

CIRCLE OF JUSTICE

by

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## CIRCLE OF JUSTICE

*A dedication . . .*

*Imagine a place you love to be, a place you want to visit again. And the memories you have of this place are all good. If this place was a story it would be called, BEYOND THE WALL. Now imagine another place, a place where you really need to go. A place by the end of this book, I hope you want to be. A better place, hopefully far exceeding any other I have taken you to. This place, this next place, lies across the other side of a river. If this better place was a story, it would be called, THE RIPPLE.*

*To cross this river you need a bridge. The name of this bridge is CIRCLE OF JUSTICE.*

*You are about to cross that bridge. By no means is it a straight bridge, nor is your journey across going to be smooth. But it is a route you need to take.*

*I really loved writing CIRCLE OF JUSTICE. Every moment I wrote, I truly put my heart into. I hope you enjoy the directions I have chosen.*

*So for all those who enjoy the journeys the people of Beginnings take you on . . . this story is dedicated to you.*



*And special thanks to . . .*

*Trish, your insight to my own characters, your personal opinions, your ideas, they all mean more than you realize. I listen to what you have to say, and by what you read on these pages, I'm sure you can tell I am following a lot of your advice. To my brother Ron, GOD! I guess I have to make a permanent marker for you in the acknowledgments. This book will be what? The \$30,000 one? To Steve, you really listened to my ideas, though I drove you bonkers with my sixty hour writing weeks and the marathon to get this story from my system. To Rob, there would be no bridge book, with out you telling me I had to build one. To D., You and I really have them fooled. And finally, as always, to F., Your emotions drive me, and what you are makes me write.*

*Thanks,  
J.*





## CHAPTER ONE

### BEGINNINGS, MONTANA

The leaves that had fallen victim to the autumn air, crushed between the spaces of Frank Slagel's fingers as he crawled belly-down through the thick brush west of the back perimeter region. It was difficult for a man of his size to stay hidden in foliage that grew barer by the day. He had a hard time finding the intruder that he was told was 'right there'. His head cold coupled with the small animals that scurried about, threw his sound perception off. And inexperienced, fill-in tower guard, Henry Kusakari, was the straw that broke the camel's back.

Frank had to stay close to the ground, deep in the brush. And if he wanted to keep his head--literally--he had to depend on Henry's directions to find the invader and take him out. It just was overly annoying to Frank, that Henry had no sense of real direction. Not even an inkling.

"Where?" Frank graveled his voice, hovering his mouth over the microphone of his headset, wishing he could scream.

"There." Henry replied. "Right there."

"Where is there, Henry?"

"Frank . . . oh. Frank . . . there. Right there." Henry's voice grew louder with excitement. "Frank, he's right there."

"Well, shut up so I can hear him." No sooner did he get the words from his mouth, Frank heard the familiar pumping sound. The pumping of a shotgun's chamber. "Shit." With quick shifting eyes to the left, he saw a black boot. In just enough time to spare, Frank rolled his body to the right, seconds before the blast of the weapon caused dirt and dried leaves to spray outward like rain. Before his assailant had another opportunity, Frank swiped his left hand forward, grasping the gunman's ankle and knocking him on his back to the ground. With his revolver already clasped in his hand, Frank fired one shot, one deadly shot, and it was over. "I got him." He stood up brushing off the dirt that had stuck to him. He bent down to the uniformed man. "Check it out Henry, we got another shotgun." Frank picked it up. "Nice one too. I'm taking this one on as my own." Tossing it over his shoulder, Frank, using his boot, rolled the man from his back onto his stomach. "See any more? Henry? Henry?"

The sound of Henry breathing heavily out could be heard. "I thought you were dead, Frank."

"I almost was." Frank moved to the back gate. "Did anyone ever tell you there's a difference between right there and right behind you?"

"Well, Frank I was a little excited." Henry defended. "But I don't see anymore. I don't think. No. Yes. No. It's O.K., go on in."

Frank grunted. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. Wait. No. It's a deer." Henry stated. "I don't like doing this, Frank. It's too stressful. Find someone else."



“Tough. You’re doing it.” Frank marched in. “You *will* play tower guard everyday for an hour. Think of it as my punishment to you because you started it.”

“How do you figure that?”

“You opened that wall.” Frank secured the gate. “This is Frank.” He spoke to into his radio as he kept walking. “Fire up the back perimeter, I’m in. And no one touch my dead body. Dean’s claimed it.”

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Questioning in his mind, ‘Dean’s claimed it?’, Joe Slagel could only shake his head and turn down the volume on his radio to spare himself from anything his son said that he didn’t understand. Of course, to Joe, ninety percent of what Frank said, he didn’t understand. But dealing with Frank’s demented point of view was the furthest thing from Joe’s mind. Other things took precedence.

Heading to his office to prep for the council meeting that would take place that early afternoon, Joe also braced for a meeting with Frank. After activity at the back gate, the unscheduled gripe session Frank called a briefing, was always imminent.

Joe wanted to lock the door along with locking the world out for a short period of time. But he couldn’t. Pounding stress headache, eyes burning from reading, Joe laid the huge stack of computer paper on his desk before he sank his stocky body into his beat-up chair.

The papers had become his new daily routine. They had nothing to do with the issues that had to be discussed at the meeting, but everything to do with George. At least Joe thought so. The information he held before him was printed from some of the disks in the cryogenics lab they discovered underneath Beginnings. Though a lot was missing, and answers still remained lost, there was valuable information in those printouts. The entire plan to wipe out the world and start all over. Death squads, the genetically enhanced embryos, and the reconditioning of humans to make them fit the mold. The entire thing was so big, how could George as the former president *not* know of the Caceres society or their plan. He had to. But nothing, in the papers Joe held, confirmed George’s connection. Joe needed confirmation, a gut instinct wouldn’t be good enough. He knew the people of Beginnings, whether they trusted Joe explicitly or not, would not believe George had anything to do with the Society. The answers and the proof, Joe was certain, still laid in Beginnings somewhere. He was determined to uncover it, even if it ended up being the last thing he ever did. He owed it to the people of Beginnings. He owed it to the billions who had lost their lives in the senseless plague that was released as a mere way to control the population.

Sitting back in his chair, Joe mentally prepared himself. George was third council, and would be at the meeting. Facing George, knowing what his insides told him, was one of the hardest things Joe had to do. But it paled in comparison to the pleasantries and fake trust Joe had to front to George. Front to a man he had truly grown contempt for since he arrived back in Beginnings ten days earlier completely unscathed from being held hostage for a month.

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A look of confusion perched upon Melissa's naturally pretty face. She tucked her red hair behind her ears, folded her arms tightly and jolted--again--to the loud sound of crashing glass that flowed from the cryo-lab. She turned around, looked at the closed door, and then tapped on the glass of the blackened out window. "Dr. Hayes?" She called out. "Everything all right?"

Another crash, a thump and a squeal were the sounds that preluded the buzz of the lab door. Dean only popped his head out. His dark blonde hair in total disarray. "Um, yeah, sure. We're uh, testing his strength." He gave a nervous smile.

"He's very strong." Melissa commented.

"Yeah. One more, maybe five minutes." Dean slammed the door.

Melissa tossed her hands up.

In the lab Dean leaned against the metal door. "El, did you get him?"

Up from behind the counter Ellen Slagel stood. She ran her fingers through her hair, which not only matched Dean's in color, but in being messed up as well. Only Ellen's was long enough to be knotted. "What are you nuts? Catch him? I can't even think that fast. We really should do his check up right before his nap time. That way he's not so hyper."

Dean hunched down, stepping slowly in a search around the lab. "Marcus." He called in a whisper to Melissa's son. A child born as the result of the experimental implantation of one of the enhanced embryos. "Marcus."

"Here, Marcus." Ellen sung out almost as if she fetched a dog. "Dean, all the rabbits are secure, right?"

"Shit." Just as Dean, spoke, a rattling of cages was heard coming from one of the back rooms. "El." Dean raced toward the back. "Get the bunny Thorazine ready just in case. I'll lock him in the back."

"Got it." Ellen took off to the counter.

Dean hurried in the back room, bodily slamming the door as he entered. "Marcus." He called in a parental scold. "Put that down."

Marcus didn't have a normal laugh, but he tried. A gurgling hiccup is

what it sounded like. He smiled widely, but most of it was hidden beneath the thick brownish flesh that folded all over his face. The child four weeks old, looked six or seven months. His body was pug, almost muscular looking. Sitting on a counter, he held on to the rabbit cage lifting it high and shaking it as if it were his own live rattle. The furry inhabitants rolled and bounced helplessly around as he did.

"Marcus." Dean stepped to him. "Down. Mommy will feed you later." He cringed when Marcus slammed the cage and playfully lifted it again.

"Have it." Ellen announced as she raced back in the room, shutting the door. "Oh, look Dean, he's playing."

"Swell." Dean shook his head. "I think you're right. I think a closed in area is needed for an exam. We'll have to try again tomorrow."

"Maybe have Melissa there?" Ellen asked.

"Yes. But . . ." Dean took a step closer to Marcus. "We have to return him first."

"No, we have to catch him. He's there, Dean. Get him." Ellen giggled. "Go on, get him."

With a grunt, Dean smiled to the baby. "Marcus. Come on. Put down the cage."

Marcus did.

"Good boy." Dean raised his voice to a high, upbeat one as he held out his arms. "Come here. Let's play. Come here, Marcus. Come . . ." Before Dean could say another beckoning word, a high pitched delightful squeal came from Marcus and he shot forth happily into the arms of Dean, barreling the small doctor's five foot seven frame up a foot in the air and back five. Dean smashed into the wall before falling onto the floor. "El." With Marcus perched upon his chest, he groaned trying to avoid the very wet kisses Marcus plastered him with at that moment. "Help."

Ellen just laughed, shook her head and stepped over Dean. "Hold on to him. I'll get his mother." She laughed once more before opening the door and leaving.

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Never without an entrance, and Frank didn't make an exception. Even though Joe received the radio call from Frank stating he was stopping by before meeting Dean, the 'boom' of the office door as it flung open and hit the file cabinet, still made Joe jump.

"Hey, Dad." Frank walked in carrying a poster size piece of wood. He closed the door with his foot. "Thanks for taking the time. Check out what I made." He stepped closer to the desk. "After my tower watch episode with mentally deficient Henry."

“Mentally deficient Henry?” Joe questioned. “Who’s calling the kettle black, Frank?”

“Who?”

“Never mind.”

“Who?!” Frank questioned louder.

“Frank!” Joe snapped. “Never mind. What do you have?”

“Oh.” Frank set it upright facing Joe. “After today, I went back and finished it. What do you think of my chart?”

Joe stared at it and at the red painted heading. “What in the world, is ‘S’, ‘U’, ‘T’?”

“Huh?” Frank looked. “Oh. O.K. Not ‘S’, ‘U’, ‘T’. You say it like ‘butt’, only SUT. It’s the name of the death squad guys that the frozen people created.”

“Who in the world gave them a stupid name like . . . never mind, I don’t need to ask. Frank, why did you name them?”

Frank rolled his eyes, shaking his head and running his hand over his dark complected face. “It would be a little long winded don’t you think, if tower had to yell over the radio, Frank, I see a death squad guy that the frozen people made.”

“I’ve heard enough. What is this . . . SUT-Buster Chart?”

“My way to keep track and estimate when this little game will be over.” Frank closed one eye and pointed to his own temple. “See, the plan says, twenty-five hundred. I’m marking numbers we took out, when and where.”

Joe nodded impressed--sort of. “I see. Keep track of what’s left. And what is this projected end date at the bottom?”

“The way I figure. Their little chip in the brain has them programmed to come and attack us like zombies going to flesh. And the way they flock steady at four per day, giving them the benefit of a few big hits. Which I look forward to, I figure they should run out of SUTs in three years.”

“If they didn’t make more. Which they probably did.”

“Yeah.” Frank grinned. “So. What do you think?”

“I think I need an aspirin before my council meeting.” Joe stood up and walked around his desk to the door.

“Oh. Hey, if you see Dean, can you tell him his dead SUT is waiting. Hurry before the birds get him.”

Joe only mumbled something inaudible and left.

Frank looked down and gloated in his nice looking accomplishment. Then figuring his father was really impressed with it, behind the file cabinet that Joe faced when he sat in his desk, Frank proceeded to hang that chart.



Andrea took in the cool fall air in a long deep inhale through her nostrils. Her arm looped through George's as they walked slowly. "This was nice. Thank you." She complimented.

"You need to get out more." George said.

"I know. I just . . . two big parts of my life have left me in a years time, George. I'm just not that strong."

"Ah, but you are." George patted her hand. "And you going back to work is the way to do it. Get your mind off of things. The clinic needs you. Dean and Ellen . . . they need you. I don't know what's up with those two."

Andrea had a slight chuckle. "I believe those two haven't decided their field of calling. Medicine or mad scientists."

"Tell me about it. They treat Marcus not like a child but like . . ."

"A lab experiment." Andrea nodded. "That's our Dean and Ellen."

"See why we need you back?" George slowed in his walking. "This is where I have to depart. Thank you for taking the walk with me, Andrea. I needed a little friendly face before the meeting." George started to leave and when he felt the tug to his arm, he smiled, but didn't let Andrea see it.

"Whatever do you mean?" She asked.

Pretending to be so down, George swayed his head slowly. "Oh, it's Joe. He's . . . He's not been the same with me. I can't figure out what I did."

"It's not you, George. Joe's just stressed. These little attacks here and there by those soldiers are wearing at him. Even though the society episode is over with, I believe the whole ordeal is still so fresh. I'm sure Joe will get better. He's just dealing with leftovers right now."

"Good to hear that." George said. "I thought it was me. I couldn't figure out what I did. I don't want to cause Joe any unnecessary stress."

"Who you?" Andrea giggled. "Only Frank and Ellen can do that. And they're doing good, together and individually. Knock on wood."

"Knock on wood. Thanks again." George smiled and walked away. He felt better. He hated the thought of being in the same room as Joe. He carried the little black case that contained the drug he would use on him. It was a small mental consolation for times such as council meetings, where he had to deal with Joe's arrogance. He couldn't wait for the day that it became a reality. But that couldn't happen until Joe had achieved the mental and physical levels that wouldn't warrant any suspicion over his sudden health deterioration. And after his little chat with Andrea, George was hopeful. She had given him some food for thought on how to start pushing Joe to those optimum, prescribed levels.



"Where is he, Frank?" Dean hurried to the back gate where Frank waited for him. He toted a jar in his hand.

"He's this way. And . . . it's about time you showed up." Frank led the way.

"Sorry. I had to at least help Ellen start to get the lab in order after we tried to exam Marcus this morning."

"Out of your control again?" Frank shook his head as he walked deeper into the woods. "You need bigger people with you guys. Killer baby Marcus is almost as tall as you both."

"Frank, that's terrible. He's not a killer baby." Dean defended. "Just sort of mutated."

"Dean." Frank stated his name. "I saw what he did to that chicken the last time he got loose."

"And no one is supposed to know about that." Dean instructed. "How much further?"

"I dropped the SUT somewhere around here." Frank peered around.

Mouthing the word 'SUT?' Dean followed Frank.

"Oh!" He rushed to the right. "Here." Frank stood above the body and rolled him over with his foot. "All yours."

Dean stopped as soon as he saw the man. "Aw, Frank. What did you do?" He asked almost whining as he knelt before the body and set down his specimen jar.

"I killed him."

"T'd say." Dean threw his hands up in the air. "I can't use him."

"Why not? You said you needed to examine his brain for that chip."

"Yes I do. But you shot him in the head. He has no brains left."

Dean moved to the top of the body and to the gunshot wound that seemed to take a two inch section of his forehead out. Pulling out gloves, Dean put them on and pulled out a penlight from his pocket. He shined it through the entrance wound of the forehead while probing his fingers inside. "Nothing. Frontal lobe is completely shot . . . so to speak." Dean took off his gloves. "I need a viable sample, Frank." He stood up. "You think there will be more?"

"Inevitable."

"What are the chances of you getting me one with the head still in one piece?"

"I can do that." Frank nodded and began to walk.

"Any chance . . . you bringing me one alive?"

"I can do that, too. But I thought you wanted to get a brain sample."

"Well . . ." Dean cleared his throat and picked up his jar and followed Frank back to the gate. "It would be a lot easier, and scientifically, it would breed a better sample if the subject was alive during the expulsion

process.”

“You’re gonna take out the man’s brain while he’s still alive?” Frank asked.

“A fresher sample. That would tell me what part of the brain exactly was removed. I could even watch it function for a while . . .”

“Dean that’s cold. And people talk about me.” Frank waited until they passed through the gate and he gave security the call to arm it again.

“It’s science . And uh . . . thanks for trying today.”

“No problem. And Dean?” He called to Dean as walked further from him. “I’ll bring you a live one. If not, I’ll bring you his head. Will that work?”

“Uh . . .” Dean walked backwards. “Yeah, that’ll work. Don’t wait too long though.”

Frank shook his head in a ‘no problem’ manner, and gave a thumbs up. He watched Dean leave down the small grade of the hill. “The man is sick.”

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Henry’s long coal black hair dangled over his face when his head dropped forward and he let out a long dramatic fake cry. “No, Joe.”

“Henry.” Joe slammed his hand on the desk. “It’s decided, you have to make the run anyhow.”

Henry lifted his head. He looked at George pleadingly then at Joe. “A run, I’ll make. But, Joe you guys are sending me to North Dakota.”

“To pick up Jason Godrichson’s work.” Joe said.

“A time machine.” Henry corrected. “Call it what he thinks it is. A time machine.” He grunted. “You have me going to North Dakota for a time machine. Think about it.”

“I did.” Joe stated. “And whether he believes he is H.G. Wells or not has no bearing. It’s his life’s work and he’s been very helpful here. You’ll do the run to North Dakota.”

“Fine.” Henry slumped in the chair. “Go to North Dakota. Run mechanics. Do containment while El is in the lab. Be a tower hero. I’m only one man. Well . . . at least I helped get one today.”

George looked confused. “Get one what?”

Henry was happy and proud to answer. “One of those . . .”

“Elks.” Joe interrupted. “Damn things keep knocking the perimeter off. Henry spotted him. Good job.”

“But, Joe.” Henry spoke up. “I . . .”

“Henry!” Joe snapped. “No need to be modest. Frank told me the whole thing.”

Henry threw his hands up then let them fall. "Fine." He stared puzzled and forward at Joe.

"That should be it." Joe gathered up the papers. "I'm heading off to plastics. George, you'll do a shift fill-in at the bakery."

"I thought we needed me in the security bay?" George asked.

"Um, no," Joe said. "Greg's training a new man. We're good there. Bakery."

"All right." George shrugged and stood up. He noticed Henry wasn't moving. He sat in the chair biting his nails. "Something wrong, Henry, we're done."

"Sort of." Henry said. "I'm just having a bit of a personal problem with Frank. I'd like to talk to Joe about it."

"Oh." George walked to the door. "I'll just leave you two to air it out."

Joe, with raised eyes collected his papers as he waited for George to leave. "What's going on? And be forewarned I'm not in the mood to hear you bitch about my son."

"I don't have a problem with Frank. It's you."

Joe stopped what he was doing. "You have a problem with me? Then I suggest you spill it son, I have to get to plastics."

"Not you personally. Wanna tell me what's going on? Why you hid the fact that we got a SUT from George?"

"No particular reason. I just wanted to keep that between me and security." Joe walked from behind his desk.

"It's me Joe, come on." Henry stood up. "George is council."

"Yes, I know." Joe moved to the door.

"What's going on?"

"Nothing, Henry." Joe grasped his shoulder as he walked by Henry. "Just do me a favor and keep it under wraps for a little while. Thanks."

Henry didn't care much for the answer that Joe had given him. And Joe didn't elaborate any further, he just left. Treating it like anything else that bothered him, Henry would not let it leave his mind until he figured out what Joe was up to.



CHAPTER TWO

Wiping up the last of the cleaning solution and seeing a smudge free cloth, was Ellen's signal that she was done. Remnants of a bad day with Marcus were gone. She tossed the rag in the cryo-lab sink like a basketball. "Done." She smiled and turned to Dean who sat before a computer. "Dean?" She walked to him. "I'm going home."

Snapping out of his work daze, Dean raised his eyes and turned his stool. "So early?"

"Early?" Ellen snickered. "It's after four. What are you engrossed in?"

"Just reading over the ingredients of our identified seven vials."

"Dean? If we identified them, why are you concentrating on them? We have forty-five others to work on."

"I know." Dean rubbed his eyes. "Trying to find a connection."

"You look tired. Find one later. Go home, rest. Me and Frank have the kids. Come back tonight."

Dean nodded. "Maybe I will. You wanna work with me tonight?"

"Oh, no. Dr. Hayes." Ellen waved a finger. "I learned a lesson working at night with you."

"There you go joking about it again." Dean lifted his hand as she laughed. "I'm serious El, you keep ignoring it happened, pretty soon you'll deny it all together."

"Deny what?" Ellen asked. "Are we talking about the same thing?"

"Our little . . . incident."

"Oh, my God. Did we have an incident." She shook her head when Dean gave up. "Night, Dean. See ya tomorrow." She moved to the open door, only to find herself not walking out into the hall, but into Joe. "Oh, hi Joe. Bye Joe."

Before Joe could respond, Ellen was happily moving down the tunnels. Shrugging he stepped in the lab. "Hey, Dean." He made his announcement.

"Hey, Joe." Dean turned around. "What brings you here?"

"Kind of hoping you had a progress report for me."

"Oh, I could give you one. But if you want actual progress, *that* I can't do."

"Still at seven with the vials?" Joe asked.

"Yeah. I'm trying a different route though." Dean saw he had Joe's interest and waited until he moved closer. "I'm breaking them down, finding a common connection, and possibly come up with guesses as to what they are, and eliminate them that way."

“Sort of like if you guessed one of those vials were chicken pox. You’d test them all for chicken pox.”

“Exactly.” Dean said. “And chicken pox we got. Vial forty-three.” He smiled. “Sorry I can’t help with anything else. We’re still theorizing that the hidden files in the computer system contain information we don’t know. Which I’m led to believe that, or why else would they be hidden.”

“You haven’t found those files yet?” Joe questioned.

“Oh sure, Henry did, all three hundred of them. But it’s useless, they’re all password protected.”

“And you can’t break them?”

“To be honest, me and Ellen tried a few times, but we gave up. After three tries the system shuts down and you have to boot up all over again. It becomes tedious.”

“Thanks, Dean.” Joe gave a smile and a swift pat to his shoulder. “I’ll check back with you later.”

“Joe?” Dean called to him. “You’re acting like I just told you something you needed to hear.”

“Actually . . .” Joe opened the door. “You did.” He paused. “Oh, and one more thing you told me. But it was something I didn’t want to hear.”

Oddly, Dean looked at him. “What was that?”

Joe gave a knock on the door. “Let’s just say, if you and Ellen are going to discuss your little . . . incident. Check the hall or at least make sure the door’s closed. Night Dean.” With a smile and a wink, Joe left.

Dean’s heart dropped and immediately he thought , ‘oh, shit’. After he calmed himself, was grateful it was Joe and not anyone else, Dean returned to working on the vials.

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It was Frank’s version of a Walkman. Having Mark in the security bay place the radio microphone to the speaker of that small cassette player of Ellen’s, Frank could enjoy all his favorite songs. Of course what Frank listened to, everyone who had a radio listened to as well. Frank justified that as his right as head of security and he only asked for ‘Frank Radio’ one hour a day.

Frank stood before the fourth warehouse, screwdriver in hand, the security keypad to the building, dangling. He sang unknowingly louder than he thought. Some obscure *Journey* song. In his own world, he just wanted to finish up and go home. The unexpected tap to his shoulder caused the last note Frank sang to squeal out. He spun around taking off his headset. “Oh, hey, George.”

“Thought you’d be home by now. It’s been a long day for you.”

George tapped on his own watch.

"I was, but . . ." Frank lifted the cover to the keypad. "I remembered this. My father has been bitching at me for days to fix the keypad. And . . ." He screwed it in. "I did. I'm tired of hearing about it. This and those reports I'm behind in."

"Was it the elk today that put you behind?"

Frank was a bit puzzled. "Elk?"

"Yeah, your father said you got one at the back gate."

"Oh. Yeah." Frank nodded then shook his head. "Elk." Frank snickered at the thought of how his father was trying to outdo him on a better name for the SUTs. And Frank knew his name was better. He couldn't even figure out what Elk stood for. But to save his father any embarrassment over coming up with a dumb name, Frank just pretended that was what they were called . . . for the time being.

"And not like you don't have enough on your mind as it is." George spoke so understanding.

"Exactly." Frank shoved the screwdriver in his back pocket. "The keypad, reports, Elks. But . . . I'm going home now. I'm all caught up on everything and I won't have to hear about it. My Dad should be happy. At least for a little bit. Night." Frank gave a nod of his head and started to walk away.

"Night." George took a step back and pretended to leave as well. As soon as he knew Frank was far enough out of sight, he returned to warehouse four and lifted a screwdriver from his own back pocket. He brought it to the keypad that Frank had just fixed. "Sorry about this Frank. But can't have Joe happy, yet." He unscrewed the pad. "Not yet."

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A simple 'hmm' every once and a while from Jason Godrichson, was all the response he gave Henry. In the social hall, Jason nursed a drink. He occasionally ran his hands through his salt and pepper hair, but never did he look at Henry. His eyes stayed transfixed on 'Sam' the mannequin as if the phoney bartender would somehow get him out of the verbal lashing.

"And no dallying," Henry instructed.

Jason sipped his drink.

"I hope this . . . *thing* doesn't waste my gas. A heavy object will do that."

Jason did his stock 'hmm'. He knew all he had to do was bide through the complaints and Henry style-bitching and soon enough he would have his life's work right in Beginnings with him. Of course, that would be after a four hour torturous trip each way. But it would be worth it in the long

run.

"No excess baggage. And I have a late meeting tonight so, you'll have to do some driving. But you can't drive too fast. Or out of control."

"Hmm." Jason added a nod with his groan.

"I'll be tired and a little irritable so be ready. O.K." Henry gave a swat to Jason's back. "I feel better about this. See you at five in the morning."

Jason listened, sipped, then turned his head to make sure Henry was gone. He breathed out in relief when he saw that he was. Being the newcomer in Beginnings, Jason had a lot to learn. He didn't have much exposure to many people, he preferred it that way. And he had to admit he paid no attention to the community complaints about how annoying Henry could get. He doubted the truth behind them. But as Jason finished off his drink, he realized the merit in those complaints. And, oddly enough he was grateful for Henry's unnerving abilities. Because even just the fantasy of sticking Henry in the time machine and zapping him fifty years or so into the future was incentive enough for Jason to complete his life's work.

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With an open mouth smile, saying the word 'what' in a high pitch voice, Johnny Slagel, held Brian as he sat in a chair at the dining room table with Ellen. He talked to Brian, lifting him up to his eye level like Brian was a puppy dog. "He is getting so cute."

"Yeah." Ellen's hand brushed against the table, she enjoyed her evening talk with Johnny.

"I can't believe I'm gonna have one of these soon."

"Johnny, please, you're making me a very young grandmother. Don't remind me." She watched Johnny--so much like his father, in looks and actions--hold Brian to his nose pretending that Brian was attacking. Johnny would scream in fake pain. Ellen would shake her head and laugh. "I'm glad you came by tonight." She saw Johnny lift him higher.

"Me too. He's getting so big," Johnny lowered the baby back down. "So has Jenny still been throwing digs about how far behind Brian is."

"When isn't she?" Ellen slumped on her hand, and then immediately jolted up and cringed when her daughter, Alexandra, let out a loud shrill happy scream. It was followed by Frank's big mouth mumbling something. "God, Frank!" Ellen yelled into the living room. "Knock it off!" She shook her head. "He drives me nuts with them."

"It makes me a little jealous." Johnny cradled Brian.

"You want your Dad to wrestle with you? Johnny, don't you think you're a bit old?"

"No." Johnny laughed. "Not that. Just, just the way he is with the

twins, and Brian. I don't know. Part of me wishes I had memories of him being like that with me when I was a kid."

"You're Dad is a good father, Johnny." Ellen's hand rested on his arm.

"Now he is. El, come on. You know as well as I do, he was never around when I was a kid. He was always stationed away. I never saw him. And when he did come home, usually him and mom fought and he'd storm off somewhere." Johnny looked down at Brian. "Hey, he's asleep. I'll lay him in the cradle and I have to take off."

"So soon?"

"Dad has me on the tower at five a.m., then it's the clinic." Johnny stood up. "Long day." He carried Brian over to the cradle which rested just inside the living room. He laid him down. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"O.K." Ellen kissed him and started walking him to the door. "Frank, say goodnight to Johnny."

"Night, John." Frank tilted his head back on the couch.

"Night, Dad." Johnny leaned down and kissed him on the cheek. "Night, El."

Ellen watched Johnny walk away. There was an air of sadness about him that bothered her. Stepping back into the house she realized that the whole time Johnny was there, Frank barely spoke to him. In a sense, Frank had lost a part of Johnny as a son years earlier. As Ellen watched Frank with the twins, happily playing, she wondered if subconsciously he knew that and was making up for that part of Johnny he could never win back.

^^^^

George scuffled around Joe's dark office. He knew he was there late and couldn't put the light on. He only hoped that the dim beam of his flashlight wasn't noticed, but if it was, he had answer. Not the truth. Never. His desire to be in Joe's office for a brief period of time was fulfilled. It didn't take long for George to find what he searched for. The beam of the light hit the nice neat stack that sat center of Joe's desk. Frank's reports. Perched there so Joe could see them when he arrived in the morning. George's fingers flipped over the tops of the reports, smiling as his eyes skimmed the dates. Weeks behind they were. So much work Frank did to catch up. But the awaited on reports were all there. After a smile, George turned off the flashlight, snatched up the stack, and using the moon's illumination as his only light, George left Joe's office.

^^^^

Dean didn't mind taking Ellen's little advice on going home, resting

and returning. He did mind the fact that he slept to nearly midnight. It did have advantages, he felt rearing to go and doubted he would return back home for the night.

Heading down into the cryo lab, Dean thought it was his grogginess or possibly he was losing it. He could see the goldenness of the cryo-lab light as it peered its way through the open lab door. But Dean knew shortly that it wasn't his grogginess when he heard voices, and then saw Joe and Henry as he walked into his lab. His pace slowed down. "What's going on?"

"Dean." Joe looked up to him as he walked in. "I didn't think you'd be down here."

"Obviously not." Dean moved across the lab to the counter. "Mind if I ask why you two are down in *my* lab when you know I wouldn't be? Because. I'm finding this an awful big invasion of my privacy. It's almost like you guys are checking up on me."

Joe shook his head. "No. It's not you."

"O.K." Dean walked to them as they stood before a computer. "Who or what?" He didn't get an answer. "Henry?"

"It's council business, Dean." Henry told him.

"Council business." Slowly Dean nodded. "If it's council business then where is . . ." He noticed the expression on both of their faces. "Oh, I get it. Well, I highly doubt that either of you are going to find the proof you need down here. I already looked."

Joe wasn't giving anything away. "Proof about what Dean?"

"About George. Look I'm not stupid. You're having a council meeting down here without the other council member."

After a moment's hesitation and a glance from Henry, Joe spoke up. "You said you looked for proof, what made you suspicious?"

"Besides the fact that George came back untouched after spending a month in Colorado with the same people that killed Miguel and hurt Ellen?" Dean pulled a stool up and sat down to join them. "It makes a scary sense. Just . . . Just put George in the plan and it all falls into place. As President, if he knew about the plan, he would have known to get people, to get it ready for the scientists awakening. Hence, he finds us. We do all his work."

Joe interjected. "Including the cure. He knew the virus was worse than anticipated. All those air samples he asked you about, Dean. Think about it. Knowing the virus became the air, he would have had to of known the scientists in Cleveland would die when they awoke."

Henry snapped his finger in thought then added his own theories. "Which would explain why he was so adamant about me getting away from that wall. He was biding his time until Dean cured the virus."

"Actually . . ." Dean said. "He edged me on to cure the virus."

"And when you announced your perfected cure . . ." Joe stated.

“Henry conveniently opened that wall.”

“Yes, that’s right.” Henry nodded excitedly. “No.” He let out a whine. “That night he sent Frank down. If he was waiting for the cure, why did he still try to stop me.”

Joe stood up and began to pace. He stopped with a spin. “Chester. Chester was in Beginnings still. He may have been waiting for Chester to spill his guts about the lab. But if George was in it from the beginning, then Chester knew about George.”

“Oh!” Henry excitedly jumped up. “What if Chester didn’t commit suicide after all. What if George killed him to prevent him from talking?” He waved his hand. “Never mind, we could theorize all night and couldn’t get the proof. Chester is four feet under.”

Dean’s face lit up with an idea. “We could exhume the body. Do a sort of autopsy to see what the cause of death was.”

“Excellent idea.” Joe snapped his fingers. “Would you have a problem with that?” He saw Dean shake his head. “Good, then we can do that. Pile up the evidence so to speak.”

Henry shook his head. “I’m not digging up a dead body. I’m not.”

“You won’t have to, Henry.” Joe said. “I’ll need you in the security bay to shut down the front gate. We’ll have to time it perfectly. We can’t speak over the radio, Frank will hear us.”

Dean seemed puzzled. “Under wraps from Frank?”

“Most definitely.” Joe answered. “If Frank even get wind of what we suspect. Proof or no proof, he’ll kill George for what happened to Ellen. Kill him. I can’t take that chance. We need undisputable evidence for the people of this community to accept it, and you two know it.”

Standing from his seat, head shaking, Henry held back his hair. “When do you want to go after Chester?”

Joe thought about it. “We’ll have to wait until the ground isn’t so wet. Maybe next week. Until then, we should start working on the passwords to those hidden files. Maybe something is in there about George. Dean, any chance I can get you to do that? I know you’re busy.”

“Sure. I could get Ellen to help.”

“No, no, no.” Joe argued. “I don’t want her involved.”

“Joe, it’s perfect.” Dean said. “She’ll do it. She’s nosey. I’ll tell her it’s our next project and she has to do it. In fact . . .” He sat back looking smug. “She’ll never even ask why.”

CHAPTER THREE

"Why?" Ellen asked as she propped herself on the counter in the clinic lab to sit.

"Because." Dean answered as he sat reviewing Melissa's baby chart. "I feel it's time to get into the files, that's why."

"But we're working on the vials." Ellen's legs swung back and forth, her feet hitting with a bang on each swing.

"Well, maybe the information for those vials are in the hidden files."

"Yes, but you never mentioned that before."

"I didn't think of it before." Dean finally turned to face her

"I find that hard to believe. What are you up to, Dean? Why are you being so secretive?"

"I'm not being secretive. I told you why."

"Yes, but it's a lame excuse. I really think that if . . ."

"Ellen." Dean stood up. "Shh." He walked to her. "And stop this." He grabbed her knees holding her legs still, stopping her from making anymore childish bangs. "Yes or no. Will you?"

"Dean, it's gonna be a pain in the ass. You want me to start alphabetically and keep trying. You know as well as I do, that the system shuts down after three failed attempts. It's gonna be annoying." Ellen looked down noticing he still held on to her legs. "Are you sure you're not just making excuses to spend more time with me."

"Don't flatter yourself."

"O.K." Ellen nodded. "Then why are you holding on to my legs like that?"

"Because you'll start kicking them again like a two year old. Answer my question. Will you help me?"

"Um . . ." Ellen tilted her head back, bobbing it side by side in thought. "Yes."

"Thank you." Dean leaned in to her and kissed her quickly. "Now was that so difficult?"

It was a feminine clearing of the throat. But a halting notion nonetheless. Andrea stood in the doorway grasping their attention. "Dr. Hayes, Mrs. Slagel."

Dean's instincts caused him to immediately move. "Andrea." He backed up. "What . . . what are you, um doing here?"

Andrea smiled widely. "Just wanted to let you know. I'm back." She started to leave but stopped. "And thank you guys for filling in and handling patients. I know it was a bother for you."

Dean shook his head. "Oh, no. No bother. Especially for you."



Ellen shook her head as well. "We didn't mind one bit."

"Good." Andrea grinned. "I'll see you in a little while."

Stepping slowly toward the door, Ellen waited to make sure Andrea was gone. She clenched her fist and threw back her head. "Yes!"

"God." Dean's knees buckled. "I thought she'd never get back. I hated patient work."

"Could she have taken any longer of a grieving break?"

"Tell me about it." Dean's hand tapped on the counter. "Hey, wanna go down to the lab for a while before the Marcus check up. After all, we can."

"Andrea *is* back." Ellen headed to the door.

"Wait. Do you think it's fair. I mean, she just got back. She has lots to catch up on."

"Dean, please, she's been doing nothing for weeks. We have our own work. Let's go." Ellen hurried from the lab.

Dean, really agreeing with Ellen's point, wasted no time following her out.

^^^

"Whoa." Henry leaned so far over the steering wheel it almost became an extension of his body. He looked out the windshield as they drove up the long drive way to the house that set way back. A huge house, barely seen through the large trees and the ivy that seemed to have grown like a carpet over it. "Is this really your house?"

Tired and a bit irritable, Jason Godrichson leaned his salt and paper hair against the window. "It's my house."

"Whoa. It looks like stately Wayne Mansion. Hey Jason, is there a bat cave?"

"As a matter of fact, Henry, my lab." Jason rolled his dark eyes, then shot daggers from them to Henry in anticipation of what his attitude would bring. "Only I don't have a pole you slide down."

"Great house. Yard work leaves a lot to be desired. Jason, you know what you can do? You can jump in your time machine, go back, tell yourself to hire landscapers . . ."

"Laugh and make jokes about my work. Go on. I'll remember that. And don't think I don't hear everyone and their smart comments either."

"We're only having fun." Henry prepared to pull up directly in front of the house. "In a world with very little entertainment, what else is there to do?"

"Dream." Jason opened his truck door and stepped out.

^^^

George knew there was a meeting to attend to and he made his way there. One with Joe, one that would be like the others . . . Disturbing. George would listened past Joe as he spoke of things that gnawed at his insides, ideas that seemed like a waste, like a detriment to the master plan that George was far from giving up on. He had to nod his head and smile a lot. Fake pleasantries. He supposed that Joe was doing the same. He sensed it in his words. Words that were no longer warm when he spoke to George. Words that used to be.

George was not a stupid man. He wanted nothing more than to stand up to the arrogant leader of Beginnings and take him down like his gut wanted. But he couldn't. Not yet. The desire to end the Joe-era stayed constantly with him. And having the drugs in his possession, drugs that could do it, made that desire like a bad food inside of him. Ingesting slowly, painfully, needing to be released.

He kept telling himself, it would have to be done soon. The militant soldiers were starting to trail up to Beginnings. It wouldn't be long before the rest would start making it up in their brigades. With the amount of soldiers that didn't die from Beginnings' attack, combined with the ones that were being created by the scientist that were spared, the numbers of his forces would soon be insurmountable..

But in order to bring about a successful blow to Beginnings--not that George actually thought the first one or two waves of fifty would do it--Joe had to be at least semi out of the picture. Expecting that first wave in three weeks or so, gave George enough time to plot his fall of Joe. And it would have to be done perfectly. The minor things George had planned, combined with the little attacks, would have Joe's stress level so high, that a diagnosis of a major stroke would be not only plausible, but expected. But there was one thing that really was the icing on the cake George was certain and played on the fact that Joe knew. His confirmation of that came when he passed Joe earlier in the day. Joe was fixing something at the school in Henry's absence. A mere lift of his head on acknowledgment was all Joe gave to George. And as their eyes connected in that brief moment in time, George could see it. Joe suspected, Joe wanted to know. And, George knew if Joe asked him about his involvement, he wouldn't lie. He couldn't lie to Joe.

Of course, that would be the last thing in authority Joe would do for the community. Of that George was sure.

^^^^

Boot tapping fast as he sat in the chair, forefinger pressed tightly to his eye socket. It took everything Frank had to remain in control. He felt like

a child. Receiving the lashing of his father's words. So strong. So hard. He just wanted to jump and yell 'enough'. But respect kept Frank in that chair, and he endured every painful verbal bash Joe delivered. Life had made him adverse at that. But if asked, Frank wouldn't even begin to know what Joe yelled about, practice and singing Journey's songs in his head gave him the ability to block his father out.

"Do you?" Joe yelled. "Frank?"

Frank lifted his head "Yes."

"So we're clear?"

"Yes."

"Good." Joe saw his son stand. "So I should expect those back reports today and that keypad fixed by night."

Frank stopped walking. "Is that what you were yelling about?" He saw his father's face turn red.

"You weren't listening."

"Yeah, I um, yeah. But I wasn't clear on it."

"I asked you if you were?"

"I know. I misunderstood."

"Misunderstood?" Joe's voice raised as he stepped to Frank. "How in God's name can you misunderstand me yelling at you about two week old reports and a goddamn keypad that leaves the warehouse open to everyone. I said it six times. You nodded."

"I did it."

"Did what?"

"I did the reports and the keypad. All yesterday."

"Bullshit, Frank." Joe yelled.

"No. Not Bullshit. I put them on your desk and I fixed the pad."

"Well the reports aren't here and the keypad is still dangling!"

"No." Frank shook his head. "I know . . ." He looked around. "I think I did. I thought I did."

"You didn't."

"But, Dad, I swear I did." Frank scratched his head. "Maybe I was only thinking about doing it and thought I did, but didn't."

Joe grumbled and headed back to his desk. "You didn't and I want them done by . . ." Before Joe could finish, over his radio on the desk, and Frank's headset, the call from Dan came.

"Frank. This is tower come in."

"Yeah." Frank spoke into his headset.

"Greg and I spot what we believe to be SUTs at the back gate."

Frank quickly looked up. "Repeat that Dan, my uh, *father* is listening."

"Oh." Dan said. "Sorry. We have Elks at the back gate."

“On my way.” Frank charged to the door and stopped. “We’ll finish later about the reports Dad, and see, how nice I am. Did you hear Dan. We have . . . Elks at the back gate.”

