any more time leaving. He had to.

June 1st - 6:00 a.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut

Like a zombie, Ellen moved at almost an aimless direction back to her house from Kelly's. Taking the long way back. Moving slow. Heavy thoughts of what Kelly did, learning exactly what happened by just staying a few extra minutes in the house. She clutched a picture frame tight in her arms, close to her chest as she moved slowly down her street. She could hear the sounds of her make-shift aid station floating up to her. It was when she felt the pulling and stretching of her skin, that Ellen realized she was still covered in blood. The only problem was, it was dried and Ellen had to do something before getting home.

The Jamieson house on the corner, was the biggest and nicest house

in Ashtonville. They had money, the Jamieson's did, and they swore they didn't flaunt it. But they bought everything and anything their money could buy. Ellen remembered seeing them in her lawn trying to get relief for the illness that ravished them. For the first time, the Jamieson's couldn't buy what they needed. The cure. There was no price tag on that, because simply there was none.

Knowing, she had to clean up, and knowing where the Jamieson's were, Ellen went into their house to clean away the mess she had become.

While Joe was out making a minimal medication sweep with Jenny, she asked him a question. Jenny asked Joe why they were writing everyone's name down, keeping track of who came in. Joe didn't have a good answer at the time. In fact, he left Jenny without even attempting to answer her. He merely told her to just keep doing it.

Perhaps Joe just needed to step away to find that answer. And he did while watching Johnny in Ellen's kitchen hungrily slurp up a bowl of cereal.

Amber, Lindsay, and Megan. Joe always saw so much of Kelly in them. But Johnny. To Joe, Johnny was all Slagel. He had the brains of his uncle Jimmy. The likeableness of Hal. Frank's black hair. And of Robbie, Johnny had Robbie's innocence. Within that one little boy, Joe saw all of his sons. Sons Joe thought about constantly. All four of them so forefront on his mind. Were they sick? Were they alive? Where were they? Every attempt Joe made to locate even one of them ended up futile. Even his last attempt a few hours earlier when he stopped at a police station to use the radio, was in vain. Joe couldn't find his sons. Whereabouts unknown. Unless they showed up in Ashtonville, Joe would never know what became of the boys he dedicated his life to. That hurt. And that was the reason for writing down names. So that somewhere in the world there would be a record of the lives that meant much more than just being plague victim number so-and-so. For that one single person that would eventually wander into Ashtonville looking for their family. One month, six, maybe even a year down the road, they would be able to at least find an answer and find peace. Peace that Joe would never have without answers about his sons.

Joe was a realist. From what he had been witnessing with the virus—even though he wished with his all heart—he knew all of his boys couldn't be alive and well. And with the four of them scattered about the country, Joe could only hope and pray, that maybe out there—even if only for one of his

sons—someone was taking time to care enough about them to write down their name.

Ellen shivered a breath as she stepped even closer to her house. It looked worse than when she left, but she knew it wasn't. It was just the brightening of the day that lit the true numbers that had showed up at her home. Ellen had a hard time understanding why they stayed. They weren't getting constant relief. The medical attention they received was limited to a teenager, a CIA agent and a nurse. But they hoarded around her home like fireflies in a field. Lingered in masses.

She spotted Joe as she drew closer. He aided a woman who laid on a cushion from Ellen's patio furniture. He stopped when he saw her and immediately made his way to Ellen.

"I'm sorry I left you there." Joe took Ellen in his arms, holding her tight.

"No, that's O.K." Ellen shook her head. "It was for the best. She overdosed them, Joe. She put sleeping pills in their juice." Ellen spoke as if in a dream like state.

"The girls must have gotten sick." Joe's hand held tight to the back of her wet hair. "She didn't try to kill ..."

"Yes." Ellen pulled back from the hold. "Yes, she did. Johnny too. Sick or not. He just didn't drink the juice."

Joe's eyes closed. He got sick to his stomach at the thought of Johnny waking up and seeing his mother first. When Joe opened his eyes he noticed Ellen holding a frame. "What do you have there?"

"Frank."

"Excuse me?"

"Frank's picture. It was on Johnny's dresser. He's my best friend, Joe. God, I wish he were here."

"Me too, Kiddo." Joe could see the bloody finger prints around the frame. "Can I?" he reached for the picture turning it around. Joe snickered. "You took *this* one? Ellen this is his army graduation picture."

"I know." Ellen peeked at the photo. "But I love this one. I think Joe, no matter how old he and I get. He will always look like this to me."

Joe blinked staring down at the picture of a thinner and still gawky looking Frank. "You poor thing."

"Joe." Ellen lowered her head not wanting to smile.

Joe pulled her closer and kissed her on the forehead. He handed the photo back to her. "I would think you would have this picture."

"I do." Ellen started walking toward her house. "But it's in a box of stuff I have at Doc Breyer's. Pete hated the fact that I had anything in the house that had to do with Frank."

Joe's heart dropped when he heard the name Peter. So much had happened in the short time, he had forgotten.

"You know Joe, I swear if anyone beats this, Peter will... ."

"Ellen."

"He has had the luck of the Irish ..."

"Ellen." Joe grabbed hold of her arm.

"It used to piss me off." Ellen turned to Joe. "What's wrong?"

"Peter ... Peter didn't make Ellen. He passed away right before we got to the aid station."

Ellen stared at Joe for a moment, then continued walking up the path of her home.

"Ellen, are you all right?"

"Yeah. I want to see my children." Ellen nodded, moved to the door, opened it and stepped in.

Joe watched her. He completely understood Ellen's reaction. No sadness. No tears. It was hard to feel anything about one thing, when so much was going wrong around them.

**June 1st - 7:15 a.m.
Fairfield University - Stamford, Connecticut**

William whistled as he dropped the tarp to the back of the large military truck packed with supplies. "How did you manage this?" he asked Dean who stood with him.

"It never got unloaded. And Henry packed the medication. I doubt we'll need it," Dean said. "Ashtonville's a small town. I figure they're a day behind us, at least."

"I would expect as much also. Well ..." William looked at his watch. "Wish me luck."

"Good luck."

“And you come right to Ashtonville, you hear.” William pointed his finger at Dean then moved to the driver’s door. “You’re all I have in this world. I don’t want to lose track of you.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“You better.” William readied to step in the truck. He stopped, faced Dean with a smile and kissed his son on the cheek. “Be careful.”

“You too.” Dean held the door for his father, and when William was inside. He closed it. He backed away from the truck when William started the engines. And before going back to the lab, Dean stayed until his father had driven completely from sight.

June 1st - 8:30 a.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut

Joe stepped from the bathroom, drying his hands. He tossed the towel back into the bathroom before going into Ellen’s room. The door was ajar and he pushed it open, slipping quietly inside. Ellen knelt on the floor by the bed, giving Josh a breathing treatment. Josh coughed quite a bit and Taylor grew restless, tossing and whining softly.

Ellen reached over and turned off the Nebulizer. She saw Joe. “They’re getting worse, Joe.” Ellen folded the tube, tucking it in the front of the machine. She returned to staring at her children. “Every minute that goes by they get worse.”

So silent Joe was. He only moved to behind Ellen.

“Kelly. Peter. The girls.” Ellen ran her hand over Josh’s face. “If I’ve learned anything from you, Joe. It’s to be realistic. I’m realistic. I know what’s next.” Her voice dropped to a whisper, “I know what’s next.”

Joe rested his hand on her shoulder. “I wish I had the answers. I don’t.”

“There are none. There are no answers to why my children are sick. Why this is happening to this world. And worst of all, there are no more answers to prayers.”

“Why would you say that?”

“I believe right now, there is only one prayer is being said by every person in this world. A prayer for help. With so many people praying for the

same thing, wouldn't you think that one single prayer would be answered?" Ellen tilted her head to lay it on Joe's hand. "It's not happening. Alas ... we've been abandoned."

**June 1st - 10:25 a.m.
County General Hospital - New York City, NY**

The squeaking wheels of the rolling hospital cart seemed loud on the quiet seventh floor. Andrea, dirty, sweaty and wearing hospital scrubs, held on to the end of the cart and pushed it, body and all, down the empty corridor. She turned the bend and the cart came to an abrupt halt when it hit into another. With the back of her hand she removed the sweat from her forehead, took a breath then shifted the cart back and forth until it fit. Knowing that was all she could do in that particular wing, Andrea exhaled loudly and stepped back. She raised her head and took one more look. From where she stood at one end of the long corridor, all the way to the other end, sheet covered bodies on carts were crammed together in that hallway. No spaces between them. Carefully fitted like pieces of a puzzle. The west wing of the seventh floor's own blanket of death.

**June 1st - 10:45 a.m.
Outskirts - Chicago, IL**

Frank moved at a slow, but steady pace and he moved away from the tents of the aid station. He had a small green knapsack filled with food draped over one shoulder. Across the other, an M-16. He figured one of those cars on the highway had to have a map in the glove compartment, but first he had to reach the highway. He kept moving away across the grass area packed with tents, despite the fact that an officer, wearing a gas mask followed him. Frank didn't know if the officer was male or female, it really didn't matter. Once Frank heard the word 'stop' Frank made up his mind to keep going.

“Sergeant!” the man blasted, keeping up to Frank. “If you are well enough to walk, you are well enough to stand post or help out here.”

Frank silently scoffed at the thought of standing post. He had done that stint and for longer than he should have. Ignoring the officer, Frank kept moving.

“You are still an active member of the United States Armed Forces. This country is under Martial law. I am ordering you now to halt.”

Frank didn’t.

“Stop or I will shoot.” The officer pulled out his revolver and pumped the chamber.

This stopped Frank. With an outraged look he spun around to the officer. “Shoot me? The world is dying and you want to shoot me? Take a look around you. It’s over!” Frank shouted, his arm flying out as he spoke. “Right now, I need to be with the people I love most in this world. And let me tell you something, pal. They aren’t here. Now if you’re gonna shoot me, you’re gonna have to shoot me in the back. That’s the only way you’ll stop me. Because I’m walking out of here. I’m going home.” Frank began to move backwards. “I’m going home.” Without missing a beat, Frank spun back around forward and kept on moving.

The officer’s aim was steady on Frank. But not for long. Really hearing Frank’s words, he lowered his gun and returned to the tents.

June 1st - 10:50 a.m. Ashtonville, Connecticut

The sound of it was assurance to the dying woman that Joe had not been lying to her. Help was going to come. In the middle of him convincing her more help was coming, she heard the truck motor in the distance at the same time as Joe.

The squealing breaks carried to Joe, but he really didn’t see the truck until he left the woman’s side and ran closer to the street. He looked up. “Son of a bitch. The kid pulled through. Son of a bitch.” Joe smiled and jotted up the street to the military truck. He saw William step from the truck. “Tell me you’re our help.”

“I’m the cavalry.” William extended his hand. “William Hayes.”

“Joe, Joe Slagel.” Joe shook his hand, then pointed. “You’re his father.”

“Yes, I am.”

“Hell of a kid you have. He pulled through.”

William looked about the street. “A lot of people. You’ve started quite a set up.”

“With what little we have.”

“I have supplies.” William pointed backwards. “Lots of them. Tents, cots, medication. But I need help.”

Joe raised his eyebrow and clapped his hands together once. “I’m it. I’ll give you a hand, but first ... let me tell me daughter you’re here. It’s her home these people came to. Do you mind?”

“Not at all.” William shook his head. “I’ll just start.”

“Thanks. I won’t be long.” Joe made a quick turn and began to dart with energy toward Ellen’s house. He had to tell her the help they were hoping for, did indeed arrive.

With such excitement he raced into the home. “Ellen!” He called out in his move to the stairs. “Ellen!” Leaving her children’s side to go help outside was one worry Ellen didn’t need. Joe wanted to give her the news that she didn’t have to leave them at all. “Ellen.” He raced into the bedroom. “The doctor from Stamford ...” Joe’s feet stopped before his body did and he nearly fell over. A thump hit chest as his heart beat strong. Taylor was a sleep on the bed, but Josh was not. Josh was in his mother’s arms. In the rocking chair near the bed Ellen held Josh close to her. The chair rocked as she cradled a boy nearly the same size as her. His arms and legs dangled lifeless as Ellen clutched his head into her chest and buried her lips to his head.

“Ellen, honey.” Joe staggered to her and dropped to his knees before Ellen.

“He’s gone, Joe.”

“No.” Joe’s hand raised slowly and fell to Josh’s hair.

A burst of tears escaped Ellen. They saturated her face, rolling over the lips that kept kissing Josh. “The treatments didn’t work.” Her breath quivered. “His lungs gave away. I picked ... I picked ...” She closed her mouth and stopped speaking. She just couldn’t at that moment.

“It’ll be all right.”

“No.” The word whimpered from her mouth. “It will never be all right. He’s gone, Joe.” Ellen sobbed. “My son is gone.”

“I’m sorry.” Joe’s head dropped against her hand. “I’m so sorry.”

Ellen sniffled hard and deep, running her hand so harsh across her wet face, “Could I ... could I just have a moment alone. Then I’ll put him in his bed like I did so many times. Just a few minutes alone with my son.”

Joe said nothing. He ran his hand over Ellen’s face as he stood up. He brought his lips to her forehead then to Josh’s and he backed up and turned from the bedroom. Pulling on the door, Joe’s head dropped when he heard another sob come from Ellen. He looked back in the room to see Ellen rocking and holding Josh. So lost, so hurt and there was nothing Joe could do for Ellen, but give her the moment of privacy she sought, so she could say goodbye to her only son.

June 1st - 11:43 a.m.
Fairfield University - Stamford, Connecticut

Molly’s eyes were wide open and lifeless. Her struggle had ended quickly, yet not without a life time’s worth of pain. Henry, solemn lifted his lowered head and reached to Molly closing her eyes. A sense of guilt hit him. He promised Dean he’d take care of her, Henry couldn’t recall the last time he checked on Molly. He checked on Molly as often as he could, but there were so many people dying so fast, Henry couldn’t keep up. He felt bad, really bad for Molly. A woman he knew had three children and six grandchildren. She had a family, a life she loved. Yet with all that she built in her personal world she didn’t deserve to die alone like she did. Alone in a tent, draped off from so many others just like her.

Henry brought the sheet over her head and left the draped off area. He would have to go tell Dean. He could hear the flies buzzing. There was less movement and noise, Molly was the twelfth person in ten minutes Henry found dead. Walking across the darkened tent, Henry saw a shadowy figure at the edge. Big and blocked out by the sun that poked through behind it. It was a man and he made it into the tent, looking around at the bodies. “Can I help you?” Henry called as he moved to the man. “Are you looking for someone?”

“Yes.” Carl’s deep voice answered as he looked up.

Henry neared closer and gasped when he saw Carl’s bloody and bruised face. “Do you need help? You’re ...”

“No.” Carl rushed to Henry. “I need to find Lt. Dean Hayes and I

need to find him now. Do you know where he is?”

“He’s in the next tent.”

“Thank you.” Carl rushed to the edge of the tent and stopped. “Can you tell me how I’ll recognize him.”

“Um ...” Henry scratched his own head. “He’s the only one standing?” Before Henry knew it, Carl had raced out.

**June 1st - 11:44 a.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut**

A hand drawn map, courtesy of Joe, was spread out on Ellen’s kitchen table. William, Joe, and Jenny stood around it.

With a pencil in his hand, William bent down toward the map. “It’ll be easier now, as you can see where my lines are, to separate them. I know it will still be a task. Jenny and I counted close to six hundred.”

Joe whistled and swayed his head. “Didn’t think that many. You’re wanting to put those who need it more all together?”

“Exactly.” William answered. “You’ve been keeping track of people, so it will be easier. Treatment-wise, it should go a lot smoother. Joe, I noticed some people camping out about four miles from here. Any chance you can scout there for any healthy survivors?”

“You got it. I’ll help unload a little more then head out.”

Jenny had questions of her own. “What about the dead. It’s bad. We lost close to sixty already. What are we gonna do with them?”

William hesitated before answering because he knew the coldness his answer carried. “Move them together in one place until we can burn them. But we must exercise precaution now. Cholera is a threat and something we aren’t immune to. And my dear Jenny, if you think it’s bad now, wait. Out there, that is only the beginning.” With a deep breath and his pen in hand, William leaned back down to the homemade map and continued in the quick design and set up of what would be their aid station.

June 1st - 11:46 a.m.
Fairfield University - Stamford, Connecticut

Carl grew frustrated when Dean wasn't in the tent that Henry told him. He moved to the next and to the next. Had Dean not been the only one standing—as Henry described—Carl wouldn't have known it was Dean. Dean not only stood, but he moved quickly away from the tents. "Lt. Hayes!" Carl cried out, running as fast as his injured and exhausted body could move. "Please wait."

Dean stopped moving and turned around. He could see the bigger man chasing him. Aside from his father and Henry it had been a while since he saw anyone else walking. Dean made his way to Carl.

"You're Lt. Hayes?" Carl asked.

"Yes."

"Thank God. Please, come with me." Carl started moving in another direction.

"What is ..."

"Please." Carl beckoned as he picked up speed.

Shrugging and confused, Dean followed Carl. Away from the aid station near the end of the long line of idle traffic. Dean watched Carl stop at a jeep. Carl stood by the open passenger's door, and Dean, figuring there was someone there that needed help, walked a little faster that way.

"She's in too much pain to move." Carl said, then stepped out of the way for Dean.

Confused even more, Dean walked around the jeep and gasped in shock when he looked inside. He dropped immediately to a knee before the jeep. "Catherine."

A sob, barely heard, escaped Catherine in her exhale. She closed her eyes and a tear rolled down her face.

Dean saw the seeping stomach wound and his eyes cased up to her head which bled as well. So pale and weak. Just as his hand moved to examine the extent of her injuries, Carl squatted next to Dean.

"I have something." Carl reached into his pocket, pulled out the vial and handed it to Dean.

It was so tiny, even in Dean's hands the vial was lost. His eyes looked at it then to Carl. "What is this?"

"I believe Catherine, deserves to tell you," Carl said.

“Catherine?” Dean had questioned in his eyes. He saw her throat move in her desperate attempt to swallow.

A heavy breath came from Catherine as her hand, seemingly out of her control, tried to grab for the stack of papers on her lap. Her fingers grasped but she couldn’t lift them, even the papers were too heavy. A painful sob seeped from her as she spoke breathy and short. “Our ... chance. Slows ... slows early stages.” Her lips quivered as she fought with everything she had to talk. “Combine ... it. Try.” In her final attempt to lift the notes, Catherine’s fingers crinkled the paper, stopped, and her head flopped to the side, eyes open toward Dean. Catherine stopped moving, she was still and quiet.

Lifting Catherine’s hand, Dean slipped the stack of papers from her lap, looked at the vial in his palm and up to Carl who nodded. Once more he faced Catherine. He reached up and in his slow sweep of his hand down her face, Dean closed her eyes. He swallowed and dropped his voice to a deep whisper. “Thank you, Catherine.” Eyes closed tightly, Dean paused in a grateful momentary vigil to her. Then clenching the papers and vial tight, Dean stood up and with the first sense of hope he felt in a while, raced top speed back to the lab building.

**June 1st - 12:42 p.m.
St. John, Indiana**

It was easier than Frank had thought getting to the point he was. The toughest trudge was the first mile or so making it to the main highway. To find transportation, it was faster searching out cars easily removed from the jam. Frank did. He cleared the car, pulled it to the bane of the road and drove there until he hit a clear section of highway. But then the other problem kicked in. Gas. By the time Frank ran out of gas, he was in a section of the country without power. No power. No ability to work the gas pumps. So he had to abandon that vehicle in search for another. That brought him to St. John. He found a little blue one, keys inside, parked sideways, and it had gas. Enough, Frank figured, to at least get him to another city. But first, Frank had to remove the dead occupants from the car.

While doing so, Frank was surprised he was holding up as well as he was. Especially considering how awful he felt. But he supposed that box of

Ho-Ho's he consumed gave him the energy he needed as a quick fix.

After removing the last of the three bodies, Frank closed all doors, tossed in his knapsack and weapon then started the engine. He was determined and he would keep going until he had to stop. To Frank there were only two reasons to do so. One was if the car broke down or needed fuel. The second reason was if Frank like the car, just ran out of the gas. With the way he felt himself going, Frank was wagering the later.

June 1st - 12:55 p.m.
Fairfield University - Stamford Connecticut.

Dean's computer ran a sequence on the contents of that vial. The numbers of the sequence ran rapidly while Dean stared down to the counter in the lab. Papers, the ones he got from Catherine spread out on the counter. But the paper wasn't everyday. Notes were on a page from a telephone book, duty rooster, post-its. And all of the notes were burned to an extent and blood covered.

He lifted the vial and peered at it. The vial was half full and the tiny cap was cracked. A huge blood smear stopped him from seeing any name on the label. Without a name Dean couldn't tell what he was working with. He knew his computer would put out that information shortly, and when it did, Dean would get the opportunity to work on it. Work on what he needed to, and that work was finding a way to beat the virus. He would use his knowledge and Catherine's advice, and in a superstitious way, keep his fingers crossed the entire time.

June 1st - 1:00 p.m.
County General Hospital - New York City, NY

The last one who remained and Andrea felt like she was the first to arrive. But after forty-eight hours straight, a total of two hours sleep, Andrea's work was finished. She feared some going down alone into the

streets. But she took comfort in the fact that it had been a while since she heard any gunshots. She supposed those who had gone mad and rioted were either sick or dead at that moment. The safety factor increased in New York with each passing hour. But Andrea couldn't hide out in that hospital forever. It was time to go home. Time to get to her husband.

Surprised that there was still power, Andrea knowing it would be a long walk home, took the elevator down to the main floor. The doors slid open to a view Andrea did not expect to see. Instead of going down, Andrea felt as if she emerged *up* from some sort of bomb shelter into a war ridden world. In reality, it was. All of the windows there were shattered. The door was still closed, but that too was missing the glass. Patients, for lack of rooms, were lined up in the lobby. Health care workers, soldiers and civilians lay dead everywhere.

Making it across, Andrea had to close her eyes and turn her head. Death by plague was something she had grown accustomed to and Andrea clearly saw, the plague wasn't what killed most of the people in the lobby. Especially those who were set up on the right side. Men, women and children, laid shot and some burned on their cots. Caught in the crossfire when rioting civilians battled the military in a war in which they fought the same enemy.

The sun was peeking through the dark lobby. That helped give Andrea the courage to go out there, but protection would make her even braver. Stopping at the body of a soldier. Andrea retrieved his hand gun, grabbed more ammunition and moved to the door. She wanted to use the revolver to clear away the broken glass on the door, but since noise would have been an alert to anyone dangerous still walking around, Andrea reached for the handle instead.

The world had changed a lot since Andrea last saw it. She knew that, but was still ill prepared for what her mind told her she would see. Soaking one more breath of courage, Andrea opened the main door and stepped out side for the first time in two days.

June 1st - 1:05 p.m.
Interstate 25 - Four miles from Ashtonville, Connecticut

Six hundred and seventy five people were just too many for three people to handle alone. That was why Joe headed to the highway. The 'Aid Station ten mile' sign was not a distance marker to Joe, but a people finder instead. A military truck was off to the side of the road. The tarp was up. As if that truck on his way to the aid station, stopped to help someone and everyone else, flocked to that spot like pigeons to bread.

At the end of the long line of traffic, Joe stepped from his car. Tents were set up and people camped about. He jotted forward stepping on the trunk of a car then jumping to the hood. "Hello!" Joe called out to those whose hung around. "Is there anyone here who isn't sick?" he asked loudly. Some people paid attention, some didn't. "We have medical help in Ashtonville. But we need hands." He waited for someone to say something, but no one did. "Anyone?" Joe tried again, giving up shortly afterwards.

Joe jumped from the hood disgusted and readied to go back to his car, when a bigger man, burly, and long black hair approached Joe.

"I can help," he told Joe. "I'm not sick."

"Me either." A thin black man stood beside the man.

Joe looked at them both. "That's great. Follow me." He headed back to his car as did the two men. He jumped in his car and turned it around to faced the direction he need to go in order to return to Ashtonville. When he saw the two cars pull out and join him, Joe started to go. But little did he know, not only did those two cars tag behind him, so did a long line of others as well.

June 1st - 1:40 p.m.
Fairfield University - Stamford, Connecticut

It was a quick combination based more on theory rather than knowledge, but time was short. It had reached the point where Dean was trying everything. His scattered notations were the only record of what he tried. Still unknown, the vial had benefits. It definitely slowed the virus but only on the early stages, very early stages. The mystery substance in that little bottle of light would forever go nameless, and forgotten because even if that substance combined with what Dean had worked, there still wasn't enough to save the world.

From his watch to the computer Dean kept looking. He'd pace back and forth, bite his nails, cross his arms, uncross his arms. The scientist in him knew with how he was 'throwing' it together, his chances of hitting the mark right away were slim. But positive results had been bred in different experiments under more stranger situations.

He was waiting for the analysis, the results. Would his newest combination work? And if so, how? Making it three feet or so from the computer in another Dean-pacing-frenzy, the beep of the computer signaled the results were in. Dean spun, leaped back over to the computer slamming his hands on the counter as he did so. He peered at the screen and at the results. Dean's mouth dropped open and he closed his eyes. Lowering his head, he clenched his fist and gave a single pound on the counter. "Yes." The word seeped through his clenched teeth. So, emotional and shivering with excitement, Dean raised his head to the ceiling, mouthed the words, 'thank you' then bolted off into the other lab.

June 1st - 2:44 p.m.
New York City, NY

Andrea never thought about how long of a walk it was from the hospital to her home. She never thought it was that far, but then of course she never walked home, nor did she ever walk through plague and rioted ravished streets. Numerous times she had to dart inside a building when she heard some one. Usually the sound of breaking glass, or rummaging. She could have spoken to them, tried to talk, but Andrea feared what was left. All she wanted to do was make it home.

She made it to her street. A street that was the epitome of urban life. But Andrea had always loved living there. Her apartment with her husband Jake. Neighbors she could hear arguing, children that played stick ball and jump rope on the street. The fire hydrant that the men of the neighborhood always turned on for the children. Mrs. Davis, insidiously sweeping her walk. That was Andrea's life. When she looked upon her street, she knew her life was over.

No children, no screaming, no laughter. Sounds of life were gone. Even her little street wasn't immune to the war zone the city had become.

Barker's store had been looted. The big window busted, items spewed from the store trailing into the street. Bodies were everywhere, many of which wrapped in sheets, plastic, curtains, whatever. They sprawled about on the curb and doorsteps as if they were left out trash. Besides not being immune to the virus, the victims were not immune to the rats. Multitudes, and more than Andrea had ever seen in her lifetime combined, ran rampant about the streets. Coming up when the scent of the dead rang to them like a dinner bell.

The rats had become bold, not darting away when they saw her but darting to her. She kicked them away and kept moving. It wasn't far to her home. A corner building that she always felt had historical charm. Andrea prayed that it was unscathed, that her husband Jake would still be there. She hoped he hadn't left in an attempt to get to the hospital to find her. Because the closer to the hospital, the worse things were.

She arrived at her building, tired, sore and relieved. She walked up the eight steps, a rat sat before the oak doors, and Andrea kicked her foot to clear it from her way. Nothing mattered to Andrea but getting inside. She walked in. It was a different world. Had time stopped? There were no sounds of children crying, no sounds of arguing neighbors, just silence.

As she made her way up the stairs to her third floor apartment, she heard a moan coming from the second floor. Listening carefully to pinpoint it, Andrea located its origin and walked in the apartment. It was Mrs. Graham.

"Mrs. Graham." Andrea called from the doorway. There was no sign of her in the living room. "Mrs. Graham?"

Mrs. Graham's moans were weak.

Andrea turned the corner to her bedroom and screamed. Mrs. Graham lay on her bed. Three rats sat on top of her, nibbling on her hands and face.

"Get off!" Andrea screamed at them swinging her knapsack, two of the rats darted away. One arrogantly sat up staring at Andrea as if to say, 'this is *my* dinner'. Andrea swooped down her knapsack at the rat, sending it flying across the room and smashing into the wall. Mrs. Graham moaned once more, and then she died.

Andrea, fearful of what she would find in her own home, headed to her apartment, hoping her husband had not met the same fate as Mrs. Graham. She bolted through the door of her apartment, ready to take on anything. She ran to her bedroom, where Jake, her husband, lay on the bed.

"Jake." Andrea touched him, he was hot. "You're still alive."

"Andrea." Jake opened his eyes.

Andrea lifted his head and placed it on her lap. She held on to him tightly grateful she made it in time.

**June 1st - 3:22 p.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut**

A sweat broke out profusely across Miguel Sanchez's forehead. Using the back of his hand, he cleared it, stopping it from dripping in his eyes. He had erected another tent to help shade those who waded through their illness in the street. He lost count of how many cots he set up since Joe brought him and another man named Jonas to their little aid station to help. If course not long after Miguel and the other new helper, Jonas arrived, the aid station on a street in the quaint little town could no longer be described as little. More people had come out of their homes for help, some returned, some stayed. But the numbers nearly doubled when so many cars followed, that Jonas had the job of moving the vehicles that the people abandoned. Miguel didn't mind helping, it was a lot of work, but it kept his mind off of everything. Off the loss of his mother, who died in the car on the way to Ashtonville. He just did whatever Joe Slagel told him and when he as finished he went back and asked what was next. There still were too many people for the number of workers they had, and he heard Joe saying that there were many more still in their homes. A problem—when the plague was all said and done with—if they all decided to stay in Ashtonville.

Miguel's English wasn't the best at times so he nodded more than spoke words. Just like he nodded when Joe asked if he could help move bodies out. Miguel agreed. Everyone that was well, helped. Maggie, an older woman Miguel met, kept up her part even though her husband was failing by the second. Jenny, the teenage girl helped a lot too and her parents were there. But the biggest surprise helper was the little boy. Joe's grandson, whom Joe tried with diligence to get to stay away. But Johnny didn't. Coming back from taking another body to where they piled them two streets over, Miguel watched Johnny going from patient to patient. He held a bucket of water, Johnny wiped their faces, their lips. Johnny would speak to the patients. But it was clear to Miguel that Johnny just was so young. Because Johnny didn't know. And that fact broke Miguel's heart.

Making his way closer to the boy, Miguel watched Johnny swat away flies, then wipe a woman down. Miguel sniffed outward, the smell in that particular section was strong. He moved closer to Johnny. "Hey," he spoke.

Johnny dropped the rag into the bucket. "Hey."

"Johnny. Right?" Miguel asked.

"Yes."

"Johnny, I know you're helping."

"I want to help."

"Would you do another job?"

"Like what?" Johnny wrung out the cloth and brought it to the woman's face.

Miguel shifted his eyes to the woman. "We need someone to help us, so we can help the sick. Do you feel like getting water and maybe make sandwich for the workers."

"Am I allowed?" Johnny asked wiping off the woman.

"We all would like very much." Miguel smiled, then ran his hand across his own face again.

"O.K." Johnny handed Miguel the bucket. "I'll wash my hands first." He held them up.

"You do that." Miguel watched Johnny dart off and when the boy was from his sight, Miguel lifted the woman Johnny had been cleaning up, tossed her limp body over his shoulder and carried her off.

William had just finished examining Taylor. He ran his hand over the little girl's face as Ellen held her on the bed. He was compassionate and used that manner of speaking. No matter how many years a person is a doctor, a child dying is not something a person gets used to seeing. "Joe has found more help." William told Ellen. "You ... you stay here now."

Ellen sniffed and nodded, holding a sleeping Taylor even closer.

William let out a slow breath keeping his eyes on Ellen. He reached into his lab coat pocket and pulled out a syringe. It was filled and capped. He held it up briefly, saw the curious look on Ellen's face, then William gently set the syringe on the night stand. "When ... When it comes to our children, our pain is secondary to theirs. Out of our love, a choice that spares them is never wrong." He laid a hand on Ellen and slid it off as he turned and walked to the door.

Even though she didn't want to, Ellen kept looking at that syringe. Her eyes would close in pain after seeing it. She raised her head when she heard William leave, and when she looked up, she saw Joe walking in.

Joe didn't say anything, there as nothing he could say. He walked to the bed, kissed Ellen then Taylor. As soon as he sat on the edge of the bed, Ellen fell in to him and began to cry.

June 1st - 3:30 p.m.
Fairfield University - Stamford, Connecticut

Dean hadn't slept in days. He may have looked it, but he didn't move like it. Behind Henry, he trailed, upbeat, speaking rapidly, arms going about. Henry had carried a body from the tent and went back in for another. Dean followed. "And Henry, I still haven't a clue what it is. Carl doesn't either. It's illegible on the paper and the analysis is coming up nil. But ..." He grabbed the end of the body, lifted it and aided Henry in carrying it out. "But ... combined with what I've been working on, whatever it is, may be the missing link. It weakens the virus, slowing it. On the earliest recorded stage of the virus, the combination is phenomenal."

"So if we would have had it in the beginning we would have beaten this plague?"

"Sad to say, probably, yes."

"What about with the later stages?" Henry asked as he dropped the body, dusted off his hands and moved back to the tent.

"The earlier the better." Dean moved behind him. "What I'm hoping for is to hit the earliest stages we can. Make the virus dormant. Slow. Give the patient time to regain their strength while giving me the time to beat it." He watched Henry pick up another body, and Dean grabbed the feet.

Henry swayed a slow view to Dean as he moved from the tent, struggling with the heavy dead man. "Look around, Dean, this is a dead camp. Everyone here is in the last stages. This is a dead camp."

"But Ashtonville may not be. They're a small town. Chances are their stages behind us. I can't leave yet. I want you to take it there. The batch is mixing now. I'll have thirty initial doses and thirty second ..."

"Thirty?" Henry nearly laughed in ridicule. "Only thirty doses?"

What's the use?"

Dean, stunned dropped his end of the body. "I can't believe this is you talking. Is this Mr. Upbeat in front of me? Why would you say that?"

"Because I'm tired of seeing death."

"Well, so am I Henry." Dean spoke with edge and passion. "And thirty people may not have to see it either. I don't know, maybe it's selfish. Probably. But, Henry, if I can save one ... just one person, then everything I've learned, everything I've done, will not be in vain. Tell me ... tell me you'll take the serum."

Quietly, Henry only looked at Dean.

**June 1st – 3:33 p.m.
New York City, NY**

Andrea tucked the sheets beneath her husband, Jake, to make him more comfortable. She had moved the bed closer to the window so that his last few hours could be spent enjoying the beautiful day that was just outside the pane of glass.

"It's awfully warm in here, Jake, isn't it?" Andrea wiped the sweat from her chest. "This is going to be one of those days I will have wished that we had broke down and got an air conditioner." Andrea reached over him and opened up the window, a gentle breeze blew in a slight coolness along with a slight stench. "Oh." Andrea covered her nose. "This smell will only get worse." As she stared out the window, she remembered how many times she and Jake had shut it to close out the noise from the buses and people. Now she longed for them. Forgoing the heat she reached for the window to close it again when she heard what sounded like a baby's wail.

"Did you hear that, Jake?"

Jake lay still on the bed, sleeping soundly.

The high-pitched shrieking continued. "There it is again." Andrea stuck her head out of the window. She listened. It was a baby, and its crying echoed the empty streets. "I'll be back."

Andrea jumped from the bed. She grabbed a shirt from her dresser drawer and doused it with perfume, she covered her nose and headed out of the apartment. The hallway was scattered with dead rats, the poison she had placed in her doorway and on the steps was working so far. She knew she would have to get more. But first, the baby, she prayed it would not stop

crying. “Please keep crying, child.” Andrea hurried to the street, ignoring the rodents which were starting to gather around the deceased. She listened intently for the cries and followed them.

They led her to an apartment building one block down. She looked at the building and raced in. Following them up four flights of stairs, she located the door from which they came.

“Hello?” Andrea knocked. “Hello, is anyone there?”

The baby cried louder.

Andrea turned the doorknob, and walked in. She glanced around the apartment, and removed the shirt from her nose. She began a search of the apartment. Empty baby bottles covered the kitchen counter. From there the cries flowed from a small hall. Two steps and a door was ajar.

As she opened it, she could see a crib, and in front of the crib, a rocking chair, where a woman sat.

“Ma’am?” Andrea called out. “Are you all right?”

With no response, she made her way in the. “Oh, God.” There in the crib a curly blond-haired baby sat up wearing a diaper and a pink T-shirt. She stopped crying when she spotted Andrea.

Before Andrea picked up the child, she noticed the woman in the rocking chair, her head slumped over, and the blood that flowed from her mouth was not yet dry. Andrea felt for a pulse, the woman was dead, her body was still warm, she had just died.

Andrea picked the little girl from her crib which was sopping wet and filled with bottles. The woman must have tried desperately to care for her until the very end.

She held the baby close, she was no more than six months old. “Oh, little one, you’re not even sick.” Andrea spotted a bag of diapers. “Let me change you real fast and I’ll get you out of here.” As Andrea changed the baby, it dawned on her, how many other children may have been left alone. She finished and gathered up things she needed. As she did, she noticed the hospital birth certificate on the wall. “Katherine.” How ironic, Andrea thought that this was the second Katherine destined to live. “I’ll call you Katie.” Andrea covered the baby’s mother with a blanket and she left the apartment with Katie.

As she carried Katie tightly stopped and looked around the street. So many buildings, so many apartments, could someone else be alive? She opened her mouth to call out, but stopped. With all that had gone on, what if someone tried to kill her? What if she *didn’t*? Would it be a sin on her soul if

she did not try?

“Hello! Hello! Is anyone there?” Andrea moved slowly down the street crying out as she walked on. “If you can hear me, or if you need my help, please answer me. Hello!”

Andrea continued home. The rats were beginning to gather more. What would it be like in a day or two? She knew she would have to get Katie not only out of the neighborhood, but out of the city. But she couldn’t until Jake was gone.

“Is anyone there? Can anyone hear me?” Andrea stood in front of her building. “I’m going in my home now. Please, if you can hear me ...” Andrea sighed. “Oh, Katie, it looks like just you and me.” With a diaper bag harnessed over her shoulder, she clutched Katie and turned to her door. A black rat sat as if guarding it. “Get out of my way!” Andrea snarled at it. Frightened, it scurried along.

“Wait!” a tiny voice called out.

Andrea turned.

Across the street stood a little boy, maybe seven or eight years old. He wore a backwards baseball cap and a pair of cutoffs, while holding a bag of chips. “Lady, I’m scared.”

“Come here, I’ll help you.”

He just stood there.

“What’s wrong, are you sick?”

“No.”

“Well, what is it?”

“I’m not allowed to cross the street.”

“I’ll watch you.”

The little boy looked both ways and darted over. He grabbed a hold of Andrea’s legs and hugged them. He looked up at her with his blue eyes. “Will I get in trouble for leaving my mom?”

“Is she O.K.?” Andrea asked.

“No, she died. She told me my dad went to the hospital to get better, and don’t leave, because he would be back.”

“Come on to my place. I’m sure if he comes back he’ll call out like I did.” Andrea opened her building door.

“I don’t think he’s coming back, do you?”

“Let’s talk about this upstairs.” They walked in and Andrea quickly shut the door behind them, keeping out the three rats she saw speeding their way. They were safe inside, if only for a little while.

**June 1st - 4:05 p.m.
Fairfield University - Stamford, Connecticut**

With a gun swung around his back like he was Rambo, Henry stood with Dean by a motorcycle at the edge of university grounds. Dean handed Henry a small cooling sack with a strap. Henry took it and placed it over his head.

"Tell my father the instructions are in there." Dean pointed to the sack.

"Got it." Henry nodded.

"I'll pack up my stuff. Finish making more, and be there tomorrow."

"Got it."

"And reiterate to my father, give the serum only to the earliest available stages. Or else ..."

"It will be a waste. Yes, I know." Henry mounted the motorcycle.

"And don't crash." Dean waved a finger.

"Crash. Ha!" Henry nodded. "I'm not gonna crash, Dean. I'm gonna get shot. You know that. I'm getting shot." Henry rattled as he adjusted himself. "I'm riding around like a rebel. It's martial law and I have a gun. I'm a dead man. I just know it."

"Henry." Dean shook his head in a chuckle. "Get going."

"I'm going." Henry started the motorcycle. "But do you know something, Dean? I'm like the cool hero riding in to save the day."

"Yes, you are."

"I can hear the theme music playing now. Sing it for me while I ride off."

"Henry."

"Kidding." Henry revved the bike. "Wish me luck."

"Good luck."

Henry prepared to move the bike. He stopped and gave a thumbs up to Dean. "You did good." With another rev of the engine, Henry sped off. Excited, hopeful and nervous, and with a charging feel, Dean watched him ride off—just as Henry claimed—like the hero into the sunset.

**June 1st - 4:17 p.m.
Logan, Indiana**

There was plenty of bad Barry Mannilow music for Frank to listen to in that little blue car, unfortunately there wasn't plenty of gas. It sputtered its last bit of fuel and Frank let it go until it stopped. Dying like everything else on that side farm road. The lack of fuel was forefront on Frank's mind. He expected it--not so soon considering it was an economy car—but he expected it none-the-less.

Grabbing his rifle, his knapsack and rolled sleeping bag that was in the car, Frank stepped out. He knew he had to keep going, at least until he found another means of transportation. Tired, arms full, head pounding and grateful that he ate that large bag of Cheetos or else he'd be starved as well, Frank trudged down the abandoned two lane road.

**June 1st - 4:40 p.m.
Fairfield University - Stamford, Connecticut**

"How's the head?" Dean asked Carl, bringing himself down to a squat by the tree where Carl leaned against.

"Getting better." Carl sipped on water. "That rest did me some good too."

"You didn't get much."

"I'm sleeping against a tree."

"True."

"So ... " Carl hesitated before asking. A little scared of what Dean would say. "Did ... did it work?"

"The combination of the two bred positive results. Thank you."

Carl grinned, clenching his fist in gratitude. "O.K., so, what now. There wasn't that much in that vial, or was there."

"No there wasn't." Dean answered. "However, right now I'm running a synthesis of it. It won't be quite as potent as the original, but, it will still give us results. I should have a large enough batch for us to bring with us

to Ashtonville. Actually, tonight ...” Dean took a breath. “Tonight, you and I should have cases to pack up of it.”

“Cases?” Carl asked. “There are that many people in Ashtonville.”

“No, I mean, I don’t think. The cases are for, well, just in case. If when we get to Ashtonville tomorrow and we see that the serum worked. I’d like to get together a few of us and start as fast as we can hitting rural areas.”

Carl understood. “Because like Ashtonville, they would be behind the bigger cities as far as how advanced the virus is.”

“Exactly.” Dean swayed his head toward the tent area. “And I know, right now it doesn’t look like it here. But out there somewhere, we still have hope.”

**June 1st - 5:15 p.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut**

The motor and revving of the motorcycle probably could have been heard for miles. At least it sounded that way to Henry. He was able to move freely in between and around the areas where traffic was most congested. In his haste to get to Ashtonville, he only nearly wrecked three times. But once Henry learned how to use the breaks, he was fine.

He followed the sign and was surprised that the town just appeared right after the highway exit. He thought for sure he’d have to find some dirt road and look for signs. But after he drove past the McDonald’s, Taco Bell, and little mall, a mile later down a tree lined road there he was. He found himself smack dab in the middle of what looked like town square on an episode of *The Andy Griffith Show*. Only this small town looked deserted. It was eerily quiet too. Papers that were thrown across the single stop light main street, blew up in the air when Henry brought the bike to a stop. He had to take a second to look around for a direction to go. From what Henry could see, there weren’t many streets off of that main road, and it wouldn’t be difficult to locate where a make-shift aid station was set up. Figuring, Ashtonville wasn’t that big, and the noise from the ill should carry loudly, Henry rode off straight ahead in his search.

A long table, medication, Joe's list of the sick. William stood before them. It was the care table set up directly in front of Ellen's home. Everyone waited for William to distribute what they had to administer to the ill.

Ellen didn't feel like waiting. Taylor couldn't wait. Tired, eyes puffy and red, Ellen squeezed between Miguel and Joe looking up to William. "Excuse me, William." She spoke tired and drawn. "Do you have it?"

"Yes." William nodded in his reach for a box.

"It has to be strong." Ellen told him. "She needs something ..."

"William!" the voice echoed in the distance. "William!" It was Henry.

Ellen turned, as did everyone, looking for the voice that called out.

William recognized it. "Henry?" Over the heads of those who stood before his table, William peered. "Henry."

Henry had left the bike back at the long line of traffic that blocked off the street at the end. "William!" He charged ahead full speed into the area of the ill. He leaped over a man who laid on the ground, tripped a little, spun, apologized to the man and hit the yard. "William." He raced toward William. His hands slammed hard on the table's surface as if that were the only way to stop himself.

"Henry, what the ..."

"Your son." Henry spoke out of breath. "He sent the first step ..." He took off the cooling sack laying it on the table. "... to the cure."

A loud eruption of 'whats' came from the group and they gathered in closer. Their voices mumbled and meshed together with their excitement and curiosity.

Henry handed William an envelope. "It stalls the virus and buys Dean more time to beat it. He's making more. However ..."

William had opened the envelope and started to read. "It works best on the earliest stages." William spoke through his reading. He then looked up to the faces who stared back at him and laid his hand on the cooling sack. "He said to give this batch only to our earliest stages otherwise the serum will be wasted. O.K. people." William pulled the list of ill. "Let's look at our Joe list and find our thirty least ill. We have to pull them, inject them and isolate them. Then hopefully ... save them."

Between watching William distribute the sheets, Joe saw Ellen slip her arm through and take the Taylor medication William had ready. He saw the look on her face, along with pale, it exuded sadness. With the medication in her hand, she slowly backed up. "Ellen." Joe took a step to her. "Wait, Maybe ..."

"Maybe what?" Ellen spoke holding back any tears. "I know my

daughter is not going to be one of the thirty. I know.” Without saying anymore, she walked away.

William paused in what he was doing. He couldn’t help but take a moment to look at Ellen who seemingly so alone went into her home. After she left his sight, he returned to distributing the list of ill to review.

Though Taylor was curled up on Ellen’s lap and sleeping soundly under the heavy medication, she whimpered as she slept. On the bed, Ellen cuddled and held her. Taylor’s little fingers were tightly intertwined in Ellen’s hair as she reached to hold onto her mother. Her eyelids fluttered in a dream that Ellen prayed was a peaceful, good one.

“And Uncle Richie.” Ellen’s fingers tickled lightly over Taylor’s forehead. “He’s coming to visit this summer. Yeah. Cringe huh? And Pappap Joe is going to the beach with us in August. Or at least he says. We have all sorts of ...” Ellen looked up to the knock on the door. “Come in.”