“Let me know.” Joe called out as the door closed. Proud that Frank was quick on picking up the ‘under wraps about the SUTS’, Joe sat down and relaxed a minute before his tedious meeting with George.

Frank raced top speed from the office building. Turning the bend to head to the back gate, he nearly plowed over George. “Sorry.” Frank called out.

“Everything all right?” George asked.

Still running, Frank replied. “Yeah, Elks at the back gate. We think. Gonna take them out.”

George scratched his head and watched Frank so excited, fly toward the back gate. “Elks?” He questioned to himself. He always suspected something was mentally deranged about Frank, and the fact that Frank took great pleasure in taking out helpless deer-like animals only confirmed that to George.

^^^

“So how long will it take us to move this machine of yours into the truck.” Henry asked as he followed Jason to the front door of his home.

“Few minutes maybe.” Jason placed the key in the knob. “I had packed everything up before my cryogenics processing. It’s ready.”

“Hey.” Henry spoke as Jason turned the knob. “You think anyone’s home?”

“Do I think . . . Henry, lets just grab my lab so we can get home by dusk.”

“Sure.” Henry shrugged walking into the house. “Great house. This is huge.”

“I was rich.” Jason led Henry to the back of the house.

“Really? Then we have a lot in common.”

Realizing that Henry was just being facetious, Jason brought him to the lab. “Here we are.”

“What? No steps, no dungeons . . .Wow.” Henry walked into the lab. “Dean would be so jealous of this.”

“I’ll take it that’s a compliment. O.K. Henry grab one of those three monitors and I’ll begin on the drives. I have a box of chords on the floor.”

Henry placed his hands on his hips and really took in the view. The large lab was so comparable to the cryo-lab in Beginnings. It seemed to be, at one time, so state of the art. It had to have been air tight, barely any dust

formed on the counters. But Henry didn't see it. For as big as the lab was, it wasn't quite that big that it could be hidden. "Where is it?"

"Where is what?"

"The thing we came all the way over here for."

"Oh, the Quantum-Regressionator. Yes, it's right here." He picked up a box no large than a shoe box.

"That's it? That brown leather box. Right."

"Part of it Henry. Here, I'll show you." He lifted the lid.

"It looks like wires and contacts."

"Yeah, it does. And in an essence, that's what they are. But in actuality, they are electro-probes." Godrichson spoke in a mature, explaining manner.

"O.K. Somehow I thought it would be bigger."

"Like a car? A huge box like contraption. Or better yet Henry, how about a telephone booth? Hmm?" Jason started to grow sarcastic along with annoyed. "That is such a lame, Hollywood, civilian view of what quantum physics really is. You probably think you can travel to the future too, a time sequence yet created. You *would* think you'd sit in an H.G. Wells invention and turn a switch. You *would*."

"Then how does it work?" Henry asked, ignoring Jason's tone.

"You want me to explain years and years of research in a paragraph?"

"If you can, I'd like to hear it." Henry leaned against the counter.

"Quickly, these electro-probes are placed strategically, in an area no wider than three feet, and no taller than seventy-seven inches."

"A doorway." Henry folded his arms. "Like in an archway?"

"Yes. You have three computer components. One, breaks down the codes for the Regressionist to set his or her destination. The second sends a signal to the computerized power source, and the third sends the desired amount of power needed to cause the correct magnetic field desired for quantum movement."

"Power source?"

"Yes. This." Jason laid his hand on a box marked 'radioactive materials' "Uranium."

"Uranium?" Henry's eyes widened.

"Small amounts. Never exposed to the regressionist. Uranium is needed for power in any regression that breaks the barriers completely. This is my theory, which I am very close to proving. Barrier breaking regressions are those over say, one hour. I have enough Uranium for eight trips. Of course, Uranium is only good for a destination of no further than twenty-five years. After that I'd need a power supply of radioactive materials that would be large enough to generate a forty megaton nuclear explosion. So you can

see, any of those movies you have ever witnessed in your life, where the time traveler went hundreds of years either way, is completely far fetched. It would be explosively dangerous to the regressionist as well as anyone in a fifty mile radius.”

“O.K. sounds good. Let’s go.” Henry turned to pick up the first computer monitor.

“You aren’t buying any of this, are you?”

“Jason it’s a great explanation. However, I am very much a realist. But . . . If it gives you pleasure in your life believing that you can actually accomplish, what is it you called it? Quantum-regression?” Henry reached over patting Jason on the shoulder in a pacifying manner. “You go right ahead.” He picked up the computer monitor and walked out the door.

“Laymen.” Jason spoke with a grunt and began to grab equipment also.

^^^

Frank ran hard through the wooded area just outside the back gate. A look of determination on his face, his revolver held tight. “Where Greg?” He asked into his headset, still running.

“Keep going. He’s darting, trying to lose . . . bare left fifteen degrees.” Greg instructed via radio from the watch tower.

“Is he close?” Frank kept his eyes peeled ahead.

“You’re closing in. He should be . . . oh shit! Behind you! Now!”

Holding out his revolver, Frank spun himself around firing blindly once to a man no further than ten feet from him. “Yes, I got him. Shit.” He turned forward to run agin.

“What’s wrong?”

“That one’s useless to, Dean. I don’t see the other.”

“Pick up speed, Frank, ten more degrees left.”

Frank veered his body. As he passed a large bush area he could see the SUT running with full speed. “He’s in my focus.” Frank slowed down holding out his revolver steady with both hands. Closing one eye, breathing heavy from running, Frank talked to himself. “Hold still. And . . .” He fired. The SUT dropped down. “I got him.” Frank, still not taking a chance, ran to where the body fell.

“Is he dead?” Greg asked.

Frank happened upon him. He kicked him with his boot, rolling him over. “Yep, he is.” He placed his revolver back in the harness. “Hey, Greg?”

“Yeah.”

“Didn’t you work for a coroner?” Frank knelt down to the body.

“Yeah, Frank, why?”

“Leave Dan in the tower alone for a few minutes. Come on down here.” Frank reached feeling for a pulse. “I need your help.”

^^^

Frank saw Dean and Ellen as soon as he hit the lab door. They leaned against the counter, back to him, appearing to be reading something. He knocked once and stepped in. “Dean.”

Dean turned from his paper work. “What’s going on, Frank?”

“I brought you something.” He held up a large silver bucket.

Ellen walked to Frank and kissed him. “What do you have?”

“Wanna see?” Frank asked with a smile, showing Ellen the contents.

Ellen screamed. Loudly. Her voice vibrating, her hands shaking as she stepped back frantically from the bucket that merely showed the bloodied brown hair.

Startled by Ellen’s screams, and confused by Frank’s laughing, Dean moved to see what Frank had. “Oh, excellent.” He reached his hand into the bucket. “And it’s still warm.”

“Fresh.” Frank handed it to him. “Thought you’d be happy. Do something with this.”

“I’ll put him in the fridge. We have a patient to see.” Dean took hold of the handle and carried the pail like Little Red Riding Hood to the fridge.

Frank, still laughing, saw Ellen, horrified leaning against the counter. “What’s wrong?” He kissed her on the cheek.

“Please Frank. Please don’t tell me my husband did that to someone.” She pointed to where Dean was.

“Who me?” Frank shook his head. “No way. I couldn’t cut off some SUTs head. Greg did. Dean needed it to try to get a hold of that microchip.”

Ellen looked at Frank then at Dean. “There is something wrong with both of you.” She walked by the counter and swiped up a stack of folders. “I have a room to get ready for our patient.”

Dean’s head shook confused as Ellen walked out. “She’s rattled over a head in a bucket when she thrives on Bunny Autopsies?”

“Go figure.” Frank said.

“I should go too. Thanks for the specimen.” As he went to leave, Dean stopped. “I’m curious.” He scratched his head. “Why do you call them SUTs?”

“Oh . . . Stupid, Uniformed, Target.”

Dean nodded. “A Frank acronym.”

“Uh . . . yeah.” Frank ran his hand down his goatee. “Of course my father has another name for them, maybe you could help figure out what it stands for. You’re a scientist. I haven’t had a chance to ask him.”

“Sure.” Dean looked at his watch. “I’ll spare the minute. What is it?”

“Get this . . . Elk.”

“As in a larger version of a deer?”

“Yeah. Henry told me he specifically called it that when he was telling George about what I shot.”

Dean opened his mouth, a smile crept upon his face, sarcastically he spoke to him. “Wow, Frank, I’m baffled.”

“Me too.”

“Ask Joe, I’m sure he’ll fill you in.” Turning around and rolling his eyes as he did so, Dean left the room.

^^^

Jason leaned close to Henry, checking with doubt over his shoulder, as Henry worked under the hood of the truck. “Can you fix it?”

Slowly Henry turned his head to Jason, the look on his face all but said, ‘don’t be so stupid’.

“What’s wrong with it?”

“I blew a rad hose.” Henry wiped his hands on his pants and moved to the open driver’s door.

“How are you going to improvise on that one?” Jason followed him.

Henry reached behind the driver’s seat. “With a new rad hose.” He pulled one out. “You don’t actually think I’d drive in a plague ridden world without replacement parts?”

“I didn’t give it much thought.”

“That is why you work in theory, and I work in reality.” He felt the closer presence and breathing of Jason over his shoulder. “Can you . . .” Henry shooed him back. “Please.” Henry adjusted the rifle that hung over his shoulder and reached the new hose into the truck. It caught his attention as he worked under that hood. The thumping of metal, the moving of the truck and the slight groan. “What the hell is he doing?” Henry shifted his head to the right to peer from under the hood. He saw on the ground Jason’s legs extended. “Jason . . . shit.” Stepping back and around the truck, a man, a man he did not see, jumped, maddening for Henry. His large stature seemed frightening. A long reach, holding a knife, swung forth. Henry ducked, stood up, clenched his fist and delivered a punch to a man who seemed to barely feel it. Realizing that, Henry, using the butt of the rifle, pummeled the man in the face. Once, twice, and three times until blood shot forward, and the man fell to the ground. Ensuring his and Jason’s safety from the man who had attacked them, Henry placed his one foot on his chest, the other to the man’s cheek, and with a quick step and a snap, he broke the man’s neck. Adrenaline pumping, Henry turned to Jason. “You all right?”



Wiping his bloodied eye with the back of his hand, Jason looked up to Henry with a squint. "I'll be . . . Henry! Watch out!"

He felt the arm go around his throat. The strength of the hold lifted Henry from his feet. It was strangling to him. Henry reared his head forward, snapping it back into his attacker. He turned abruptly around, rearing the assailant with the rifle's butt. Then in one motion, Henry spun the rifle barrel forward, clicked back the hammer and fired once. Back, flew the man.

Out of breath, Henry stood there, searching to see if there were more. He saw no one but Jason. He reached his hand down to him, helping him to his feet. "You O.K.?"

"Fine. That was very impressive."

"Yeah, well, I guess training with Frank has it's advantages."

"It does." Jason brought the palm of his hand to his eye to catch the blood. "But somehow, I was expecting Karate moves from you."

"Why? Because I'm Asian? Oh that is such a typical, clouded, Caucasian way of thinking." Annoyed, Henry went back to the hood of the truck to finish fixing the problem.

Snickering, Jason reached into the vehicle for a cloth. He stopped dabbing his blood when he heard something in the bushes not far from the over grown road. "Did you hear that?"

"Yeah." Henry lifted his rifle and positioned it. He brought it to his focus, aiming as he searched through the scope.

"Don't shoot!" A woman's voice called out, she stumbled through the trees. She slowed down, looking oddly at the truck, running her hand across it as if she had never seen one. Her long black hair was mangled, and she was dirty. A bloody abrasion took up most of her cheek. "Can you help us?" She sighed when she saw the two bodies. "Please. They came after us."

Without hesitation, Jason stepped to the woman to follow. He saw Henry did not. "Henry? They're hurt."

"O.K."

"You're not helping?"

With a slight shake of his head in irritation, Henry finally moved. "All right. God. If they all are injured, El is gonna have a fit." He walked with Jason behind the woman. "Because you know we'll have to take them. This better not be an ambush. And, I don't even think we have room in containment. Is there even room in the truck?" Henry stopped when they reached the clearing. He whined when he saw what was left after the attack on the camp. "Great."

"Henry." Jason said. "I'm curious. How many friends do you have in Beginnings?"

"Really one. Just Frank."

"Did you ever ask yourself why." Jason leaving Henry behind, went

to aid the injured.

CHAPTER FOUR

For as eloquently and precise that Dean handled his scientific experiments and mixtures, that was how badly he fumbled with the infant tape measure. "Useless. We won't pull it off, El." He laid the roll on the examining table in room two.

"Sure we will." Ellen pulled the tape and let it snap back into the roll. "Just pretend you know what you're doing. You remembered how I told you the examination went."

"Yes. I am not a pediatrician."

"You examine Brian."

"That's different. Brian is . . . is . . . Brian is different." Dean ran his fingers through his hair. "Why do we have to do this?"

"Because we want Melissa to trust us as good caretakers for Marcus. If she doesn't she'll never allow us to do some of the testing we want. So today we do a normal infant exam."

"On Marcus?"

"On . . . Marcus!" Ellen smiled when mother and son stepped into the exam room. "Look Dean, Melissa and . . . Marcus are here." Holding her hands out, Ellen reached for the baby. "Oh look how cute he is, Melissa." She took the baby into her arms.

Melissa gave an agreeing nod. "And growing fast."

Ellen ran her hand over the roundish baby's hair. Hair that was so animal like in color and texture. "You're a cute guy." Ellen smiled at him. "He's smiling."

"Yes, he is." Melissa proudly set her hand on Marcus' back. "He's a good baby."

"Are you a good boy?" Ellen asked, in such an unlike Ellen way. "I just love this kid. And trust me, I don't like kids."

"I got him all undressed for you. Are you ready?" Melissa asked.

Dean picked up Marcus' chart. "Ready. El? Wanna weight him?"

"Absolutely." Ellen carried him to the scale, setting him down and humming as she did. "Twenty-three pounds. Pretty big for a few weeks."

Melissa helped Ellen lay the baby on the table. "He's not going to stay a baby for long, is he Dean?"

"I don't know." Dean placed his stethoscope in his ears and began listening to Marcus' breathing. "I'd like to do a complete scan on Marcus, not yet, but soon."

Melissa agreed. "Sure. Hey Dean?"

Dean lifted his head, lowering his stethoscope. "What's up?"

"He makes this noise."

“What kind of noise?” Dean asked.

“Well, this grunting type noise, sort of a soft . . . growl. Is that normal?”

“Uh . . .” Dean dragged his words out. “Yeah, it’s normal. El . . . Didn’t um, Billy, grunt?”

Ellen raised her eyes from the chart she looked at. “Yep. Grunts and groans, just like his father.”

Dean widened his eyes to her then faced Melissa. “Normal.” Dean checked the baby’s reflexes. As he flicked his finger on the bottom of Marcus’ foot, Marcus heaved back his leg and snapped it forward at Dean’s fingers with a smack. Dean pulled back his hand shaking his finger. “Fussy?”

“No. You just tickled him.” Melissa ran her hand over Marcus’ head.

Dean opened the baby’s mouth. “Oh, wow.” He shined the light in there. “His gums are swelling. I thing I see a . . .” Dean began to reach in to feel the gums, but thought twice about it. “Tooth.” He cleared his throat. “Anyway . . . Melissa get Marcus dressed. I’d like to speak to you about some tests I want to run.”

Melissa nodded. “Nothing too painful.”

“Nah.” Dean shook his head as he walked behind Ellen, peering as a double check at her notes. “Can I speak to you in the hall for a sec, El?” He whispered. When he saw Ellen nod, he took her by the arm to the door. “Melissa, we’ll be right back.” Stepping into the hall, Dean closed the exam room door. “Well?”

“You did great.” Ellen complimented.

“Too soon to get permission to remove to remove some of Marcus’ skin for reaction purposes?” Dean asked.

“Um, no. She trusts you. Go on.” Ellen stopped him before he went in. “But, Dean. As a mother myself. Phrase it as . . . skin surface, allergy testing.”