The door opened and William walked in. Quietly he closed it and moved near the bed.

Ellen first kissed Taylor, holding tight to her head, then after a breath, she looked at William. She felt the lump in her throat. “Did you find your thirty?”

“Yes. We’ve separated them and are getting ready to give them the injection.” William sat on the bed by Ellen’s legs. “My Dear, I need you to understand. My son gave me strict, very strict orders not to give it to anyone in the later stages.”

Ellen didn’t want to cry, but it happened. A tear, thick and warm rolled down her cheek. She pulled Taylor even closer.

“Ellen, chances are so, so, slim that it will even effect the advanced cases. Taylor is very advanced.”

“I know this.” Ellen sniffled.

“O.K., just so you understand the chances. But my view is ...” William leaned into Ellen. “A slim chance is better than no chance. Correct?” He reached into his coat pocket, pulling out a syringe. He watched Ellen’s eyes raise to him in shock. “No matter how small, let’s give Taylor that chance.”

Ellen couldn’t speak. Her throat had swollen up so much, words couldn’t emerge. All she could do was cry. And her body bounced even

harder in her tears when William uncapped the syringe of hope, grabbed hold of Taylor's thigh and injected her with the serum.

**June 1st - 8:30 p.m.
New York City, NY**

She only packed what she needed and wanted to take. She left so much else behind. Her arms would be full with the children. Andrea swore she packed more pictures and memorabilia than clothing. That was all right, because Andrea knew, picking clothes up would never be a problem. She also knew they had to get out of the city. Staying there wasn't an option. Besides dangerous, it wouldn't smell all that great in a few days.

In her bedroom, duffle bag packed, Andrea looked to the bed. She had taken time to wrap Jake in a sheet, then cover him. She left the window open, then she picked up her bag, walked out of the bedroom and closed the door. She had said her goodbyes to her husband and vowed she wouldn't go back in there. Setting down her bag, she laid her hand on the closed door for a moment and thought of Jake. Andrea was tired. The children were sleeping. Denny on the couch, Katie blocked off in a chair. Andrea was tired, all she wanted to do was sleep. Knowing that rest would have to be gotten if she wanted to have the strength to venture out and leave the city, Andrea took the other end of the sofa. She grabbed the throw pillow and sat down. Bringing her legs up, she cradled that pillow close to her chest. In that corner of the couch, curled up so tight, Andrea tried to sleep.

**June 1st - 8:45 p.m.
Interstate 80 - East Indiana**

There was a sense of disappointment that Frank had in himself. A man fit and strong, yet he barely made it twenty miles. He thought for sure finding a vehicle would be easy. It turned out to be a task. And the more Frank looked, the further it seemed that he walked. Until Frank couldn't go

anymore.

He felt the light headed feeling accompany that headache. He stomach started to feel sick again. He knew it couldn't have been those five apples, because he picked them straight from a tree. Even though the creamed beef from the M.R.E. tasted nasty, Frank had eaten enough of those that they would never bother his stomach. Frank knew the reason had to be his head. That and the fact that he really felt bad was how Frank justified himself stopping for the night.

He found a spot in a thick grassy area off of the highway. A car was parked there and that was where Frank dropped his stuff. He had barely set down the knapsack, unrolled the sleeping bag half way, sat down and leaned against the car, and Frank, M-16 still gripped in his hand across his lap, fell fast asleep.

**June 1st - 9:12 p.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut**

"Thank you for going up there." Joe told Ellen as they walked slow down her street toward her house.

"I needed too. I really did. And ... I'm glad I went," Ellen said.

"We'll get through this. You know that don't you?"

"I know." The words barely crept from her mouth. She saw Joe slow down as they passed the tent where they isolated the twenty-nine injected with the serum. "How are they?" she asked.

"Just about the same. They aren't progressing quite as fast, but they're still progressing." Joe turned to face her. "Ellen." He laid his hand on her face. "I want you to know how grateful I am that I still have you. Very, very grateful."

The slightest of smiles escaped Ellen, because that was all she could give. She reached out, wrapping her arms around Joe and held on to him.

Joe backed up and he peered outward. "There's Miguel. Did you want to speak to him?"

"Yes. Thanks." Ellen looked to see Miguel heading toward the isolation tent. "Miguel," she called out to him, waited for him to stop. She needed to speak to him about what he did, and did on his own. "Miguel." She

walked up to him. “Joe and I would have done it.”

At first Miguel looked confused, then horror struck his face. “No, Ellen. I meant no harm.”

“Harm? No.” Ellen held up her hands. “I’m not scolding or yelling. I’m ... I’m thanking you.”

“Thanking me?”

“Yes. For taking the time and care to bury my son for me. I wouldn’t have been able to. I don’t think Joe would have either.”

“When Mr. Slagel tell me to take your boy up to that hill. I could not leave him. I thought it best.”

“I saw the cross.” Ellen spoke soft. “Thank you. You don’t know what that means.”

“I was hoping you weren’t Jewish. I did not think it good time to ask.” Miguel smiled fast then erased it. “I pray for you and your children.”

As Ellen opened her mouth to thank him, a frightening shock went through her when she heard Jenny’s voice, not only calling, but screaming her name.

“Ellen!” Jenny extended far from the upstairs bedroom window of Ellen’s house. “Ellen! Come up here!”

“Oh my God.” Ellen’s hand ran over Miguel’s arm as she fled to the house. “Taylor.”

Joe heard the scream for Ellen also, and watched her fly into the house. He took off running.

Ellen’s heart pounded. It seemed like a journey making it in her house and up those steps. She even stumbled turning the corner upstairs, but she didn’t miss beat. She kept going straight into her bedroom. “What happened?” she asked panicked, her eyes moving to Taylor on the bed then to William.

William smiled. “We had a drop in temperature.”

Ellen gasped loudly, then raced to the bed. “What is it?” She asked.

“An hour ago she was at 106. Two minutes ago,” William smiled again. “102.”

“Oh my God.” Ellen was frighten, scared to death that William was wrong. But she had to know. She didn’t want to fully believe it until she herself knew. She spoke rapidly. “Let’s take it again. Take it again to be sure.” Ellen took the aural thermometer that William handed her. Her hands shook violently as she reached down, tugged on Taylor’s ear and prayed as she

inserted it. A few seconds later it beeped. Ellen looked. When she saw the reading she shrieked and dropped the thermometer, “101.” Nearly jumping she lunged for William and tossed her arms around him in her enthusiasm. “Thank you.” She kissed his cheek at least ten times. “Oh, thank you.” She turned, and just because she was there, Ellen hugged Jenny as well. “Thank ...” In her embrace she saw Joe standing in the door. “Joe ...” Ellen flew to him grabbing his hand. She pulled him so fast to the bed. She laid her hands on Taylor. “Her fever dropped, Joe. Feel her. Oh, feel how cool she is now, Joe. Feel how cool.”

Slowly and apprehensively Joe walked to the other side of the bed. He reached out his hand laying it on Taylor. When he felt her skin, he exhaled loudly and his hands moved about frantically taking in the feel of the cooler skin. “Oh my God.” Joe raised his head and laid his hand firm on Ellen’s cheek. “It’s ... it’s a miracle.” Ellen nodded at him and a tear seeped from the corner of her eye, gliding down her face and over Joe’s fingers. “See, Ellen.” he moved her head as he spoke with emotions. “This shows that you were wrong. We haven’t been abandoned yet.” Joe looked down to Taylor then back to Ellen with a smile. “Not just yet.”

DAY FIVE

**Tuesday, June 2nd - 7:00 a.m.
The White House - Washington, DC**

A barricade wall of fence and trucks kept safe the occupants of the White House, at least while the soldiers holding post were still alive or there. Bodies of the diligent protectors laid right where they once held their posts. Sounds were nil in the country's capital. It wasn't a typical Tuesday. And the world around may have stopped functioning, but the sprinkler system for the front lawn of the White House didn't. They rose up in their normal routine. Spraying and 'cheeing' keeping that lawn green and alive while everything else died.

Corporal John Matoose just thought he was lucky. Three soldiers were chosen to protect the shelter where President Hadly was at. Two for outside the door, one for inside monitoring the computer system. John went inside. He really thought that was the reason he was sitting there alive, in that monitoring station sporting a 'life's a bitch' tee shirt over his camouflage pants. He knew the two outside had died. He saw it with his own eyes when he peeked. At twenty-three years old, he had a certain 'dumb innocence' about him. He truly believed that he was spared of the plague because he made it into the airtight shelter quickly enough. Of course, he was at a lack of explanation as to why everyone else in there wasn't spared as well. Everyone else but the president. It was just the president and him. John was still getting used to calling the president, George as he requested. Perhaps if 'George' spoke to John more often, it would feel comfortable. But George kept his distance from John. Not because George felt John wasn't worthy of his company, but because the president was consumed with the death of his wife.

John thought it a noble gesture on the part of the president. A move of marital dedication along with twinge of masochism. Because George would not leave his wife's body side no matter how badly she began to smell.

John wouldn't go into the other room. He was invited, but declined. Having gone in there enough during the past twenty four hours when all

forty-eight people in there dropped dead. Going through the pandemonium of being vaulted in with the plague. Helping the ill that wouldn't get better. When it was all said and done with, John resumed his post in the other little room. He had his little supply of food. He could see through the glass window just fine as George sat beside the bed his sheet covered wife still laid upon. John was just fine.

But he knew the time was nearing that they would leave their air tight shelter. He could tell by the numerous times George had checked on the strength of the life signals they monitored, and by the fact that George gave him something described as 'vital' reading material.

John could see for himself it was classified. The word was printed right across the front cover. But vital? Ludicrous and boring is what crept through John's mind as he tortured his way through it. He would have lied and said he finished it, but he feared, knowing the way the president was, there would be a pop verbal quiz following his completion. So between the shifting of his eye watching the life signals dwindle like sand through an hour glass, John slowly read through, *The Garfield Project*.

June 2nd - 8:00 a.m.
New York City, NY

"Andrea, Andrea, wake up." Denny shook her as she lay on the couch.

Andrea opened her eyes. "What is it, Denny?"

"Listen."

Andrea tuned in and sprang to her feet at the scratching sound at her front door. "Sit with the baby, Denny." Andrea walked slowly to the front door, she looked through the peephole, and saw nothing. She grabbed the knob and slightly opened the door--not much, but just enough for her eyes to focus in on the carpet of rats that engulfed the hallway. She quickly slammed the door. "Oh, my God."

"What is it?"

"We have to get out." Andrea began to gather up the stuff. "Here, Denny, put your backpack on." She ran over to the window. "Fire escape." She looked out, the fire escape was clear, but the street below was moving. "They're everywhere."

Denny stood beside her. “Rats? Where did they all come from?”

“The sewers. They came up for food.”

“So all we have to do is get out of the neighborhood, huh?”

“Just to my car, and that’s a block up the street. I’ll drive over the sons of a bitches to get to the police station. Then we can try radioing for help.”

“Are we going down the fire escape?”

“Yes, but I have to figure out what to do when we get to the bottom.” Andrea turned to the front door as the scratching got louder.

“That’s easy, we’ll walk across the top of the cars.”

Andrea smiled at Denny’s idea. “Oh, honey, what would I do with out you.” Andrea grabbed the baby carrier and strapped it to her chest. She placed Katie in, put on her backpack and grabbed her keys. “Wait.” Andrea ran into the kitchen and grabbed a frying pan. “Carry this, Denny.”

“What for?”

“We may have to break the back window to get in the car.”

Andrea and Denny went over to the window with the fire escape, she opened it and they carefully climbed out. She held Denny’s hand as they made the way to the ladder at the bottom. “There’s a car, Denny, but it’s a good four feet from us.” Andrea lowered the ladder and looked around. “I’ve got an idea. How fast do you think you can make it down this ladder to that car?”

“Real fast.”

“Denny, you have to be real fast. When I yell go, you go as fast as you can and try not to fall, O.K.?”

“O.K., but what about the rats?”

“I hope this works.” Andrea grabbed a planter that was sitting out on the fire escape. “I’m gonna drop this. I need you to climb down as far as you can, ready?”

“Yep.” Denny climbed down to the second rung.

“Watch out!” Andrea pushed the three foot planter over the side, sending it crashing to the ground and sending the rats scurrying. “Run!”

Denny dashed to the car still clutching the frying pan, and Andrea awkwardly climbed down and ran to the car barely escaping the barrage of rats racing for her.

“Come on, Denny, quickly.” Andrea ran ahead of him to the next car, reaching to him and helping him across.

They ran across the roofs of ten cars until they had reached Andrea’s. As they stood on her car roof, Andrea, with Denny behind her,

dropped the frying pan, shattering the rear window.

She climbed down carefully, avoiding glass and moving it with her foot. She held Denny's hand, with the other clung tightly to baby Katie, who was still strapped to her chest. She climbed though feet first.

Once safely inside the front seat, Andrea handed Katie to Denny. "Hold her tightly." After starting the car, she pulled from the space and drove down the road slowly. The compact car bounced up and down as the weight of the vehicle crushed the rodents that dared to cross its path.

June 2nd - 8:05 a.m.
Fairfield University - Stanford, Connecticut

Dean believed it was his first 'real' shower in days, and he felt better. Hair still wet, wearing clean clothes, he carried a box to the truck that Carl was loading.

"Anything else besides the serum?" Carl asked.

"Just the equipment that's mixing the last batch. It should be done in an hour. The lab's empty."

Carl looked into the back of the truck. "I'd say."

"Hey." Dean shrugged. "Trust me, I'll need that equipment later." He helped Carl lower the tarp and he looked back to the silent camp. "As for now." Dean let out a breath. "Our work here is done."

June 2nd - 8:35 a.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut

The smaller bedroom was all girl. Taylor's room. Story book perfect Ellen had it decorated. The pale pink carpet that matched the ruffle curtains on the window. White walls with print border wallpaper. A canopy bed with the most expensive of spreads. And Taylor had her toys, which were never out of order, and that was Taylor's doing, not Ellen's. A doll house big an obnoxious, shelves lined the one wall where Taylor's dolls sat neatly as if never touched. And her little table was in the corner, completely set up with

miniature tea service for four.

It was the perfect bedroom and Taylor loved her room, that was why Ellen put her in there. In her own room, her own bed, so Taylor could be comfortable while she got well.

In her bed Taylor laid, covers to her chest, still pale and still fevered. Ellen stopped above her checking the intravenous tubing that flowed from where the bag hung on the head board down to Taylor's wrist. She untangled the twist, lifted a clipboard by Taylor's bed and made a notation. After kissing her daughter and whispering she loved her, Ellen grabbed the small tube of blood from the night stand that she had taken from Taylor, and left the bedroom.

^^^

"My son will be here today." William stated as he stood at the medication table with Joe and Henry. Joe listened. So did Henry, but Henry also stood with one arm crossed over his waist and the other brought to his face, hand covering his nose.

"That's good." Joe said. "We'll need him. Things are progressing fast. They're getting bad. The way I see it, with Taylor stabilized, we can pull Ellen to help."

"We can have Maggie sit with her." William suggested. "She's wearing down."

"I can see that. It will be the rest she needs. We can put us three, Ellen and Jenny on patients, and your son of course, when he gets here. Keep Mike and Jonas on moving bodies. Them doing that helps us keep up."

William nodded in agreement.

Henry, muffled and nasal spoke up. "I can move the bodies, Joe."

Joe looked at Henry, turned away then looked again quickly and cross. He pulled Henry's hand down from his face. "Quit that."

"I can't help it Joe. It smells." Henry complained.

"It'll smell a lot worse if it gets hot."

"Or rains." William added.

"But it shouldn't get hot," Joe said.

"Actually." Henry held up a finger. "For this time of year, I was noticing the barometer pressure is extremely ..."

"Henry." Joe halted him.

"Yes, Joe?"

Joe didn't say anything, he just shook his head 'no', picked up the

medication tray, and handed it to Henry. After grabbing his own, Joe moved on with William right behind him.

Ellen pretty much noticed Johnny playing with the short wave radio at the kitchen table, but she didn't notice Jenny crying, until after she placed Taylor's blood in the refrigerator. Maggie comforted Jenny at the kitchen table. "Jenny?" Ellen called out softly. "What happened?"

Jenny shook her head and buried it in her hands.

Maggie looked up to Ellen. "Her parents just passed away."

Ellen's eyes closed at first then she made it to the table standing on Jenny's side. "Oh, I'm so sorry." Ellen laid her hand on Jenny's back. "Do you need ...?" Ellen looked up when she heard the static and crackling coming from the radio. "Johnny, please don't touch that. If you break it Pap will have a fit."

As Johnny retracted his hand, Andrea's voice, a little broken up, came over the airwaves. "Hello? Is anyone there? Can anyone hear me? I need help. Hello?"

Ellen slowly stood up, eye transfixed upon that radio. "Johnny, go get Pap-pap."

Johnny jumped from his chair, raced from the kitchen to the hall and bolted out the door calling as he did. "Pap! Pap!"

Joe turned from his caring of a patient when he heard the call. He saw Johnny running his way. "What's wrong?" John hunched down to Johnny's level fearing something had happened.

"Pap." Johnny caught his breath. "There's a woman on the radio. She needs help."

Shock was the first thing that hit Joe. He wasn't expecting to hear that. Mouth open, he stood up straight, then almost in a daze of surprise, he moved quickly back to the house with Johnny.

Henry followed suit.

"Here," Johnny said out of breath and pointed to the radio.

Joe waved out his hand in a hush manner to everyone who muttered questioned. He picked up the microphone. "This Joe Slagel, Ashtonville, come in."

Static.

“Sweet Jesus. Thank God. My name is Andrea Winters. Can you help us?”

“We’ll try,” Joe said. “Where are you radioing from?”

“New York.”

“City?”

“In the heart.”

Joe rubbed his head and turned to Henry. “New York will be impossible to get in to.” Joe pressed the button. “Andrea, do you need help getting out of New York?”

“Yes, I have two small children I found. One is a baby, the other a boy, but the problem is rats, big, small, everywhere, the city is overrun.”

Henry snapped his finger. “CO2, the cold will scatter them. Tell her to get a fire extinguisher, and make her way out of the city to the Memorial bridge. You can get them at the bridge.”

“Andrea.” Joe called. “How far are you from the Memorial Bridge?”

“Not very.”

“Listen, I need you to get fire extinguishers, the cold will scatter the rats.”

“Will it really work?”

“Yes, Andrea, then I’ll pick you up on the bridge. It’ll take me a couple hours, I’m in Connecticut. I’ll be there.”

“Promise.”

“I’ll be there. I promise. See you in a few.” Joe laid down the microphone, and stood from the table. “Good job, Johnny, you keep monitoring like you were.” He grabbed his bag from the table and took out his gun, checked the chamber and placed it in his shoulder harness. “Henry, can you guys handle things here while I ... um, scratch that. Have William handle things here.”

“Sure, no problem. I don’t do well in authority.” Henry said.

Joe chuckled. “I’ll be back shortly” He kissed Johnny on the head. “Be good, if you hear anyone else, get Hen ... Miguel, and then you guys can reach me on Channel 19, in my car, all right?” Joe walked to the kitchen door.

Ellen grabbed his arm. “Joe, wait.”

“What is it, Ellen?”

“Please be careful, please?”

Joe placed his hand on her cheek and kissed the other. “Hey, Ellen, it’s me. You aren’t getting rid of me that easy.” With a wink and a smile, Joe ran out.

June 2nd - 9:00 a.m.
New York City, New York

Andrea held the baby bottle in Katie's mouth as she watched Denny pretend to hose down rats with his fire extinguisher. "Now, Denny, you remember what I told you right?"

"Yes, ma'am, and this ain't even too heavy for me either."

"I watch your back, you watch mine. Right?"

"Right."

Andrea placed the bottle back in her pack and adjusted little Katie on her chest. "I think we'll be able to drive most of the way. We'll probably have to foot it about ten blocks or so."

"How long till that man said he'd get here?"

"I don't know. Not long I guess." She examined her extinguisher. "Or rather ... I hope, because I don't know how long these will last." She led them to the glass doors of the precinct and looked out. "It looks clear to the car. Ready?"

Denny nodded, all aimed and ready as if he were a member of a SWAT team.

"Let's go!" Andrea opened the door.

The passenger side of the car awaited them. Andrea bolted for it and flung the door open. She quickly slid across seat. With Katie held close to her chest, she waved out. "Denny come on!" She called from the car.

Denny stepped down the precinct steps. He held the hose of the extinguisher extended in front of him.

"Denny now!" Andrea grew angry.

Denny snarled as he moved back and forth on the sidewalk. "Wait I have to see if this works."

"This is no time for games boy. Get your little ass in this car!"

A huge grin fell upon Denny's face, as what looked like a moving fur rug neared him. "Here they come Andrea start the car."

Andrea turned the car over. "I don't believe this. Dennis this is no time to play Ghostbusters with rats."

"Ah ha!" Denny backed up until his rear end hit the passenger's door. As the conglomerate of rats reached it's closing distance of two feet to him, Denny pressed the releases button. *WOOSH!* A blast of cold white air

shot at them, sending the pack fleeing back. All but one rat remained. “Yes!” Denny raised one fist in the air as the rat rolled on its back. Its tail whacked up and down on the side walk, and the little arms and legs waved frantically, as it spun around and around. Denny jumped in the car. “Did you see that Andrea? Did you see that? I saved us!” Denny closed his door.

“Don’t you ever, ever do that again!” Andrea pulled the car out and began to drive. “You scared me.”

“No, no, I was cool. It’s cool.”

With a ‘hmm’, Andrea began to drive.

They made it within six blocks of the Memorial Bridge; Andrea pulled her car to the edge of traffic. “This must be where people were trying to get out.”

“I heard on the news they were shooting people. They won’t shoot us will they, Andrea?”

“No, honey.” Andrea looked out the window, something was wrong. It was too quiet, no enormous sound of squeaking rodents scurrying. “Stay here.” Andrea grabbed her extinguisher and stepped from her car, her foot landing on a soft squishy surface. She looked down; she had stepped on a dead rat. Shuddering with disgust she closed the door behind her and aimed her extinguisher.

All around on the ground were rats, but these ones were dead. She slowly crept to the station wagon in front of her, trying to breathe only through her mouth so as not to smell the air. She could see as she approached the wagon, four heads tilted back. Not wanting to look, but having too, Andrea aimed and turned quickly to the drivers door, and screamed as she looked in.

The station wagon held a family, all of which had died waiting, Andrea supposed, to get out, to get help. But the sight of the virus-stricken family was not what shocked her. It was the sight of their half eaten bodies. Their laps contained the carnage of their post-mortem destroyers—the rats. The rodents had obviously crawled through the open window.

Andrea covered her mouth and turned. She peered at the rat that lay dead at her feet, on its side, eyes wide open. Its toothy mouth which kissed the concrete was encircled by a pinkish substance.

“Vomit,” Andrea thought out loud. “Good for you, you bastard.” She kicked the dead rat as if it were a stone, hurtling it into the air. Then it dawned on her, the rats had died of the virus too. But they did not catch it from the air, they caught it most deservingly from the food. “Rats aren’t

immune.” She whispered in discovery, then smiled. “Rats aren’t immune.”

Walking back to the car, she retrieved Denny and Katie.

“Gross!” Denny curled his lip as he peeked into the station wagon.

“Don’t look. Please.”

“Yeah, but I want to.”

“You’re gonna have nightmares.” Andrea used her foot to remove the rats so as to make a clear path for Denny.

“No, I won’t. I play video games scarier than this.”

Andrea glanced at the boy, then continued leading the way.

As they walked, every car and every passenger inside began to look the same. There were even a few vehicles that were empty. Perhaps their inhabitants gave up the wait and went elsewhere.

Rats, garbage, rubbish and blood lined the streets. Dried vomit garnished the sides of every car.

Finally, after much walking, they neared the bridge. At the end of the long line of traffic laid a barrage of Army vehicles barricading the entrance to the bridge.

Andrea stopped.

“What’s wrong, Andrea?”

“I just want to make sure there’s no military left.”

“Will they shoot us?”

“I don’t think so.”

Waiting a few moments before continuing, Andrea made sure she saw no visible signs of life. She called out a few times, her voice echoing through the deadness of the air. After no response she moved on.

She walked at a snail’s pace, all along keeping Denny behind her. As she reached the end of the traffic she turned horrified, stopping Denny from seeing anything. “Oh, God, Denny. You’re gonna have to keep you eyes closed for the rest of the walk. Just until I get us beyond the Army trucks, O.K.?”

“Oh, all right.” Denny responded hesitantly.

“Thank you, give me your hand and close your eyes. It’s not very far.”

Denny did as instructed as they moved. If she, too, could have closed her eyes she would have. Bloody and bullet-ridden bodies lined the road before the trucks already maxed to capacity with bodies. The soldiers who had diligently held their posts, now lay dead amongst their victims.

Andrea exhaled when they made it to the other side of the Army deluge. She looked down at Katie who continued to sleep through

everything. “Denny, it’s all right now, you can open your eyes.”

Denny opened them. “What now?”

“We’ll walk up a little further,” Andrea said, peering out to the long empty bridge before her. “And we wait.”

June 2nd - 10:55 a.m.
Interstate 25 - One mile from the Ashtonville Exit

“What is this?” Carl spoke soft as he slowed down the truck.

“I don’t know.” Dean peered through the windshield.

“Should we stop, Lieutenant?”

“I told you to quit with the lieutenant. And yeah, they may need help.”

Carl slowed the truck down to a stop, halting the huge vehicle only a few feet from the four men that stood there blocking the road. “I don’t like the looks of this.”

“They’re just worn out.” Dean commented looking at the filthiness of the men.

“Still.” Carl grabbed his rifle and opened the truck door. “Stay here,” he told Dean then stepped out. “Gentlemen.” He pumped the chamber. “Is there a problem?” Carl’s shifted his eyes trying to keep all of them in view.

One of them stepped forward. “We were stuck on the highway and everyone left. We found this house about a mile down that back road.” He pointed. “We have two people ill. Do you have supplies? You’re military.”

“Yeah.” Carl nodded. “But we can’t stop. There’s a temporary aid station set up in Ashtonville. You can get the relief you need there.”

The man stepped even closer to Carl. “Why can’t you just give us what we need and we won’t have to go to the aid station.”

“Because we can’t.” Carl raised his eyebrows. “There’s some cars here on the road, take one, get your ill and drop them off.” Carl stepped back toward the truck door.

“How about food?” The guy asked. “You got food?”

“Nope.” Carl reached for the truck door and saw the man who had spoke, twitch his head to two of the other men. The second Carl saw them near was the second he raised his weapon at them. “Don’t think about it. Back away from the truck. Now.” He didn’t get a response and he moved his finger to the trigger of the rifle, tauntingly pressing and releasing it. “Now!”

They stepped away from him and Carl, eyes never leaving the men stepped up and into the truck. He closed the door.

“What was that all about?” Dean asked.

“Don’t worry about it.” Carl held on to the gear shift. “We’ll have to keep a close eye out for trouble when we get to Ashtonville though.”

“Do you think they’ll go there?”

“I doubt it. If they didn’t go a mile before, they aren’t going a mile now. And ...” Carl stared through the windshield at the men still in the road. “They won’t even get off the road. Do they think I won’t hit them.”

“You wouldn’t. Would you?”

Carl looked quickly at Dean, then with intimidation looked out the windshield, revved the engine of the truck and shifted the gear into drive. He hit the gas and the men dove from the way in the nick of time.

“Shit.” Dean peered into the side view mirror. “I don’t understand this. I mean we’re all survivors in this mess. Why would people start trouble?”

“For a scientist you are awfully naïve,” Carl told him. “Stress alone will break people. Cause them to go to extremes they normally wouldn’t.” He began to speak as if he read off a paper. “In the conquest to live, those who can’t hack it can turn ugly. It’s thought and believed the good will stick together and so will the bad. Post apocalyptic world survival training film number M.C. I. T. F. B-27.”

Dean nodded then jolted his views back to Carl when what was said finally seeped into his conscious. “Post apocalyptic world survival training ...”

“Film number M.C. I. T. F. B-27. Yes.”

“They showed you a film on how to survive in a post apocalyptic world?” Dean seemed shocked.

“Yep,” Carl said as he drove.

“How come I never saw that?”

“Simple. You’re Army.” Carl gave a snide grin to Dean and shifted gears. “I’m a Marine.”

**June 2nd - 11:00 a.m.
Interstate 80 - Bryan, Ohio**

Frank knew he was wearing down. He felt worse by the hour and the tell tale sign of his weakness came in the form of rest. It was the second time since day break that he had to stop for a while and sleep. So many car batteries had died from people sitting with heat on in their cars while in traffic, Frank couldn't find workable vehicle to even take him to the next bigger town.

He rolled from his lean against a car and brought himself to a stand. It was time to check the cars that lined the sides. He couldn't even look at the ones inside the traffic because getting them out into a clear spot wasn't going to happen.

Grabbing his gear, Frank moved on. Down the line, peeking in each car. If it didn't look like the fan for the heater was on, Frank opened the door and tried it. His luck wasn't with him. He began to think he was going to have to walk all the way to Connecticut. Until he spotted the green van. Like it was going to be another futile attempt, Frank peered in, saw the fan in the 'off' position, and opened the door. He had to turn his head from the smell that pelted him. Holding back any gag or salivation that crept upon him, Frank reached in, across the lap of the woman, grabbed the keys and turned the ignition. He grinned in excitement when it started. The grin left his face when he saw not only did he have to remove the dead body of the woman, but the bodies of three small children as well.

**June 2nd - 11:05 a.m.
New York City, New York**

Andrea looked down at her watch again. She had everything gathered and ready to go. Katie was asleep on a blanket beside her, while Denny stood by the railing looking over to the river. "Dennis, don't touch that railing. I won't jump in after you."

"I'll be careful."

How she started to miss Jake. Now that she had a moment just to sit, Andrea began to feel guilty, did he realize that she was there at the end? She wished she could go back to all the times they should have sat and talked, but both wandered their own ways. How very precious and short life is, and how very fast it can go.

“Andrea, did you hear that?”

“No, it was nothing, Denny.”

“No, I heard something.” Denny faced the other end of the bridge. “There!”

Andrea jumped to her feet, she could see the vehicle nearing. She picked up the baby and watched as it stopped. Joe emerged.

Denny pointed. “There’s the guy.”

Andrea smiled and breathed deeply when Joe walked toward them. With excitement she ran to him, clutching tightly to Katie and she embraced Joe with her one free arm. “I am so glad to see you.”

Joe returned the embrace. “I’m glad to see you guys, too.”

“Sweet Jesus.” Andrea kissed him on the cheek. “I can’t tell you how glad I am. I’m Andrea, this here’s Katie, and this little guy,” she rubbed Denny’s head as he stood next to her. “This is Denny.”

“Hi, Denny.” Joe extended his hand. “I’m Joe. Are you guys ready?”

Andrea looked back. “More than you know. My things are over there. I’ll go get them. Here.” She handed him Katie. “Hold her.”

Joe looked at little Katie. He cradled the baby tightly to his chest when memories of his own grandchildren came crashing to him.

Andrea huffed back slightly out of breath. “I have everything.” She paused when she noticed Joe holding the baby with his eyes closed. “Joe, are you all right?”

Joe nodded and returned Katie. “Yep. Let’s go.”

“Joe, where are we going?”

“Ashtonville Connecticut, there are some survivors there. Unless you want to go elsewhere?”

Andrea walked with Joe and Denny. “No, Ashtonville sounds great. We’ll love it there.”

“Good, we can use all the help we can get.”

“I’m a nurse.”

They arrived at the vehicle and Joe opened the door for her. “Even better.” After securing them in, he closed the door, got inside and without hesitating, began to drive off.

Andrea turned around in her seat as they took off. She looked back at New York City. As the city began to shrink from her view, Andrea closed her eyes, and quietly, in her mind, said goodbye. Though the only home she ever knew began to fade, the memories and the pain that left the city with her, never would.

**June 2nd - 11:11 a.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut**

Carl and Dean lucked out.

Having given the simple directions Joe wrote down to his father, and not remembering what it was, Dean and Carl found Elks Drive with little problem. They made the first right off of Main hoping to just circle around. Before they hit it, four blocks ahead and to the left they could see the abundance of cars. They drove up, and looked to their right. The new aid station could clearly be seen. It took up most of the street. They barely turned the corner and had to stop.

“Christ.” Carl explained. “Didn’t we just leave this?”

Dean only looked over to Carl as he tossed the truck in park. “It’s called a reoccurring nightmare.” He opened the truck door and hopped out.

Carl did the same. “I’m gonna take it that house down there is the one. That’s where they’re centered.” Carl pointed to Ellen’s home about seven houses away.

“I see Henry. Why don’t you start pulling the serum from the back and I’ll go get him.”

“Sounds good.” Carl moved to the back end of the truck as Dean walked toward Henry.

It took all of Jenny’s body weight to hold down the convulsing man while Ellen held a suction tube into his mouth. “He’s hurting me.” Jenny grunted.

“One more second.” Ellen struggled with the man’s jaw as much as Jenny did with the body. She felt the cot tip some and Ellen moved her body more into it. “Almost done. Then we’ll give him fifty milligrams of ...” Pulling back the tube and trying to turn the man’s head to the right, she saw Henry and two men walking toward the special isolation tent. “Jenny, who are they?”

Jenny saw Ellen twitched her head, she looked over her shoulder. “Don’t know.” She shrugged and leaned on the man. “Just please hurry.”

Ellen kept looking until they went into the tent, then slowly, more curious about what was happening in that tent, Ellen returned to helping the man.

Dean's soul felt about as heavy as it could. His disappointment was so crushing, he could barely breath. Inside the tent, with a painful expression, his head shook slowly back and forth, and it took everything he had to keep his eyes from closing. The cots were lined up neatly. On them people moaned, cried and some even thrashed about in their misery.

Henry spoke very soft and factual, "Their progress slowed down some after the first and second doses, but not a lot. Where they should have moved into the next phase last night, they moved into it this morning."

Dean let out a sigh. "They're still sick. No regression. No remission. It should have worked."

"You said you brought more," Henry said. "What about hitting them again, and the others outside."

"If the original serum didn't do it, I doubt very much the copy will. We can try though. We can try. I really thought ..." Lifting his hand, Dean let it drop and hit against his leg in defeat. "Damn it. I failed."

"Come with me, Dean." Henry motioned his head. "Please."

Dean, so lost, watched Henry walk from the tent. He started to follow but stopped to speak to Carl who still stood there gazing about. "Carl, you can ... you can start to inject these people if you want. I'll be right back." Letting out another breath of his disappointment, Dean left the tent.

She saw one of them again, this time walking toward her home with Henry. Ellen, pushing the suctioning machine to the next person, spun in a clockwise turn watching as they disappeared into her home. "Jenny," Ellen spoke in a daze. "Take over,. I think I know who that is." Ellen's hand slid slowly from the machine, and without saying anymore, her focus forward, she walked to her house.

Dean didn't understand why he followed Henry across the lawn of

sick into the quiet house. He just did.

Henry held on to the door knob of Taylor's closed door. "What did you say to me in Stamford? Do you remember?"

Dean shook his head, not really in the mood for guessing games. He shrugged.

"I'll tell you," Henry said. "You told me if you could save one person, just one person, it would all be worth it. Take a look, Dean, at the one person you saved." Henry turned the knob and pushed open the door.

Dean was immediately exposed to the sight of Taylor on the bed. Maggie sat beside her. William behind Maggie. Peaceful and quiet the little girl slept. Dean's mouth dropped open as he neared the bed. He looked to Taylor, then back to William. As he turned to question Henry, in through the door barreled Ellen at full speed.

She nearly knocked over Henry to get into the room. She skid to a complete stop and stared at Dean. Breathing heavy, she stepped slowly to him never taking her eyes off of him. "William, is this him?"

"That's my son," William answered.

With a shriek first, Ellen all but leaped at Dean, taking him by surprise and tossing her arms around him. Her thin arms gripped him and squeezed him as if she wasn't letting go. Dean's hands hesitated in his shock, then finally he gave up and returned the embrace.

"Thank you," Ellen spoke in his ear. "Oh, God, thank you."

"Dean." William decided to be the introducer. "This is Ellen."

"Nice to ..." Dean grunted through the hold. "Meet you."

Ellen, realizing she could very well be squeezing the life out of him, pulled back. "Sorry."

"Dino." William moved toward him. "This little one here." He indicated to Taylor. "Is Ellen's daughter."

Ellen grabbed hold of Dean's hand and tugged him closer to the bed. "Look what you've done." She told Dean, clenching his hand. "Right now, Dr. Hayes. You're my hero. Look at my little girl. I lost one child to this plague already. You stopped me from losing another. Twelve hours ago she was in the final stages of the plague."

"The final ..." Dean quickly looked at William. "Dad."

William shrugged. "Hey, it worked."

Dean smiled. "That it did." Dean felt his hand gain freedom from Ellen's hold and in total awe, eyes glued to Taylor, he reached down and laid his hand on Taylor's face. Cool skin. A short huffing laugh of disbelief escaped him as he raised his views to Ellen. Her smile made him smile. After

a sway of his head and another short amazement chuckle, Dean looked back down to Taylor. He hadn't failed completely after all.

**June 2nd - 12:05 p.m.
The White House - Washington, DC**

"Well? You didn't say." President George Hadly grew tired of waiting on a response from John Matoose. He watched the young corporal, barely over the legal drinking age, flip a page in the Garfield Project manuscript, then flip another. "John?"

John shrugged in a hem-haw way.

"You have to have an opinion."

"O.K." John swiveled his chair a little to face George. "Sir, the concept is good, don't get me wrong. Secured community. Built to be self sufficient. Secluded. The Garfield Project sounds good on paper but ..."

"It's a real place, John."

"Oh." John nodded and looked back to the manuscript. "But there's still one problem."

"What would that be?" George asked.

"Uh, out of the fifty locked down here to start things over with, we're the only ones left." John raised his eyebrows a few times figuring he informed the president of something he may not have thought about. "You and I." He pointed to George then himself. "We can't do it. We can't repopulate the world."

So annoyed, George grabbed the manuscript back. "What is your duty down here?"

John sat straight up. "To monitor and track life signals for diminishing or stabilization and inform you of the results ... sir."

"When you find one that isn't diminishing and has stabilized, you just let me know. O.K.?" George stood up. "That's where we'll find some of our fifty people."

"Oh." John nodded.

"Didn't think of that did you?"

"No."

"Now your job makes more sense doesn't it?"

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Back to work.” Giving a curl of his lip in disgust from the lack of common sense projected by John, and before he said something crass or insulting to the only other person he had left to talk to, George quietly left the room.

**June 2nd - 12:20 p.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut**

“Mommy?” Taylor opened her eyes and shifted them with some fright. She looked to Dean, a stranger to her. He sat on her bed examining her. “Mommy?”

“It’s all right, sweetie.” Ellen ran her hand over Taylor’s forehead as she stood on the other side of the bed. “This is Dr. Hayes.” Ellen looked at Dean. “Twenty-four hours ago she was so lethargic and delirious she couldn’t even speak.”

“Amazing.” Dean hung his stethoscope around his neck. “Has anyone charted her progress?”

“Right here.” Ellen lifted the clipboard from the night stand. “Charted every hour, doctor.”

Dean took it and flipped a page. He raised his eyes to Ellen. “We’ve been physical. You can call me Dean.”

“Dean.” Ellen gave a blushing smile. “I’ve also taken blood samples every two hours. They’re down stairs in the fridge.”

“Excellent.” Dean handed her back the chart and stood up. “Now if you can tell me how to get to that clinic you worked at so I can get set up and start trying to beat this virus.”

“I’ll show you.” Ellen leaned over Taylor, tucking her in more. “I’ll be back in a little bit,” she spoke softly to her daughter then kissed her. She led Dean to the door and stopped. “Do you think you can beat it?”

“You can say ...” Dean looked over his shoulder at Taylor then back to Ellen with a wink. “I’ve been given great incentive.”

“That’s all I needed to hear.” Checking on her daughter with a smile, Ellen then pulled the door closed.

“Sweet Jesus.” Andrea gasped as she stepped from Joe’s car on the edge of Elk’s drive. She closed her eyes to the noise. Noise that reminded her of all those zombie movies. Moans of pain, scary and loud carried through the air.

“It got ahead of us.” Joe told her, watching Denny dart from behind the car.

“I’ve been there.” Andrea told him. “I just wasn’t expecting to be there again.”

“You don’t have to help if it’s too ...”

“No.” Andrea held up her hand. “It’s our call. The Good Lord spared us.” She shook her head.

“Seems endless.”

“Yes it does, doesn’t it.” Andrea began to walk with Joe. “Unfortunately Mr. Slagel, from what I see and hear, you may be closer to the end than you think ...” Andrea slowed in her walking to face Joe. “Or want to be. Trust me.”

**June 2nd - 2:25 p.m.
Dairy, Ohio**

To make it home.

Frank was a man on a mission, he was also a man with the worst case of luck. He dove to the ground behind his open van door when a bullet seared by nearly hitting him when he stepped out. “Hold your fire!” Frank yelled. “Hold your fire!”

The man that called out in the distance had a country draw to him. He spoke slow, and sounded as if he were older. “I suggest ya’ best get on back in that vehicle and be off with you. Don’t need no sick people here.”

“I’m not sick.” Frank replied loudly, staying behind the van door.

“You look sick.”

“I have a head injury and I’m getting dizzy from all this hiding shit!” Frank blasted in anger. “Now let me stand up and don’t shoot at me!”

“If you’re sick, I’ll drop ya’ right away.”

“I’m not sick!”

“Just so you know. Stand up. But if you’re ...”

“I am not sick!” Frank stood up. “O.K.?”

Three people all toting rifles came into the clear focus of Frank center of that small town. They were old, not one of them younger than seventy. Two men and one woman. A man, average in height stepped forward. He was the one calling out. “You don’t look sick.”

“I’m not. Not with the flu anyway. Just a head injury. Which ...” Frank closed his eyes for a second when he felt his head throb. “Which by the way really hurts.” He began to rattle in a complaining manner. “I’m tired. I’m dizzy. I’m hungry. I need food. I need gas for the van. If you can just help me get these things, I’ll be on my way in ...” Before Frank had even finished his sentence, everything got to him. He didn’t sway, he didn’t give a bodily forewarning, he just dropped. For the second time in two days, Frank passed out, face forward to the hard ground.

The three elderly farmer looking folks stepped out of a falling Frank’s way. Then Dirk, the ring leader who had done all the talking, cautiously inched his way forward and poked Frank’s body with the shotgun to see if he were alive or dead.

**June 2nd - 3:47 p.m.
The White House - Washington, DC**

“Anything?” George asked John as he slid in the chair next to him in the monitoring room. He watched John stare at the computer, then realized why he received no response. The music blared so loudly through John’s headphones, that George found it distastefully loud. “John.” George reached out and tapped John on the shoulder.

John jumped in shock. He looked to his right, saw George and took off his headphone. “I’m sorry. Did you say something?”

“Anything new?”

“No. The signal is shrinking but definitely the strongest we’ve gotten in one area.”

“Good, keep me posted.” George stood up. “If it stays pretty strong, that little spot in Connecticut is where we’ll find the Garfield residents.”

“O.K.” John lifted his headphones and placed them back on.

George started to walk away, he paused to look at the corporal. How easy it would be for George to just sneak out on his own, find that spot in Connecticut, and leave John. But there was only one problem with that. John wasn’t smart. To George, ninety percent of the fun in leaving John behind would be John’s bitching about it. But George firmly believed John wasn’t bright enough to notice he was left behind.

June 2nd - 4:00 p.m.
Dairy, Ohio

A wet rag graced across Frank’s forehead as he laid on the rose pattern couch. He opened his eyes with a grunt and had to wonder if he was Kansas. The three elderly farm people stared at him as if he were an alien.

“I have to get out of here.” Frank grunted as he tried to sit up.

Such strength that little old lady, Thelma, had. She pushed him right back down. “No you don’t. You really should go anywhere. Not with your head like that. Wait ‘till morning. Better chance you won’t crash when you pass out driving.”

Frank tried to move again. “Why is my body so sore?”

Dirk snickered.

Stan, the third, person back handed. “Stop that.”

“Sorry.” Dirk snorted one more laugh out.

“What?” Frank asked confused.

“Well.” Dirk answered. “Probably you’re sore from us bringing you in here. Had to use a plow pull on you.”

“A plow pull.” Frank’s reddened eyes widened.

“Yep.” Dirk nodded. “Attached one of them carts the mechanics use to slide under cars.” Another snicker escaped him. “You’re a big guy. Dropped you twice.”

“Shit.” Frank wanted to say worse but he was being respectful.

Stan reached out and gave Frank a friendly tap. “Watch the language. There’s a lady present.”

Dirk chuckled. “Where.”

“Aw.” Thelma whined. “Now why ya got ta go and be all nasty and

rude with me.”

“I ain’t being nasty and rude.” Dirk replied. “I’s being honest.”

“Oh my God.” Frank’s eyes rolled and he plopped backwards on the couch. It was a dream to him. It had to be a dream. There was no way, with all that was happening, he was stuck in the situation he was. He closed his eyes hoping to wake up to something sane. Maybe in a highway somewhere. Frank’s head pounded and anywhere else was better than that living room where the three elderly people bickered loudly and insidiously right above his aching head.

**June 2nd - 4:32 p.m.
Ashtonville, Connecticut**

“Johnny. Back in the house!” Joe barked to his grandson as he held his arm out in a point and bodily blocked the woman who had so violently thrashed and convulsed, she flew off the cot, landed near Johnny’s feet and cracked open her skull. “Now.” Joe ordered. To him it had reached the point that Johnny should no longer watch.

Johnny backed up in horror. His eye stayed glue and peering down to the river of blood that seeped from the woman’s head and flowed around and through Joe’s feet. He shook a little, spun and flew, running right into William. Not looking back, Johnny moved away from William and kept on running.

William knew he was too late to aid Joe with that woman. The syringe he intended on using was still clenched in his hand. He shifted his eyes around the people who all seemed to hit their final stage of the virus at the same time. Raising up his views, William looked to Joe. “I’ll get the others. It’s time.”

With pride, Andrea stood over Taylor’s bed, her eyes having a hard time moving from the little girl. She gripped Dean’s hand. “Catherine would be so proud to know her efforts were not in vain.”

“They certainly weren’t.”

“I’ll tell you, Dr. Hayes.” Andrea shook her head with a pleased look. “There may be a world of hurt outside of this house. But there is such an abundance of hope in this room, it makes you not want to leave it.”

Henry’s voice was not one they expected to hear. With a rush he spoke. “You *are* going to have to leave. Dean, your dad says he needs you both, now. It’s ... it’s falling apart.”

As Henry flew back out of the room, Dean slid his hand from Andrea’s and chased him out. Andrea took a second, closed her eyes, laid her hand on Taylor and prayed. Prayed to have the strength she needed to face what she hoped would be her last round in the battle of the virus.

The first box emptied, the second, then the third. A mountain of vials formed on the medication table and William dumped yet another box filled with Morphine. “O.K. people.” He called out. “Grab it.” He spoke as the hands reached in. “Area four is where we’ll start. That’s where it’s happening worst. Three cc’s. And try to conserve on needles because we still have areas two and three to deal with. They’re next. Quickly now. Let’s go.”

Ellen moved slower than everyone else. They all hustled, she didn’t. Stuffing four vials in her pockets, Ellen lifted another and moved toward area four as she stared at it.

Joe had all he needed. In his rush by Ellen, he bumped her, spun backwards and grabbed her arm. “You all right?”

Ellen nodded, eyes wide as she walked. She looked down to the vial then back up to Joe who was far ahead of her. “My God ...” She swallowed. “We’re killing them.”

5:15 p.m.

All they could do was give the medication needed to the patients and help them to their peace. Peace that they waited far too long for. The quaint, quiet street in Ashtonville, once with its perfectly maintained lawns, became a war zone from hell and the workers were the soldiers. The front lines were the ill and their armament was the morphine. There was no shield from injury

for those who worked with diligence to aid the sick. Because nothing could protect the hearts that hurt and broke with each person that passed away. In the section they called area four where the agony cried out, the beginning of the war raged with vengeance.

Happy children's music played loudly in Taylor's room. Too loud for Maggie's liking, but she needed something to block out the noise that carried through from the outside. Noise Taylor didn't need to hear, or Johnny as he stayed in that room as well. There were sounds of pain and crying. The yelling for help by the workers. Maggie didn't have to look out the window to know what was going on. By what she heard and what she knew in her heart, outside, it was without any uncertainty ... the end.

Miguel never stopped blessing himself with the sign of the cross. Nor did he stop fumbling with each person he helped. It didn't get easier for him, he knew it never would. Grabbing another vial, Miguel turned from a cot where a woman laid, to the next one behind him. He briefly closed his eyes and shook as he tried to lift the syringe. He saw the child laying before him, shaking, convulsing and near his death. How much pain the little boy looked in and how much relief from that pain Miguel knew he could give. But he still had a hard time. Syringe filled, he took hold of the boy's thigh but couldn't bring himself to inject the needle.

In her move to another patient, Andrea witnessed Miguel and his struggles. Seeing the child and seeing Miguel, Andrea stepped toward that cot. She laid a gentle hand over Miguel's trembling one, gave him a look of reassurance then took the syringe from his hand.

Miguel stepped back and turned away. He didn't have to look to know Andrea had completed the task. The child stopped screaming out.

Another empty vial sailed down and crashed to the concrete, shattering at Ellen's feet. She shook her head, grabbed another vial, lifted it high and plunged a syringe into it. She slipped the vial into her pocket and leaned her stomach on the cot before her. Syringe clenched tightly in her teeth, she readied to inject the man laying in front of her. He gripped to the edges of the cot convulsing. Before Ellen could inject him, he kicked into

high gear thrashing violent and out of control. The cot tipped from his body weight and it fell Ellen's way. The grunting of her efforts to stop the man from falling to the ground was heard by Dean who worked behind her.

Quickly Dean turned around, jumping to her aid, and bringing the cot upright and steady. He stayed there, holding the man for Ellen.

She removed the syringe from her mouth, and without hesitation injected the man. She too leaned her weight on him until seconds later he stopped moving. Ellen paused with her eyes closed.

Dean had to move on. There was no hesitation for any of the workers. Backing up to return to the patients, he watched Ellen stand up right from her lean. "You O.K.?" he asked, laying his hand on her back.

Ellen only nodded.

Dean gave one more look to Ellen, and he moved away, his hand slid across her as he did so.

Emptiness. Total emptiness was what Ellen felt.

Whether it was warranted or not, she had to stop. How many did she inject. Give peace to ... kill. She swallowed the lump that formed in her throat as she backed away from the scene with her heart beating so strongly. She swayed her body away and glanced back to her house which seemed so far in the distance. At least in her home there was a ray of light. She needed to see that before going on.

Turning back to the horror in which she just wanted to run from, Ellen slowly slid her hand across her dirty and sweaty face, smearing in the evidence of her hard work as she finally took in the view before her. If it was even possible to breathe at that moment, Ellen lost her breath. Everybody worked fast and with desperation on someone. They moved about, trying to stay strong. There were more ill than workers. It was loud. So loud. Chaotic. And in the distance, over the hillside, Ellen saw the destiny of the world she loved and watched die. The thick black smoke of burning bodies.

Twelve Hours Later ...

The music finally stopped playing in Taylor's room. Maggie may have stayed at Taylor's bedside, but she stayed awake doing her part, wading through the nightmare with everyone else.

So quiet. The only sounds in the bedroom were Taylor and Johnny's

little huffs of sleep breath. Maggie held off going to that window. She knew what she would witness. Slowly, arms folded close to her she walked to the tiny window that faced outside the side of the house. She stood tight against the wall to get a full view, parting the curtain as she did. The sun that began to shine with an orange cast, lit up the truth.

Maggie's head dropped.

The last of the moans of sickness had disappeared. No more coughing, gagging, chocking, screaming. No more plague in Ashtonville. The small town fought from the silent beginning until the thunderous end four days later.

They ran out of coverings, sheets, body bags or blankets. Whatever they could, they used to cover the bodies. Andrea flapped the last sheet she had over the three cots she had pushed together. She wiped the sweat from her brow, made sure they were covered completely and then, exhausted she moved away. There would be no more illness for her to face only the effects of a destructor that swept through civilization so fast no one had time to think. Not even Andrea, and that was fine with her. Because she knew in the aftermath of it all, all she would have time to do, *was* think.

The moment he witnessed the last person to die, Joe went into the house to kiss Johnny and Taylor in a parental gratefulness. But he returned outside. He passed Andrea on his way to find Ellen. He gave the woman he met less than a day before, the peaceful look of a lifetime friend. And in a sense all of them, strangers twenty-four hours earlier, had united in a bond that no one could ever break. William looked exhausted, but he trudged on. Preparing for what as he described a the worst part ... cleaning up. Henry, Miguel and Jonas helped. Joe saw Carl carrying bodies to a pile, and Jenny crying as she made her way back to Ellen's house. But where was Ellen?

Out from the tent they had set up separately, Ellen emerged with Dean behind her. Joe walked right to her. Silently he placed his arm around her pulling Ellen tight to him. In her hold of Joe, she rested her head against his chest as they moved toward her home. Ellen lifted her head once and that was to look at Dean who walked quickly by her and Joe. Dean glanced at Ellen in his pass of her, making eye contact in a saddened defeated way before he continued on in his walk.

Holding tight to Joe, Ellen stopped with him on the porch of her home. They turned once before going inside to look at all that had happened and how it formed of a carpet that spread out everywhere for as far as they could see.

They knew the sun would rise fully and another day would start. There was no stopping that. They knew that everything they walked away from in the dawn of the first day-after, would still be there when they finished resting. To them, walking from the house and facing all that they fought and lost would not be the hardest part. The hardest part was yet to come and that was ... continuing on.

THE GATHERING

*One person or two,
How many will be?
Will they all come together?
Or alone choose to be.*

DAY SIX

Wednesday, June 3rd
Washington, DC

George gathered the last of the small amount of belongings he had decided to take with him on his journey. He zippered up the green duffel bag and sat on his bed.

“Sir.” John Matoose opened the bedroom door. “I gave it one more check. The signal is still there. So if you still want to go?”

“I do, and you don’t call me ‘sir,’ I’ll call you ‘John,’ you call me ‘George,’ is that good?”

“Yes, George.”

“Do you have your gear all ready?”

“Yes, I do.” John still stood in the doorway.

“Good, good, come on in, John, have a seat. I’d like to have a word with you.”

Nervously, John pulled up a chair next to the bed and sat down. “What is it?”

“Are you sure you are wanting to join me? I mean, you don’t want to search for your family anymore?”

John shook his head. “No. Both my folks are gone, so unless you don’t want me to come, I’m with you. But if I might ask, what is our plan? Are we just going to stop off at this town and move on, or what?”

“John, you were monitoring the satellites. You watched the signs of life slowly disappear. Now what we have in Connecticut what we think is a group of people, and these people are gonna try to go on with their lives. That’s what I want to do, and if they’ll have us, we’ll work with them, and help them. I’m not the President anymore John, I am merely one of the very few survivors. I want to join others.”

“Me, too, my stuff is outside the door. I have a car downstairs. So, whenever you’re ready.”

“I’m ready,” George grabbed his duffel bag and began to leave the bedroom.

“Sir, the Garfield manual?”

George went back to the bed and retrieved it. "This will come in handy. This has a lot of vital information if they want it."

"You're not gonna come right out and tell them?"

"Nope, I'm not the President, and I don't want these people thinking I'm acting like one either." George stopped and checked himself out at his dressing mirror. He straightened his Buckeye State sweatshirt. "Oops, forgot one more thing." He reached to the table and grabbed his green baseball cap and placed it on. "My lucky hat, wore it on election day."

"I remember." John opened the door. "Shall we?"

"We shall." George, carrying his own bags for the first time in a while, followed John as he led him out of the White house.

Ashtonville, Connecticut

A dump truck was parked half full with bodies three doors up from Ellen's home. A second truck pulled up, squealing loudly right alongside the first one. Carl stepped out and immediately lifted his Vicks Vapor rub laced mask around his nose. For two hours they had been piling bodies, getting them positioned to place them in the truck and take them to where they would burn them.

Like an assembly line, Henry and Jonas tossed a body in the truck and moved back to the pile. Behind them, Joe and Miguel hoisted one in.

Joe had to take a breather. With his forearm he wiped his sweaty face. "We have to try to get this done people." Joe spoke loudly. "It's gonna be a scorcher today." He looked to Henry who walked by him. "And no comments about the weather Henry."

Henry tossed his hands up clueless as to why Joe had said that. He couldn't help it he was informed about meteorology.

Joe adjusted his face mask and moved to the pile with Miguel. Just as he bent down to grab hold of the other end of the body he saw Dean, clean, walking up the street with folders. "Must be nice." Joe said sarcastically to Dean head toward Ellen's. "You know, being the brilliant scientist."

"Uh ..." Dean smiled. "Yeah, it is."

"So you don't plan on lending us a hand?"

"Um, not right now." Dean held up his folders, smiled and kept on walking.

Joe whistled, short and high pitched. “Hey!”

Dean stopped and turned around to face Joe. “Yes?”

“Don’t get too caught up. You said you’d lend a hand. I made an agenda. You’ve been assigned.”

“You told me before we went to sleep,” Dean said.

“Just reminding you. One hour. Got that? Be back. One ... hour.”

Dean lifted his hand in a wave and continued to walk.

“Arrogance.” Joe complained as he lifted the body.

Carl on his way to the body pile, saw Joe grunt and grumble his ‘Dean’ comment. “He was an officer.” Carl motioned his head as he bent down for a body.

Joe paused, bobbed his head in an ‘well, yeah, you have a point’ fashion and then carried the body with Miguel to the truck.

With a raised fist, Dean paused before knocking on the archway to Taylor’s room. He shook his head when Joe barking out a gripe to Henry carried from outside. “Hey,” he called into the room as he knocked once. He smiled at Ellen who was fluffing Taylor’s pillows.

“Hey.” Ellen smiled back.

“Boy, Joe is ...” Dean shook his head. “Joe’s tough out there.”

Ellen smiled. “Joe tends to take control of every situation. He does good.”

“Speaking of good. How’s our girl today?” Dean smiled at Taylor who slept.

“Our girl is doing fine.”

“Excellent. I ran those test. Let’s sit.” Dean extended his arm with a point to the mini table in the corner. He waited for Ellen to walk there and he joined her, sitting in the tiny chairs. He moved some of the tea party set, laid the folder on the table and scooted his chair closer to Ellen. “O.K., ready?” He waited for Ellen to nod. “The virus is definitely stalled.” Dean felt Ellen’s entire body release her breath of anticipation. She leaned some into him as she let out her relief when she heard that. “It’s no weaker. But ... it’s no stronger.” He made eye contact with her. “It’s idle right now. Which is good. Very good. Because we now have to try to kill it. My focus will be on that and bringing down her fever. We need her strong.”

“I understand that. What’s the plan of action today.”

Dean glanced at his watch. “Fever reduction. I want to head to the

clinic before you and I do our town duty.”

Ellen cringed. “Body clean up. Can’t we get out of it?”

Joe’s, “Christ no, you can’t get out of it.” Rang in the room.

Ellen jolted. “Joe.”

Dean looked at his watch again., “You said we had an hour. It’s only been seven minutes.”

“I know what I said. But I need one of you, because the rest of us are taking off and I want to explain what you two are doing.”

At the same time, Ellen and Dean both stood from their too small seats.

There was no doubt in Ellen’s mind who would go, she walked toward Joe. “You stay here, Dean. I’ll go. You work on the virus.”

“You sure?” Dean bent down to the table and closed the folder.

“Positive.” She replied.

Joe cleared his throat and pointed down. “I’m heading to the kitchen. Mind if I snatch up that bag of pork rinds you bought me? I’m hungry. I want to get something in my stomach.”

“No, not at all.” Ellen replied. “Go on. I’ll be right there. Oh! There’s also some microwave burgers in the fridge. Might as well eat them up. We’ll pack ‘em up for the guys.”

“Sounds good. Thanks.” Joe winked and started to leave.

“Whoa. Wait.” Dean called out. “It’s nine in the morning. Burgers. Pork rinds?”

“And your point?” Joe asked. “That’s nothing compared to some of the stuff I eat.”

Dean shook his head. “Burgers and pork rinds. You smoke. Joe, God ... your cholesterol alone ...”

“Don’t care. I beat the virus, didn’t I? See you downstairs, Ellen.” Joe walked away.

Ellen chuckled. “Joe. He’s funny. OK, I’m heading out. Good luck. I’ll ...”

“Ellen,” Dean called her as he lifted the folder. “Before you go. There are some things I’d like to try and give to Taylor. Would you like me to explain them so you feel comfortable about me working with her?”

“No.” Ellen shook her head slowly. “No, you do what you need to do to save my daughter.” She glanced at Taylor then back to Dean. “She’s made it this far because of you. Believe me when I say, I trust you.”

With a close mouth, peaceful look, Dean smiled to Ellen as her and Joe left. He turned back around to Taylor, knowing Ellen hadn’t a clue how

much more of a charge her words gave to him.

Andrew's Air Force Base - Washington, DC

In the open side door of the helicopter, George, sunglasses perched on top of his head, peered into his briefcase, checking through the papers he had. He stepped over when John loaded another bag in.

"Sir."

"Yes." George readied to close the briefcase.

"Are you absolutely sure you know how to fly this thing?"

"You know, it's comments like that, that really tell me you weren't old enough to vote when I first got elected." George, in a huff, slammed his briefcase. "Finish loading this bird, we have a small town to find." He started to walk away and he stopped to look back at John. "If I don't crash and cause us to burn on the way there." He raised his eyebrow to a panicked looking John, grunted then, briefcase in hand, moved to the pilot's door.

Dairy, Ohio

They had argued all night and seeped into Frank's dreams, but the three folks from the small farming town did something else. They helped him get his strength back. By insisting he didn't leave, Frank got the rest he needed and breakfast.

He sat around Thelma's table, a huge plate of eggs before him. Frank scoffed them down, shoveling them into his mouth. "Thank you so much, ma'am." Frank said, wiped his mouth and prepared to eat more. "I swear I haven't eaten since Saturday."

"No wonder you keep passing out," Thelma replied.

Stan who was stirring his coffee, pointed his spoon at Frank. "He's got one of them concussion, that's why he keeps passing out. Then again, if he don't slow down that eating, he'll vomit. Right Dirk?"

"Right." Dirk replied. "Don't want to be vomiting. Got yourself a

long ways to go. Be an awful shame if you vomited the whole way.” He swayed his head to Stan. “Seen enough of that vomiting yesterday?”

Thelma gasped. “Who’d you see vomiting yesterday?”

“Ev-body that died.” Dirk nodded.

“Oh ya did not.” Thelma quipped. “Ya hid like an old fool through the whole plague. Ev-body said, ‘Where’s that ol Dirk Jefferson? Ain’t he gonna help’ I had to tell em you died too.”

Frank peered up from his marathon eating. He smiled at the three that seemingly knew each other forever. Their arguing started again, but it didn’t bother Frank. His head hurt less, he was eating, he felt better and he actually liked the trio.

Ashtonville, Connecticut

“Careful, Ellen, you’ll drop her.” Dean hollered as they made their way down a narrow stairwell with the body of a woman.

“So what Dean, she’s dead.” Ellen clumsily fumbled. The protective gear she wore was much too big.

“Have a little respect.”

“Please.” Ellen sighed in relief as they reached the outside. “Come on, a little more to the truck.”

“Stop moving so fast. I’m losing my grip on her head, she must weigh two hundred pounds.”

“One eighty six, to be exact.” Ellen stopped at the small pick-up truck she and Dean had. “Ready? One, two, three.”

They swung the woman’s body towards the back end of the truck. Dean’s half barely made it to the open gate, while Ellen’s half of the body flopped to the ground.

“Shit.” Dean grabbed the legs. “Help me.”

Ellen helped him lift the rest of the woman’s body into the back of the truck

“How did you know her weight?”

Ellen walked away from the truck and removed her mask. “Mrs. Winefield, she was a patient, always whining about her bill. God, I hated her.”

“Was there anyone you liked in this town?” Dean removed his mask and looked up to the sky quickly.

“What is it?”

“Shh, listen.”

“What?” Ellen looked up.

“Sounds like a helicopter.” Dean scanned the sky. “Look, there it is.”

They had no exact location of where the life signal came from, so George had to rely on John with binoculars to visually see the people moving about. At first they thought it would be difficult seeing how the life signal wasn’t that strong. There had to be at least ten in a one mile area. And how bleak that seemed considering how many people use to live in the United States of America.

Ten people would have been hard to spot. They may have flew over Ashtonville several times had it not been for the smoke signal. Before they even arrived they saw the smoke rising to them. Signifying to them, in a dead world, someone had to be alive to be burning those bodies.

“There.” John lowered his binoculars as they flew over the small town.

George tilted the helicopter, then leaned his body to view. “Looks like they’re cleaning up. I’ll find a place to land.” Straightening up the bird, George veered right.

Joe had taken the dump truck containing tents and cots, and drove to where it looked like the chopper was lowering. Just before the main street of town right where the four line highway turned to two, is where they started to land. They actually arrived nearer to Ellen’s street. He thought he saw the insignia on the chopper door as the bird lowered to the ground, and as soon as Joe stepped from the truck, and the helicopter set down on the ground, Joe knew. “I’ll be goddamned.”

Waiting for the engines to stop, Joe slowly made his way to the helicopter as the two men emerged.

“Hello!” George waved.

Joe approached him. “Joe Slagel.” He extended his hand.

George removed his sun glasses, and shook Joe’s hand. “George Hadly, nice to meet you, and this is my friend John Matoose.”

Joe shook John’s hand but never took his eyes off of George. “You’re ...”

“Please.” George cut him off. “We just wanted to join a group of survivors. We’re willing to help out and do what ever you folks are doing. Whatever skills John and I have are at your service. We just want to blend in, just think of us as two people who happened upon you.”

“Two people who made one helluva entrance.” Joe was stunned.

George grabbed his bag and briefcase which John had set down next to him. “We noticed from the air that you people are cleaning up. If you let us know where we can put our stuff, we’ll be happy to help out.”

Joe began to walk with George and John. “We can take it to my daughter’s house for now, I’m sure everyone’s gonna want to meet you. Might as well, get that out of the way.”

George adjusted his bag. “No problem, just show us the where we go.”

Joe led them to a yard.. “We’re actually over on this street here.”

As they made there way onto Elks Street, they stopped when Ellen and Dean screeched up in the red pickup truck.

“Joe.” Ellen jumped from the truck, and Dean ran behind her. “We saw a helicopter.” Out of breath she stopped when she saw George and John. “I guess they landed.”

“Ellen, Dean, this is George and John.” Joe introduced them.

Ellen shook their hands. “Nice of you to join us, are you staying on?”

“Yes, we are.” George answered.

Dean extended his hand to them. “Dean Hayes. You know George you look awfully familiar. Have we ever met?” With his free hand Dean waved his index finger back and forth.

George shook his head no.

Joe looked over Dean’s shoulder to the truck that sat parked in the middle of the street. “Jesus Christ, did you two bring bodies on this street? You know that there are kids here. Get that out of here, now.”

“Sorry.” Dean backed up slowly. “We’re moving.”

“Come right back.” Joe instructed. “I’m sure everyone is anxious to meet these gentleman so we’re getting it out of the way.”

“Got it.” Ellen gave a thumbs up. “Nice to meet you, George and John, see you in a few.” She walked slowly with Dean. “You know Dean there is something really familiar about that George guy.”

“Maybe he’s famous.”

“I know. He looks like the President.”

“No he doesn’t.” Dean reached the truck.

Joe heard this as he walked by the pair, he shook his head, whispered ‘idiots’, and kept the lead to Ellen’s house

“I told you he was the President,” Ellen whispered to Dean in her dining room where everyone gathered.

“No,” Dean corrected. “You said he looked like him, you didn’t say he was.” Dean caught glimpse of the disgruntled look Joe gave them as he passed. He turned to Ellen. “What was that look for that Joe just gave.”

“Oh,” Ellen said nonchalantly. “That’s the look he gives when he wants to call us a name.”

“Really? Why would he want to call us names?”

Ellen only shrugged.

“Thank you.” George smiled as he looked up to Andrea when she poured another cup of coffee for him. He peered to everyone that had gathered in Ellen’s dining room, waiting and anxious to talk to him. He sipped his coffee and set down the cup. “And the air safe room worked for just John and myself.”

Dean shook his head. “No. You’re immune. If you weren’t, the virus would have hit you like a bomb the second you breathed in the air. Ask Henry. We saw this baby born at the aid station, and the second the baby took a breath he died instant ...”

William cleared his throat. “Dean.”

“Sorry.” Dean stopped talking.

It really didn’t matter to Joe why George survived, he had another question on his mind. “So why did you drop in on us?”

“Looking for life.” George answered. “We tracked the strongest signal we got. That’s you folks. We saw you cleaning up and we’d be more than happy to lend a hand.”

“We can use the hands.” Joe said. “We’re working on this street first because this is where everyone ended up. Plus we’d like to not have to sleep on my daughter’s floor anymore.” He looked at his watch. “And we don’t want to waste day light hours. We can all talk later.”

“I’ve no problem with that.” George finished off his coffee and stood up.

Ellen forged her way forward with a smile on her face. “I just wanted

to let you know, it's a great honor to have you here." She extended her hand to him. "I voted for you both times."

Henry's "I didn't" caused everyone to swing their views his way. Henry shrugged. "What? I'm a citizen. I voted."

Joe only grunted. "Let's just finish our work." He looked cross at Henry. "Then we can all talk or insult President Hadly later."

Henry was somewhat baffled as everyone filed out of the dining room one by one giving him glares he felt he didn't deserve. "I didn't vote for him." He tossed his hands up, after Dean, the final one out gave a finishing look. Henry stood alone. And then Henry shrugged it off and followed the pack out.

Dairy, Ohio

Frank swore he would always remember the town of Dairy. Nor would he forget the three people that helped him get together what he needed to try to make it home. A motorcycle, food, and most of all rest to make the trip. Hating to leave them behind, and vowing to return, Frank lifted his hand high in a wave to Dirk, Stan and Thelma, as he rode onward from that deserted street and headed home.

Harmer, Connecticut

"Now why exactly are we scavenging these?" John Matoose asked as he and Henry together lugged a small generator to the truck. They had it parked on the walk in front of a Sears and Roebuck Store.

"Joe said we'll need them." Henry carefully helped John lift it into the back of the pick up. There were at least twelve in there already.

"So why is he making us get them?"

"Joe's a tyrant like that." Henry said and wiped his hands off on the side of his pants. "He'll get along good with your president buddy."

"Joe did seem kind of gruff."

“Very,” Henry stated. “But I bet he has a plan. He has a plan about these generators. He said we’ll need power soon.” He shrugged. “I’m gonna go along with him. I mean, what else do I have to do.”

“True.” John looked into the back of the truck. “Well, that was the last generator from here. Do we need anything else before we move on.”

“Gas cans.” Henry stated.

“I saw some inside.” John pointed.

“Actually I was thinking we’d pick those up at K-Mart.”

“Why?” John asked as he moved toward Sears.

“They’re cheaper there.” Henry saw John didn’t really appreciate his humor. Snickering first as John headed back to Sears, Henry then followed.

Ashtonville, Connecticut

Never one to notice what didn’t pertain to him, Dean didn’t notice what Andrea, Maggie and Jenny were doing in Ellen’s kitchen. He merely walked in the back door, smiled a polite hello to the three women and proceeded to get a glass of water. It was when he filled the glass up to take outside with him that he saw the oddness of it. On the table before them and on the floor surrounding them were piles and stacks of frozen meat. Dean had to laugh. “What did you guys do? Raid every refrigerator in town.”

“Almost.” Andrea answered never noticing Dean’s sarcasm. “Joe told us to. He’s hooking up a couple extra freezers to the generators and we’re storing it so we can have meat.” She looked at her female companions as she tossed a package of ground chuck into the ground meat pile. “Joe says it won’t be long before the power is gone.”

The corner of Dean’s mouth raised. “Now really. How does Joe know?” He only received shrugs from the three women, and deciding to take the front way out, Dean left the kitchen with his glass of water.

He had every intention of walking straight down the hall through the foyer and out the front door. He even passed the living room intending on doing so. But he saw Ellen in there, alone, and Dean stopped walking.

Setting down his water on an end table in his entrance into the living room, Dean kept his eyes on Ellen. She stood before the fire place, back to him. Her hands were folded on the mantel, and her chin rested on them as she stared at the long line of photographs there. Quietly and hoping he

wasn't an unwanted intrusion, Dean stood next to her. He spoke softly. "Hey. Is that your son?" He got a sad nod from Ellen as she kept staring at the photograph he pointed to. "This ...?" Dean moved his point to another picture. One of a man. "That has to be Josh's dad. They look alike."

"No." Ellen answered. "That's my brother. There are no pictures of Peter up here. We weren't exactly ..." Ellen looked at Dean. "The happy couple."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. We ... we made our own problems. I never focused on our marriage or anything else for that matter." She tilted her head and rested her cheek on her hands. "But working with you to help Taylor is the first time in my life I truly focused on anything. Bet you never had that problem."

"Focusing?" Dean shook his head. "No." He inched closer to her and dropped his voice. "But I can honestly say, I now have great reason for the focus. Your eyes." He saw the odd look Ellen gave him and felt the heat of the slight embarrassment hit him. "Let me explain." He lifted his hand slightly with a nervous smile. "Despite all that I've done in my life, you're the first person to ever look at me with so much faith. No one has ever done that. And that means a lot."

Ellen's eyes lowered in a blush. Instead of ruining a complement she rather enjoyed getting by saying something to down play Dean's words, Ellen said nothing. She returned her stare back to the pictures.

8:22 p.m. - Ashtonville, Connecticut

In all the years Joe visited Ashtonville, for all the times he was there, he never noticed that hillside east of the small town. Until that evening as he walked home with Johnny. The darkening sky, still with a hint of dusk, lit up with the flames that roared on top of that hill. The smoke rose up preparing to create the clouds that would darken their next day. But clouds or no clouds, Joe knew not matter what, the next day would be dark. It was another day of the exhausting, same thing. Elks Drive may have been cleaned up and cleared, but the rest of Ashtonville wasn't.

Ellen wore a pair of bigger khaki shorts and a white long tee shirt after her shower. Lighter clothing for an evening that seemed too hot for the time of year that it was. She felt fresher. So much of her still damp that her clothing stuck to parts of her body. Combing her wet hair she heard the strange sound of high pitch voices coming from her home. Setting down her brush on her dresser, she walked out and stopped when she got to Taylor's room. She leaned in the doorway, watching as Henry sat by Taylor. He held two Barbie dolls in her view and had them bickering while Taylor weakly giggled.

"No." Henry had the brunette Barbie hit the blonde. "I hate you. No. I hate you. You're always going after Ken. Ken is mine. No mine. No mine. No ..."

The Barbie Dolls dropped from his hand when he noticed Ellen standing there. "El, I'm sorry. I was just ..."

"Don't stop." Ellen told him. "You go on. She's smiling. Please."

"Are you sure?" Henry asked.

"Positive."

"Thanks." Henry picked the dolls back up.

Ellen stayed there watching. It wasn't Henry's show she didn't want to miss. It was the glowing look on her daughter's face. A smile and wellness Ellen thought she'd never see again on Taylor, and Ellen swore she would enjoy watching every single second of it.

Joe Slagel never like the Jamieson family. He always thought they were pompous, arrogant and flaunted their money too much. They weren't nice people even though they thought they were and they looked down their nose at Ellen. Joe didn't like them. But he liked their house. And he confiscated it as his own, the second they finished cleaning up the street.

He put Johnny to bed, and fixed coffee for his company that evening. Bringing the two mugs into the large oak dining room, Joe set a mug in front of George, then sat at the table next to him.

George nodded in acknowledgment, never taking his folded hands from on the top of the bound manuscript.

"Now." Joe spoke. "I'm a smart man. So now it's just you and me. You wanna tell me the real reason you sought us out and don't tell me it was just to clean up bodies."

"No." George smiled and pushed the manuscript Joe's way. "Here."

"The Garfield project?" Joe read the title.

“Yes.” George said. “In 1972, the United States Government planned ahead for an event like our virus. Extinction by plague. This is the first step in starting over. I want to go there.” George spoke with passion. “I want to do this. But ...” He sat back. “I can’t do it alone. It needs run, stocked and ... it needs people.”

“Hence the strongest life signal you found.”

“Exactly. Read. I think you’ll find it interesting.”

Joe flipped open the first page to the thick manuscript. He felt like he was sitting with his son, Hal in that dining room. Flashbacks of when Hal, the writer, used to give Joe something of his to read and sit there while Joe read it. But despite the fact that George watched him and looked for signs of perked interest, Joe shifted his chair, placed his back to George and read.

Scranton, Pennsylvania

He knew he wasn’t that far from home, but Frank knew he had to stop. He set up a small fire where he parked his motorcycle. He sat on a rolled out sleeping bag, a box of Twinkie’s and an M. R. E. beside him. Illuminated by the fire was the photograph Frank held in his hand. A picture of his four children. In the photo, Johnny held the baby Frank barely got to know. He wondered if he would ever know her. Would all, if any, be alive when he arrived home? He could only hope and pray with all his heart, his children were spared. After all, he was. Maybe that was why he stopped for the night. So much enthusiasm and focusing went into going home, so little thought went into what he would find when he got there. Besides using the night to rest for his arrival home, Frank used the night to mentally prepare and brace himself for what he could possible find out.

Ashtonville, Connecticut

Seven times? William shook his head, rolled his eyes and glanced back

down to the book he read as he sat in the easy chair of the home two doors down and across from Ellen's. "Dean. Stop it," he spoke through his reading.

"Stop what?" Dean ran his fingers through his wet hair. "Dad?" He saw what his father read. "*Of Mice and Men*?"

"What's wrong with it?" William turned a page.

"Is that the only book you read?"

"It's the book I love." William, so calm, lifted his views over his half square glasses, watched Dean move about, then he looked back down to the page. "You're pacing."

"I'm bored."

"You're anxious."

"I'm not."

"You are," William said. "Go."

"No."

"Why?"

"It's late."

"Is the light on?" William asked as he turned another page.

Dean peeked out the window.

"You really need to look?"

"Yes." Dean looked.

"Is it on?"

"Yes."

"Go." William spoke monotone.

"Are you sure?"

"It's fine."

"I'll go."

"Go."

"Thanks. Night." Dean moved quickly from the living room to the foyer.

The second William heard the front door slam, he slid more comfortably and relaxed into his chair. "Thank God." He flipped another page.

Ellen thought about going back down to her living room and turning off the lights. But she figured, what was the use. With the tea party chair at Taylor's bedside, Ellen set the huge unlit candle and matches on the night stand. She prepared to sit on the chair that kept her face to face with Taylor,

but before she sat, she turned to the knock on the archway. “Dean.”

“Hi.” He stayed in the doorway. “I uh, hope you don’t mind me just coming up.”

“No. Not at all. How were the tests?”

“I’m sorry. No change.” He cleared his throat. “I’m trying.”

“I know you are.” Ellen smiled and sat down on the little chair. She noticed Dean still standing there. “Did you want to come in?”

“If you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.”

“I’m not feeling comfortable in that house yet. I don’t know why.”

“Pull up a chair. I’m just sitting.”

“Thanks.” Dean walked over to the table set and grabbed a tea party chair. He pulled it to the other side of Taylor’s bed and sat down. “Taylor’s sleeping pretty soundly.”

“She’s wore out.”

Dean tilted his head in question to Ellen. “Wore out?”

“Henry was playing Barbie Dolls with her.”

Dean let out a single chuckle and a shake of his head. “Did he have the Barbie dolls complain about President Hadly?”

“As a matter of fact ...” Ellen smiled. “No. He stuck to bickering about Ken.”

Dean reached up and laid his hand on Taylor’s little one. His fingers lifted and touched hers. “You know, children’s hands amaze me.”

“Why is that?” Ellen asked softly.

“Well look at them.” Dean lifted Taylor’s index finger. “Tiny. Delicate. So small. Yet ... they use them so well.”

Ellen, listening to Dean, brought her fingers to the same hand of Taylor’s Dean held.

“Look at these.” Dean shook his head once in wonder. “I know I couldn’t work with hands this small.” There was a smiling moment as both Dean and Ellen leaned into Taylor. Dean’s eyes caught Ellen’s in that smile and connected in a quiet stare. He lifted his index finger and ran it softly over the back of her hand. Catching himself, he retracted his hand and cleared his throat in nervousness as he sat back. “So, um ... what’s with the candle.”

“Oh.” Ellen looked at the large blueberry candle. “Being prepared. Joe says it won’t be long before the power goes out.”

“That is the fourth time I heard that today. Now how does Joe ...” A power surge hum interrupted Dean’s sentence. It slowed down to a low tone and then there was total blackness. Dean chuckled once. “... know.”

The noise of the ignited match precluded the flame that lit Ellen's face. She smiled at Dean then lit the candle.

DAY SEVEN

**Thursday, June 4th
Ashtonville, Connecticut**

It was their system, and the only way they could keep track as they went about cleaning up what they could of Ashtonville. Markings of death Carl called them. Everyone paired off and checking homes for bodies did so. As Henry did with Miguel. After placing the body of a woman in the back of the truck, Henry stepped away, lowered his face mask and walked up to the little blue frame house they brought the woman out of. He reached into his back pocket, pulled out a small can of spray paint, and across the closed front door he sprayed a huge letter 'X'. House finished, empty, complete. And solemnly, Henry walked back to the truck where Miguel waited to drive on.

For some reason, for the first time he could recall, the cold scientist in him left in the make shift lab of Doc Breyer's clinic. Dean felt it. He felt the shock of it ricochet through him as he watched Ellen, turn with such emotions into the lab counter. It was like it happened in slow motion. Her arms went down, her head dropped, then she buried her face in her hands.

"No." Her words were muffled and sad through her fingers. "No, Dean. Yesterday she smiled. Today ..."

"Ellen." Dean rushed from his equipment to her side. "It's just the fever."

"Why is it rising again?"

"She's building an immunity to the fever reducer we're using, That's all. We'll try another." He moved closer to her trying his best to speak in a reassuring voice. "Listen to me. The virus is still in remission. It hasn't progressed. That is good. O.K.?"

"But ..."

"No buts." Dean pulled her hands from her face and leaned in so close to her. He lowered his voice to a passionate whisper. "You said you

trusted me. Trust me, Ellen. We're not out of options, yet. Don't give up on me."

Listening to his words and feeling the strong grip Dean had on her hand, Ellen slipped her fingers in between his. Closing her eyes, she clenched on to not only his fingers, but to his words of hope as well.

Highway 25 - Outskirts, Ashtonville, CT

Frank's motorcycle fluttered with its last bit of gas; he rode it until it stopped on its own. Catching his foot on the uneven ground, and nearly tripping as he hopped from the cycle when it fell sideways, Frank stared down the road ahead of him. The surroundings looked familiar. The red brick house, with the huge wooden front porch, which sat far off the road to his left, was a welcome sign. He knew where he was. He had seen that house many of times. "I know it's not that far now, I can hoof it." Frank picked up his back pack, tossed it on, and began to walk the road. First with a snails pace, then with a trot. He was tired, he was hungry, and he was only five miles from home.

Ashtonville, Connecticut

It was on Elks drive that Joe and William worked and unloaded gas cans. It was there that William saw the look on Joe's face. Joe stopped what he was doing to watch Ellen and Dean walk back toward Ellen's home. The worry, the concern. The same expressions William too, would have on his face if he were in Joe's shoes. In a way William was in his own worrisome situation. Taylor's fate rested upon William's son. A heavy responsibility for Dean, but one William was confident he could handle.

"I know my son," William spoke as he approached Joe from behind, laying a hand on Joe's back. "This is only a minor set back. He *will* get this."

Joe let out a grateful breath. Glad to hear those words from William, he gave an appreciation smile to him then continued in his work.

Frank didn't stop running. Once he saw the beginning of Ashtonville, he picked up speed and headed directly to his street. It was Empty, vacant, but Frank didn't focus on that. He focused on his house not that far down the road. Up the grass to his porch, dropping his belongings in his charge, and he bolted straight through the front door. "Hello!" He called out. "Kelly! Johnny!" Frank didn't have to go any further than the entrance hall. The house was not only quiet, but it was dark. All the blinds had been drawn and there was a sour smell of death that lingered in there and seeped into Frank telling him what he didn't want to know. The door was still open, Frank turned and walked back out. He saw his things right where he left them on the lawn. He would get them and go back into the house. Moving slowly off his porch, Frank picked up his bags. He wasn't listening for noises of life in Ashtonville. But he heard it and in a form he didn't expect. Undeniably and very clearly, his father's voice.

"Jesus Christ, Henry!" Joe yelled.

Frank smiled and looked to where he heard the voice echoing from. Through the yards of the houses, Frank sped in that direction. Two streets over Frank emerged. His things dropped from his hands and he couldn't move. He breathed heavily when he saw his father.

In such disgust Joe shook his head, staring at the smashed front end of the pick up truck. Henry stood by the hood, hands in pockets looking around as if nothing was wrong.

"Not a goddamn car on the road." Joe griped. "How in the hell did you wreck?"

"Very easily Joe. I was looking through the music and when I looked up, there was a tree."

Joe stood up straight and scratched his head. He was getting ready to say something else when he saw Frank trotting his way. "Oh my God." Joe gasped, feeling the pounding hit his chest. "Frank." He took off running toward Frank.

Henry was lost. "Frank? Who's Frank?"

"Frank!" Joe shrieked out in excitement, grabbing hold of his much bigger son and clinging to him as Frank clung back.

A moan of excitement and enthusiasm rolled from Frank's chest.

“Yes! I knew you were alive. I just knew it.”

After kissing Frank on the cheek, Joe stepped back. “And ... guess who else.”

“Dad! Dad!” Johnny with such a charge, and raced up the street.

The muscles in Frank’s neck tensed up as he clenched his jaws and fists. He grinned widely, bending his knees then taking off for Johnny. He swept his son up into his arms. Body against body he held Johnny tight, not wanting to let go of the ‘real’ feel of holding him. He closed his eyes in gratitude.

“Good to have you back.” Joe stepped closer to the two, laying his hand on Frank’s shoulder.

Frank opened his eyes. “Dad, what about my ...”

“I’m ... I’m sorry, Frank.” Joe slowly shook his head. “I’m sorry.”

Frank closed his eyes again and held on to Johnny tighter.

Dean undid the tourniquet from Taylor’s arm, then removed the tube of blood he had filled. “I need a temperature, El.” He set the tube on the night stand and lifted the clipboard.

Ellen inserted the aural thermometer into Taylor’s ear. After the beep, she removed it and spoke with such disappointment. “102.”

“It hasn’t risen.” Dean wrote down the results. “That’s good.”

“But it’s still higher than yesterday.” Ellen placed down the thermometer at the same time, her name was called.

Serious.

Calmly and soft, Joe spoke. “Ellen.”

Slowly Ellen turned away from the bed to see Joe standing in the doorway. And then ... she saw Frank. Every ounce of air escaped her, her insides dropped and her knees buckled the moment she laid eyes on him. From her gut, deep, she cried out and raced for him. Her hands clenched tightly as Frank gripped on to Ellen, wrapped his huge arms around her and lifted her from her feet in that embrace.

“Oh, my God.” Frank spoke deeply, pressing his face to hers.

“Right now, you are the person I needed to see most in this world.” Ellen cried through her words.

Frank set her down to her feet not breaking the connection of their bodies. He pulled back only a little so he could look at her. His hands, so

large ran across her face feeling every inch of her. Softly he kissed her. Then with a smile he kissed her again. His lips moved fast with excitement, and pulled at hers with missing and gratitude. Laughing at the unbelievableness of it all, he pulled from that kiss and kept his hands firm to her face.

Joe didn't want to do it, but before anything else was said or done, Joe had to step in. "I hate to steal him Ellen, but I ... I really need to sit down and talk with Frank."

Ellen pulled Frank's hands from her face and held them. Her expression dropped and she looked at Joe. "I understand." She turned back to Frank. "Go with your father."

Frank stepped back as Joe gave a pull to his arm. He paused, leaned forward and kissed Ellen again. "I love you." He took a shivering breath. "I'll be back. Then you are *never* getting rid of me. Never." He moved backwards. "I love you." He didn't let go of Ellen's hand until their fingers slipped apart in his move toward the door.

Ellen smiled. Frank had returned. She exhaled with a quiver and wiped her hand across her face.

Dean had done nothing but witness the entire reunion in that little bedroom. His hands didn't work. His body didn't move. He just was speechless. He looked at Ellen who watched the empty door. When Ellen turned around with an 'up' to her spirits, Dean, catching himself in a stare at her, nervously returned to his work with Taylor.

Frank was uplifted when they first returned and had a seat in Joe's dining room. But that soon ended. Joe hated the thought of it. Telling Frank. It was the hardest and most painful news Joe had to deliver in his life. It wasn't the news that Frank's wife and other children had died. Joe somehow knew Frank would have prepared himself for that. But there was no preparing for the news of *how* they died. After a lot of thought and debate on if he really should, Joe delivered the truth before Frank found it out another way. Simply, calmly and in the form of Kelly's suicide note.

"Frank." Joe whispered. "There was no way to stop it. Her mind was made up. I'm very, very sorry."

The fingers on the Frank's hand that held the note spread wide and closed down in an arpeggio manner around the paper, crumbling the note with in his palm. "How could she do this? How could she kill my kids?" His

head dropped to the table. The horrible reality of what he never expected to face, hit Frank, and buried beneath the arms that draped over his head, he let out a single sob.

DAY SEVEN - EVENING

Ashtonville, Connecticut

George spread open the third map on Joe's dining room table. "Now let me show you this before you take this over to William. This here ..." His hand smoothed over the map. "This is a closer look at the farming region."

"This *whole* section is farming?" Joe whistled.

"Yes. A lot for the ground breakers to farm at first. But with growth, well, it will come in handy."

"Completely surrounded by mountains?"

"Valley setting. Perfect secluded and protected setting. Some mountains had to be cut out as you can see."

Joe listened and nodded. "Question."

"Shoot."

"You were here ... when?"

"Garfield?" George cleared his throat. "Never."

"So this could very well be a fairy tale."

"A very expensive fairy tale. The government budget paid yearly upkeep fees to maintain the land."

Joe chuckled. "No offense, but you never know. Someone in the government could have set this whole thing up as a way to pull funds into a hefty retirement account for themselves. You know how gullible the government is when it comes to funds. Those rumors of the ten thousand dollar hammers started somewhere."

George tilted his head. "True. That's why I want a team of us to go out there first. See it as a reality."

Joe nodded in agreement. "Check it out. See what it needs. Scout the route."

"Create an exact plan of action."

"We're gonna have to make teams to go out for the stockpiles."

"Can't do that without seeing what we need."

"We should set up a trip soon."

"I agree," George said. "Let me show you the expansion area."

“You mean the supposed ... expansion area.” Joe chuckled, as did George. He reached for cigarette and in doing so, he saw Frank, damp from showering step into the dining room.

“Dad.” Frank sounded groggy, his face red. “I’m uh ... Johnny’s settled. I uh ... I’m going to El’s. I’ll be back .”

“I think you need to do that. Spend some time with your friend.” Joe walked to Frank, laid a firm hand on his arm and listened to the saddened breath come from his son. “But for Johnny’s sake, you should be back before he wakes up. Explaining to him ...” Joe dropped his voice. “Why you spent the night with Ellen. Now is not a good time. Not with his mother just dying.”

“I know. I understand. I thought of that. The Ellen, me thing ...put it this way. The truth can wait. He’s too young, and the situation is too screwed up to explain.”

“Good.”

“I’ll be back.” Frank didn’t say anymore. He just turned and sluggishly walked away and out of the house.

For a moment, watching Joe stood there, even after Frank was gone. He took a few seconds to rekindle up his meeting mode, the Joe went back to speaking and viewing maps with George.

Dean hid his smile as he stood across from Ellen in Taylor’s room. “Close your eyes, Ellen.”

Ellen shook her head and reluctantly without verbally responding, allowed him to cover her eyes with his hand.

“Ready?” From behind his back, Dean pulled out the aural thermometer. He lifted his hand at the same time he held the digital display in Ellen’s view.

Ellen let out a peep of a shriek and gripped tightly to Dean’s hand. “It went down.”

“Two degrees lower. I told you it was an obstacle we just had to ...” Dean’s speech slowed down. He released Ellen’s hand and stepped back away from the bed when Frank walked in the room.

Curiously Ellen looked at Dean, then turned her head to where he stared. “Frank,” she said his name softly. “Hey.” She extended her hand. “How are you?”

“T’m uh ...” Frank grabbed her hand and stepped closer to the bed. “How’s Taylor?”

Dean answered. “We’ve gotten her temperature down again.”