“Got it. Thanks.” Dean winked, and returned back into the room with Ellen, smiling as he did.

~~~~~

To Henry, Joe didn’t look very happy after escorting the eight new people into the clinic for Ellen, Dean and Andrea to tend to. Henry supposed, as suspected, Ellen complained badly. It showed on Joe’s face as he emerged from the clinic building. Even though he hated to burden Joe more, there was one more thing to be settled in order to put the whole North Dakota mission to bed. “Joe.” Henry darted up to him. “You didn’t say where you wanted Jason to be set up at.”

“I didn’t?” Joe scratched his head leaning toward Henry peering at

the truck parked across the street. "He really has a time machine in that truck?"

"That's what he thinks." Henry looked backwards to Jason. "Joe." Henry dropped his voice to a whisper. "He has uranium."

"Uranium?" Joe peered to Jason. "Jason, what the hell do you have uranium for?"

"For my Regressionator. Minuscule amounts. Safely sealed in separate containers. Eight of them." He moved closer to Joe and Henry.

"And what would happen, damage wise, is one of these eight containers would happen to explode?" Joe asked.

"Not much." Jason shrugged. "It would cause an explosion yes, only really wiping out a quarter of a mile maybe."

Joe raised his eyes brows. "Oh boy. O.K. Henry, take him to the empty building five miles out. You know, the one we housed the scientists in. Let him have that as his personal lab."

"Gotcha." Henry walked over to the truck. "Come on, Jason." Opening the truck door Henry paused and returned to Joe. "Hey, Joe, I have a question on a personal level. Maybe you can help."

"What's that?" Joe asked.

"Jason . . . he implied that I may have a . . ." Henry dropped his voice to a whisper. "A personality problem which effects my making friends. Do you think that's true?"

Joe stared hard at Henry, but only for a second. "Yes." With a quick smile, a pat to Henry's arm, Joe walked away.

Henry's mouth hung open even as he reached for the truck door.

"See, Henry." Jason stated. "What did I tell you."

Stunned, Henry slid in the truck. He hesitated before starting it. "I can't believe this. I thought I was so nice. What should I do?"

"Since I foresaw the possibility of you eventually coming to me, a newcomer with an intelligent objective opinion. I took the liberty last bathroom break to . . ." Jason reached into his pocket. He pulled out a piece of paper and handed it to Henry. "Make you a list. Like everything else you do. Work on it until you get it right."

^^^

Warehouse four. Screwdriver in hand--again--Frank stared at the keypad, but this time he scratched his head. The keypad was fixed. His lips parted slightly, his head tilted and he spoke out loud to himself. "I thought . . . no. Yeah. Maybe this morning." Finally it hit Frank. He stood upright. "George." Placing the tool in his pocket, he moved from the building and turned the bend. As luck would have it for him, he saw George walking with

Andrea. "George!" Frank called out trotting to him.

George placed on a pleasant smile. "Hey, Frank. Something wrong?"

"Yeah." Frank replied then nodded in acknowledgment to Andrea.

"Yesterday, do you remember me fixing that keypad on warehouse four?"

"Absolutely." George stated. "I was there when you finished up. Why?"

"Well . . ." Frank tossed his hands in the air. "My dad came down on me pretty hard today about it not being fixed. I knew I did, he insisted I didn't, and when I believed I didn't, I did."

Andrea blinked slowly. "Frank, maybe your dad was confused and thought it was another warehouse. He's been stressed. Heaven knows we get a little odd when we're stressed."

"Tell me about it." Frank said. "He changed my name for the soldiers that are hitting us. I had a pretty good name, and he changed it to ELK."

George looked up.

Frank shook his head. "I like SUT better. And don't think I won't use it. Right now, I'm appeasing him. But I won't appease him about those reports."

"What reports?" Andrea asked.

"I did two weeks worth of old reports. I put them on his desk. I know I did them cause look . . ." He held his middle finger to Andrea. "I still have the pencil dent."

Andrea cleared her throat. "Well. Thank you for sharing. Maybe the reports got lost in the shuffle. He was busy today."

Frank scoffed. "Awaiting a time machine." He said sarcastically.

Pretending to stand in Joe's defense, George spoke up. "Some of us need those little outlets Frank."

"Yeah. We do. I do. Bye." He smiled and walked by George and Andrea not saying another word.

Andrea turned at the same time as George when Frank abruptly departed. Puzzled, she shrugged. "I guess we helped."

George smiled. Andrea helped more than she realized, because so innocently she was helping with his plan.

^^^

How late was it? Ellen had been at containment situating the new survivors for so long, she actually felt like it had to be heading into morning. But she knew it wasn't. The new survivors and the old survivors were wound up with tension between them and there still was a social skills class to go. Her legs hurt, her back, she felt like Henry complaining so much in her mind.

Standing in the skills room doorway, she leaned against the arch. She just wanted to go home.

And then she felt it, the air beneath her feet when her body was swept up. Only a minor shriek of surprise came from her before she was kissed quickly, saw Frank's huge smile and realized she was in his arms.

"Hey, El." Frank turned her. "Look who's here? Break time."

Greg lifted his hand in a wave. "Sounds loud." He pointed to the skills room then walked his brawny body into the area. Silence hit the moment he did.

Ellen, shocked, tried to look, but Frank carried her down the hall. "Frank. Where are we going?"

"To your office for an hour."

"You aren't trying something kinky in there. Are you?"

"Nope." Frank pushed open the door with his foot. "How about romantic." He set her down and saw the look. It was the one simple look that every husband loved to see. A glow of slight happiness on the wife's face that confirmed that their small gesture actually worked instead of pissing them off.

Ellen stepped into her office. A few candles were lit. Dinner was on her desk.

Frank pulled up a chair for her. "I knew you'd be hungry."

"Frank. I don't know what to say. What brought this on?" She sat down.

Walking around, Frank knelt before her. "In one instant today I realized something. You take a lot of my shit, but you never doubt me. Ever." He grabbed her hands. "I just want you to know how much I appreciate having you in my life. I don't tell you enough, I know. But know how grateful I am." Frank brought his lips to her hand. "I waited a life time for us to be like this. And I don't want to let you go."

A simple knock at the door broke the mood, along with the moment. George stepped in. "Oh, I'm sorry."

Ellen looked around Frank. "Something wrong, George?"

"This can wait." George, hands full, stepped back.

"Wait." Frank called out and stood. "My reports." He grabbed the stack of papers George had. "Where did you get these from?"

"Your Dad's office." George sounded saddened. "When you told me and Andrea, I got to thinking. When I met with your dad, he did that subconscious thing. You know, talking, moving things, and I watched him move the stack to behind his desk. I had a hunch." George lifted his shoulders in a shrug. "I don't want you to think I was snooping. Or God knows, your dad. He's tense as it is. And he has something on his mind."

Ellen stood up. "George, we know it's only concern. Thank you."

Frank won't mention you finding them. Will you Frank?"

From his reports, Frank looked up. "No. I won't. And you're right, George. He has something on his mind." He set the reports down. "And he better get it off his mind because it's effecting the way he runs things."

At that second, it took everything George had to look full of empathy instead of happiness.

^^^^

The stack of reports were loud when Frank dropped them onto Joe's coffee table.

Joe looked from them to Frank. "What's this."

"These are those reports." Frank said strongly. "Reports I said I did."

"Where did you find them?" Joe asked innocently.

"In your office. Behind your desk. Know anything about it?" Frank asked with edge.

"No, I haven't . . ."

"Dad!" Frank engrossed in getting his thoughts out, didn't see the glare upon his father's face. "I put them on your desk! You moved them! Just like you didn't check that keypad, because it was done!"

"I have had a lot of things on my mind. Maybe I messed up." Joe said calmly.

"That's it? You messed up?" Frank's voice grew. "I sat there today and fuckin listened to you ream my ass out over something that was your fault, not mine!"

With a heavy hand, Joe pointed. "Don't you dare take that tone with me. I am your father!"

"That's right." Frank snapped. "And I never forget that. Ever. My entire life I have sat back and listened to you read me the riot act. And ninety-nine percent of the time I fucked up. But not this time, father or not . . . this time you're wrong." With one more angry glare from Frank, he spun on his heels and in a march, stormed from Joe's home.

His hand moved to the stack, and Joe slowly and confused about it all, lifted the reports.



CHAPTER FIVE

Joe cringed when he heard the ‘whoa’ come from Henry just outside his office door. A result of Henry probably being barreled over by Frank who had stormed out. Behind his desk, Joe braced himself. He wasn’t in the mood for a Henry-style episode in the middle of morning bustle, he just had a ‘Frank’ one. Rubbing his eyes which were not only tired, but sporting dark circles as well, Joe looked up when his office door opened.

“Morning, Joe.” Henry closed the door. “What’s wrong with Frank?”

“Same thing that has been wrong with him for three days. He’s pissed at me. He comes in here explaining things like I’m senile and . . . and he took back his SUT-buster chart.”

Henry looked to the bare spot behind the file cabinet. “That wasn’t very nice.”

“No. So . . .” Joe leaned back. “What’s up?”

“Oh.” Henry stood straight. “Before we begin.” He cleared his throat. “My, you look well today.”

“Huh?”

“How are you doing today, Joe?” Henry asked.

“Fine and yourself?” Joe asked with suspicion.

“Fine, thank you. I am not going to complain about you today.” Henry spoke almost forced. “I’m doing something nice. I am working in containment so you don’t have to.”

“Henry. What the hell . . .”

“Hey, Joe.” Dean walked in. “I wanted to give you the requisitions before I disappear into the cryo-lab today.” He set them on Joe’s desk and shivered off the chill from just coming in. He turned. “Hey, Henry.”

“Hi, Dean. My, you’re looking well today.”

The corner of Dean’s mouth raised. “Um, thanks.”

“How are you? I’m fine, you know. I am not going to complain about you today. I am doing something nice. I’m working containment so El doesn’t have to.”

Dean chuckled. “Good to hear. See ya.” With a wave to Joe and Henry, Dean took off.

Dean’s exit brought Greg’s entrance. It was a typical morning, and no surprise to Joe. Everyone always went in and out before the day got underway. “Morning, Joe.” Greg stated. “I have last night’s round reports.” He walked to the desk. “Hey, Henry.”

Joe looked up to Henry. He waited. He dreaded.

“Morning, Greg.” Henry responded. “My, you’re looking well today. How are you. I am . . .”

“Henry!” Joe yelled. He had enough. “What the hell are you acting like a drone for?”

“Excuse me?” Henry was so confused.

“The sudden niceties. You never act like that and you never ask Greg how he’s doing,” Joe said.

“I’m trying a personality change.” Henry said. “A couple days ago Jason gave me this informative list.” He pulled it from his pocket.

Joe reached across the desk and snatched it from Henry’s hand. He read it. “Always compliment. Ask people how they are. Respond nicely. Show you care. Do not insult or complain. Do something nice for people.” Joe dropped the list. “These are suggestions, not explicit instructions.”

“Oh.” Henry seemed surprised. “But still, Joe, don’t you think if I apply myself, follow those suggestions, people will like me and I’ll make friends.” Henry waited and didn’t get an answer. “Joe?” he waved his hand. “You have a lot on your mind.” He turned to Greg. “Greg, what do you think?”

Greg gave Henry the answer. With a loud burst of laughter, Greg walked from Joe’s office.

^^^

The day was going well for George. A warm day for the end of September, Frank was treating Joe like a two-year old when he dropped things off. Joe hated it. George loved it. And, though sick, he came up with another way to stress out Joe. Knowing there was no way to get Ellen to fight with Joe, George came up with another way. Stress Ellen out. Make her paranoid. And he found it time to implement, when he saw Ellen walking from the living section.

Ellen was in awe. It was a simple note. Years of marriage to Pete. Years of living with Dean and how long with Frank? Yet, it was the first ‘thanks for taking time for me last night’ note she ever received. The act of lovemaking was so commonplace in marriage and relationships, Ellen couldn’t recall ever being thanked for it. It made her smile.

“Ellen.” George called her name so close.

Ellen looked up from the note. “Hey, George.”

“You look happy.” He complimented.

“I do? I guess I am.” Ellen said.

“Glowing.” George stated. “In fact, you’ve even put on a little weight. Looks good on you.” He hid his snicker. “You sure you aren’t hiding a pregnancy from us?”

Weight gain. Glow. Ellen's eyes widened. They were things that didn't transpire right way in a pregnancy. "Shit. I mean, thanks. No. I'm not. See ya." Hurrying and placing the note away, Ellen moved quickly to the clinic.

George watched her and he gloated. However, had George realized the chain of events he had started, he would have gloated even more.

^^^^

Frank sat in his office, looking over the list of men he had on his security team. He was trying with diligence to come up with a work schedule for the upcoming Beginnings Day. Every other year it wasn't so difficult, but with the SUTs seemingly making a daily appearance, Frank had to figure out how to keep the community safe. Plus, he had to give all of the men a chance to enjoy the day they celebrate as their sort of Thanksgiving. It was giving Frank a headache. He just wanted to say screw it Frank lifted his head from his work when he felt the coldness of the air from his office door opened. John Matoose walked in. "John? What are you doing here?"

"Working." John hung up his jacket, shook his arms to shake the slight chill he felt.

Frank looked at his watch. "It's only four o'clock."

"I know." John sat down across from Frank. "But, Jenny is menstrual." John noticed the agreeing cringe of Frank's face. "I had to get out of there. So, I thought, maybe you'd like to see your wife. Hopefully you'll have better luck."

"As a matter of fact." Frank tossed down the pencil. "I would." He handed John the schedule. "Can you give this a look over? It's a special schedule for Beginnings Day. I'm trying to make sure everyone gets to be there, but I need full staff."

John sniffed and wiped his nose with the back of his hand. "I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you." Frank walked to the door. "And uh, John. Thanks a lot. This is perfect. I've been trying lately to really make things special."

John stood up walking to Frank's side of the desk. "Have fun."

"I will. Thanks again." Frank opened the door, and like a kid, took off running.

The noise level in containment was astronomical as Frank buzzed himself in. Wondering if Ellen had lost control, he quickly headed to the skills room, to where the noise came from. When he stepped in, Henry lingered in the corner, while the large group of survivors seemed to be in an

intense game of Win, Lose, or Draw. “Henry?”

“Hey, Frank.” Slumping and drained of enthusiasm, Henry looked up. “My, you’re looking well today.”

“Thank you. I’m feeling well today. Where’s my wife?”

“She and Dean are in the cryo-lab today. Did you forget?”

“Shit. Yeah. Thanks Henry. I’ll head down there.”

Henry returned his view to the sad game that happened in the room. “No, no, no. No dirty pictures.”

He was going to surprise her. Though Ellen probably wouldn’t see it as that. Frank did. He could hear their whispering voices as he approached the lab door. It was open, and he didn’t need to knock. A few feet before the doors, he heard what they were saying. It caused Frank to stop.

“Ellen, there is no way you are pregnant to those guards. If you were the HCG levels would be there.” Dean explained.

Frank didn’t go in. He felt bad, truly bad that she would even have to be concerned with that.

“And you’re sure, Dean?” Ellen asked. “What if I just got pregnant?”

“It’s too early to tell.”

Frank chuckled out in the hall. He had no medical knowledge and even *he* knew it was too early to detect a pregnancy in Ellen. He and she had only just started being intimate again.

“Dean, what if I am pregnant?” Ellen came off worried. “George says I’m glowing.”

“Not to insult you, but you look the same to me, El. But . . . if you are, you are.” Dean replied.

“Dean . . . you know the time frame we’re talking about. Oh my God, what if it’s yours?”

*No! She didn’t just say that. No!* Frank knew there had to be a mistake. He had to have heard wrong.

“Ellen to be honest I highly doubt you’re pregnant. But if you are, then chances are it’s mine. I won’t let it go.”

Confirmation given. Frank closed his eyes. His chest felt heavy from the breath he held so deeply, so intensely. As he released it, his heart literally dropped. He felt as if the firm concrete he stood on, suddenly weakened and he began to sink. Physically and emotionally. Tilting his head with his eyes closed, Frank clenched his fist, and walked away.

^^^

Frank could feel the pounding of his heart, so strongly at the base of

his neck. It grew with each step he took towards his home. His face felt hot, and the heat grew the closer to his door he got. *No, this can't be happening.* He thought. His breaths were short and heavy as he walked into his house. He slammed the door, looking around a place so familiar, yet Frank felt lost. He was helpless and his hands shook. He kept closing his eyes, pulling his fist closely to the sides of his shaking head. Wishing it wasn't true, wishing it was a nightmare. Knowing in his gut it wasn't.

He went directly upstairs. The bedroom. Their room. A place he could think. His jaw started to clench. he bit down hard trying to block out the conversation he just heard. But he couldn't, it played over and over in his mind like a repeated song. *No! She didn't do this to me, not Ellen.* The more he thought about it, the more the lump grew in his throat. There was no mistaking what he heard--none. With building outrage, Frank turned to her dresser. Staring at him, amongst the nicknacks was a picture of him and Ellen. Frank picked the frame up, bringing it close to his eyes. He stared at it for a moment, then in a rage, clenched his fist and drove it into the glass of the frame, shattering it. He threw the frame across the room, smashing it into the wall. Huffing, and unable to catch his breath, he cried out an angry emotional, grunt, and with one sweep of his arm, he swung his arm across her dresser, clearing it of everything. Sending all of Ellen's personal things searing across the room.

Wanting to destroy everything, wanting to just scream, Frank spun around in total confusion, and sought out the bed. He sat down abruptly, and covered his face deeply with his hands as he leaned forward onto his knees, rocking back and forth. Feeling like the bottom had just dropped out. Feeling like he just lost his world.

CHAPTER SIX

It was odd, as Ellen reached for the front door and tried to turn the handle. The door was locked. "Weird." She tried it again, this time the door opened and all she saw was Frank's back as he walked away from it. "Hi Hon. What's going on, you're home early."

Frank stopped walking, he didn't want to face her.

"Frank?"

Frank spun to her, as soon as his eyes laid upon her, he felt it in his stomach. That twitch, that gnaw.

"What's wrong? Are you sick?" She saw the redness of his eyes, but received no answer. "Anyway." She walked up to him, kissing him on the cheek. "We're by ourselves." Starting to move past him she noticed two empty boxes on the floor. Next to them, a duffle bag. "What's this?"

"It's for you." Frank finally spoke. His words soft, yet they graveled.

"For me?" Ellen smiled. "What, are we going away?" She joked.

"You are." Frank glared at her.

"I am?" Ellen picked them up. "Frank, where in the world am I going?"

Frank closed his eyes, still speaking calmly. "I don't give a shit." His eyebrows raised, he grabbed her arm pulling her to in front of him. "I want you out. It's over. You no longer live here. Pack up Ellen. Pack up and leave." He released her arm and stepped back.

"Frank . . ." Ellen started to breath heavy. "You're joking. This is a joke. If you're . . ."

"This is not a joke!" Frank's voice bellowed through her heart and soul. "Get out of my house Ellen. Get out before I kill you."

"No, talk to me. What did I do?"

"Oh, you would ask. It figures. You don't know?" He raged to her. "Did you think I'd never find out that you've been having an affair with Dean?"

She felt it. Her heart as it hit her stomach. "Oh my God . . . you know."

Frank gave an emotional quick laugh. "Unbelievable." He shook his head. "That's the reaction I get?"

"No, Frank." Ellen followed as he backed away from her. "Please let me explain . . ."

"Explain what? That you slept with him? There is no explaining that. You're my wife. You were with him. You are not my wife anymore. Get out!" He grabbed the duffle bag and handed it to her harshly. "Now!" Frank moved her out of his way, trying to control his rage.

"No!" Ellen threw down the bag. "Listen to me, Frank. Listen to me. I was wrong. It was a mistake. It won't happen again. Please, Frank." Ellen pleaded. "Please, talk to me."

"No!" He faced her. "How could you do this. I love you with everything I am. I'd die for you, Ellen. Die for you." His words were emotional, almost tearful. "I would never think of hurting you like this. Never! I would never do this to you." He walked away again. "Get out. It's over."

"No." Ellen followed him and jumped to in front of him. "Frank, look at me." She reached up to his face, he pushed her hand away. "Don't do this. Please don't do this. I'm sorry with everything I am. I'm begging you, Frank. Begging you." Ellen pleaded with her every emotion. "Don't throw away twenty years."

"You already have!" He pointed at her. "You destroyed everything we had. You hurt me Ellen, in the worst possible way you could. You cheated on me. I trusted you. I trusted you with my soul. That was the biggest mistake I ever made. Trusting you."

"No, Frank . . ."

"I should have known. I should have known you'd do this." Frank's tone deepened. "How long have you been doing this? Huh? To Pete. To Dean. To me? I should have never have fallen in love with you because the whole time I loved you, you were nothing, nothing but a fuckin whore."

"Hey!" Joe walked in. Walked in just in time to hear what Frank had said. "What the hell is that about?"

Frank's grip snatched Ellen by her wrist to halt the slap that she instinctively began to deliver. He stared at her open hand. "Don't." Frank growled his words. "Don't even think about it."

"Frank!" Joe stormed to him. "You better let go of your wife! Get your hands off of her, Frank. Now!"

Frank let go off Ellen forcefully, almost sending her over with the release of her hand. "Get her out my house."

Joe followed him. "Frank! What the hell is going on? You don't call . . ."

With everything he had, his heart and soul, Frank turned from the door and screamed to his father. "Get her out of my house now!" He flung open the door and raged out.

"Ellen?" Confused, Joe turned to face her. "What happened?"

"Oh, God Joe." Her whole entire body shook. Her face was pale. "He knows."

Joe closed his eyes and took Ellen into his arms. He tilted his head back to look at the open door. Joe knew where Frank was off to. And all Joe kept thinking was, *God help Dean.*



Dean held up the beaker before him, concentrating on the substance inside. He swished it around, and around. "Nice shade of blue. But will you work as a cough suppressant?" He spoke to his tincture. He set the beaker down, and placed in his little finger, tasting it. Dean cringed as the horrible substance was so sour it nearly burned his tongue. Making the worst face, Dean turned to the sink, still carrying the beaker with him. He spit, trying to rid his mouth of the flavor. He turned on the sink and brought a handful of water to his mouth, then spit again. As he turned off the water he heard the door shut. Wondering who it could be, Dean turned back to his counter. "Hey, Frank."

Frank just walked in.

"Something wrong?" Dean lifted the beaker looking at it, admiring the shade.

Frank swallowed. "I just wanted to let you know. I'm tired of this fighting over Ellen shit. She's yours now."

Dean chuckled. "Thank you very much for the gift, but, no thanks, Frank. You can keep her." He swished his liquid.

"I'm serious, Dean. If you have enough nerve that you can sleep with my wife. Take her, I don't want her."

The beaker in Dean's hand crashed to the counter, shattering glass everywhere. Blue liquid seeped about. Dean was speechless, and Frank was just standing there. Dean didn't know what to say. In fact, Dean was waiting, waiting for it to come. The physical part. "Frank." Dean cleared his throat. "Look, I know you want to hit me, I know . . ."

"I'd like to pound the fuck out of you right now. But I'm not. This is what you wanted, Dean. She should be out of my house by now. I just wanted to let you know that." Frank turned to walk away.

"Frank!" Dean moved from behind the counter. "You think you can just hand her over to me? I'll be honest with you, I'd love to have her, but the truth is . . . she loves you. Things happened, Frank. We can't take it back. I am sorry for that. I really am."

"Are you?"

"Yes!" Dean answered loudly. "But it was one time. It shouldn't have happened. It won't happen again. Let it go. Just let it go."

"What?" Frank stormed up to him. "You act like it was nothing."

"No, that's not what I'm saying." Dean tried to remain rational. "I'm saying that, you stand giving up a woman that you have loved most of your life. I know you're angry . . ."

"You don't know!" Frank's abrupt words cut him off.



"I don't know? What are you joking? Is your memory that short?"

"This is totally different, Dean. We're married."

"You're right Frank." Dean held up his hands. "It is different, but not because she's your wife. Different, because when you would sneak with her you never cared if I got hurt. I made one mistake and I felt so guilty over it."

"And you should have." Frank pointed. "Back then, you and I never got along. I thought we became friends. How could you look me in the eye, knowing you slept with my wife!" Frank slammed his hand on the counter and turned back around.

"Don't Frank!" Dean shouted back at him. "Don't you dare pass judgement on me! I was with her. I lived with her. I was building a life with her. You!" Dean pointed. "You took her from my home, our children. You took her from me. And you didn't care! You have a chance right now with her to put this behind you. Do it. I didn't have that chance. You never gave me that chance. Maybe, if you wouldn't have married her when I couldn't do anything about it, her and I would have resolved what we felt, and what happened would never have occurred."

"Don't put this on me, Dean!" Frank's words shot so harshly his face grew red. "I didn't tell her to sleep with you!"

"I'm not putting the blame on you. I'm just trying to make you see." He saw Frank was getting angrier, but Dean didn't care. "She loves you. Don't do it. Don't walk away from twenty years for one mistake that she'd give her life to take back."

"Too late." Frank's voice graveled as he turned away once again. "She blew it."

"You're being an asshole." Dean saw Frank snap back around and angrily charge toward him, but at that moment, Dean didn't care. "You're wanting to put this all on her. But she wasn't the only one. I betrayed you too. If you want to blame anyone, you blame me. She was going through a bad time when it happened. I saw it coming. I knew it was coming. I let it happen because *I* wanted it to happen!" With his final words to Frank, Dean saw the room go out of focus, he felt the sharp pain, and heard the loud 'crack'. Before he knew it, he had been spun backwards, face forward to the counter behind him. He watched the droplets of his red blood fall to the green surface as he heard the door behind him violently slam. Dean closed his eyes, breathing heavy. He brought the back of his hand to the corner of his mouth, and wiped. He looked at the blood smear. He didn't notice the pain so much. It was a pain he felt was long over due. Using his hands, he lifted himself to stand firm on his feet. He shook the dizziness from his head. And then it hit him. He turned to the door. *Ellen.*



Ellen's heart beat faster when she heard him coming up the steps. She carried with her to the duffle bag, the last of her clothes. She set them inside the bag slowly and looked at her hand. The hand that bled when she cut it on the glass she was picking up from the floor. Glass from the frame, the picture of her and Frank. The picture, though torn, lay packed in her bag.

"What are you still doing here?" Frank walked in the bedroom. "You're stalling."

"You're right." Ellen zipped up the bag, and turned to him. "I want to talk to you."

"I really don't think you're getting this. You've done something I can't forgive. I won't forgive. I won't forget."

"Just listen to me." She kept stepping ahead of him, stopping him from leaving. "I made a mistake. A huge mistake. If I could take it back, I swear to God I would. And there's nothing I can say to justify it. I hurt you. For that I am so sorry. I'm just asking you, please, please, think about what's happening now."

"I have." Frank moved her bag from the bed, dropping it to the floor. "Go."

"I know you're angry. I expect that." She saw him scoff at her. "Maybe if we give it some time, then we can sit down and talk about us."

"There is no more us, Ellen!" Frank yelled and picked up her bag. "It's over. Now leave. Get out of this house. You no longer live here. This is no longer your home."

"Fine." Ellen swallowed. "I'll go. I just have to finish getting Brian's things . . ."

"Whoa." Frank stopped her as she walked to the door. "You go. And you go alone."

"Frank, Brian is my son . . ."

"He's my son too, El. And he stays with me. You haven't earned the right to be called his mother. You don't hold him all the time. You don't feed him. You don't care. You forgot how to be a mother Ellen, and my son will stay with me."

His words could have been a knife through her, they hurt so bad. Ellen closed her eyes briefly, clutching her bag. "I'm going to forget you said that because I know when you're angry you say things."

"I know exactly what I'm saying. I just never had the guts to say it to you before."

Ellen closed her mouth tightly trying to contain her emotions. "I'm gonna walk away before anything else is said that can't be taken back." She turned and faced him again. "Because I know you still love me."

“Love?” Frank moved closer to her. He placed his hand firmly on her chin. “Right now El, when I look at you, I don’t see love. I see nothing but hate and contempt for you.”

Swiping his hand off of her, Ellen tossed the bag over her shoulder. With her eyes closed, she turned from him and slowly walked away.

^^^^

Where could she have gone? Dean checked everywhere and couldn’t find Ellen. He had to see if she was all right. Not that he thought Frank would actually physically hurt her, but knowing the state Frank was in, anything was possible. Dean had checked every structure in town, including his very own home. Ellen wasn’t there. Heading to the last place he’d think he find her, Dean spotted her. Ellen walked from her house, closing the door behind her. A duffle bag flung over her shoulders.

She saw him standing there, twenty feet or so away. Ellen lifted her sad eyes, and went in the opposite direction.

“Ellen.” Dean raced up to her. “Please wait.”

“Dean.” Ellen fought the lump in her throat as she stopped walking. “I, I want to be alone.”

“Are you O.K.?” He stepped in front of her, grabbing her arm.

Ellen saw his mouth, the corner of it bleeding, swollen. “Did Frank hit you?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Dean looked into her eyes. “I need to know. Are you all right?”

“It’s bad, Dean.” Ellen started walking again. “It’s really bad.”

“Where are you going?” Dean kept walking backwards. “I’m worried about you.”

“Don’t be. I’ll be fine. Right now, I really just need to be alone.”

“I can respect that. Here . . .” He reached his hand out. “Let me just take your bag. Let me take it home and you won’t have to carry it around with you.” Dean reached for the strap. “It’ll be there when you get there.”

“Dean . . .” Ellen took a deep breath. “I’m not going to your house, if that’s what you think.”

“But you always come there when you and Frank fight.”

Ellen shook her head, she spoke so soft, so sad. “It’s different this time. I can’t go to your house. I can’t. Excuse me.” She moved past him walking slow.

“El . . .” Dean lifted his lowered head to her. “I am sorry. I’m really sorry.”

Ellen closed her mouth tightly, giving a fake smile. “Not half as much as I am.” Adjusting her heavy bag, Ellen kept on walking.

CHAPTER SEVEN

As if the nights weren't long and cold enough, the reality of what happened hit Ellen every first morning light. She stood in front of Henry's bathroom mirror, brushing her just showered hair. She reached for the back of her neck, rubbing the kink out of it. She had barely slept the night before, and if Greg hadn't awakened her from her desk, she would have been much more stiff.

Ellen leaned closer into the mirror, looking at her eyes, so dark and so tired. She returned her brush to the duffel bag on the floor, picked the bag up and took it to the spare bedroom closet. Hiding it way in the back so Henry wouldn't see it.

Taking one more look around Henry's house--making sure nothing was out of place--Ellen left. She was grateful that Henry left his home so early. She was even more grateful that Greg promised to wake her in the morning when he saw Henry walk down the street. It had been her routine for three days, sleep a few hours in containment each night then hit Henry's to catch another hour and get cleaned up. With some playing of words, no one questioned where she was staying. She didn't want to be anywhere else but home. And she had it in her mind, that before long, she would be.

The light was on when she approached her front door. Like she had done everyday, she gave it a try and knocked.

Frank opened the door. "What?"

"I came to get Brian."

"Like I've been telling you, I'll take care of it." No more was said, Frank slammed the door.

It was earlier than she usually had shown up at Frank's, she did it on purpose, perhaps allotting more time to try again. But as she lifted her hand to knock, Ellen chickened out and walked away.

^^^

"Alex, sweetie, come on." Dean shook his daughter than kissed her. He took the clothes he already had laid out and placed them by her pillow. "Get dressed."

Alexandra merely grunted in response.

Dean smiled. "Billy." He shook his son once, and he sat up. "Get dressed. You guys can sleep downstairs after breakfast." His own tee shirt in hand, he left the room putting in on, then ran his hands through his hair to straighten it.

His normal routine of nearly running down the steps was

interrupted. He slowed in the middle of the staircase when he saw Ellen standing by the door. "El." He came down the rest of the way. "It's six in the morning. What are you doing here?"

"I came to get the twins for school."

"You're an hour and a half early." Dean looked at his watch.

"Sorry." Ellen fake smiled. "I'll come back."

"No." Dean reached out and stopped her. "Why would you go? You're here. Stay."

"No, that's O.K., I'll come back."

"El." Dean grabbed her hand. "Why don't you stay. Come on. Have breakfast with me and the twins. They'd love it."

"I can't do that Dean. It wouldn't be right."

"What? What wouldn't be right? Having breakfast with your children?"

"No Dean." Ellen pulled her hand from his. "Spending time with you." She stepped back and left the house.

^^^

With fierce rage, Frank whipped his jacket into his office before he even stepped completely in.

"Whoa." John Matoose ducked. "Quite the entrance."

"Sorry." Frank slammed the door. "What are you doing in here anyway."

"Nice mood." John held up a ammunition clip. "Stupid me, left my extra clip in here yesterday. So, the bad mood. You didn't get it?"

"What the SUT? I got him. Driving me fuckin nuts those stupid idiots."

"Frank, you all right? You seem a bit more pissed than usual."

"Yeah." Frank waved his hand, then brought it to his face, running it down harshly. "No, I'm not. I'm surprised you don't know. Every bit of news flies like wildfire in the community."

"Know what?" John asked, zipping up his jacket.

"Ellen was with Dean. *With* Dean."

"O.K. . . . So?" John didn't seemed phased.

"What do you mean, so? She slept with him. There's no so in that."

"Sorry Frank, I just thought you had an understanding with Dean." John shrugged.

"I don't have an understanding with Dean!" Frank snapped at him.

"Frank, chill." John held up his hands. "It's me remember. The quiet guy? I'm sorry this happened. I am. So, what's Henry make of it?"

"Henry?" Frank's head was spinning. "What the hell does Henry

have to do with it?"

"Well Ellen going to Dean. Is it Henry you have an understanding with?"

"I don't have an understanding with Henry."

"Whoa, I'm batting a thousand here. Well who do you have the understanding with?" John asked so as to figure out who else to avoid this day.

"I don't have an understanding with anyone. I don't believe in them."

John realized at that moment, asking 'why?' would not be in his best interest, opening the door, he looked once more to a frightening Frank. "Sorry Frank. I am." He left before anymore could be said.

^^^

"El." Johnny's voice nearly cracked. "Come on."

"No, Johnny." Ellen showed him the chart. "Pay attention. I want to get out of here before Dean comes back. We were in the middle of a lot of experiments"

"This is really stupid." Johnny stated. "I won't take over your lab work for you just so you won't be around Dean."

"Then the community will be at a loss." Ellen said. "Because I won't work with him."

"He's gonna figure out that your not just taking an emotional break from work."

"Good. That way it will be easier than telling him. And I have to go." Ellen tried to leave the lab.

"El." Johnny stopped her. "Can I ask why?"

"I have to show your father I'll take what ever steps needed to get him back."

"Even if it means giving up everything you love?" Johnny asked.

"Without a second thought. Especially if that's what he wants."

"Then that's wrong, El. You give up things too easy for him." Johnny called out to her as she walked from the lab. But his words were not heard. He sank back into his seat. "That's why you're in the position you're in."

^^^

"We have time." Joe looked at his watch then closed his office door. He walked around to his desk for his secret meeting with Dean and Henry. "So, where were we?"

Henry sat up. "When are we digging up Chester?"

Joe folded his hands. "Rained pretty hard last night. Let's give it a few days to dry up. Dean and I will have a hard enough time, let alone adding the burden of digging up mud."

"Joe." Henry leaned forward. "I was thinking. What about John Matoose. He came to Ashtonville with George."

"I thought of that, also Henry." Joe spoke. "We'll have to keep him under check. Dean, what are your thoughts on . . ." He turned his views to Dean who was slumping sideways in the chair. "Dean?" Joe snapped his finger. "Dean, are you with us?"

Dean sat up straight. "Sorry, Joe. My mind's just elsewhere."

"On Ellen?" Joe asked.

"Yeah. I'm really worried about her. Have you seen her?"

Joe nodded. "Last night. She's pretty bad."

"I saw her this morning." Dean stared down. "She's not herself."

"She won't be. I know my son. And knowing my son as well as I do . . ." Joe pointed to Dean's mouth. "I really have to say, I expected you to look a lot worse."

Dean touched his healing injury. "So did I. It's odd Joe. He wants to blame it all on Ellen. That frightens me."

"Me, too." Leaning back, Joe rocked slowly in his chair. "Frank's not taking the hurt approach, he's taking the hostile . . ." Joe paused. He didn't know what caused his eyes to shift to the window, but they did. "Shit." He rose up.

Henry looked back. "What's wrong?"

"It's Ellen. I hope to God she's not going to see Frank. I told her stay away from him for a few more days."

Henry was confused. "Why? You would think you'd want them to work it out."

"I do. But Frank is so explosive right now. So on the edge. It . . . it scares me the way he is. I don't trust him."

At that instant, with the sound of squeaking chairs, both Dean and Henry rushed to their feet.

"No." Joe held up his hands. "Stay put. I'll take care of this."

^^^

"Frank." Ellen called to him softly as he stepped from his office.

"Ellen, you are the last person who should be talking to me."

"Just listen to me." She stood in front of him. "I just wanted to tell you, though you think it, I'm not staying or working with Dean. I won't. I'm going to do whatever it takes to put us back together."

"Don't waste your time." He tried to get past her.

"Frank. Stop it." Ellen latched on to his wrist.

"Get your hand off of me."

"No." She held on tighter.

"El." Frank pulled slightly, she didn't budge. "Get off of me."

"You have to talk to me."

"Get off!" He jerked his arm from her, and as he did, he pulled so harshly it sent Ellen turning and nearly falling to the ground. Shaking his arm Frank stepped forward only to be stopped by his father. Stopped by him, grabbed by him, and thrown so fiercely by him, that Frank flew backwards crashing with a loud bang into the side of his office building.

Joe charged forth, snatching Frank by the shirt. "Don't you ever touch your wife again!" He reared back his fisted hand.

"Joe, no!" Ellen leaped forward stopping him.

"Ellen." Joe turned to her. "Go away."

"I won't let you do this, Joe. I won't. Don't hit him."

"Ellen . . ."

"No, I won't let what's happening between him and me, tear you two apart. He's your son Joe, your blood. I'm nothing to you, don't do this."

"How can you say you're nothing to me?" Joe lowered his hand. "Don't talk like that. And he should not be laying a hand on you. I raised him better."

"He didn't mean to." Ellen looked at Joe, then at Frank who stared coldly at his father. "Just please don't do this." Ellen stepped back. "Don't. I'd sooner leave this community then watch your family be torn apart." Slowly, with her head down, she walked away.

"You wanna let go of me now, Dad?" Frank requested.

Joe released him less than gently.

"Thank you." Frank rubbed the back of his head. "Made me crack my skull."

"I should crack your goddamn head open to see what's wrong with it. What was that shit, you shoving her like that."

"I don't mean to. You heard her."

"Right." Joe rubbed his eyes. "You have to draw a line somewhere Frank. You really do. Learn some control. By what I heard and what I've seen. You maybe be burning bridges."

"If you mean getting back with Ellen. No."

"You say that now. You say it because you're hurt and you're angry. But that anger will subside, I guarantee that. And you are going to look at that woman and see all those years that you loved her. You'll want her back."

"No, I won't. We're through."

"Then you'll be a lonely man. And if you decide you still want her,



then you still may be lonely. You can't take back shit that you say or do. You just can't. That, that calling your wife a whore, that can never be taken back."

"It's the truth." Frank began to walk away.

"I ought to slap you." Joe pushed him back. "Listen to you. Don't speak through your rage Frank. Take my advice."

"Take my advice, Dad. Stay out of this."

"I can't do that Frank. You're my kid and I love you. You need time. I'll make sure she gives that to you. I just want you to think about it. It's a lonely world now. And she truly regrets what she did. Think about that too."

"If she regrets it so bad, then why didn't she come to me earlier. Maybe if she did, maybe, I could have tried to work it out."

"Then don't blame her, blame me. I told her not to." Joe was ready for his repercussion on that statement.

"You knew? You knew and you didn't tell me?" Frank's words were sharp.

"Yes. She told me and I told her not to say a word to you."

Frank shook his head at his father as he stepped back. "I can't believe you. I'm beginning to wonder which one of us is actually your kid. Because I don't think it's me. I see where your loyalty lies." Frank stormed away leaving a thick air of tension that would linger as a separation riff between him and his father.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Joe slouched down some on the couch. He popped the medication Ellen gave him in his mouth, then downed it with water. "Thanks." He handed her the glass.

"That migraine must be bad for you to stay home an extra few hours."

"I've had it for days."

"Joe, that's not good." She sat down next to him.

"Andrea says my blood pressure is up. I'm seeing her today. I wanna be in top shape for the game."

"Are you telling Andrea of these headaches?" Ellen asked with concern.

"No. And don't you either. I'm fine."

"Joe, why don't you just take the whole day off. I'll tell George and . . ."

"No. I'll be at distribution by ten. Just make those changes for me, please?"

"Will do." Ellen opened the folded piece of paper and put it in her pocket.

"And if Frank sees you to bitch . . ."

"He won't say anything to me. Frank just doesn't speak to me anymore."

"Join the club." Joe put his head back.

"Frank still isn't speaking to you?"

"Not nicely." Joe waved his hand. "He'll get over it."

"I'll let you rest." Ellen kissed his forehead. "Get better." With a look of concern, Ellen stared at Joe. He was so stressed out. She would speak to Dean at the clinic and see about something for him. But first, relieving his stress was best. She would take care of that immediately.

"Ellen." Joe called out as she left. "Remember, I . . . I don't won't to impose on anyone. So don't mention this. Especially to . . . to George."

"I wouldn't dream of it." Ellen smiled. "Get well. See you at the game."

^^^

George removed his glasses after reviewing the changes Joe had made. He gave a reassuring smile to Ellen along with a squeeze to her arm. "Thank you for coming to me. I'll make these changes right away." He leaned against Joe's desk.

"You know my father, George." Ellen said. "He is so stubborn. He didn't want me to bother you."

"Of course not."

"So you won't tell him, right?"

"No." George closed his mouth and shook his head. "And I'll do what I can to relieve Joe's burden without him knowing."

Ellen grabbed her chest and sighed in relief. "Thank you. Thank you so much." She kissed him on the cheek. "Joe's lucky to have a friend like you."

George winked as Ellen backed up to leave.

No sooner did Ellen walk from Joe's office, did she walk right into Frank. He glared at her. Briefly she made eye contact and tried to get away.

"What were you doing in my Dad's office?" Frank asked coldly.

Ellen stopped walking and turned to face him. "Your father asked me to make changes for him on the work schedule. He's not feeling well, and is gonna be late."

"Are you still hanging around my father? He's my father El. Not yours."

"Yes, Frank, I know. And I'll stay away from him when you start speaking to him."

"I don't make deals with you." Frank snapped.

"Fine, then I won't stay away from Joe. He needs someone in his life that looks up to him." She started to leave again.

"El. I want to tell you something."

"What is it?" Ellen stopped, she didn't want to look at him.

"I was thinking last night. I think maybe after Beginnings Day, that you and I should set up a time to go see Reverend Bob and talk to him."

She lifted her eyes to Frank. It was the first true feeling of hope she had in nearly a week. "You mean to work this out? You want to see if he can help us?"

"Help us? No, why would you think that." Frank nearly laughed at her. "To end this. End it so I can know you aren't walking around this community with my name."

"Fine, Frank. Do what you feel you need to do." With partially closed eyes, Ellen walked away and didn't look back.

^^^

"Sweet Jesus." Andrea gasped as she removed the blood pressure cuff from Joe's arm. "This . . . this is way too high, Joe Slagel. I have never see your blood pressure so high."

Joe rubbed his arm as he sat on the exam table. "I'm under a little

stress. I'm fine."

"I can't allow you to go umpire the game in the heat. October or not, it is way too warm out there for . . ."

"Andrea. I'm fine." Joe stated.

"Then no work for the rest of the day."

Joe grumbled. "I took the morning off and I have some paper work to review after the game. That's it. Not much."

"Can we at least take some time to do some stress testing this afternoon?" Andrea asked.

"No. I'll fail them." He shook his head.

"Can I help at all?" She showed concern.

"No one can." His voice dropped. "This shit with Frank and Ellen. Frank is being . . . he's being bad. I have the scientists that I know are still out there. The SUTs moving at our back gate daily."

"Oh, you gave in." Andrea spoke pleasantly. "That helps." She grabbed his chart.

Joe shifted his eyes around wondering if she was talking to him. "What?"

"You gave in on the name. Frank said you were insisting you call the SUTs, Elks."

"Frank told you . . ."

"About you liking the name Elks. He told George and I." She heard him moan. "Joe, you have to admit his name was better. We can't figure out what Elk stands for."

"Enormously Lame Kid. That's what it stands for." Joe slid from the table. "Son of a bitch bastard. What the hell is . . ."

"Joe!" Andrea scolded. "Stress."

"Andrea. I just realized it can't be helped. I have Frank for a son!" Joe rattled off irritated as he moved to the door. "I'm beginning to believe that stress isn't a repercussion of a situation. It's a goddamn payback via Frank for something I did wrong early in my life!" He flung the door open.

"Joseph Slagel!" Andrea called out. "If you don't modify how you allow things to get to you, you will be placing a coronary on your wish list this Christmas!"

"Good! It'll be right under killing Frank! Better yet!" Joe stopped in his exit. "Give me the goddamn heart attack and spare me the shit I have to deal with!" On his final screaming word, Joe slammed the door.

Almost with a tone of offense, Andrea let out a breath and grabbed his chart. "Well." With an arrogant sniff, she calmed herself and left the exam room.

^^^

The wind had picked up some, but not enough to add a drop of temperature to the air. Ellen held back her bangs as she walked, using her hand to block out the sun. She could hear the children giggling, lots of children, as she walked to the field that Saturday afternoon. Almost everyone was there, it was something to do. Frank and his sports. Everyone always laughed at him, running around, getting teams together. But yet everyone always showed up at the games. No matter how hot, or cold, people showed up. A taste of the old life, Ellen supposed. Maybe that's why she was there too.

A welcoming feeling didn't strike her the closer she drew to the field. But Josh made her smile. Ellen could see him rolling in the grass, five or six children including her own jumping on him. The smile left Ellen the more the children came into focus. Why was Jenny Matoeso holding her son? Didn't she have her own baby to worry about? John was next to her holding their daughter. Ellen needed to hold Brian, she needed to see him. Her time with him was so limited, courtesy of Frank.

"Jenny." Ellen approached her, standing so threatening over her. "I'll take Brian."

"I'm sorry, Ellen." The smile left Jenny. "Frank told me not to let you have him if you show up."

"Give me my son."

Jenny didn't budge.

"John." Ellen scolded. "Tell your wife to hand over my son now. He's my son."

John turned to Jenny. "I'll handle Frank, give Ellen her baby."

"Thank you." Ellen snatched Brian up. As soon as his body met her chest, her heart sunk. Ellen's arms wrapped tightly around the baby and her lips planted firm on his puffy cheeks. She didn't want to let him go. She closed her eyes. Holding him tight, she walked to the area where everyone sat and watched the game. "Let's watch Daddy play."

Frank's team was playing Henry's, and Ellen knew what that meant. She was just in time. Frank stepped up to the batter's box. A long white tee shirt hung over his baggy cut-off sweat shorts. She smiled as she watched him--backwards baseball cap and all--warm up as he moved to the plate.

She looked to the score board, it was a tie game. Two men were on base, and Henry was pitching. Ellen cringed. She knew what was coming. It always happened.

Henry wound up his pitch and sailed the ball forward. The speed wasn't there but the aim was. Even though Frank moved, the ball hit its destination. It reamed Frank in the side of the head.

"Take your base." Joe told Frank who shook off the stinging of his

head.

“Nope.” Frank moved to the batter’s box.

“Frank, take your base. You got hit with the ball.”

“No.” Frank argued, lifting his bat. “Count it as a strike, I don’t care. I’m not taking a base.”

“Frank! Take your goddamn base! Now!”

“No!” Frank yelled back.

“Frank. Rules are rules. Take the goddamn base now or you are out of the game!” Joe’s voice reached the level of Frank’s.

“No. Then throw me out.”

“You’re out of here.” Joe pointed his thumb back.

“Dad no . . .”

“Out!” Joe pointed and got behind Greg who was catching. “Next batter.”

“Fuck!” Frank banged the bat once against the plate and stormed past, sitting on the bench on the outside of the field.

Ellen ran her hand over Brian’s head. “Wanna go cheer up Daddy? Let’s go.” She moved toward the field.

Dean hadn’t any idea why he looked for Ellen at that moment. Kneeling down with Billy, his eyes raised to see her. Ellen carried Brian and walked toward a very irate Frank. Dean saw what was coming and headed that way.

“Frank.” Ellen spoke almost happily, sliding on the empty spot next to him. “Look who’s here to make you feel better.”

Frank’s eyes did not light up when he saw Brian. He couldn’t get past Ellen. “What are you doing?”

“We came down to . . .”

“Don’t!” Frank snatched Brian from her arms. “And don’t you ever use my son to get to me.” He harshly stood up and carried Brian away.

Witnessing from the field, Joe marched toward the bench before Frank could get too far. “Frank!” He blasted. “What the hell are you . . .”

“Stop!” Frank swung around with a heavy voice and point to his father. “You made it perfectly clear where your priorities lie! Stay out of this!” Continuing in his stride with Brian, Frank stormed off.

Holding a bag of tiny cookie snacks, George hid his snicker as he offered a treat to Josephine. “Seems there’s a little trouble in the Slagel Family paradise. Wouldn’t you say?”

“Yeah.” Josephine reached her fragile elderly hand into the snack bag. “I hate that Frank.”

Wanting to say 'me too', George refrained and opted for enjoying his snack and the show.

Ellen watched Joe pretend to blow off the whole argument, and Frank just walk away holding her son. Her head instinctively dropped. She took a second to regain herself, and sadly she stood up. She just wanted to leave. She didn't want to be there. She just wanted to run and hide. Hide from the scene that everyone witnessed. Quickly she made it through the staring faces.

"El." Dean called to her.

Ellen kept walking.

"Ellen, please stop." Dean caught up to her. "Please." He grabbed her arm.

"Dean. Frank is going to see you . . ."

"Screw Frank." Dean turned her to face him. "I want to talk to you. I need to talk to you."

"I can't talk to you, Dean." She started walking again, this time faster. "Ever again."

Dean ran behind her, it didn't take long for her to be far from the field. "El. Don't do this. Come on." He stopped trying to catch her. "I miss you."

Something nice. Ellen heard something nice. She stopped cold in her tracks.

"I miss you." Dean walked up behind her placing his hands on her shoulders. "Don't do this." He whispered in her ear. "Don't shut me out anymore."

Ellen turned to face him. "I'm sorry. I don't want to shut you out."

"Then don't. If you're worried about Frank, don't. I don't care. I need my friend. I think my friend needs me."

Ellen finally let her eyes meet his. "She does."

"Then let me help you." Dean reached out to her pulling Ellen closer. "Please."

"I'll get upset. I don't want to get upset."

"Then let's just walk." His hand slid down and it gripped hers. "Thank you for this." He held up his hand that held hers.

"I need it."

"And I think you need to stop running and hiding from everyone. Actually, I think you need to work with me again."

Ellen slowed down in her walking. "Dean, I can't."

"You have to. I'm going crazy without your mouth running in the lab constantly. I'm beside myself."

"You just miss all that bullshit work I do for you." Ellen spoke

sarcastically.

“No, El.” Dean turned serious. “I just miss seeing *you*.”

^^^^

George watched Andrea for a moment before interrupting. She scurried about the lab seemingly trying to clean it up. He tapped on the archway to get her attention. “I’m gonna guess you aren’t ready?” he asked.

Andrea stopped cold, released the papers she held, and turned around with a smile. “Would you be angry if I said I wasn’t.”

“Andrea.” He stepped inside. “You promised me you and Katie would be my guests for dinner.”

“And we will.” Andrea said. “I’m trying to catch up. I knew I shouldn’t have stopped at the game.”

“You weren’t there very long. In fact, you missed it. Frank, Ellen, Joe, big confrontation.”

Andrea closed her eyes. “Sweet Jesus, like the man needs this now.”

“What are you talking about?” George asked.

“Joe. His blood pressure is through the roof. In fact . . .” She hurried across the lab. “He never stopped by for his medication.” She lifted a blue bottle.

“He went back to his office.” George told her.

“It figures. He needs this.”

“Tell you what.” George walked over to her and took the bottle from her hand. “You finish here. I’ll take this on up to Joe.”

“Would you? I don’t want to make you go out of your way.”

“Nonsense. It’s for Joe.”

“You are too sweet.” Andrea smiled.

“And hungry.” George walked to the door. “See you at dinner.” Leaving that lab, George looked down to the medication in his hand and . . . smiled.

^^^^

The Indian summer humidity didn’t help the headache that pounded from Joe’s temples to the back of his head. The headache that felt like fingers, gripping into his skull, pulling at his neck muscles. He dug his palm of his hand tightly into his eye socket wishing his could make a suction that could remove all the pain. He dropped the pencil on his paperwork, concentrating was becoming a task. He was barely able to think of anything, but the pain and his recent confrontation with Frank.

“Joe?”



An angry jolt shot through Joe when he heard the voice call to him. Joe raised his eyes from the hands that covered them. "George."

"Are you all right?" George stepped further into the office, closing the door behind him. "You look bad."

"Killer headache." Joe put his hands on the desk. "We don't have a meeting or something do we?"

"No-no. Just here as a favor." With a soft thump, George set the medication in front of Joe. "Andrea sent that for you. It's for your blood pressure."

"Thanks." Joe took the bottle.

"I'll let you be." With a wave, George left the office.

Joe's hand gripped tighter the bottle in his hand. It was medication he needed. But it was medication George had handled. Opening his desk drawer, Joe threw the bottle inside. It then became medication he was never going to touch.

CHAPTER NINE

The two a.m. October moon illuminated everything so brightly that it caused Joe to have to bribe Frank's front gate tower guard. 'Ignore what you see' Joe told him, 'Dean's playing doctor Frankenstein with a dead body'.

Animal sounds, howling and chirping, covered up the grunts and groans that came from Joe and Dean as they tugged on the rope that dangled down into the hole they had just dug up.

"Joe." Dean pulled. "I don't remember him being this big."

"Dead weight, so to speak. Hold the rope."

"Hold the rope? You aren't letting go, are you?"

"Yeah. Plant your feet." Joe released his end and walked to the hole. He watched as the weight of Chester's body--slipping back down into his grave--pulled Dean right along with him.

"Joe." Dean struggled. "I can't hold him."

"Christ." Joe jumped down in the grave. "Pull." He began to lift Chester's body as Dean pulled on the rope that was secured around the black sack. Once Joe knew the body was safely above, he jumped out of the hole.

"Let's make sure this is him before we lug him to the truck." Dean took out his pen flashlight. He undid the top buttons of the homemade black bag and turned down the flap. Immediately at the same time, he and Joe gasped and turned their heads from the smell. Dean blew out of his mouth and wiped the back of his nose with his hand. He shined the flashlight on the face. "Yeah, it's him." He looked at the corpse. Its decomposing face seemingly a feast for anything that could crawl. "Let's take him to the lab." He dropped the flap over the head.

"Now you're sure you'll allow us enough time to get him back here before sun up?"

"Yes. Positive. The exam shouldn't take longer than a few minutes." Dean replied.

Both men stood to their feet, each grabbing an opposite end of Chester's body and carried him to the awaiting jeep just a few feet from the graves site.

^^^

"Henry!" Joe's scold echoed in the tunnels. "Will you please quit holding your nose and use two hands to help us."

"I can't." Henry answered nasal. "He smells really bad."

"He's dead for crying out loud. What did you think? He'd smell like roses. Now help us."

“All right.” Henry lifted his shirt over his nose and used two hands to help carry Chester the rest of the way to the cryo-lab. “I’m dying here.”

“Ignore it.” Dean struggled with the weight of the man, backing with him into the lab. “We’ll take him into the old cryo room. I have a table there.”

Slowly they moved the body through the lab. Once into the back, with a loud one, two, three and grunt, they lifted Chester with a thump on the table.

Joe wiped the sweat from his forehead smearing the dirt into mud. “I do not look forward to carrying his ass back.”

Bending over and grasping his knees, Dean caught his breath. “Me either. God that killed me. You wanna take five minutes and grabbed something to drink?”

Joe sniffed. “Sounds good. Social hall is right above. It’ll be empty, let’s go.”

Henry watched as they just started to leave. “Wait. You mean we’re just going to stop, leave this smelly body here and go have an alcoholic beverage?”

Joe rolled his eyes. “Ten minutes tops Henry, we need a break. We, not you, dug him up. Now, come on.” He walked behind Dean. “And shut the door.”

“But, Joe.” Henry followed. “What if someone comes?”

“Henry.” Joe said his name annoyed. “Who the hell is gonna be down here at this hour?”

^^^

Ellen walked, almost in a skip down the tunnel to the lab. She carried in her left hand the little cassette player, in her other, a jam sandwich wrapped in a towel.

As soon as she stepped into the lab, it hit her. “Oh.” She placed her hand to her nose. “What is that smell?” She laid the cassette player and her sandwich on the counter and powered up the computer. Crinkling her face she walked over to the sink, opened the cabinet and pulled out a bottle of perfume. Spraying it around, she grew irked wondering how she would eat her dinner with that smell. She walked over to the computer. As she watched it run through its boot-up sequence, the overbearing perfume disappeared and the smell came pummeling back. “Dean.” She spoke his name as a curse out loud. “Where is it coming from?” Sniffing like a dog, arms folded, Ellen searched out nose first. Following the scent from weak spot to strong, it led her to the old cryo room door. She turned the handle and the smell belted her more. She saw the black cloth covered body on the table. “No.” Was it a

body? Had Dean finally snapped? Holding her nose she walked to center of the table, and lifted the loosened cover from the mid-section of the corpse. Immediately a grey arm plopped out and a worm crawled from a hole in the skin.

Bellowing a blood curdling scream, Ellen backed up, hands shaking and ran from the room. She ran right into Dean.

“El.” Dean held her face. “What happened?”

Joe shut the door to the back room, motioning his head to Dean that Ellen was in there.

“El . . .” Dean tried to soothe her. “What did you see?”

Overly dramatic her body shuddered, intermittently letting out sounds of disgust. “The world’s biggest worm.” She shuddered again, the snapped quickly out of it and tilted head. “Dean, why do you have a dead body?”

“It’s a SUT, El. We wanted to take a private look at one.”

Joe moved to in front of Ellen. “And what the hell are you doing down here? It’s two-thirty in the morning?”

Ellen, still holding her nose answered. “I come down here everyday at this time. To work.”

Joe immediately turned to Dean. “You knew this and you didn’t tell me?”

“How would I know, Joe?” Dean asked.

“She lives with you.” Joe stated.

“No she doesn’t, she lives with Henry.”

Henry shook his head. “No, she lives with Joe.”

Joe’s attention snapped to Henry. “She doesn’t live with me.”

At that instant all three of them turned their views to Ellen.

“O.K. All right.” Ellen sat down before her computer. “I’m homeless. I didn’t want to bother anyone, I thought Frank would take me back in a day. I was wrong.” She pulled out a book. “So, after I leave Joe’s house, take the kids to Dean’s. I sleep at containment for a few hours and then work here until Henry leaves his house. Then I go there.”

“That was you leaving things around?” Henry backed up to the counter and leaned, almost in relief. “Oh thank God. I thought I had a ghost.”

Dean laughed at Henry, then switched to concern for Ellen. “Where are your things? At containment.”

“No, actually in Henry’s spare bedroom closet.” She gave a sorry look to Henry.

“El.” Dean walked to her. “Stop this. I want you to get your things and take them to my house.”

“I can’t do that.”

"Yes you can. This isn't for romantic purposes. Your kids live there. Stay with us."

Henry moved into the conversation, but not before spraying the perfume. "If you don't want to stay with Dean, stay with me. I have the extra bedroom."

"No." Ellen shook her head. "I couldn't do that Henry, I'd end up sleeping with you." She saw his mouth drop open. "I'm kidding." She saw Joe getting ready to make a suggestion. "And no Joe, tension between you and Frank is high enough. I can't stay with you."

"Then it's settled." Joe lifted his hands. "You stay with Dean. No argument. Like he said your kids are there. It's for the best. And don't worry about what my son thinks. He'll deal with it. He kicked *you* out."

After a moment's debate, Ellen smiled. "You're right. I'll take my stuff over when I'm done." Ellen didn't notice the expressions on the three men's faces that screamed they wanted her out. "I'm getting quite good at this password stuff, though. I broke two already." She opened her dictionary.

All three yelled. "What?"

Ellen raised her eyebrows. "That's what Dean wanted. God, get excited why don't you."