Ellen smiled at Dean then looked to Frank. “T’m sorry. I didn’t introduce you. This is Dr. Dean Hayes.”

Without really looking at Dean, Frank nodded in acknowledgment, sniffed and ran the back of his hand under his nose. He lowered his head and closed his eyes. “El, I really need to talk to you.”

Without hesitation, Dean gathered up his things. “T’ll leave.” He held them sloppily in his arms as he moved to the door quickly. “You need some time alone. I have tests to run.” He darted back in, grabbed a lone paper off the dresser and went back to the door.

“Dean,” Ellen called to him.

“T’ll be back.” Dean walked out the door.

Ellen took a step toward Dean as he left and Frank pulled her back. He reached into his pocket, pulled out the crinkled note and brought his hand forward and the note into Ellen’s view. Ellen immediately recognized the stationary. She spun her body to face Frank. Taking the note from him, she laid her hand on his face. “T’m so sorry.”

Frank turned his head to bring his lips to her palm. Softly he kissed her as he laid his hand over hers. So sad, no words, Frank pulled Ellen to him and dropped to his knees. His hands slid against her waist grabbing her tighter and to him as her arms cradled him. And like a lost child, Frank buried his head onto her stomach and held on.

William had a pretty decent size front porch. Big enough for furniture and the two rocking chairs. That’s where he and Joe sat.

“You’re a wise man, William,” Joe stated. “I really would like your thoughts on this.”

“I think surviving and moving on is not an option, it’s a must. If someone wants to hand us the groundwork already laid out, we’d be fools not to take it.”

“If it exists.”

William chuckled. “If it exists. Hey ... I’m up for it. I say, just tell everyone about it. If they want to be a part, they’re a part. If not... .” William tossed his hands up. “Their loss.”

Joe let out a chuckle. "I appreciate your back up on this one."

A tiny little tapping knock was heard on the screen door behind them, then Henry's voice followed it. "What about me? Can I give my opinion now?"

Joe shook his head when he looked at Henry then he turned back to William, "Forget what I said about you being a wise man William. You're a masochistic man for bringing Henry into your house."

"Hey." Henry defended his honor.

"No, Joe." William stood up. "I am a wise man, because I'm working all night in the lab with my son." With a smile and a wave, William walked to the edge of the porch and off. The smile stayed with him as he walked listening to the arguing that immediately entailed between Henry and Joe.

The generator hummed, the machine buzzed, the centrifuge spun. Dean shuffled about the hypnotically loud lab, so consumed he never heard Ellen enter.

"Can I help?" she asked.

Her voice startled him. After dropping paper inadvertently from his hand, Dean jolted in surprise to Ellen. "What are you doing here?"

"I need a break." She stepped further in. "You didn't come back."

Dean lifted his shoulder in a half shrug. "I figured you would want to spend some time with Frank. You seemed ... you seemed happy he came back."

"Well, I am." Ellen watched Dean organize papers on the counter. "Frank's my best friend. I've known him forever. Of course, he's also been the other man in my life for fourteen years and ..." Ellen noticed Dean stopped touching those papers. He looked up at her. "And ... and ... oh boy. Sorry. But ..." She held up her finger. "There is a reason I am here, other than to confess the sins of my past to you."

Dean snickered as he finished stacking the papers. "Which is?"

"Excuse me?" Ellen stepped to him.

"What's the other reason?" Dean grabbed a rack of empty tubes.

"I want to help you tonight. You really need my help."

"Ellen, no, don't worry about it. See." Dean motioned his hand in a point at the counter. "I'm setting up. My Dad is helping tonight."

"You can use my help."

"Really, I'll be fine." Dean told her softly. "Don't worry about it."

You should be with Frank.”

“I want to help.” Ellen felt bad, Dean seemed so occupied with getting things set up, he nearly ignored her. “Dean?”

“Yes.”

“Are you listening?”

“Of course I am.” He laid another rack of tubes on the counter. “But Ellen, you go home. Why you would want to spend the evening in a lab is beyond me.”

“You do. You are.”

“It’s my work.”

“It’s my daughter.” She did it. She caught his attention. Softening her voice, Ellen stepped even closer to Dean. “This is my daughter, Dean. Why don’t you want me to work with you?”

“It’s not ...”

“Is it my work?” Ellen asked so innocently. “Tell me what I’m doing wrong. Tell me what I need to do. I’ll learn ...”

“Ellen.” He laid his finger on her lips. “It’s not your work. Just know that.”

“I need to help out here. I need to be a part of this. Every step. Please.” She blinked hard. “Don’t leave me out. I have to be a part of this. I have to fight this with you. For Taylor. She’s all I have.” Ellen leaned into Dean gazing up with innocence. She locked eyes with Dean. He brought two fingers up to her face in his stare and ran them down to her chin. Ellen covered his hand with hers. “My only focus. Remember? Your ...”

“Reason.” The word slipped without control from Dean’s mouth as he found himself engrossed in the closeness with Ellen. His fingers on her chin became the hand that moved to her check, slipping behind her neck. Eyes connected, he brought Ellen gently close to him, hesitated, then softly he laid his lips to hers. Their eyes closed after a heartbeat, and Dean kissed Ellen again, bringing her closer to him, holding her as his lips moved fuller against hers. A soft moan seeped from Dean’s throat as he ended the kiss. He pulled back slightly, still staring at Ellen. “I’m sorry. Maybe ... maybe I should haven’t done that.”

The clearing of William’s throat scared Ellen and Dean into springing apart. “No, you shouldn’t have.” He slowly walked by Dean. “Have you seen the size of Frank? Way to pick em’, Dino.” After a swat to Dean’s back, William walked to the counter where Dean had set things up. “Look how nice and anal you are about getting things ready.” William raised his glasses to the bridge of his nose. “Now are we working?” He looked over at

Dean and Ellen who still faced each other. “We are working, correct?”

Through the tops of his eyes, head down a bit, Dean stared at Ellen. He nervously ran his fingers through the top of his hair, acting as if he were waiting. And he was. He was waiting for something from Ellen. Anything that told him she wasn’t angry or upset. When Ellen gave a soft smile of approval to Dean, he exhaled loudly and raised his eyebrows. “Yes.” He spoke up with a crooked smile. “Yes we are.” Taking hold of Ellen’s arm, Dean led her to the counter. He really did want her help, especially with him feeling that they were so close to the break through point, he didn’t want Ellen to miss it.

DAY NINE

**Saturday, June 6th
Ashtonville, Connecticut**

It was the meeting of the minds in the middle of Ellen's front yard. Tables joined together formed one long line as almost everyone sat around listening to Joe and George who stood at the end of the table. Johnny played with Denny in the grass, in their own worlds, occupying themselves from the 'stupid' grown up conversation. Jenny had left, happily, to go sit with Taylor. Frank had wanted to sit with Taylor, and he did, but by Joe's request, he was needed at the meeting.

Frank walked out of Ellen's house, hearing his father's voice explaining away. He stopped by Johnny and Denny to see how they were doing, then made his way to the table. He grunted low in disgust when he saw Dean sitting next to Ellen and he walked to behind them, tapping Dean on the shoulder. "Excuse me." He waited until Dean got the hint and moved his chair over, then Frank pulled up an empty one and wedged it in.

Joe shook his head. "As I was saying ... Scavenger hunts. We're going to pair off in trucks, make runs for what we need."

George continued the sentiment. "With our scout trip out there next week, we should have a pretty good idea of what we'll need to fully stock the place. Especially with food. We can't expect growth for at least a year or two. We have some ideas on that. And we hope to get a list together so the runs you make will be easier than everyone just going out on a free for all search."

"We plan on dividing the pair-offs according to areas of specialty. No one should be sent for things they wouldn't have a clue on." Joe said. "Armory, metals, clothing and such. Those are all things we'll probably need. The place is suppose to be a shell."

After rolling her eyes in boredom, Ellen looked down to her watch. A slight smile hit her face and she leaned forward to get Dean's attention, when she did, Frank leaned forward. Ellen leaned back, so did Frank. Giving up and huffing, Ellen stood up.

Frank reached for her hand. "Where you going?"

"Taylor's new medication should be done mixing, I'm going to the

lab to get it.”

Dean turned in his chair. “Want me to go?”

“Yeah.” Frank said.

“No.” Ellen shook her head. “I’ll go. Stay here and uh ... talk about crops and armory runs.” She backed up. “Just tell me what my part is. Taylor and I go wherever Joe does.”

Frank held on to Ellen’s hand until she had moved too far away from his reach. Despite the meeting that continued, his eyes stayed focused on Ellen.

Andrea raised her hand as she toggled Katie on her lap. “I have some concerns about these electric fences you talked about. Are they a hazard to the kids?”

“Perimeters, Andrea.” Joe corrected. “And no. The main living section sets center this compound. The perimeter runs along the barrier of it. The children should be nowhere near them.”

“Do we need protection like that?” Andrea asked.

Joe nearly laughed. “Andrea, the world isn’t going to get better, it’s gonna get worse. The more time that passes, the more people will lose it.”

“How do you know?” She questioned again.

Dean mumbled. “Probably Post Apocalyptic World Survival training film M.C. something ...”

“M.C. I T. F. B-27.” Joe finished. “Yes.”

Dean looked up quickly. “You saw that film too?”

“I was CIA, Dean of course.” Joe said.

George tilted his head in wonder. “Wasn’t it B-22 that told of immediate mental response to all out catastrophe?”

Frank interjected. “No, immediate response was M.C. I T. F. B-8. That was immediate. M.C. I. T. F. B-22 dealt with homicidal tendencies with those who can’t adjust.”

“But.” Carl held up a finger. “Didn’t M.C. I. T. F. B-22 also deal with the first through second months post ravage.”

“No.” Frank shook his head. “That was M.C. I. T. F. B-9.”

“That’s right.” Carl nodded. “B-22 dealt with scavengers and wanderers in the post apocalyptic world.”

“So did M.C. I T. F. B-24.” Frank said.

“You know.” Joe interrupted. “We should really get a hold of those stock films. They could come in handy for everyone. Especially M.C. I. T. F. B-13 though B-15.”

“Building the new life?” George explained. “Good choice. There’s

some military installations we'll pass. I'm sure we'll find them there. What about M.C. I T. F. B-18?"

"Good suggestion." Joe said. "Law and Order in the post apocalyptic world."

Dean tossed his hands up listening to the men ramble on letters and numbers about training films he hadn't seen. "Why am I the only one here who was military and doesn't know about these films?"

Frank snickered. "They probably didn't show them to you because they figured why waste their time. You wouldn't survive anyhow."

"Thanks." Dean shook his head.

"You're welcome."

"O.K." Joe breathed out. "Enough about entertainment. We have to finish talking about the Garfield Project."

A few people, Andrea and Henry, especially had a their questions regarding the stock films and how they would be a valuable learning tool. But as soon as Frank realized the conversation wasn't going to stay on something as interesting as the M.C. I T. F. Training film series, his thoughts went to Ellen and how lucky she was to be at that clinic.

Ellen neatly had the six vials of new medication on the counter in the lab. She only needed two. After picking them up, she reached over the counter to the switch marked 'generator' She flicked it down and the lab went dark. The humming of the generator's motor slowed and the lab was silent. As soon as it did, and Ellen moved to the lab door, she heard a crash. She stopped in her stride. "Dean?" She called out. "Dean?" Not getting an answer, Ellen shrugged and continued out of the lab, down the hall and to the reception area. Stepping in there, she saw the door closing and the coat rack had been toppled. It didn't phase Ellen much, in fact she didn't think twice about it. Picking up the coat rack, she stepped outside.

She wasn't out the door and a foot away when she felt it, scaring her, causing the vials to fall from her hand and crash to the ground. Her hair was yanked abruptly in a clutch and she was pulled back into the hard chest of someone bigger, someone who smelled foul. Letting out a short shriek only, Ellen tried to get away when a hand covered her mouth and an arm wrapped harshly around her waist lifting her feet from the ground.

In front of that clinic she fought and struggled, biting the hand of an obviously man, fighting so hard he spun with her. She caught through her

horror filled eyes, the reflection off the glass doors as he held tightly to her. How big he was, dark. Then her shoulders dropped and her fear left her when suddenly behind him there was another figure, she knew this one and knew it could only be Frank.

She felt herself drop to the ground and she rolled out of the way as she watched Frank grab the man, slam him into the wall and punch him over and over. Then with the fierce anger Frank sailed the man outward with a loud grunt, crashing him through the glass doors of the clinic.

Ellen shielded her head from the flying glass. She saw Frank step through and she heard it. Three shots and then ... silence.

Lifting herself some from the ground, Ellen peered into the clinic to see Frank putting away his gun and stepping out.

“El.” He reached his hand down as she stood up.

Without taking his hand, as soon as she stood firm on her feet, she jumped to him, wrapping her arms around him tightly. “Hold me.”

“El, are you ...”

“Shh.” She gripped tighter to him. “Just hold on to me and take me home.”

Frank did.

Heavy discussion, loud and muttering, filled Ellen’s dining room where everyone had gathered.

Joe’s voice rose above the rest. “Sorry, it’s no longer a question. These people can wander in from anywhere.”

Henry’s eyes shifted from the arguing to Ellen who sat with her face buried in her hands. “Should we ... should we hold off on talking about this?”

Andrea slipped in the chair next to Ellen. She laid her hand with comfort on her back. “Are you all right?”

George stayed in agreement with Joe. “You know everyone questioned those perimeters.”

“Exactly.” Joe said. “This is five days, people. What’s it gonna be like in five years. I think our first concern should be on the safety of the women here.”

Frank spoke up very coldly. “I think we should just shoot anyone that sneaks into town. That’s what I think.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “You would.”

Frank snapped his views Dean's way. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"It means." Dean's had flew out. "It mean you can't just shoot everyone."

Again, Henry looked at Ellen and how red her face was from rubbing it over and over. "Hello? Can we ..."

"Dean!" Frank's voice pummeled. "It's that attitude you have that put El in the situation she was in."

"What?!" Dean snapped in almost a ridicule. "You can't possibly blame this one on me."

"Why not?" Frank asked. "You have her running around. Alone. Doing your fuckin work for you when ..."

"Frank!" Ellen screamed his name as she stood up. "Leave him alone! It's no one's fault. It happened. It's over and I have better things to do, like take care of my daughter. Excuse me." Harsh, Ellen barged her way out of the dining room.

Frank watched her then glared and pointed at Dean. "See."

Dean tossed his hands up in the air in defeat.

They still argued, and Ellen could hear them as she made it upstairs. And then she heard something else. A gurgling sound coming from Taylor's open door. With horror, Ellen rushed inside.

"You don't want to hear the truth!" Frank's hand came down in a heavy point at Dean.

Henry tried to be the peacekeeper. "Can we just stop."

Dean shook his head "I'm not listening to this." He stood up and moved toward the door. "I'm going up with Ellen."

"Sit your little ass down!" Frank blasted. "And stay away from her for five minutes!"

"Knock it off!" Joe blared out in his loudest voice. "Two days, Frank. Two goddamn days you're back and you have to start a ..."

"Dean!" Ellen's screams, so frantic carried to them. "Oh, God, Dean! Please!"

Dean was the first to rush from the room. Everyone followed behind him. He bolted up the steps and flew into Taylor's room. His entire being shook when he saw Ellen holding up Taylor. So white and pale, Taylor

was, her little body swollen and her breathing was so labored it was heard.

Ellen, panicked and lost, looked up from her daughter to Dean.
“What happened? Dean?”

Dean’s head dropped.

^^^

The solemn feel engulfed Taylor’s bedroom. Taylor was propped up on an angle, the generator outside the room hummed, and a respirator hissed and clicked with each breath it helped Taylor to take. Ellen felt torn, holding her daughter’s hand, laying her head on Taylor’s arm. Frank stood behind her, silently and giving her strength, and Joe stayed huddled, watching in the corner.

They may have been engrossed in Taylor, but the second Dean slipped into the room they sensed him and all eyes went to him.

Dean felt center of the most horrific stage of his life. “I’m ... I’m sorry. The virus ...” He had to stop and regain his composure. “The virus mutated to overcome the block.”

Frank felt Ellen’s sadness as his hands lay on her shoulders. “Dean,” he spoke with a gravel to his voice. “You’ve been working on this. There has to be something.”

“I’ve tried everything I ...”

“Try something else!” Frank blasted.

Calm, Joe raised his head with warning eyes. “Frank.”

Frank shook his head and lowered it to Ellen’s back.

Dean hesitated then walked to the other side of Taylor’s bed to face Ellen. He knelt down and placed his hand over hers. His eyes were red as he stared with his heart at her. “Ellen, I’m so sorry.” It was difficult for Dean to even speak. “I am.”

Ellen raised her head to him. “Please don’t tell me we’re out of options.” Ellen’s voice weakened as she grabbed on to Taylor’s hand. “Look at her, Dean. Help her ... please.”

“Ellen, I ...” A click. A hiss. The respirator went silent. Dean’s throat swelled up as his eyes went to Taylor.

Ellen looked in horror at the little hand she held. “No. No, Dean so something. Oh my God.” She grabbed for her daughter. “No!” She cried out. “Oh God, not my baby.”

Frank saw Ellen’s grip Taylor and try to lift her. He gave his best

attempt to pull her back and Ellen swung out her hand hard hitting him away. “Ellen.”

“No.” Ellen lifted Taylor. Lifeless she dangled in her mother’s arms. “Joe.” She raised her sad eyes to Joe. “My baby.” Her shoulders bounced and she gripped Taylor into her chest. Burying her face to her daughter, Ellen began to sob. Her cries grew louder, deeper and from her soul. There was nothing no one could do. No way to calm her. Frank wrapped his arms around her from behind, trying to give Ellen some of his strength, but Ellen was hysterical. Louder she cried out, screaming her daughter’s name over and over in her agony. Ellen had battled and she had fought through the virus. But even with all of her prayers, the hope and faith she some how surmised in the midst of a tragedy ... Ellen still lost.

The ticking of the clock in the quiet bedroom awoke Ellen. She lifted her head to the candle lit room as she laid on the bed. Frank sat in a chair by the bed, holding her hand. He moved closer to her and pressed his lips to her cheek.

“El, lay back down. You passed out.”

“Where am I?”

“At my Dad’s.”

Immediately Ellen sprang up and jumped from the bed. She had to catch her breath. “Taylor. Where’s Taylor?”

“We had to move her down to ...”

Ellen gasped an emotional scream. “You took her from her bed? Her home?”

“We had to El, she was ...”

“That was her home, Frank.” Ellen emotional charged out. “Her home!” She spun and bolted from the bedroom so fast, it took Frank by surprise.

Frank raced out after her, listening to her feet on the steps. But Ellen ran straight from the house leaving the door open in her exit.

From the living room, Joe saw Frank getting ready to go after her. “Frank.” He called out, rushing to the door to stop him. “Let her go.”

“But Dad.”

“Let her go.”

In the doorway of their home, they watched Ellen as she kept

running, straight to her house.

The distance wasn't far from Joe's to her own house. Ellen huffed in her breathing. Her emotions and heartache stole her breath away. There was no delaying in going in Taylor's Room. It would have been completely dark had the moon not shone so bright. Ellen let out a single sob as she neared the bed. She just wanted to crumble there, curl up and die. Her hands smoothed over the empty bed and grabbed for the covers and pillow. Crying, Ellen brought them to her nose and inhaled deeply the remaining scent of her daughter. Cradling them into her body, Ellen saw something she didn't expect. Dean. He sat in the corner of the bedroom on the floor. His back was against the wall, knees brought up and his head was down on the arms. "Dean?" Ellen laid down the covers and the pillow and walked over to that corner of the room "What are you doing?"

Dean didn't answer. He raised his head slowly then placed it back down.

Ellen lowered herself to the floor, kneeling in front of him. Her heart ached again when she heard his sob. "Dean," she whispered.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." He shook his head as he lifted it.

Ellen scooted closer to him, laying her hand on his arm.

"I swear to you." Dean's words seeped his hurt. "I swear if I could have given my life to stop this. I would have. I tried. I tried." He felt her fingers slip through his hair. "No one has ever looked at me with as much trust as you did. I swore I wanted to keep that look in your eyes. I gave you false hope. I let you down. I'll never forgive myself for doing that to you."

"You didn't," Ellen whispered. "You gave me real hope. And you also gave me something else." Ellen wiped her hand across her face, smearing her tears. She drew closer to Dean. "You, Dean. You gave me time with my daughter I would have lost. You gave me one more smile from her. The chance to hear her voice again. You gave me one more, 'I love you, mommy.' I wouldn't have had any of that, if it wasn't for you. I didn't lose my trust in you, Dean. Look in my eyes, it's still there."

Slowly Dean's eyes connected with Ellen's. He exhaled deeply and grabbed onto her pulling Ellen into him. It was almost a life saving grip he gave to her. Clinging tight, he pressed his lips hard to her cheek and held her. He wanted to thank her, but he couldn't. He couldn't even talk.

Ellen pulled back, but only a little. She wiped her hand down his face

and brought her lips to his in a soft kiss and they returned to the embrace.

On the floor, Ellen slipped between Dean's legs, laid her head against his chest, and buried herself within his arms. In the somber room lit only by the moon, for the longest time, Dean and Ellen held on.

THE SURVIVING

*If you had the single chance, to start it all again.
Would you start it all anew?
Or retrace the steps of pain.
Would you reach back desperately, to catch your yesterday gone wrong?
Or go forward not looking back, find a new way to belong*

Thursday, June 11th

‘Things will only get worse.’

Carl’s words.

Right after he and Frank ran into a suspicious car fire on the highway.

No occupants in the car. No one around.

‘This is fucked up,’ Frank said. ‘What happened?’

‘Who knows.’ Carl had replied. ‘Things will only get worse.’

‘That’s why we’re doing what we’re doing, right?’

The close call with Ellen’s attack and the somber feel left in the town after Taylor’s death, compelled Carl and Frank to put their minds elsewhere. All the talk about the apocalyptic training films, and possibility of more Ashtonville intruders, gave them a reason to leave for the day. Their mission was simple. Hit the closest military base for more weapons, means to secure Ashtonville, and, hopefully locate a copy of those M.C.I.T.F. Batch training films.

They left at sun up, excited about their pre-Garfield Project salvage hunt. The stop at the electronics store didn’t give them the high quality that they sought, but it afforded them radio means until they found better ones on the base. The red radios were cute, little, and Frank and Carl played with them a lot in the truck.

A way to communicate with each other while they went their separate on the base.

They didn’t think too much about it.

They should have.

Static.

‘What was that?’ Frank shook the radio. ‘Fuckin’ piece of shit. Come back. Carl?’

Static.

‘Three guys. Fuck. They hit ...ree.’

‘Come again.’

"No. More than that. They must ... live ... base."

Static.

Frank shook his head as he blasted from a warehouse on base, pulling forward an M-16. "Carl? Come in. Where are you?"

"I'm taking watch ... fuck!"

Shots. Lot of them and firing quickly.

Frank stopped, but only for a second to gather his bearings and hone in where the shots came from. With a right pivot of his body and another shot fired, Frank bolted. The empty base was like a megaphone for noise and his boots slammed loudly on the ground in his run. Just as he turned the bend, he heard another shot and dove fast to his left as a bullet seared by him. Rolling to a safety stand behind the metal building, Frank raised his weapon from view and slowly peered round the corner.

Four men stood outside an open door. Frank checked his clip.

"This your guy!" one of the men shouted out.

Frank didn't answer. He looked around the building and saw it. Metal rungs. He tossed his weapon over his shoulder, grabbed the first rung then quickly, and quietly began to climb up.

"Hey! I know you're there. We heard you. Saw you."

Frank arrived to the roof. In a squatting run, he made it to the edge, then sat and prepped his weapon.

"Take a look at your friend!" he shouted.

Frank lifted up slightly, and the tops of his eyes peered over the lip of the roof. Two more men were dragging Carl's lifeless, bloody body into the open air.

At first he winced in pain, then an anger knot formed in Frank's gut.

The man shouted again. "Let this be your warning. You're next when we find you. You're stealing from us. This is our home now. Our property."

"Are you United States Soldiers?" Frank shouted out.

"What?"

"You heard me? Are you United States Soldiers?"

The guy laughed. "The military's dead! No! We aren't soldiers."

"Well I am!" Frank stood up with a firm stance and aim. "So actually, your standing on my property mother fucker!" Before they even focused on where he was, or even had time to raise their guns properly, Frank opened fire.

All six dropped quickly into a blood bath on the ground.

What was it that made Frank sink deeply into the memory of what happened two days earlier? He didn't know. A comment maybe, made by Johnny. Whatever the cause, Frank slipped deep into thought in the middle of tucking Johnny into bed. By the time his daze-of-memory was over,

Johnny was fast asleep. Leaning forward Frank kissed Johnny, then stood up. He breathed deeply and paced across the room, stopping at the window. He parted the blinds and with an exhale, smiled slightly. Ellen. She sat alone, outside at one of the many picnic tables they had set up on Elks drive. Not only was she just what he needed to see, she was just what he needed.

A lantern afforded Ellen enough light to see the pages of her notebook. Though she didn't write much, she thought about what she would jot down. It was something Joe asked of everyone. Make a list of items that would they would need to stockpile for the future. Ellen believed the list was more of a therapy to keep people's minds focused.

She was just about to write down an item when it caught her attention. Something she hadn't seen since before the plague. A coffee house paper cup, complete with lid and cardboard insulator sleeve. Her eyes rose as it set before her. Dean sat down across from her.

"For me?" she asked.

"For you."

She gave a quirky smile, lowered her nose, and sniffed. "It smells like cappuccino."

"Actually, latte. I couldn't get the foam right enough to be a cappuccino."

She chuckled in an airy way. "Oh, my God. You made me a Latte."

"You struck me as a latte girl."

"I am." She grabbed it. "Thank you. This is very sweet."

"Wait." He stopped her. "I give the disclaimer on taste. It's made with one of those mini espresso machines and since all milk is bad, I had to use canned."

"It'll be perfect. I can't believe you did this." She stared at the cup.

"Well, I was walking through town, saw the coffee shop and thought of you."

Ellen smiled "Really?" She sipped the beverage. "Oh, Dean. Dean this is great." She took another sip. "Can I ask why?"

"Honestly? Peace offering."

She glanced at him curiously. "I didn't think we were fighting."

"Maybe peace offering is a bad word. But ... but after Taylor's funeral, you and I, both of us, kind of..." he stammered for the word.

"Hid?" she asked.

Dean snapped his finger. "Yes. Hid. Thank you. I stopped working."

You stopped working. We both kind of stayed away from each other. I was afraid that you hated me.”

Ellen’s eyes closed. “Oh, my God. No.”

“I know. Joe ... Joe set me straight.” Dean winked. “We both have been wrapped up in sadness and, for you, rightfully so. I have been giving it some thought. It isn’t good. Especially not for you.”

“I have ... I have the notebook.”

“May I?” Dean reached for it and lifted the book when Ellen nodded her approval. “Just as I thought. You have about as much written in yours as I do.”

Ellen shrugged. “I stare at blank pages. I did ...” She blushed. “I did write a poem.”

“You wrote a poem? Really?”

Ellen nodded.

“Can I read it?”

“It’s bad.”

“It can’t be.”

“Really, Dean. It’s bad. I’m not a poet.”

“Poetry consists of thought and emotions. How can it be wrong or bad?”

Ellen smiled peacefully. “Thank you. That’s true. Huh?” She paused. “It’s in there, you have to flip through. You can read it.”

“Thank you.” Dean started to search.

“Thank you for the latte.”

Dean paused in his search. “I also have another reason for bothering you tonight.”

“That is?”

“Like I said, hiding, staying away, it isn’t good. I’d like to ... I’d like you and I do to some things. You know, research related. Work together. We were doing that pretty well. I think that it will help keep your mind occupied. I think that you need that.”

“Hating to agree. I do.” Ellen said.

“Good.” Dean smiled. “Then can I? Can I focus you elsewhere? Can I help you?”

Frank answered that one. “No. That’s what she has me for.”

Dean, surprised, turned around.

“Frank.” Ellen looked up. “I thought you were staying in tonight.”

“I was, I needed to speak to you ...” Frank walked to the picnic table. “By your ...” He paused, tilted his head, and looked at the cup. “Why

do you have a take out coffee?"

"Latté." Ellen corrected. "Dean made it for me."

"Dean made you a latte?" Frank asked. "Why?"

"To be sweet." Ellen replied.

"Actually," Dean said. "I wanted to warm her up to an idea."

The corner of Ellen's mouth raised in a smile. "Warm me up? Hey, double ant tundra. How witty."

Before Dean could respond, Frank being childish, whispered in a mocking whine, "How witty."

Ellen gasped in a scold. "Frank."

Dean stood up. "I'm gonna go."

"No, don't." Ellen said.

"Yes, please." Frank added.

"Frank." Ellen snapped.

"I'm ... going." Dean closed Ellen's notebook and slid it to her, focusing only on Ellen. "I'd like to read that. Maybe tomorrow?"

Ellen nodded.

"Goodnight, Ellen."

"Goodnight, Dean," she whispered peacefully.

"Bye, Dean." Frank said with edge.

Dean, hands in pockets, lifted a sloppy wave and walked away.

When Dean was a short distance away, Frank huffed and sat down.

"Why are you sharing your notebook?" he reached for it.

Ellen snatched it away. "What is your problem?"

"Him."

"You have no reason to have a problem with him." Ellen protected her book.

Sarcastically, Frank responded, "Really?"

"Really."

"Right."

"Frank."

"Sorry." Frank shook his head. After a moment of silence, his demeanor changed. "I'm having a bad day, you know, with Carl and all. And ... I just really miss you." He reached across the table and grabbed her hand.

"You see me all the time."

"Yeah, I know but ..."

Ellen slipped her hand from him. "We agreed. You and I both. Us? It has to wait. At least some time, it's too soon for Johnny. He won't understand how you can forget his mother so quickly and go straight to me."

So for now, you and I, for appearance sake, are friends.”

“For appearances.” Frank said. “What about behind closed doors?”

Ellen laughed. “You can’t be serious, can you?”

“What? You’re wanting not to fool around.”

Ellen shook her head in disbelief. “I can’t believe that’s even on your mind.”

“You mean sex?”

“Shh.”

“What?” Frank asked. “Like anyone can hear us?”

“The street is dead, everyone can hear.”

Frank scoffed. “No one can hear.”

“I can.” Joe called out from the porch.

“Why is he eavesdropping?” Frank questioned.

Ellen shrugged. “He’s Joe.”

Frank lowered his voice. “Are we still a couple, El?”

“Frank, you and I were never a couple.”

Silence.

“OK, you have a point,” Frank said. “Then can we still be whatever we were?”

“I love you, Frank. We’ll take this one step at a time. Just like we’re taking life right now.”

Frank nodded. He then tilted his head. “Can I see your notebook?”

“What?” Ellen chuckled. “Why do you want to see my notebook?”

“You were showing ... Dean your notes.”

“I was showing Dean a poem I wrote.”

Frank looked serious then cracked a smile. “You? You wrote a poem.”

“Yeah.” Ellen snapped.

“It can’t be very good.”

Ellen gasped. “How rude. I’ll have you know, Dean said there is no bad poetry because it comes from emotions and thoughts.”

“Dean said that?” Frank asked. “Pansy.”

“Just for that.” Ellen hugged her book. “No.”

“Come on. I won’t make fun. I’m sure it’s good.” Frank held out his hand. “Please? You were showing Dean.”

After a moment of debate, Ellen opened the notebook found the poem and handed it to Frank.

Pleased, Frank smiled. “Thank you.” He pulled the lantern closer and read. After, he set down the notebook and was silent.

“Well?” Ellen asked.

“It ... you know what Dean said about poetry?”

“Yes.”

“He ... he ... he was wrong. That sucked.”

Ellen’s mouth dropped open. She grabbed the notebook and stood up. “You are so rude.”

“El, wait.”

“No, I’m going home.” With a dramatic march, and not looking back, she stormed from the table to her house.

Frank watched her, snickered, then after a few seconds, he followed her. After all, he still hadn’t gotten the chance to talk to her like he needed.

^^^

William defiantly wasn’t a visual Betty Crocker. Though at home in the kitchen, he seemed awkward mixing items via candlelight. He mumbled a bit of the recipe, held up the measuring cup to the candle, and nodded.

Dean was watching, or rather trying to talk to him.

“And this concerns you ...” William stirred his mixture. “How?”

“Why do you do that?” Dean asked.

“Do what? Stir Dino, you have to if you want the ingredients to mix properly.”

“That’s not what I mean. You answer me, and talk to me clinically. Always pre-occupied. You never did that to your patients.”

“You aren’t my patient. You’re my son. I never liked you as much as I liked them.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “Ha-ha. Why are making a salad dressing anyhow?”

“I’m hungry.” William answered “And we’re having a late dinner with Joe. A small meeting and then we’re watching the batch apocalyptic films. They’re always a treat. Joe has been ...” he tried his tincture. “Almost right.” He said, “Joe’s been saving generator gas all day for this.”

“Late is right.” Dean looked at his watch. “You guys are hooking up the television to ...”

“Heaven’s no.” William shook his head. “Frank brought back the reel to reels as well. We’re hooking up an old projector. Ought to be fun.” He tasted his dressing again. “Ah, perfect. I’ll wait until we’re ready to eat to add it to the salad. Did you want to join us?”

“No. I’m going to bed.”

“That ... Dino, is the exact reason you have a problem.”

“Excuse me.”

“With women.”

“I’m not talking to you about a problem with women, I’m talking to you about a problem with Frank.”

“Over a woman. Ellen.” William gathered his things. “Ellen in a sense is his. Sorry. Fact of life. Whether their little relationship was carried on morally right or wrong, it is still a fact that they were together long before you entered the picture. If Ellen is ready to move on, then more power to you. I see no reason for you to fear Frank.”

Dean scoffed. “I don’t fear Frank. I just want to get along with him. That’s all.”

William laughed, “Well, that would be possible if you stopped trying to steal his woman.”

“I’m not trying to steal his woman, I’m trying to be friends with her.”

William hummed out an ‘hmm.’

“Stop that.” Dean said. “I just need advice.”

“Fine.” William took on a fatherly look. “You want to be friends with Ellen. Help her through this difficult situation. Befriend her I think that is a very good idea. For the both of you. You too, you need friends. Just don’t bore her ...”

“Dad.”

“It’s true, Dino. You bore a person, that’s why you never had friends. You and your science mumbo-jumbo stuff. But, all that aside.” William said. “What I’m getting from you is, that you just want peace. You want this friendship without problems. Frank is going through a difficult time. He’s threatened, that’s all. He’ll be fine. If not. You’ve dealt with bullies your whole life. Do what you always do. Stand up and out smart them.”

Dean nodded. “Thank you.”

“Hope I helped. But I must be off.” William grabbed the two bowls.

“Dad, just so you know. I don’t think I’ll bore Ellen. I think her and I will connect on a science level. In fact, tomorrow ...” Dean said so pleased. “I’m taking her out and I’m teaching her how to take air samples. We’re going to hit all over.”

“Air samples.”

“Yes. What do you think?”

“Remember when you were twelve and you got that comprehensive science kit. You took it immediately down the street to impress that young

girl you liked.”

“Yes.”

“What did she say to you?”

Dean thought. “She called me a geek and went inside her house.”

William smiled. “Exactly.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You asked what I thought of you and Ellen and the air samples. Think of the outcome of that story. That’s what I think.” William walked away.

Dean stood alone in the kitchen. “I hate talking to him.”

^^^

George shook his head. “I know we need the hands, but we’re talking about taking all the men from Ashtonville to make this Montana trip.”

“We need Miguel,” Joe said. “He was a truck driver. He’ll assist us in bringing the truck back for the salvage runs. Henry and John are needed as well for the technical side. In all seriousness, George. If his place is as big as you say and we want to get back in one week, we need all the hands we can get to check this place out as quickly as possible, and get our idea of what we need.”

“If I may,” William interjected. “You aren’t taking all the men. I’m here, so is Dean and Frank. Contrary to what my son appears, don’t let his size and brains fool you. He is quite capable of handling situations. As far as keeping the community safe ...” he chuckled. “Leaving one more man here is not going to make a difference. We have Frank.”

Jo held out his hand. “There you have it. William wisdom. Situation settled. Now ... we leave the day after tomorrow, so, let’s take a break from all this and have some fun.” He clapped his hands together once. “Hook up that projector for some apocalyptic training films.”

The three of them were already position facing the only white wall. Joe headed to the projector, but stopped when he heard a knock on the door. “Can you handle this, George?” He asked and walked to the door.

Andrea stood there. She was wearing a summer dress and holding a plate.

“Andrea?”

“Evening, Joe.” She said. “I saw a light, and thought if you were hungry, we could have a snack and chat. I made cookies.”

“They look great. I was just settling to watch the training films. You

want to join?”

“Love to.” Andrea stepped in.

“You look very nice,” Joe said.

“This thing?” Andrea smiled as she walked to the living room. “I found it. Tossed it on and ...” she paused when she saw George and William. “You have company. I’m sorry. I’m interrupting.”

“No, come in. Join us.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

Andrea inched her way to the sofa that was set up theater style, and sat next to William.

“Cookies?” William asked her.

“A-hmm.” Andrea set the plate down.

“Nice dress.” William raised an eyebrow. “Were you also just in the neighborhood.”

Andrea gave a scolding look to William.

“All right.” Joe announced. “We’re ready. I’d say hit the lights but they’re already ...”

“Hey.” Frank blasted out when he walked in. “Why’s it so dark?”

“Christ,” Joe mumbled. “If you must know we’re watching training films.”

“Yes!” Frank hurried into the living room and stopped. “Whoa. The community elderly.”

Andrea gasped.

“Is like no one under the age of forty invited?” Frank asked.

“Go!” scolded Joe. “Out.”

“But ...”

“Now.”

“There’s cookies,” Frank said.

“I don’t care. Leave.” Joe instructed. “I can’t believe you would say something like that. Insulting everyone.”

“Fine.” Quickly, Frank extended a hand, grabbed a cookie, and despite the fact that Andrea smacked his hand, he took it anyhow and left.

After a huff, Joe stood by the projector, ready to turn it on. He lowered his voice to a whisper. “See?” he waved a pointing finger at William and George. “You both questioned why I said no one under forty can hang with us tonight. Do I know the younger generation, or what?” he turned on the projector.

Saturday, June 13th

Ashtonville, Connecticut

He was feeling the slight effects of a hang over. Perhaps Joe shouldn't have drunk that wine the night before. Wine always had that affect on him. However, he was celebrating with George, and tired or not, he'd drive only the first six hours or so, then someone else would take the wheel.

Double-checking the chord, Joe made sure that the generator and pump system was secure on top of the van before they took. That generator would be the link to them getting gas along the way. Economy van or not. He wasn't making it to Montana on a single tank of gas.

Joe pulled out the sheet of paper Frank had given him regarding directions to the three eccentric farmers in Ohio. If the Garfield project really existed, farmers were something they needed. They'd make the stop on the way there.

Last bag in the van, passengers almost all inside, Joe gave a once over of all they were taking. Daylight had broken and the good day driving hours were ahead. He was ready to go.

Almost.

"Honestly, Joe." Henry followed him. "Montana. I'm making on last plea."

"Shut up, Henry, you're going," Joe said.

"But, Joe."

"No buts." Joe waved a scolding finger. "Get in the car."

"All the young men are leaving."

"There are two of you."

"Exactly." Henry argued. "Don't you think you should leave me behind to protect the women?"

Joe snickered.

"I don't do well on long trips."

"No one does."

"I'll vomit," Henry said.

"I'll get you a bag."

"Maybe twice, three times."

"I'll bring plenty." Joe paid him no mind.

"I get upset. And I'll talk, what if I talk too much ..."

"I'll duct tape you." Joe shut the back of the van. "Get in. Be quiet. Take the pill William gave you."

"I think he wants me dead."

"Christ, Henry, do you blame him?" Joe pointed. "Go. Van."

Sweetly her voice called out. "Joe!"

Joe winced.

Henry chuckled. "You have a girlfriend."

"Go." Joe scolded, and then turned around. "Hey, Andrea."

"I brought you some goodies for the trip." She handed him a bag. "Share with the others."

"Andrea, this is very sweet. Just in time too. We're leaving."

"I know. You be careful." She leaned in and kissed him on the cheek.

"Thank you," Joe nodded and stepped back toward the driver's door.

"I'll pray for you."

"Thanks." Joe opened the door. He gave a scolding glance to Henry who was leaning between the front towns. "Get ..."

Andrea called out again, "Make sure you keep touch. Use that radio."

He flashed an annoyed look in the van, then turned and smiled to Andrea. "Thanks." Again, he attempted to get inside. Until...

"Dad." Frank called out.

Joe grumbled. "This is why I wanted t leave before sun up." He backed up. "Yes, Frank?"

"Glad I caught you. I just wanted to say goodbye and be careful."

Joe pointed to Andrea. "She took care of that. But thanks." He gave a pat to Frank's cheek.

"Keep in touch. Use the radio."

"Yes, Frank, I know. I'm going now." Joe arched his body into the van. "One week. That's all we'll be gone, and ..."

"Joe!" Ellen called.

Joe hesitated. He looked to the passenger seat to George.

"I'd go." George said.

"Christ," He grunted. "One ore second." With a huff, he stepped from the van. "Yes, Ellen."

Ellen embraced him. "I wanted to say goodbye. Be careful."

"I will." Joe kissed her on the cheek, and stepped back from the hug. "And no causing trouble."

She shook her head.

“See you in a week.” He reached for the door again.

“Joe, don’t forget to keep in touch,” Ellen said. “Use the ...”

“Radio. Yes. I know.” Joe waved, and before he could be interrupted in his departure any further, he got in the van and started to drive away.

Frank, arms folded, watched with pride as the van pulled down the street. His focus stayed there until he heard a sniffing. Turning his head to the right, he looked down to Ellen. “Are you crying?”

She shook her head. “No.”

He peered past Ellen to Andrea. “Why are you crying?”

“I’m just I’m just overwhelmed at this moment.” She fanned herself. “They are taking off to a new world. Like pilgrims. Like the original Mayflower. Like ...” She sniffed. “Columbus. Your father is the new Christopher Columbus.”

Frank’s eyebrow raised and with an odd expression looked at Ellen. “Oh, she’s fuckin’ whacked.”

Andrea gasped. “And I will tell Joe about that little comment.” Offended, she stormed off.

Ellen snickered. “You sure know how to make friends.”

“Hey, I have you and ... and .. Why is Dean walking this way?”

Ellen looked over her shoulder, then to her watch. “Oh, we’re going.”

“We’re?” Frank questioned, “Where are we going?”

“Not you and me.” Ellen answered. “Me and Dean. Yesterday you know how Dean taught me how to do air samples. Today we’re implementing my new skills.”

“Where exactly are you going to collect these air samples?” His eyes shifted to Dean who now stood next to Ellen.

“About twenty miles out, near the coast. First we’re going to get as close to Manhattan as we can for some.”

“What exactly are you hoping to accomplish?” He noticed Dean still standing there and this irked him. “Excuse me!” Frank bellowed. “We’re trying to have a conversation.” He took Ellen by the arm and pulled her aside.

“Was that necessary?” Ellen asked him.

“Yes.”

“Frank, I have to go.”

“El, wait. Why are you doing this? You know, we’re all immune anyhow, and besides, you should work on your list. Which I might add you’re

not very good at.”

“Frank.” Ellen placed her hands on her hips. “Everyone is making lists. Yes, we’re all immune, but it’s been two weeks since the outbreak and we’re am curious to see if this virus is leaving the air.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Huh?” Ellen asked curiously. “What are you talking about?”

“You said we’re curious about the virus in the air.”

“Ass. Me and Dean. Not you and everyone else. Like I care what everyone else is curious about.” She shook her head and started to walk away.

“Whoa.” Frank grabbed her arm and pulled her back. “What’s with the attitude.”

“Me? You. You’re giving me attitude about going.”

“No, I’m not. I’m questioning why you suddenly have this interest in virus-cology.”

“It’s called virology.”

“Oh, so now you hang out with a scientist and you think you’re all intelligent.”

“You!” Ellen pointed. “Have a problem. You gave me shit yesterday about this.”

“I did not.”

“Yes, you did. I told you what we were doing and you laughed.”

“That’s because I didn’t think he wasn’t teaching you anything. he was lying so he could spend time with you.”

Ellen laughed. “What? Why would you say that?”

“I watched. I didn’t see any samples.”

“Because it was air. God!” Ellen heaved out a sigh. “Frank? I’m going. OK? Dean brought all the equipment to do this. I want to do this. Never mind that I don’t have prior knowledge or skills. It stops me from seeing death at every corner. My kids. Your kids. It keeps me busy. I need that.”

Silence.

Humbled.

Frank nodded once. “I’m sorry. You’re right.” He exhaled. “Be careful. OK?”

“I will.” Ellen stepped back.

“El, wait.” Frank looked around, and then kissed Ellen quickly. “Be back before dark. It gets dangerous.”

Ellen nodded, turned, and walked away.

“I mean it.” Frank watched. Ellen had waved, joined Dean, and kept

on going. Frustrated, he shook his head and stood there.

Dairy, Ohio

They were still there as Frank predicted. Feisty, ornery and still bickering. But Joe and George didn't mind their little visit to the three farmers in Dairy. In fact they were enjoying it, along with the fresh corn on the cob they served. They felt somewhat guilty for leaving Henry in the van. But they didn't want to frighten their agricultural prospects.

Joe felt stuffed, he wiped his mouth with a napkin and tossed it on the table. "That was excellent." he huffed out a breath. "Now back to what we were saying. Right now, we're gearing up to go check out the place."

Dirk sucked the corn from his teeth loudly as he spoke. "Are we one of them supply runs you mentioned?"

George tilted his head with a smile. "You could say that."

"Now see." Dirk pointed. "Here's where I'm lost. You were the president. Ya think you'd thought of farmers."

"I did." George said. "Well, agricultural experts. But, they died."

"Killed them did ya?" Dirk snickered.

"Aw, Dirk." Thelma whined "Why ya have to be like that to the man. Have some respect."

"Thelma." Dirk snapped. "He ain't the president no more. If he is, he got himself a sorry country and no one to vote. Probably win again."

Stan, the quiet one, finally spoke up. "I don't think these men are hear to listen to you two fight. They need an answer."

Thelma grumbled. "Got our own crop to worry about it. How we gonna go all the way to Montana and run our fields here."

Dirk's hand slammed on the table in annoyance. "Aw hush now, Thelma, you ain't that much of a stupor now are ya to think they're gonna make us commute back and forth. Gees, Woman."