"El." Dean turned her to face him. "You really broke two of them?" He smiled. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because we're looking for the files with the vial info, remember?" She shook her head. "Those forty files only contain info about the embryos and ovum harnessing." She shrugged. "Who would of thought. Amniotic, and copulating were passwords."

Dean could barely breath. "Forty files? You opened forty files."

"Yes, Dean." She looked up to the stunned faces. "Very boring stuff. Not important."

"El." Dean grabbed her face and kissed her. "You are so great."

Ellen was taken aback. "Dean, did you hear me? It isn't the vial information. Maybe you're just tired. And that smell . . ." She sprayed the perfume and flipped through her dictionary. "Where was I? 'C-R'. That's it." She noticed she was being watched. "Do you guys mind? I want to get started on this. It's very time consuming, the system does shut down on me a lot. Go play with your SUT or something." She waved her hand at them. "And shut the blinds in there. I don't want to see."

Joe nodded his head backwards to Dean and Henry. "Let's go. You heard the lady."

Dean stared at Ellen. "One second, Joe. I'll be right there." He waited until they left. "El." He put his hand on her back. "Though I hate that you were down here all night, good job."

"Thanks." Ellen keyed in an incorrect password. "Shit." She typed

again. "Shit. Wrong."

"And . . . I'm glad you're coming home with me."

Ellen paused and tilted her head to him. "Thanks." She smiled softly. "It'll feel nice."

"I promise it will be." He kissed her on the cheek again. "I gotta go. Good luck." He walked to the back room, the whole time, he kept staring back at Ellen. As he reached for the door handle he heard the loudest 'shit' yet and he knew she had to boot up again. But Ellen was trying, and Ellen was making progress.

^^^^

"So, Dean." Joe stood back some from Dean's way. He occasionally had to bring his hand to his nose, but for the most part, Joe was getting used to the smell. "What do you make of it?"

Dean stood over Chester's body which laid prone on the table. He examined with his fingers through the open skin on the back of Chester's neck. "In the cervical region we have on the left side of the neck, a subdermal hematoma." Dean breathed heavily. "C-3, 4, and 5, are crushed, more so to the right. The hematoma extends upward." He paused when he heard Henry gagging. "What is wrong with you?"

"I can't, Dean." Henry's muffled words through his hand were heard. "This is really impossible." He turned his back and peeked out the blinds. "Hey, Ellen's leaving, can I walk her home?"

Joe rolled his eyes. "Yeah, but you get your ass back here so you can help us carry this thing."

"Body, Joe." Henry opened the door. "And thanks." Quickly he shut it.

"Go on, Dean."

"All right. In the lumber region." Dean indicated. "There is sufficient blood collection, a bruising around L-1 and L-2. So . . ." Dean lifted his head and stepped back. "This tells me the rope didn't do this. The bruise on his back. The upward bruising of the neck. The way that the cervical vertebrae are broken. It tells me, Chester was laying on his stomach when he neck was broken."

"Like whoever did this, had his knee into his back when he broke his neck."

"Yes." Dean said. "Arching. And there was a struggle." He began to cover up Chester's body. "Damn it. Why didn't I check this before."

"We didn't suspect before. It looked like a suicide. We didn't know George would do this."

"Did he?" Dean asked securing the black cloth over Chester.

“Are you saying you doubt George’s participation?”

“No not at all. I’m just doubting that George did this. Chester is a big man. It would take a big man to do this. Or strong. Someone n an essence, younger. George is in his sixties. Yes he is in great shape, but in *this* good of enough shape?”

“Then who?” Joe asked.

“Anyone that trains with Frank knows how to break a neck. That’s like Frank’s trademark.” Dean raised his eyebrows. “I just don’t want us to rule out the possibility that maybe someone else is involved.”

Joe rubbed his head. The pain was starting to come back. “John Matoose?”

“He’s young, he’s big. He came to Ashtonville with George.”

“No, Dean. No.” Joe shook his head. “I follow my gut. John was just a soldier. I believe George did this alone. And age has nothing to do with it. George is a strong man.”

“All right.” Dean raised his hands. “Promise me you won’t rule him out.” He saw Joe agree then press to his temples. “Headache again?”

“Tension.” Joe shook his head.

“Why don’t we go up to the clinic, I ‘ll give you something.”

“What about Henry? He’ll be back.”

“Yeah.” Dean laughed. “And he’ll be alone with Chester. It’ll be fun.”

To Joe, aside from Ellen breaking two passwords, that was the happiest thought he had all night.

CHAPTER TEN

He hated Beginnings Day. Walking around, smiling that George smile. Having a third of the host duties to an event that he thought was the stupidest thing the people of Beginnings ever came up with. It was something they planned for all year. Making one pig extremely fat. Roasting that, and chickens on an open fire pit that they built especially for the day. The food was about the only thing that George liked. It was a big picnic, and George, even as a kid, hated picnics. He thought they were useless before the plague, and he thought worse of them after.

George's face was starting to hurt from the fake laughing he put on. The tension muscles didn't want to relieve themselves. There was just so much that irritated him. Especially the asinine free games that gave people a chance to win homemade rag dolls, wooden cars and other things Henry picked up on runs. George knew as soon as he gained control of Beginnings. Things like Beginnings Day, would be things of the past.

So close to obtaining the position he believed and felt he was due, he was certain it wouldn't be long before Joe was history. Walking around, he made himself feel better by figuring out who would be on council. Who would stay, go or die. His mind-list was not complete, but he knew one person aside from Joe would be on it, Frank. If Beginnings Day wasn't bad enough, Frank especially irritated George. Laughing, smiling, playing the 'big' father with some other man's children. Why Dean didn't just put a stop to that, George never knew. Perhaps it was Dean's fear of Frank. Everyone feared Frank. And, that was a fear that Beginnings would be rid of soon.

Filling his glass with more apple cider, George sought out Andrea. One of the few people in Beginnings he never minded speaking to.

^^^

*God, what is in this cookie?* Ellen wondered as she looked oddly at the orange round thing bringing it to her nose and smelling it. The aroma of it made her face cringe more. Having to find out what Josephine was trying to accomplish, Ellen snapped apart the cookie. A piece of the hardness flew from her fingers and down to the ground. "Shit." She crouched down to get it, smiling when she heard her daughter.

"Mommy!" Alexandra sounded so excited. "Mommy!"

"What, sweetie?" Ellen stood up turning around. The smile left her when she saw Frank.

"Look, Mommy." Alexandra held up a rag doll. "Uncle Frank won



me a doll.”

“Look at that.” Ellen lowered her view from Frank to the doll. She bent down kissing her. “Did you see Daddy. It’s time to go with him.”

“Can I stay with you and eat cookies?”

“Yes. Yes you can.” She planted her lips firmly to her cheek. “Say goodbye to Frank.” Ellen tried to ignore Frank and his glares. He just stood there staring, and Ellen knew it was coming, despite the fact she didn’t want to hear it.

With his hand reaching over Alexandra’s head Frank leaned closer to Ellen. “Alex told me she woke up and you were sleeping there.”

Ellen didn’t answer him, she handed her daughter a cookie that didn’t look too bad.

“El.” Frank’s voice crept above a whisper. “Is that true?”

Ellen shifted her eyes to him. “Yes.”

“So you moved back in with Dean?” Another increase in his level.

“No, Frank.” Ellen remained calm. “I moved in with my children.”

“Same difference.”

“No, it isn’t.” Ellen spoke soft watching Alexandra cringe the same face she made at the cookie.

“Bullshit. When did you move in with him?”

“Come on, Alex.” Ellen grabbed the tiny hand.

“El.” Frank reached out and stopped her. His face, his angry face, said it all.

Dean saw it as he made his way to Ellen. The way Frank spun Ellen, staring at her. “Frank!” Dean stepped closer, taking Alexandra’s hand from Ellen. “I would appreciate if you didn’t speak to Ellen like that. Especially in front of my daughter. Let’s go, Alex.” He pulled her with him.

“Daddy, wait.” Alexandra pulled from his hand and ran to Frank. “Bye Uncle Frank.”

Frank put his arms around the little girl, closing his eyes as he held her. “Bye, Alex.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, sweetie.” He kissed her, then released her.

Alexandra giggled and returned to Dean showing him her doll. “Look what Uncle Frank got me.”

“Yeah.” Dean barely looked at it. “Uncle Frank’s a real gem.” He walked away with her.

Seeing Dean leave with her daughter was Ellen’s clue, she too began to step away.

“El, you’re taking her from me, aren’t you?” Frank asked, his words not as harsh as most that came from his mouth. “You’re going to take her

and Billy from my life. Aren't you?"

"No, Frank. I wouldn't do that to my children."

"I see it." He tilted his head. "You're back with him."

"I'm with my children." Ellen tried to speak with reason.

"And Dean."

"I will not discuss this with you." Ellen began to walk away.

"Are you back in his bed too, El?" Frank continued, even though she didn't respond, he knew she listened. "You told me that you won't do it. You said you'd do whatever it took to get us back." He saw her stop. "You think you're doing that?"

Ellen rushed back to him, placing her face close to his. Her words losing their sadness and gaining edge. "You said you wanted to end us. Is that still true, Frank?" Her eyes widened at him.

Frank swallowed as he stared at her, his jaws twitching. "Yes." He moved even closer, almost growling his whisper to her. "I want you out of my life."

"Then stay out of mine!" Ellen pointed at him, stepped back and stormed away.

Frank watched her walk away, down the street, away from the festivities. He breathed heavy slamming his hand on the table.

"It's terrible how she is with you, Frank." Jenny Matoose ran her hand down his back.

Frank spoke no words. He just stared outward to where Ellen used to be, a heavy stare.

"Um Frank . . ." Jenny's voice perked. "Do you thing since you don't have the twins you can go relieve John now so he can enjoy the festivities with me?"

Frank turned harshly and walked away.

"Thank you!" Jenny yelled to him, and then smiled.

^^^

She had calmed down some. Letting her anger subside. Ellen emerged from the clinic where she went to cool down. It was if George was waiting for her when she stepped through the double doors. Smiling sympathetically, so fatherly.

"Ellen." He stepped up the steps to meet her. "I saw what happed. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine George, thank you for asking."

"Here, let's sit." He led her down to the steps. "Away from everyone for a moment."

"I guess everyone saw." Ellen held back her hair.

“Nah.” George waved his hands. “I saw because I was headed to that table for one of those terrible cookies.”

Ellen smiled. “They were bad, weren’t they? But I guess you should stay away from them. You don’t need to get anymore sick, huh?”

“What do you mean?”

“Your ulcer. Henry said it was acting up last night, that’s why you weren’t with them.”

“With them?” George asked.

“The goof troop. They had that dead body in the cryo-lab in the middle of the night last night. Oh ,George.” Ellen waved her hand. “It smelled.”

“That body.” George nodded. “I *was* sick. I didn’t feel up to it. So, you filled in?”

“Me?” Ellen placed her hand to her chest. “No, I was in the lab digging up the passwords to the hidden files. Dean asked me to work on it, so I’ve been down there. Broke two of them already.”

“Two?” George raised his eyebrows. “Like a puzzle for you. You know that could be good therapy. Take your mind off of things with Frank.”

“It’s gonna get worse. I moved into the house with Dean and the kids.”

“That is understandable.” His hand rubbed her knee. “You two are very close.”

“Our closeness was what started this mess.” Ellen took a deep breath. “I had a bad experience and I went to him instead of Frank, that played a big role.”

“Oh . . . yes.” George lowered his head. “When you were raped.”

Ellen’s head slowly turned to him. “How . . . how did you know? No one knows.”

George was caught. He tried not to let it show. “Sorry, Ellen. I just found out. This past week.”

“Can you excuse me, George.” Ellen stood up. “Thanks for the talk. I appreciate your concern.” As she reached down and touched his hand, she felt her heart beat strong, her blood boil, and then Ellen marched off.

^^^

“You think that will work?” Joe took one more hit from his cigarette than flicked it away and rubbed his eyes. “Henry really is a terrible liar.” He spoke with Dean as they sat on the single step in front of Dean’s house.

“Henry’s our only choice. He’s the only one of us that can get away with asking John Matoose any . . .” Dean could see from the tops of his eyes, Ellen. “I think we better be quiet.” He pointed.

“Wow, does she look pissed.” Joe commented.

“Frank got her at the festivities.”

Ellen stopped before them, she dramatically crossed her arms. “Just the two I’m looking for. What the hell is wrong with you? I just want to say thanks. Thanks a lot. And I would love to know which one of you it was?”

Joe squinted his eyes from the sun that shone behind her. “What are you talking about?”

“George.” Ellen spoke in a scolding manner. “Which one of you told George about what happened to me in Colorado. You two and Frank were the only ones that knew.”

Joe looked at Dean. George had made a mistake. Not wanting to let George know he was aware of the slip up, Joe decided to cover. “Ellen, I am really sorry . . .”

“Joe.” Dean stopped him. He couldn’t let Joe take the fall. Especially with Frank already not talking to him. With the thought of Frank, Dean smiled, and quickly removed it. “No Joe, don’t cover for him. Ellen.” Dean stood up. “It wasn’t Joe or I that said anything. Perhaps it was . . . Frank.”

Ellen swallowed drastically. She started to say something, but opted to save it. “Thank you. That’s all I needed to know.” Angry, she stormed off.

Joe lifted himself from the step and smacked a smiling Dean in the arm. “What the hell did you go and do that for? Like they need any help.”

^^^

She didn’t even bother knocking on his office door when she heard he was in there. An entrance is what he needed to feel, and an entrance is what Ellen gave him. With a loud ‘boom’ she flew open his office door. “Frank!” She slammed the door shut and marched straight to his desk. “You told him.”

“What are talking about?” Sitting behind his desk, Frank’s focus was on his papers.

“George. You told George, didn’t you? You told him about me.”

Frank lifted his eyes. “Yeah, so what.”

“So what?” Ellen’s heart started to beat, an almost hyperventilation crept upon her breathing. “So what? Don’t you care? Are you that cold that you could tell him that?”

“Yes I am.” Frank stood up. “I told everyone. And why not? Huh El?” He stepped closer. “It’s not like it’s a secret.”

“It was!”

“Well not anymore!”

Ellen half closed her eyes. “I didn’t want anyone to know.” Her words were so emotional.

"And you think I did?" He shouted to her. "You don't think I'm embarrassed by the whole thing? I am. And you should be too! So I told people. So what!"

"How could you?." Ellen fought back every single emotion. "I know you're angry. I know the man in you is hurt. But I thought the friend . . . how could you do that to me?"

"Because you deserve it!" He struck his words at her with a powerful deliverance.

A gasp. A gasp of shock by his emotions took her breath away. For a moment she froze. "That says it all." She reached for the door. "I guess that's how you *would* feel about it now." She stopped in the open door and looked to the man who wouldn't even look at her. "You know what Frank, I never thought I'd see the day when you would tell me that I deserved to be raped." She dropped her head and walked out.

The slamming of the door brought Frank's heart to his stomach. "El, no." He reached for the door. Through all the angry words, all the bitterness, Frank never stopped for one moment to realize that they were screaming at each other about two completely different things. As he stepped outside he saw her. Ellen nearly ran. "El!" He called out to her. No matter how outraged he still was at her, he had to stop her. The thought that he had implied Ellen deserved one of the most horrible things that had happened to her, sickened him. Frank couldn't believe he did that, whether unintentional or not. He couldn't let her believe he meant it. Chasing after Ellen, he got the call. Tower spotted two SUTs near the back gate. Frank had to get them. He debated on what he should do. With few men working, Frank knew the safety of the community had to take precedence over a marriage he felt no longer existed. Saving his talk to Ellen for later, Frank ran to the back gate to check out the SUTs.

^^^

George knew he was taking a big risk going into the cryo-lab while everything was so hectic above him. A big risk he had to take. He could feel in his gut suspicion was rising. Joe, Henry and Dean and their hidden investigation. The body that they had in the lab. To bring it in during the middle of the night, and Henry lying that it was a council thing, meant it had to do with George.

And Ellen with the passwords. He wondered how she figured out two already. George didn't even realize they were going after those files yet. But with two uncovered he had to make his move.

First thing was first--the password. The main password to the four files that would give Beginnings every bit of information they needed to kick

George out, or worse kill him. That password had to be changed. With the instructions that Jeffrey had written laying out in front of him, George went into the computer. He entered the correct password then began to change it. To what? He saw the dictionary sitting next to the computer. *No, she's not.* He thought, and then he saw the bookmark. Ellen was going through page by page. Flipping the pages to just about center, George blindly pointed to a word. How fitting, his index finger would land on that one. The fatal word that would unlock the file, then trigger the destruction program George was getting ready to load. The word that would make them smile when they realized the information it unlocked. Information that their eyes would only lay upon for three minutes. Three minutes before the information disappeared along with anyone who was still reading it when it was times up.

How long would it take Ellen to get to the 'M's' George wondered. Weeks, a month, not long. George knew as soon as Ellen got there, as soon as Ellen typed in the word 'murder' it was over. George would never be found out. His secret would lay buried along with Ellen and whoever else was in the cryo-lab with her.

George thought as he changed the password about just erasing the file. Erasing his secret. But what fun would there be in that? Letting them find him out, meant letting them die. And Ellen was one of the people in Beginnings he just didn't want around when he took over everything. Ellen was one . . . Joe was another.

Tapping his fingers, George watched the indicator on the compute tell him the destruction program was nearly loaded. A few more moments and it would be complete. Then it would be time to set his other plan in motion. It was time, George knew, for Joe.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Son of a bitch, he’s right.” Joe spoke to himself as he sat alone in his office. He read the note Frank left him, actually a detailed note on what they needed to do. Joe lifted his coffee mug to his lips, remembering vividly his and Frank’s argument the night before. Frank had taken down two more SUTs all while Beginnings celebrated their day. That totaled twenty-nine so far, and it was too many.

Beginnings relaxed for a little since Colorado, and it was time to move on. Time to hit New Mexico. Time to erase the rest of the problem that originally started in the tunnels of Beginnings.

He’d call a meeting with Frank. If anything, Frank could set it up, get together the men, and plan their attack. Joe felt bad for blowing Frank off, making him feel like he was over reacting. The truth was, Joe just wasn’t in the mood for Frank’s rambling. He wasn’t feeling up to it. Perhaps it was the fact that New Mexico was all Frank talked about. There weren’t any niceties at all. Frank treated his father like a co-worker rather than his father. And that added more fuel to Joe’s fire to not listen to a word he said.

But Joe heard it, and it sunk in. It was time to tell Frank he was right. Maybe by doing that, they could start to mend some fences.

As he lifted the radio from his desk, Joe heard the creak behind him. He thought it odd, so early in the morning. He knew he was alone. Chuckling to himself, thinking it one of Henry’s ghosts, Joe picked up the radio.

No words came from his mouth. It happened before he knew it. A sharp pinch in the back of his neck, and a burning heaviness flowed through his blood stream--Joe could not move. The radio dropped from his hand.

He fought it. He fought with everything he had. Trying to turn his head was a chore, it felt as if it weighed a hundred pounds. Grasping the desk as much as his fingers could, Joe tried to lift himself up. Barely a foot above his chair, he felt whatever it was, move within his body. It felt like his whole being had just been injected with Novocain.

*Dear God!* Joe lifted his hand, fingers numb, head pounding, thoughts racing. *My blood pressure. Dear God, am I having a stroke? No!*

He reached for the radio again, but couldn’t grasp it. Arms that had lost control plowed down to his side. His balance was lost, his legs gave way, and Joe fell without control down to the floor. He tried to call out. His mouth wouldn’t open and he saw a view he had never thought he’d see in his life. A view of helplessness, fallen, unable to move, unable to call out, with the side of his face pressed hard to the linoleum floor of his office.

As he lay there, fear racing through his mind. Fear that fate had dealt him such a cruel hand as to strike him down to such a helpless state, he heard

it. A whispering voice so deep in his ear. A voice so close to a body so numb, Joe couldn't feel the breath as they spoke.

"It's the end of your era, Joe Slagel."

*George!*

"I brought you down, Joe. Down in a way better than killing you." George taunted. "You'd rather be dead than watch your community, this piece of weak shit you run, fall apart. Or watch your people, family, fall. You'd rather be dead, than do that, wouldn't you, Joe?"

*No. He didn't do this to me. Son of a bitch, I let him do this'.* Joe thought the words he wanted to say.

"Guess what? You'll watch it all. And you won't be able to do anything about it. I could kill you right now. But I'd rather let you see it happen. Who knows, I might need your advice." George laughed. "Right now, and anytime I first inject you, I control you."

Joe's left eye, the only one that could see above the floor, watched as George's shoes moved to right in front of him.

"And I control you now. I even control when you open and close your eyes. Bye Joe." George reached down his hand.

Joe laid silent unable to fight, to scream. Without feeling the hand he saw, he watched the room turn black.

^^^

Ellen clutched the stronger pain medication in her hand as she made it to the door of Joe's office. A pain medication that would help with the headaches, plus a relaxant for his nerves. So strongly Ellen felt it couldn't be Joe's blood pressure, it had to be stress causing his not feeling well. Joe was too healthy and strong. Aside from the smoking, he took good of care of his body.

Ellen knocked on Joe's door, she knew he was in there. Henry told her Joe would be there all morning. "Joe? I have something for you." She opened the door to his office. An empty desk. A bad feeling. Her eyes caught glimpse and the moment she saw Joe, her hand gripped so tight to the bottle of medication, it shattered in the palm of her hand. "Oh my God, Joe!" Racing to him, she dropped to the floor

Joe heard her. *'Thank God. Ellen. Ellen. Get help.'*

"Please be all right. Please be all right." She felt his pulse then rolled him over and laid her hand on his face. "Joe." Immediately her chest felt heavy. She saw the blood on the right side of his forehead. "Did you fall? I have to get help." Trying to hold up his head, Ellen quickly reached for the radio stretching as far as she could so as not to leave Joe. She gripped it with relief. "Frank." No response. "Frank please."



“El, don’t fuckin’ call me on the . . .”

“Frank, it’s Joe. Hurry to his office. Something’s happened to him. Hurry.” She switched the channel on the radio, her hand stinging from the cuts she had on it. Cuts from Joe’s medication. Then it hit her. Medication. Joe had been sick. His blood pressure high. She immediately elevated his head more. “Dean, come in.”

Dean heard the desperation in her voice. “What’s wrong?”

“Dean, something’s happened to Joe. I found him on his office floor.”

“Is he hurt?” Dean worried. The first thought that came to his mind was George.

“No.” She tapped her fingers harshly on the back of his wrist, no response, no movement. “Dean, I think he had a stroke.”

Dean’s heavy breath could be heard. “We’ll be ready for him. Keep his head up.”

“I got . . .” She heard the door open. “We’ll be right there.”

“El.” Frank saw her holding his father. “El . . .” He dropped down to the floor and looked at her. He saw the fear in her eyes. “What happened? What happened to my Dad?”

“We have to get him to the clinic, Frank.” Her hand ran down the side of Joe’s face. “I think he had a stroke.”

“No.” Feelings surfaced in Frank he didn’t know how to control. Panic. Worry.

“I’ll help you take him out to the jeep.” Hurrying, Ellen grabbed Joe’s arm, and crossed it over his stomach, she reached across and laid her hand on Frank’s. “He’ll be fine.”

Frank moved his hand, grabbed hers and turned it over, it was bleeding. He rolled his fingers over hers and held her hand for a second. “Get the door. I’ll carry . . .” His head dropped as he tried to gain control of his emotions. “I’ll carry my father.” He reached his arms under Joe, and with all that he had, he lifted his father--a man nearly his size--into his arms as he stood to his feet.

Racing to the door, Ellen flung it open all the way and joined Frank. She saw the struggle, not just physical, but emotional, as he carried Joe. She braced her one arm under Joe’s head, the other giving reinforcement to Frank’s arm that held Joe’s legs. Backwards she walked, guiding the way to the jeep. She climbed in first and Frank laid his father by her. She adjusted his head.

“Hold him tight. Watch him.” Frank instructed.

“I will. Just get us there.”

Frank nodded and jumped in the jeep.

“I have you, Joe.” Ellen laid her lips on his cheek. “I have you.”

Druga-Marchetti/Circle of Justice

Please fight. I need you. Fight this.”

*I am fighting, Ellen. I am. There's nothing I can do.*

CHAPTER TWELVE

Andrea didn't want to face any of them when she walked into the waiting room of the clinic. All she could focus on were Frank, Ellen and Johnny as she and Dean stepped inside. That's all she saw. Frank stood up immediately. Ellen walked closer with Johnny right behind her, hands resting on her shoulders. "We believe . . ." Andrea took a breath through her nostrils. "We believe that Joe has had a stroke."

Ellen knew it, it hurt to hear it. Her body slumped. She felt Johnny grip her tighter, she saw Frank, just fall back to a sitting position on the couch. "How bad?" Ellen asked, afraid.

"We don't know. We did a scan, but as of now we don't see a clot. Which is not unusual. We do see a clouding at the base of the brain. Whatever it is, is effecting both sides." She listened to the unison gasps in the room. "Right now though, we're fortunate he's breathing is not effected."

Johnny's hands held tighter to Ellen. "So what your saying is Andrea, my grandfather's had a massive stroke."

Andrea nodded. "The next forty-eight hours are crucial. Very crucial. We have to watch and see what mobility or functions return in that time frame. That will tell us a lot. But Joe is strong." She clenched her fist. "Joe is very strong. Right now, we are sedating him. Stroke victims tend to get agitated. And since Joe has been under a tremendous amount of stress . . ." She saw Frank's face drop. " . . . lately. We want to avoid anymore. I'd like for any visitors tonight to be only family."

Ellen stepped forward away from Johnny. "When can we see him?"

Frank stood up. "She said only family, Ellen. You aren't family."

"Dad!" Johnny stormed over to him, lowering his voice so sternly. "This isn't the place for this shit."

"This isn't the place for her." Frank snapped.

Ellen didn't want to hear it. "Don't." She shook her head stepping between the two. "Don't argue. Not now."

As Dean watched Ellen reach up to Johnny, he saw it. Her arm covered with blood. Some of it still fresh. "El." he walked over and grabbed her arm. "What happened?"

"It's nothing." Ellen said.

Pulling her aside, Dean opened and examined her hand. "I have to take care of this. Come with me."

Ellen shifted her eyes to Frank who watched. She whispered to Dean. "I want to see Joe."

Dean leaned closer to her ear. "You will." Holding her injured hand, Dean put his arm around Ellen and led her from the waiting room.

Everything swarmed around Frank at that moment. Andrea stating she'd return when Joe was ready. Ellen leaving with Dean. Frank's chest thumped and his head spun. He swallowed harshly everything that was happening, and while he waited, Frank buried his face in his hands.

^^^

Opening and closing the palm of her right hand, Ellen looked down at the wounds Dean had cleaned up earlier, then back into Joe's room. From the archway, she watched Joe laying motionless on the bed. His heart monitor beeping steady, and strong. Such a good sign to Ellen and the fact he didn't need a respirator gave her hope too. She knew as a nurse, most massive stroke patients didn't breathe on their own.

Johnny had stayed for a while with Frank in the room before heading out. Both of them being a sense of support for Joe. Could Joe feel her support too? Though she wasn't holding his hand. Her heart was there wanting too, imagining she was. Ellen felt horrible. All she kept thinking was, how long did he lay on the floor? How long after Henry spoke to him did it happen. Her heart broke to think like that. Little did Ellen know, Joe laid there two hours, waiting for someone, anyone to show up.

"El." Dean spoke softly behind her. "How's it going?"

"Still the same. He's still the same."

"Not Joe, you." He placed his hand on her shoulder. "Have you gone in yet?"

She shook her head. "Frank's still in there. I don't want to do anything that will make him leave. And you know as well as I do, patients sense the tension. I don't want that for Joe."

"El, he's a father to you. You can't linger in the hallway."

"I'm in there Dean, really I am."

"O.K., I'm going home again. Try to come home later for some rest and food. Please?" He kissed her on the cheek. "Night."

Ellen only nodded then watched Dean as he walked down the hall. She returned her views to the room. How long *had* she been standing there? She could see through the small window in Joe's room, it was dark. It didn't matter.

She watched Frank move, he extended his hand up, running it down his father's blanket covered leg. He grasped his father's ankle, looking to Joe, waiting for something. Then Frank brought his hand away. He leaned on his elbows, and his face dropped to the palms of his hands.

Standing upright from her lean on the doorway, Ellen took a small step in. Her heart started to beat when she took another step and Frank sat straight up in the chair. Begging in her mind for him not to yell at her, she

closed her eyes and let out her breath with quiet exasperation when Frank spoke to her.

"It's all my fault, El." He didn't face her. "All my fault. I've been so rotten to him."

So sacred, Ellen, afraid to speak, reached her trembling hand resting it on his shoulder, gripping him with a firm gentleness.

Frank reached his hand up, taking hers. He brought it to his face, then slowly, with his eyes closed, he rubbed his cheek against it, feeling the softness of her. He glided it to his mouth but stopped and let her go. "I have to get out of here." Frank stood up, rushing from the room.

"Frank." Ellen followed him. Out of the room then out of the clinic. "Frank." She called to him as he took off running down the street. Against what her insides told her, she followed him in the direction of his home. "Frank, please." Ellen knew she was taking a chance calling to him. A big chance. She watched him stop at the front door. "I'm here. Let me help you though this."

Frank turned around and faced her. He breathed heavily, so heavily.

There was almost something frightening about him, his eyes hardly opened, Ellen took a step closer. "Let me help." He looked as if he were going to lash out at her. Ellen's heart dropped in fear, as he raged to her. Just as she was about to step back, his arm swung out and he grabbed her. His huge hand gripped the back of her head. His lips pressed hard to hers, pulling her with such force to him that she nearly lifted from the ground. His other hand went up her back, ensuring she didn't step away. His lips moved, they moved on Ellen's with almost a biting anger.

Ellen could barely breath. She brought her hands to his face, pushing him, separating him from her. "Frank."

With tight closed eyes, a scared expression on his face, Frank shook his head 'no' and he pulled her back to him.

^^^

The heaviness of his body lifted from Ellen's as Frank rolled over onto his back, bringing to her the coldness of the room. Ellen laid on to her side to face him, to watch him as his hand ran down from the top of his head down his face. Frank stared at the ceiling, speaking no words, his one arm raised above his head.

He slowly blinked. Almost if he needed to close his eyes only briefly for thought. Without saying anything, he flung the covers off of him and swung his legs over to the floor. He sat on the edge of the bed, hands gripping to the sheets.

As Ellen reached her hand to his back, he stood up. His nude body,

walking with a seldom seen slump, moved across the room slowly, searching for his clothes. "Frank, are you going back to the clinic?"

"Yeah." He pulled on his pants, then grabbed his shirt.

"I'll get dressed." Ellen slid from the bed, her clothes laid right on the floor by her, right where he had taken them off. She started to get dressed, listening to him fasten his shoulder harness on. She stood up, bringing her shirt over her jeans, flipping out her hair, bending down to pick up her shoes. "I'll go with you to the clinic."

"No." He answered her soft yet gruff.

"Then I'll wait here for you."

"No, you can go."

"I can go?" She walked around the bed to him. "What do you mean I can go?" Moving closer she saw he wouldn't turn around. "I thought you needed me, I thought . . ."

"You thought wrong." Frank's whole body faced her. He raised his hand to his forehead and stared off to the side away from Ellen.

Ellen's mouth dropped open letting out the sound of her shock. She blinked her eyes several times, tilting her head, rewinding the night. "The way you were with me . . . boy, did I get it wrong. I assumed you were just sad, hurt . . . but . . . it was bitterness and anger. Wasn't it Frank?" He didn't answer her. "You took your anger and bitterness out on me when you made love to me."

Frank's face turned red, his top lip quivered as his voice bellowed. "Don't call it making love, El! I did *not* make love to you tonight!" He softened his tone. "You did what you were supposed to. You can leave." Maybe at that moment if he hadn't closed his eyes, he would have seen it coming. Ellen's cold hard slap stung not only his cheek, but his whole body as well. Frank never did open his eyes, he couldn't. Not until he heard her leave.

^^^

Working was not something Henry wanted to do, especially with Joe so heavy on his mind. But with Joe ill, he had to. The thought alone of getting out of his warm bed in the middle of the night was disturbing enough, let alone to go out and chase after the paranormal activities reported by an obviously inebriated eighty-six year old Josephine. But Josephine pounded on his door and insisted she would do so until Henry answered or she passed out. Henry actually debated on covering his ears and letting her just fall into a drunker stupor on his front step, but for peace in the neighborhood, he emerged.

After paying a social visit to one of the lonely men in the community

who needed the comfort of an attractive older woman, Josephine said she saw it. She was a little lost on her way home when she spotted the flicker of a light in one of the vacant homes in the last row of houses. Drunk and brave, Josephine started to investigate until she heard the ghostly noises and then she staggered in a screaming run all the way to Henry's.

When Henry arrived at the house, he didn't see a light, but he did hear the noises seeping from the home. They weren't ghostly, they were more heart wrenching. Sobs.

Flashlight in hand already illuminated, Henry opened the front door. The sobbing stopped. The beam of the light sought out where the snuffle came from and it lit upon Ellen huddled in the corner of the empty livingroom. "El?" Henry hurried over to her.

"Can . . . Can I be alone?" Ellen asked, her head buried to her arms.

"Sure. But just tell me you're not hurt." Henry's answer came in the form of another sob. "El?" He sat down on the floor next to her. "What is it? Are you concerned about Joe?"

"Yes. But that's not the reason I want to be alone. Please leave me alone, Henry. Please."

"Something has happened." Henry moved closer. "Did Frank . . ." Henry's eyes closed, her cry answered his question before he asked it. "What did he do?"

"I did it. It was me." Ellen spoke through her tears. "I . . . I was with him, Henry. With him tonight."

"El." Henry laid a hand on her back. "It's all right. He's your husband. He needed you."

"He didn't need me." Ellen lifted her head. Her face was so red it could be seen in the dark. "He really hates me."

"That's not true. He was with you."

"He said I could go, Henry." Ellen broke down and cried again, only this time she fell into Henry's chest. "He said . . . I could go."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Feeling better Joe?”

Joe heard that question, that distinctive voice. It laughed as the question was asked. *George.* Joe opened his eyes, the realistic sight of the clinic room came into his focus. George stood at the foot of the bed, directly in Joe’s view. He tried to move, but he couldn’t. He felt like a soul trapped in a shell, a shell that was dead and lifeless.

“Oh, I see you can open your eyes now. Perfect, now you can see everything as well. Just thought I’d let you know.” George moved closer to the bed. “They’re voting tonight on who will run the community while you’re down.” George laughed.

*Go ahead George, taunt. I will get out of this bed. And when I do, you’re a dead man.*

“Strange thing though. Henry said this morning that he’s going to ask the people if they’ll accept him to fill in. I told him to try, but you and I both know who will be voted.”

*You think you have it all wrapped up. People will object, Dean will . . .* Joe saw Dean enter the room, slow down and smile. *Dean! Dean get him out of here!*

Dean smiled at Joe. “Your eyes are open.” Then the smile dropped, as he saw George. “We really want only family in here George. You’re gonna have to leave.”

“My apologies. I was just concerned. Andrea confirmed it was a stroke, I hear.”

“Andrea can be wrong.” Dean wrote down in the chart. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m checking on Joe.”

George stepped back. “I’m sorry for intruding. I’ll leave.” He moved to the door. “But I have to say, I’m sensing a bit of hostility coming from you to me.”

“George, I’m worried about Joe. I just don’t know what this community is going to do.” Dean turned back to Joe. “Bye.” He mustered up a look of disgust waiting for George to leave. “Joe, your pupillary response is great.” He flipped a page to the chart. “It just isn’t normal.”

*Of course it’s not normal Dean, what the hell do you think. Come on! Don’t be so stupid.* Joe mind-argued.

“Something’s up.” Dean set the chart down. “And the lab results aren’t here. Shit.” Dean walked to the foot of the bed. “I’ll be right back, Joe.”

Joe saw him leave and he closed his eyes again. He just wanted to pretend it was a nightmare. Maybe if he fell asleep, he’d wake up and it would all be over with. But that wasn’t going to happen, he heard the footsteps.



They moved slow. *No, not George again.* He opened his eyes. *Ellen.*

"You opened your eyes!" Ellen smiled excitedly, running to him. She grabbed his face and kissed him. "Oh, Joe this is great, this is so great." She pulled up a chair and sat next to him. "You look pissed though."

*I am pissed. Wait, let me try to look worse.*

Ellen noticed the shift in his eyes. "Are you looking around?" She saw him blink slowly. "Joe? Are you understanding me?"

Joe blinked slow again.

Ellen looked to the door, then back at Joe, she whispered. "I'll tell you, Andrea and Dean will think I'm nuts, but . . . One blink for yes, two for no." Ellen edged closer. "Your communicating means so much for your recovery." She grabbed his hand, and began to bend the fingers. "I'm exercising you, incase you're wondering. O.K., question. Do you like cats?"

Joe blinked twice.

"Oh, right answer."

Joe rolled his eyes slightly. *Ellen this is dumb, ask me something important.*

Ellen began move his hand in a circle. "Now that we established you understand me . . . I have to talk to you." After a few bends she rested his arm down and stood up. "It's important, and I know you are sick. But . . . you are my father." She kissed him. "This is gonna make you angry and if you could, I know you'd scream at me. Things are bad, Joe, really bad with Frank. And I decided to leave Beginnings. I took some of my things out to the tunnel, you know where there aren't any beams. And I'm just gonna leave. For a while. Give Frank space."

*Son of a bitch bastard, What the hell did my son do. You can't leave this place, you'll get killed.*

"I know it's dangerous." Ellen continued. "But, it's what I want to do. I'll be back. I hope. The twins will be fine. Not like they care much for me anyhow." Ellen spoke sad. "And Brian. I thought I'd have a chance with him. But I'm not allowed around him."

"Since when aren't you allowed around Brian?" Dean asked sternly as he walked in the room.

"Dean." Ellen spoke startled. "I was just . . ."

"Answer me." He stepped closer.

Joe felt relieved. *Talk to her Dean. Talk to her now.*

"I haven't been allowed around Brian since Frank and I split up."

"What! That's two weeks? He won't let you see him?" Dean's face turned red and he grabbed Ellen by the arm. "Excuse us, Joe." He pulled her from the room. "That is bullshit, El."

"Dean, lower your voice."

"Fine." He led her into the next room, it was empty. "Why didn't you tell me?"

“Because Frank was angry. I thought he’d let me eventually.”

“Let’s go get Brian.” Dean insisted.

“No, Dean, he won’t give him to me.” Ellen pulled away.

“Then we’ll take him.” He scolded. “Because has no right to do that to you. None. That is not his kid, El. He’s ours. Ours.”

Ellen went silent in the painful reality of another way she hurt Frank. “No, Dean. He’s Frank’s. No matter who supplied the genetics. You know what we decided. The baby was made to be Frank’s. And, I’ll see him. Eventually. Then Frank will just find another way to hurt me.”

“Like he did last night? What happened last night El? Why were you so upset when you came home?”

“Please don’t get mad at me.” Ellen turned away.

“Why would I get mad at you?” Dean turned her to face him. “What happened?”

“I was with Frank. I thought he needed me. I thought he wanted comfort. It meant nothing to him, that’s why I was upset.”

“He told you that?” Dean asked almost shocked.

“No, he was more blunt than that. He said I did what I was supposed to do, and I could leave.” Ellen recognized the error in telling him. Dean’s face became so outraged, his eyes actually glared. “Dean.”

“That’s it.” He flew for the door.

“Dean stop it. Don’t go after Frank.” Ellen grabbed his arm. “He’ll kill you.”

Dean pulled his arm away from her. “Then he’s going to get one hell of a fight. I can’t let him do this to you. I can’t. What kind of a man does that make me if I just stand around and let him hurt you.”

Before Ellen could stop him and grab him, Dean was gone. After a moment, Ellen seized the opportunity and went her own way.

^^^

It really bothered Henry as he made it back to his office. The simple ‘hi’ Ellen gave him as he passed her on the street. She wouldn’t look at him. The more Henry wandered from where he saw her, the more he regretted not going back to ask if she was all right.

“Henry?” Mark ran up to Henry just as he past the security building.

“What’s up?” Henry stopped in his walking. “I’m heading to my office. Is it important?”

“It’s weird. Come in here.” Mark led the way.

“What is that beeping?”

“That’s why I brought you in here. It’s a motion detector. A motion in the tunnel.”

“Holy shit!” Henry snapped upright in a panic. “Someone’s getting in. Seal the tunnel, turn on the perimeter, I’ll go get . . .”

“No.” Mark stopped him. “I would have done that. Look at which detector it is?”

Henry looked. “The second one?”

“Yep. Henry, someone’s not coming in. They’re going out.”

“Someone’s going out? But . . .” Before the word ‘who’ could leave his mouth, Henry knew the answer. “Shit.”

^^^

The hour it took Dean to find Frank did not help him to calm down, it made matters worse. The more he searched, the worse he grew. Dean thought a person of Frank’s size would be easy to spot. But Frank was outside the perimeter, and even Dean couldn’t go and find him there. So he waited. Waited by his office, because that’s where he was told Frank was going.

Rationally and calm were not the emotions Dean conveyed when he saw Frank approach. He stormed up to him, calling out his name in complete and utter anger. “Frank!” He moved closer. “You and I have to talk.”

“Move out of my way.”

“No.” Dean placed his hand on Frank’s chest pushing him back. “You’ll listen to me.”

“Don’t touch me again, Dean!” He scowled at him.

“Frank, first off, you will give Ellen Brian. You will let her see her baby.”

“No, she has no right, she lost her right.”

“Bullshit! She has every right. I’ll will be by to get him tonight. You hear me?”

“Dean!” Frank snapped at him then brushed by him. “You will not. He is not your kid, Dean, stay away from him.”

“Then stay way from mine!” Dean came back, stepping with rage to him. “You wanna play these games, Frank. We’ll play them. You don’t want Ellen to see Brian, then don’t you ever go near my kids again.”

“I don’t make deals with you.”

“This is not a deal. This is a threat.” Dean marched closer, his face red, and close to Frank’s. “Don’t piss around with me, I’m sick of your shit.”

Frank’s hand came down pushing him away. “Who the hell do you think you are walking up to me, getting in my shit, defending her? Yeah, you can forget what she did because you were part of it. She was wrong!”

“And so are you, Frank. So are you. You can’t sleep with your wife then treat her like she’s your whore.”

“No I can’t. I treat her like she’s *your* whore.”

Though Dean knew it could very easily mean his life, his gut took over. With a closed fist hand, he gave Frank everything he had. The hit was loud and it seemed to echo as Frank’s head flung to the side.

Blood? Frank, still looking away could feel it. He moved his tongue to the corner of his mouth and felt the taste of it. He brought his hand up and looked. The sight of the red smear drove through him. He turned with abrasiveness and snatched up Dean, rearing back his fist to hit him. He saw Dean wasn’t backing down. He saw no fear in Dean’s eyes. “I’m warning you right now. The last time I hit you, I took it easy on you. Don’t make me hit you, Dean, cause I swear to God I’ll kill you. I’ll kill you.”

“It won’t be as easy as you think, Frank. I will give you everything I got.”

Frank released Dean harshly shoving him back. “Walk away!” Frank backed up. “Do you realize how close you are? You took part in destroying my life! I’m not with my wife anymore because of you.”

“No, Frank, you aren’t with Ellen because of *you*! If you weren’t such a fuckin’ asshole you would see that.” Dean only had a second to think, the frightening sight of Frank raging to him was a warning. With all of his weight he raced to Frank, slamming his body into him and crashing with Frank to the ground. Frank rolled from where he fell, stood in a charge, reached down with a grunt and lifted Dean by shirt. As his hand reached back to deliver a blow, he stopped when he heard Henry shouting.

“Knock the shit off! Knock it off!” He separated the two men abruptly. “Knock it off.”

Frank’s head spun to Henry. “Stay out of this, this is between him and me.”

“I will not stay out if this!” Henry stepped further between them. “I’m not going to let you guys fight. Not now!” He looked at Frank. “Calm down. And Dean . . . you too. Listen . . .” He stepped back to face both of them. “Ellen’s gone.”

Frank shrugged, and started walking away. “Then tell her lover to seek her out. I’m not searching the town for her.”

“I telling *you*, Frank!” Henry shouted. “I’m telling you because you’re her husband. She’s gone. She left Beginnings.”

Frank stopped and turned around. “She didn’t leave. She can’t get out.”

“The hell she can’t. The tunnels?” Henry knew at that moment he had Frank’s attention, Frank came running back.

“When?” Frank stepped to Henry just as Dean opened his mouth,

“At right now, we’re looking over an hour.” Henry looked at his watch. “I looked for her to be sure. And I am. She left.”

Dean started taking off. "Henry, tell Andrea to watch my kids, I'll be back."

Frank's head turned. "Dean, you won't go find her." He extended his arm out stopping him. "I will. And she's going to fuckin' hear about . . ."

"Frank!" Henry scolded. "What is wrong with you?" He stood toe to toe. "I will go after her. I will! Dean . . ." He looked at him. "You can't. Stay here. I'll find her."

Frank halted Henry. "I can't let you do that. I have to go . . ."

"And what Frank?" Henry asked sharply. "Make her never want to return."

"It's dangerous out there, she can get killed."

"I know this." Henry stepped back. "And if anything happens to her it's on your head." He pointed. "Because you're the one that caused this!"

Frank closed his eyes and placed his hands on his hips. "Wait." He ran after Henry. "Let me at least arm you, and give you the proper supplies."

"I know what to bring." He kept walking. "Dean?"

"Yeah?" Dean caught up to him.

"Make a small medical supply bag . . . just to be safe."

"I'm on it." Dean took off running.

Ignoring Frank, Henry moved ahead. He wanted to get to ammunition, get some supplies for himself then hit the tunnels. Enough time was wasted.

"Henry, stop." Frank called out.

"What Frank!" He turned but kept on moving.

"Bring her back. Don't keep her out there longer than necessary. I'm worried."

"Save it ,Frank." Henry spoke with sarcasm. "Save your concern for her. Don't insult Ellen like that." Spinning forward, Henry walked on.

^^^

Joe could hear as he laid in that bed, the commotion coming from down the hallway. He knew they were Dean and Henry's voices, what they were saying he couldn't make out. He only wished that Andrea hadn't decided to play that gospel music on that tape recorder next to his bed. Just when Joe reached the end of his rope trying to decipher what was being said, he found out the answer. George, so happy popped his head in the room.

"Hey." George spoke upbeat. "Just wanted to let you know." He winked. "Ellen left Beginnings. The futile search is on."

Joe grunted and swore in his mind. If determination alone were enough to pull Joe out of it, he would have been out of that bed in an instant. He himself wanted to find Ellen and bring her home. And he would have . . .

if he were able. But there was nothing Joe could do. Nothing.

^^^

Dean lifted his head from his work at the sound of his name being called. He didn't turn to the voice, he returned to his work.

"Dean. Dean. I know you fuckin hear me."

"What is it, Frank?" Dean turned around on his stool to face him. "If this doesn't have anything to do with medicine, leave. I don't want you in my lab." He stood up walking around the counter.

"This is a civil visit." Frank walked further into the lab. "I wanted to let you know as soon as they get the signal that they're heading in, I'll tell you."

Dean continued working.

"And . . . You were right. When they get back, tell Ellen to come over to the house. She can get Brian."

"I'll tell her Frank, but I'll come and get him. I don't want Ellen anywhere near you."

"It's not your place to decide that."

"I'm making it my place." Dean sat back down. "Now, I'm busy, Frank . . . leave."

"See I don't get this. I come in here, telling you you're right. Giving you what you want and you go and give me your Dean-little-man attitude. Why is that?"

"Because you push, Frank. You push and you push until you've passed the point of no return. That's why I don't want her near you." Dean shook his head, waiting for Frank to leave.

"It just works out perfect for you doesn't it?" Frank asked sarcastically. "We have problems and you slip . . ."

"Problems?" Dean nearly laughed at him. "You don't have problems, Frank. You have nothing. Nothing." No longer was Dean able to hide his irritation. "Anything you had with Ellen is over with. Sealed tomb. Do you even comprehend what you did? Do you? You're so worried about what she did to you, you failed to see what you did."

"I know what I did."

"Bullshit!" Dean screamed. "It wasn't that long ago that she was brutally violated! And what did you do? The same thing! Only you didn't just take advantage of her body, you took advantage of her mind, her heart. In some sort of sick, demented Frank-way you made her pay. And that is a crime worse than what they did, because you love her! You are her husband. And don't think I won't do everything in my power to change that."

Frank had no line of defense. No words. "I . . . I didn't come here to

argue. If you want to keep her from me, do it. It doesn't matter." Frank lifted his hands and walked out. "It just doesn't matter."

Dean took a relaxing breath after Frank left and the tension no longer filled his lab. He knew, as he took a double take at the door, that it did matter to Frank. It mattered more than he wanted to admit.

^^^

Henry almost had to laugh as he stepped from the tunnel out into the wooded area that lay four miles beyond Beginnings. His search for Ellen was complete. Not ten yards from the tunnel she sat. He smiled and moved to her. "Ellen."

Startled, Ellen jolted a bit. "Henry? What are you doing here?"

"I should ask you the same." He unloaded the things he carried on his back to the ground and sat down next to her. "Running away from home, El?" Henry took his rifle off of his shoulder and laid it next to him. "Everyone is worried. Including Frank."

"Frank is an asshole."

"Yes he is." Henry looked around. "So where were you going?"

"Just about right here." She noticed the surprised look on his face. "You didn't really think I'd wander all that far from Beginnings, did you? Heck, I don't even have a gun."

"I expected to have to find you. You know, really look for a while." Henry checked out her stuff. "Sleeping bag, food, some clothes. How long were you leaving us for?"

Ellen shrugged. "Until I thought it was safe to go back."

"Safe? You think it's safe out here?"

"Physically no. Emotionally, yes." Ellen played with the edge of her sleeping bag she sat on. "Frank's making my life a miserable hell."

"So why do you take it?"

"What do you mean? What else am I suppose to do?"

"Fight back." Henry raised his eyebrows. "You know Ellen, I have to tell you, you are really pissing me off."

"Sorry, Henry."

"No. Don't do that. Don't." Henry waved his hand about. "Yell at me. Fight with me. Fight with Frank. You act so afraid of him, that it's making you cower from everyone else."

"I am not afraid of Frank."

"Then quit acting like it. When he crosses the line, speak up. Be Ellen damn it. Don't take his shit anymore. I didn't want to tell you this, Ellen, but . . . Jenny . . . Jenny Matoose is calling you a loser."

Ellen gasped. "No!"

“Yes. Wait. A big loser. She laughs at you. Makes fun of you at the social hall. Remember in the old world, ‘dumb blonde’ jokes?” Henry asked her. “Well, her and Josephine have made up ‘dumb Ellen’ jokes.”

“No.”

“Yes.” He saw he finally got her charged. “So, what are you going to do about it.”

“Show them.” Ellen started to get up, but stopped. “Henry? Do you suppose the return of the old Ellen will have the same effect if I wait until later. I don’t feeling like going back. At least not yet.”

“Sure it will. And you can use this time to practice. But I can’t let you stay out here by yourself. I’ll stay with you. Our own power building party.”

Ellen laughed, she swore it was the first laugh in weeks. “Thank you Henry, I’d like you to stay with me.”

“Then I will.” Henry nudged her back

Ellen smiled at Henry, brought her knees up and looked around the area. Though she could see the tunnel, Beginnings could not be seen. They were only a few miles from home, but the quietness, the secludedness, made it seem so far away. And that was what Ellen needed.

^^^

Frank got the call on his radio, motion detector one had gone off, then two. It had to be Henry and Ellen. But it was nearly three-thirty in the morning? He had to have a hard time finding her.

Frank made his way down to the tunnel to wait. He was angry and he was worried. Ellen left the community and the security walls. He only hoped that the signal was both of them, not just Henry failing to bring her back. Frank couldn’t live with that. *He* was why she left, plain and simple. He crossed the line with her, and he was wrong. Frank actually felt wrong.

He saw them walking at a quick pace to through the tunnel. Instead of relief, he began to get hot. Ellen didn’t look like someone who had left the community distressed. She looked happy.

“Henry!” Frank called out, his huge mouth echoing down the tunnel. “How far out did she go! Fuck! You been gone all day and night.”

“I found her right away. We just stayed out there.” Henry walked past him.

“You should have brought her back” Frank spoke as if Ellen wasn’t there.

“Ellen needed the time. I didn’t see a problem with it. I was there.”

“I do.” Frank saw he was getting no where. “El, what the fuck were you thinking?” He didn’t get an answer. “I hope to God this wasn’t just some sort of sympathy tactic to get . . .”



“Frank!” Henry held his hand out, pushing back a charging and heated Frank. “Back off! Just back off of her.”

Frank harshly ran his hand over his face, calming down. “El . . . El, are you O.K.?”

Ellen didn’t answer she kept on walking.

Henry stopped Frank’s hand that reached for her. “Back off.” He led Ellen down the tunnel. “Remember the promise you made me out there” He whispered in her ear.

“I won’t forget it. You’re going to see a new . . . no wait, the old Ellen back.”

“Good.”

Ellen stopped walking right before they climbed up the latter. She faced him. “Henry, about everything that happened outside the tunnel. I . . . I wanted to say thanks. I think it’s what I needed to really give a push and move on.”

“Good. And everything else . . .” Henry leaned to her. “Is our little secret.” He touched lightly his lips to hers. They weren’t on Ellen’s long before he felt this strange presence, like another person. Then Henry heard the clearing of a throat. He turned his head separating his lips from Ellen’s. “Frank.”

“Why are you kissing her?” Frank asked.

Henry started to answer, flubbed his words then laughed. “Just a friendly kiss.” He faced Ellen helping her climb up.

“Henry, what’s the secret?”

Henry smiled. “El, I’ll meet you up top.”

“Henry.” Frank was insistent. “Come on.” He closed his eyes and tilted his head. “You didn’t do that to me, did you? You weren’t with my . . . you didn’t sleep . . .”

“Frank, Ellen left Beginnings because of you. I went to get her. I brought her back. What happened outside that tunnel last night is really none . . .” He saw Frank’s head drop back. “No, Frank, if you’re thinking I did, I didn’t sleep with Ellen.” Henry smiled and adjusted his belongings. He grabbed to the rungs to climb up. “Of course if I did, would I be insane enough to tell you?”

The expression dropped from Frank’s face as he watched Henry climb up. He ran his hand harshly across his goatee speaking softly. “I don’t care. I don’t care.” He waited until Henry was all the way up. “Who am I kidding?” He grabbed a hold of the ladder and climbed to above. “I care.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Frank dropped his shoulder harness and his tension when he walked into his office. "Thank God, it's you here." He spoke when he saw John Matoose. "I thought for sure it was another Ellen seeker."

"Getting pretty bad I suppose? Well, you'll have that when there aren't any women. Hell, I have that because word gets out that I share . . ." He saw the look Frank gave him. "Enough of that." He handed him the clipboard. "I fixed your receiver for your spare headset. It's working fine now, it's in your drawer."

"Thanks." Frank walked to his desk.

"No rounds now? No SUTs?" John asked moving to leave the office.

"No. And, I needed to come up here before I stop and see my Dad." Frank plopped down in his chair. "I put Dan on my rounds for an hour."

"Things seem calm. Like the calm before the storm. Almost scarey." John commented.

"Yep." Frank leaned forward to his desk, propping his elbows up, then running his hand over his head.

"Something happen, Frank? Another run in with Ellen?"

"I wish. I tried again to talk to her. It's been a week since her little disappearance act with Henry. I can't get near her. All I want to do is apologize."

"Apologize? Why are you apologizing to her?"

"I did something to her and it was wrong. Let's just leave it at that. And . . . I miss her, John. I'm really starting to miss her. Why is that?"

"You still love Why can't she see that? Forgive me Frank but that angers me. Jenny and I have watched you fall apart for these past few weeks. And it bothers us. She acts like she is the innocent, when she was wrong. I even just heard that Henry and Dean are going to have an understanding. That Henry will be her new primary relationship."

"Henry wouldn't do that to me. He's my friend." Frank defended.

"Sorry Frank, face reality. Henry *has* done it to you. Seems that wife of yours talks a lot. The truth is out in the community about what happened outside the tunnel." John raised his eyebrows. "Just remember, you were more than understanding and she's still sticking it to you. Look how low she has you? Sorry for going off, but I believe I'm your friend."

Frank brought his finger up to his eye, squeezing the corners of them, fighting the headache that crept upon him.

"And as your friend . . ." John opened the door. "Know that Jenny and I will get you through this."

Frank slammed his hand on the desk at the same time that the door shut. "Why do I just feel like he made me worse?" He started to look at his clipboard.

"Hey, Frank." Henry walked into his office. "What's up? You looked pissed."

"Henry!" The clipboard hit the desk harshly. "Did you sleep with my wife?"

Henry turned around and walked back to the door.

"Henry! I asked you a question."

"No, you yelled at me. And . . ." He opened the door. "I answered that question once. I will not answer it again. Bye, Frank."

"Henry wait, why did you come here?"

"I forgot. You just frustrated it out of my mind." He walked through the door and shut it.

"Man." Frank shook his head. "I got the weirdest fuckin' friends. They sure know how to make a guy feel better."

^^^

"Muffin?" George placed the golden brown pastry close in Joe's eye sight. "Oh I forgot, you can't eat can you?" He reached up and played with the intravenous tubing. "Well, not real food. Amazing how Salicain works isn't it?" George pulled up a chair sliding right across from the one Joe sat in. "You looked surprised Joe. Well actually, you look pitiful."

Joe's eyes were stone cold.

"Gosh, we have some catching up to do. Did you miss me?" George patted Joe on the knee. "Asshole Dean would not let me in here. Said only family. But thank God for Andrea, she said, and get this . . ." George stopped to laugh. "That *you* think of me as family. Anyway, I was telling you about Salicain. It's this amazing drug that was developed to replace anaesthesia for surgeries. One half a CC and the patient is numb from head to toe for eight hours. However . . ." George sat back, picked a section off his muffin and stuck it in his mouth. "The patient can't open his mouth, but you can swallow liquids. How long did it take for Dean and Andrea to figure out you were actually swallowing?" George shook his head. "Idiots."

If Joe could block George out, he would. Joe felt it regrettable at that moment his ability to hear wasn't paralyzed as well.

"So, one half a CC does it. But . . . if given in high or frequent doses, Salicain can cause the appearance and symptoms of a stroke. Depending on the dosage, the patient should come out of it in two weeks time. Anyway to keep up the . . . stroke appearance, or paralysis, I only need to inject you once every two weeks with minimal amounts."

*No, he's gonna do it to me again.*

"One more week. But don't you worry." George nodded his head. "That unable to open and shut your eye thing, that will only last about an hour. Then you can pop them eyes right back open to see your punishment."

Joe just wanted him to leave. But he could see how, George, staring at his muffin, picking it apart, was going no where.

"All I can say is I'm glad I'm allowed in this room. You need some excitement." Another pat to Joe's knee, another piece of his muffin. "Do you know?" George perked with enthusiasm. "Community asked me to fill in for you. Seems Henry didn't get the chance to ask for the position. Guess why?" George paused. "Come on, Joe, guess. Never mind, I'll tell you. Henry kept Ellen company on her running away from home expedition. Gone, during the vote. And, have you heard the newest rumor? It's been flying around that Ellen and Henry had a little tryst out there." George mustered up a look of surprise. "No kidding, that's what's going on." George smiled. "Got to hand it to your daughter. Dean, Frank, and now Henry. Quite the little slut."

The rage began to build in Joe.

"Of course she's been my little helper. You didn't know that? Sure, she spilled her guts about some body in the cryo-lab. That prompted me to move ahead with my plan. Did you know she trusts me impeccably and tells me everything?"

Swearing he could hear himself whine, Joe wished it wasn't his imagination. It was torture enough being unable to move or to speak, but George added to that by telling little stories to Joe that confirmed to him how dumb the people he loved really were. Joe swore at that moment he would find some comparable means of torment to hand to George prior to delivering him to his death. Thinking of torturous way helped Joe wade through George's visit. And the thought of tying George to a chair and plucking out those nose hairs Joe was subject to always seeing, made him inwardly smile.

~~~~~

It seemed as though all of Andrea's facial muscles were pulled to one side of her face. Her lips puckered to the left in some sort of fish face as she stared stone cold at Dean. "I can *not* believe you are saying this!"

"Andrea." Dean tried not to laugh at her. "All I'm saying is that it has been one week."

"So?"

"So? Where's the clot? Where is the swelling?" Dean moved about his lab, almost rushing. He slid to a stop, bent down to the tiny fridge and opened it. "Yes. Sorry. I was saying, it just isn't right. Something should have

shown by now.”

“What else could it be?”

“I don’t know. I want to run more test. Bet me top cupboard.” Dean moved--again--across the lab.

“What the hell are you doing?” Andrea asked in scold watching Dean race around.

“Um, nothing, searching for clues. Don’t worry about, And I have test that Jason and I . . .”

“Oh no. No, no!” Andrea waved her hands and shook her head. “Do not tell me that you and Mr. Quantum leap man have been consulting on my patient when I am not around!”

“It’s suspicious that’s all.”

“Suspicious?” Andrea laughed. “You think someone did this to him?”

“Don’t laugh at me.”

“Why shouldn’t I? You Dr. Hayes were some top government doctor. You are our town’s bright boy and you can stand here and tell me Joe’s condition is suspicious? On what basis?”

“It shouldn’t have happened. It wasn’t predictable.”

“You think not?” Andrea pointed her finger at him. “Don’t question my judgement on treatment when you can make a statement like that.” Her fingertip pounded down on the counter with her words. “Joe had been stressed out, his blood pressure was through the roof. He had dizzy spells, extreme headaches. What does that sound like a prelude to? I think you better hit them books again if you can’t see it.”

“Why are you getting so pissed off at me?” Dean continued searching the cupboard.

“Because you are questioning something that is plain and simple.”

“But look at his previous health history. Joe is fit. Very fit and . . . oh! Yes! Ha!” The argumentativeness left from his face and Dean smiled. “El, did it.” He showed the note to Andrea. “Whoops, you can’t see it.”

“Oh!” Andrea said in a disgusted manner, rolling her eyes at Dean. “I’ll just leave. We’ll finish this later.” She moved closer to Dean. “You make me sick.”

“I make you sick? Why do I make you sick?”

“Look at you. Chasing Ellen notes.” She looked behind him, checking out his rear. “If there was a tail back there it would be wagging.” Andrea moved to the door.

“Andrea, wait.” Dean called out in vain. She had left. He looked at the note that told him the password to another file. He smiled, forgot what he had been working on previously and headed to the cryo lab.

^^^

Frank really didn't want to carry so much wrath with him when he went into his father's room. But John Matoose got him going, then Henry, and little-man Dean nearly knocked him over as he walked through the clinic doors. Knowing he had to present a meeker demeanor, Frank took some calming breaths, then turned the corner into his father's room. "George?"

"Hi, Frank." George stood up.

Joe felt a sense of relief. *Frank, I see that look on your face. You heard him. You heard him didn't you?*

"Hey, my Dad is sitting in a chair now." Frank pointed and smiled.

"Yes he is." George gave Frank his chair. "Did that this morning and Andrea told me they are going to try feeding him liquids through his mouth."

"Oh, that is great."

*Great? I'm an invalid for Christ's sake. Great would be used to describe me walking, not eating broth.*

"Frank, I'll just leave you with your father. Talk to him, I have a feeling he can hear you. I did. We had a nice conversation." He reached down resting his hand on Joe's. "Didn't we Joe?"

"George, thanks a lot. You're a good friend."

"No problem."

*No, Frank, no. You are not this dumb. Can't anyone see through him?*

Frank slid the chair closer to his father. He leaned over and kissed his dad on the forehead. "George isn't telling me any news. I know you can hear me. That's why I come in here and talk to you."

*What's it gonna be about today, Frank? Ellen? Or how about Ellen? Or better yet. Ellen.*

"I guess because you're the only one who can listen to me talk about . . . Ellen."

^^^

"Hey George." Ellen approached him as she made her way to the clinic. "Just the man I wanted to see."

"What's going on, Ellen?"

"Not that I think you're blowing me off, I realize you've been busy adjusting, but I have things that have to be taken care of in containment."

"You go on." George patted her on the shoulder and began to walk.

"Gee thanks but I can't. That is the community leader's responsibility."

"Well, what is it?" He asked hastily.

"Agitated about something, George?"

"Ellen, I have things to do."

“Fine. I have two that need released from containment. And I can’t . . .”

“Bring me the papers and I’ll sign them.” George, again, tried to make his escape.

“Just like that? Don’t you want to see them? Or verify where I want to put them so you can give their work orders.”

“You take care of the work orders. I trust you.”

“Me?” She placed her hand to her chest. “Joe would never let . . .”

“Ellen, take care of it.”

Ellen shrugged. “O.K. whatever. Hey George, did you just come from seeing my father?”

“Yes.” George forcefully smiled. “He’s doing well.”

“Good. I want to do his hair. By any chance, Frank wasn’t in there, was he?”

“No Ellen, Frank isn’t in there. I just left, I didn’t see him.”

“Thanks, George.” Ellen finally walked on.

“No problem.” The thought of Joe being subject to Frank and Ellen bickering when he could nothing about it, made George smile as he walked on.

^^^

Ellen walked cradling the box, tightly in her arms. She thought of stories to tell Joe on her visits, hopefully amusing ones. She was going to gripe about George giving her power, she thought that should stir him. She hoped--as she closed in on the room--that she wasn’t going to bore Joe.

All of her attempts to build a wall of strength were futile. Ellen’s stomach twitched as she stepped into the room and saw Frank. He lifted his eyes to her as she stopped mid doorway. She paused there, possibly frozen, surprised to see him. Afraid also. Her mouth opened slightly, her lip quivered in nervousness as she quietly spoke. “Sorry.” She swallowed. “I didn’t know you’d be here.” Clutching the box so tight, she turned and left the room.

“El.” Frank’s call to her carried down the hall. “El . . . stop.” Frank watched her turn the corner, debating with every step he took whether he should follow her. He saw Ellen go into the lab and heard the door close.

Ellen let out the breath she held once she was safely inside the lab.

“El.”

Ellen screamed in surprise and spun to Frank who walked in. He closed the door and latched it. “I’d really feel much more comfortable if you opened that door.”

"When I'm done." He stepped closer to her. "I've wanted to talk to you all week. But somehow no one will tell me where you are. Dean or Henry always stop me right before I find you."

"I want it that way." Ellen tried not to look at him.

Frank took another step closer. Taking a breath, he placed his one hand on his hip and ran the other over the corner of his mouth, pausing before anything was said. "El . . . the night after my dad . . . after he had his stroke. What happened that night after we made love . . ."

"Don't." Ellen held up her hand. "Don't you dare call it that. You made it perfectly clear Frank that was not what it was. You made it painfully clear what happened between us."

"I know, I . . ."

"Do you have any idea how that felt? Do you? Do you have any idea what it was like to have the man you love tell you that he didn't make love to you, it meant nothing and just to leave? You don't." She turned her back to him, gripping the counter.

"No, El." Frank stepped even closer. "It was wrong. I shouldn't . . ."

"You're right it was wrong. I was such a fool to be with you that night. Such a fool to let you touch me. To touch you."

"No." Frank raised his hands reaching them out to her hair, stopping before he touched her. He leaned closer to her ear. "I needed you that night. And I need you now to listen to me." He saw her head drop. "I was wrong for making you feel that way. I crossed a line I shouldn't have. I shouldn't have said those things to you. And I am so . . . so sorry I . . ."

"Don't apologize to me. I don't want it." She moved away from him. "You lost all respect for me and I was too blind that night to see that you were punishing me. I see it now." She walked to the door. "Please leave."

Frank's head lowered and he swayed it side to side.

"Just so you know. Incase you're mind is thinking of ways." She opened the door. "I don't think there's anything left that you can do to me that would bring me down any further."

"I don't want to do that anymore. I'm done with that shit."

"Good I'm glad. Maybe now we can sit rationally with Reverend Bob. If you think that's possible, I'll speak to him today and set up a time."

Frank moved to the door. "I can . . . I can do that. I'm ready to do that. Are you making the suggestion to see him, to get him to help us work it out?"

"No Frank, I'm not. I'm giving you what you want. I'm going to ask him to let you have your name back. It's over. Let's just end it officially now."

Frank closed his mouth, swallowing drastically, trying to think of what to say in that awkward silence. And before he could counteract, or



speak up, Ellen was gone.

~~~~~

Giggling was never something Dean prided himself on doing. But in the cryo-lab, Ellen's note in hand, he booted up the computer. At first he thought her game of clues was stupid. Following one note that led him to another and so forth. But when he finally found the last note, he was glad for the search.

Excited like a kid, he pulled up the program, entered the password 'Dragonfly' and sat back with his fingers crossed. He waited and anticipated hoping it was information he needed. When the file popped up, Dean's head dropped. "No." He whined, crumbling the note. He lifted his head back up and read the heading of the file that indicated it was about insect control. Dean shook his head, but he wasn't giving up., Ellen may had unlocked a moot file, but she was making progress. She was almost through all the words under the letter 'D'.

~~~~~

*'I am proud of you'* Was the last line of the little note Henry wrote Ellen and planned to put it in her inner office mailbox. He knew he probably told her so when he saw her at containment and she filled him in on the Frank confrontation. But he wanted to tell her again. She wasn't giving in. She was staying strong. And telling Henry she was sure Frank could not bring her down again, was only a reiteration of the promise she made to him outside the tunnels.

Sitting behind Joe's desk, Henry folded the note and placed it in his back pocket. His hand tapped on the folder before him as he waited.

Humming a show tune from *Bye-bye Birdie*, George slid in his walk into the office when he saw Henry. "What's going on?" He asked.

"I wanted to talk to you." Henry held up the folder.

"What are you doing sitting in my desk?"

"Joe's desk." Henry gave a crooked smile. "Anyway, I wanted to . . ."

"Get the hell out from behind my desk!" George blasted. "Now."

Henry remained calm. "Fine." He stood up slowly and allowed for George to sit. He raised his eyebrow with almost a snicker as George sank in the chair with an 'ah'. "Now can I . . ." He shut up when George held his hand up to him. "George."

Taking a breath, George leaned back. "What?"

"In that folder are the releases from containment. Ellen assigned these people to different areas. She said you gave her the authority to do it."

"I did."

"Ellen can't have that authority. She bases her decisions on personal choice instead of necessity and skill. We need to . . ."

"Give Ellen the decision." George cut him off.

"No." Henry snickered. "I like El and all, but she . . ."

"Has to learn."

"George, may I finish a sentence please?" Henry almost snipped.

"Are you going to argue with me on this Ellen authority situation?"

"Yes."

"Then no." George firmly stated. "I gave her it, she'll do what she sees fit. If she screws up, that's how she learns." George saw Henry's mouth open to argue. "No. End of discussion."

"But Joe wouldn't like this."

"Joe isn't capable of using the potty, let alone capable of not liking my decision."

"Oh." Henry gasped. "That is such a wrong thing to say."

"It's the truth. And another truth is . . . I am the leader now. Bye." He wiggled his fingers in a wave.

After a near silent grunt, Henry reached forward, snatched up the file and headed to the door.

"Henry, have a good evening." George said snide.

Henry turned after opening the door. He wanted so badly to blast back at George, but that was what George waited for. Not giving him the satisfaction, Henry just smiled widely and left.

^^^

More so than ever before, the emptiness of his house hit Frank the moment he walked in the door. He turned on the light and took off his shoulder harness dropping it to the couch. No kids, no locking away the gun. He just got back from meeting Dean to give him Brian. Frank shook his head over that thought. He tried to get past the clinic with Brian. Wanting to take him to containment as a sort of mental slip, pretending he didn't know Ellen had a social skills class. But Dean saw him, and stopped him. It was like no one had noticed that he just wasn't going to fight with Ellen anymore.

Frank moved slowly through the quiet livingroom to his kitchen to get a drink of water. He grabbed a glass then paused before opening the refrigerator. He stared at the drawing Billy had made. A picture of a family. All of the kids, Frank and . . . Ellen. Frank ran his rough finger over the stick person painting, closing his eyes for brief thought.

He would have thought the knock at the door would be a welcome break from the quiet house, but to Frank it wasn't. Walking with his full glass

of water he went to the door and opened it. Jenny Matoose stood there. "Jenny?"

"May I come in Frank?"

Frank shrugged and stepped back, bringing his water to his lips. He shut the door and moved past her to the living room. "What's up?"

"John sent me." Jenny spoke softly. "He sent me because he thought you might be alone."

"I am."

Jenny paused to close her eyes, avoiding frustration she was feeling by trying to get through to him. "No Frank. He said that you were down. Maybe needing some comfort. He thought you might like company."

"Tell John that's nice but . . . Hey . . ." Frank's hand was empty as Jenny took his water. "My water." Frank's hand followed the glass that she set on the table next to the couch.

Jenny moved his hand away and stepped into his full view. Slowly, almost seductively, she lifted her shirt over her head, dropping it to the floor. She gathered her long strawberry blonde hair to fall on one side of her full body, allowing the wispieness of its ends to brush over, just slightly, one of her very large breasts.

Sometimes he was slow, but Frank got the picture. "Jenny I . . ."

"No." She moved closer to him. "Shh." She placed her finger to his lips then slowly moved her hands down his chest, across his waist and to his back. Her fingers pressed and rubbed. Her hands found a home following the journey of sliding them down the back of his thighs, then bringing them up just a little. "Relax. You're so tense."

"Jenny." Frank closed his eyes as her lips moved on his neck. He swallowed so harsh her lips had to feel it as they parted there. A knot formed in his stomach. His mind immediately crashed to Ellen. "Jenny." He reached down grabbing her arms and removing them. "Stop. Tell John thanks for the offer. I can't."

"Yes you can." She edged back in. "You need the company, comfort. Take your mind off of things."

"No." Frank removed her again. "Besides the fact I have no desire to be with anyone else, I want my mind where it should be . . . on Ellen."

Jenny ran her hands through her hair, stepping back from him in aggravation. "You aren't with her anymore."

"Yeah I am." Frank spoke softly. "I'll always be with her. I love her. No one can even attempt to fill that with me, because no one ever can." He reached down and picked her shirt from the floor, handing it to her. "Here."

She hurriedly threw on her shirt. "John is going to be very insulted by this. He was being generous."

"John's gonna have to get over it." Frank walked to the door and

opened it. "Night." He felt the abruptness of her as she stormed out the door. Without a second thought about what happened, Frank closed it. He paused in his stride to retrieve his water again. Water that Jenny took from him. He started remembering. Remembering tenderness, touching, and lips on his neck. But they were Ellen's lips, and Ellen's touch. He shut his eyes breathing in frustration at himself for missing that and wanting that *so* bad again, it was starting to hurt.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Dean had just about all he could take of the ‘give it backs’ and ‘no, El, my turn’. The bickering caused a pain in his temple and his hand slammed to the counter where he worked with a rabbit. “Knock it off!” He blasted at Ellen and Henry.

“Dean.” Ellen sounded like a child. “Tell him the password thing is my project and he’s wasting time. I used the words he’s trying. I did all the ‘G’s”

“No, El.” Henry argued. “You didn’t mark them.”

“Henry. I’m telling you. I did. I must have been tired. You tried two, they didn’t work, Don’t try that . . .” She looked at Dean. “Hey, Dean. What are you doing to that helpless rabbit?”

“I gave him tetanus so I can see if that vial actually does contain the tetanus vaccine. That is something that can be . . .” Dean and Ellen turned their heads to Henry’s loud exclamation of vulgarity.

Ellen’s shoulders dropped when she heard the system shut down. “Damn it, Henry, I told you.” She marched up to him and grabbed the dictionary, then she proceeded to hit him with the paper back. “I told you.” She tossed the book at him. “I’m leaving. I refuse to stay here while you are here aggravating me. Waste my Friday.” She stormed to the door. “Dean, I’ll pick up the slides and bring them back down here. Jason said something about you finding them interesting?”

Dean nodded as he injected a squealing rabbit. “Yeah, I know what he’s talking about. Thanks Ellen.”

“I’ll be back.” She shrugged and opened the door.

“Wait, El.” Henry jumped from the stool. “I’ll come with you.”

“Oh you are just determined to work my last nerve today, aren’t you?”

Henry laughed. Ellen didn’t. In the lab, Dean continued his work, grateful for every sound of the fading and arguing voices.

^^^

Really not in the mood for something trivial, and angry that is was George’s job to handle non-security problems at the field, Frank made his way to the field house. Cole seemed anxiously waiting for him. “Hey.” Frank lifted his chin in acknowledgment. “What’s up?”

“Ready?” Cole asked, bracing Frank. “Follow me.” He walked to the right of the field house. “Saw one of those wild bores that always slip through.”

“Oh, yeah?” Frank smiled “You gonna cook it.”

“No, I didn’t get it.” Cole stated as he stopped. “I wanted to use a scope rifle. I came to the armory hatch to get one. And . . .” He bent down and lifted the metal hatch.

“Fuck.” Frank’s one word echoed in the empty hollow container. “Where’s the weapons?”

“George removed them. I called him, he stated that since survivors are running around left and right, per Ellen’s instructions, he thought safety first.”

“And he removed them?” Frank asked strong.

“Yep.”

“Let’s go. Grab a jeep, we’ll stock it back up.” Frank marched off toward his own jeep.

“But George specifically said . . .”

“George is wrong. It was a mistake.” Frank kept his stride steady. “Or at least if better be.”

^^^

“Are you listening to me, Dean?” Jenny badgered following Dean around the cryo-lab. “Are you? Dean?”

“Jenny. No.” Dean said. “I’m not. I’m working. And why are you down here? This is off limits.”

“And this is important.”

Giving up, Dean set down the rack of blood. “Go on. Make it fast. I have plans for tonight.”

“With Ellen?” Jenny questioned.

“That’s none of your business.” Dean said with a chuckle.

“I’m making it my business.”

“What? Why are you making me and Ellen your business?”

“That’s what I’d like to know.” Ellen, arms folded, stepped into the lab with Henry. She moved toward Jenny. “Why?”

Taking a deep nostril breath, Jenny flung out her hand. “Fine. You want to know. I’ll tell you. Someone has to stop you from reeking havoc around here.”

Ellen laughed. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“What you did to Frank.”

“What I did to Frank? Where is this coming from?” Ellen argued.

“If you must know. Last night I went to him, to comfort him and . . .”

“Hold it.” Ellen stepped to her. “Comfort him as in sex?”

Snidely, Jenny tossed her head back. "Please don't tell me, you of all people have a problem with that. The way you run around here, failing to do things right. Next thing you know, you'll have a problem with me coming down to Dean."

Ellen raised one eyebrow. "I do. Are you? Is this some sort of revenge on Ellen for Frank by going after the men in my life?"

Jenny laughed. "Please. Not even I could keep up with the amount of men you handle, Ellen."

Not much thought went into it. In fact none at all. Years of frustration went into her fist. Years of dealing with Jenny Matoose went into the hit. Ellen nailed Jenny with all of her weight, sending the heavier woman back and tumbling to the floor. And then Ellen dove on her, fist swinging violently, while Jenny screamed out. Both women began to roll about in a brawl, crashing about on the linoleum.

Dean jumped up and pulled at Ellen who was giving him more of a struggle than he thought a woman of her size would. Grunting he turned to Henry. "Can you help?"

"Sorry." Henry snickered, wiped the smile from his face then went over to help Dean..

"Calm down!" Dean scolded at Ellen as he lifted her and Henry grabbed Jenny. "El. She just wants to get to you."

Breathing heavily, Ellen stepped back. "And she did." She wiped her mouth. "She got me." Ellen backed up. "She got me to see what I have to do." Without saying anymore, Ellen bolted from the lab.

Speechless and frazzled, Dean stood in the center of his lab. He looked at Jenny who pulled herself together. "What just happened here."

Henry shrugged. "Don't know. But here . . ." He handed Dean a box. "We brought your slides."

^^^

With a long shuddering breath, Ellen looked at her left hand one more time before knocking on Frank's office door. She tapped lightly, her walk to his office had cooled her down. After his stock, 'yeah', Ellen opened the door, peeking her head inside. "Are you alone? Can I come in?"

"El . . . yeah." Frank stood up, trying to hide a smile.

"Thanks." She stepped inside, her hands shook. And for the first time ever, she couldn't look at Frank. She really couldn't look at him. "I have something that belongs to you."

"What is it?"

Breathing in, Ellen walked to his desk, brought her hand down to its surface and dropped before him her wedding ring. "It belonged to your

mother, so put that away.” She started to leave.

“What is this?” Frank didn’t want to touch it. “I gave it to you.”

“I don’t want it. I can’t keep it. That was your mother’s.”

“El.” Frank picked up the ring. “I don’t want it back. I gave you my mother’s ring because . . .”

“I don’t want it!” She shouted, throwing her hand his way. “Just . . . just keep it.”

“This is wrong. Giving me back the ring I gave you. It’s wrong.”

“What am I gonna do Frank? Keep it? Wear it? I’m not your wife. You made that perfectly clear before, and you certainly made that perfectly clear last night.” She started to leave again, but stopped. “You know, I thought you couldn’t possibly do anything that could hurt me anymore. If it was anyone else, anyone, I’d understand why you went to them. But you did it on purpose didn’t you?”

“What are you talking about?” Frank held his hands out totally confused.

“I know you’re dumb, but you aren’t that dumb. You racked that brain of yours trying to come up with a way. Saying to yourself, what else can I do to really kill Ellen? Well you did. You did it. You evened the score card . . . no wait. You’ve won.” She raced to the door.

“El, I guess I am that dumb, cause I haven’t a clue on why you are . . .”

“Two words.” Ellen stepped through the door. “Jenny Matoose.”

Frank jumped with the slam of the door. “Jenny Matoose? Oh great, she has a fight with Jenny so she gives me back my ring.” Frank opened his hand and looked down at the ring and the indentation it caused. He picked it from his hand as he walked to his desk, placing it on his little finger and feeling the ring as he blindly sat in his chair. The roundness. The semi-smoothness of the design. As his body sunk down, so did his heart. At his low point, mind playing what just happened . . . it hit him. “Shit!” He sprang up. “Shit.” He ran to the door, Ellen was gone. “Shit, she thinks I slept with Jenny.”



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

From Ellen's point of view she really wasn't doing any good at the social skills class anyway. She hung more so in the back, allowing Henry to explain to them the proper procedures when visiting any of the distribution areas. Ellen knew Henry was trying to make her smile when he so diligently tried to do the class. But he couldn't. Nothing would. She just wanted to go home. And Henry offering to stay and finish up, was her invitation to leave.

It was surprisingly odd how dark Dean's house looked when she approached. He and the twins couldn't be in bed already it wasn't even nine. Ellen stopped, totally stopped as she opened the door to Dean's house. At that particular moment she didn't know to leave or stay. She could see from the small hallway, Dean heard her. He looked up at her, smiling a blushing smile as he bent over lighting a candle. "What's going on?" She asked.

"El. You're a little early."

"Oh shit, I'm interrupting something. I'll leave."

"No." He shook the stick he used to light the candle. "You aren't." He walked up to her and shut the door she still held open. "Besides, interrupting what?"

Ellen shrugged.

"El." Dean seemed nervous. "You're probably going to kill me. Don't. I wanted to do something nice for you."

"You do enough for me. You shouldn't have done anything."

"Yeah, I should have." He ran his fingers through his hair. "It dawned on me today. After all these years you and I never had an evening together. A couple's evening."

"You mean like a date?" Ellen looked to the steps. "Where are the twins? Sleeping?"

"Um . . ." Dean briefly closed his eyes, hoping she wouldn't get upset. "Andrea has them tonight. It's just us."

"Us?" Ellen peeked around to the livingroom.

"So will you El? Will you have this evening with me?"

Ellen felt his hand reach down to hers. "I'd love to have this evening with you."

Dean gripped her hand. "Great." He led her through the livingroom to the dining area.

Ellen took in the rooms as she walked through them, the candles, the table. Two glasses setting there. "So, since Andrea has the off spring, I take it she knows about this date."

Dean sat down at the same time as Ellen and grabbed a bottle of wine. "Andrea is the one who suggested taking the kids. She said . . ." Dean

held the bottle over Ellen's glass. "... you and I needed it." He poured for her and himself.

A hint of sneakiness hit Ellen. "Are you trying to seduce me tonight?"

"Nope." Dean moved his chair closer. "But, if you decide somewhere in the course of this night, that you want me too . . . just let me know."

"Dean. I'm really sorry. I am. You're such a great guy, and I never saw that."

"Yeah, you did. In your own way." He watched her sip the wine. "A part of me believes that I hold a special place in your heart. No matter what happened."

"You do." Ellen took another drink then softened her voice. "Dean. Just know, all the times that I hurt you . . ."

"El." He lifted her chin. "Forget about everything that happened in the past. Tonight's not about that." He reached for his own glass and stood up. "Now I have a question to ask you. Will you dance with me? I have never danced with you. I would love to."

Ellen stood up. "As long as you're not going to sing for us."

"No." Holding his glass in one hand, he led Ellen to the livingroom. He set his glass on the coffee table and took Ellen's from her hand, placing her glass next to his. Bending over to the floor, to their little lab cassette recorder, Dean pressed play and the slow music began. "May I?" His hand held out to her.

Ellen placed her hand in his and stepped to him. His arm went slowly around her waist and Dean pulled her to him. His cheek pressed to hers and their bodies moved slowly, slower than the music played. There was something just a little awkward about the moment. The tension was there and it stayed as the first song slipped past them.

Ellen felt Dean start to release her, she shook her head, pulling him back, waiting for the next song to play. Slowly she pulled her head back to look at him. "Dean. I want you to know, I'm not letting you hold me like this, out of spite to Frank. I'm with you right now . . . I'm here because I want to be."

Dean pulled her back into him. "I'm glad."

"Dean." She whispered in his ear. "I'm not afraid of where this could lead. Are you?"

Her whispering words sent a shiver through him, making his eyes roll slightly. He let go the hand he held, sliding it up her arm to her neck, bringing his lips to her ear. "Not anymore." As if a lever was released, the tension, anxiousness, and fears left him. Dean moved his body more freely, holding Ellen against him as he did. He felt her breath. He pulled back some,

looked at Ellen, brought his lips to hers and stopped. It wasn't time. Not yet. The rush wasn't going to consume him. Every reason was there to take in the moment. He wasn't going to let something he waited for slip by him so fast that he hadn't any time to realize it was happening.

Faces so close. Eyes staring into eyes. Lips brushing in a teasing kissing manner to each other without ever touching. The emotion of the song began to build as did they. Dean brought his hands up to Ellen's face, placing them against her, feeling the contour of her gently with his finger tips. He stared so intensely into her eyes it was if he were looking into her soul. Grazing down his thumbs to her lips, he parted them for her. The music stopped.

"Dean . . ." Ellen moved her lips to his.

"El, If it starts, I'm not gonna be able to stop. I'm not going to want to stop. Are you sure?"

Her answer to him was simple and strong. Pressing her lips to Deans, she separated his mouth with hers, bringing her hands to his hair, letting her fingers slip though it, and holding him to her.

Henry didn't understand the meaning of filling out after social skills class reports. About half way through the paperwork, he decided he didn't want to understand. Leaving containment, he headed to Dean's. He would drop of the paperwork to Ellen. Hopefully she still would be up.

Was Dean's house on fire? Henry wondered as he approached almost in a panic. The glowing amber and orange color emanating from Dean's home, made Henry think of flames. He ran to the house but stopped ten feet from it. He saw them. Through the window, the slightly opened blinds, he watched Dean kissing Ellen. A tight embrace, and hands that did not stay in one place. By the kisses, by the scene, Henry knew what was happening.

He thought it too much of an irony that Ellen would be with Dean on the same day Jenny implied that she slept with Frank. Though it wasn't his place, Henry felt it was a mistake. In this midst of his thoughts, Henry had stopped watching them. When he returned his views he saw them slip from the window's scope. "Shit." He took off running.

Ellen lay on the couch watching Dean above her. Watching as he brought his knee to the cushion, his hand clung tightly to the back of the sofa as he leaned down. A look of apprehension to join her was on him.

An invitation without words was given. She reached up to the belt loops of his jeans and pulled him down to her. They continued kissing,

pausing only as Ellen lifted his shirt from his jeans and brought it over his head, laying it on the back of the couch.

“Frank!” Henry burst through Frank’s front door.

“Shut up, Henry I just got my baby to sleep.” Frank stood up from the couch.

Henry took a moment to catch his breath. “Get Josh to stay with the baby. You have to stop them.”

“Stop who?”

“Ellen, Dean. You have to stop Ellen.” Henry, whose breathing began to normalize, grabbed Frank’s arms. “I went to Dean’s house. I saw them through the window. They were kissing. They were . . .”

“I don’t want to hear this.” Frank backed up.

“No you have to hear it. You pushed her to this. You pushed her because of everything you’ve said. But mostly because she thinks you slept with Jenny. Frank . . .” Henry walked up to him. “If that’s why she’s doing this you owe her the truth. You owe it to yourself. It’s a mistake Frank. She deserves to know the truth before she does this. You have to tell her.”

“It’s too late.” Frank’s shoulders fell and he closed his eyes.

“No, not yet. But it will be if you don’t get over there and talk to her. Talk to your wife.”

Frank’s head sprung up. “Tell Josh to watch Brian.” Through the door that Henry left open, Frank ran. He ran with everything he had to Ellen.

Dean closed the bedroom door slightly, then turned to Ellen who stood before him. Her shirt off, dropped somewhere in the journey upstairs. He moved to her, biting his bottom lip as he did. Waist first he pressed to her, immediately laying his mouth at the top of her neck. His fingers gripped the straps of her bra sliding them off her shoulders, then removing the garment and tossing it backwards out the door. His lips brushed downward to the center of her chest. She held his head tight to her as he pulled the belt from her loosely fitted tan pants and undid the button. Slipping his hand slightly into them, feeling the touch of her bare skin, sent Dean completely over the edge.

Raising his head, kissing her on the lips, he backed her to the bed.

Frank told himself he was going to stay calm. He had too. He stood at Dean’s door, knocking was out of the question. There was a chance they wouldn’t answer.

With a sweaty palm Frank turned the knob. He opened the door

wide, stepping in and calling her name somberly as he did. "El."

An empty room. Candles still burning. Frank stepped inside. He saw the coffee table, two glasses perched there, Dean's shirt laying on the back of the couch. Lowering his head he turned to the door, and stopped. Thinking he still had time, believing that, his head shifted to the stairs and he took the first one. Not much in life scared Frank, but he was scared of what he'd find, and scared he was just going too far. As he reached the middle, he saw Ellen's shirt. His heart beat stronger as he lifted it up, bringing it to his face, smelling it.

He moved faster up the staircase. When he reached the top, he felt as if he were looking through tunnel vision. He saw the bedroom door, he heard nothing but silence. Then his eyes caught the whiteness of it as it lay near the semi-closed door, half in the hall. Ellen's bra. He stepped to it, picking it up, as he did his eyes caught glimpse through the small openness of the door, he saw legs.

Standing up, placing his huge hand palm flush against the door, Frank slowly opened it, exposing the room, exposing the bed. His breath literally left him and he let out a silent emotional gasp when he saw them.