Joe hid back his laugh. "Actually, we want you three to live in our community. We're trying to rebuild civilization ... eventually."

Thelma shook her head. "Don't count on me having no children. I did that."

"Fifty million years ago." Dirk insulted. "Can we leave her behind."

George turned to Joe with a look that all but said, 'are we doing the

right thing?’. But the three knew farming, and eccentric or not, what they knew of farming was more than anyone sitting in Ashtonville. They needed them. And at very least, the three would be entertaining.

Ashtonville, Connecticut

William was surprised when he opened his front door. “Frank?”

“It’s six-thirty.” Frank said in a not-so-happy manner.

William glanced down to his watch. “That it is. Thank you. I was wondering if my watch was incorrect. Come inside.” William opened the door wider and Frank stepped in.

“No, I’m not here as official time keeper. Where is your son?”

“He’s not here.”

“Did he get back?” Frank asked.

“Not that I know of.”

“Fuck. It’s almost dark. He has Ellen.”

“I believe Ellen went with him.”

“Still it’s ...” Frank stopped when Andrea walked in to the living room from another area of the house. She held a plate of food. “Man, you make your rounds.”

“Pardon me?” Andrea questioned, confused.

Frank shook his head.

William decided to clarify. “Frank is a bit concerned about Dean not returning.”

Andrea waved out her hand. “Oh, I’m sure he’ll be here shortly. Why are you worried about Dean. He’s a big boy.”

“Not, Dean,” Frank replied. “Ellen.”

“Well, she’s fine, Frank. She’s with Dean.” Andrea smiled.

William cleared his throat. “I believe that’s what concerns Frank.”

“Oh.” Andrea nodded. “I’m sure Dean can take care of her. Plus, Frank, Ellen’s been through ...” Andrea sighed. “Quite a tragedy. She needs someone right now to take her mind off of things.”

“She has me.” Frank said.

“Yes, but you have Johnny. Ellen needs someone on a different level. From what she has told me, she’s not had a very good life with her husband. Maybe she needs a different type of companionship.”

“She got that from me for years.”

Andrea smiled politely. “But that’s different, Frank.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Yes, it is. You ... you were married.” Andrea nodded.

“And ... your point is?” Frank asked.

Andrea’s mouth dropped open in her speechless state. She inhaled, looked at William, and then cleared her throat. “I’m going in the other room.” With a turn, she walked out.

“What’s wrong with her?” Frank asked.

William took Frank by the arm. “Nothing. Just like there is nothing for you to worry about. In fact, they probably returned and just didn’t tell me,” William said as he led Frank to the door.

“You might be right. I’ll check the clinic.”

“You do that.”

“Thanks.” Frank opened the door.

“Oh, and Frank. If they aren’t back, I’m sure they’re close to pulling into Ashtonville now. OK?” When he received a nod from Frank, politely William smiled and bid him goodnight. He closed the door.

“Is he gone?” Andrea asked.

“Yes, it’s safe.” William said.

“Are you worried about Dean and Ellen, William?”

“Not at this moment.” William replied. “I worry about when they return.” He glanced back at the door in reference to his concerns over Frank.

Ellen sat perched upon a large rock. Her knees bent up close to her chest, and her arms folded around them. She stared out into the ocean as a slight breeze came back to her, blowing softly through her hair. The last of the day’s light reflected off the water, giving it a silent, shimmering appearance.

“Hey.” Dean called from behind. “We’re all done, are you hungry?”

“Starved.”

“I’ll be back.” He ran to Joe’s SUV, which sat poised above them and returned a few moments later. “Here.” He held wine glasses in front of her. “Hold these.”

Ellen took them. “You brought wine?”

“Well.” Dean sat down next to her, he had a brown bag. “I brought dinner.” He pulled the bottle of wine from the bag, put it between his legs, and opened it. “Hold the glasses.” He began to pour it.

“Dean?”

“Yes?”

“You weren’t like counting on some romantic interlude, were you?” Ellen joked and nudged him.

“No.” Dean began to blush. “Stop. You’re embarrassing me.”

“We did have that moment of weakness in Doc Breyer’s lab.”

Dean inhaled, then released the breath in a heavy sigh. “I know.”

“It wasn’t bad.” Ellen whispered.

“I ... know.” Dean winked. “But you and I discussed *that* and ...”

“Frank.”

“Frank.” Dean said. “Tonight though. I knew that the beach would be the last stop we would make, and I thought it would be a nice change of pace to have dinner here, that’s all. Honestly, I’m not trying to ...”

“Seduce me?”

“No,” Dean put the bottle down and took his glass from Ellen. “Get killed while trying to seduce you.”

“Frank.” Ellen shook her head and peeked in the bag. “So ... what did you bring?”

Dean smiled. “Here, hold my glass again.” He handed his wine to Ellen, and then he opened the bag and reached in. “We have bread.” He placed the two small loaves between them. “Smoked sausage, courtesy of the Hickory Farms in town. Between you and me, I cleaned them out of that processed cheese, that stuff lasts forever. I also have olives, and Snack Pack pudding for desert. Complete with utensils.”

“Mustard?”

“Little packets.” Dean held them up.

“My goodness, Dean. It’s a beach picnic.”

“I tried.”

“This is very nice, thank you.” Ellen spoke softly resting her head against her knees.

“You’re welcome.” Dean stared at her for a second, reached out his hand, and ran the back of his fingers gently down her face. He smiled with a shivering breath and returned to getting their dinner ready. “Anyhow . . . I figure we would need something nice after visiting New York.”

Ellen cringed. “That was awful. Of course, we didn’t get into the heart of it, but we were close enough. It was like something from out of a science fiction movie.”

Dean handed Ellen her sandwich. “I have news for you, Life right now is something from out of a science fiction movie. Eat up.”

“Thanks.” Ellen began to eat, but suddenly returned to a stare of the

ocean.

“El?” he snapped his finger before her. “Something wrong.”

“No, uh, why?” She returned from the daze and took a bite.

“I lost you for a moment.”

“Oh, it’s nothing.” Ellen continued to eat. “I was just remembering how many times I used to bring my kids out here, they loved it. I always hated all the sand and the mess. Now what I wouldn’t give to do it just one more time.”

“What I wouldn’t give to have done it once.”

Ellen looked at him. “What do you mean? Haven’t you ever been to the ocean?”

“Oh, sure.” Dean stretched out his legs. “I don’t mean that. I mean, you know, to have a kid, and watch him or her play, to have that child look at you like no other person ever could. Hold your hand, say they love you and really mean it. That’s something I never had or probably never will. I’m sorry, am I being insensitive?”

“No, not at all. Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Making me feel fortunate for having that, instead of sorry for losing it.”

“Well, you’re welcome.”

There was a silent moment, and then Ellen turned to him. “Dean? Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Yesterday, I was going through a lot of my kids’ things. Pictures. Poems they wrote. Stuff like that. Just looking, and remembering. Getting a smile here and there, instead of sadness.”

“That sounds nice.”

“It was. Anyhow, I started ...” Ellen paused. “Never mind. This is gonna sound silly.”

“What? What is?”

After hesitating, Ellen continued, “I was thinking about something. I want your opinion on two things.”

“Shoot. What are they?”

“Be honest with me. I was thinking that I don’t want to spend the rest of my life without a child. Eventually, maybe even soon, I’d like to have a child.”

A peaceful look hit Dean’s face. “That unconditional love and look that only a child can give.”

“Exactly. I mean nothing will ever replace Taylor and Josh. But to fill emptiness in my life, a child could. So do you think I’m wrong for thinking that, and do you think it’s to soon to think that?”

“No, Ellen.” Dean shook his head. “There’s no normal time frame on anything. Because there’s no normal anymore. Plus, what better incentive to survive and move on than to have someone depend and love you so much.”

Ellen gave a gentle smile. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. So ... what does Frank have to say about that.”

After a flutter of her lips, Ellen chuckled. “I didn’t say anything to Frank. Not yet. I wanted to get the opinion of someone who wouldn’t base it on a preconceived notions of who I am.”

“That’s an odd comment.”

“Well, think about it. Frank’s known me forever. He’ll base his opinion of my wanting a child on who he knew before the plague.”

“Is the pre-plague Ellen that different from this Ellen?”

“How can she not be?”

Dean stared for a moment. “True. Then I guess I’m getting to know this one.”

“That makes two of us.” The wind blew and Ellen shivered.

Dean saw this. “You’re cold. It is getting chilly. You wanna head home?”

“Am I boring you?”

“No, I’m loving the dinner and conversation. It’s just that it’s ...” Dean nodded and shivered.

“Cold.” Ellen chuckled. “Hey, I got an idea. I’m not ready to head back yet. Not just yet. How about ...” She looked behind her.

“The truck?” Dean asked.

Ellen nodded.

“Sounds great. We can see the ocean and be warm. Let’s go,” Dean said.

They didn’t waste time. Quickly gathered up the items and moved them to Joe’s SUV. They stayed at the beach for a long time. Finishing their meal, while watching the ocean, sometimes silent, sometimes talking about their childhoods.

After Dean and Ellen had finished, they packed up and headed back, taking it very slow on the dark roads they traveled. It took them longer then

they would have liked to return. But with no electricity, there were no road lights. By no means was it entirely late when they returned. Just dark. After they unloaded the supplies into the clinic, they returned Joe's SUV, parking it in front of the house where Joe lived.

Dean turned the key, shutting off the ignition. "I'll run these up to Frank." He clutched them in his hand.

"I can do that." Ellen said and took them. "If he's up, he's probably expecting me to stop in."

"Yeah, probably." Dean lowered his head. "Um . . ." His hand tapped on the steering wheel. "Good job today." He looked at her.

"Even though it was work, I had fun." Ellen gave a half smile. "Dean? I appreciate after the work part was done, that we talked about things. I want you to know that. O.K.?"

"O.K." He reached for the door handle.

"And."

Dean stopped in his reach.

She was silent.

"And?"

"And..." Ellen turned in her seat to face him. "And you didn't have to be so nice tonight. You took my mind off of things for a little while."

"I'm glad," Dean said in a quiet manner.

"Yeah, me too. I want you to know." She took a deep breath. "I'll uh, I'll always remember tonight. Thanks."

"You're welcome."

She leaned over to him, kissing him on the cheek. But Ellen didn't pull back as quickly as she darted in. Slowly, she inched away, and then her and Dean locked into a quiet stare.

But that was all that happened. Frank's hand 'banged' on the door, causing both of them to jolt. After a chuckle, Ellen quickly she opened up the car door. "Frank, you scared me."

"Good." Frank tried peeking in the car. "What was going on?"

"Oh we were just saying goodbye."

Frank stared as Dean stepped from the car.

"In fact," Ellen said. "I was just bringing..."

"Where have you been?" he asked strongly.

"What?" Ellen laughed some. "O.K., I've been out with..."

"This is not a joke El. Don't you realize that things can be a lot different out there? It's dark."

"Frank, I know..."

Dean closed the car door, approaching the two. “What’s up?”

“What’s up?” Frank looked at him. “Let me ask you a question, Dean. While you had her out there running around doing air samples or what have you. Did you even think to bring any type of protection? A weapon?”

“Of course I did.” Dean blew off Frank’s attitude. “I brought a revolver.”

“Do you know how to use it?”

Dean chuckled. “I should hope I do. I’ve been in the Army for ten years.”

“Then the Army didn’t teach you jack shit.” Frank blasted him. “Do you not realize we haven’t any idea what’s left out there? Didn’t it occur to you that you shouldn’t be running around all over the place let alone when it’s dark out. You should have ...”

“Hey!” Dean raised his voice at him. “Who in the hell do you think you’re talking to? I’m not some peon of yours. I’m not some idiot who doesn’t know anything. I don’t . . .” Dean raised his hand as he calmed himself. “I don’t appreciate you speaking to me like I am. And I don’t appreciate you insinuating I can’t take care of myself or Ellen.” He stepped back. “Goodnight Ellen. Thanks for all your help today.”

Ellen looked at Frank, then followed Dean. “Dean, wait.” She caught up to him. “I’m sorry about Frank.”

“Don’t apologize for him.” Dean shook his head.

“Please understand that he’s going through a bad time right now. All right?” She folded her arms.

“Yes, well, so are you.” Dean raised his eyebrows and stared at her for a moment. “I’m letting it go. Don’t worry about it. I’ll see you in the morning?” His hand rested firm on her folded arm. “Bright and early? We have a lot to start on.”

“Bright and early.” Ellen watched Dean placed his hands in his pockets as he turned and walked slowly away. She shifted her eyes to Frank who moved to right next to her. Calmly she faced him. “Goodnight, Frank.”

“El, wait.” He took hold of her arm. “I just worry.”

“Worry about what?” Ellen pulled away abruptly.

“Losing you?”

“That’s absurd.”

“You think?”

Ellen paused.

“El, come on.” Frank stepped to her “You spend so much time with him. I know you guys created this bond when he was working on helping

Taylor. I know this. That's what scares me."

"I'm not going anywhere, Frank."

"You're not acting like it."

"Frank ... Where am I supposed to go? Huh? Do you actually think, after all these years, when we finally have a chance to be together the way we're supposed to be, that I would ... I don't know ... up and go to one of the few remaining other males."

"Yes."

"Oh, you're ridiculous." Ellen spun and walked away.

"El. Wait." Frank trotted to catch her, and after getting ahead of her, walked backwards. "Wait."

"What." Ellen stopped.

"Can we not fight in the middle of the street?"

"We aren't fighting. I'm just pissed at you."

"Fine. Can you be pissed at me inside? Let's go to your house."

"No," Ellen tried to get by him.

"El," Frank blocked her, then softened his voice. "Come on. It's been so long since you and I have been alone." He leaned closer to her. "So long." His words whispered as his lips hovered over hers. "Don't you miss it? Don't you miss me?"

"Aw, Frank," Ellen whined.

"El," He laid his hands on her face. "Be with me. I need you."

The door to the Ellen's home was barely shut. Frank and Ellen were embraced in a kiss that was intense and passionate. The weight of his body moved her against the wall, edging her to the free area of the living room. Lifting Ellen some with a tight hold, Frank led her to the floor. His kisses pounded, one after another, pulling, hard, intense, while his body nuzzled in between her legs.

"Frank," Ellen breathed out. "Not on the floor."

Frank pulled at her clothes. "Why?"

"Not here."

"Where?" he asked, and then kissed her again.

"Let's go upstairs."

His arm scooped under her, ready to hoist her with him as he stood, but he paused. "Do you have ... you know? He kissed her.

"What?"

“El.” He tried to convey facially his request.

“What?” Ellen kissed him softly.

“You know ...” Almost painfully, and embarrassed, he said, “Condoms.”

Ellen snickered. “Frank, don’t worry about it.” She grabbed him and kissed again.

After lovemaking, it was mid kiss, that Frank caught the glow of the wind-up alarm clock. “Shit.” He whispered and reached for it. “I have to go.” He set it down and kissed Ellen quickly.

“Frank, I wanted to talk to you about something.”

Frank began to slip from bed. “Can it wait until tomorrow?”

“It could. But I’d rather not. Right now is best.” Ellen sat up, keeping herself covered.

“What’s wrong?” Frank asked. He reached down to the floor and tossed Ellen her shirt. He then grabbed his clothes.

“Nothing, really, I ... I want to talk to you about maybe ... having a baby.”

Frank laughed as he put on his pants.

“Frank.”

He faced Ellen. “You’re serious.”

“Yes.”

“Well...” Sitting down, Frank reached for his socks and shoes, and began to place them on. “Having a baby. In a few years that might not be a bad idea.” He finished and stood, looking for his shirt. “I mean, get things settled, and start everything up again.”

“I’m not talking about a few years down the road. I’m talking soon. Very soon. Like trying immediately.”

The shirt slipped over his head, exposing his shocked and slightly angered expression. “Now?”

“Yes.”

“Unbelievable,” He shook his head in disbelief. “Was that what tonight was about?”

“What?” Taken aback, Ellen rose from the bed. “What are you talking about?”

“Tonight. Telling me not to worry about the condoms?”

“No, Frank.”

Frank continued, “The urgency in which you made love.”

Ellen laughed sarcastically. “Me? Urgent? Um, no. You. You, Frank.”

“You wanted to get pregnant.”

“And you just wanted fucked.”

With a jaw tense and clenching, Frank glared at her. “I’m going home. Next time you wanna pull your little tricks ...”

“Tricks!” Ellen leaped his way. “How can you trick someone you’ve been with for fourteen years? I thought you loved me.”

“I do!” Frank shouted. “I thought you loved me! Discuss it first with me El. I don’t want a baby. Not now.”

“Why are you so angry about this?”

“Because I feel like you just betrayed our kids. Our kids. They died, El. They all just died. And you wanna replace them so quick?”

Huffing Ellen stepped back. “You know what? Go home. You’re so fucked.”

“No, El, you are.” Frank flung open the bedroom door. “For even thinking this.” He stormed out.

In the aftermath of emotions left in the air of that room, Ellen just plopped to the bed.

Sunday, June 14th

Ashtonville, Connecticut

The pencil rattled as it fell to the clinic counter. Ellen picked it up and dropped it again. Once it lay still, she repeated the pattern. Pick up, drop. Pick up, drop. Until Dean had enough. His hand came down stopping the pencil.

“I told you waiting on results could get boring,” he said to Ellen.

“I know.”

“Did you want to find something else to do?” he asked.

“No, I’m working on my notebook.”

“You’re fussing.”

She shook her head. “No, really, I’m thinking.”

“I see. So ... any chance during your thinking phase, I can still that notebook and look at that poem.”

“No.”

“Why? You said the other day that I could.”

“That was before Frank said it sucked.”

“And how much poetry does Frank read?”

“You have a point.” Ellen inhaled. “Ok, here.” She opened the notebook. “Read.”

“Thanks.”

“And please don’t tell me it sucks.”

“I wouldn’t ever do that.”

“Be honest.”

“Let me read.”

“OK,” Ellen stood up “Is it hot in here?”

“Yes.” Dean started to read.

“I’m gonna go out side for a bit.”

“Go on.”

Ellen moved to the door.

“Oh, Ellen.” Dean called her. “This is very good.”

Ellen smiled. “Thank you. Thanks so much.” She walked out.

After he was sure she was gone, Dean exhaled. “Whew.” He shook his head and put down the notebook. “That was bad.”

Ellen had not been outside the clinic more than a minute when she saw Frank approaching. She tried to hurry back in, but he called her name.

“El, wait.”

She didn’t want to, but Ellen stopped. She wanted to visually convey to Frank that she didn’t want to speak to him, so she swooped her body in a turn. “What?”

He walked to her. “Last night didn’t end so good.”

“You think?”

“Stop this. Just ... stop. OK?”

“Frank, you and I have nothing to say to each other. I have air sample results to get back to.” Ellen turned for the door, and walked in.

“El.” Frank followed her.

“Now is not the time and this is not the place.” Ellen told him.

“You think I give a shit?” Frank asked hard.

“No, not really, that’s your whole problem.”

“No, see, El, that’s your problem. You don’t care.”

Ellen chuckled in disbelief. “What are you talking about.”

“If you even cared about me, you would have discussed this decision with me before you took steps to make it happen.”

“For your information, Frank,” Ellen said. “Last night. I had no hidden agenda.”

Frank looked away.

“You don’t believe me.”

“Would you.”

“I’m done.” Ellen threw her arms out.

“What? What do you mean, ‘done?’” Frank asked. “Us?”

“There is no us, Frank.”

“Why do you say that? Ever since I got back, you have said that.”

“It’s true.” Ellen said.

“Is it because I want us to take it slow in front of Johnny.”

“No,” Ellen shook her head. “It’s because we’re not a couple.”

“Then what do you call us?”

“Not a couple.”

Frank huffed out. “How can you make that statement after fourteen

years.”

“And you have to ask?” Ellen said. “Got news for you Frank. I was married to someone else. So were you. We weren’t a couple. We were friends who slept together. Period.”

“We’re more. I love you.”

“Not the way a man should love a woman.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“Frank, I really don’t want to talk about this.”

“Too late, El. We are. And I think you’re saying this shit because you’re pissed.”

“Damn right I’m pissed.” Ellen argued back.

“Why? Because I didn’t like a decision you made out of your grief?”

“See? I think your decision is based on your grief.”

“I hate when we do this back and forth shit.” Frank said.

“Then let’s not.” Ellen folded her arms.

Frank shook his head. “This isn’t going anywhere. I came to talk to you to work things out. What do I get? I get that we aren’t an us.”

“How can we be an us, Frank, we haven’t a clue how to even do that correctly.”

“Then let’s try.” Frank said. “Let’s just see what happens.”

“I don’t think that’s possible.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I’m not so convinced that the only thing you want out of me is...”

“Don’t.” Frank held up his hand. “Don’t even go there. Don’t even suggest that all I want is sex out of you. I could say the same thing.”

Ellen fluttered her lips. “That’s giving yourself a lot of credit, don’t you think.”

“I’m out of here.” Frank moved away. “Maybe once you calm down and change your mind about this baby thing, we can talk rationally.”

“I have changed my mind about the baby thing.”

Frank stopped at the door and turned around. “You did?”

“Oh, yeah. My original decision was to have a baby with you. Don’t get me wrong, Frank, I still want that baby. But if you won’t help me, then I’ll find someone who will.”

Frank bit his bottom lip and glared. “Then I suggest you find yourself a sperm donor.” He slammed his hands into the door and stormed out.

Ellen was holding a breath. She slowly let it out and jumped when

she heard a clearing of a throat. She spun around. Dean stood there.

“Without crossing a line ...” Dean tilted his head. “That ... that was harsh what you said.”

“I know. Frank brings out the worst in me.”

“Some times people ...”

“Are the air samples done yet?” Ellen asked, obviously changing the subject.

“You don’t want to talk about this.”

Ellen shook her head.

“Then in that case, some of the samples are done.”

“And?”

Dean twitched his head toward the back. “I’ll show you.”

Ellen started to follow Dean, she took one more glance back to the door, and then she looked back no more.

Dickinson, ND

Joe leaned back on his elbows and stared across the huge field where they had stopped for a rest. He looked behind him as John and George conversed over an open map, and then straight ahead to where Henry vomited. The site of Henry up heaving—though demented—made Joe chuckle. Especially after Henry carried on about his disastrous sixth grade dance.

In a pretty relaxed state, Joe had no desire but to lay there and relax. The trip had been uneventful, they’d not seen a single person.

Though not far from him, George discussed finding the Garfield project, Joe just listened. They talked about how it would be hard to find. How the small road was hidden off the main one. Joe wasn’t wagering on there being a hidden survival place, and he wasn’t wagering on there not being one.

One day at a time.

He was pretty relaxed about the whole thing. Though Henry and Miguel stated their apprehensions about Garfield, and how it could have been a government urban legend, Joe didn’t.

Why worry about it, The truth would be evident soon enough. And if worse came to worse and there was no Garfield project then Joe got to see

the country and an a good idea of what they had to prepare for.

Ashtonville, Connecticut

Even though he appeared busy, it was obvious that William eavesdropped. In his kitchen, cookbook propped up on a stand, two lanterns for illumination, he went from looking at the pages to peering over the rims of his half square glasses to Ellen and Andrea.

A little of this, a dash of that.

Cock an ear and listen.

But Ellen and Andrea didn't seem to notice, in fact, William waited on his chance to intervene, which would come.

"You don't have to leave do you?" Ellen asked.

"No, I was just wondering if I should go check on Jenny and the children." Andrea said.

"Jenny is fine," Ellen assured. "She babysat for me numerous times." From assured to sad, but Ellen quickly polled out.

"Well, then I'll wait until after our meal, which smells ..." She inhaled. "Delicious. William, dinner smells divine."

"Thank you. Although if my son doesn't return shortly, we will eat without him."

"Anyhow ..." Andrea retuned to Ellen. "You were saying?"

"I'm not boring you right?"

"Good heavens no. Why would you say that?"

William chuckled. "She realizes that she's been hanging around my son and being boring is contagious."

Andrea shook her head. "Continue."

"I was just getting your opinion on what I said to Frank."

Andrea thought for a moment. "It was a bit insensitive."

William spoke up, "I disagree."

Both women faced him.

"Not that I'm eavesdropping or anything, I couldn't help but hear. But ..." William said, "Yes, the words were cutting. However, this is a man you've known most of your life Ellen. He should understand what it is you want. He should be favorable to helping. You on the other hand spoke

through your frustration.”

“Yes, I did. Andrea, what do you think of my decision?” Ellen asked.

“Which one. The one to have a child or to do it with or without Frank.”

“The child.”

Andrea partially smiled. “Having been a nurse for many years, I’ve seen woman in your position reach the same decision.”

“It’s not like I want to replace them,” Ellen said.

“No,” Andrea shook her head. “You need to be a mother.”

“Exactly. Yes, I have Joe and Frank, and Johnny. But they aren’t really mine.”

“Joe’s like a father,” Andrea said.

Ellen nodded. “But he isn’t mine. My children were mine. I loved them without reason and unconditionally, they loved me the same. I need that in my life. I need that to go on. Yeah, I’m going on, but not the way I want. If I have that to focus on, I think ... no, I know I’ll be better.”

“The there’s nothing wrong with the decision or timing, “ Andrea commented. “Have you explained your reasoning to Frank?”

“Ok, well ...” Ellen held up her hand. “After I left Doc Breyer’s I ran into Frank again. We were calmer, I told him what I just told you and things erupted again.”

“He got angry over what you said?” Andrea asked.

“No, I got angry over what he said. He told me I always make decisions without thinking, and this was one of them. When I asked him what he thought I’d do, end up not wanting the child once it was born? He said yes. I’ll not want it and act like it.”

William fluttered his lips. “He’s a boob. Sorry, Ellen. I like the man but ... if you want a child. Have a child. Plain and simple. Try to conceive, it if happens it is meant to be.”

Andrea wisped out an ‘oh’, and swayed her head humming “William, you have an insight. If the Good Lord wants Ellen to have a child, He’ll deliver.”

William pointed a spoon. “And so will Ellen once she gets pregnant. And, I’m also willing to wager something else. I’m willing to bet that once you get pregnant, more so once this child is born., Frank will want everything to do with it and forget what he said about not wanting another baby now.”

Ellen chuckled. “That would be nice, but ... I can’t get pregnant to Frank without Frank’s help.”

“Who said the child had to be Frank’s in order for him to want to

raise it?” William asked. “That child will be yours, in return, that is what Frank will want a part of. Your child.” William continued to mix. “Do as he suggested, Find a sperm donor. You’ve many around here to choose from. Just ...” He set down the bowl, “Don’t choose Henry.”

Andrea gasped. “Is that a racist remark?”

“No, it’s an annoyance remark.” William replied, “Something tells me Henrys child will whine as much as he does. Take a pick, Ellen, you needn’t even sleep with the man, my son probably could help out on the medical end. In fact ...” William snapped his finger. “What about using my son? Genetically it would be a good move. And I don’t believe he’s ever had sex so supplying without a woman wouldn’t be a problem.”

This made Ellen laugh extremely hard. “William, you’re funny.”

“But in all serious, if you truly are willing to move forward without Frank’s help, think of Dean.”

Andrea said, “Are you sure it’s not a plight for a grandchild.”

“No,” William answered. “Wont we all be part of the child’s life? I’m not being biased, Dean is a good choice.”

The back door opened at that second. “What about me?” Dean said.

“Oh,” William answered. “We were just talking about you supplying some of that pent up sperm for the Ellen baby cause.”

On that remark, Dean turned and walked right back out.

Monday, June 15th

Garfield Country, Montana

The day's first light began to shine. The wooded area was still dark, and headlights were needed. The six men made it past the first gate and headed down the bumpy dirt road in search of the community.

"It shouldn't be much further, Joe." George noted as Joe drove. "Directions say about a half mile."

Henry leaned between the two front seats. "I think we're on the wrong road."

"Ninety-four," Joe said. "Ninety-four goddamn times, you complained or made a derogatory remark. Do you realize that. There's something wrong with you."

Henry snickered, "Oh, yeah, well, you're counting."

Frustrated, Joe bit his lip. "Where's the duct tape. Miguel do your thing to Henry again."

"No," Henry called out. "I'm serious. That looks like a mountain up ahead, you can see it, look."

Joe looked over the steering wheel. "Seems like we're headed right towards it."

George looked over his notes. "No, this has to be it."

Joe hit the breaks, and everyone jerked. "It is."

In front of them, the road became paved, and it led to the opening of a gated tunnel. Just in front of the gate was an empty guard booth, and on the gate a sign which read, UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT PROPERTY. NO TRESPASSING!

Joe stepped from the van, and everyone followed. He walked to the booth with a chuckle. "It's well-guarded, I can see." He then walked to the gate which closed off the tunnel. The gate was secured by a padlock and chain. "Oh, this will keep people out." Joe said sarcastically as he reached for the chain.

"Wait!" John yelled to him. "Don't touch it." He ran up to Joe. "Don't touch the fence."

“What the hell?” Joe looked strangely at him.

John gently moved Joe with his hand. “Step back.” John looked around and found a stick. He picked it up and hurled it at the fence. The stick clanked against the metal and fell to the ground.

Joe shook his head. “John, that is not going to open the gate. We’re gonna have to shoot it off. Throwing twigs is just not going to do it. Unless of course you want to intimidate it into opening, in that case we’ll all just sit here and yell names at it. Or annoy it and have Henry bitch.”

John picked up the twig. “Ha, ha, ha, very funny, Joe.” He pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to Joe. “This compound is powered by three solar energy generators. One of which generates the security system, here.” John showed him on the paper. “The system secures all ground entrances in by shock and burn waves. If by some chance the generators were up and running, you would have been electrocuted.”

Joe refolded the paper and handed it back to John. “Don’t you mean ‘solarcuted?’” Joe walked back to the van and opened the back hatch, and retrieved his rifle. He returned to the other men who were standing at the gate. “Watch out.” He aimed at the lock, fired one shot, and the padlock and chain fell to the ground. Joe walked up and opened the huge gate. “Let’s get back in the van and go.”

They drove through the dark tunnel. The only guiding light was the appearance of sun at the end.

When pulled out of the tunnel, they were on a roadway that sat above the huge complex.

The complex, which was recorded to have been built on twenty-five square miles of land, was laid out like a community meant to grow. As far as they could see, sporadically encircling the compound where huge, gray, warehouse-type buildings. Those were marked on the plans to be used for storage. To their left was plain land, laid out for farming. The three long greenhouses could also be seen. To their right were the small rows of houses, all of which were tan in color and diminutive. All of them, five rows of ten, each had a scrawny front and back yard. There were several other structures around, and land that looked as if to be used for more buildings if needed.

George stepped out of the van first. He spread the map on the hood of the van.

Henry was astonished. “I can’t believe it actually exists. It’s so big.” He stood next to George and looked down at the map. “George, this looks better than it does on paper.”

George whose back was facing the complex, agreed. “It sure does,

doesn't it."

Joe looked back at the small tunnel. "Hey, George, how in the hell are we going to get trucks with supplies in this place?"

"We're gonna have to use the other entrance, here." George pointed. "But we have no directions on how to get there so we'll have to figure it out." George turned and faced the men. "All right, We have all discussed this, Jonas and Miguel, you two will check out the agriculture side. Henry and John, you two check the solar generators. John, I believe you have the papers. Joe and I will check out the structures. Everybody, give a quick check, and we'll meet here in say one hour, just a quick check. After that then we'll get into everything more thoroughly."

They all grabbed the paper work for each of their divisions and headed off.

Henry and John were the first to return to the van. There they sat on the ground drinking warm beers until the others arrived.

Joe and George huffed a bit as they made it back up the small hill. Jonas and Miguel followed a few feet behind them.

Joe reached into the cooler filled with the beer bottles and grabbed one. He opened it, chugged it quickly so he would not taste the warmth of it. He wiped his mouth, then plopped on the ground next to Henry.

When the men were all finally seated in a circle, Henry was the first to speak:

"John and I checked out the generators, and they are definitely there. We feel that there should be no reason why we can't get them up and running with little problem. They each have a huge reserve pool, which tells me that they're one heck of a bunch of generators. Also, from what we could tell, is right now we only need two of them, and probably not even much of the second one. The third seems to be a spare for when more buildings are eventually built."

George nodded. "You're right, this place was designed to be started with fifty people, but the plan also includes growth. The population will definitely increase. It's designed for that. Joe and I checked out the structures. All the housing units appear to be the same. Military-style housing. No carpets, living room, dining area, nice-size kitchen, one-and-a-half baths and two bedrooms. Although none of the rooms are very big, they are adequate." George pulled out a small notebook and began to read. "They all have a

stove, fridge, heating and cooling units. Very, very basic. As far as furnishings, that too is very basic. So it's not an immediate need.. Also there is plumbing. It is not working."

"Oh my God," Henry gasped. "How do you know. Did you use a toilet and it not flush?"

Joe glared at Henry. "What the hell is the matter with you We turned on a goddamn faucet."

John raised his hand in interruption. "Henry and I read in our instructions that the filtering and pump systems won't work until we get the generator up and running. The one generator definitely controls that."

George closed his note pad. "Good, also the warehouses that we did get to, appear to be empty. And now Joe has something to add."

"Thanks, we also discovered the small school and library, though furnished, have no books. There is a small clinic-style hospital, no medication or supplies. There are two other smaller buildings, one seems to be set up like a grocer, no food. The other seems to be like the supply stores I remember in the military, but no supplies."

Miguel stood up. "We have a similar problem." He pointed to the land to the left of them. "All of that seems to be designated for different areas of farming. The greenhouses are set up. The warehouse is stocked with equipment, and what appears to be everything we need to get started."

Joe was puzzled. "So what's the problem?"

Miguel sat back down. "None of us, in any of the conversations that we've had, has mentioned that we know the first thing about farming. In order for us to determine what we need, we'll have to bring our trio out here first."

Joe winced. "We'll put that on our list. Right now I have to hook up the radio and let the others know we arrived. Then I say let's rest a bit, then get to work. During this week, gentleman, we have to list everything that we need, and more to get this place running. I have a feeling that will be one helluva list."

Ashtonville, Connecticut

"There." Ellen reached across the Scrabble board and placed down

the tiles. “That’s ten.”

Frank wrote down her score. “Thanks for waiting with me, Ellen.”

“Yeah, well, it doesn’t mean I like you or I’m not mad at you. I just want to be around when Joe radios. Take your turn.”

Frank smiled arrogantly. “Wait until you see this.” He proudly picked up four tiles and placed them on the board. “Ah-huh! Triple-word score. That’s three, and four is seven, plus one, three . . .”

“Wait a second! What is that?”

“My word. I added R, I, S, M, to your word ‘plague’ and hit the triple word.”

“And what exactly are you trying to spell?” she asked annoyingly.

“Plaguerism. You know when you steal someone else’s idea.”

“It’s not ‘plaguerism,’ goof. It’s ‘plagiarism’! Take it off.”

“Are you sure it’s not a word? I mean now it might be, since we’ve been plaguerized. Get it?”

“Take it off.”

At that instant Joe’s voice echoed through the kitchen over the speaker on the radio. “Frank. Frank are you there? Over.”

Frank sprang to his feet, knocking over the chair as he dove to the radio. “Dad, I’m here.”

“Hey, Frank. We found it, it really exists.”

“What’s it like?” Frank asked.

“It will work, but only with work.”

Ellen grabbed the microphone from Franks hand. “Hey, Joe, I miss you.”

“Hey, Kiddo, I miss you too.”

“So it’s really real?”

Joe answered Ellen’s question. “It’s real, very plain, but real. You guys will love it. It needs to be pretty much fully stocked.”

Frank retrieved the microphone from Ellen. “Hey, Dad, how much?”

“Well, basics are here. I mean the big stuff. It’s the little shit that we need. So we’re gonna spend the next couple days finding out exactly what that is, then we’ll head home. Oh, Frank, we sort of come up with a plan on the way out here and would like you to share it with everyone.”

“What is it?”

“We thought that once we knew exactly what needed, we’d break it down into categories and pair people off sending them out to get the stuff. It was just hypothetical planning on the way out, but unfortunately it looks like

that's what we're gonna have to do."

"That much?"

"Yeah. Listen I'm gonna get some rest. Check in if you have any problems, otherwise, I'll see you in about a week, as soon as we're done."

"All right, Dad, I'll see you." Frank turned off the radio. "El, they made it."

"I'm glad. I'm gonna go now, I didn't get much sleep last night, and I want to rest up before Dean and I go out and search for that cow." Ellen started to leave.

"You go on, thanks for whoa. Wait." Frank called her. "A cow? Did you say cow or did I miss understand you."

"No, I said cow. When we were doing the air samples, we saw a cow. We want to try to get a blood sample from it to see if it's immune to the virus, or a carrier."

"Why?"

"If it's a carrier, breeding it with another would not assure its offspring is immune. I mean obviously cows get the virus, why else would their carcasses be all over the place? But if it's immune, chances are there will be others, too."

"So you guys are going to walk up to this cow, stick a needle in it, and leave."

"No." Ellen rolled her eyes. "We're bringing it back. We saw it about ten miles away."

"You and Dean are going to bring back a cow? Why? Are we having steaks?"

Ellen shook her head. "I'm leaving." She headed to the front door.

"I'm serious, El." Frank gently held her arm. "If you and Dean manage to bring back this cow. What in the world are you going to do with it once you've tested it?"

"Uh Fresh milk maybe?"

"Milk. That's very smart."

"We're intelligent people Frank. Some people actually gain something from their education. Now please may I go? I need my rest, the cow is a big undertaking."

"You guys need any help?"

"Oh, no. We did real good with the dead bodies. How hard will one alive cow be?"

“Dean, she’s not budging!” Ellen pushed the cow’s backside with her own. The fluttered her lips, swatted her hand. “God, the flies. Are you pulling on the rope?”

“Yes.” Dean pulled with everything he had. But the cow rested on the hard pavement. He too, swatted away the abundance of flies.

“Dean, maybe we shouldn’t try to take her.”

“Why?”

“She could be sick, I mean ...” Ellen flung her hand in her face. “The flies.”

“We just won’t drink the milk, that’s all. Sick or not we can test her.”

“True.” Ellen exhaled and stood behind the cow, hands on her hips. “Well, how did we get her this far?”

“She followed us.” Dean dropped the rope and leaned against the truck out of breath.

“Maybe she decided she doesn’t like us.” She walked to the front of the cow and spoke in a high-pitched, upbeat voice. “Come on cow, wanna go?”

“El, she’s not a puppy.”

The cow looked at Ellen, mooed, shook hits head to shuck the flies in its eyes, and when it did, a long line of slimy salvia flung out at Ellen.

Shuddering with a vocal cringe, Ellen stepped back.

Dean glanced over the small pick up truck. “Ellen, how in the world are we going to get her in this truck?”

“Wait, I got an idea.” Ellen picked up the rope and walked over to the passenger door and opened it. “Come on, Dean, just start driving.”

“You want to drag her?”

“No, maybe if you drive real slow, I’ll hold onto the rope and she’ll follow us again.”

Dean shrugged his shoulders. “It’s worth a shot.”

They climbed into the truck and very slowly began down the road. The cow lifted itself from her lying position and began to walk side by side with the slow moving red truck.

“Dean, it’s working.”

“Yes but at this rate, it’ll take us three hours to get home.”

“True, but we’re coming home with a cow.”

Garfield Country, Montana

As the others napped soundly on the hard floor of the first row small house, Joe sat against the wall, knees bent up, smoking a cigarette. He watched the others, almost as if he were the watch-dog. It wasn't that he expected anything to jump out and get them. Then again, he was in bigfoot country. Joe needed *his* time. He had done his best thinking in the past, when he was alone. It was hard for him to comprehend, that even in a dead world, he had trouble being alone.

Joe had to work now on his long term plan. Once they got everything they needed, would they be able to run as a community? Most of those alive were total strangers. They had already, counted on each other, without disappointment or let down. But now it was different. Now each of them had to depend on each other to make their survival work. In a situation such as this, a situation where everyone had to do their part to eat, and to live, there had to be no loose links in the chain. Whether it be any of the fifteen of them, or any survivors they found in the future. Joe pulled out 'the Joe notebook' and began to write. 'No lose links' was scribbled boldly across the top of a blank page. This was something he felt they had to enforce. This was going to be *their* community. *They* were going to finish building as it had been intended. *They* were going to stride to have it flourish with the sweat and pain of their own bodies. And now, they would have to be careful, from this moment on, who they let in. One wrong person could break the project. Joe vowed to himself, as long as he was there, he would never allow that to happen.

Ashtonville, Connecticut

The fenced in yard was large, but not large enough. Ellen stood at the best distance she could from the cow. "All right, girl, you're not gonna charge at me are you?"

"She's not a bull." Dean walked up to her.

"Oh, you scared me. What took you so long?"

"You wanted me to get the others, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Anyway, she's clean, no sign of the virus at all."

“Good. How about anything, else? You know since she has flies.”

Dean shrugged. “We may do better to test the milk.”

“Good idea.” Ellen reached her hand over and touched Dean on his side. “How are your ribs?”

“Getting better, thank you very much for laughing at me when she kicked me.”

“Well I told you she would jerk when I pricked her. Remember I have never done venipuncture on a cow before.”

Andrea’s voice neared as she called out to them. “Are you guys back here? We brought the bucket like Dean ...” She stopped in her tracks when she reached the yard. “Sweet Jesus, is that a cow?”

Dean bobbed his head. “Looks that way.”

Denny ran to it. “Neat.”

Ellen stopped him. “Stay back, Den, I don’t think she’s used to people yet.”

Andrea handed Dean the bucket. “Here, Dean, it’s the biggest and the cleanest I could find.”

Johnny also ran into the back yard. “Wow, hey, Daddy hurry up, there’s a cow here.”

Frank was amazed. “You guys actually got it here. I’m impressed.”

Dean held tightly to the bucket. “Yes well, it was easy. Now we need to get a sample of her milk.” Dean placed the bucket under the cow while everyone stood around and watched. He wiped his hands off on the back off his jeans and reached under the cow. He paused, reached again, then stood. “Ellen, you do it.”

“Me? I’m not touching it. No way.” She looked over at Andrea. “She has flies.”

Andrea waved her hands. “Uh-ah. Nope. I’m a city girl. I’m a cow virgin.”

Ellen turned to Frank. “Frank?”

Frank fluttered his lips. “Yeah, right.”

Dean looked around. “How hard can it be?” He faced the cow. “I’m gonna milk you.” He knelt down on her side and very gently pinched the udders between his fingers and lightly pulled. “Nothing’s happening, maybe she’s dry.”

William stepped forward. “Christ, Dino, you’re not seducing the thing, you’re milking it. Watch out.” He moved Dean aside. “I’ll show you.”

“Dad, you know how to milk a cow?”

“Dino.” William squatted. “Did you forget I worked my way through

college on a dairy farm?”

“Oh.” Dean remembered. “That’s right. If you knew how to milk a cow, why didn’t you say so? Why’d you let us go back and forth on it?”

William looked up at his son. “I thought it was pretty funny.” He grabbed hold of the udders. “I’m going show you, how to milk first, then what you have to do with the milk so we can drink it.” William then proceeded to milk the cow, while the others watched the good doctor put his well-trained hands to work.

Sunday, June 21st

Ashtonville, Connecticut

The first hours of daybreak of the first day of summer brought the awakening sounds of honking horns and air brakes, as four semi-tractor trailers rolled on to the street where everyone resided. Summoning everyone from their beds, Joe and the others waited patiently in the street for everyone to greet their arrival home.

Those half-awake brought a sense of relief when they walked to the street and saw the others had returned. The trucks that they had brought were a sign that the survival plan was about to move on.

Once everyone was present, Joe grabbed their attention. “We’re sorry for waking you up like this, but we couldn’t wait to see you. Before you ask . . . and Ellen don’t whine . . . Henry and John stayed behind so they could get things up and running, energy-wise. It’s up to all of you, we can brief you now, or wait until later.”

The choice was given. Even though it was early, impatience was forefront over sleep, and they voted to listen to what the returning four had to say.

Joe took a deep breath as he opened up his notebook and looked upon the eager faces seated before him. “Now, we have been working all week on this, and we hope we can get your support. We think we have this thing pretty much laid out. First off, let me say I think it’s gonna work. We have a lot of hard work ahead of us, but we can do it. This place, this community in Montana, needs stocking, and here’s how we’re going to do it. We’ve broken the list into four categories, as you can see by the four trucks, and we’ve assigned you to the trucks. If everyone sticks to their assignment, we can stay on track and perhaps be in Montana by August. Now George is going to tell you what we’ve come up with. George.”

George stood. “All right, Ashtonville can’t be left unattended and neither can the kids. Maggie and William will stay back with the children. The

first truck to go out will be the clothing and cloth truck. That will take Andrea, Jenny, and Miguel. You three need to spend the next couple days laying out your mapping and planning. You have to come up with clothing to be stockpiled and issued--blankets, and any other cloth items that you can think of.”

Andrea raised her hand. “So we are to go about the countryside looking for all of this, sort of a scavenger hunt?”

“Exactly.” George answered. “Basically that’s what all of you must do. But I need to remind all of you, planning is essential. If you know what you are to get, and where to get it, the easier it will be to get it all back here in one week. Next is food, we have assigned Frank and Jonas to this. They are to stockpile food. Realistically, one truckload will not be enough. Hopefully by September we will have the warehouses in Montana stocked to their fullest. Keep in mind, this isn’t food for our long-term survival, it’s food to hold us over until we are self-sufficient. Frank led us to three endearing and experienced farmers. Tomorrow Henry and John will be meeting them half way. They’ll be Montana when we get there, and they are confident, they can at least get the greenhouses going, along with livestock if we find any. Yes, Ellen.”

Ellen lowered her hand “We have a cow.”

“That’s nice now ...” George paused. “A cow.”

Ellen nodded. “Dean and I found it. Brought it back. But she may have some unknown vet illness. Even though William has a remarkable tug and jug method for the milk. I won’t drink it until we’ve tried to test for everything.”

George noted William’s irritated sigh, then looked at Ellen. “Is the cow sick?” he asked.

“That’s what we’re trying to determine, George. Unfortunately neither Dean nor I are vets. So ... we’re winging it.”

William sighed.

George shifted eyes to William, then back to Ellen. “What makes you think she might be ill.”

Ellen stated. “She has flies.”

“Flies?”

“Lots of them. Everywhere. They are always on her, around her, in her eyes.” Ellen shuddered. “Horrible. Flies.”

Finally, William sighed even more heavily with a slap to his thigh. “For goodness sakes, Ellen, for two intelligent people you and Dino are idiots. She doesn’t *have* flies.”