Dean lay on top of Ellen, his half dressed body moving slowly. His head buried to her neck. Ellen's eyes closed. Frank was frozen, they didn't even hear him. They were so engrossed they didn't know he was there. He watched Dean slide his hand up Ellen's bent leg. The leg pressed so tight to the side of Dean's body. His hand ran from her calf, to her thigh, it paused to grip her hip, then his fingers extended to the top of the pants she still wore. Lifting his body slightly, he began to pull them off.

Frank swallowed. He had two choices. Leave or stop them. In a soft hurt voice, a voice that would resinate through them, Frank called out. "Stop."

In a startling instinct Dean's hand released Ellen's pants. He lifted his head from her neck. "No, he's not in here."

Frank waited. The second since he called to them seemed like an eternity. Calmly, he spoke again. "Dean, get off of my wife." He turned his back to them. "Please."

Ellen closed her eyes as Dean lifted off of her. "Frank, you have to leave."

"I'm not leaving. I can't let this happen." Frank head flung back. His one hand stayed on his hip, the other clutched her clothes that he held.

"You don't have a choice." She argued calmly.

"Unless you plan on finishing while I stand here, then *you* don't have a choice." He still didn't face her. "Get out of the bed."

"No." She stated firm.

"Get out of the bed and get dressed!" He turned around tossing the

clothes to her. "Now!"

Dean ran his hand through his hair and down his face. "Frank." He stepped around the bed. "You can't come into our house like this."

"The hell I can't! She's still my wife, Dean! She's still my wife!"

Ellen placed on her shirt. "Frank, you have no right . . ."

"I have every right to stop you from doing this." His finger pointed to the bed. "I need to talk to you. Get out of the bed and come with me. Now Ell!"

"No." Ellen shook her head.

"Don't make me come over there and carry your ass out, because I will." Frank yelled.

The situation was beginning to heat up and Dean could feel it. The awkwardness was being over shadowed by anger. Nervous over being stopped in such a compromising position, Dean tried again to reason with Frank. He felt he could. If Frank was going to do anything violent he would have done so. "Frank. Just leave O.K.? Just leave and I'll talk to her and see if . . ." Dean's eyes widened. "Frank! Frank! You can't just grab her . . . Frank!" He charged forth.

"Back off, Dean!" Frank's hand came pummeling down in a pointing motion. "Back off." With Ellen over his shoulder hitting him, kicking, and screaming, Frank carried her out.

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And Henry thought that juicy ripe apple he munched on was good. It paled in comparison to the entertainment he received in his livingroom when Frank carried Ellen in and set the wiry woman down. He waved to the couple, but didn't say anything. It really wasn't his place.

Frank let out a breath, standing face to face with Ellen. "Calm?"

"Absolutely not." She turned to the door to make a mad-dash escape.

"No!" Frank pulled her back.

"Quit touching me." She whacked him hard. "Don't put your hands on me again!"

"Fine." Frank raised them in surrender. "But you will listen to me."

"I will not. Who the hell do you think you are coming into Dean's house, picking me up and dragging me out of there?"

"Your husband."

"You are not my husband anymore. Learn that and situations that just happened . . . won't." Ellen opened the door.

"You aren't going back there!" He slammed it shut with such

determination, not paying one bit of attention to Henry who stood there like he was watching a movie. "And look at you. Not even dressed." He buttoned her pants and zipped them, ignoring her hits.

"Frank, you are really pissing me off!" Ellen yelled, face red.

"You're pissing me off! What the hell are you doing El? Huh? What!" He started to scream. "You think I sleep with Jenny, so I go find my wife, in some bed, with some guy humping on . . ."

"Aw, gees Frank." Henry cringed. "Tact. Tact."

Ellen's hands slapped down to her thighs. "I'm not going to listen to this. I know you think so low of me that I would sleep with someone to get back at you" She opened the door. "Let me tell you something Frank, that's not what I was going to do with Dean."

"Let me tell *you* something Ellen, I did *not* sleep with Jenny Matoose." He got her. He had her. She stopped. "I didn't touch her." His hand reached out as he watched her head drop. He shut the door. "I couldn't." He turned Ellen to face him. "I had no desire to be with her. None." Frank lifted Ellen's chin. "So do you see now why I had to stop you? I didn't want you doing this with Dean thinking I slept with Jenny."

"Thank you for telling me." She removed his hand from her face. "I have to go."

"No!" After a brief outburst of panic, Frank pulled her back in the house and led her further in. "No El, don't go back there."

Ellen took a deep breath, turning to face him, holding her arms tightly to herself.

"I didn't sleep with Jenny. Not just because I didn't want to, but because I would *never* do that to you. I know how you feel about her. Know how I feel about Dean. It's the same thing. Don't do this." His voice and words pleaded. "Please don't go back and be with him."

"I have to go back there, Frank. I'm sorry." She turned and grabbed the door.

"If you love me, El!" He watched her stop and drop her head. "If you ever loved me in your life . . ." His hand reached out and laid on the back of her head. "You won't do this to me. You won't do this while you are still my wife."

Ellen slowly faced him. "Frank . . ."

His hand slid to her face he pulled her closer. "Please."

Ellen pressed her hand to his, closing her eyes briefly, then sliding his hand from her face. She held it. "I'm going back there . . ." She watched his head lower. "I owe Dean an explanation."

Frank's let out a breath of relief.

"As long as I'm your wife Frank, I won't. But know this . . ." Ellen opened up the door, this time without resistance. "It's *only* for as long as I'm

your wife.”

When the door shut, Henry watched his friend’s head and arms just drop. Frank stood in his livingroom looking weary from a battle he lost as well as won. Chomping on his apple, Henry stepped closer to Frank and laid his hand on his back. “You did good.”

Frank nodded and lifted his head with a breath. “She may have left, but . . . I stopped her, Henry. That’s one good thing.”

“Yeah.” Henry said softly. He brought his apple to his mouth and took a slurping bite. “But . . .” He spoke through his loud chewing. “What do you think the chances are she just told you she wouldn’t be with Dean, so she could get out of the house?”

Wide eyed, Frank spun around to face Henry.

Henry, still chewing, held up his hands. “Just curious. She meant what she told you . . . I think. Yeah. She did. Probably.”

Grunting in frustration, Frank snatched the apple from Henry’s hand, shoved it in his own mouth to keep from saying anything, and stormed out.

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“And then he . . .” George paused in his taunting laughter to catch his breath. “Joe, he carried her over his shoulder down the street.” With a hard swat he slapped into Joe’s leg. “Yeah. Quite the show for the community. That Ellen . . . Back to what we were talking about.” George exhaled the remaining laughter out. “I’m making what I would call low profile changes. Well, at least until my troops arrived for the first hit. Which should be soon. It’s gonna be exciting, I’m sure you’ll hear all about it afterwards. Not like I expect this to be the final raid. More will be on the way. I spoke to the scientists . . . Hey, you’ll get a kick out of this . . . the fiber optics thing we talked Henry into getting up and running is working for me. I have phone communication with New Mexico. Our secret Joe.”

*God, we played right into his hands. Every advance we made was right into his hands.* Joe cringed inside.

“They are programming them to wait for my call. Enough of them” George crossed his legs. “Let’s get back to Ellen. She’s always a fun topic, and a soft spot for you. Did I tell you, I think I did, she has been in that cryo-lab working on those passwords. Guess what?” George leaned into him. “I have this program . . . I loaded it in the computer already. It causes a pre-wired explosion to go off as soon as the key password is unlocked. Pre-wired. Separate explosions, the first mild, the second as an insurance. And the key password? I changed it before I loaded the program. Yep. Adding a bit of Hitchcock to our reality. Ellen’s going through the dictionary word by word,



so guess what I did? Come on Joe Guess? Gosh you're not in the mood for this guessing stuff are you?"

*You didn't. Please dear God, be didn't set up my daughter.*

"I picked a word I know she'll type in. Key password, she'll get excited about the information then . . . BOOM!" George laughed as he brought his voice to a starling level. "Shh. I have to be quiet. Bye-bye Ellen."

Joe's whole body filled with fear, with anger. And at that moment--with his will to jump from that chair to get George--it went unnoticed by his taunter, that Joe's little finger moved.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*Ab, the feeling of power.* George smoothed his hand across Joe's desk. He sat back enjoying doing nothing. He actually hadn't done anything. For the community's well being that was. He did what he thought Joe always did-hid. He shuffled the names around the work orders, saying he was one place when he actually wasn't anywhere important.

George's private gloating party of one was interrupted by a loud slam at the office door. He raised his head to the intruder. "Frank."

"What the fuck's going on!?" Frank stormed his words at him.

"What are you talking about?"

"This!" He threw the clipboard at George, it slammed on the desk.

"Oh." George pushed it back.

"You're blowing me off."

"Frank, I am not."

"George!" Frank's hand came pummeling down on the desk. "Two days ago you changed my scheduling for training. Taking three of my crew off to put them in useless places. Yesterday you blew me off . . . *again* about setting up a raid on the New Mexico lab. And today, today Herb refused to release the fuel for the chopper. I need that fuel! I need Johnny or John Matoose to make that flight!"

"It's an unnecessary flight."

"Bullshit!" Frank argued--loudly. "We haven't seen a SUT in five days. Five days? They're gathering somewhere. I can't afford to send my men out to see. I have to fly reconnaissance of the region to look for them."

"Instead of being so pessimistic Frank, why don't you just be grateful that their little attacks have stopped."

"Pessimistic?" A frustrational laugh emanated from him. "How about realistic, George. We know how many there are. You really want to take a chance with this community that they are gathering?"

"They aren't gathering." George opened the desk drawer and began to pull out papers. "You're emotional. Things are happening in your personal life. When you get emotional you don't think straight. Everyone knows that."

Reaching downward, Frank snatched the papers that had George so engrossed. "Listen to me George. I have to get to New Mexico to take out the SUT factory. I can't chance taking one of the few men I have from this community to do that. So I have to make sure the area is free and clear of those things. You *will* sign the fuel release. I *will* have Johnny make a flight. And you will *never* change another one of my training schedules again. Clear?"

Still remaining an annoying calm, George reached back for his papers, grabbing them from the strong wrinkling grip Frank held them with.

“You are just overreacting.”

“And you are being way too lax with this.”

“Are you forgetting I’m the leader of this community now?”

“You are not the leader of this community! You are filling in for the leader of this community and you are doing a piss poor job. If my father was sitting there, this conversation would not be happening. My father trusts the way I protect this community and I have never let this community down.”

Taking a tone of offense George began to raise up. “Well you’re father isn’t sitting here right now. I am!”

“Then be a goddamn leader and sign the order!” Frank shouted, yet his loudest.

“Don’t you scream at me. Don’t you take that tone with me!” George stood straight up.

“And don’t you dick around with me!” Frank screamed back at him. “My wife, my children, my family, live in this community. It is my job to protect them. And if you screw around once with their lives because of your pansy outlook on things, then you’ll have to answer to me.” Frank charged forth. “Let one thing happen George, one thing, and this . . .” Frank picked up the clipboard. “Will be the last order you rescind.” He slammed it back down. “Sign it. Sign it now!” He stepped back and raged to the door.

“Frank!” George called to him with such anger, that it actually made Frank stop. “Threaten me again and I’ll move to have you ousted.”

“Try it.” Frank glared at him, opening the door. “You won’t get past the first laugh.”

George sat back down with the slamming of the door. He ran his fingers through his grey hair. “God . . . I hate that man.”

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To Joe, it was a normal Frank entrance. The huffing into the room. The stopping directly before Joe. The hand . . . the hand that Frank waved about as his mouth opened and words failed to come out. Mind searching for the right words to tell Joe. Contemplating everyday if he should. Starting out every bitch session to Joe with the same line. ‘Dad, I hope you don’t think I’m silly talking to you like this . . .’ Everyday it was the same thing. He saw the look on Frank’s face. Red, angry, and why hadn’t his son shaved?

Joe prepared himself to hear it. A long repetitive talk about Ellen. The Frank and Ellen soap opera saga. Wasn’t there anything else of importance in the community to discuss? At least when Frank talked about Ellen he wasn’t reading. Frank reading was more of a nerve bending event than a stimulating one. It was especially bad when Frank opted for Hemingway. Joe who was a great reader had a hard time reading Hemingway

himself. But Frank? Frank made the famous author sound like a basement wanna be writer who could barely finish writing a business letter. Joe did enjoy Frank's explanation of why he chose Hemingway. Telling Joe moments before he blundered through the opening paragraph, that he was going to read Joe a book by some old guy, and since Joe was old he probably would like that.

Frank's third pacing cycle. The hand over his head, scratching it. Slapping his hand downward on to his leg. Then . . . the squat in front of Joe. It was the beginning to the Frank daily routine. *O.K. Frank, fire away.* Joe was ready.

"Dad, I hope you don't think I'm silly talking to you like this. I have a major problem. *God* I wish you could talk to me."

*All right Frank, tell me about Ellen.*

"Fuckin' George Dad."

*George? Frank, what did you find out? What happened?* Joe perked with interest.

"You have to get better or that man is going to drive this community into the ground! He's pissing around with the safety of the community. He won't release the fuel I need to go to New Mexico to take out those scientist."

*This is really good.* If Joe could show Frank his smile, he would.

"I threatened him today. And he threatened to oust me. Can he do that?" Frank stood up and started to pace again. "He probably can't. Am I wrong? I just have a bad feeling. Like, why is he always hiding? Why won't he sign anything. Distribution closes at three. Three? Eighty percent of the people in this community don't walk off their shifts until six."

*You have to think about this one Frank. Why. What does he have to gain. If you think, you'll get your answers.*

"You know I realized now why I didn't vote for him in the first place. Aside from the fact he's a Democrat. Hey Dad, you don't think that has anything to do with it, do you? You know how them Democrats hate confrontations."

*No, Christ, his political party has nothing to do with it. I'm done. I'm stuck. I'm never getting out of this shell. Lord knows Dean and Henry aren't doing anything about it.*

## Druga-Marchetti/Circle of Justice

“Dad, look.” Frank squatted again before his father. “I know George is your friend and all. But he just isn’t doing the job, and I have to find out why. Maybe he’s just holding things tight until you get better. It seems to me . . .” Frank ran his hand across his head, staring at his father who’s only contact with him was his eyes. “It seems to me that he’s doing it on purpose. Like he wants everything to go wrong so he can pick it back up and be the big hero. But he’s taking a chance on the safety of this community. Most importantly, my family.” Frank stood up. “I’ll tell you, Dad. I’ll kill him if something happens, something that could have been avoided if he would have acted the leader.”

*It will Frank. Something is going to happen.*

“Sorry if I sound so bad.” He looked down at his watch. “I have to go. I’ll stop back. I have to go see Reverend Bob with Ellen today. Seems . . .” Frank’s hand touched his father’s. “Seems it’s all going to be over soon. I’ll stop back.” He leaned down and kissed his father. “And um, I’m sorry I came in here rambling off about George. It’s just that, who else is going to listen to me. Everyone likes him.”

*Not everyone Frank. Not everyone.* Joe’s eyes shifted as his son, sad and angry, left the room.

^^^

Like a little girl shrieking at the sight of a bug, Ellen laughed and squealed as she struggled with the rabbits. “Dean, this isn’t going to work. Every time I open the cage to put one in, another jumps out.”

“Here let me help you.” Laughing, he walked up behind Ellen. “You’re lifting the lid too much.” He placed his one hand over hers that clutched the rabbit, then the other to her hand that held the lid to the cage. “First of all, you aren’t gripping the rabbit firm enough.” He squeezed his hand over hers. “Second, just lift the cage a little.” His hand helped her lift the lid.

“Dean . . .” She felt him move closer behind her. “What are . . .”

“Then you let it slip right in.”

Ellen giggled, she felt his hand go around her waist. He moved her hair from her neck and kissed her. She tilted her head from him and away from the tickling feeling. “Dean, stop that.”

“Yes Dean . . . stop that.” Frank spoke into the room, monotone.

Dean rolled his eyes and moved back from Ellen. “Don’t you believe in knocking, Frank?”

“Don’t you believe in keeping your hands to yourself?” He stepped forth in the room. His face very serious, yet giving the appearance of trying

## Druga-Marchetti/Circle of Justice

to remain calm. "I would think you had enough of touching my wife last night."

"As a matter of fact, Frank, I didn't. Seems someone barged into my room."

"Aw, too bad."

"Why are you here?" Dean asked, a hint of annoyance in his question.

"I'm here to get Ellen. We have an appointment with Reverend Bob. Or didn't she tell you. Keeping things from you already, Dean?"

"Frank." Dean said his name with annoyance. "Go."

"El?" Frank looked at her. "Walk with me."

"I don't think so, Frank. I'll see you there." Ellen returned to her rabbits.

## Druga-Marchetti/Circle of Justice

Frank just stood there, waiting as if she joked with him. When he saw she didn't, he flung out his hand, turned and left the lab.

"Gone." Dean whispered.

Ellen let out breath. "Thank, God. I really didn't want to walk with him there. It's hard enough."

"Are you sure you guys will adhere to Rev. Bob's rules. He said he won't discuss this annulment thing if you aren't calm and rational."

"Dean." Ellen spoke, trying to be convincing. "I have every intention of being calm and rational."

"You do. But . . . what about Frank?"

^^^

The large blue vase crashed loudly after it silenced, by Frank's hand, across Rev. Bob's livingroom.

Standing up, Rev. Bob looked to the water smear on the wall then to Frank. "And do you want to tell me what my vase did to you?"

"Not the vase. You!" Frank pointed and swung his arm. "And her. Both of you. This isn't a fuckin tea party. What she did was wrong and it's being mowed over. Why aren't we discussing this?"

"Frank." Ellen stood up. "We aren't here to save this marriage. We aren't here to discuss how to get through this. We're here to end this. You tried. I tried. It's not worth it. We will never get passed what I did or you did."

"I did?" Frank stepped to her. "You're the one who cheated."

"And you're the one who destroyed this marriage! You keep saying about what I did." Ellen spoke up. "What about what you did. Telling your wife she isn't a fit mother, you hate her, you feel contempt for her, and that she is nothing to you. Or how about calling your wife a whore? Better yet, sleeping with her, then telling her to leave." She tossed her hands through her hair. "But the worst thing you did to me, the worst, was when you told me I deserved to be raped."

"No!" Frank cried out. "No. I thought we were fighting about something else. I would never imply that El, never. You know me, I wouldn't do that."

"I thought I knew you. And now it's worse because you let me walk away believing that. You could have said something. But you let me go. You let me go because you thought as long as you didn't mean it, it wasn't wrong. It was." Ellen faced Reverend Bob, who sat in his chair, only this time he looked shocked. "Reverend please listen to me. I have done so many things wrong in this life. I'm going to have to answer for them when I leave this earth. Please, please don't make me live my hell now. End this for me. For

him. Just . . .” She walked past Frank to the door. “Just end this.” With a quick exit, she left.

Reverend Bob slowly stood from his chair as Frank slammed his fist against the closed door. “Frank. I’ll um, I’ll sign the papers. I’ll need you and Ellen to come over and sign . . .”

“No!” Frank charged to him. “Don’t sign them. If you sign them, that’s saying it’s over. I’m not ready for it to be over.”

“Have you told her this?”

Frank closed his mouth tight and dropped his head swaying it. “I tried. But every time I open my mouth to tell her she interrupts me. She doesn’t want to hear it.” Frank walked slowly to the door. “Don’t sign them yet. Not yet.” Taking a deep breath of sadness, Frank walked from Reverend Bob’s home.

^^^

Ellen maneuvered the comb through Joe’s hair. “There. All done.” She set down the comb and brushed her hand down his white button shirt. She made Joe look like Joe to her, shirt, hair done, cigarettes in pocket. “You look very handsome, Joe. I always wondered why you continued to wear these white shirts. But you look strong in them.” She straightened the collar. “Getting back to Frank.”

*No, not back to Frank.*

“Frank loved to write letters. Him and I, both. Robbie too. I wrote a lot to Robbie.” Ellen picked the comb back up and fixed the sides of Joe’s hair. “And knowing how I ramble, imagine how long my letters were. Would you like some coffee now?” She replaced the comb with the cup. “I think it should be cool.” She stuck the straw in the coffee letting a little go into the bottom, she held in there by placing her finger to the end. “Here.” She separated his lips, tilted his head back slightly and gave him the coffee. “Is it good?” She watched his neck muscles swallow.

*UH! Christ Ellen, how much sugar did you put into it?*

“Is there enough sugar?” She reached to the cloth and grabbed another small piece of cane. “There, that should be enough.” She stirred it with the straw and brought it to Joe’s mouth.

*No, no.* Joe nearly gagged when she dumped more in his mouth.

“I bet you needed that. Hey . . .” Ellen snapped her finger. “I know what you would like.” She ran to the door, peeked into the hall and ran back. “Would you like a cigarette?”

*What is she going to do? Ellen, go to work.*

Ellen reached into his pocket grabbed a cigarette and his lighter. She placed it in her mouth, lighting it. She started to cough. “Joe.” She hacked



again. "Make a filter or something." She looked to the door, then placed the cigarette in Joe's mouth.

Joe breathed it in, and tried, really tried to blow the smoke out.

"Shit." Ellen took the cigarette from his mouth and waved her hand in front of him to clear the cloud of smoke that lingered thick around him. "Shit."

"Ellen." Dean stood in the doorway. "What are you doing?"

"Um . . ." Ellen placed the cigarette in her mouth. "Smoking." She held in her cough. "God, it's been forever since I had one." She exhaled loudly.

"Put it out, and you shouldn't be smoking in here with Joe."

"O.K." Ellen shrugged to Joe and put it out.

"And El. You really shouldn't start smoking again, O.K.?"

"O.K." She smiled then waved.

Joe saw Dean leave, *Take her with you. Take her with you. Shit.*

"Joe." Ellen spoke softly and knelt before him. "You know what's going to be really sad about all this break up stuff with me and Frank. You won't be my Dad officially." So sad, she rested her head on Joe's hand. Her fingers touched his. "That makes me sad. I wish you were better Joe. I wish you were." She kissed his hand.

A tingle. A tingle in his right hand. *No, I didn't feel that.* Joe's eyes looked down, he watched Ellen rub her cheek on his hand. *I did, Ellen, Ellen, I felt you!*

Suddenly Ellen's head sprang up. Her eyes widened to Joe. "Did you just move your hand?" She grasped it. "Joe, try. Try to squeeze my hand." She not only felt his fingers wrap around hers, but she felt them grip her tightly. With a loud gasp, Ellen smiled. "Oh, my God."

*I feel you. I feel my daughter.* Joe grabbed her hand tighter. He didn't want to let go. He had control, control over his right hand.

"Joe." Ellen stood up and kissed him. "I'll be back. I have to tell Frank."

*Don't leave. Don't leave. Let me hold your hand. I can hold your hand.*

"I'll be right back." She lifted his fingers from hers. "I promise you I'll be right back." She ran excitedly to the door, stopped and ran back, placing her hands on his face. "I love you Joe, thank you for this." Out of the room she flew. She never stopped, high speed she ran. Crashing through the double doors, she nearly knocked over George.

"Whoa, young lady, what's the rush?" He placed his hands on her shoulders.

"I have to get, Frank." Ellen flew away from him. "Joe moved his hand." She jumped the four steps, pausing in the street, looking up and down. She saw Frank, coming out of the library. "Frank!" She chased him.

“Frank!”

“El.” He turned and saw her running. “What’s wrong?” His heart beat faster as he met her halfway. “What’s wrong?”

Smiling brightly at him, she grabbed his hand. “Come on.” Leading him, holding his hand she ran to the clinic.

“El, is it my father?” He stopped at the doors.

“You have to see this.” Still gripping tightly she raced with Frank to Joe’s room.

“You did his hair.” Frank stopped when they walked in. “He looks good.”

“Not that. Get down.” She reached up to his shoulder leading him down to a kneel at his father’s right hand side. She stepped back and knelt next to him. Picking up Joe’s hand, she smiled at Frank as she laid his father’s hand on his. “Do it, Joe. Do it.”

It came out of Frank with such excitement, an enthusiastic exhale followed by something that he hadn’t done in weeks. He smiled. A open mouth smile lit up his face when he felt his father take hold of him. “El.” He was nearly breathless. “He grabbed my hand.”

Ellen, her face close to Frank’s, nodded with a huge smile that matched his.

“He moved his hand.” Frank in awe spoke. “He moved.” Reaching his other hand to behind Ellen’s neck, he clenched her with excitement, pulling her close, leaned and kissed her quickly. “He’s coming back to us.”

“Yes he is. And it’s good, Frank. Very good.”

*Enough of the mushy shit. Someone get me a pencil.* Joe mind bitched.

Dean, seeing from the hall, stepped in. “What’s going on?”

Frank stood up. “My father moved. Look.” Frank lifted the hand that Joe still gripped.

Dean smiled. “I see that. Can I?” He stepped forward. “It’s his right hand.” He spoke softly taking Joe’s hand from Frank.

Frank gave Dean room. “Right hand, left hand. Doesn’t matter, he moved it.”

Dean pulled from his pocket a lance. Raising it, he turned Joe’s hand over. “I want to see if you feel this, Joe.” He pricked down lightly, Joe’s fingers flinched. “You felt that. You felt that.” Stunned Dean began to examine his hand. “So why is *this* hand coming back?” He looked up to Joe.

Joe’s eyes met Dean’s. *You know. You know something is up. Son of a bitch you know.*

Frank moved over to Ellen, leaning down to her. “What’s up with the right hand thing.”

Ellen moved back with him. “If any movement was going to come back after a stroke, it would most likely be the left side of his body. Not the

right.”

“Maybe he didn’t have a stroke.” Frank asked.

“That’s what I’ve been arguing with Andrea about.” Dean stood up, staring into Joe’s eyes. He rubbed his chin and pulled out a pencil from his pocket. “El, get me a piece of paper. I want to try something.”

If Joe’s shoulders could have dropped in relief they would have. *Thank you, Dean. Thank you. I can tell you how to help me.*

Before Ellen could leave for the paper, Frank grabbed hold of her. “Thanks, El.” He smiled at her. “You did something.”

“I didn’t do anything Frank. All I did was give him a cigarette.” She ran to the door.

“You had my father smoking?” Frank watched as Ellen smiled, but stopped in the door way when a frantic looking Melissa showed up.

With tears in her eyes, Melissa ran to Dean. “Marcus is gone. I feel like a terrible. I went to get him a snack, I came back, he was gone. Took off. He started crawling.” Melissa spoke sacred. “You know how fast he moves.”

“Shit.” Dean ran his fingers through his hair. “Joe, we’ll be right back. El, help me.”

Ellen turned to Frank. “Can you help?”

“I’ll get some men. Melissa which way did he . . . uh run?”

“Sped.” Melissa answered. “I’m scared Frank., he went out to the fields. They have the tractors out there what if they don’t see him.”

“All right.” Frank took a second to think. “Melissa head back home, start looking in the living section. Dean, you and Ellen search center town. I’ll have some men head to the field and I’ll case toward the front gate.”

With nods, all three of them left the room.

“Dad.” Frank laid his hand on Joe’s. “I’ll be back.” Placing his headset microphone to his mouth, Frank barked out instructions as he left his father’s room.

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Pulling a reluctant Dean, Ellen brought him into the clinic. “I’m telling you I saw him come in here.”

“El come on, he’s like six weeks old. What did he do, open the double doors.”

“Yes.” Ellen waited for him in the open door.

“This is silly. Really silly.” Dean walked past her. “No way he’s in here. We’re wasting valuable time looking . . .” Dean halted the moment he stepped by his lab. “Shit.” He walked inside, grabbing the radio immediately. “Frank, we have him. At the clinic.” Dean set the radio down.

“Oh, no.” Ellen looked about the scene. “Marcus?” She crept up to

him, speaking in a high pitch. "What have you been up to?"

"I think it's pretty obvious, El." Dean ran to the sink and turned on the water. "Hurry and bring him over."

Ellen lifted the baby holding him at arms length from her. "Look at the mess you made in Dr. Dean's lab." She moved to the sink. "Dean this baby is heavy."

"Is it any wonder. With his appetite." Dean faced the scene in the room. The long counter, the open rabbit cage, the blood and rabbit parts sprawled upon it. "Let's hurry and clean him up before Melissa sees him. I really hope Jason will give us more of his quantum rabbits."

"Oh this fur is going to be impossible to get out of his mouth." Ellen grabbed a towel dipping it in water. "Dean, put your fingers in his mouth and get it out."

"Are you nuts! I'm not sticking my fingers in his mouth."

"Fine I will." Ellen pulled down the square chin of the child. "Can I see?" She opened her mouth for Marcus and stuck her finger inside. "OW!" She screamed loudly.

"El, are you all right?" Dean panicked.

"Just kidding." She tossed a fur ball at him. "Good thing these weren't the rabid rabbits, huh?"

"Funny." Dean shook his head.

Frank's heavy walking was his entrance announcement into the lab. "You guys have him? Melissa is on . . . Holy Shit! What the hell are you guys working on now?" Frank noticed the disrupted counter.

Ellen finished cleaning the baby. "Let's just say Marcus has been busy." She noticed Dean glare at her.

Frank held his hands up. "I don't wanna know." He backed up. "I'm going to see my father." As he stepped to the hall he stepped right back in, snapping. "Melissa's coming."

Quickly grabbing Marcus, Ellen ran to the door. "Thanks." She waited for Dean, who came out and shut the door. "Frank, we'll be right down."

Melissa smiled as she saw Dean and Ellen standing in the hall with her baby. "Thank you, thank you. You found him." Her arms reached out.

Ellen handed him to her. "He's been very busy."

Melissa bounced her son. "Have you been bad? Dean is he all right?"

"Um . . ." Dean ran his hand across the top of his head. "Sure. A little hungry though." He grunted when Ellen smacked him in the gut. "He's fine."

"Thank you again." Melissa lifted the baby's hand to give a wave. "Say goodbye." She smiled again and walked down the hall very happily with her child.

## Druga-Marchetti/Circle of Justice

Ellen let out a breath. "That was close. Good thing mothers never see the bad in their child."

"Nothing's bad about Marcus El. He's just . . . just . . . he's . . ."

"Very carnivorous?"

"Excellent word." Dean nodded. "Hey. Go down to Joe's I'll meet you there, I want to grab that paper. I want to see Joe's hand control."

"Why are you making Joe write? In all my years of nursing, never have I seen a doctor give a piece of paper and a pencil to a stroke victim the first time they move."

"El." Dean pointed.

"I'm going. But don't be long." Ellen placed her hands behind her back and walked to Joe's room. The moment she stepped inside, the smile fell from her face. "Frank? Oh God, what happened?"

Frank was lifting his father in bed. "I came in here and he was slumping in the chair."

"Oh no." She moved to Joe. "His eyes are still open." She grabbed his hand. "Joe. Joe, come on. Joe, squeeze me hand Joe." She placed her face close to his. "Joe, please squeeze my hand."

"El." Frank grabbed her hand and took it from his father. "I tried that. I did."

What was going on? Dean wondered as he stepped into the room. "El? Frank?"

With growing sad eyes, Ellen faced Dean. "He's relapsed."

"No way." Dean moved to the bed. "He couldn't have." He looked down at Joe. "Frank what happened?"

"I came in here and found him." Frank said.

Dean, shaking his head, pulled out his penlight, shining it in Joe's eyes. "Pupillary response is good." He clicked it off placing it back in his pocket. "Can I have a minute to examine him?"

Frank nodded and stepped back, as he did he grabbed Ellen's hand pulling her with him, so naturally to the hall. Not speaking, he looked down at his hand that held Ellen's. He was holding her hand, she wasn't holding his.

"I'd better . . ." She stepped back. "I'd better see if Dean needs me in there." She pointed back with her thumb, pulling from his hold.

"But I need you out here." He pulled on her arm, stepping closer to her, slowly, just wanting to hold her.

Ellen saw him drawing closer to her. She felt his hand slip up her back and to her head. Before he stepped any closer, Ellen pulled away. "I'm sorry, Frank."

Painfully he closed his eyes. "El, in our entire lives, you have never once walked away when I needed you. Don't . . . don't let this be the first

time.” He opened his eyes, she was still there. He could see the look of debate on her face. “I know things are really, really bad between us. But I need you right now. Could you at least just stand here with me?”

Ellen stopped walking backwards, she stepped closer to him and leaned against the wall outside of Joe’s room.

“Thanks.” Frank leaned against the wall next to her. It was good enough. It was a start. Without anymore needing to be said. Frank rested his head back, and he and Ellen waited.

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His examination of Joe brought nothing but frustration. It was so unexplained. So wrong. It confused Dean why his mind kept going to George. But how could George cause Joe to have a stroke or at least make it look like that. Dean was a doctor, and the doctor in him, the scientist in him, told him ‘no’. It was medical and Dean’s reason for thinking such was his mistrust of George and his inability to find the missing piece to what Joe’s true medical condition was.

He sat in a chair next to Joe. He held the hand that not one hour earlier was gripping so tightly to Frank. Dean stared at Joe’s face, and at Joe’s eyes that looked straight ahead, looking far off. “This isn’t right, Joe. This just isn’t right.” He spoke out loud. “Something is not right.” Dean watched Joe’s eyes move from his straight ahead stare. They shifted to Dean, making deep contact on Dean’s final word and his heart skipped a beat. “What is it? What is it that you’re trying to tell me. What am I missing?”

It was a start, a small one, but a start. Dean knew at that instant, Joe’s response was not one of someone who had a stroke. But of someone who was telling him, ‘yes, you missed something. Yes, if you try harder you can find it’. And Dean would try harder. He had to figure out what was happening. And Dean knew, if it was the last thing he ever did, he would get Joe back. He would get the man so strong, out of the world he looked so trapped inside.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It could have been just about anything that would set Frank off, causing him to yell that loud ear cringing 'hey!'. But at that particular moment it was the song that played on the jukebox in the social hall. Frank yelled, and whoever made that selection would quickly get off their chair and change it. Frank would be satisfied, maybe only a little while, until someone else made the same fatal mistake. Sipping his moonshine slowly--he didn't want to get drunk--he poured Henry another.

"Frank, no." Henry held up his hand.

"Henry, drink with me."

"But you aren't drinking, you're sipping. I'm the one drinking." Henry brought his drink to his lips.

"What do you suppose they're doing Henry?" Frank rolled his glass in his hands.

"Right now they are frantically searching for a song that won't piss you off."

"Not them." Frank waved his hand. "Ellen and Dean. What do you suppose they're doing right now. Right now at . . ." Frank looked at his watch. "Nine-forty-seven p.m.?"

"I couldn't tell you, Frank. But if you wait until nine-forty-eight, I may have a better idea."

"I'm not joking."

"What do you want me to tell you Frank?" Henry stated rather annoyed. "I can't tell you what I don't know, and I won't tell you what you want to hear."

Frank breathed out deeply. "Drink up." He watched Henry finish his drink and he poured him another. "Probably being one big happy family, and now they have my baby over there. My kid."

"Stop that." Henry took the drink, not even paying attention that Frank kept adding the more he sipped. "You'll drive yourself crazy."

"Go over there, Henry."

"Why?"

"Just go over and visit. Hang out until one of them goes to sleep. Please?"

"No, I won't go over there and be your spy."

"He stole my wife."

"He didn't steal your wife." Henry began to get pissed. "You were the one that made it perfectly clear to everyone that it was over. And then you dogged her. Face it." He looked down to his drink. He paused before taking a sip swearing the full glass was nearly empty last time he checked.

Shrugging he sipped it.

"I want her back, Henry, I want her back bad. I love her." Frank replenished his glass.

"Have you told her?" Henry asked.

"No. Not yet. I am, tomorrow. I'm telling her whether she wants to hear it or not. And her and I will work this out damn it."

"O.K." Henry leaned back. "Has it occurred to you that maybe she doesn't want to?"

"Fuck that, she will." Frank grabbed the bottle. "She better. If she's says no. Tough. She's coming home."

"See you're doing this all wrong." Henry rubbed his eyes, they were starting to feel heavy. "You can't just barge in, say El, I want you back and then take her."

"Yes I can, she's my wife."

"You keep saying she's your wife. Well she can't be all that much your wife if she's living with another man. She's moving on Frank. And she's well on her way to doing it . . . with Dean."

"I know this." Frank's expression showed how painfully he knew it. "I'm dealing with that. But I don't want her there anymore, what do I do?"

"Work to get back with her. Work Frank."

"You're a good friend. You'd be a better friend if you went over there and paid them a visit." Frank filled Henry's glass.

"No. I'm not doing that. Don't mention it again."

"I won't." Frank wallowed. "She'd never buy you stopping by out of the blue drunk." Just as he sank into his drink, his eyes shifted and Frank lifted his head with a big smile. "Never buy *you*, stopping by all drunk."

^^^

"El." Dean ran his hand on her legs that extended across his lap as she lay on the couch. Legs he used as a desk. Placing his notepad down on them, writing, lifting it back up. "Would you classify yellow fever as a modern day threat." He lowered his glasses as he asked her.

"No." She paid little attention to him as she sat reading a magazine, its edges yellowing and tattered.

"What are you reading?" Dean smiled.

"Soap Opera magazine." She giggled and turned the page. "I have a bunch in my memorabilia box. You've seen them."

"Yeah I did." He laid the tablet on her shins. "Why wouldn't you?"

"Why wouldn't I what?" She flipped a page. "Cute." She smiled. "Dean?" She turned the magazine to face him. "Do you think men will ever look like this again. So . . . so beautiful."



“Ellen.” He lifted the magazine from her hand. “I’m trying to talk to you.”

“Sorry.” Ellen at up moving closer, keeping her legs over his. “I’m all yours.”

Dean grinned. “Here.” He shared his notes. “I’m trying to come up with a list of things that could possibly be in those vials. Things that I can look for specifically.”

“It wouldn’t be yellow fever. Yellow fever is not a North American threat, or at least wasn’t. What if there’s something in those vials you haven’t seen or can’t identify. Like our plague.”

“I’ve thought of that . . . And.” Dean took off his glasses setting them down. “That’s where you come in. You have to work harder on those passwords.”

“I’m working like a damn dog.”

“And I appreciate it.” He brought Ellen closer. “I do.” He rested his arm behind her head. “Even though you stare at a dead man’s picture wishing the men of Beginnings looked like that.”

“Dean, if it makes you feel any better, I’ll stare at your picture too when you die.”

“Thank’s, El.” He brought his hand to her face speaking sarcastically. “That makes me feel a lot better.” Slowly her brought his lips to hers, touching them only briefly before a knocking happened at the door. A steady knocking. “Frank?”

“Too soft.” Ellen swung her legs off of Dean’s and jumped from the couch. She opened the door. At first peering out, Ellen thought perhaps someone brought back the old world annoying habit of knocking at someone’s door and running. But then she smelled the alcohol blast and she looked down.

Josephine hiccuped and swayed in the door. “Hey. I . . .” Another hiccup. “We got a problem with your tunnel boy.”

“Who?” Ellen asked confused.

“Henry Goddamn it! Now come on.”

After a wave of her hand to bat away the bad alcohol, Ellen snickered, shrugged and followed old lady Josephine.

^^^^

When Ellen heard the singing, she laughed, but of course that was coupled with the fact that she got a kick out of watching Josephine run off. Smiling as she reached the end of her row of house, ready to turn toward town, the smile dropped. Frank was escorting Henry toward his home. Ellen turned to leave.

“El, wait.” Frank called out.

“El! Wait.” Henry mocked.

Ellen stopped, she closed her eyes and shook her head when she heard the whispering between the two men. Turning around, she jumped back, they were right before her. “What.”

Sloppily and sluggish, Henry reached forward. “El. God.” his head swayed. “God . . . God.”

Frank grunted. “He’s pathetic. Speaking this religious shit all night. Shut up, Henry.” Frank escorted Henry toward the house. “Can you help me with him, El?”

“El.” Henry looked at her. “He won’t let me go . . .”

“To the social hall.” Frank interrupted. “No more. I told you.”

Henry gasped loudly as Frank walked him up the steps to his house. “You lie!” Henry spun around losing his balance. “He lies, El. I wanted to go home. But he had to keep me out, telling me love stories and making me feel lonelier. Do you know how lonely I feel.”

Ellen raised an eyebrow. “I can only imagine.”

“No. You can’t.” Henry shook his head. “Frank can. Cause he’s lonely now.” He didn’t see the cringe on Frank’s face. “And . . . and . . . I think I’m gonna pass out.” Without another word Henry just fell forward into Frank.

Frank hoisted him up. “Can you help me now, El?”

Lifting her arms in a shrug, Ellen walked around Frank, and opened the door, When Frank and Henry passed through, she let go of the door and left. She wasn’t five steps away when she heard the loud ‘thump’ followed by a groan. Ellen turned around, Frank was running to her. “You didn’t just drop him in there, did you?”

“Um . . .” Frank looked back. “No. I laid him on the couch.”

“Right.” Ellen shook her head and started to walk.

“Hey, El.” Frank reached out, grabbed her hand and stopped her. “Uh, I was gonna stop and see my Dad, you wanna go?”

“I was there all night. Probably while you were . . .” She tip toed up and sniffed. “Drinking. I’m going home.”

“Wait.” Frank darted the three houses and halted her right as she stepped to Dean’s house. “I really . . . do you wanna take a walk, maybe for a little. And just . . . just talk with me.”

“No. No I don’t, Frank. Night.” She opened the door and walked in the house.

^^^

Jason Godrichson had a hard time rationalizing the reasoning behind

Beginnings' inner office mail system. He was given a slot at the clinic, and the only thing of importance that ever made it in there was the weekly memo from Joe. Since Joe had fallen ill, those memos stopped. Jason rarely read what was placed in his slot, especially the junk mail, as he called it. Why Jenny Matoose insisted on giving him a reminder for the weekly women's meeting, was beyond him. Jason did admit he chuckled at the frequent, 'attractive woman available for comfort time' advertisements he got from Josephine.

Enjoying one of his five rationed apples, Jason's fingers tapped on the keyboard of his computer in his quantum lab as he sifted through the stuff from his mail slot. Had there not been a bloody thumb print on the note, Jason wouldn't have read it. A note from Dean needing Jason to meet him for his vital expert opinion. Figuring it was Dean's way of buttering up Jason for more rabbits, Jason placed the note aside. He'd see Dean in the morning.

Smiling and ready to top of his night by going throwing himself full force into his 'true' work, Jason hit the keyboard with a final dramatic strike. When he did, he heard the sizzle then coughed at the minuscule puff of smoke that blew at him. Shaking his head with a chuckle, Jason put down his apple, stood up and grabbed the fire extinguisher and broom. He wasn't letting the failure of the moment bring him down. He'd just clean up and try again.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“So you understand, Jason?” Dean asked, near a whisper in the clinic lab.

“I believe so. But is it right? Joe is Andrea’s patient.” Jason said.

“I think it’s more wrong to ignore it. After all . . .” Dean looked up when Andrea waltzed in. “The quantum experiment is so vital to the community.”

Jason caught on to the sudden change of subject. “And interesting. I think a lecture is just what we . . .” He saw Andrea leave. He dropped his voice to a whisper again. “Do you know what you’re doing?”

“I was hoping *you* would.” Dean said. “I mentioned in my note about expert opinion.”

“Perhaps the blood smudge blocked that out.” Jason said sarcastically. “I never did the procedure. I would feel better . . .” Through the corner of his eye he saw Melissa walk in she smiled to them. Jason smiled back. “If . . . if my experiment was more welcomed.”

“Oh, please.” Dean’s acting left a lot to be desired. “Everyone is thrilled with your work.” When Melissa jotted out, Dean lowered his voice. “We could read up on it.”

“We’d need an assistant.” Jason suggested.

“I could talk to Henry. He’d keep it secret.”

“I still would feel better if we had permission. Even if Frank would say it’s O.K. I’d be able to justify . . .” Another intruder, another quick change of topic. Jason cleared his throat. “Justify speaking so long on the subject of space time continuum.”

“Gone.” Dean stated when Scott left. “All right, this is grand central station right now. I’ll get Frank’s permission. Will you do the procedure on Joe with me?”

“Get the permission. Get Henry. I’ll get the books.”

“Deal.” With relief, Dean shook his hand and smiled

^^^

In the back of the chapel, while the slight organ music played, and Reverend Bob spoke, Henry and Frank sat. The last pew, the one very few people in Beginnings sat in.

“Henry, sit up.” Frank leaned over to him, whispering.

“My head hurts too bad.” He leaned forward holding his palms to his temples. “Why am I in church with you?”

“I don’t know. I wanted you to come.”

## Druga-Marchetti/Circle of Justice

“Why are *you* in church, Frank?”

A ‘shh’ came from the pew in front of them.

Frank waved his hand at them. “Reverend Bob said he wouldn’t talk to me unless I came.”

“You going to talk to him about Ellen?”

“Well I’m not talking to him about becoming a priest. I want you to help me talk to him.”

Another ‘shh’, another Frank wave.

“Frank, people are gonna start talking. First you and I are out drinking, then we’re in church. I know they’re gonna start looking at us like those two guys in fabrics.”

“Christ, Henry. Don’t talk that shit in church.” Frank widened his eyes to the person in front of him that yelled ‘shh’. “Besides, you told me you would help me get my wife back.”

“Oh, I did not.” Henry snapped. “I never agreed to that. I don’t think.”

With a snarl, Marv turned to Frank and Henry. “Will you two shut up? We’re in church.”

Frank flung his hand at Marv. “Like I care. Mind your own goddamn business and turn around. We’re talking here. And Henry, you did agree to hep. You were just too drunk to remember. It was right after you were hitting on Josephine.”

“I was not.”

“I’ll tell people you were.” In a cross between embarrassed and humbled, Frank tapped his fingers on his knee. “Come on, Henry, please. You can help me understand what he tells me to do.”

“Fine. I’ll go with you to talk to Rev. Bob.” Henry plopped his head further in his hands. He cringed in pain. “Ow. Gees, Frank, what did you do to me last night?” He raised his eyes when he noticed the people seated before them turned around. “See?” Henry pointed. “See what I mean?”

^^^

Though he left a message that he needed to speak to Frank, he was the last person Dean expected to see when he opened up his front door that afternoon. “Frank.”

Frank held up the crinkled note. “John said you were looking for me.”

“Yeah, but I said I’d find you when I brought Brian back.”

“I’m here now.” Frank said.

“Brian’s not.”

“Well, I’m here now. May I come in?”

## Druga-Marchetti/Circle of Justice

Dean stepped back opening the door wider, and motioning his hand. He saw Frank looking around. "Ellen's not here."

Frank nodded sadly as he took in the view of the livingroom, complete with pictures that used to be in his home. "I feel like I stepped back in time. The place looks like it did when she lived here before."

"Yeah, it does." Dean shut the door. "Things kind of went that way."

"Are they same, Dean?"

"I'm not discussing Ellen with you." Dean said sharply.

"Why are you being such a dick?" Frank asked.

"Look who I'm dealing with."

"Fine." Frank snapped. "We won't discuss Ellen. But know I have every intention of getting her back."

"That's not the surprise of the century Frank. Now do you want to know what I wanted or are you wanting to stand in *my* livingroom arguing with me."

"Tell me."

Dean took a second to calm down. "I need to talk to you about your father."

"Is it about the relapse of his stroke?"

"In a way. I'm really doubting that it's a stroke. Something is bothering me about it. It just isn't typical. So, I want to do a procedure on your father, extract spinal fluid. It can tell us a lot. The problem is, Andrea is his doctor. Andrea won't let me do it because she said he had a stroke."

"So you want my permission to do this behind Andrea's back?"

"Bluntly . . . yes. And I'm hoping it will tell us what happened, then we'll be able to help him."

"Then do it and let me know." Frank received a nod from Dean and moved to the door. "Is that all?"

"Yep." Dean said. "No." He called out as Frank began to leave. "I need . . . I need your complete secrecy on this. It's vital."

"I won't tell Andrea."

"I mean no one. No one is to know. Secrecy." Dean reiterated.

Frank was silent and then he agreed. But it sent warning signals off to him. The secrecy told him Dean was covering up something more than just doing a simple medical procedure. And for the first time in a long time, as Frank left, he wished he were on better terms with Dean so he could be trusted with the information Dean was hiding.

^^^

George had to make it appear like he cared. That he was doing the

leader thing by seeing how Jason's progress was going. But the truth was, he had ulterior motives. With a simple knock to the metal door, George called out. "Jason?" He opened the door. "I uh . . . brought you that gasoline." He handed out to him the small can. As he did he sniffed. "What's that smell. It smells like a barbeque."

Jason looked up with a slight chuckle. "Let's just say, my victims of bad timing. The energy level is there, but it's not connecting with the time contingency sequence, which in turn when they pass through the door way, they aren't passing through to a different realm . . . so to speak."

George ran his hand over his hair. "You have totally lost me. What the hell are you talking about?"

"The smell, you asked what the smell was. It's the after effects of my Regressionist."

"Regressionist?"

"Time travelers." Jason took the can finally from George and walked over to his rabbit cages. "Can't test my machine properly if I don't have subjects."

"Subjects?"

"Yes." Jason reached in the cage. "Meet my next two travelers. I call them Bill and Ted."

"That's terrible. You're putting those animals through a machine that doesn't work."

"Oh, it works." Jason held the rabbit up. "It just doesn't make them travel time yet."

"Well, what does it do to them."

"Remember when you were a kid George, and you used to go see the magician? And in a puff of smoke the rabbit would disappear?"

"Yes." George just wanted to make his escape.

"Well, I give new meaning to that."

"Where do they go?"

"They disintegrate." Jason spoke so matter of fact. "Not much is left at all. Leaves a little bit of smoke and a burning smell. But, at least the smell isn't unpleasant." Jason sniffed. "Kind of makes you think of fourth of July."

"I'm leaving." George walked to the door. In his mind, this was a man unstable. The only wise thing Joe ever did was stick him and his machine five miles from the community. "Oh Jason. I need to ask you something. In your . . ." George swallowed harshly. "Fine medical opinion. How is Joe?"

"Don't know. I'm not really involved too much in the clinic."

"They haven't consulted you on him at all?"

"No. Why would they?"

"You're a scientist, a doctor."

## Druga-Marchetti/Circle of Justice

“Yes well, so is Dean but, Andrea is quite fussy about her patients. Of course most of Beginnings are her patients.” Jason shrugged holding up the rabbit, peering into it’s pink eyes. “Ready to go see yesterday?”

Widening his eyes, George walked to the door. “Have a good day.”

“I’m hoping.” Jason, holding his fussy short lived friend, moved to his table. He turned back and looked at the door. In a way, a part of him felt bad for lying to George. But he had too. He made a promise to Dean that he wouldn’t tell a soul how much he actually was working with him on Joe.

^^^

It probably would have been easier for Ellen to take the straight route to returning Brian. Easier on her arms, and easier on her fingertips that were beginning to catch the chill of the fall air that seemed so cold when the wind blew. But she took the long one. Avoiding against everything, knocking on that door that would open, exposing her to Frank.

The door to a house she used to call hers, was right there before she knew it. It had been so long since she had walked into what would be called a friendly element with Frank. The prospect of that frightened her beyond belief. And she stood there, so unable to knock.

“El.” The front door opened. “Come in.” Frank opened the door wider for her.

“I just came to drop off Brian.” She handed out the baby to him, Frank did not take him.

“I would like you to come in.” He stepped back.

“I’d rather not Frank. I’d really rather not.”

“Please.”

Awkwardly and with a deep breath, Ellen stepped inside. She looked around the home she had not stepped foot into in so long. Again, she held out Brian.

“Sorry.” Frank took him. “I know he’s getting heavy.” He grabbed his son’s hands and brought them to his lips. “Your hands are cold. Did Mommy have you out too long?”

“Yeah, unfit mothers tend to freeze their kids.” Ellen turned and began to walk out.

“El, stop that. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I have to go.”

“Don’t please. I have to talk to you.”

Holding off from turning the knob, Ellen turned back. “What is it? I have to get back. Dean has to go to the clinic.”

“Then why don’t you go get the twins and bring them over.” Frank suggested.



"Whether you want to believe this or not, I want to spend time with them today."

"Not just drop them off. Why don't you and the twins come over, have dinner . . ."

"No."

"O.K. just a suggestion. Why don't you take your coat off, and we can . . ."

"No." She nervously fiddled with something in her jean jacket pocket.

Frank noticed how much she looked as if she just wanted to run out the door. So tense, so nervous. "Can we talk? I'd really . . ."

"El!" Excited and running, Josh thumped down the steps. "El." He ran up to her embracing her and kissing her.

"Hey, sweetie." Ellen brought her cold hand to his face. He shivered drastically and she laughed at him.

Frank was getting nervous, and Josh wasn't making it easy. "Josh, can you go . . ."

"El." Josh put his hands on her shoulders. "Home? Coming home?"

Frank's eyes lit up. "No, Josh she's not. But . . ." Frank looking shy, lowered his head and raised his eyes. "I'm hoping very much that she will."

Ellen looked at Frank, then Josh. "Josh honey, can you take Brian upstairs for a few minutes. I have to talk to Frank."

"O.K." Josh took Brian and he trotted up the stairs with him.

Ellen, shaking her head, waited until Josh was gone. "Frank, what are you doing?"

Frank ran his hand over his head. "I just . . . all right." He let out a breath. "I want you back."

"You want me back." Ellen stated rather than questioned.

"Yes. So, you know, get your things and come back. I'm O.K. now. I forgive you."

"You forgive me." Ellen spoke slow. "And you want me back."

"Yes."

At first her eyes raised. It was her prelude to her anger. "Fuck you Frank, you can't have me back."

"Excuse me?" Frank seemed a bit shocked. "Didn't you hear what I said? I said . . ."

"I heard you!" Ellen grunted. "You forgave me, and you want me back. No working at it, you just want it to happen. Well it won't happen like that. It can't. No asking what I want. Did it ever occur to you that maybe I don't want to come back? Did it ever occur to you that maybe so much has happened, so much has been said, that it doesn't matter what you or I want. Or that it's so far gone now, that it can't, it can't be worked out." She turned

her back to him and reached for the door.

“Do you still love me?” Frank asked, his voice raspy.

Ellen stopped reaching, she stared at the white door.

“Do you . . .” Frank walked over to her. “. . . still love me?”

Ellen leaned her head forward placing her forehead against the door.  
“I’ll always love you.”

A shiver of relief hit Frank. “Then there’s nothing . . .” He moved closer to her, standing directly behind her. “. . . nothing that you and I can’t work through.” He leaned into her back, placing both his hand flush upon the door above her head. “I love you.” He brought his lips close to her ear. “I want you back. I want my family back.” He spoke softly and with intensity in her ear. “I’ll do whatever it takes to do that. And so should you.” He kept his body, his mouth, so close to her. He brushed his lips close to her face without touching as he spoke to her. “Work with me El. Let’s do this. Let’s make it right again.” He felt as his cheek ran against hers, a wetness. A tear. Frank’s heart dropped, she was crying, and he didn’t know why. A slight trembling began in his gut. “Can’t you see how bad I want you back. Stay and talk to me about this. Please.” How long would he wait for an answer? No matter if it were one second or one hour it would be too long. Her silence was like a poison, it was killing him. Suddenly there was an emptiness as Ellen slipped out from under his arms. Frank’s body fell slowly into the door, and he pounded his hand against it. He had lost. His pleas, his attempts were vain. Ellen left.

^^^

The darkening of the room told Joe that he had done it. Though he still couldn’t perform any of the basic functions given to a human being, he had made it through an entire day without being mentally tormented. He had visitors, his family. But none of them stayed long or said much that drove at his emotional nerves. And George, he failed to stop by at all. Aside from the salty broth that Melissa forced into him, Joe had a good day. Preparing to close his eyes and sleep, he realized his aspirations for a frustration free day were futile.

“Hey, Joe.” Henry, bubbly, walked in the room. He squealed a chair across the linoleum as he brought it to Joe’s bedside. “Thought I’d keep you company and read you a little bedtime story.” Henry smiled. “Frank said you like old stuff so . . .” He spoke in a high pitched tone as if Joe were two. “Look what I got.” He lifted the book into view. “Nancy Drew Mysteries.”

^^^

Ellen heard the ceramic cup hit the night stand and then she smelled

it. "Coffee?" She smiled as she read her notes on the bed..

"Thought you'd like some." Dean said.

"Thanks." As Ellen turned to her cup she saw he was wearing his jean jacket "Where are you going? It's after midnight."

"Clinic. I have something to take care of." Dean pointed backwards then leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. "Night."

"Dean." Ellen called out as he started to leave. "Everything all right?"

"Yeah." He stopped and turned back around. "No." He moved back to the bed. "I have something clinical on my mind and this Frank all of the sudden wanting you back . . . it's bothering me."

"We knew it would happen." Ellen said calmly.

"I know. It's just that he's in full gear and we know the control he gets over you."

"Dean." Ellen spoke softly as he hand laid on the tablet across her lap. "Frank and I . . ."

Dean interrupted. "Are not over yet. Whether you get back as husband and wife, lovers or friends, twenty years is too long to just kick in the ass. It's not over. Not by a long shot." He took a deep breath. "I know I said I would do everything in my power to stop you guys from working things out. That was wrong. Everybody needs that one more chance. Without it there's no resolution."

Ellen nodded slowly. "Like us?"

"Exactly. And even though I hate what he did to you, hate the way he treated you, just know, as a friend who loves you very much, I will stand behind what you decide to do, one hundred percent. I want you to be happy."

Ellen smiled slightly. "I am happy Dean. I am." She patted the bad. "Look how comfortable I'm getting."

"I see, and that scares me."

Curiously she tilted her head. "Why?"

"Because I'm getting comfortable, too." Almost sadly, Dean smiled at her. "Good night, El." He turned and walked fro the bedroom.

^^^^

It was a procedure that Dean was not that versed at. Yet, it was a procedure that he had to do. Like criminals in the night, doctors performing illegal procedures, Dean, and Jason hovered over Joe's prone body in the deafening quiet of the small operating room. Breathing could be heard, whose it was, was hard to distinguish. Tension was high in the surgical procedure. A procedure near completion. Dean raised his eyes over his mask

to Dr. Godrichson whose fingers pressed down on the lower portion of Joe's back.

Jason watched the hesitant movements of Dean's hand which guided the needle. "Looks good Dean, just do it." He spoke assuredly.

Dean took another deep breath. In the back of his mind he wished that Jason was the one performing the procedure. But he knew he had to be the one to take the fall if something went wrong, or Andrea found out. Shifting his eyes one more time before inserting the needle, Dean looked to Henry who stood facing the heart monitor. The monitor that beeped in silence so as not to be an alarming witness to something that could be considered amiss. "Henry, you watch those numbers. Let me know if his heart rate drops."

"Gotcha" Henry said. "Holding at seventy-eight." Henry was grateful that he didn't have to see the needle go in. He heard Dean say to Jason 'I'm in' and in those two words, an overwhelming feeling of fear hit Henry as he watched the digits drop. "Oh no, Dean his heart rate is dropping."

"What is it Henry?" Dean asked in a calm yet panic ridden voice.

"Seventy four. What do we . . ."

"Henry, Shh." Dean closed his eyes briefly and shaking his head. "It's all right." He filled the needle, watching the color as it entered the tube. "Jason, does this look right to you?"

"Not at all." Jason observed. "Possible hemorrhaging?"

"Looks it. This may be our problem after all." In a way Dean was disappointed, if foul play was involved, there was some hope that he could do something about it. "Done." He laid the needle on the tray.

Jason peered again at the substance. "This could explain why we saw that clouding."

"Yeah." Dean removed his gloves stepping back. "I'll check it out tomorrow late morning. Doesn't seem to be a rush now, does it?"

"Was there before?" Jason asked.

Dean moved his focus to Henry who turned at Jason's remark. "No. I uh, guess not."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Frank waited on his return, he listen for it. During the later portion of his early morning rounds he heard the sound of the helicopter engines and he saw over his head as the bird rose up and flew off. Though it irritated him that he was not informed of the flight. He knew John Matoose must have had good reason. Perhaps John saw that the fuel order was signed, and like Frank, mistrusted George's intention and hurried to take out the chopper before George could change his mind.

But it was all irrelevant as Frank trotted toward the hanger. He'd given John time to land and he just wanted to get the report. Where and how many SUTs were gathering. It was not a question of maybe, Frank was certain they were there. Like a bad odor that lingered, Frank could smell the trouble in his gut.

And then Frank saw him, walking so calmly from the hanger, clipboard in hand. "George?" Frank ran up to him. "George, where's John?"

George looked at his watch. "My guess working. Like maybe you should be."

"I am working. Who flew the bird? Johnny?"

"Nope." George walked passed him.

"Who . . . You?" Frank spun around his eyes staring with concern.

"Yes me, Frank. I flew. I flew your little reconnaissance."

"And?" Frank followed.

"Nothing." George kept up his pace.

"No there has to be a mistake. George you had to miss . . . did you really look?"

George stopped, curled his lip and turned around. "What the hell did you think I was doing up there Frank? Sightseeing?" George turned again and began to walk.

"Wait . . ." Frank took off after him. "Something's not right George. George?" Frank wasn't getting any acknowledgment. So he did a typical Frank thing, he yelled. "George, listen to me!"

"No!" George, finger pointing and words as loud and as angry as Frank, faced him. "You listen to me! You wasted my time, community time, flight time and you wasted fuel with this half baked idea of yours. Now get your head out of your ass and start thinking clear. There are no SUTs and those men that you have pulled are needed back full time at their jobs. There's no reason anymore for extra security."

"No." Frank took a step forward. "You are wrong. *You* aren't seeing clearly."

"Back away Frank. I told you. You are over stepping your

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boundaries. I am not your father!”

“No you aren’t.” Frank’s voice rasped at him. “And I’d be insulted if anyone insinuated you were like him. If you pull my men, you are making a big mistake. For this community and you.”

“And you have been warned Frank.” George turned around. “Not one is above ousting. No one.” George stormed away.

Frank could have followed but chose not to. He knew right there and then there was no getting through to George, and there had to be a reason why.

^^^^

A lot of things were running through Dean’s mind as he prepared to really view the spinal fluid he took from Joe. He had the microscope hooked up to the computer and he loaded the first sample. Coffee in hand he waited, looking at the screen, wanting to view it. When it popped up, Dean jumped back. “O.K. too close.” Chuckling at himself for hitting the wrong magnification, Dean’s hand retracted. Perhaps the things on his mind were clouding his focus. He didn’t know. But he did know when he looked at the sample, something just wasn’t right.

^^^^

At the point where his blood would near boil, Frank headed back to his office. Paper work had to be finished, paperwork George ignored, but Joe would want when he got well. All the way there Frank kept telling himself not to get angry. It was not a day for that. He had to see Reverend Bob in a hour and whether the anger was George provoked or not, he would not carry it with him to the first meeting that was meant to help him get back Ellen. “What the hell are you doing in here?!” Frank asked with annoyance when he stepped into his office.

“El-Ellen said you may-may ne-need me.” Oscar sat behind Frank’s desk.

“She what? And get the fuck out of my chair.” Frank walked over to his desk, on top were work orders. Oscar’s work orders. A release from containment and work assignment given, all by Ellen. “No, she didn’t.”

“F-F-file Clerk.” Oscar smiled. “El-Ellen said m-make your life easier.” He nodded.

Frank looked for a date, she didn’t put one in. “She said this, did she?”

“El-Ellen said you l-like me-me.”

“Uh huh.”

Oscar was acting so pleased with Frank. "El-Ellen said you-you'd be pl-pleased."

"Well El-Ellen . . ." Frank stood up, order in his hand. "Is n-n-nuts." He stormed to his door. "And she's d-dicking around at the wrong time."

The loud slam only made Oscar shrug and he re-took his seat at Frank's desk.

Frank took only a few steps from his office, mumbling to himself how Ellen was doing it to him on purpose. A total payback for having Oscar follow them when they were out beyond the wall. "She said I'd pay." Frank spoke out loud. "Well, I'll show her, just because she never knew . . ." Frank stopped and did an immediate zoom of focus back to his office. "She *didn't* know, did she?" A bright smile hit Frank and the bad mood left. He barreled back into his office calling out as he entered. "Oscar!"

Oscar screamed as he jumped up.

"El-Ellen's is right." Frank shut the door. "I got a job for you."

^^^

Jason Godrichson knew as soon as he walked into Dean's lab. He stood back for a few minutes watching his post-apocalyptic world colleague idle in perplexity. Dean slumped off to one side, holding up the bangs of his growing hair. Lifting himself to look in the microscope, then return to slumping again.

Rubbing his chin which was starting to sport what Jason liked to refer to as, the Frank and Johnny facial fashion statement, he moved closer to Dean. "I know that look well."

"You do, do you? What is that look?" Dean turned to him.

"You have stumbled across something that you are finding hard to believe. You keep checking it, second guessing yourself." Jason pointed to the microscope. "Joe's sample?"

"Yep. Wanna look?" He reached his hand over to the computer bringing the microscopic image to the screen. "What do you think?"

"Looks normal, however this is not my field."

"Yes, but." Dean stood up and pulled out a scan. "Take a look." He held it up to the light for Jason. "Joe's CT Scan when he was first brought in. Notice the clouding." His finger ran over it. "Next one, one week post trauma. Clouding is . . ."

"Nearly gone." Jason noted as he looked.

"Third. Taken an hour after relapse. Our clouding again."

"Hence our theory of blood in the cerebral fluid. However . . ." Jason indicated to the screen. "Looks normal."

"At that magnification. Watch." Dean brought it closer, and closer,

until the image changed. "What do you think?"

"What is it? It isn't a virus, is it? Or a new form of infection?"

"Nope. I've seen this type of structure one too many times." Dean's thin finger moved slowly over the object they watched.

"A synthetic?"

"Precisely."

"Is it in his blood stream?" Jason asked.

"I have to obtain some cultures. To be sure."

"Which brings us to a very viable question. What is Mr. Joseph Slagel doing with synthetic microbes infesting his cerebral fluid?"

"I have a guess on that one."

"Let's go look." Jason waited for Dean to lead the way.

They went into the room, Joe's bed was propped up, he sat staring forward with his eyes open.

Dean walked in first, shutting the door after Jason had entered. "Hi Joe." He walked over to the bed. "Sorry we have to disrupt you for a minute."

"Let's lean him forward." Jason suggested.

Dean sat on the bed, holding Joe's forward falling body as Jason checked his head.

"I'm not seeing anything." Jason moved small sections of Joe's hair at the base of his skull. "I just . . . wait. I got them. Two of them. Look."

Dean still holding Joe with the help of Jason, grabbed his glasses from his pocket and looked to where Jason pointed. Two small injection sites. One healed. "This *was* done on purpose."

"Knowing that, you at least know what to do. One, it's a synthetic, we can wait for it to wear off, which it will do eventually. Barring a repeat injection. A guard on the door perhaps?"

Dean shook his head. "Trust me that won't work. I could isolate it."

"You could do that. Try then to figure out how to beat it. Counteract it. That could take weeks, maybe months. Do we have this much time? Obviously whoever has done this, wants Joe down for the count."

"For many reasons." Dean sat back down looking at Joe. "I can help you now Joe, I really can help you now. It's just gonna take time."

"Dean." Jason interrupted. "You have an idea who this is, don't you?"

Dean nodded.

"Then may I give you some advice Doctor. For safety reasons for Joe, you have to not approach this person. And, if you know who it is, you better have enough proof to prove it before you say anything. For Joe and you."

"Why me?" Dean asked, sounding so surprised.



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“As a very objective observer. Someone that hasn’t been around Beginnings very long. If I were to sit back watching this thing unfold . . . objectively. And I were to hear someone did this on purpose. If I didn’t know better, my first guess would be to you.”

“Me?” Dean didn’t notice, Joe’s eyes shifted. “Why would you say that?”

“From my point of view and from any other community member. The only person in this community capable of making something like this, would be you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

“An hour.” Frank griped walking from the living section with Henry. “I take an hour out of my time. Go to his smelly house. Sit there. Pour out my soul. The man tells me he can help me get my wife back. And what do I get? Rev. Bob’s pre-plague world non-best seller, *Twelve Steps to Rebuilding a Heavenly Marriage*.”

Henry chuckled. “No, Frank you got two copies.”

“Which I had to pay for. With my blood. Church for a month, plus eight hours of his field work. Fuck. And you . . .” Frank looked at Henry. “You said nothing.”

“I was too busy laughing.”

“Yeah, probably because since you did whatever secret you did with my wife, you don’t want me to work it out. Do you?”

“Honestly?” Henry asked.

“Don’t answer that.” Frank stopped in his walking. “What the fuck?”

“What’s wrong?”

Frank pointed. There was a commotion at distribution. Twelve angry people stood screaming at what should have been the door. But Frank didn’t see the door, the closer he drew, he saw it was Greg.

“What’s going on!” Frank shouted pulling people back from a very frazzled Greg. “Greg, why you pissing everyone off?”

“I’m not pissing everyone off. They’re bitching to me, not at me. Now give me the keys to distribution.”

“Why do you need the keys?”

“Well Frank, it’s locked.”

Frank was shocked to hear that. He looked at Henry then back to Greg. “No way, it’s not even two o’clock.” He reached out his hand to the knob. “Shit.” He pulled out the long key chain and sought out the correct key. “Why is this locked?”

Cole stepped forward. “I was working Frank, George said he wanted to conserve and he shut us down. I asked him about our three o’clock show ups, he said they’ll have to wait until next week.”

“That’s just bullshit.” Frank unlocked the door. “We have plenty of food.” He opened it wide and turned to the small crowd. “Cole is going back to work in there. Go on, there just was some mistake.” Frank stepped away from the door to let them in. “What’s George up . . .”

“Frank!” George stormed forward screaming his name like an out of control parent. “What the hell are you doing!?”

Frank shook his head at Henry. “No, he is not yelling at me like that.” Stern, fearless and annoyed, Frank faced a reddened George. “You

made a mistake.” He spoke strongly. “You shut down distribution too early.”

“I shut down distribution on time. We have to conserve. Winter is coming.”

“So none of these people who are scheduled for their pick ups can have their food? That’s bullshit.” Frank argued. “They work here, live here and they earned it. No too mention we have plenty. We throw out more than we use. You know that.”

“What I do know is that they are now considered thieves. And since you let them in there, I am holding you responsible, Frank. You have to answer for that. You know the rules on stealing.”

Frank stepped closer to him. “Why do you want me out of this community so bad?”

George moved in also. “You’re a pain in the ass. You run your mouth, think you own the place and make everyone’s life a miserable hell. Including your wife’s. Why don’t you just move on out of this community. Save us all, Frank, the trouble of throwing you out.”

Henry saw the curling of Frank’s lip. His eyes went to Frank’s hand that seemed to be clenching. Henry knew the reason behind George’s behavior, it was threat. “George.” Henry stepped in between them. “I told Frank to open the door. It was my decision to do so. Not his.”

George stepped back. “You went against the rules, Henry.”

“No George, you did.” Henry said. “You have to clear shit like this with council. You didn’t. I wouldn’t have approved it and neither would Andrea. As a matter of fact. I believe you should bring the decision to close distribution early all the time, to us. I think you’ll see we want it to stay open till seven again.” Henry took hold of Frank’s arm pulling him away. “Have a good day, George.”

As Frank walked with Henry, his eyes kept going back to George who stood by distribution looking as if he wanted to lash out.

“Let it go, Frank.” Henry pulled him further away. “It won’t be long before Joe is back. I trust Dean is gonna help him.”

“He better.” Frank spoke soft. “That’s the third time this week he threatened to kick me out. And each time he does it . . .” He let out a heavy breath. “I get more and more afraid he’ll find a way to do it.”

^^^

Somehow it made it easier for Joe. Easier to live like he was, knowing that it wouldn’t be much longer. Dean knew, and so did Jason for that matter. Jason still was excluded from any further knowledge of the situation, Joe figured that was good.

He had sat and listened to Dean and Henry talk about what the were

going to do. They talked in front of Joe, and to Joe, knowing now that he definitely heard and understood every word they said. It also was frightening for him, frightening because he couldn't say or warn them about anything he knew. His daily visits from George brought the mental torture, the suspenseful agony of what laid ahead for those who tried to bring George down. Not too mention what else George--in his demented world--was up to.

The worse thing was, listening to Dean and Henry speak of how they had push Ellen to work on the passwords. The ability to move, to speak, to get out of this lifeless shell Joe was in, was no where near as important as it was to stop Ellen from finding out the truth. For finding out the truth not only meant Joe's freedom, but it meant tragedy to whoever uncovered it.

The most painful experience Joe had ever encountered yet in Beginnings, was happening. He had to sit back and watch, full of knowledge that could be helpful. Dangerous knowledge they just needed to know. But there just wasn't anything he could do about it. For the first time ever, Joe couldn't help.

^^^

Ellen caught her breath when Frank opened the door. "I got your message I rushed over as soon as I could." She stepped inside and shook the chill. "Where's Brian?"

Frank didn't say anything, he just shut the door and locked it.

"Frank?"

"Brian is at Andrea's. I didn't really need you to get him. I wanted to get you here to talk to you?"

"You lied?" Ellen asked.

"Yeah. We have to talk about our marriage."

"You lied to get me here. Yeah, Frank that's a good way to show we are building trust again." Shaking her head Ellen moved to the door.

"No, El. Please. I . . . I . . ." Frank reached to the couch. "I got you a gift." He handed the book to her. "And I paid for it. You don't pay for much in Beginnings. Trust me I paid for that."

Ellen looked at the title. "Frank."

"No, it's good. I have one too." Frank spoke upbeat. "The twelve steps are pretty cool. First step is talking. And it's vital to build the absence makes the heart grows fonder. He says avoid touching and . . ."

"No." Ellen handed the book back. "No."

"El, please." Frank stopped her from leaving. "What do I need to do? I'll do it? Do I have to beg. I'll beg you."

"You don't have to do anything, Frank. I destroyed this marriage too." Ellen said. "I don't want to be married anymore. I don't want to be

your wife.”

“Why?”

“Why?” Ellen repeated in disbelief. “Being your wife means touching you, and I don’t want your body anywhere near mine.”

“Oh, my God.” Frank stepped back speaking softly. “That night. El, I swear to you. I swear I am so sorry. I was angry. Upset about my Dad. I was hurt and . . .”

“You were punishing me!” Ellen blasted. “You knew exactly what you were doing, don’t kid yourself. And don’t try to kid me! I felt you, Frank. I felt your body move on me. Rigid. Cold. I felt your hand grip my hip so hard it left a bruise.”

A slight gasp of air escaped Frank’s parted lips as he closed his eyes and stepped back.

“Do you understand me now?” Ellen asked.

Frank only nodded slowly.

“Good.” Ellen turned to leave again, when she did she noticed she still held the book he gave her. Handing it back, she looked at the title. The word ‘rebuilding’ caught her eye. “Are you . . . are you really reading this?”

“Yeah.” Frank said sad. “I was . . . I was really reading it.”

“Too bad it says Marriage instead of friendship. That would something I would rebuild with you.” She handed the book to him and turned reaching for the door.

“El! Wait! Wait.”

Ellen halted in her grip of the knob. Behind her she heard shuffling. Then Frank’s cursing. “Frank?”

“Shit.” Frank shook a pen as he held the book. “It doesn’t want to write on this slick shit.”

“What the hell are you doing?” Ellen asked.

“You said if it said friendship, instead of marriage. I’ll make it friendship. I’ll go through every fuckin page of this book. All . . .” Frank flipped through to the end. “All two hundred and seventy five pages. I’ll change every marriage word to friendship. I’ll do it. I will.” He sounded desperate. “I don’t need you to be my wife, El. I don’t need you in my bed. I just . . . I just need you in my life.” Frank extended the book back out to her.

Ellen looked at it. She saw the shininess of the cover and the indentation of Frank’s valiant efforts to change the title. Slowly shaking her head, Ellen took the book.

^^^

Alexandra was a picture of Ellen, Dean thought, as he sat on the couch, his daughter before him, and he towel dried her wet hair. “Feeling

better?”

“I wasn’t feeling bad, Daddy.”

Smiling, Dean reached for the shirt on the couch, one of his shirts and he placed it on his daughter, helping her tiny arms through. He grabbed the comb and started combing her hair.

“Daddy? Where’s Mommy?”

“Uncle Frank had to talk to her. I told you that.” Dean set down the comb.

“Does that make you sad when you think about her leaving?”

“Just between you and me . . .” Dean leaned forward kissing his daughter gently on the nose. “It makes me very sad.” He felt the hand slide across his back, then through the corner of his eye, he saw Ellen standing there. Dean leaned closer to Alexandra. “Busted?”

Alexandra giggled and ran off.

“Dean, what’s going on?” Ellen asked.

Dean stood up and walked around the couch. “I bathed the kids.” He grabbed his jacket. “I have to get to the clinic.”

“Am I going somewhere?” Ellen followed him. “You made it sound like I was leaving.”

“Yeah. You’re moving out.” Dean adjusted the collar of his jean jacket.

“Really when?” Ellen asked with a chuckle.

“Whenever . . . whenever you can, El.”

“Dean?” Ellen reached out, grabbed the sleeve to his jacket and pulled him back. “Did I . . . Did I do something? Why are you kicking me out?”

“I’m not kicking you out. I would just like for you to not depend on staying here.”

Almost saddened, Ellen let go of his sleeve and stepped back. “I don’t understand. I thought . . . I thought things were working out.”

“Yep.” Dean nodded. “They are. And trust me, however you thought it was here, my wishful thinking mind quadrupled it. I like you being here. I am getting used to you being with me and the kids. I can’t be like that, not when Frank wants you back so bad. I’ve given this a lot of thought.”

“Not much.” Ellen defended. “I am not getting back with Frank. I told him I’m moving on.”

“Really?” Dean reached down and lifted her hand that had the book. “Thought I recognized this from the library.”

“No. See.” Ellen held it up. “We’re working on rebuilding our friendship.”

With a chuckle Dean shook his head. “Same difference, El. Friendship between the two of you always breeds a relationship. Whether you

are apart a week, a month or ten years, you will get back together. And when you do, that person you moved on to is gonna be at a loss.”

“Dean, if you’re worried about getting hurt, don’t. I won’t let you be alone. I won’t stop being close to you.”

“Who are you kidding?” Dean asked. “El, it’s Frank. And I have been hurt so much by you. I love you. I don’t want to get wrapped up in a fantasy of something that may or may not happen. I’d rather not want it at all.”

“I’m not getting back with him. I’m going to move on. I mean it.” Ellen said strong.

“Good.” Dean nodded “Good.” He opened the door. “But I can’t be the one you move on to. I can’t.” He stepped through the door. “I won’t be long.”

“Dean.” Ellen spoke up. “Contrary to what you want. I’m not leaving. My children are here. You . . . are here. You have to throw me out.”

“I won’t do that.”

“Oh, well.” Ellen exhaled and changed her demeanor, trying to bring the mood up. “You’re stuck with me.” She backed away from the door. “Go to work. Shall I make a late dinner for us?”

“El . . .”

“Dean.” Ellen tilted her head.

Dean hesitated for a moment. “Make dinner. I’ll be two hours.” He started to leave again, but stopped. “Oh, and, El? Tell Frank if he wants to rebuild that friendship with you. Learn how to spell the word.”

Ellen looked down at the book, still in hand, when Dean left. “Oh, my God. I didn’t even notice that.” She chuckled as she noticed he forgot to put the ‘T’ in friendship. Setting down the book, Ellen went to the kitchen.

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Dean heard the double-clomp of the boots enter his lab and he knew exactly who it was. Results laying by him, he turned on the stool to see Frank. “Trying to be quiet.”

“You looked busy.” Frank walked in further.

A snicker escaped Dean. “Since when do you care?”

“Since you’re working on something about my father. Is that them?” Frank questioned pointing to the folder Dean held.

“Yep.” Dean stood up and handed the folder to Frank.

Frank opened it, looked down, nodded and handed back. “Like I understand that shit. What does it say.”

“First through that procedure we did, we think that we found a . . . a virus that has stricken your father.”

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“Did you tell Andrea it isn’t a stroke?”

“No.” Dean shook his head. “I still want this kept under wraps. With it being a virus, I don’t want word to get around. People may panic, think it’s airborne, and who knows where they’ll want to put your father.”

“I get it.” Frank nodded. “Do me a favor. Don’t mention any of this to George.”

“Why would you say that?” Dean was very curious.

“I really think he doesn’t want my Dad to get better. He wants to run this community. Only he’s running it into the ground. He’s screwing around with so much, it’s like he’s doing it on purpose. I’ll tell you Dean, he causes anyone I know any harm with his lame actions, he’s done. And . . . Three times this week he threatened to have me ousted .”

“You’re kidding me? He threatened you?” Dean ran his hand through his hair. It shocked him to hear that. In fact, it made George look even more guilty. “Look, Frank, don’t do anything rash with him. He can’t oust you, but on the outside chance he figures a way to, we’re all screwed. I really don’t think he’s stable, and you’re father will handle him when he gets well.”

“Are you saying you think he’ll make a full recovery?”

“I’m saying I *know* he’ll make a full recovery. Just give me time to beat this thing. Four or five weeks tops.”

“All right. I’ll try to hold off killing George until then.” Frank said as if he were actually holding off on a plan in motion. “In the mean time, I’ll speak to Henry, he’s on council. Maybe he can stop George from cutting all my security.”

“Why is he cutting security?” Dean asked.

“He doesn’t think we’re in any threat. I think that he’s just pissing me off to get me out, and he’s screwing around with the safety of the community to do so.”

“Do you think there’s a threat of something?”

“I think there’s a big threat.” With confidence Frank spoke. “Everyday we had SUTS coming to the gate, now, nothing. I don’t think that the SUTs are gone. I think they’re gathering somewhere waiting to attack us. But . . . I’m ready. My men are ready, despite the fact that George cut my drills.”

There was that name again, George. And right there, Dean wanted to tell Frank everything about George that he and Henry suspected. But he knew if he did, Frank would go ballistic. And if Frank did that, without any viable proof, he would be gone. Disliking Frank or not, Dean knew there wasn’t a soul who could protect Beginnings like Frank. “Just bide time, Frank. Please. I’ll get you father well.”

“Thanks.” Frank backed up. “I’ll let you get back to work.”



“Yeah, Jason is supposed to stop by, and I want to get home. El’s making us . . .” Dean paused and turned his back. He cleared his throat. “I just wanna get . . .”

“Dean.” Frank interrupted. “That’s O.K.. I want you to know I’m not running interference. El, she needs you in her life. And I won’t get between that friendship. If I force her to stay away, it’ll cause more problems when she doesn’t.”

Dean had to laugh. He hid it well. Over his shoulder he looked at Frank. “I’m not buying that.”

“You should. We working to rebuild our friendship.” There was a hesitation before Frank continued. “But you and I know . . .”

“You’ll get back fully.” Dean finished the sentiment. “I know. But they were nice words, Frank.”

“I mean them. Hey.” Frank spoke upbeat. “I read them. Chapter two. Rev. Bob’s book. A whole section on making sure you let your spouse keep their friends.”

Another snicker came from Dean. “Speaking of friendship. When you wrote the word on the cover. You didn’t put an ‘F’ in friendship.”

“I know. Because Dean, there is no ‘F’ in friendship. Really, when you think about it, should there be.”

Dean’s chin dropped and his mouth stayed open “God!” he boasted loud with a dramatic cringing flare of his body. “I can not believe something that good came from you!”

“Yeah. Thought of it myself.” Frank grinned arrogantly. “El will love it.” Still looking at Dean’s gasping mouth, Frank walked out. He paused in the hall to take a gloating moment. He took from the inside of his jacket, Rev. Bob’s book. Biting his bottom lip, Frank nodded. “Oh, yeah. He bought it. Thank you, Chapter Three. *Show the other person you are the better man.* Rev. Bob can’t say *I’m* not following his advice.” After tapping the paperback on his palm, Frank put the book back and walked away.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Dean tapped Joe's chart against his leg as he walked to Joe's room. An odd rhythm it tapped, perhaps to the song he had playing in his head. He slowed down the quick pace when he reached the door way. Joe sitting in a chair, Frank sitting across from him. With a huge grin, and seemingly perky stride, Dean walked in. "Morning, Joe. Hey, Frank." Dean set the chart down. "So, Frank, how's your Dad today?"