“Yes, she does,” Ellen said. “You’ve seen them.”

“No, flies are attracted to her like every other cow. She doesn’t have flies. You speak like she has lice or ...”

“Oh,” Ellen scratched her head. “Thank you for that.”

William huffed. “She doesn’t have flies like it’s a disease.” He peered to George. “The cow is fine. The milk is fine. I’ve been drinking it since we got her.”

Dean blinked. “Dad, I told you not to do that until we tested her. That wasn’t very smart.”

“Well, neither is thinking a cow is diseased because flies buzz about her, but that didn’t stop you.”

George held in his chuckle, cleared his throat, and continued. “Well make arrangements for the cow. Than you William. And on that ...I’m glad, Ellen, you and Dean work well together because you are our medical-supply people. We have a hospital there that needs stocking. Everything is needed. We figure William can help you compile your list. Dean, Miguel is going to spend tomorrow with you teaching you to drive the truck. Yes, Frank.” George called upon him.

“Dean in a semi?” Frank asked. “Driving?”

“Yes,” George responded.

“Dean?” Frank said again, only this time really motioning his head Dean’s way.

Joe aggravated, intervened. “Christ, Frank, that’s what the man said. Dean driving a semi.”

Frank huffed and placed his hand out to indicate short.

“Oh,” Joe nodded. “Yeah.”

George added. “OK, Dean, you might want to bring a phone book or something to reach the pedals.” Frank’s snicker caused George to pause, but not for long. “Finally, Joe and I are on paper. That includes books and so forth. We have also decided to have a couple computers running, other than the ones Dean has for his equipment. And I’ll let Miguel finish this up.”

As George sat down, Miguel stood, he spoke slowly. “I hope to have you driving trucks well. Dean, the pedals might be ...”

“A reach,” Dean nodded “Yeah, I know. Continue. I’ll bring a pillow.”

“Thank you,” Miguel said. “By the end of this week, everyone will go out to get what they have to find, and return in one week. We will make three trips to Montana. Take a truck out, unload it, set up, and again until we finish. On the very last trip, we will load a cargo plane with our stuff and fly it out.

Because of fuel and no place close to land the plane, we can not make every trip by plane.”

George interjected. “We’ll get more in depth with each of you on an individual basis this week. But there is still one more very important task left, and for that, we have an assignment for Johnny and Denny. This place in Montana has no real name. That is your task. This week you will name our town. And whatever you two decide on, that’s what it would be.”

“Yes!” Denny clenched his fist. “We get to name the town, this is way cool.”

“We have to be serious, Denny.” Johnny calmed him. “We’re starting history with this.”

George smiled and closed his notebook. “All done. Now we have to get some rest before we stop by and see you guys all sometime today.”

Frank rubbed Johnny’s head. “Wow, John, you and Denny name this place.” He smiled at his son, and at Ellen. “Are we talking yet?”

“For civility purposes.” Ellen replied as she got up from her chair.

“Huh?”

“She meant” Dean approached.

“Don’t.” Frank ordered. “Don’t even proceed to tell me what she meant. And what do you want? Aren’t you gonna spend enough time with her on the road.”

Ellen gasped. “Come on, Dean. Let’s go start our list.” It was apparent Dean had more to say to Frank, but Ellen physically persuaded him to move on.

“Keep going. You two suck at lists.” Frank shook his head then noticed his father looking at him. “What?”

“What the hell is the matter with you?” Joe barked.

“Everything. Why are Dean and Ellen going out together for this.”

“Frank they’re in charge of medical. I had you two paired up, but everyone said ‘no’. Besides your strength is needed elsewhere. It’s only a week.”

“A lot can happen in a week, Dad.”

“Well, yeah, Frank it can. Hell the world ended in a week.”

“And they can go out on this trip and change my life again.”

“Don’t be silly,” Joe said. “You and Ellen have been together, right or wrong, for a long time.”

“We’ve been having issues.”

“Why don’t you put forth an effort to resolve these issues before you two go out.”

Frank chuckled, “They can’t be resolved. Not in a week.”

“Do you really think the issues between you and Ellen are so bad that one week with Dean, will change everything with you.”

“Oh, yeah.” Frank said.

“Frank, please.” Joe scoffed. “I highly doubt that. Look, if it will make you feel better, why don’t you tell me the issues.”

“One. One issue.”

“Easy enough.” Joe folded his arms and stared upon Frank, fatherly. “Tell me about the issue and I will assure you there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Thanks,” Frank proceeded. “Ellen wants a baby. I don’t. Not yet. Not for a while. She asked me. I turned her down. Problem being. She doesn’t want to wait. She wants a baby and wants it now.”

“A-ha,” Joe nodded and sighed out. “Well, I’m getting some sleep.” He gave a swinging pat to Frank’s arm. “Night.”

“Whoa. Whoa. Wait. You said you’d assure me that I have nothing to worry about.”

“I did say that, didn’t I?” Joe inhaled. “Well ...” He turned. “Night.”

“Dad, wait.”

“Fine, you wanna hear what I have to say?” Joe waited for Frank’s agreement. “Resolve this. Agree to the baby. Something. I know Ellen. So do you. If she’s headstrong ... you really do have to worry about the week.” Joe smiled. “See in a few. Night.”

Before Frank could say anything, Joe was gone, and Frank was left standing there alone.

^^^

Dean, Ellen, and William worked hard on a preliminary list. They spoke of so many different medical supplies and products that Ellen feared her dreams would be filled with rolls of dancing gauze. After departing the Hayes duo, Ellen retired to her porch with a book. She wasn’t a big reader, but Jenny called it one of her escape books, and it would hurt to try.

Clear her mind. Read a teen romance. It was better than thinking of bandages.

Lantern at the brightest, Ellen heard the tiny ‘pat’ but ignored it. Again, it happened, ‘pat’, a few second break, then ‘pat. About the forth of fifth time it was really, close. Too close, the pat occurred on her page.

She raised her eyes. Frank, why are you throwing pebbles at me.”

“To get your attention.” He leaned against the porch railing. “You were ignoring me.”

“I’m reading.”

“I’ve been standing here for ten minutes.”

“It was a good scene.”

“Oh, yeah?” Frank lifted the book. “Love trap at Whitman High?” He chuckled “Good book.”

“For your information Mr. Smarty Pants. I like it. What do you want?”

Frank laid the open book over the railing to hold the place. “This. To talk.”

“Why?”

“Because you and I haven’t really talked all week. We’ve been how did you put it, Civil.”

“We also have been at each others throats.”

“Over a single thing. One thing. And this has to affect our lives. Don’t ...”: He held up his hand. “our lives.”

“Frank, nothing is the same anymore.”

“OK, stop.”

“What?”

“Are we gonna really talk, because if we are, I’m coming on the porch with you.”

Ellen sighed out. “Yes, we’ll talk.” She lifted a bottle. “I’m having a beer. Do you want one?”

“Yeah, I’d like that.”

“They’re next door, in the toilet tank of the powder room.”

“Next door.” Frank nodded.

“You want one go get one.”

“Man, you’re tough. I’ll be back.” Frank darted to the house next door and returned shortly with the beer. A chair was set up for him next to Ellen and that pleased him. He opened the bottle as he joined her. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Frank gasped after his first swig. “Man, that’s cold.”

“The tank method. William taught us that trick.”

“Here’s to William.” He lifted his bottle; he kicked up his feet to the railing. “So, truth out.”

“Truth?”

“I’m not handling you and Dean going out for a week.”

“I see. Well, I’m not keen with you going out with Jonas for a week.”

“What?” Frank looked at her then saw she was joking. “I get it, you’re kidding.”

“Can I ask you why you aren’t handling me and Dean?”

Frank just started at her.

“OK, dumb question. Then ... what can we do to make you handle this.”

“Let’s talk about what has been tearing us apart.”

“Talk or fight?” Ellen asked.

“Up to you. I want to talk.”

“Then we talk.” She turned her chair to face him. “I want a baby. You don’t.”

“I’m not ready to have one. I don’t want to even try yet.”

Ellen nodded “I understand that. Can’t you understand my need to have a baby.”

“I understand that.”

“Then I don’t understand how you can not help me?” She said with passion. “I think about it from the time I wake until the time I go to bed. I imagine what it’s gonna be like to hold that child in my arms. To feel that. I want that.”

“And eventually so do I. But not yet.”

“Let me ask you a question,” Ellen said, “What would you do if I said I was pregnant now.”

“You aren’t.”

“But say I was.”

“Are we pretending it’s mine.”

“Yes.”

“Then you aren’t that far along.”

“Frank!” Ellen snapped. “Pretend. What would you do?”

“Deal with it.”

“Then why can’t you just help me get pregnant and then deal with it.”

“It’s more than that, El.”

“How can it be more than that?” she asked. “You get me pregnant, deal with it, I handle the baby. You don’t even need to be a part of its life.”

“Stop.” Frank held up his hand. “Yeah, I do”

“No, if you don’t want a baby, then you don’t have to be ...”

“Yes. ... I do.” Frank was adamant. “And that is part, no, a huge

part of my decision. El ...” He grabbed her hand. “Kelly, the girls, they just died. Johnny, he may be too young to understand, but old enough to understand. You know what I mean? He’s gonna feel funny about the fact that his dad and El are having a baby, kissing, sleeping in the same bed, all so soon after his mom died. He’ll start questioning, didn’t I love his mother? How can I answer those.”

Ellen nodded. “I see your point.”

“If Johnny watches us develop a relationship, take our time, they’ll be no questions.”

“How long?”

“I don’t know.” Frank shrugged.

“Do you want a relationship with me?”

“Of course I do.” Frank declared.

“No, Frank, I mean it. Do you want a relationship with me? A real one. Time every day. Sit down and talk, be together. A couple. A couple the way a couple is supposed to be.”

“Like marriage?”

Ellen rolled her eyes. “Forget the word marriage, but in a sense, every aspect of it.”

“I want us to be close.”

“You want us to still have sex.”

“I hate when you do that.” Frank barked. “You’re more to me than just sex.”

“Then let’s be more than just sex. Be more than sneaking off after Johnny’s asleep, and sneaking back home before him or anyone else can see and open their mouth. All we’ve ever done was sneak, Frank. If you want to be a couple, let’s do this right.”

“I agree.” Frank nodded. “In time.”

“Johnny time.” Ellen said. “Don’t get me wrong, I do understand that decision I do understand you giving him time. But I need more.”

“I can’t give you more right now.”

“Well, what can you give me one hundred percent?” She sat up. “Please tell me, because I need one aspect of you in my life a hundred percent.”

“One hundred percent?” Frank asked. “I can be your friend a hundred percent of the time.”

“Then we’ll be that.” She stated matter of fact. “We’ll be friend like we once were, no sneaking off. No hiding anything about it ... we’re friends.” She held out her hand.

Frank took it and kissed it. “I love you, you know that?”

“I know that.”

“So how long will this only friends be?” Frank asked.

“Until the time is right, if it’s ever right.”

Frank looked dejected. “And the baby?”

Ellen swallowed. “I want a child. Understand, Frank, the decision is now mine.”

“Then I’m confident.” Frank sat back. “Because right now, were moving into the long term survival plan. And you’ll see, the baby thing will slip from your mind.”

Tilting her head, Ellen peered at him. “You really don’t see the importance of this for me.”

“Yeah, I do.” Frank nodded. “But I also know you. You know what’s really important to you.” He winked.

Ellen rested back, and whispered, “Yeah. I do.”

Saturday, June 27th

Ashtonville, Connecticut

Three tractor trailers were lined up one right after another on Main Street. Ready to go, facing the direction they would need to be in to get to the highway.

William, clipboard in hand, made a visual check once more of the trucks. Not that he knew what he was doing, but he looked the part. He was in charge of overseeing that everyone got off for their designated runs. The trucks were ready and waiting. The routes were designated. But the drivers were no where to be found.

After looking at his watch just one more time, William gave in and took the radio call from Henry. He had hoped that Andrea would get the hint, and just tell Henry, he was busy. But she didn't. Calling over again. "William, speak to Henry. He's on the radio."

He supposed that didn't irk him as much as Andrea continuously stating it was long distance.

"It's a radio for crying out loud," William exclaimed as he walked to the porch where Andrea brought the unit. "Yes, Henry."

"William." Henry said, relieved. "Do you have a minute?"

"Actually, no." William said. "We're running late as it is."

"But I need to discuss me staying out here in Montana."

"You should have discussed it with Joe or George."

"Andrea said they left at dawn."

"You missed your chance."

"But ...but ... Miguel can switch places with me."

"Miguel is making too many runs with the trucks. He can't."

Silence.

"William."

"What Henry?" William asked, annoyed.

"It's barren here. I'm not just stuck with John Matoose, but those farmers ..."

"Tough. Deal with it. You have my condolences."

"We can't talk about this?"

"No." William said. "And I have to go. Quit using battery power."

Sarcastically, Henry said. "I'm not, we're using the power me and John got up and running."

"Ah, then you're doing your job. Good boy. Bye." William put down the radio, and gave a scolding look to Andrea. "No more Henry calls. Got that?"

"You need to quit picking on the boy."

"You need to get ready to leave." William left the porch and made his way to Miguel. "Are you ready?"

"Yes." Miguel nodded. "Got the map and supplies."

William peered around. "I see Jonas? Now where the hell are Dean and Ellen?"

Miguel pointed backwards. "They said since their truck is last they want to finish a few things up at the clinic."

"I'm afraid to ask." William said. "Frank?"

"I just sent him after them."

The official clipboard dropped and William shook his head. "Starting trouble already, aren't you?"

Boxes were spread about the lab in Doc Breyer's clinic. Some opened, some sealed. Dean placed a smaller box in one and faced Ellen. "There shouldn't be too much left for you to do once we get back."

"What else am I going to do, but work. I don't mind." She shrugged.

"I don't know how much time I'll have to help you. I haven't a clue when Joe's shipping me out."

Ellen looked upset. "I don't understand why you have to stay out there."

"Someone has to get that medical facility up and running. I'll be back before we head out for good. But ..." Dean closed the flap on a box and neared Ellen. "I could use the help."

Ellen's head went back. "Dean. No. We talked about this."

"I know. Why?"

"You know why?"

"Frank?" Dean asked.

"Yes. That's a pretty big reason."

"I know." Dean sounded despondent. "But you said it yourself. You two haven't been the same. Frank needs alone time to deal with everything. You could give it to him. Come to Montana with me, El."

Ellen stared at Dean. "That's not a good idea and you know it."

"Yes it is. You need it. I can use the help. There's no reason why you

can't come out there with me and stay the six weeks."

"Yeah, there is." Frank's voice interrupted when he walked in the room. "Me." He moved straight to Dean and Ellen, laying his hand on Dean's chest and inching him back. He handed Dean a sheet of paper. "Your route sheet, Dean. I have your stops all mapped out including rest stops. So follow it."

Dean took the paper and shoved it in his back pocket. "Yeah."

"I mean it." Frank said. "Don't dally out there. I know when you two should be back." He took hold of Ellen's hand. "Come on El, I'm leaving. Come say goodbye to me." He pulled her with him to the door and stopped with a point to Dean. "And don't touch her out there Dean."

"Yeah, yeah." Dean nodded. "Frank." Dean stepped forward. "Can I speak to Ellen one more minute please?"

"No. You're gonna spend the entire week with her. Talk to her then." Frank tried again to bring Ellen to the door.

Ellen stopped walking. "Frank, two minutes. Please. I'll be right there."

Frank stared for a second and released her hand. "All right. Two minutes. I'm timing you. Then I'm coming back." He held up his wrist, tapped on his watch and walked out.

Ellen turned her way back to Dean. "What is it?"

"Why is he being like that?" Dean asked. "He is really being insecure."

Ellen scoffed. "Uh, hello, Dean, he walked in here when you were asking me to stay in Montana."

"Still, El. We're friends. I like being around you."

"I like being around you. Frank knows that. And ... and ..." Ellen waved out her hand. "I got to go."

Dean grabbed on to her arm as she tried to make a quick escape. "And what?"

"And well ..." She saw Dean raise his eyebrows in anticipation of her answer. "Well you know how I've been about getting pregnant?"

"Yes." Dean nodded. "You want to have a baby. What does that have to do with me?"

"Frank ... he's kind of afraid that you'll be a willing volunteer to help me out."

Dean was shocked. "What? Where did he get that from?" He didn't get an answer. "Ellen?"

"O.K., your dad said you might."

“My Dad said I ...” Dean’s eyes widened. “I never said that.”

“I know. But Frank doesn’t know that. And since he doesn’t want to and I ...” Ellen hunched. “I told him ... what William told me.”

Dean nearly screamed. “Ellen. The man is six foot three. If I touch you. I’m dead. I already live in fear for kissing you.”

“Oh.” Ellen waved him off. “Frank’s a big teddy bear. He’s harmless.”

“No he isn’t.”

“O.K., no he isn’t. But don’t worry about him.” The smile from Ellen’s face fell, and she turned solemn. “In all seriousness Dean. You know how much I need a child in my life. If Frank doesn’t ...”

“Ellen ...”

“No, listen. If Frank doesn’t. Will you think about it?”

Dean went silent. “Only if you think about staying in Montana with me.”

Ellen closed her eyes. “I can’t believe you’re bartering with me.”

“I can’t believe we’re still standing here.” Dean checked out the time. “Frank is timing us.”

Ellen had to laugh. “No, he’s not. He didn’t mean that. What’s he gonna do when time is up? Carry me out?”

Dean just looked at her.

One long blow of a horn was Miguel’s signal that he was ready to pull out. On Main Street Dean and Ellen stood watching the trucks before they got into their own.

William moved to them and adjusted Ellen’s shirt which was lifted. “You’re not hurt?” he chuckled.

“No.” Ellen shook her head. “I can’t believe Frank just tossed me over his shoulder and carried me out like that.”

Dean looked at his father. “I can.” He watched the first truck roll away, then finally the second started moving. As it did, Frank stuck his head out the window with a wave to Ellen and a warning point to Dean. “See.” Dean indicated to Frank’s truck. “It’s a sign of things to come.”

William softly spoke as if to himself as he watched the trucks pull away. “Possession becomes the law. We keep what is ours, take what is not, and want what we can’t have. We become who we will be within months of

our world going bad.”

With a quirky look, Dean turned his head to his father. “What are you talking about?”

William let out breath as he snapped out of his daze. “Oh, I was just thinking out loud.”

“That was pretty profound.” Dean commented. “Did you think of that yourself?”

“Actually, no.” William laid his hand on Dean’s back. “I remembered it from Post Apocalyptic World Training film. M.C. I. T. F. B-3.”

Dean’s mouth dropped open as his father chuckled and walked away. “Ellen, you’ve never seen that film have you?”

“No. Not me. I only saw the ones Joe brought home. I think only B-14 through B-18.” She shrugged. “We’d better get a move on.”

“I’m the only one.” Dean threw his hands up. “You know that?” he moved toward the truck. “I’m the only one who doesn’t know what to expect in a world like this.”

Ellen shook her head as she followed Dean, knowing full well, training films or not, no one was going to know what to expect. It was impossible. How could they? The world had never ended before.

Tuesday, June 30th

Buffalo, NY

Ellen's body bounced up and down every five minutes as they drove down the highway just outside of Buffalo. "Dean, I think tonight we should find a nice place to camp out. I feel funny sleeping in this truck. That's why we brought our sleeping bags, you know."

"I know, I didn't sleep well either last night. We'll camp-out tonight if it doesn't make you feel uncomfortable."

"Me? How would it make me feel uncomfortable?"

"Bugs, outdoors, stuff like that."

"Oh, yeah." Ellen shrugged. "Point taken. But I'll be fine. I thought you were meaning something else."

"Like what?" Dean asked.

"Like you and I being alone, sleeping close."

Dean chuckled. "You think I'm afraid to be laying next to you."

"Um, yeah." Ellen said.

"OK, you're right. I don't want to hear it from Frank."

"You worry too much about him."

"Ellen, please. You have the man believing that I am going to impregnate you."

"You are the best choice. Even above Frank, at least that's that Andrea says."

Dean's foot immediately moved to the brake, the truck began to slow down. "Me?"

"Keep driving."

"Sorry." Dean returned to his normal speed. "You took me by surprise. I know how bad you want this baby."

"Of course you do." Ellen said. "Why else would you barter your sperm for me to stay in Montana."

"I'd barter that because I want you to stay in Montana with me. I think it'd be good for you, me, and us. And ... really, think about it. If having a baby and me getting you pregnant is important, don't you think Montana, away from everyone might be helpful. Hmm? Unless of course, you're thinking of taking a scientific route."

“No.” Ellen shook her head. “I’m going to sleep with the father.”

“And the arrangement with the kid being ...” Dean questioned.

“I raise the kid. Obviously the father would see him or her.”

“Are you going to have anything emotionally to do with the father?”

“How can I not? But I really want to try to separate the act of getting pregnant from a relationship. Does that make sense?”

“So, you just want to get pregnant, and that’s it. Try to keep emotional attachments out? The father is just a physical sperm donor instead of a test tube?”

“At this point, if it isn’t Frank, then it’d have to be. Are you considering it.”

“If it was anyone else but you, yes I would.” Dean said. “But I’m not so sure I can separate myself emotionally from you. Sleep with you without getting attached. Do you honestly think you can separate the act from the emotions with me?”

“I do.”

“Then I don’t think you’re being honest.” Dean said, and then lightened his tone. “Besides, right now, you’re having a hard time separating your emotions for me from Frank, add sex...” He fluttered his lips and spoke jokingly. “You’re done.”

Ellen laughed. “You made a joke. How cute. Thanks.”

Dean looked at her. “I wasn’t joking.”

Taking a moment to retrieve seriousness, Ellen saw Dean crack a smile, and she shook her head. “There’s the sign. Bare off here.” Forgoing the conversation, and chuckling, Ellen placed her thoughts on the plan at hand.

Garfield Project

Henry was tired; there was no doubt about that. Having marathon driving episode across country with John was beginning to catch up. And he was hungry. Little did he know, satisfying that hunger would have such a heavy price. Henry just wanted to eat and go to sleep.

John didn’t seem to mind. He gobbled his food. Of course, he wasn’t the one the three Ohio farmer stared at. Yes, they cooked the food, but did they have to stare?

Henry played with his fork, peered up, and then finally dove his fork into his potatoes.

“Hot dig damn,” Stan shook his head as he rocked back in his chair. “Dirk you was right.”

“Told ja’,” Dirk said. “Thas’ jus’ the racist in ya’.”

“Thelma shook his head. “I still ain’t convinced.”

Dirk huffed. “Whacha mean you ain’t convinced, woman, he picked it up, didn’t he? He used I, didn’t he?”

“But,” Thelma added. “He also watched us fer a while.”

Dirk nodded. “True.”

“Why don’t we ask him?” Stan suggested.

Finally, Henry had enough. “Ask me what? Obviously you’re talking about me.”

“Fine. Attitude,” Dirk leaned forward “That there fork you just stuck in your mouth. Have you used a fork before?”

“Of course I used a fork before,” Henry was defensive.

Thelma said, “but don’t cha use them there sticks to eat.”

John laughed.

Henry was offended. “Not always.”

“I thought Chinese people didn’t know how to use forks,” Thelma said.

“I’m Japanese,” Henry retorted.

Stan questioned. “Ain’t it the same difference?”

“No,” Henry snapped. “It’s not the same difference. Gees. It would be like me calling you Canadian.”

“But I’m not,” Stan said.

“And I’m not Chinese.”

“Look Chinese,” Stan said. “I think we knew a Japanese man one time.”

Thelma nodded. “Did. He was a nice man.”

Dirk huffed. “No. Whacha gonna go and lie like that fer Thelma. We ain’t known no Japanese man. We knew a man who knew a Japanese man. Back in World War II. When the japs weren’t very nice.”

Stan smirked. “And judgin’ by him you think they’re nice now?”

Henry grumbled. He knew the time in Montana was going to seem like forever, and John Matoose, with his giggling, wasn’t any help.

Wednesday, June 31

Pittsburgh, PA

Ellen shut the window to the truck as they crossed the Fort Pitt Bridge, leading them into the heart of the city. “Dean, we’re never going to make it all the way to Oakland.”

“Oakland?”

“Yeah, that’s where the university is, and the hospitals.”

“How do you know?”

“I went to school in this town, remember? Oakland is jam-packed with traffic normally. Imagine the chaos around the hospitals, especially there.”

“Then what do you suggest we do?” Dean asked.

“Make a left here, on the north side of town there’s a major teaching hospital. We should be able to get what we need there.”

“One hospital’s the same as the next right?”

They neared the huge, white hospital building, set in the north said of town. On a city street, with very little frontal space. Traffic was not as congested as they originally believed, and they were able to pull up the emergency drive way and park.

Just as Dean opened his door, he stopped, retracted, and slammed it. “This isn’t a good idea. It’s about eighty degrees, and humid. It smells really bad out there. We have to lube.”

“Lube?”

“Lube.” Dean reached for the glove compartment, opened it, and pulled out two masks and a jar of menthol chest rub. “Place it all around your nostrils before you put on the mask.”

“Ah, the Joe trick.”

Dean paused as he dipped his fingers into the salve. “Joe trick.”

“Yeah, he said he used to use this when he went to autopsies.” Ellen shrugged, and took the jar from Dean.

After they had ‘lubed’, facial masks strapped to them. They left the truck and approached the hospital. What little lawn there was, had become a shrine of dead, who never made it into the healthcare facility.

Maggot-ridden, decomposed bodies skewed out across the grass. Some on cots, some not. Dean and Ellen made their way through the maze of hopeless victims, along with carcasses of rats and other animals who had come to their remains in desperate search of food.

Ellen opened the main door to an even more horrific scene. What lay ahead in the hospital, visually, was far worse than what had lain across the lawn. What had happened to the world impacted her right then and there. Men, woman, and children, all who came in dire need of help, arrived only to find the final resting place. Reality. Ellen wasn't alone in her loss. Ashtonville wasn't the only town hit

"Dean, let's just get what we need and get out as quickly as we can," she said.

"I'm with you," Led by the beam of his flashlight, Dean scooted by Ellen. "I'll go to the desk and see if there's a directory."

Ellen stared straight ahead, trying not to look at any one corpse.

"Ellen, I found one."

Ellen turned, but as she did, she bumped into a cart. Catching herself mid fall, she looked down, and the wide open blue eyes of the tiny little girl who laid there, stared at her. "Oh, God." She dropped her flashlight and ran from the hospital.

"Ellen!" Dean chased her until they reached the truck.

Ellen jumped in and shut the door. She took off her mask and folded her arms close to her body.

"Ellen." Dean boarded the truck, and took off his mask. "Are you all right?"

"I was until I saw her."

"Who?"

"That little girl, that small girl, she could have been my daughter. Oh God, Dean, I tried so hard to keep that vision from my mind. That vision of my daughter. It all just came storming back."

"I'm sorry, we'll get out of here."

"No, Dean, you go, I'll just wait here. You need your equipment."

"Ellen, I'll make do with what I have. Besides, I'm sure in time I will go back out and find it." He started the truck. "I'm sorry I did this to you. We should have just left this city after we got what we needed from the warehouse."

"I'm sorry I broke like that."

Dean reached over and placed his hand upon her knee. "You're human. We're all allowed to break sometimes. I'm here for you."
She put her hand over his. "I know."

Cleveland, OH

The huge department store warehouse sat on the city's river bank. Miguel had remembered it. He had driven his truck there hundreds of times. It was the perfect place to stockpile the jeans and outer-wear. They had done well already. The truck was nearly a third filled, packed to it's capacity. Miguel knew how to pack it.

"Jenny?" Andrea ran a switchblade across a box, and opened the flaps. "We have to find smaller sizes. Or else everyone's going to be walking around with their pants around their ankles."

"You're right. We haven't had much luck in that." Jenny chuckled. "Oh well . . . poor Ellen and Dean."

Andrea laughed a deep chesty laugh. She thought the same thought but dared not speak it. "If we don't find any. They are gonna have to . . ."

Their laughed ceased when the loud shrill of a man's scream was heard from the next room.

Jenny turned quickly. "What was that? Was that Miguel?"

"I don't know. Maybe he tripped or something. Let's go see." As they made their way to the door, they froze as three gunshots rang out, followed by a loud "thump". The flashlight dropped and its beam spun around.

"Andrea?" Jenny backed up

Andrea wrapped her arms around Jenny and led her to a corner while peering around the dark room. "My gun's over there. Damn it!"

"Should we get it?"

"No." Andrea tugged Jenny back when the clomping of footsteps echoed in the room.

They cowered more the louder the footsteps drew.

"Andrea? Jenny?" Miguel called out.

Andrea jumped up and raced to him. "Miguel, what happened? Are you O.K.?"

Miguel dropped his rifle and fell to his knees. Blood poured from his right shoulder. "I had to. I had to."

“Had to what?” Andrea reached for him. “You’re bleeding. Were you shot?”

Miguel just shook his head. His body trembled. “I was in the other room. This man. This mad-man lunged for me. I tried to fight him off. He kept trying to stab me. He got me.” Miguel covered his wound. “It knocked me down. When I saw him coming again, I reached for the gun . . .”

Jenny lifted a sweatshirt which they had stacked in the pile. She placed it on Miguel’s wound. “He just came after you?”

“I tried to talk to him, I did. He attacked me. He said he’d kill me.” Miguel’s head hung low. “I didn’t mean to do it. I didn’t want to do. There’s not that many left of us. Why lose one more?”

Andrea covered her mouth as she watched the giant man weakly give in to the trauma that just happened. “This is what Joe was talking about, and has been warning us about.” She spoke softly to them both. “No wonder he’s so of afraid picking up other survivors. The plague was not prejudice. It even let the bad ones live.”

London, KY

It was like many of the small towns Frank and Jonas had gone through during the past days. Little activity visual of the plague days, unlike in the big cities, where traffic congestion was heavy. No signs of any aid stations or attempt to make one like Ashtonville.

Jonas spread the map adjusting it against the windshield. “This food warehouse can’t be too hard to spot.”

“What street’s it on?” Frank asked as he slowed the truck down.

“Birmingham.” Jonas folded the map. “My guess, it’s going to be on the outskirts.”

“I’m going to say . . . what’s this?” Frank slowed the truck even more, causing the air breaks to sound off.

“Looks like someone is camping.” Jonas peered out the window at a tent perched all alone in the small park center town. “Wanna check it out?”

“Why not?” Frank threw the truck in park and stepped out. “Hello!” he called out walking around the hood of the rig and waiting for Jonas. They stepped into the park, Frank leading the way. “Hello!” Frank called again slowing down and looking into the parked car not far from the tent. “Must be wandering around.” He walked closer to the tent and heard the oddness of

it. It sounded to Frank as if it were a sick cat, growling some in pain. “What in the . . .” He flung open the flap to the tent and immediately turned his head to the side at the smell. As Frank released the flap, Jonas stopped him. “Wait.” Closing his eyes briefly, he covered his moth and then poked his head in the tent. A man lay on a sleeping bag. An old man, maybe seventy, laying peacefully as if he were sleeping. Early signs of decomposition, as if he just died days earlier. But the man was not what made Jonas go into that tent.

“Hold this.” He handed Frank out his rifle. “God. No.” He stepped further into the tent and emerged holding a baby, no older than a year. The child quivered and shook and its pale features showed the signs of his imminent death. “Frank.” Jonas raised his sad eyes to Frank as he cradled the whimpering child.

Frank closed his eyes tighter.

“The old man must have been caring for him. We have to help him, Frank.”

“How?”

“Food.” Holding the baby closer to him, Jonas rushed over to the truck with Frank.

Frank immediately jumped inside coming out with a blanket, a jug of water, and some food. “Let’s take him over here.” Frank pointed to an area of grass and he handed Jonas the blanket, covering the baby.

Both of them rushed and fumbled helplessly, as they tried to get the small little boy to ingest something. His reflexes would not work, he wouldn’t swallow, and he spit forth anything that came near his mouth. Unresponsive, shivering, dying.

“Frank.” Jonas spoke in a panic as he rocked the child.

“You think we can make it home with him? Maybe William can help him.”

“How long will it take us?” Jonas asked.

“Nine, ten hours. We have to try, it’s our only hope.”

“Then we have to try.”

“Take him to the truck, I’ll be right there.” With haste, Frank gathered the gear, took it to the truck, and dumped it inside. He climbed in the driver’s seat murmuring, “Please let this kid make it.” Frank started the truck and recklessly tossed it in gear.

“Frank . . \.”

“Fuck Jonas, how many? How many like him are out here?”

“Frank ...”

“He could be my kid, El’s kid. How many survived the plague and can’t live past it.” He shook his head. “We have to get him . . .”

“Frank.” Jonas spoke stronger. “Stop the truck.”

“Jonas, we don’t have . . .”

“Stop the truck, Frank.” Jonas felt the vehicle stop moving. He raised his lowered eyes to Frank and shook his head as he covered the child with the rest of the blanket.

Frank’s heart dropped and so did his head as he laid it against the steering wheel in heartbreak over their vain attempt to help.

It was near a small flower patch, near a park, that Frank and Jonas buried the child. Giving him what so many other children who died during the plague may not have gotten and deserved. They named the child Jude, after the saint of hope. They symbolized the child in their minds as every other child who may not have had someone to hold them at the end, to want to help them. And like every other child that was not strong enough to survive the world that they were lost to. Frank and Jonas mourned him, shed tears for him, and they prayed for him.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 1

Interstate - 95

Dean poked the small fire of a camping area they had found somewhere in Virginia. They had made the sixth of the seven warehouse stops just a few hours, earlier and decided to put the Fairfax stop ahead of the seventh which was located in Baltimore, a place closer to Ashtonville.

Dean moved back from the heat of the fire and sat on his open sleeping bag. He grabbed a package of peanut butter crackers and began to nibble when he saw Ellen appear just over the crest. "Ellen, I was starting to worry about you, you were gone a while."

Wearing a long shirt, hair wet, Ellen put her dirty clothes in a bag, sat, and began to comb her hair. "I wanted to take a shower."

"It had to be cold."

"It was, but it was so hot today, it felt good."

"We're running out of room in the truck."

"I know, I'm glad we decided to stop at Fairfax first. That way if we run out of room, we have the homeopathy supplies."

Dean offered a cracker to Ellen.

She shook her head and placed down the comb. "I think I'll get some sleep." She climbed under her sleeping bag and lay on her side facing Dean. "Don't forget to put out the fire."

"I won't." Dean rested his arms across his bent up knees, and then rested his chin on top of his arms and stared at Ellen.

"I thought you gave that staring thing up."

"What?" Dean laughed. "Sorry. I just I don't know, can't believe you're going to sleep."

"I'm tired."

"Yeah, but ... I though we could talk."

"About."

Dean paused. Then, after clearing his throat he said, "The baby."

Eyes closed, Ellen asked, "What baby are ..." she opened her eyes and lifted up some. "The baby."

Dean nodded.

"Have you been thinking about it?" She asked.

"I want you to go to Montana."

“You’re bartering your sperm again.”

“It’s not bartering,” Dean said. “I want you to go.”

“I’m not gonna go to Montana to have sex.”

“Well ...” Dean leaned forward some, “I don’t think having sex with you is viable in Ashtonville.”

“Why not?” Ellen asked.

Dean only looked.

“Are you worried again about Frank?”

“I worry about Frank’s reaction to the pregnancy. I mean, he’s gonna change his mind.”

Ellen shook her head. “He lost his chance.”

“You have a lifetime with him.”

“I still can. I want a baby.”

“I’m worried.”

Ellen lifted more. “Why?”

“I’m worried about us getting attached. I know what you say, but I know what I feel. What I get from you.”

After a moment of silence and a stare, Ellen nodded slowly. “Then that’s a chance I’ll have to take. And why are we talking so serious about this. Unless ...”

Dean gave a partial, closed mouth smile.

“You’ll do it.”

Dean exhaled.

“Really? Can I ask why?”

“Yep.” Dean nodded once. “The sex.”

Ellen blinked several times. “The sex.”

“No,” he chuckled. “The child. You said the father will be able to be a part of the child’s life. I want that. I really want that, and to be honest, in this world right now, if I don’t take this opportunity, I may never get that. Besides,” He inched forward and leaned to her with a whisper. “I think you’re pretty cute.”

“Ditto.”

Dean smiled, Ellen returned it.

“So,” He sighed out. “When do you want to start? Montana?”

“There you go with the Montana thing.” Ellen scooted over and patted the sleeping bag. “We’re alone. And ...” she winked. “I’m a sure thing.” She saw the look of debate on his face. “No?”

“Not no. Yes, I mean ...” He cleared his throat. “How?”

Ellen sat up. “How what? You don’t know how?”

Dean grinned at her. “No that’s not it.” He scratched his head closing one eye. “How should we?”

“What do you mean?”

“Technical or”

“Oh,” Ellen sang the word. “I know what you mean. Either like we want to or like we’re trying to have a baby.”

“Exactly.”

“Dean?”

“Yeah.”

“Uh ... I think if we’re going to do this ... we should make it worth our while.” She winked.

“I couldn’t agree more.” With an ornery smile, without hesitation, Dean slipped his hand to her neck, drew Ellen inward, and began to kiss her.

Dean looked back one more time at Ellen who lay sleeping on her side in the bag. He had just finished placing on his jeans, jeans only and he paced slowly, with his hand behind his neck watching her. He wanted so much just to lay with her, sleep next to her. But after they had finished and they slipped into conversation as if nothing transpired between them, Ellen fell fast asleep. She fell asleep without giving permission to Dean to stay close to her. And knowing Ellen as he was beginning to, that was not a boundary he was going to cross without having her tell him it was all right.

Feeling the night air chill against his bare chest, and the tiredness from the day behind them. Dean knew it was time to sleep. He doused the remaining fire with the awaiting bucket of water and he walked to his sleeping bag, sliding it just a little closer to Ellen’s. Before he laid down, he stood over watching her for another moment. Squatting down over her quietly, Dean ran his fingers through his hair as he brought his face close to hers. With two fingers he touched so softly her face and he brought his lips to her cheek. His kiss stirred her some, but not enough to wake her. With Ellen’s roll onto her other side, Dean half smiled, mouthed the words ‘goodnight’ and serenely walked back over to his sleeping bag.

SATURDAY, JULY 4

Northern Outskirts of Philadelphia

Ellen's eyes twitched in REM. Her lips moved slightly, reflecting her inner conscious occurrence. She slept, head against the interior window of the truck's cab, rain pouring down outside.

"All these years," Frank blasted her in the dream.

"Just let me explain."

"How can you explain? All these years and you couldn't wait. You couldn't give me time so we could have the baby."

"Frank, please."

"How many times, El?" he asked. "How many times did you sleep with him."

"Just twice, I swear, just twice."

"Did you enjoy it."

Ellen didn't respond in the dream.

Frank neared her. His face close. "Did you enjoy it?!"

Ellen jolted awake. Swiping her hand across her face, she cleared not only her hair, but the sleep feel. Her heart raced, she breathed heavily. After sitting up, she turned and looked to her left. Dean slept soundly in the other seat.

She could still hear Frank's dream words and a fear hit her. Perhaps because they were heading home, and she would have to face Frank. Face him knowing what had occurred between her and Dean. Surely it was a breach of trust. In thought, Ellen tried; she tried to justify her actions of sleeping with Dean. Justify them as her wanting to conceive. But it was more. It had to be.

The two times they had been together were more than two people trying to conceive. It was pure. It was good. And in Ellen's heart, it was now wrong.

Her thoughts traveled to the previous night. After lovemaking they laid there. Dean caressed her while they laughed and spoke, and they kissed. A lot. Before, during and after they kissed. A carry over from the entire day, when he stopped to kiss her several times, and she did the same.

What was going on?

Being with Dean held a certain security. Something about being with him, made Ellen feel wanted.

“Look what I found.” Dean said the day before.

“A camera?” Ellen asked.

“A digital camera. I’ll use it until the power supply runs out.”

“What are you gonna take pictures of?”

Dean snapped a shot of her.

Ellen squealed in shock.

Dean laughed. He leaned into her and kissed her, running his hand down her face.

Pause.

“God, you’re beautiful.” He smiled, and then kissed her again.

Ellen closed her eyes coming out of that memory, flashing to the lovemaking. Slow, tender. Dean apologized to her. Apologized for enjoying being with her.

“Don’t apologize, I’m enjoying this too,” Ellen said.

“I’m meaning more than a physical level.”

“I know what you mean,” Ellen told him. “I feel the same way. I’m enjoying this too.”

“What’s going on here, El?” Dean asked. “It feels more than us trying to have a baby. Maybe it’s my imagination, but you’re responding emotionally.”

“I know.” She whispered.

“And it’s going beyond the confounds of our being intimate at night.”

“I know.”

“Maybe ... you know ... maybe it’s something that should be more than just us trying to conceive. What do you think?”

Ellen didn’t hesitate. She started into his eyes and answered, “I think you’re right.”

God! Did she say that? Intimacy before conversation is like a truth serum. Ellen knew it. The fact remained, it didn’t matter how she felt and the closer she drew to home, to Frank, the more she drew in guilt.

She had to face the fact that she couldn’t be any more with Dean than a person with whom she was trying to conceive. And even that would probably have to end. But first she had to face Dean, wake him, and get them

moving, so she could eventually face Frank.

Ashtonville, CT

William walked proudly across the yard holding his tin bucket, he headed for the cow. "This way, boys."

Johnny and Denny followed closely behind. They knew this was the day that they would receive the first true lesson on how to milk a cow.

"Listen up." William sat on the small stool aside of the cow. "Now, when you do this, I don't expect you to fill the bucket, not yet. You're just not going to be strong enough. Denny, are you paying attention?"

"Yes, sir." Denny snickered.

"All right, first." William reached his hands under the cow. "Watch. With a firm, but not too hard grip, grab a hold . . . " William stopped.

"William." Johnny moved closer. "Is something wrong?"

"No, I just . . . " William released the udder and grabbed his left arm.

"William?" Johnny placed his hand on his shoulder. "What's wrong?"

William tried to speak but couldn't. He grabbed tightly to his chest and fell from the stool.

Johnny turned sharply to Denny. "Go get Aunt Maggie, quick! Tell her William is sick." Johnny knelt down to William, who was still conscious. "Hold on, William, you'll be all right."

"Johnny, run to my house." William gasped for breath. "Up, uh, on the table in the dining room is my black bag, get it."

"I'm not leaving you."

"Now, John." William rolled on to his side holding tightly to his chest.

Johnny stood, then dashed across the lawn, nearly bumping into Maggie as he rounded the corner. "William needs his bag."

Maggie flinched when she saw William on the ground. "Oh, Will." She raced to his side. "What is it?"

"My heart, can't breathe."

"What can I do? Tell me."

"Nitro in bag." He gasped. "Won't make it home, get me inside."

Maggie looked up, they were only a few feet from the house where the cow grazed. "Do you think we can make it in there?"

William turned his head. "I'll try."

"I have the bag." Johnny ran and slid as he made his approach to them. "Here."

Maggie opened the bag and scurried for the pills. Once she found them she placed one in William's mouth under his tongue. After a few moments, they slowly made their way into the house. She laid William's weakened body on the couch, then searched the home for a blanket. When she returned William had slipped into unconsciousness.

Andrea jumped from her side of the truck and raced home to see the children. She dropped her bag at the door and called out, "hello?" There was no answer. It was still early, but the kids had to be awake. "Hello?"

"Andrea?" Denny stood at the front door.

"Denny." Relieved, Andrea turned; she ran to him and embraced him, picking him up from his feet. "I missed you. Where are Maggie and Katie?" She set him down.

"One street over. We heard the truck. Andrea, Maggie needs you, something's wrong with William, he's sick."

Andrea didn't hesitate. She raced into the street, calling the attention of Miguel and Jenny as they unloaded their belongings. "Miguel, Jenny, come with me, something's wrong with William."

The three of them followed Denny. When they arrived, Andrea was the first to enter. She immediately saw William lying on the couch. "William."

Maggie stood above him crying. "Andrea, I didn't know what to do. He's been slipping in and out."

Andrea knelt on the floor, "When?" she asked. "When did he get like this?"

"Just a few minutes ago."

"William," Andrea spoke his name with a stern passion. "Are you in pain. William?" As she spoke, hands feeling his wrist, she noticed William's black bag on the coffee table. She reached in and retrieved the stethoscope. She placed it on and listened to his chest. "His breathing is shallow, and his heartbeat weak. William? William, can you hear me, it's me, Andrea. William?"

William's eyes fluttered as they opened slightly, "Some. Some pain."

“You’re responding, that’s good.” Andrea said, lowering the stethoscope. Her head then cocked at the sound of a truck and air breaks. “Jenny! Go get whoever that is, hurry. Maybe it’s Dean.. William?” she spoke soft. “Dean may be here.”

“Dean?” William coughed. “Not, Dean.” In his weakness, he joked, “He might kill me.” Just as he chuckled, he coughed again, released a whispering, “Dean,” and his head slumped to the side.

“Sweet Jesus,” Andrea whipped the stethoscope from neck, and pulled William to the floor.

“What’s happening?” Maggie asked.

“He’s in arrest.” Andrea widened the opening of William’s bag and searched quickly.

“Do something,” Maggie beckoned.

“I am.” Andrea pulled out a vial and syringe, immediately filling the syringe. Extending William’s arm, Andrea’s injected the fluid into his vein. She tilted back his head, breathed into him, and then began resuscitation. After four cycles, she checked for a pulse again. Nothing. She continued.

Joe barged into the home after Jenny had summoned him. “Son of a bitch.” He dropped to the floor. “Where we at, Andrea.”

Hand on his chest, Andrea counted out loud. “Fourteen and fifteen and ...” a shift of her body, she delivered a breath. Exhaling, she sighed. “Nothing.” Her hand grabbed the syringe, filled it and as she reached for the arm, Joe stopped her.

“Have you gone directly in?”

“No.”

“Try it.”

Andrea found the placement using her fingers, and bought the needle into the area. She injected.

Joe joined her in the cycles. Joe on compressions, Andrea on breathes.

Again they stopped, they checked. Nothing.

“We need a deliberator.” Andrea said exasperated.

“Can we send Miguel to the clinic?”

“Not enough time.” Andrea answered.

Joe suggested. “Cardiac thump?”

“Can you?” Andrea asked.

Joe nodded.

Andrea showed the placement, and Joe, fist high above William, delivered a drop of his hand with a power thump to William’s chest.

Andrea listed. “Nothing.”

“Let’s keep trying.” Joe cupped his hands over William’s chest.

Fifteen minutes had passed, and still William had not returned to them.

Andrea, with sweat forming on her brow, was the first to stop “I’m sorry, William.” She placed her head to his forehead, and began to sob.

Joe laid his strong hand on her arched back. “You did all you could. You did good.”

“I didn’t do enough.”

“Yeah, yeah, you did. Come here.” He lifted her to her feet. “With what we had, you did the best anyone could have done.”

Andrea buried herself in Joe’s arms. “With so little of us left, why did we have to lose one more.”

“I don’t know.” Joe looked back William. “Andrea, you go with Maggie. I’ll take care of him.”

Maggie took hold of Andrea, and her, Andrea, Jenny, and the children left the house.

The conversation didn’t go as well as expected. Or rather as well as Ellen hoped. She sprang it on Dean, when they stopped for fireworks. Literally, as she picked up ‘snaps’ she fired it at Dean. “We can’t do it anymore. I still want to have the baby, but it won’t work with you. Oh, hey, should we get snakes?”

“What? You’re joking.”

Ellen looked at him, lost the ‘up’ to her, and shook her head.

“Why? I don’t understand.” Dean asked her.

“I’m sorry.”

“I thought things were going well.” Dean said.

“Dean ...”

“No, El. What? One day we’re close, the next we’re not. What about our little talk?”

“Dean, you agreed ...”

“I know what I agreed to. I know what you agreed to. I also know what we’ve been like all week. El, come on.”

“Dean, I’m sorry.” Ellen softened her voice. “Please understand this.”

“I can’t. You gave no indication last night. Actually, I probably would accept this better if you didn’t respond to me the way you do. And you responded, El, boy do you respond. What? You don’t like me.”

“That’s not it.”

“I don’t do it right.”

“Dean, stop it. It was only twice. You couldn’t have gotten that attached to me after twice.”

Dean chuckled in sarcasm. “You’re right. I got attached to you before hand. I’m sorry, El, I like you. I really like you. I did from the moment I met you.”

“I like you, too, Dean.”

“Then why are you stopping this? We didn’t even give it a chance. Give me one reason. One good reason and I’ll accept this.”

“Frank.”

That was all it took. That one word. Ellen even tried to explain the reason. How she felt funny, felt as if she were doing wrong, even though she wanted the baby, she by all rights should have waited on Frank.

Dean accepted it, didn’t mean he liked it. His attitude the rest of the way home proved it.

Both were quiet. The mid-afternoon sun began to beat brightly down when Ellen and Dean pulled into Ashtonville. Hitting Ellen’s street was the first conversation between the two for over a hundred miles.

“We’re the last ones back,” Ellen said quietly, box of fireworks on her lap.

“I see that.” Dean put the truck in gear and opened the door.

“Are we still working together?” Ellen asked.

“Yes.”

“Can we wait until tomorrow to do more air samples?”

“Why? So you can spend time with Frank.” Dean stepped out.

Ellen sighed in frustration, then she too stepped from the truck. When she did, she saw Andrea approaching, and she waved. “Hey, Andrea. We brought back fireworks.”

Dean mumbled. “Fireworks is right.”

“Shh.” Ellen snapped. “Shut up.”

“You shut up.”

“Baby.”

“Baby?” Dean turned to her.

Ellen ignored his comeback and motioned her head at Andrea.
“What’s wrong with Andrea.”

Dean looked.

Andrea drew closer, and directly towards Dean. “Dean.”

Dean looked into her eyes. “Something’s wrong. What happened?”

Andrea took a deep breath, looked at Ellen, then back at Dean.

“Dean, your father had a heart attack. I’m sorry, he didn’t make it.”

“No.” Dean looked at his house.

Ellen reached her hand for him, but Dean took off with a charged to his home.

“Dad,” Dean apprehensively walked in. Joe and George stood waiting in the living room.

Joe placed his hands on Dean’s arms. “I’m sorry, son, he’s upstairs.”

Dean took the steps two at a time. When he reached the top, he took a deep breath before entering his father’s bedroom. He opened the door, and there lie his father motionless on the bed. A blanket covered him, and he looked as if he were sleeping. With trembling hands, he reached to him. As his fingers touched down upon his cold skin, the reality of his father’s death hit and he dropped to the floor at the bedside.

Joe knocked once before walking in. “Dean?”

“When, Joe?” Dean looked up at him.

“This morning. Dean, I want you to know, we did all we could. Andrea worked . . .”

“I know, I believe that.” He looked at his father. “What do we do now?”

“We have to bury him. I have a spot on the hill ready. He’ll be buried next to Ellen’s children, and my grandchildren. It’s a peaceful, beautiful spot. He’d like it. We’ll say a few words.”

“I would like to do it myself, Joe.”

“That’s fine.” Joe squatted in front of him. “Let me help you move him. Then I’ll leave you alone with him. It’s not far, you can walk back.”

Dean looked up and nodded. He reached his hand out, and as Joe helped him to stand, he noticed Ellen in the doorway.

“Dean?” She stepped in. “I’m so sorry.”

Dean turned his head from her and looked away. “Ellen, Joe and I are going to take my father up to Murphy’s Hill now.”

“Dean.” She approached him, but Joe stopped her with a slight shake of his head. “Dean,” Ellen whispered compassionately, “if you need me.”

“I’ll let you know.” Dean only nodded.

Ellen backed from the room. “You know where I am.”

Dean waded in the silence of the room, staring down at his father. He closed his eyes in a silent, brief prayer, then covered his father with the remaining blanket, and looked to Joe for help in moving him.

Nightfall did not bring the fourth of July festivities as planned. Though a table set in the center of the street, it was not to celebrate, but to mourn the loss of a man they had come to love. A man they had all looked up to. The only one missing was Dean. It had been several hours since Joe had returned, yet Dean remained on the hill.

They would talk of what they had found, then they would talk of William. They would talk of what needed to be done, but they always ended the conversation with William. It was the first post-plague casualty. A death not one of them had expected, nor was ready for.

Andrea noticed Ellen staring out. She placed her hand over Ellen’s. “When he gets back, talk to him.” She caught in the corner of her eye, Dean walking slowly down the street. “Look, here he comes.”

Ellen and everyone else looked.

Dean saw the group of them, then turned and went into his home.

Ellen stared down to her cup. “I think he’d rather be alone.”

“You don’t know that. But you owe it to him to find out if that’s what he wants.”

“You’re right. I’ll wait a little bit and head down there.”

“Good.” Andrea patted Ellen’s hand and rejoined the conversation.

George gulped down the rest of his beverage. “O.K. so are we in agreement? Rest for a few days. Then four of us take two trucks out at the end of the week.”

“What two trucks, though?” Joe played with a ballpoint pen. “And which four?”

“Definitely me and you.” George answered. “And two men. Miquel is out, since he’s injured. So, we’ll unload, get everything put away, get our farmers situated, then you and I will head back.”

Joe agreed. “That’s really not a bad idea. Leave two men there to organize things, and come back for the last two trucks, that will save on time. It’s July now, let’s see.” Joe thought for a moment. “We’re talking, everyone back here by August to get ready for the final move.”

“It would also add time by leaving two men out there to help John and Henry. Time to get another truck full of food. Frank and Jonas brought back two. The more food we have, the less chance of running out too soon.”

“Excuse me?” Andrea knocked on the table. “You’re talking men, men, men. What exactly are us women supposed to do? Just sit here and wait six weeks until you get back?”

“Well.” Joe bobbed his head back and forth. “Yes. Andrea, listen, you won’t be alone, there’ll be someone here with you. I would rather have you four women back here, instead of traipsing back and forth. The trips are exhausting. Besides, the kids need you guys. They need a woman’s care.”

Andrea folded her arms. “I think it’s sexist. You’re just lucky, Joe Slagel, that my body is too tired and sore to put up a fight with you right now.”

“See.” Joe waved her off. “We’re doing it for you. Andrea, the world died six weeks ago, can we bury the women’s lib thing with it too? Let chivalry reign for a while again.”

“Chivalry, my batoona.” Andrea snapped, “Ellen, has this man always been such a male chauvinist?”

Frank shook his head. “Come on, Johnny, I think this thing may get a little heated for you.” Frank grabbed Johnny’s arm, and stood. He laid his hand on Ellen’s back, and whispered, “Goodnight.”

Ellen gazed up with a solemn smile, then answered Andrea. “As long as I’ve known him.”

Joe laughed at the comment, and others laughed at Andrea’s dismay. But it was short lived. The laughter at the table broke into sudden silence when Dean approached. His hair wet from showering, he walked with one hand in his front pocket of his Levi’s jeans, a white T-shirt hung over. He said nothing. Walked by the table, not a smile, not a motion. He just walked by, stopping only at the edge of the table where Ellen was seated.

Dean firmly gripped her hand. “I need you,” he spoke softly. And without waiting for a response, still holding her hand, led her from the table and to his home.

Still silent, Dean shut the door, released Ellen’s hand, and walked center of the living room.

“Dean ...”

“Shh. I want to say something to you. I understand what you meant all those weeks ago.”

“What do you mean?”

Dean ran his fingers through his wet hair. “Remember when I tried to talk to you? You told me that, one time, you had no one, no one left. And I insisted that you did. I understand now. I was wrong, you were right. Because now I have no one.”

“No, Dean, I was wrong.” She neared him. “I have everyone in this town. I have you. You got me through a difficult time. We’re friends, Dean, let me be here for you now.”

Dean turned his back to her.

“You said you needed me.” She reached up and rested her hand on his shoulder. “I’m here.”

Dean turned. With his eyes closed, he reached for her waist and pulled her close. He sought comfort in her arms. For a long time he just let her hold him. When he felt he could look at her, he lifted his head, wiping his eyes. Without another word, he placed Ellen’s face in his hands and stared at her.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

Dean brought her face to his, and kissed her deeply and passionately. He actually had to force himself to stop. “Ellen, I really need to be close to you right now.”

Ellen didn’t answer. She didn’t want to answer. This situation was exactly what she wanted to avoid. Dean was in pain, and his emotions were taking over. She had promised herself she wouldn’t be with him again, and if she let it go any further right there, she would be. But he needed her. Against what she promised herself, she would give in. She would be what Dean wanted and needed to help him through this night.

Taking a deep breath, she removed his hands from her face and placed his arms around her. She pressed her body firmly against Dean, and began to kiss him.

Dean held her tighter. If he could have pulled her inside of his soul at that moment, he would have. Finally, without any mental restraint, he let himself go, sliding his hand up her back, gently clutching her hair and pulling her head back. He brought his lips away from hers, and glided them down her arched neck, through the openness of her shirt, to the center of her chest. With his head buried between her breasts, he lifted her off her feet, and led her to the couch only a few feet away.

MONDAY, JULY 6

“Just a minute.” Andrea finished drying a green pan, placed it down and walked over to the back door to answer the knock. Joe stood there. “Joe, come in.”

“Am I bothering you?”

“No, no, just cleaning up from breakfast.” She held the door open for him. “Sit down.”

“Thanks.” Joe pulled a chair out from the table and sat down.

“Would you like some coffee?”

“Oh, no, thanks.”

Andrea sat at the table with him. “So, what’s up?”

“I wanted to fill you in on a few things. Ellen isn’t around so maybe you can pass the info on.”

“Sure, what is it?” Andrea reached behind her and grabbed her coffee off of the counter.

“Just a few minor changes. Me and George are only bringing one person out with us on the first trip. It’s a room thing. You know, incase we find someone.”

Andrea snickered, “This is what you came to tell me?”

“No, one more little thing. Since William’s passing, we’re in need of a doctor.”

“You have Dean.”

“Dean’s a scientist, he can do some doctoring, but I doubt very much that he can make on-the-spot diagnoses without looking it up. He’ll be a great asset if any of us come down with a virus.”

“So what are we going to do?”

“George and I were talking. We’d like to see you take over that position.”

“Me?” Andrea grabbed her chest. “Oh, Joe, I don’t think, that’s an awful big responsibility. I’m a nurse.”

“And you’ve been one for over twenty years. No amount of schooling can replace that knowledge. You and Dean will work together. I’m saying treat the patients, if any, that we have at the hospital there.”

“Joe.” Andrea was apprehensive. “I don’t know.”

“Everyone will have a job, or else we’ll never get this thing going. Everyone’s job will be vital to the maintenance of the community.”

Andrea stood from the table. “And mine is being a doctor. With reservations Joe. I’ll do it.”

“Good. You really don’t have a choice. You’re the only one here really qualified enough to do it.” Joe pushed his chair out and stood. “I’ll let you get back to cleaning.” He walked to the back door and grabbed the handle. “Oh, Andrea, about the other night, when we were kind of fighting?”

“Oh, don’t worry about that, Joe.”

“I’m not. Just wanted to say, I kind of liked it.” He winked and walked out.

Andrea shook her head, “Oh, no. No-no.” She spoke out loud to herself, walking to the sink. “He is not priming me for wife number seven. No way, sweet Jesus.” And with that comment, she peeked out the kitchen window to watch Joe walk down the street.

Ellen opened the door to the lab with her backside, her hands occupied with a brown box. “I’m back. I got some air and soil samples for you.”

“Good, put them down,” Dean said.

Ellen shut the door with her foot, and then turned to place the box on the counter. “Oh, my God, Dean, you did it.”

“Yep.” He sat staring at a computer screen. “The battery pack for this still worked. I can’t believe I didn’t thinking of running back to Stamford for this stuff sooner.”

“Were you able to find the programs we needed?”

“I just down-loaded the last one.” Dean took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

“Dean?” Ellen walked over to him. “Were you just wearing glasses?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you always? I never noticed.”

Dean shook his head in disbelief. “No, Ellen, I wore disposable contacts. I just used up my last pair.”

“Put them back on, let me see.”

“No, you’ll see me in them enough.”

Ellen pulled up a chair and sat down. “What happens if you break them?” Ellen picked the glasses up.

“I have another pair. And put those down!” he spoke sharply.

“I’m sorry.” Ellen was taken aback. “Dean?” he ignored her. “Maybe you need another day or two to clear your mind.”

“No, I need to work.”

“This genetics program you have, is it easy to run?”

“Pretty much. But when we connect the computer to the generator, we have to make sure that very little else is on. If by chance the power blows, we’ll lose everything we put in. And we have to remember do back ups.”

“I’ll remember that.” Ellen stood up and walked to her box. “I went to the beach to get the one sample, and the soil I got from ...” She noticed Dean not paying attention to her. “Dean, are you all right?”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe you need to take a break.”

“No, working keeps my mind off of things.”

“I understand that. So if you’re ready to listen to me now, I ... “

“What happened to you the other night?” Dean turned his stool to face her.

“What?”

“The other night, where did you go?”

“Oh.” Ellen remembered. “I went home.” She began to unpack the box.

“Why?”

“Why? Because you were sleeping. We talked about it before you fell asleep. We agreed that you would spend yesterday alone, and if you needed to talk, you’d find me. If this bothered you so much why didn’t you come to me yesterday?”

“I was mad because you left in the middle of the night.”

“Do you feel better now?” She placed the empty box on the floor.

“I guess.” Dean turned back to the computer. “I have to get back to work.”

“You’re mad at me still, aren’t you? You can’t be mad.”

Dean’s hands slammed down. “And why is that?”

“You don’t have a reason.”

“I think you confusing me emotionally is a reason.”

Ellen laughed. “How am I confusing you emotionally?”

Dean stared.

“The other night,” Ellen said. “You came to me. You needed me.”

“And no one said you have to sleep with me.”

“That’s what you wanted and needed.”

“So any guy who is down, can come to you and ...”

“Don’t!” Ellen yelled. “Don’t even go there. You’re talking through your grief, and I’ll forgive that insinuation. This time.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.” Dean stood up. “I just ... I just get something else from you.”

“What do you mean?” Ellen asked.

“I mean, it wasn’t a goal or project that made us connect.” He inched closer, and laid his hand on hers. “I was more.” He paused. “There’s something here. And it pisses me off that you’re denying it. I feel it. There’s something happening between us, you care about me more than a work partner, it’s deeper than that. That’s what I think.”

Ellen’s lips stammered, but it wasn’t her voice that emerged.

It was Frank’s.

“Then you’re thinking wrong.” Frank stated as he walked into the lab. He moved directly to the two of them, grabbed Dean’s hand, removed it from Ellen’s, and faced Dean. “If your mind is going somewhere with El, it’s moving in the wrong direction. Cause it isn’t happening.” He inched Ellen away, “Come on, El.”

It didn’t take much effort to get Ellen away from Dean in that lab. Frank took her away with ease. Dean saw it. It was a sharp slap of reality to Dean, on Frank’s control over Ellen in every aspect.

FRIDAY, JULY 10

Ellen sprang from a dead sleep. She jumped from the couch when she heard the sound of engines. She quickly raced out to her porch, only to see the tractor trailer pulling away. “Damn it, Joe. You didn’t say goodbye.” Shaking her head, she watched the truck until it was out of sight. Just as she turned to go back in, possibly get some sleep; she heard the call of her name.

“Ellen.” Andrea trotted her way.

“Oh, hey, Andrea.” Ellen said dejected.

“Joe said to tell you goodbye.”

“He could have told me himself.”

“Well,” Andrea had something in her hand; it was hard to see with the way her arms held tight to her body. “You won’t miss Joe too much, we’ll be busy scavenging books and metals, you know.”

“Uh huh.” Ellen nodded watching what appeared apprehension on Andrea’s face. “Something is up. What is it?”

“To the best of your knowledge, when was Dean going out to Montana?”

“Next trip, why?”

Andrea stepped closer. “Miguel, even though he thought he’d be stronger, he didn’t go.”

“Oh, OK, that’s good.” Ellen said with quirkiness.

“Here.” Andrea handed Ellen a piece of paper.

“What is it?”

“Dean said to give that to you.”

Ellen opened the folded paper and skimmed it with her eyes; she peered when Andrea sighed heavily. “These are program instructions to the new program. And ... a list of things to do. How odd.”

“That’s it?” Andrea asked.

“Yeah.”

Andrea reached the note and quickly read it. “That son of a bitch.” She wisped out.

“What?”

“Ellen, I thought this was ...” she handed it back to Ellen. “I thought this was a note, not an instruction sheet.”

“Why would he leave me a note?”

Andrea hesitated. “Because he left, Ellen. Dean left for Montana.”

Curiously, Ellen looked to the letter. “He left? He wasn’t suppose to go until next trip. Frank was going ...”

“Frank didn’t leave. Plans changed this morning.”

“For how long?” Ellen asked.

“He’ll be coming back with the truck. No worries, two weeks.”

“That works.” Ellen slowly folded the note. “I can’t believe he didn’t say goodbye either. But, he’ll be back soon.”

THURSDAY, JULY 20

Garfield County, MT

“God damn rabbits!” Joe pulled back the homemade sling shot he held in his hand. He aimed, released, and fired a single stone across the field at a brown and white rabbit. The rock beamed him in the backside and the rabbit went scurrying. “Son-of-a-bitch.” Joe searched for another stone. There was still eight more rabbits, grazing in their field of grass. He aimed again, pulled back . . .

“Joe.” Dean snuck up behind him

“Shit.” The stone fired shot twenty feet off target.

“Nice aim.”

Perturbed, Joe turned around. “Why don’t you walk over there and we’ll see if your ass can figure out how good my aim is.”

“What are you doing to the rabbits?”

“Trying to kill them. Damn complex is over run with them. They’re sneaking in the perimeter. We have to get rid of them before they start breeding and then we’ll never get rid of them.”

Dean placed his hands in his pockets. “Why don’t you just shoot them then if you want to kill them?”

“Too easy. The hunter in me won’t allow it. Besides, I don’t want to waste my bullets. What is it that you want anyhow, Dean?”

“I decided I’m not going back. The hospital’s not done and it needs a lot of work. Anyway, Frank can stay in Ashtonville. Johnny needs him. He won’t have to leave him or . . .” Dean cleared his throat. “Ellen.”

“I’m sure he’ll appreciate that. Now if you don’t mind, may I return to being Elmer Fudd?” Joe began to aim at the little rabbits again.

“Sure.” Dean figure it best to leave Joe to his task, and Joe always seemed to find a task to keep him occupied. Dean walked back down the hill to the little clinic. He returned to his work. The work he procrastinated accomplishing, so he could avoid going back home.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 26

Andrea tapped lightly on the door to the laboratory before entering. “El, may I come in?”

“Sure, come on.”

Andrea opened the door. “It’s dark in here.”

“Don’t turn on the light.” Ellen’s face was illuminated by the computer screen. “What’s up?”

“I thought you’d like to know.” Andrea smiled. “They’re back.”

Ellen leaped from her chair. “When?”

“Just now. I brought the car over so you could get back faster.”

“Thank you.” Ellen hastily took off her gloves and jacket, and followed Andrea out to the car. They drove quickly to the street.

Upon seeing Joe, Ellen, barely waiting for the car to stop, opened her car door and bolted towards him. “JOE!”

“Hey.” He didn’t have to walk far. Ellen ran to him and hugged him.

“Joe, I missed you, you’ve been gone too long.”

“This is quite a welcome. I didn’t get this the last time.” He put his arm around her shoulder. “Listen, Sweetheart, can we catch up in little bit? I’m beat.”

“Sure, sure, you go get rest. I want to talk to Dean, I have a lot to tell him.” She kissed Joe on the cheek and looked around.

“Uh, Ellen.”

“Yes, Joe?”

“Dean stayed in Montana.”

The smile fell from Ellen’s face. “Why?”

“A lot of reasons. There’s a ton to do. He’s barely got the hospital situated.”

“But Miguel, Jonas and Frank are going out tomorrow morning. They’d . . .”

“Dean stayed so Frank could stay here with Johnny, and I agreed. Besides, he knows where we’re headed with things out there. With George and I being back, that’ll help.”

“What things?”

“Ellen, I’m tired.” He turned towards his house.

“No, Joe.” Ellen stopped. She stopped cold.

“What? What’s wrong?”

“I’m not feeling well.”

“Emotionally or physically?”

Ellen’s hand shot to her mouth.

Joe shook his head in disbelief. “Just like that? All of the sudden, you aren’t feeling well?”

With that question came Ellen’s answer. She stepped a foot back, removed her hand, turned her head, and vomited.

“Christ.” Joe closed his eyes. “I guess I got my answer.”

A slice of homemade bread, and a warm cup of tea did the trick. Ellen was a hundred percent better and back in the lab, not thinking too much about her expulsion episode. Actually, she was playing solitaire on the computer when Frank knocked on the archway.

“Oh, hey.” Ellen wiped her mouth and turned around.

“I hear you weren’t really thrilled about me staying.”

“What?” She snickered. “Don’t be silly. Where did you get that idea?”

Frank walked to her. “I spoke with my Dad and ...” his hand extended, he grabbed the mouse and played a card on the computer screen.

“Hey, that’s my game.”

Frank shrugged.

Ellen folded her arms. “You seem pissy.”

“I am.” Frank exhaled. “I talked to my Dad. He said you were so... how did he put it. So revolted you puked.”

Ellen laughed. “I did not.”

“He said you threw up. Right on his shoes.”

“I didn’t throw up on his shoes.”

“He showed me.”

Ellen cringed. “That’s gross.”

“So you’re sick?” Frank asked.

“Was. Better now.”

“Uh huh.”

“Must have been something I ate.”

Frank nodded. "That's what my Dad said. He said we need to watch what you eat, he thinks you're eating spoiled food."

"Probably."

"Right."

Ellen looked curiously at him. "Did you just say right?"

"Yep. I know you. Cut the shit."

"I haven't a clue what you're talking about."

"How's this." Frank raised his eyebrows. "You're pregnant."

Ellen clammed up.

"So you are."

"Frank ..."

"You are." Frank stepped back and nodded.

"Let me explain ..."

"No." Frank held up his hand. "I expected this."

"I'm sorry if it hurts you." Ellen stood up.

"Shocks me," Frank said. "But ... I can deal with it. I knew. The night you told me that you wanted a baby, that it was a done deed. We can't take it back, so, I'll deal with it. I'll handle Johnny and ..."

"Frank. No."

"El, I don't have a choice. If I'm gonna be a father again, I might as well ..."

"Frank."

Frank continued, "Handle it. I guess part of me is a little glad that ..."

"Frank. Stop." Ellen held up her hand. "The baby ... the baby isn't The baby is not yours."

Frank blinked several times. "Not mine."

Ellen shook her head.

Frank exhaled. "I didn't realize you and Pete were close at all ..."

"No. Not Pete's. Not yours. I got my period the day after the last time we fooled around. I told you about that. Remember."

"Yeah, but that would mean ..." Frank closed his eyes. "Who?"

"Let me explain."

"Who?"

"Frank," Ellen cleared her throat. "I wanted a baby. You didn't want to have one."

Finally, Frank blasted his loudest. "Who!"

Ellen covered her ears. "I'm not telling you who."

"Oh, you'll tell me who the father of the baby is."

“For what reason?” Ellen asked.

Frank’s voice went high and squealing as he tried to control his emotions, but they still seeped out. “For what reason? So I can fuckin’ kill him, that’s the reason!”

“You have no right!”

“What do you mean I have no right!” Frank yelled. “Every man here knows you and I have a history. Every man.”

“And we decided to just be friends.”

“So that means you can just jump into bed with the next available guy?”

“Don’t!” Elle snapped. “I wanted a child. I wanted a child now. Not next year. Not two years. Now. I wanted to get pregnant. I was with him to get pregnant.”

“And didn’t you feel anything, El? Not one fuckin’ iota of guilt over me. Yeah we were friends, but we decided to take it one step at a time to be more. Didn’t it bother you?”

“Yes!” Ellen screamed. “Yes, it did! That is why I decided not to anymore. I stopped it just as fast as it started.”

“Before you knew you were pregnant.”

“Yes.” Ellen nodded.

“So you stopped because of me. For what reason?”

“Guilt. Dedication to you. And I figured if I’m going to have a baby, I’ll have it with you.”

With a slow sweep down his face, Frank paced a few moment in the lab, calming himself.

“Frank?” apprehensively, Ellen inched to him. “Are you OK?”

“No. I’m not. I’m trying.” Frank faced her. “But I need to know who in order to deal with this.”

“Are you going to kill him?”

“Probably, El.”

“Then I’m not telling you,” Ellen said. “We need him.”

Frank’s hand immediately slapped to his face. “No.”

“What?”

“No.”

“Frank?”

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” Frank stopped. “Fuck. Dean?”

“Frank.”

“It is Dean. Of all fuckin’ people. Dean. Please tell me you really did stop it because of me, and not because sex with Dean was bad.”

“The sex with Dean wasn’t It wasn’t mean to be for enjoyment, Frank. God.” Ellen said. “I stopped because of you.”

“How many times?”

“Now, why do you have to ask? It’s not important.”

“Oh, I beg to differ. I need to know. I have to get through this, I have to know.”

“Twice. Well, three but the one time doesn’t count.”

Frank’s eyes widened. “Doesn’t count? How does it not count.”

“We didn’t finish.” Ellen waved her hand out.

“I got news for you, El. It counts.” Frank paced again, then stopped. “Does he know you’re pregnant?”

“No. In fact, he probably wouldn’t even think I got pregnant.”

Frank nodded. “Good.”

“Good?”

“Because you’re not telling him.” Frank stated.

“What do you mean? I have to tell him.”

“Oh, no you do not. He was with you to get you pregnant. You were with him to get pregnant. You got a fuckin’ bond already. I want that bond broke. We can’t get passed this if you keep that bond. Telling him you’re pregnant to him is keeping that bond.”

“But is it right?” Ellen asked.

“Was it right that you went to him before I could change my mind. While you and I were working on being a couple.”

Ellen shook her head.

“Then you don’t tell him. He won’t know.”

“He’ll know when I start to show,” Ellen said.

“Who cares? You tell him it’s mine. In fact, when the time is right, we’ll tell everyone it’s mine.”

Ellen slowly stood and walked across the lab.

“I want a life with you, El. I want to work toward that life.” Frank followed her. “I can’t have a life with you if we have Dean interfering and playing Daddy. This has to be our start. Our child. I’ll raise it. I’ll take responsibility. I’ll be the father. No one has to know but you and me.”

Ellen turned and faced him.

“I love you, El. Let’s do this. What do you say?” Frank asked.

With slight trepidation, Ellen answered, “I say congratulations. You’re going to be a father.”

SUNDAY, JULY 30

Garfield County, MT

Scattered about the floor, the conversing voices echoed in the large building. Miguel, exhausted from his trip there, laid on the linoleum, his hands folded across his large stomach, his eyes fighting to stay open. Jonas nibbled on an apple, one of a bunch he and Miguel stopped and picked. John Matoose stretched out on his side, using the floor as a desk as he canvassed the building with his eyes. Dean sat next to Jonas, listening quietly, like everyone else, to Henry.

“So what do you suppose this building actually is for, John?” Henry asked as he sat Indian style.

“It’s not in here.” He turned a page. “Storage maybe.”

“So close to town? And it’s big, but not that big.” Henry commented. “Should we use it for distribution?”

John shook his head. “Joe already picked the building that reminded him of a store.”

Miguel, in an almost snore talk, grumbled, “None of you paid attention.”

The four of them turned their heads to the man they thought was asleep.

“None of you paid attention. Joe said what he wanted to do with this building, all of you agreed.”

Henry laughed. “You mean make it into the town meeting hall slash bar?”

“Social Hall.” Miguel corrected. “And I have to agree. Once we get this place going, we’ll need it.”

Henry noticed John writing. “You’re actually putting that down?”

“Sure why not?” John asked. “Joe said that. We did agree. I remember. Besides, we have nothing to stock it. We’ve spent all this time getting this place ready with things to live and survive. I for one think it’ll be a nice change of pace to go on a run that involves something other than surviving.”

Henry shrugged his shoulders. “I guess your right. Hey, Miguel?” He received a grunt and Henry shrugged again. “Jonas, how are things in Ashtonville? Are they getting stuff ready?”

“They have plans to really get into this week,” Jonas said. “Frank, Joe and George have a bunch of neighboring places they plan to clean out and pack up. But they are limited in time because they only want to go out sun up to sun down. They don’t want to leave the ladies since the incident with Ellen.”

Not only did that catch John and Henry’s attention, but Dean’s as well. Dean’s head sprang up. “What happened? Is she all right?”

“She’s fine.” Jonas told him. “She was working at that doctor’s office doing things in that lab. I don’t know what, none of us do. She needed something from town and decided to walk there” He saw Dean wave him on to hurry him. “Easy.” He held his hands out. “Anyhow, she went there late and another straggler came from the highway.” He paused in his story to let them Dean, Henry, and John rumble verbally in worry. “But . . .” Jonas lifted his hand. “Frank happened to be walking to get her and showed up in time. Just in time. And.” Jonas took a bite of his apple wiping the juice from his mouth as he spoke so nonchalantly. “He killed him. What is it about Ellen and attracting trouble.”

Henry agreed. “I think she’ll be a magnet.”

John added, “Maybe she does it just so Frank can be here hero.”

Jonas snickered, “Frank can be my hero any time.

Dean, concerned and perturbed, probed Jonas. “Was she hurt, did he hurt her. What did he do?”

“Fine, Dean.” Jonas said. “She’s fine.”

Dean’s head dropped in relief.

Gathering up his papers, John lifted from the floor. “Break time over, let’s hit the next few structures then we’ll let Miguel and Jonas rest up completely from their trip.” He stretched out his arms and shook his head about the story Jonas just told. “And all of you quizzed me about these fences. Now you know why.” Tucking his papers under arms against his thin body, he moved to the door. “You guys coming?”

Henry stood up. “Yeah.” He saw Dean and Jonas stand and Miguel still laid on the floor. “Miguel.” Henry called him. “Miguel.” He walked to him and nudged him with his foot. “Miguel.” Seeing that Miguel didn’t move, Henry shrugged and followed John from the building.

“Jonas.” Dean tugged his arm as they walked out the door, holding him up from following Henry and John. “Have you talked to Ellen since I was gone? Has she said anything to you like, how she’s been doing?”

“Nah, she doesn’t need to say how she’s doing. Frank has her taken care of.”

“I see.” Dean released him. “I guess that’s what she needs.” With a lowered head Dean staggered behind the group. Hoping that Jonas and Miguel would bring some other news about Ellen other than the trouble she had. Anything at all. Something positive and he received nothing. Feeling let down, Dean veered off, unnoticed from the pack, and returned to his work of stocking the hospital.

SUNDAY, AUGUST 6

Ashtonville, CT

It was something different to occupy their time. Ellen really didn't mind. Joe, pulling her from her little lab where she piddled about. Telling her to be part of the group for once, work had to be done. Ellen had done her community work, but saw no reason to join in on the most recent endeavor Joe deemed as female job. For the most part, it would take her mind off of things. The more she drew to the end of the experiments Dean left her to run, the more she thought of Dean and the baby. And the more she thought of him, the more she missed Dean. Missing Dean was the biggest no-no Ellen could do to herself. So to counter it, she constantly remembered their last conversation, and how he just up and left. And then there was Frank. Frank would help too. But not in a supportive way, more in a Frank way. His, I-don't-give-a-shit-about-Dean attitude. His, bitching about a man he barely knew yet had already marked Dean as the one person that he would end up killing. His whole Dean-outlook coupled with Ellen's loyalty to Frank always helped to sway her. Plus the fact that Frank, her, Johnny and the baby, would soon be starting a new life together .. she believed. Dean was not a part. He couldn't be.

It was a great day for August. Usually hot, but this day. Ellen joined Andrea, Maggie and Jenny on the flat grassy front yard of her home. Joe's task sat center of the four women circle. Wooden crate boxes near by them for the results of their job.

The conversation flowed as if they were making a quilt instead of separating metals to be brought with them to Montana. Metals that would be melted down, in the future near or far for when they ran out of the supplies they had gathered and were forced to then make their own. Supplies, as Joe stated, such as needles for the hospital, ammunition, tools, weapons, fillings for teeth, and even something as minuscule as a nail. Metal was needed and stockpiling tons of it was what Joe wanted to do. Unseparated metals waited for them at Montana, and a monthly metal run would be pegged until they drained the last drop that they could.

Ellen supposed she'd thank him in the future when she needed a new frying pan, but as she sat in the front yard she wanted to curse him. Her fingers ached, but that wasn't entirely Joe's fault.

With a slight grunt and a sigh of relief, Ellen dropped her shoulders. “Ah, got it. Tough one too.” She held up the small diamond, letting it catch the light of the sun. She then placed it in a velvet sack she had sitting on the ground next to her, and tossed the band in the crate designated for gold.

Andrea snickered as she watched Ellen scurry through the pile for another piece of jewelry with a stone in it. “Why are you doing that? Saving those. They are worthless now.”

“Not really.” Ellen showed Andrea the red ruby then took her small screw driver prying at the stone. “The way I see it is some time in the future some one is going to want to give jewelry. And they’ll be like, ‘hey I can make a ring but I need a diamond’ and I’ll be there. Figuring money will be obsolete, I probably will get one hell of a trade for what I have.”

Jenny giggled like the teenager she was. “Are you going to stash them in that box you are making?”

Maggie turned to Ellen’s nod. “What box?”

“I’m going to call it my memorabilia box,” Ellen stated. “It’ll be filled with useless things for the future that just will remind me of the things I loved in this world. The world we lost.”

Andrea let out an ‘ah’ as she separated probably faster than the rest of them.

Jenny leaned forward over her folded legs. “Ellen, will you charge the man who wants to make me a ring. Will you charge him for a diamond?”

“Of course not, Jenny.” Ellen said.

“Good.” Jenny sat back in relief. “I plan on getting married someday and when it gets close I can throw hints that you have the goods.”

Ellen looked up at her a little shocked. “Married.” To Ellen it seemed like such a starry eyed teenage notion. Hadn’t she noticed that the world ended. “Jenny, who are you going to marry?”

“One of the men left I suppose.” Jenny fiddled with the ring she held. “I could wait until we get more men to choose from, but according to Joe that may be years. There’s enough men to go around. And the way I look at it is, as much as we may find them distasteful now, after spending all this time together we’re all bound to connect and they’ll start looking different. Like the boys in my choir. When I first joined choir I thought . . .” Jenny cringed her face. “They were gross. But . . . the more I got to know them the more what they looked like didn’t matter. They were nice boys. That’s why I got to date a lot.”

Ellen snickered. “Sort of on the lines that beggars can’t be choosers.”

Andrea nudged Ellen's leg. "Be nice."

"Oh I didn't mean to be mean." Ellen looked at Jenny. "I was thinking how right you are. Maggie, what about you, do you think you'll get involved with anyone again?"

Maggie shook her head. "No, no. I was married for forty-three years. I'm done. And I'm glad also glad that the men with us are young" She saw the quick look from Jenny. "To me they're young."

Ellen edged on. "Oh I don't know, Maggie. What about the farmers that Joe and George found in Indiana? I hear they're pretty old. You may find yourself in a hot and heavy post-plague world fling."

Maggie, embarrassed, raised her hand with a chuckle as she grabbed her chest. "Please. You make me blush."

Ellen laughed. "What about you, Andrea? You were very much in love with Jake. You think you'll ever be with anyone again?"

Andrea tilted her head. "If it happens. That was something Jake and I always discussed." She saw Maggie nod in agreement. "I guess very happy couples do. We always promised each other that we wouldn't stay alone. That we wouldn't let the memory of one of us get in the way of allowing ourselves to feel. So . . . if, like Jenny, one of our men look good to me, sure. I'll move on."

"Like Joe?" Ellen asked.

"Joe Slagel?" Andrea shook her head dramatically. "Joe Slagel is a heathen. Our sweet Lord will frown upon me if I got involved with such a man. No, no, no."

Ellen freed another diamond from its base, smiled at that and Andrea's comment. "So Jenny, have you given any thought to which man here may strike you as the one." Ellen brought her hands up as if quoting.

"I was thinking . . ." Jenny smiled. "John Matoose. What do you think, Ellen? Do you think he's cute?"

"John Matoose?" Ellen looked puzzled. "I don't think I even remember what he looks like he's been gone so long. Andrea do you?"

Andrea nodded. "Thin man, tall, nice face, blonde hair, kind of sweeps it some to hide his baldness."

Ellen winced. "I hate when men do that. If you're gonna go bald, go bald gracefully or shave your head like Frank. Anyhow, I guess he would be cute, Jenny, I don't remember him striking me as ugly. But I remember what Henry looks like. He's very nice and . . ." Ellen winked. "Henry is cute."

"Henry is old." Jenny stated,

“Henry’s old?” Ellen was shocked. “Henry is not old. Henry is twenty-nine years old.”

Andrea interjected. “Remember, Ellen, when you’re seventeen years old, twenty-nine is old. Twenty-three is not.”

“Who’s twenty-three?” Ellen asked.

“John Matoose.” Andrea answered. “I remember asking him.”

Ellen’s mouth dropped open. “John Matoose is that young? I thought he was my age.” She shrugged. “It’s the military life that does it to you. Look at Frank. Anyhow, Jenny why don’t you get to know John when we go to Montana, at least your evenings won’t be boring like the rest of ours.”

“O.K.” Jenny liked that idea. “You know, Ellen. Dean will help you not be bored. He’s cute in an old guy way. Or don’t you remember what he looks like since he’s been gone so long too.”

Ellen lost the smile on her face and took on a solemn look. “No, I remember what Dean looks like.” The corner of her mouth twitched some in sadness. “But . . . I kind of think Dean is they type of guy who would rather be bored in his lab by himself. Plus, I have Frank. And . . .” Ellen smiled. “Enough talk about that stuff.” She rummaged through the dwindling pile. “Oh look.” She held up an old latch key. “I’m keeping this. I’ll put this in my box.”

Andrea shook her head. “I certainly hope in a few years, you’ll pull out that box and share it with us all.”

“I will. However, Andrea, I think in a few years I’ll probably be on everyone’s least favorite person list. I had that problem you know.”

Jenny giggled. “Like the with the other mothers I babysat for. They hated you, Ellen.”

Andrea gasped. “Jenny.” She scolded so motherly. “That isn’t polite.”

Ellen, closed her eyes with a hidden laugh. “It’s the truth, Andrea. Don’t worry about it. I was black balled from the PTA. Well, no one liked me there so I went anyhow just to be annoying.”

“It’s only because they were jealous of her.” Jenny said. “Ellen had money, she’s pretty and skinny. And . . . she had a husband that looked like he should have been in the movies.”

“Really?” Andrea asked with surprise. “You failed to mention, Ellen, in all of your distaste with Peter, that he was a handsome man.”

Ellen rolled her eyes as she bobbed her head. “Oh, yeah, Pete was hot. I guess I have to give him that one. He probably was the best looking

guy I had ever seen . . .” Ellen noticed a shadow, the big shadow of a figure that cast upon their metal collection. He just stood there and Ellen smiled. “Next to Frank.” She laughed when they all yelled, ‘what.’ “Oh sure, in my book, no one is better looking than Frank.”

Frank squatted down with a smile as he happily dropped another bag filled with metals center of their circle. He laughed at their whining. “Thanks for the compliment, El. See, I guess all those years of being friends with me did something to you.”

Andrea snickered in sarcasm. “Yes, it’s called brainwashing.”

“Now see.” Frank pointed as he stood up. “And here I found something that I thought you should have.” He reached into his back pocket. “And, just to show you how nice I am, I’m still giving it to you.” He tossed Andrea a small jewelry box case. “I have to run. See ya, El.” He ruffled her hair as he walked away, so harshly he pulled her over.

Ellen picked herself up from the ground, straightening her hair. “What is it?”

“I don’t know.” Andre looked frightened to open it.

Maggie peered in more. “Take a look. It won’t bite. Will it, Ellen?”

“It shouldn’t. Come on, Andrea.” Ellen waved her on.

Andrea lifted the lid and smiled. “It’s a pin.” She pulled out the gold medical insignia pin. “But I shouldn’t have this. I’m not a doctor, Dean should have this.”

Ellen shook her head. “You’re the town doctor now remember?” She reached out her hand to touch it. “And . . . Dean already has one of those, he showed . . .” She slowly withdrew her hand. “Dean has one.”

“I’ll wear it proudly.” Andrea took it from the case and began to pin it to her shirt. “I must give Frank more credit. I guess he can be nice, thinking of me when he found this.” She finished pinning it. “There. How’s it look?” She looked up when she saw Joe join the circle.

Joe smiled and pointed to the pin. “Looks good, Andrea. I’m glad you decided to take that.”

“Yes.” Andrea smiled as she patted it. “I’m actually touched. It was a very sweet gesture.”

“Thanks.” Joe said. “I thought you’d like it. And I thought it would be nice for you to have, the minute I saw it.”

“You?” Andrea asked. “I thought Frank . . . Frank said he found it for me.”

Joe laughed loudly as he lit a cigarette. “And you believed him?” He laughed again, so hard he had to walk away.

Andrea gasped as she rolled her eyes in disgust. “Forget what I said about Frank.” Trying to block out the fact that she felt like the fool, Andrea returned with the others in their conversation and in the tedious survival task of separating the metals.

MONDAY, AUGUST 7

Garfield County, MT

Henry watched him for the longest time, trying to think of what to say to Dean. Watching through the open blinds as Dean sat in what would soon be his laboratory at the clinic in their new home. How many times, especially in the past two weeks, had Henry wandered upon Dean in the same demeanor. Sitting there on a stool staring blankly at the green counter top. Papers were spread before him and the pencil in his hand tapped slowly from the point to the eraser over and over again. Dean had not spoken much to Henry or any of them while he readied things for when they would live there.

Taking a long breath, Henry tapped once on the door and walked in. "Hey, Dean, how's that housing list going?"

"Um . . ." Dean looked up. "Its going. Almost done."

"Is this it?" Henry reached down.

"Henry ..."

Henry stared at the paper he picked up. "Everyone seems to have a home. But, you forgot someone." He laid the paper down. "Ellen. Where is she going to live Dean? Don't you think she's coming?"

"I know she's coming," Dean smiled. "I just don't know where to put her. I know where I want her. But ..."

Dean dropped his pencil and rubbed his eyes. "I know where she doesn't want to be."

"How about . . ." Henry took the pencil. "Number 5. End unit." He set down the paper. "There you have it. Right next to you. Now let's go. We're gonna eat some dinner." He looked down to Dean, hoping his 'up' attitude would help. "Wanna get something to eat?"

"Yeah." Dean started to stand.

"Are you all right? I mean, you seem worse."

"I just miss her, Henry. And her and I . . . I kind of left right in the middle of something. Now I have this big feeling of things being unresolved."

"Then why didn't you go back with Joe?" Henry asked. "And resolve them."

"Silly I guess. I know how she feels, basically she doesn't feel. I thought that if I stayed out here, I'd feel differently about her. But . . . as the old tale goes, absence makes the heart grow fonder. It has in my case."

“Hmm.” Henry folded his arms. “I never felt that to be true with me.” He shrugged and saw he made Dean smile. “Listen. I don’t know Ellen very well yet, but I know what she is going through. The same thing as we all are going through. And none of will not know for a very long time how we are going to think or feel. We have to just go with it now. Grow with it because things are completely different. In time, all of us will learn to feel again. Some sooner than others, but it will happen in time. We just have to give it that ... time Dean.”

Dean looked up to the young man who spoke such logical words. “That’s very good advice, Henry. Thank you. I’ll remember that.”

“It’s a Henry theory.”

“A what?” Dean followed him out.

“A Henry theory. Or that’s what my friends used to call anything I explained. Henry theories. You’ll get used to them, and then, like my friends, you’ll get annoyed by them.”

Dean started to laugh. “I don’t see how.”

“Oh, you will.” Henry led him down the long corridor that ended with a set of double glass doors. “Anyhow. Did I make you feel better?”

“As a matter of fact, you did.” Dean patted him on the back. “I still miss her, but I feel a lot better.”

“Good. Cause Dean?” Henry stopped and faced him. “Since you’re feeling better, you think you can work a little faster? We’re going back in a few days.”

Laughing at Henry’s very true implications, Dean spun in his mind what he really had left to do—and do quickly—he and Henry left the clinic.

TUESDAY, AUGUST 15

Ashtonville, CT

The return trip into Ashtonville was a quieter one. They pulled up to Elks Street in a mini van, unlike every other entrance where they rolled into town loudly in an eighteen wheeler. There was no need to. Any and all further remaining supplies to be brought to Garfield Project, would be taken by plane.

Their return arrival did not go unnoticed. Like a welcoming party, everyone ran to the street from what they did that late afternoon, to greet Dean, Henry, John, Jonas and Miguel. Their safe arrival told everyone that it was getting to the time where they would soon leave for good.

Miguel limped as he stepped from the drivers seat of the van. He stretched some in irritation. He had to do most of the driving while the other's slept. He was taken aback in surprise when he was pummeled with tightly wrapped arms around his neck. "Whoa." He looked at Andrea who was the giver of the embrace. "What is this for."

"All of you boys made it back safely. We're proud of you." She moved on to hug Henry on the same manner.

Dean kept peering around after he shook George's hand, followed by Joe's, but he didn't see her anywhere. His heart raced with anticipation to look at Ellen, to speak to her, to tell her things that he needed to.

"Welcome back." The voice said to him.

Smiling, Dean turned and the smiled dropped. "Andrea." He ran his fingers through his hair. "Thanks."

"Even though you don't seem happy to see me. I'm happy to see you." She embraced him. "As I told the others, we are proud of you all."

"Thank you." Dean broke from the embrace. "Andrea?" He looked around again. "Where's Ellen. I'd like to see her."

"Oh." Andrea glanced also. "I don't know. Frank saw her last." She saw Frank pass. "Frank." She grabbed his arm pulling him back. "Dean's looking for Ellen. Where is she?"

Frank lifted his hands and shrugged "Don't know."

Andrea's eyes widened. "Yes, you do. Is she in her house? Where is she? Tell him."

Frank shook his head with a closed mouth. “Don’t know. Sorry, Dean.” He walked away.

Andrea grunted.

“Andrea, don’t worry about him. I’ll find her.” He stepped back. “I’m sure it won’t be too difficult.” Leaving the celebration of their arrival back, Dean quietly searched for Ellen.

Ellen dropped her pencil and rubbed her tired eyes. She stretched outward, then reached up and turned off the computer, rose from her chair, and turned on the light switch next to the door. “That’s enough, I’m done for today.” She went back over to her work space and began to organize her notes. Uncomfortably hot, she had to get out of the lab.

“Ellen.”

Ellen’s heart skipped a beat when she heard the familiar voice coming from the doorway. Closing her eyes briefly with a smile, she turned to see him. “Dean.” Her voice raised in excitement as she dropped her papers and began to go with enthusiasm to him. She quickly, mid tracks, stopped herself. All happiness, all excitement over his return, disappeared from her face. She acted as if she just saw him only a moment earlier.

“How’ve you been?” He slowly entered the lab.

“Oh, working hard. We have a lot of catching up to do. How was Montana?”

“Good, you’ll love it. We designated a corner house for you. I know how you like your privacy. Joe wants us all together at seven tonight at his house, you know, for final plans.”

“Good, I’ll see you there.” Ellen gathered her papers. “I’m done here for today. I have to get out of here.”

“Ellen.” Dean closed his eyes reaching for her arm, just wanting to touch her.

“Don’t!” Ellen jerked away. “Don’t.” She lifted her hand. “You ran. You hid from me. But worst of all, you left without saying goodbye, and I’m still pissed.” She shook her head and calmed herself. “I have to go.” She grabbed hold of her folders and walked past him, stopping at the door. “Oh, and by the way . . . you need a haircut.”

Dean’s head lowered and he grabbed for the counter in defeat over their disastrous reunion.

Andrea brushed a hair from Dean's forehead as he sat in his seat at Joe's house, waiting for the meeting to begin. "It looks good. I did a good job." She gave him the thumbs up. "Ellen will be pleased. And speaking of which." She motioned her head to the door as Ellen entered the room. "Last as usual. Excuse me, Dean"

Ellen walked in and looked around. She smiled when she saw Henry talking to Joe. Slowly, she walked over to him tapping him on the shoulder. "Welcome back."

"Hey." Henry smiled. "Thanks." He accepted the kiss on the cheek. "Thanks for that too."

"Feel honored." She pointed with a half smile. "You're the only one I greeted nicely." She backed up bumping into Andrea as she turned to find her seat.

"Ellen, are you O.K.?"

"Fine."

"You look a little pale."

"I'm fine, thanks." She tried to smile, then made her way to her seat between Frank and Dean. She hesitantly sat down. "Dean, nice hair cut."

"Thanks, Andrea cut it."

Frank reached his hand down under Ellen's chair pulling it closer.

"I think we should move."

"Frank, please." Ellen whispered back.

"No, I'm serious El. I know you, it's too crowded and ..."

"Frank." She brought her hand to her temple. "Not right now. All right?" She grunted and slid down in her chair, extending her feet.

"If everyone's ready?" Joe yelled out, and the room became silent. "This won't take long at all. First, we want to welcome everyone back. Our Montananites have informed us that everything is ready."

Ellen sat up and took a deep breath. She grabbed the notebook from Frank's hands, and began to frantically fan herself.

"Are you all right?" Frank asked.

Ellen nodded, fanning. "You know how I get."

"I know, that's why I suggested we move."

Joe continued. “We also have a name for our town. Johnny and Denny have informed me that it will be called Beginnings, Montana. I think it’s very fitting, good job, boys.”

Everyone began to applaud.

Ellen handed Frank back his notebook and leaned forward. She began to tap her foot and wished the meeting would move on.

Frank laid his hand on her arched back, he leaned to her. “Go get some air.”

“I’m all right.” She spoke through her hands.

Joe raised his hands to get everyone’s attention. “Also, everyone is to start packing up this week. Three boxes each, that’s it. We’ll load a truck up and drive to the airport, where the plane is located in New Haven. George and I will have it gassed up and hopefully by Saturday . . .” Joe stopped when he noticed Ellen was being restless in her seat. “Ellen, is something wrong?”

Ellen looked up at him, her face pale and her brow glistened with sweat. She shook her head no.

Joe, taken aback by her appearance, walked to her. “Ellen, you don’t look well. Are you feeling all right? Do you still have that flue?”

“No, Joe.”

Scolding, Joe looked at Frank. “Didn’t I tell you to watch her with spoiled food?”

“Excuse me.” Ellen sprang from her seat and ran from the meeting room. Everyone was silent until they heard the front door slam.

Joe began to follow her, but was suddenly stopped by Frank who stood up to follow Ellen. “Leave her go, Dad.”

“Frank, something is wrong with her.”

“Dad.” Frank held his hand out. “Just give me a minute with her. She’ll be back.”

“But she’s sick.”

“She’s fine.”

“That was not fine, if something’s wrong with her. . .”

“Dad just ...” Frank ran his hand across his own face harshly in frustration. “Nothing’s wrong with her. She’s pregnant.”

All faces in the room at that moment turned to Frank as he stood with his father.

Joe smiled. “Frank?”

Mouth closed, Frank nodded. “Yep.”

“Son of a bitch.” Immediately, Joe embraced Frank, lifting his much larger son from his feet.

Dean looked at Frank, placed down his notebook and walked out of the room.

Dean walked out into the street with every intention of heading home, he ventured that way until he saw Ellen sitting on the front lawn. After a moment of debate, he quietly walked over and sat next to her. "Feeling better?"

"Yes, I needed air. It was too hot in there." She laid back in the yard.

"So. Did you get like this when you were pregnant before?"

Ellen sat up. "You know?"

"Everyone does. Frank made the announcement."

"Frank? Oh wait till I get him. Frank has a big mouth."

"They'd find out sooner or later. Were you sick like this before?"

"Not this bad." She looked over at Dean.

Dean nodded a few times. "So, you got what you wanted."

"I ... I got what I wanted."

"Ellen." Dean paused and drew courage. "I need to know. I just need to know. Is this baby mine?"

Ellen's lips parted. She stared at him. Preparing to answer, she paused. Frank approached.

"El?" Frank trotted to them. "You OK."

"I'm fine," Ellen stood.

Dean rose to his feet. "Frank, if you don't mind, I am asking Ellen something."

"Nope, don't mind. Ask away." Frank said.

"Without you here." Dean retorted.

Frank laughed. "Oh, I don't think so."

"Frank," Ellen snapped. "Go away, I'm pissed at you."

"Why are you pissed at me?"

"Because you opened your mouth."

"It slipped," Frank defended.

"Slipped. How does it slip out?" Ellen argued.

"It slipped."

"Hey!" Dean shouted holding out his hands. "Enough. Fine. Frank. Stay. Ellen." He ached her. "Answer my question. Is this baby mine?"

Ellen's eyes shifted from Frank to Dean. She took on a solemn expression. "I'm sorry, Dean. The timing ... the ... no. The baby is Frank's."

"I see." Dean nodded once. "That's all I wanted to know." He turned. "Congratulations, Frank." He said as he walked away.

Silence.

Only the sound of Dean's dragging feet were heard.

Frank looked at Ellen. Then they both looked at Dean..

Ellen saw it. The look on Frank's face, and she knew.

"You're not." Ellen said. "What was all that talk about ..."

"Make no mistake. I am going to be the father, but he needs to know he fathered the baby. Despite how much I don't like him, I can't."

"You're right."

"I know."

Ellen nodded. "You or me?"

Frank looked back, Dean was slipping further away. "Odds or even."

"Even."

"Ready." Frank held up a fist. "One, two, three, shake ..." he tossed out his hand.

Ellen gave him a swat. "Good luck."

With a mumbling, 'Thanks', Frank turned, and in a good walking pace, headed after Dean. "Dean," he called out. "Wait up."

SUNDAY, AUGUST 20

As the sun brightly shone upon Murphy's Hill, a cool calming breeze gently swept by as Joe, Ellen, Frank, Dean, and Johnny stood above the burial sights of those that they had loved and lost.

They said goodbye to the physical beings left there, yet, they planned to take with them the spirit that each one of their loved ones had given them. For in their losses they found strength, and hope, and a willingness to go on.

Joe raised his head from the lowered position it was in. He glanced over at Frank and Johnny who knelt before their family's grave. And at Ellen who tried to be strong. "It's time everyone. I think they've waited for us long enough in New Haven."

Dean reached over and placed his arm around Ellen. "Are you all right?"

Ellen nodded. She bent down to the graves of her children. "Goodbye, my babies. I will always hold you here." She brought her fist to her heart.

Silence and sadness became them as they slowly, without looking back, made their way down the hill.

They were the last to leave Ashtonville. A place that Ellen and Frank had spent most of their adult life. The only place Johnny knew. A place that brought new hope to Joe and Dean.

When they pulled the car onto the runway, the door to the plane remained opened, with only George waiting on the steps for them. Everyone else was inside waiting patiently to leave for their new home.

Johnny ran down the aisle of the plane, taking a seat excitedly in the back.

Ellen slid in a row and Dean followed behind her. He wasn't even comfortable in his seat when he felt it on his head.

"Move," Frank spoke as he hit Dean on top of his head with an air sickness bag.

"Excuse me?" Dean looked up at Frank standing there so intimidating. "I thought you were sitting with your son."

"I will." Frank nodded. "Right now I want to sit with Ellen." He motioned his head so perturbed. "Move, Dean."

Ellen lifted her embarrassed head. “Dean, can you give us just a minute.”

“Only because you asked.” Dean stood up. “Not him.” Brushing by Frank, Dean moved to the row in front.

“Hey, Dean, I’m allowing you time with her. Keep that in mind.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“We’re having a baby.”

“No, Frank, *we’re* having a baby.”

“Enough.” Ellen mumbled.

Frank curled his lip at Dean, flipping him off then plopping in the seat next to Ellen. “Hey.” He grabbed her hand. “You ready for this?”

“Oh, Frank.” Ellen spoke low as she turned her body into his leaning down in the seat and grabbing his hand. “I am so scared.”

“I know.” Frank swallowed. He moved his face closer to hers. “I am too.”

“Really? You?”

“No.” Frank smiled and laid his hand on her face. “But, think of what’s ahead. We have a new home. A kid coming.”

Dean leaned between the seats. “We have a kid coming, Frank.”

“Shut the fuck up.” Frank snapped. He shook his head. “I’m telling you, El, I say he can spend time with you and the kid, and this is what I fuckin’ get.”

Dean mumbled from behind, “You’re a saint, Frank.”

Frank snarled his face.

“Ignore him.” Ellen pulled Frank’s attention. “You’re supposed to be reassuring me. I mean, this is so hard. I don’t know if I can do this. I don’t know how I’m going to be out there.”

“Shh.” Frank shook his head. “I know this is a big step. But El, we’ll get through this.” He slowly brought his lips to hers kissing her softly. “We’ll get through this together.”

“I am so glad I still have you in my life, Frank.” Ellen slid her arms around his neck, breathing outward as Frank wrapped his arms tightly around her pulling her into him.

Dean, slid down in his seat, listening to the ruffling of bodies behind him and the cessation of their whispers. He tapped his hand against the arm rest of the seat knowing full well that what was going on behind him was definitely a sign of the way things would be and he’d have to get used to it. He suddenly sat up when George’s voice came over the intercom announcing

that they would be taking off. “Thank you.” Dean looked up at the speaker and stood, stepping into the aisle the moment Frank and Ellen broke their embrace.

Frank ignored him, kissing Ellen on the cheek. “I’d better get back with Johnny.” He stood up. “All . . . all yours, Dean.” He motioned his hand to the seat. “For now.”

“Thanks.”

“Oh.” Frank came back. “I almost forgot.” He fiddled with the seat behind him. “This is for you El.” He snickered as he tossed her an airsickness bag.

Ellen grabbed the bag and tossed it back. “I don’t want that, Frank, I don’t need it.”

“I don’t know about that.” Frank tapped the bag annoyingly on the seat in front of Dean. “You puked twice this morning.”

Dean looked at Ellen. “Take the bag.”

Frank tossed it to her.

“Thanks, Frank.” She rested it on her lap. “Now go sit back with Johnny.”

Frank smiled, then gave a soft wink, moving back to be with his son.

Dean placed on his seatbelt, watching Ellen do the same. She was so silent, and she stared out the window. “Everything all right?”

Ellen nodded as she still peered out. “Just a little scared and . . .” She released a shivering breath. “Nervous.”

“Just let me know if there’s anything I can do.”

Ellen was quiet then sat up when she heard the engines grow louder.

The plane began to taxi down the runway and soon became air bound for their new home. With excitement, sadness, and anticipation, they headed to a place that signified the start of anew: Beginnings, Montana.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 27

Beginnings, MT

The first winter neared its end, as it struck hard and frequently. No one had imagined the vengeance of the storms, and many days were filled with snow being manually removed to make access from building to building. Supplies had held up far better than anticipated, and that, combined with a success in the greenhouses, allowed for rations to be increased.

It seemed as if winter was screaming its final hurrah as the late winter snow fiercely blew, piling up high as fast, and blocking any view two feet from eyesight.

Dean opened the lid to a pot on his stove; he sniffed the aroma, and replaced the lid. “Finished.” He turned off the heat, and a sudden pounding on the door caught his attention. He went into the living room and opened the door. Ellen leaned in the doorway, snow-covered and without a coat. “Ellen, what are you doing here? Look at you, no coat, you’re gonna get sick.” Dean scoffed when Frank appeared wiggling his fingers in a wave. “What is he doing here?”

“Dean.” Ellen held onto her large protruding stomach. “The baby’s coming.”

“Right.” Dean pulled her inside. “It’s not funny, Ellen.” He shut the door trying to leave out Frank, but he walked right in.

“I’m not joking, Dean, the baby’s coming.”

“Yeah, Dean, she’s not joking.” Frank brushed the flakes off of his head. “We’re having a baby.”

“What do you mean we’re having a baby? *We’re* having a baby, Frank. And we’re not having it now.”

“Dean, shut the fuck up and get ready to deliver this thing. She’s in labor.”

“Sure she is, Frank.” Dean rolled his eyes. “It’s three weeks early.”

Ellen could barely stand. “Oh, God. Tell it to the baby.” She closed her eyes in pain.

Dean looked at Ellen then Frank. “Are you sure you’re not kidding me? You two pulled this joke on me twice already.”

“Dean!” Ellen screamed. “I’m having this baby, and soon!”

“Oh, shit.” The color fell from Dean’s face. “And you’re sure it’s not false labor? Here, sit down.” Dean led her to the couch.

“Dean, my water broke all over my fucking floor. I’m sure.” She began to sit.

Frank laughed. “Yeah, everywhere.”

“Then don’t sit on my couch.” Dean stopped her. “I’ll get Andrea and we’ll get you to the clinic.”

“There’s not time for the clinic.”

“Oh, shit.” Dean nervously ran his hands through his hair. “What do we do? Frank can you carry her and run her over there?”

“Sure.” Frank reached for Ellen.

Ellen smacked him away. “Stop it, Frank.” She bent over some. “Dean, get Andrea. She’s right next door.”

“O.K.” Dean ran to the wall and pounded. “Andrea, Andrea.” He shouted loudly. “Ellen’s having the baby. Now!”

“Dean, you better help me upstairs.” Ellen leaned on the arm of the couch for support.

“You want to have it here?”

Frank threw his hands in the air. “See El, screw him. Let’s go back to your place and I’ll deliver the kid.”

“Oh God that’s scary thought.” Ellen grunted and bent over in pain.

The door to Dean’s house burst open, Andrea and snow barreled in. “What’s going on?”

Dean looked panicked “Ellen’s in labor and Frank wants to steal her to deliver the kid himself.”

Frank shook his head. “That’s only because your being a wuss.”

“Shut up, Frank.” Dean snapped.

“No you shut up, Dean.”

“Go away, you’re intruding on our birth.”

“Your birth?” Frank laughed. “Our birth. My kid.”

“My kid,” Dean argued. “Glory stealer.”

“Sperm donor.”

“Out.”

“I’m not going anywhere. Unless you throw me out. You wanna throw me out, Dean?”

“Boys!” Andrea shouted, walked up to Ellen, and felt her stomach. “It’s a good thing we got everything ready at the clinic for you then.”

“I won’t make it.” Ellen breathed heavily.

“It’s only a few hundred yards. How fast were your other two?”

“Less than two hours each.”

Dean smiled in relief. “Good, we have time.”

Andrea looked sharply at him. “Dean, go upstairs and get things ready, just in case.”

“What should I do?”

“Get a shower curtain and lay in on the bed, cover that with two blankets. Get about four towels, folded, and two sheets to cover her with. Also, a pan of warm water. Do it now. I’m going to check her.”

“I’ll do it.” Dean ran to the kitchen and got a clean pan, then flew up the steps.

“Ellen, are you . . .” Andrea saw Frank still standing over them. “Frank, what are you doing here?”

“Staying. This is the most excitement we’ve had in a while.”

Andrea shook her head. “Find something to do. Ellen, are you sure you won’t make it over there?” Andrea’s hands moved about on Ellen’s stomach.

“Positive.”

“Then we’ll get you upstairs. I’ll run to the clinic.” She could hear Dean’s footsteps going quickly back and forth above her. She took hold of Ellen’s arm and helped her to the steps. “Dean, come down here and get her.”

Dean bolted down, nearly falling halfway. “What do I do?”

Ellen moaned loudly.

“Take her upstairs, get her undressed, get her on the bed.”

Frank interjected, “Oh, hey Dean, look, it’s the closest thing you get to getting laid again, since El took your virginity.”

“You’re an ass, Frank.” Dean snapped.

“Bite me.”

“Blow me.”

“Boys!” Andrea scolded. “Dean, where’s your coat?”

“On the chair, where are you going?”

“I’m making a mad dash to the clinic. Ellen and I prepared a surgical box for this. I’m going to go get it.” Andrea grabbed the coat. “Get her up there, Dean.”

“Andrea.” Ellen stopped her. “You have to get Joe.”

“I don’t think there’s much time.” Andrea tried to escape.

“I will *not* have this baby without him here. I want Joe.” Ellen squeezed tighter to Andrea’s arm.

Frank removed Ellen’s grip of Andrea. “I’ll get my Dad, El. I’ll make the announcement.” He bolted to the door. “And don’t have this kid until I get back.”

“Andrea.” Ellen gave pleading eyes while waiting for Dean. “If you get back before Frank. Lock the door.”

Andrea laughed as she backed away. “I’ll remember that.” She darted out the door.

Dean supported Ellen by the waist. “Please don’t have this baby until she gets back.”

“Dean, you’re a doctor.”

“Ellen, I saw one birth and I hated it.” He walked up the steps slowly with her. “There was way too much blood.”

“I’ll try to hold off, Dean.” Ellen’s eye’s squinted from the pain.

“Ellen, you’re being very brave through all this. Doesn’t it hurt that much?”

Ellen stepped to the top step, holding on to Dean who held tightly around her waist. “You’re an asshole.”

“Sorry.” Dean helped her get undressed. He took her to the bed, laid her down, and covered her. He went over to the window and stared out. “I don’t see her.”

“Ellen!” Joe’s voice yelled from downstairs.

“Joe.” Ellen smiled. “Up here.”

Joe came into the bedroom with Frank. He raced to Ellen’s side. “Hey, honey, how are you?” He grabbed her hand and kissed it. He then kissed her on the cheek. “Thanks for telling me.”

“I didn’t want you to miss this.”

Joe placed his hand on her stomach. “Wow, you’re tight. It’s really close. I’m so happy. You know what this means, don’t you? It’s the first child born.” He looked over at Dean who still stood by the window. “So why is he over there?”

Frank answered for her. “He’s being a baby about this.”

“Joe . . .” Ellen squeezed Joe’s hand tighter. “Get Frank . . .” Her face turned red. “Out of here.”

Just as Joe turned to yell at his son. Henry and George ran into the room.

“We didn’t miss the baby yet did we?” Henry asked.

George patted Frank on the arm as he walked by. “Yeah, thanks, Frank, for knocking on the door and telling us.”

Ellen grunted loudly. “What the hell is this? Dean . . . Dean . . .”

“El shh.” Dean held up his hand looking out the window for Andrea.

“Dean!” she screamed. “Look ...” She gripped Joe’s hand in pain. “Everyone’s here.”

Dean turned from the window. “Come on guys.” He spoke annoyed. “You’re dripping snow on my carpet.”

Henry held up his hands. “Sorry. Hey Joe, shouldn’t she be breathing or something?”

Frank rolled his eyes. “I think she knows how to do that, Henry.”

Another second, another intrusion. John Matoose came barreling in. “What is it?”

Jenny followed so excited. “I heard you had the baby.”

Flinging back her head with an arch neck, Ellen yelled through her pain. “Oh my God! What is going on?” She reached her hand out and hit an empty spot. “Joe?”

Joe stopped his mini conversation with George. “Oh, sorry Ellen.” He took her hand and he winked to the observers in the room. “Contraction.”

After her contraction had ceased, and Joe breathed through it with Ellen, he yelled to Dean. “What the hell are you doing? You’re a doctor, get over here.”

Dean nervously shut the curtain. “I am waiting for Andrea. But I don’t see her.”

Ellen grabbed a hold of Joe. “Joe, get his ass over here. Now!”

“Dean!” Joe shouted to him.

Dean parted the curtains. “Ellen, she’ll be here.”

Ellen moaned loudly again. “Dean, it’s coming.”

Dean let go of the curtain and ran to her side. “Shit, just hold on.”

“Dean, the pressure, I can’t hold back.” Her face became red.

“Don’t push! Don’t do it.” Dean begged.

Joe looked at Ellen, then at Dean. “What do you mean? Get down there and handle this situation.”

Frank waved his hand. “Fuck him, I’ll do it.” He walked to the edge of the bed and reached for the sheet.

Dean flew over. “Frank! Don’t you dare.”

“What? You aren’t doing your job. I’ve seen enough movies. I’ll handle this.” He reached again.

“I’ll handle this.” Dean moved Frank’s hand.

“Stop!” Ellen yelled throaty and deep and sounding possessed. “Don’t you dare lift that sheet with all these people in the room.”

At that moment Andrea walked in, squeezing through. “What is going on in here? This is not a three ring circus. Out!” She pointed to the door. “Wait in the hall. Out!” They didn’t budge. “All of you. You too Frank.”

“Nope. I’m not going. My kid.”

Dean barked, “My kid.”

“Fine. Both stay.” Andrea closed the door.

“No!” Ellen yelled, “I’m irritated ...” Ellen’s face winced.

Andrea pulled items from the box, “Sweet Jesus, Dean, check her while I get things ready.”

“Shit.” Dean walked to the bottom of the bed and hesitantly lifted the sheet over Ellen’s bent up knees. With one eye open, he looked down. “Ellen.” He smiled. “Oh, God, Ellen, I see the head. Joe, I can see the head. Look.”

Joe shook his head. “No, thank you. I’ll pass.”

Andrea walked over with the box she retrieved from the clinic. “Do you want to do this Dean, you can.”

“No. She’s all yours.” Dean released the sheet and inched his way to Ellen, nudging Frank out of the way.

“Oh, I don’t think so.” Frank nudged Dean.

“Fine.” Dean reached for Ellen’s hand, but Frank pulled him from her. He tried again. Within seconds a full fledged Patty Cake match ensued.

“Enough.” Joe hammered. “Out. Both of you. Out.”

“But ...” Frank defended.

“No, Buts, out.” Joe ordered.

Andrea, in delivery position called out. “Wait. Head has emerged.”

Everyone halted.

Reaching for a small blue suction, Andrea cleared the baby’s nose and mouth. She dipped a cloth in the water and wiped the baby’s eyes. “One more push, Ellen.”

Ellen pushed.

“That’s it.” Andrea looked up, the baby wailed. “You have a son.”

“El, we have a son.” Dean kissed her. “You did it.”

Andrea quickly clamped and cut the umbilical cord and wrapped the baby boy in a blanket and handed him up to Ellen.

Ellen reached for the baby.

“Let me see,” Frank said, trying to poke through.

Dean was breathless as he stared at his baby. “He’s beautiful, Ellen.”

“Dean!” Frank blasted. “You’re blocking the view of my son.”

“My son.”

“Her son.” Joe halted their fighting hands for the baby. “Now, neither one of you touch this kid ...” Joe instructed, then extended his hands. “Until I do.” Smug, he smiled, and Ellen handed him the baby.

Joe’s hand trembled as he touched the tiny face of the newborn.

“Hey, you, it’s me, Pap.”

Ellen smiled as she placed her hand over Joe’s. “He looks just like you.”

Joe’s eyes watered. “He does, doesn’t he?”

Dean lifted his hands. “How can that be? Hello?”

Frank grinned. “My kid, that’s how.”

“Shut up, Frank.”

“No, you shut up.”

Suddenly the smile fell from Ellen’s face, she looked over at Dean then at Joe, then Frank. “Something’s wrong.”

Dean’s eye’s widened. “What is it?”

“El?” Frank questioned with worry.

Ellen looked down at Andrea. “Something’s wrong. I don’t feel right. Something’s wrong.”

Joe’s heart dropped. “Andrea, what’s wrong?”

“Oh,” Andrea said nonchalantly, almost singing in an upbeat tone. “Nothing much. Just another head.”

Ellen in shock, murmured. “Twins?”

Joe questioned. “Twins.”

Andrea smiled. “Twins.”

“Oh, yeah,” Frank nodded. “Now we can both have one, Dean.”

Dean didn’t verbally answer. He couldn’t. His eyes rolled to the back of his head and his body turned and fell to the floor. He passed out.

“Thank fuckin’ God,” Frank shuffled Dena’s limp boy out of the way, and positioned himself by Ellen. “This one’s all mine.”

Andrea opened Dean’s bedroom door with a bright smile to everyone who stood lining up the hall way. “It’s a boy.” She heard them clap. “And . . . it’s a girl.”

Soon the bedroom so crowded, filled with the loud chattering of praise as the babies were passed around to each and every one of them. It was a special moment and everyone felt it. They all had to see, to touch and

to hold the new life brought to their new community. And just like the name of the place they all now lived, the tiny newborn children were just that . . . A beginning.

THE CONTINUING

*With all of us so different, in all of our own ways.
We see the future through our own eyes. Taking it day by day.
We will make it happen, in our own part, each in everyone.
The future together will be ours. We've only just begun.*

FOUR YEARS LATER

THE FUTURE

“O.K. Johnny, glide her on in,” George instructed. “We’ll land her now.”

Little Johnny, now sixteen and a mirror image of his father, shaved head and all, glided the helicopter over the full growing fields of the complex.

The fields, finally, after four years, had begun to produce the crops it was intended for. A full and flourishing harvest of food that was much needed for the small but still-growing population.

Johnny had been flying since he was thirteen years old. This was his sixth survivor run. The first one in which he piloted the chopper. Johnny was wise. He had neither the appearance nor the attitude of a sixteen-year-old boy. That was to be expected. He had a lifetime worth of hurt in his young life. Fortunately, he had grown to appreciate life.

George had taught Johnny well. He didn’t even grab the wheel from him, as Joe had done when Joe taught him to drive. This is what Johnny wanted. Helping others. Searching them out. Weeding through them. Bringing them in.

Soon Denny would be joining them. George had it slated that he would begin to fly soon also. He was now thirteen, and old enough to start learning. Flying and searching out survivors was not what Denny had planned to do. Denny would rather work for Joe or Frank in security. But it was either flying, or the fields. He’d rather fly.

The search for survivors, seemed at times, hopeless. They had only begun to bring them in within the past few months. Those they did choose to come back with them, were either, weak, young, or women. Few men were found to be acceptable enough for the complex. So strong bodies were needed, yet scarce.

Johnny and Denny were taught young on what their tasks would be. They were the next generation to become adults. They were the ones who would guide Beginnings Montana ahead. They were the future.

THE DREAMER

In the clinic, Dean walked into an examining room, where Andrea was cleaning and examining a boy no older than ten. Dean looked frazzled and tired.

“Andrea, how is he?”

“Infected with lice, dirty, his teeth are bad. Other than that, he seems healthy.”

Dean walked in the room and smiled at him. “I’m Dean.”

“I don’t think he understands, Dean. He doesn’t even speak. I don’t think he remembers how.” She wrote in his chart.

“How did he survive?”

Andrea shook her head. “Maybe he was with someone early on, I don’t know. Poor baby. He was only about five when the plague hit.” She bent down and looked at the boy who didn’t say a word.

“Jenny has her work cut out for her teaching this one.” He handed Andrea a sheet of paper. “I finished the work-up on the two Joe and Johnny brought in last week.”

Andrea read the results. “Tuberculosis.”

“I went over to the school and told Jenny to keep away, with her being pregnant. I really don’t want her to come to the clinic with what the survivor runs have been picking up. Also, let’s keep John Matoose out of the clinic too. We don’t want him passing it onto Jenny and their baby.”

“I agree.” Andrea shook her head in disbelief. “Meningitis, tuberculosis, cholera. What are they doing, looking only for the sick ones?”

“And they found three more. Johnny radioed in, they’re on their way.”

“I wish we could have had the capabilities to go and search for survivors earlier. We may not be in this situation now. Some of these people may have been better off if they were found a little bit sooner.” She pressed a button on the wall.

“We couldn’t care for them if we couldn’t care for ourselves, you know that, Andrea. This is the first year the crops and livestock are flourishing and things are looking promising.”

“You buzzed, Doctor?” A thin woman in her forties walked in the examining room.

“Yes, Melissa.” Andrea handed her the chart. “This little one needs his head scrubbed and taken to containment.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

Andrea grabbed Dean’s arm. “Let’s go, I have other patients.”

“Melissa was healthy when they found her.”

Andrea walked side by side with Dean down the hall. “That’s one out of how many, fifty? Besides, she, like many of the others, was so mentally unbalanced and withdrawn, it’s frightening.”

“That was from the distress, anger, and malnutrition. They’re getting better. Four of them are working the fields already, which makes Miguel happy because now he’s in charge. And two of them are working on the clothes’ division.”

“I guess you’re right. It just gets a little discouraging. Every time Johnny, Joe and George make a survivor run, they only bring back the sick. Of course, that’s only after they weed through the adult survivors like bad job applicants. Last week alone they left behind ten. I’ll bet they were all healthy.”

“Yes. But you have to see Joe’s point. As much as we’d like to help everyone, we just can’t. How’s that old saying go? --One bad apple . . .”

“I think you’re thinking of a bad seventies song.” Andrea released his arm and looked at him. “Are you O.K.? You seem down. You don’t look like yourself today. Is it Ellen again?”

Dean waved his hand at her and leaned against the wall. “It’s everything Andrea. Ellen, the world . . .”

“Wow.” Andrea’s eyes opened wider. “That covers a lot.”

“I’m just discouraged.” Dean looked down. “I just can’t seem to master the antibiotic thing properly. I’m trying. And these people are coming in with previously treatable illnesses. Now it’s frustrating. And Ellen, for example, I love her, I really do. Yet, she argues with me every day. She gets so adamant about the survivors. She hates them being here. The young survivors, she’s fine with. The older ones, the sick ones, forget it. She wants to toss them back out.”

“You knew what she was like when you two decided to become partners in raising the twins. She does love you Dean, in her own way.”

“A funny way. Ever since her and Frank split, I keep thinking, this is our shot. We’ve been trying, for how long now to be a true couple. But, there are complications . . . well.” Dean’s frustration showed through. He stood up straight, tucked his folders under his arm, and started to walk.

Andrea followed. “You didn’t bust her again with . . . ?”

“No.” Dean answered abruptly. “She says it’s platonic now. I don’t know. At least I can talk to you, Andrea. You’re the only one here that seems to look at these new members of our community the same way I do. With hope.”

“No. There are others. John, Jenny, George.” Andrea pointed up the hallway. “Look, there’s your partner now.”

Dean stopped walking. He watched Ellen, arms full of supplies, running down the other end of the clinic. “She’s probably on her way to processing. And she’ll come home tonight pissed off at me, if they’re sick.”

Andrea laughed. “Maybe Dean, just maybe, if you and I work a little harder. If we strive to make things better. Then maybe we can show the people like Ellen, that this world can be great again. That we do have hope.”

THE LONER

In the small green building found just on the edge of the fields, Frank sat in a small office. He looked up with pride to the sound of the helicopter overhead. He knew Johnny had returned safely.

Frank’s attention was turned from Henry who sat with him in the office. When the sound of the helicopter grew faint, Frank turned back to Henry, looking at him with his stone face. Frank had matured, his face now looking more like it’s thirty-seven years. The lines that had formed upon it, scars of the heartache and anger he held in. The pain had finally let go, but not without a lot of struggle and a lot of support.

“Frank?” Henry snapped. “Are we clear on this? Joe said now it’s against community rules if anyone is found in the storage facilities without permission. But you’re not allowed to shoot at them again.”

“Got it.” Frank rocked back in his chair

“Good. Because of that last incident in my generator building, this has to be done. At least Joe got rid of that woman.”

“Yeah they’re all whacked aren’t they? These new ones?”

“Pretty much. That’s why you don’t see me getting too close to them.” Henry stood.

“Why not Henry? You might find yourself a good woman.” Frank spoke snidely.

“Not me my friend. Like you, I don’t see myself with anyone. I’m happy being alone.” Henry gathered up his coffee mug, and walkie talkie. “Cards tonight, Frank?”

“No, not tonight.” Frank rose from his chair and walked to the door with Henry. “I have plans.”

“Plans?” Henry opened the door.

“Yeah. Ellen and I are getting together tonight. You know our talking thing.”

“I see. You two have a regular therapy session going, don’t you? I’ll see you later.” Henry walked through the door.

Frank grabbed a hold of the handle. Hesitating to close it. His mind elsewhere. “Therapy.” Frank laughed once to himself. In a sense it was therapy. Or at least it started that way. Unable to be a successful couple, going back to being friends. And they did go back o the way they were Pre plague. It was how they wanted it. The way he wanted it and needed it. They were there for each other when they needed to, and sometimes when they didn’t. Once a week or so, going off, being alone, sharing memories, then as always, ending their night sharing intimacy. That was their secret, or so he thought. No commitment. No regards to whether or not he was hurting anyone in the process. Because Frank didn’t care. Life was fine with him. It was just how he wanted to live it. His time with Ellen, gave him the companionship he needed. And Johnny gave him the meaning in his life. That was all Frank needed. No more.

THE STRENGTH

Joe stood in the doorway to the small receiving center they had built ten feet from the helicopter landing pad. He watched with arrogance as Johnny emerged from the pilot’s seat, and waved. Joe returned the wave and took his seat behind his long metal desk and waited for Johnny and George to enter.

Johnny jingled the keys as he walked in. “We have three, Pap. Sort of.” He hung them on the rack just above the filing cabinet next to the door.

Immediately behind him walked in a young woman and a teenaged boy, both somewhat thin, and half-unkempt.

Joe looked up at him. “What do you mean, sort of?”

“Well, Pap, you know, these things happen.”

“Jesus, Johnny, not again.” Joe looked over at the woman and boy. “Johnny take them in the other room. And come right back!”

Joe opened his desk drawer and pulled out a syringe. He walked over to the door and laid it on top of the file cabinet. He could see George struggling with a large man, almost dragging him into the receiving center. Joe stepped back and leaned against his desk.

The man pulled from George and angrily stepped into the small office. “Who’s in charge?”

“I am.” Joe folded his arms.

“I have to speak to you!” The man’s voice was gruff and loud. His breath smelled bad.

“Why?” Joe asked.

“Your guys left three people behind. They just left them.”

“There are reasons for that.”

The man charged toward Joe. “That’s bullshit. Who do you people think you are?”

Joe jumped in his face. “Listen, pal, this is the way it is. You have a problem with that?”

“Yeah, I have a problem with that.”

Joe nodded to George, then turned to Johnny, who had walked in the office from the adjoining room. “Get him out of here.”

George grabbed the prepared syringe from the file cabinet, and swiftly injected the man. Before he knew what hit him, he was on the floor.

Joe, face red and angry, pointed his finger at his grandson. “Johnny, the next time this happens, your flights are grounded for two weeks!” He returned to his desk.

George helped Johnny pick up the man. “Joe, honestly, everything was fine until we told him we weren’t returning for his friends.”

Joe leaned back in his chair. “I’m sorry, guys. I’m just sick of these people who fight us.”

“Pap?”

“Yes?”

“Want us to drop him off where we found him?”

Joe shook his head. “No. I didn’t like him too much. Drop him somewhere else. Let him wonder when he wakes up where he’s at.”

George laughed. “I love when we do that. Come on, John.”

Johnny and George pulled the man from the office. Joe watched them leave. He could hear Ellen entering the back door of the receiving center. He would join her in a few minutes. Hearing her bitch was the last thing he needed right now.

Joe sometimes hated when he had to throw people out. It was the way it had to be. They had ejected half of the survivors they brought in for bad behavior. Rules were rules. Joe made the rules. No one ever officially elected Joe as the leader of the complex. It just happened that way, it was assumed. Everyone felt secure in the fact that Joe was there. He brought them to the point they were at. If it wasn’t for Joe, the determination and courage that everyone had, would be less than they needed to achieve such

the outcome. Joe was the best one to run things. He ran them with an iron fist. He insured everyone was safe, fed, and happy. That was the way everyone wanted it. That was the way Joe wanted it. Joe was the unsung hero in all of it. Joe was everyone's strength.

THE SURVIVOR

"Let me ask you a question." Ellen, with a gloved hand, held the new surviving woman's arm. Extending her arm out to herself, resting it on her hip, and wiping it off. "You seem like a nice woman, with all your faculties."

The younger woman, maybe thirty, looked puzzled at Ellen, as the needle came closer to her arm. Her face, dull and dark. Her hair, long and plain. The woman jolted a little when Ellen pricked her.

"What happened to you? What made you get like this?" Ellen was referring to the less-than-cleanliness the woman exhibited. "You had the whole world out there."

"I don't know. We weren't as fortunate as your group. We don't have this. We merely go from city to city, living off of them. There's no running water anymore. It's not the same world. When's the last time *you* were out there?"

"It's been awhile I guess. Yeah, it's been a long while. But still, I would never let myself go. I always look presentable."

"It's funny, how you still care about that."

Ellen pulled the blood filled tube out of her arm. "Why not?" She placed the tube on the table. "I do it for myself. Andrea, does it for her husband. Why for him, I don't know. Of course, if you saw her husband Miguel . . ." Ellen laughed. "You would ask why too." Ellen spoke to the woman as if she were an old friend. She did so because the woman was semi-clean, mentally aware, and definitely not sick. "All done. We have a shower over there." Ellen pointed to the door across the room. "There are clean clothes, *soap*, and food. Send in that boy that you came here with, when he's finished."

"I will." The woman stood up. "It's good to be here."

Ellen smiled at her. "Thank you."

The woman made her way from the room, still half dressed from her examination with Ellen. It didn't even faze her when Joe walked in. She

didn't even try to cover her half naked body. She stood there, breasts exposed.

"Whoops, sorry!" Joe quickly turned his back.

The woman said nothing. She just walked past him into the door marked 'Clean up area-Please use wisely!'

"Ellen how's it going? How are they?"

"She seems fine. She needs to learn a little modesty, but she's fine. The best one we've had yet. I haven't examined the boy. He seems all right too. Looks like these two will be moved into the community faster. I don't see them living in containment very long. The longest time may be training them. I wish all of them were like these two."

"Me too. However, that's why we have our program. Putting them into containment to see if they're functional, and training them for skills here, before letting them live amongst us. Still, so many come in sick, which in turn adds the hospital to their agenda, making it an even longer process."

"I don't want to even talk about that. I say, send me and Andrea out with Johnny. If they're sick, leave them. Period." Ellen began to rummage through her box of supplies, her back to Joe.

"Your comment is duly noted. Again."

"Thank you, again."

"Ellen." Joe walked up behind her. He placed his arm around the front of her, pulling her close to him. "You do a very good job here, you know?" Joe tried to be complimentary, but only came across as sneaky.

"No." Ellen shook her head as she laughed.

"You don't even know what I'm going to ask you."

"Yes I do. You ask me all the time. I help you all the time. This time no. Quit buttering up."

Joe removed his arm, his sly sweetness wasn't working. "Please. I need someone to go to containment tonight, to work with me in the social skills class."

"I'm always at containment, Joe. And I can't tonight. Tomorrow maybe. Tonight I have plans with Frank."

"Christ, Ellen." Joe turned her around to face him. "Do you have to be so blunt with this? You didn't tell Dean you're going to *talk* to my son again. Did you?"

"He knows."

"He's not going to be in here tomorrow whining to me again, is he?"

"Nope." Ellen stepped back and folded her arms. "I've assured him. Don't worry about it." She reached up and patted Joe on the shoulder.

“I worry about it. You do live with Dean you know.”

“I know.” Ellen was nonchalant about her special friendship with Frank. She, unlike Frank, knew how people really saw them. But she didn’t care. Her time with Frank was separate from Dean.

“As long as you two stay on top of things. And I don’t mean physically. I don’t want to hear Dean bitch again. You aren’t being fair to him.” Joe never approved of the situation between Ellen and Frank. He always felt that they should be together. But if they were going to be together, then be together. Not like this. Unfortunately, the relationship aspect of everyone’s life, was something Joe did not rule.

“I’ve got it in check.” Ellen’s attention drew from Joe when the teenage boy entered. “Look at you.” Ellen approached the boy. “You’re all cleaned-up and handsome.”

Joe smiled. “He looks great Ellen.”

“A little thin.” Ellen ran her hand across his ribs that seemed to stick out. “What’s your name honey?”

“Josh.”

Ellen’s hand dropped, along with her heart. “Josh.” She smiled at him. “How old are you?”

Josh placed his hand in the front pocket of his new jeans. “I think I’m fifteen. I lost count.”

Something in Ellen clicked when she saw the boy. “Well, Josh. Joe here is going to leave and I’m gonna check you out.” She led Josh to the examining table, and waited for Joe to go.

After she had finished her examination, the boy seemingly healthy, she made her way back into Joe’s office.

“Joe?”

“Come in, Ellen. How’s the kid?” Joe sat feet propped up on his desk, smoking a cigarette and drinking a cup of coffee.

“He’s great.” Ellen was smiling. “I like this one, Joe. I don’t want him to go to containment. I want to take him home with Dean and me.”

“Nope.” Joe answered strictly.

“Why? Please? There’s something about him.”

“I’ll tell you what it is.” Joe put his feet on the floor. “His name, and his age.”

“Maybe. But, please?” Ellen pleaded with her blue eyes.

“I’ll think about it. Let me check him out to make sure he’s not a psycho in a small framed body. I’ll get back to you tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Joe.” Ellen ran to the seated Joe and kissed him. She raced excitedly to the door.

“Ellen. I want you to think about it too. O.K.?”

“I will.” She walked from the building to her jeep that was parked on the side. Ellen got in and began to head to town. She made her way to the main street that ran through the heart of the complex. When she reached the street, she slowed down to a crawl, catching a glance of Jenny as she entertained a group of youngsters in the yard of the school. So many of the survivors they had found were children, she thought. Some born after the plague, some before. She caught the attention of her daughter, and waved to her. She began to reflect as she looked at her child’s happy face. This was a child born into a world without hatred, and a world without war. How lucky her daughter, and all the other children younger than five, were to have never known the world that had existed before them. A world, that in one split second, could be taken from them all on the whim of a madman. Ellen remembered that world, and she remembered when that world brought her the heartache and pain that made her believe her life would never go on. But life did indeed go on. Ellen smiled as she began to drive home. There across the street from her was the proof.

THE SEARCHER

He walked alone. The way he preferred it to be. The April wind began to pick up just a bit, adding even more of a chill to the air. It was time, he knew, as the sky grew darker--for safety sake--to stop for the night. He followed the road, all survivors did, and it was time to pull from it. The wooded areas now were denser, it was easier to find a spot, a safe spot, to camp out for the night. Not that he feared anything, he actually feared nothing, except for failure in his mission that he for so long now had set out to complete.

Fifty feet or so into the woods he set his gear down. He opened up his sleeping roll, and sat his tired body down upon it. His legs ached at the joints, he walked more today than he had in a while. Determination led him, his gut instincts told him it couldn’t be much longer.

A small fire was first on his mind, then he would hunt down something to fill his stomach that ached with pains of hunger. After building it, he took a moment to reflect, staring into the amber flames that blazed not

a few feet from him. Reaching into his knapsack, he pulled out a string and twined his long brown hair behind him into a ponytail. His beard itched a bit, he scratched it, trying to muster up the energy to hunt. Not really a difficult task, but a tedious one when you'd rather just sleep.

He began to get that feeling again, it happened to him every time he stopped moving, it happened now. That failing of desperation. Of knowing what he had to do, must do, and the reasons that drive. He wondered if he should just give up at times. But he knew deep in his heart, *that* would never be an option. It was time to remind himself, he reminded himself nightly. Reaching into the pocket of his shirt, he pulled out that remembrance. The folded sheet of paper, now tattered and turning yellow. Slowly he unfolded it and read it, not once, but several times. The words on that paper handwritten in blue ink were forever scribbled in his heart. The simple note that read, *'Went to Ashtonville 5/30. Love Dad'*. He breathed deeply taking in his feelings. Folding the note, he closed his eyes tightly as he replaced it in his pocket. Tomorrow would be another day for him, his journey in his mission would continue. He knew he could never stop. Because Robbie Slagel *would* never stop, he just didn't have it in him.