"He's sitting in a fuckin' chair staring out, what the hell do you think?"

"O.K., the same." Dean widened his eyes and faced Joe. He placed his hands on the arms of Joe's chair. "Hey Joe guess what? I think I've finally isolated that . . . virus you have. Which is good. I did it fast. Just give me a few weeks and I'll get you out of this. I know it seems like a long time, but that's nothing compared to how long it would be if we continued to believe you had a stroke."

It was good news to Joe. *'A few weeks is fine Dean. Just get me out of this without opening those files.'*

"Good news, too. It's all through your blood stream. All through." Dean's hands flew about. "Jason and I are trying an experiment this morning. Ellen's coming to get more blood." Dean turned his head. "Speaking of Ellen."

Ellen smiled widely carrying with her the phlebotomy tray. She walked to Joe. "Morning, Joe." She kissed him on the cheek. "Morning, Dean. Frank."

Setting his chair down to all fours on her entrance, Frank smiled "Hey El."

Ellen placed down her tray, and began to get her things ready. "Hon, why am I taking so much blood from Joe. It's an abnormally large amount?"

Frank leaned forward. "I don't know. Ask Dean, he's the doctor."

Ellen laughed and turned her head to him. "I was asking Dean. Dean? Why?"

"Um . . . well." Dean stammered for an answer. "El, to be honest he really isn't needing it, so, I thought I'd use it for some experiments."

"Andrea is wondering what you are doing with it." Ellen stated as she placed the tourniquet on Joe's arm.

Dean cringed, covering his eyes. "Gees, El." He lowered his hand grabbing hers that reached for her tubes. "Please, don't tell Andrea anything. Please."

"O.K." Ellen shrugged and grabbed the needle. "But you know how she is about Joe." She prepared to insert it. "And when I mentioned her

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questioning me about taking all this blood to George he . . .”

Joe thought it while Frank and Dean screamed it at the same time. A blasting ‘uh!’

Ellen screamed. “God.” After a moment, she grabbed for a towel. “Shit.” She laid it on Joe’s arm which pulsated the blood from her jamming him too much with the needle. “See what you made me do to him. I hit an artery. God, scream at me.” She cringed. “Sorry Joe.”

“El.” Dean walked up to her. “No one. No one is to know about the unethical taking of Joe’s blood.”

“I’d say.” Frank interjected peering at the wound Ellen caused. “Especially with the method you take it.” He whistled then winked at his father. “Good thing you can’t feel it, huh Dad?”

*Morons*, Joe thought.

Ellen gasped. “I’m good at what I do when you aren’t screaming at me. If no one is to know why does Frank know?” Ellen began to try to take blood from Joe again.

“He’s my Dad. Dean needed my permission.” Frank stated.

“So why are you giving permission to Dean to take all this blood from you father.” Ellen question while performing the procedure correctly.

“Payback. He was so mean to me as a child.” Frank leaned down and kissed his father. “Got to go. Bye, Dad. See ya, El. Dean.”

Dean nodded and moved to the door after Frank left. “I’m leaving too, drop that off when you’re done.”

“Yep.” Ellen agreed then shook her head. “Sick people in this community Joe. Almost done.”

Joe just stared at her. The woman who always looked happy to take his blood and she had the nerve to call others sick. He was just glad he wasn’t going to be her live, grown up, dress up doll.

“Done.” Ellen stated. “I’ll drop this off, then I’ll be back.” She removed the last tube of blood and tossed it in her tray. “Because I have a really great shirt for you to wear today and . . . I want to try parting your hair in the middle. See ya.” She kissed Joe quickly and left.

Deep inside his soul Joe grunted at Ellen’s words. He spoke, or rather thought, too soon.

^^^

George in a crouch before the back perimeter, peered over the tops of glasses. “Fine.” He stood up brushing his hands.

Greg looked curiously at him. “Fine?” He watched George trot off. “Sir.” He hurried to catch him. “It’s falling off. Something happened to the switch box.”

## Druga-Marchetti/Circle of Justice

George stopped walking. "Does it work?"

"Yes. I think. But . . ."

"Then it doesn't take priority. No Requisition. Mechanics is busy enough." George began to walk away.

Again Greg followed George. "But, George. Look, it's a vulnerable spot. The back gate is so accessible to anyone. Maybe I should mention to Frank . . ."

"Frank is not me!" George blasted sending Greg a foot back. "I run the community. I say what is deemed important and what is not. That box is not important yet. It's not important enough to warrant wasting mechanics time or mine. Drop it. Now do your job, Greg while I do mine." Huffing, George stormed off.

Greg scratched his head. "O.K." He tossed his hands up. "I thought I was doing my job." he took the pencil from behind his ear and placed the eraser toward the paper. Just when he was about to erase the report on the broken perimeter switch box, he stopped. George didn't see a need for it to be mentioned, however Frank would want to know any changes in the fence no matter how small. Thinking of who frightened him more, George or Frank, Greg placed his pencil back and left the information about the broken box right on the report.

^^^

"It truly is amazing, Jason." Dean spoke with excitement as he stood before the long line of rabbit cages in the cryo-lab. "It is all through the blood. I spun it down and it definitely spilled into the serum."

"That's what we needed to hear. So what are we doing?" Jason asked.

Dean handed him a clip board. "I want to try something. I want to see if what's in Joe's blood can cause the effects on a subject smaller than he. And if it does, I may be able to create an antidote with it." Dean took a syringe and filled it with the clear serum he had extracted from Joe's blood. He opened up the first rabbit cage and pulled out the spotted one. "Easy." The rabbit squirmed in his hand. "Where should I inject him?"

"Might as well hit the skull area."

"Might as well." Dean, fighting the rabbit, injected a partial amount of what was in the syringe. Within seconds the rabbits back arched and it's paws flopped to its sides. "Shit."

"Is he dead?"

Dean laid down the needle and placed his palm on the stomach of the rabbit. "Nope." He turned it right side up, then upside down. Each time the rabbit just flopped, its eyes still open. "Looks it, but he's not."

“Wow Dean, how much did you inject him with?”

“One CC. So, mark that down and note the time. We’ll see how long it takes for him to come back. Let’s try a smaller dose, cut it in half.” Dean opened the next cage pulling out its occupant, he grabbed the needle and injected it. Again, the rabbit went lifelessly still. “Mark that down, one half a CC. Smaller does?”

“Sure why not.”

Dean moved to the next cage, taking his dosage down again by a tenth. “Same. Smaller amount?”

“Hell we’re on a roll.” Jason wrote down and opened a cage.

“This is so amazing.” Dean held up the fourth motionless rabbit speaking to it. He tossed it in the cage and went to the next one.

They made their way down the line, each surprisingly breeding the same results no matter how little a dosage was given. Dean and Jason stood afterwards staring at their quiet subjects.

“Dean keep observing them for signs of revival, mark down when they start.” Jason handed Dean the clipboard. “I want to get up to my lab to finish up. And don’t get too caught up down here. Remember what today is.”

“Sure no problem.” Dean stared at the notes. “What’s today?”

Jason shook his head. “Pediatric check-up? One-thirty.”

“Oh yeah.” Dean nodded. “I’ll be there. Two of them are my patients.”

“Good, see you then.” Jason with a swift pat to Dean’s back walked to the lab door, nearly bumping into Ellen as she walked in. “Bye Ellen.”

“Bye.” Shaking her head at the odd man, Ellen walked up behind a perplexed looking Dean. “Boo.”

“Hey.” He read over his notes. “What are you doing here? No containment?”

“I hate when you’re preoccupied. You forget everything.”

“What did I forget now?” He flipped a page.

“Tissue samples. We’re playing with Marcus’ tissue samples today?”

“Yeah that’s right. They’re over on the counter.”

“Thanks.” Ellen moved to the counter. “Dean?” She stepped closer. “What’s with all the dead bunnies?”

“They aren’t dead, Ellen.” Dean set down the clipboard.

“Really?” Ellen opened the first cage, looking into the staring blank eyes of the rabbit. She lifted its paw and let it fall with a thump. “They look dead. Maybe you forgot you killed them. You seem to be forgetting everything today.”

“I didn’t forget I killed them.” Dean removed her hand from the cage. “Because I didn’t, they are . . . in a deep sleep.”

“All right. So why do you have a bunch of snoozing rabbits in here?”

“Why are you being so nosey? And just to shut you up. It’s a new sleep medication.” Dean pulled her away from the cage area.

“Just to shut me . . .” Ellen gasped. “Fine.” She retrieved the tissue sample and moved to another counter. “First you want to move me out of the house, then you want to move me out of your life.” She slammed the sample. “Now out of your new medications. Fine. Fine.” Her voice crept up. “What’s next? The lab? Huh?” She glared at Dean who seemed to ignore. “That’s all right. I’ll have you know my opinion and skills are very valued. Wait until my meeting with George. Don’t think when I give him my little password progress report I won’t mention this kicking me out of the lab thing.”

“El!” Dean screamed at her. “Don’t mention this sleep medication thing to him! And don’t! Don’t mention progress on the passwords.”

Ellen’s eyes moved slowly in curiosity to Dean. “Why? He’s the leader until Joe gets better.”

Stumped. Dean hoped his searching for a cover up wasn’t obvious. “Be . . . because. Damn it.” His hand hit on the counter. “You’re jinxing us.”

“I never knew you were superstitious.”

“Very. Why do you think I work with rabbits? Their . . . their feet are uh, lucky.”

“What.” Ellen snickered. “Like you cut them off when you’re done.”

“Yes. Always.” Dean’s eyes widened. “I just was embarrassed to let you know.”

“I never seen them. We work with a lot of rabbits.”

“I share them with . . . Frank and his men. That’s why they’re so good.”

“Cute.” Ellen smiled. “O.K. I won’t jinx you anymore. Can I help in the sleeping bunny experiment.”

Hating to do it, Dean agreed. He would just give Ellen false information on everything. Having Ellen running around with information that wasn’t true, was better than her inadvertently passing along vital information that could give George even more of an upper hand.

^^^^

Hitting the back gate last on his afternoon rounds, Frank squatted downward, holding his cup of coffee he stopped at his office to get. He looked one more time at the new switch box that Henry had replaced. One that wouldn’t had been replaced had Greg followed George’s orders. He was assured it worked before it was replaced, but Frank still had to wonder. Had there been times since that box was loose that the perimeter actually failed to protect the community?

## Druga-Marchetti/Circle of Justice

The thought had stayed with him. It stayed with him all day, especially as he placed the men in their positions to dig. Knowing he had to find out, Frank decided that after he finished his reports, checked on how the digging of his new hatches were going, he would go the security room. Answers about the perimeter would lie there.

^^^

He did it as such a repeated pattern. Leaning over the counter, head to head with Ellen, Dean would peer into the large magnifying glass hanging over the sample, he'd touch the sample with the tweezers, reach across and adjust Ellen's shirt. He'd then return to his sample. "This looks totally unscathed from the extreme cold we exposed it to." He spoke so preoccupied as he turned over the sample.

"I see that. Dean? Why do you keep lifting my shirt like that."

"Because when you lean over the counter, I can see your breasts. I find it distracting." He fussed with the sample again. "What was the temperature we exposed this to?"

"Minus forty degrees Fahrenheit. But you've seen my breasts before. Lots of times."

"Let's try another sample at minus fifty."

"They aren't even attractive. Did I tell you Jenny Matoose exposed her breasts to Frank."

"That's not a mental picture I'd like to have." He reached over and fixed her shirt again, returning his view to the magnifying glass. "Besides, I find your breasts attractive. In fact there isn't a square inch on your body I don't." He moved the petri dish and reached for another "Ellen?" He grabbed her wrist. "Why does your watch still say one o'clock?"

"Oh." Ellen twisted the band. "It's broke. I was thinking of asking Jason if he can fix it. He is a time guy."

"Don't do that." Dean shook his head. "What time is it?"

"How would I know my watch is broken. Where's yours?"

"On the other counter." He walked across the room to it, and picked it up. "Shit! It's four o'clock. I missed pediatrics. Brian's appointment."

"So what, there two other doctors up there."

"Ellen!" Dean stopped in the door, changed his mind about yelling at her for not thinking, and ran quickly, all the way to the clinic.

Dean's high top tennis shoes squeaked loudly as he slid to a stop in front of examining room two. Andrea and Jason stood inside laughing. "I missed it?"

Andrea smiled, her arms folded. "No problem Dean, we know

you're busy down there. We took care of it."

Dean held back his hair. "Brian?"

Andrea waved her hand. "Jason examined him. He's doing . . ."

"Shit. Shit. Shit." Dean moved frantically in circles, then noticed the odd looks. "It's just that I never missed a check up with him. Is he fine?"

"Sure." Jason answered. "Oh . . . where is that chart?" He snapped his finger. "Johnny must have it. Anyway. Dean, were you aware that Brian is the only child in this community without a DNA work up or blood type family match up? I took care of that for you."

"You what!" Dean yelled, his shoulders dropped. "Where are his results?"

Jason lifted his hands. "Probably still in the lab with Johnny, he's . . ." Jason turned his head to Andrea. "Where did he go?"

The squeakiness of Dean's tennis shoes could be heard fading in the hall.

"Johnny!" Dean flew into the lab.

"Hey Dr. Dean, I'm glad you're here." He walked over and handed him a folder. "I have a problem. I think I screwed up on Brian's match up." Johnny opened the folder. "Here I'll show . . . Is something wrong Dean? You look pale."

"No." Dean answered short. His eyes looked down at the results and they closed. "Johnny you screwed this up."

"That's what I thought. How?"

"Very, very easily." Dean shut the folder and led Johnny far from it. "Inexperience. Happens all the time. I'll rerun it. Take a break."

"But I just got here. I have other tests to . . ."

"Now, Johnny. One should always take a break after they screw up."

Johnny lifted his shoulders. "All right. I'll be back."

Dean plopped his head on the counter, letting out a breath after Johnny left. His head raised again when he heard the lab door shut. He didn't need to turn around, the soft, slow clicking of hard shoes on the linoleum said exactly who it was. Pulling the folder closer to him, Dean stood up straight.

"Dean." Andrea spoke his name soft and stern.

Dean rolled his eyes. Then faced her. "What's up?"

"Is that Brian's chart?" Andrea pointed.

"Um . . . sure."

"Give it to me." She snapped her finger and pointed.

"Andrea he is my . . ."

"NOW!" She held her palm out and felt the smack of hit when Dean handed it to her. Afraid, Andrea opened it slowly, closed her eyes and let out



a loud shriek. "You did!" She hit Dean with the folder. "You stupid son of a bitch!" She hit him again. "What the hell were you thinking?" A hit to Dean's head. "Do you not realize this is your death sentence? A death sentence."

"Andrea." Dean snatched the folder from her swinging hands. "Calm down and lower your voice."

"Don't you even give me orders. Don't." Andrea waved her hand in front of her face trying to wave off her hot flashes. "Sweet Jesus, Sweet Jesus, Sweet Jesus." She caught her breath. "I cannot believe you did this. And to Frank! Frank! Of all people on the face of the earth you . . ." Her words immediately became muffled with Dean's hand over her mouth.

"Lower your voice please. I will talk to you about this." Dean removed his hand.

"What were you thinking?" Andrea whispered loudly.

"I was thinking about helping out my friend."

"I knew it. I knew it. You know I had the feeling every time I saw you with that boy. I kept thinking to myself, this is so unnatural the way this man has latched on to another man's baby."

"O.K., so I have a hard time detaching myself completely from him, But I do. It was a clinical experience." Dean nodded.

"Thank the Good Lord for that."

"In fact, we were both surprised it took. You aren't telling him are you?"

"Me?" Andrea held her chest. "No way." She shook her head drastically moving her hands about. "I want no part of this. No part. I don't know anything. Let me tell you though. It is a good thing, a good thing that one, Frank is a stupid man. And two, Robbie Slagel and you have similar features, cause I always thought that baby looked just like you."

"Yes I know. Ellen and I discussed that."

"You and Ellen discuss too much. Never, Dr. Hayes, bring to my attention again how Frank slept with Ellen while you two were together. Never. Let me tell you something, you two . . ." She shook her head. "You two . . . are bad." Andrea ran her hand across her forehead leaving out a loud 'whew'. She grabbed Brian's chart. "Do something with these results."

"I will." Dean took the folder. "And thanks for not saying anything."

"Well . . ." Andrea opened the lab door. "You owe me. You owe me big."

^^^

Frank's forefinger flicked forward tapping on the computer monitor in the security room. "Seven times?" Frank commented. "It went down seven times in two weeks, Mark?"

"That what it's showing." Mark replied.

“Why wouldn’t I be told of this?”

“See for yourself, Frank. It was down three times for less than forty-seconds, once for three minutes. Nothing major, we figured it was a malfunction in the switch box.”

“Don’t figure anything anymore. I want told even if it goes out for five seconds.”

“Really?” Mark asked surprised.

“What do you mean, really? Of course really.”

“Well it’s just that . . . O.K., I’m not supposed to say anything but. Out concern for your personal stress. We’re not supposed to bother you on the little shit.”

“Under whose suggestion.”

“George.”

“George! Fuck!”

Mark, recognizing the profanity and the essence in which it was delivered, lifted his coffee mug up. It was right in time and very foreseeing of him. Frank’s fisted hand came pummeling down, slamming into the counter. “Sorry Frank.” Mark backed his chair up some. “With your Dad, and Ellen, all the stress you been . . .”

“Do I looked stressed!” Frank bellowed out, his face burning red, the vein in his neck protruding. “Do I!”

“Well . . .”

“No! You tell me everything! Everything. Fuckin George! Everything!”

“Frank, I know tell you . . .”

“Everything!” He barreled to the door. “Even if a fuckin mouse fries to the fence you tell me everything!” He blasted from the room.

Mark jumped at the rattling slam of the door. He shook his head in sarcasm. “Yeah, you’re not stressed.”

^^^

“Andrea knows.” Dean announced in his return appearance in the cryo-lab.

“Andrea knows what?” Ellen still stood by the tissue samples. “Hey Dean, minus sixty and still standing.”

“No kidding?” Dean ran over still clutching Brian’s chart. “This is amazing. Really . . .”

“Andrea knows what?”

Dean swallowed and lifted his head. “Andrea knows about Brian.”

“What about Brian?” Ellen asked.

“About . . . About his parentage.”

## Druga-Marchetti/Circle of Justice

“Oh.” Ellen spoke nonchalantly. “Oh you worry too much. Andrea’s not going to say anything. It’s fine.” Ellen waved her hand. “Besides. He is Frank’s baby. You and I decided that. Brian would not be viewed as anything other than a Slagel.”

“Yes, but . . .”

“Not buts, Dean. Frank desperately needed to have a baby. We gave him a baby. It was not out of spite. It was for Frank. And Brian was conceived very medically and very clinically. That was made perfectly clear when you went into the back room and . . .”

“El!” Dean ran his hand over his face. “Stop, all right. No reminders. You made that day very difficult for me. You and your ‘oh Dean, it’s still warm’ comments.”

Ellen giggled and walked over to him, kissing him on the cheek. “Don’t worry about it. Whoops, I kissed you. I know you don’t want that. Sorry. I’ll take it back.” She kissed him again. “You helped out a friend who needed you. You didn’t do anything wrong. I believe that.” She moved the sample to him. “Work?”

“Work.” He took a breath. “Now. Where were we with the freezing tissue sample.” Dean peered through the magnifying glass.

“Minus sixty.” Ellen leaned over toward him to look at it with him

“Excellent.” Dean commented then adjusted her shirt again.

^^^

Frank had passed George only once and a sickening feeling hit him. There was something about his eyes that Frank noticed as the oldness of George’s and the darkness of Frank’s met. There had been no words between the two. Frank felt like the hardened criminal and George was the prosecutor waiting to send him away. Though everyone seemed so assuring to Frank that an ousting was impossible, Frank knew better.

Frank had just come from seeing Greg. Dan and John Matoose were previous. They were informed of a new strategy. Frank wanted all bases covered just incase something would happen to him. If by some chance he no longer ran security, Frank wanted to have everything taken care of. Especially with the bad feeling he had been having. A bad feeling not only about George, but of the SUTs which have made their presence less and less known. To Frank this wasn’t a good sign like everyone else was taking it. It was a warning of something bigger to come.

“Cole.” Frank knocked once on the open door of the field house. “Got a few minutes?”

“Sure. Come on in.” Cole finished writing something on his clipboard and set it down. “How come you’re still working?” He sat on the

edge of his small desk.

"Two of my men down, ill. I'm on all night." Frank handed him a sheet of paper. "Here. Since our drills are prohibited and security cut. I had to rethink our strategy on the chance that the SUTs break a perimeter."

"And what's this. It's a list of names?" Cole read over it.

"Yeah. Kind of handed out secondary command for disbursement of weapons and such. It's all there. Read it." Frank pointed to the sheet. "Plus, we dug a few extra hatches for weapons. It will be easier then having them run into town. A chance of wasting time, I don't want to take. I've worked out the details and sometime this week I'll get together with you on it."

"We still want to get that scouting party out?"

"Most definitely. I know how many of those things there are. I know more can come. And we all know they've had enough time to get here and build up forces."

"Seems us men in security are the only ones that think George wasn't looking in the right area."

"Or looking at all." Frank backed up.

"Frank. Can I ask you something? Why all of the sudden are you distributing secondary power? You run things."

"Well to be honest . . ." Frank ran his hand over his head to the back of his neck. "George and I haven't been seeing eye to eye. He doesn't want me running security. He wants me out."

"You aren't stepping down are you?"

"Fuck no. But let's just not rule out the possibility that he'll request that of me. I want to be prepared. Have all bases covered. The protection of this community is vital. No matter what George thinks."

"You really think something is going to happen, don't you?"

"Let's put it this way." Frank said. "I *know* something is going to happen."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Tight lipped wasn't just a figure of speech, it was an expression predominantly on Ellen's face. She sat in Joe's room, posture perfect. Her hands tapping on her knees as she stared at Joe in bed.

Joe was proud. He knew she gave it her best effort, even though she was obvious.

"Something wrong with your lip." George pointed at it.

Ellen shook her head.

"You aren't talking to me. I asked you three times about the progress of the passwords."

Ellen shook her head.

"What?"

"I can't. I've been asked not to."

"By who?" George questioned with a chuckle. "Frank?" He watched her shake her head. "Dean." He received a wide eyed look. "Why doesn't Dean want you to tell me."

"I want to tell you why, George. I can't tell you why. It's too good to keep inside. Order me as leader."

Joe grunted, unheard, but he did. *Christ Ellen. Don't say anything.*

"I order you."

Ellen exhaled. "Thanks. O.K., I'm not allowed to tell you because Dean is a big superstitious freak." She rattled fast. "He yelled at me. Yelled at me. Seems, he thinks I'll jinx us. He doesn't want me to tell you that I am on the letter 'I' in the passwords. Haven't uncovered anything yet, but I'm trying. Really how can I jinx us, you want us to open them. He should have bases covered. After all he has stored somewhere about a thousand rabbit feet. I bet those rabbits he has zonked, that looked dead but aren't, are only there for him to mutilate for Frank and his men. Whoops, wasn't supposed to tell you about that either. Not the superstitious kill the bunnies for the feet thing. The sleep medication that he's working on."

Joe wanted to kill her.

George walked behind her. "You, Ellen, are a remarkable woman." He laid his hands on her shoulders. "But tense," He started to rub them keeping his eyes in a taunting manner on Joe.

"I'm tense because the men in my life treat me like I'm nothing. With the exception of my father. He can't treat me like that because eye can't talk. Dean's working on that though, I think." Ellen squirmed when she felt George's massage intensify. "Oh, that felt good."

"You know, Ellen. I always thought you to be not just the most attractive woman in Beginnings but the most intelligent."

## Druga-Marchetti/Circle of Justice

Ellen giggled. "Thanks."

Joe wanted to scream. He listened to Ellen ramble. He watched George so obviously hit on her while she was ignorant to the fact. *Ellen, wise up, come on.*

"Ellen. Why don't you and I just spend the evening together. Let's have dinner, maybe get a drink at the hall. Let me show you true appreciation and you can ramble all you want to me."

"O.K." Ellen shrugged. "I'm hungry and in the mood for talking." She stood up and walked to Joe. "I'll stop back." She kissed him. "Let's go, George." Bubbly, Ellen moved to the door.

George began to step put, but stop, seeing Ellen move a ways down the hall, he poked his head back in the room. He winked with a snide whisper. "I'll take good care of her for you, Joe."

^^^

Dean paced in his livingroom, then looked at his watch. It was a Henry routine he called it, but one none-the-less he couldn't help but doing. The knock shot him to the door like a cannon. He flung it open. "Hap, thank you so much for coming over."

Hap, an elderly man, tall and fit stepped into the house. "Never mind watching the kids for . . ." Before Hap could finish his sentence, Dean was out the door.

The first place Dean looked was the cryo-lab, hoping and praying he would find Ellen down there consumed with the puzzle of breaking the codes. But nothing. It was dark. He moved fast, never slowing in his pace. He ran to containment then to the clinic. Hoping she was still visiting Joe, Dean flew into his room. He heaved a relief breath when he saw Frank sitting in the chair. "Thank God you're here."

Frank shifted his eyes around the room. "Are you talking to me?"

"Yes. Tell me you know where Ellen is."

"No. You don't?"

"No." Dean paced into the room. "She should have been home. She never showed up."

Joe closed his eyes, he couldn't believe Ellen still wasn't around. How long had it been?

Frank stood up from his chair. "Should we worry? I mean, really, it's Ellen. She probably is off talking to someone."

Melissa's soft voice sang into the room as she walked in. "She is. Her and George were having a date." She giggled.

## Druga-Marchetti/Circle of Justice

At the same time, with the same expression, Dean and Frank swung their views to Melissa. "A what?"

"Jealous?" Melissa walked to the bed. "I saw her going into George's house. We spoke. They were having dinner, maybe a drink at the hall. She didn't call it a date." Melissa made a notation in Joe's chart. "But sounds like one to me. And, in my opinion, she needed it."

Dean looked to Frank. "We have to find them."

"Yeah." Frank nodded. "I don't want El messing with him. I fuckin hate him. And . . . he's old Dean."

"How about we both go look?" Dean suggested.

"Sounds good."

At that instant they both left the room. Together they ran down the hall and separated as they emerged from the clinic. Dean headed straight to the living section, Frank in another direction.

Even though Dean knew he and Frank were both searching out Ellen for different fears, he was at glad they were both searching her out.

^^^^

George's house was empty when Dean got there. And being so close to his home, Dean headed back there, hoping against hope, that he and Ellen just crossed paths. And he was right.

He couldn't have looked anymore grateful if he tried. The moment Dean stepped into the livingroom and saw Ellen, his arms dropped and he stepped exhausted like to her. "El." His hands went to her face. "God, I was worried." He kissed her.

"Why?" Ellen asked. "I was just . . ." Her words were cut by another kiss. "Hanging out . . ." She was kissed agin. She snickered and pulled away. "Dean. Stop. You hate me. Well, maybe not hate, but definitely don't want me."

"El, I was so worried. Please don't do that again. Let me know where you're gonna be."

Ellen laughed. "Dean, you are really acting strange. I was with George. And really, what could happen to me while I'm with him."

Dean stared at Ellen as she walked away toward the kitchen. He wanted to tell her all that could happen to her, but he didn't he just couldn't. Not yet. He could only be glad that she was home and she was all right.

^^^^

An arrogant sniff came from George as he leaned into the bar. He brought his drink to his lips and looked to his right to John Matoose. "I know he's your friend and all." George stated.

John just lifted his hand. "Frank and Ellen aren't together. So . . ." He left out a breath. "Possibilities?"

"Very much. We had . . . we had a wonderful romantic time." George winked. He caught a ear shot of a clearing throat and he looked over John to Len another security man. "What?"

Len motioned his head to behind George.

Turning, back to John and Len, George was face to almost face with Frank.

Frank raised one eyebrow. "Where's my wife?" He asked strong.

"Home." George said innocently. "Probably . . . tired Frank."

"Stay away from her."

"She's not your wife Frank. She's moving on." George stated calmly sounding so sincere.. "We had a great evening. Maybe that's what she needed. I know it's what I needed." knowing he wasn't seen by anyone but Frank, George mouthed the word 'gulp.'

Frank glared. Eye daggers first then he leaped forth for George hands grabbing at his shirt.

"Frank!" John Matoose, still behind George reached around. "You have to get a grip. All right?" He pulled Frank's hand from George. "I know Ellen's your wife, but you guys aren't together anymore. You can't be getting mad because someone else is with her."

George let out a breath and moved back from Frank despite the stare Frank kept on him. "Thank you, John." George straightened his shirt. "But I'm not worried. Frank does really care. Ellen said so. He just likes to look the part. Obviously, I mean Dean is still standing."

John saw it and it warranted another interception from him. "Frank." He warned. "Go back to work."

"Fine." Frank stepped back. "Stay away from her George. Go near her again, I'll kill you."

"Frank." George spoke pacifying. "Stop. I don't want anymore hostility between us all right." Drink straw in mouth, George faced him, "It's innocent. And there's nothing wrong with two people getting together. Ellen came to me. I enjoyed her . . . company." He winked.

Though Frank was the only one to see George's fast, oral sex insinuation with that straw, it was enough to drive Frank over the edge. Bodily he dove onto George blasting the older man back into the bar. John Matoose, Len, Mark and three other security guys dove up right away breaking up the confrontation before it got too far.

John blocked Frank from George. "Go, Go back to work."

George caught his breath and stood upright. He laid his hand on John's back. "Let it go. A man's jealousy is always his downfall. But don't go after me again."



## Druga-Marchetti/Circle of Justice

“Don’t fuckin threaten me.” Frank told him.

“This is not a threat. Go.” George stated as strong, yet low volume as he could.

Frank gave up, in disgust he shook his head and walked from the social hall. He would deal with Ellen as soon as he saw her in the morning.

George got it together at the bar, instructed everyone to go back to having a good time, and he himself indulged in his drink again. It tasted better to him, sweeter. Perhaps it was the sympathy he got and questions about how he was after the confrontation with Frank. There was something about looking the victim that George just loved. Especially when he was far from being that part.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

It was something Ellen hated to do, pack the school lunch thing. She just couldn't wake up enough in the morning to deal with who wanted what in their lunches. So she was grateful Dean did. But more so than making the lunches, Ellen hated when the twins forgot them. That meant taking it to them at the school. That meant seeing Jenny Matoose.

Jenny sat behind her teacher's desk. She knew first thing in the morning Ellen would be by moments after the lunch bell to bring the twins their food. Jam sandwich spread open, eyes peeled to the door, Jenny waited on Ellen. She could still hear John and Georg's morning conversation in her livingroom. How frightened George sounded of Frank. And even though George refused Jenny's offer of speaking to Ellen about doing something with Frank, Jenny, out of concern wanted to talk to Ellen anyhow. It was the least she could do. George, as leader, didn't need the stress of Frank.

Jenny watched Ellen walk in, give Billy and Alexandra their weak lunches, then try to make a quick escape.

"Not so fast." Jenny followed her to the door. "I need to speak to you."

"No, Jenny you can not steal my children's lunches. You have enough."

Jenny gasped at her. "How dare you insult me. This is serious."

"And I'm in a rush." Ellen tried to leave.

"Like always. Darting here and there. This has nothing to do about you. This has to do with Frank."

Ellen stopped cold and turned around. "I do not discuss Frank with you."

"Fine." Jenny snipped. "But either you will convince him to modify his behavior or I will."

Ellen snickered. "How Frank acts is his business. And go on. You wanna try to get him to modify his behavior, you try. Better yet!" Ellen smiled. "Why don't you try to convince him by exposing yourself to him again. Fire out one of those big floppy breasts at him."

Jenny looked so offended when Ellen walked away. She then turned back into the school room and the snickering of the children silenced. All except Alexandra who continued to giggle.

Billy leaned over the lunch table. "Alex. Stop."

A snorting snicker came from the little girl and she wiped her jam covered mouth to erase the smile. "Sorry. Mommy's funny."

^^^

People could be so predictable, George thought as he stepped into Melissa's livingroom. He'd talked to her the past couple days, watching her as she walked from her house, hair still wet from showering for her noon start at the clinic. Such a pleasant woman, but such a pattern person. He listened, as he moved to the steps, holding on to the railing, peering upward. He listened until he heard it. The bathroom door shut, the water turning on. Giving her a minute, he began to ascend the steps. Her and her shower would help him out more than she knew. Knowing the houses as well as he did, George walked to the smaller bedroom. Just as he anticipated, Marcus was there. His growing little body asleep in the caged crib. "Hello." George spoke in a gruff whisper. The child did not respond. His raspy, growling breaths still so loud and rhythmic. "You little guy are going to help out your Uncle George." With his forefinger and thumb, he flicked forward into the baby's ear, causing the sleeping child to awaken with a startled lifting of the head. "Hello." George wiggled his fingers in a wave and stood up straight. He reached forward turning the latch on the door to the caged crib, he opened it slightly, and stepped back. "Bye now. Have fun."

Knowing what the child would do and knowing what he had to do while that was happening, George snuck back out of Melissa's and prepared.

^^^

Almost as a hover, Ellen leaned over her paperwork as she sat at her desk. Her pencil move frantically. Her knuckles white from the tight grip she held as she wrote. Every few words she would do it. She'd look up through the tops of her eyes only, to Frank who sat in a chair across from her. He did that Frank-thing. Balancing on the hind legs of his chair, legs spread outward, head resting in the cupped hands he held behind him. He watched Ellen quietly, he watched.

"Frank." She shook her head slightly, looking at him again. "You've been sitting here twenty minutes."

"I know." He spoke monotone. "I'm still in that wake up phase. I'll talk in a second."

"Well, here's something that will wake you up." Ellen set down her pencil. "Get ready, Jenny is gonna show you her breasts again."

"Uh!" Frank shrieked then laughed as he settled his chair to all four legs. "Why is she seducing me again. Aside from the fact that I'm hot."

Ellen laughed. "Don't know. She's says your behavior."

"Probably fuckin George has her brainwashed. And . . ." Frank leaned forward. "Speaking of George. What exactly did you two do last night?"

"Ate dinner. Had a drink? Why."

"No, El. *What* exactly did you two do last night?"

"Ate dinner, had a drink. Again, why?" Ellen asked calmly.

"El" Frank raised his voice. "What *exactly* did you do last night!"

"God!" Ellen slammed her hand on the desk. "Ate dinner, had a drink? What do you want me to tell you Frank? I blew him?"

Frank screamed and jumped up. "No! Oh! You did!"

"What!" Ellen could barely stand up to follow him she was laughing so hard. "Where are you going. You know I didn't do that."

Frank stopped and stared at the door. He let out a loud exhale, probably more dramatic than he should of. And he acted the emotionally injured part. "I don't know . . . if I . . . I should believe you. George is . . . he is highly attractive."

Again, Ellen laughed and grabbed his hand. "Sit back down and pester me. There is something wrong with you."

The moment Frank felt her hand on his, his heart dropped. He become silent and his head lowered and eyes peeled to her touch of him.

"Frank?" Ellen asked.

"Oh, my God." The whispering words slipped out with emotions. "This is the first time you've touched me in a really long time." He saw her fingers begin to slip. "Don't. Please." He laid his hand over hers. And grabbed her hand and his eyes closed as his fingers clenched tightly over hers.

"Frank." Ellen tugged at her hand. "Can you let go?"

"No, El." He seemed so consumed.

"Well, how do you propose you're gonna hug me, if you keep squeezing the hell out of my fingers. Hold me, Frank."

Frank huffed a small breath. "I don't think I can let go of your hand."

"I'd rather you not let go of me."

Frank knew as soon as their bodies would touch, *that* wouldn't even be a question. Not wanting to, he released her hands and stepped into her. As soon as his chest touched her, his hands slid up her arms to her back and he brought Ellen to him, wrapping his arms so tight around her. He held her with his body and soul, closing his eyes, letting his senses feel every area of their met bodies.

He breathed heavily and slowly, swaying his body slightly in the embrace. Legs against legs, chest against chest. His face against her face. His hands extended, reaching upward under her hair and letting it fall on his hand. He slid the palm of his hand to her face. Blindly, with his eyes closed, his cheek brushed against hers, his mouth parted and in almost a starvation, he brought his mouth to hers and stopped before they touched.

"Frank?"

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He closed his eyes and shook his head, stepping back from her. He placed his index finger to her lips as he bit his bottom lip. "Fuck." He lifted his headset from his neck to his head and adjusted the microphone. "What?"

Ellen let out a sigh of relief when she knew it wasn't her.

Frank pressed to the earphone. "What did you say? You're breaking up." His eyes widened and he looked at her. "Where? Shit. I'm on my way."

"Frank what's wrong?"

"Tower spotted five SUTs crawling their way to the back gate. I have to go." Frank reached his hand out and touched her face. "Thank you for that." Hating to leave, Frank backed up and ran from her office. Bolting through the front door of containment he nearly barreled over a frantic looking Melissa.

"Frank!" She cried to him. "Frank, Marcus is gone. He took off again."

Frank stopped running. "When?"

"While I was in the shower. He got out."

"O.K." Frank took a deep breath. "Go in containment, Greg's in there. Tell him I said to get a crew from town to look!" He yelled as he moved. Frank knew he had to haul his body fast to the back gate. Running as quick as he could, he was barely to the edge of town when he got another call.

"Frank it's Cole. We have a problem."

"Shit! What?"

"That kid of Melissa's is up here. I stopped everything."

"Catch him." Frank instructed.

"Catch him? Do you know how fast that thing moves?"

"Um . . . Cole, arm four men now, include a loaded M-203 and send them to the back gate, tell them stay low in back formation. We have five SUTs at the back gate. But hold off on the gas until my call. I'm almost at the field." Frank could see it in the distance.

"What about this baby we're chasing."

"Get a net or something I don't care. But what ever you do, contain him to the fields."

Another minute or two run, and Frank would hit the field. He had two situations out of control, and which one would climax first was the question on Frank's mind.

In the quiet clinic hospital room of Joe's, George held up a syringe. "You have to love that baby Joe. You really do." Pushing the plunger, allowing for a drop or two to spill out over the needle, George walked slowly behind Joe. "Of course my forces are helping out immensely in the

distraction also.” With a smile, a huge smile, he injected the needle into the back of Joe’s neck.

Frank checked his revolver in his running stride to the field. He would see how the Marcus situation was going and then he’d hit the back gate with his men. As he approached the field house he could see in the distance, the moving corn stocks and heads going in and out. Marcus’ name was being called repeatedly.

Frank spotted the blonderness of his hair. “Cole!”

Cole raised his head. “We can’t find him.”

“Fuck.” Frank ran out to them. “Where did you last see him.”

“Scurrying some where in this area.”

“Are the men at the . . .” Frank’s head lifted to the sound of gun fire. “Son of a bitch.”

“I’ll take care of this, go up there.” Cole said.

“I have to.” Frank turned, as he did, he heard one of the men shouting ‘I see him’. Searching his view to where they indicated. Frank saw in horror as the speeding moving blur headed straight in the direction he was going--the back gate.

Through the commotion and hustling of the search for Marcus and the attack, Dean did his normal clinic routine. Began prepping to move patients to the safety of containment or the tunnels. Heading into his lab for the patient evacuation sheet, he stopped cold when he heard Henry’s frantic call.

“Dean! Dean, something’s wrong with Joe.” Henry ran to him.

Flying passed Henry, Dean raced into Joe’s room. In the chair, Joe was slumped over. “Shit!” Dean tried to lift Joe, as he did he noticed the newest injection site on his neck.

“Dean?” Henry came into the room. “What happened to him?”

“He got him Henry, he got him again. He used the distraction with Marcus and the SUTs and he came in here.”

“No.” Henry helped Dean move Joe to bed. “He has to be stopped, Dean.”

“We will. We just have to prove it’s him doing this.” Dean covered Joe’s body with a blanket. “I’m sorry about this, Joe. I really am.”

“Dean, what about Frank. It’s gonna kill him to come in here and see this.”

“Yeah, I know. But Frank thinks it’s a virus. That works in our favor. If he gets wind it’s George, Frank will just kill him. And then we’re screwed,

because Frank, will be gone.” Dean looked one more time to Joe, really feeling bad that he was allowing this to happen.

^^^^

Frank raced. The thoughts of the SUTs, the firing between them and his men and Marcus headed straight into it, cluttered his mind. And then it hit him as he neared the back gate area. The perimeter. Seeing the baby make his less than a straight line run, Frank’s heart raced. Straight to the fence he crawled, straight in between the line of flying bullets. He had no choice. “Down the back gate.” Frank called to security as he watched a child that moved faster than he. “Hold your fire!” Frank shouted to the men as he ran up behind them. The eight second delay on the fence would take too long for the child that neared it. “Hold your fire!” Frank leaped over their heads holding out his revolver as he did so. Aiming forward to the switch box, he fired twice downing the perimeter with sparks and smoke just as Marcus’ hands touched forward gripping the fence. He rolled on to the ground. “Cover me.”

He crawled on his stomach to the child that sat up, looking out the fence like he was peering through his crib. The gunfire raged above his head, coming from in front of him and behind him. He could see the eyes of one of the SUTs as he closed in on Marcus. Just as his hand reached forward for the little foot, he saw the boots emerge from the trees and a rifle pointed at him. Without hesitation, Frank fired once, hitting him in the head and dropping the SUT.

His fingers grabbed hold of the foot and he dragged the child to him. Scooping him up, Frank rolled with Marcus cradled to his chest away from the fence and into a standing position. He charged forward out of the way of his firing men and away from the fence. As he jumped forward to the safety of the small grade, he felt the searing, burning pain hit his left thigh. He dropped to the ground behind his men. “I’m hit.” He looked at his bleeding thigh. “Here.” He handed the baby to a shooting Doug. “Take him and run. Get him out of here now.”

Doug took Marcus--who seemed to be having fun--and rolled down the grade running back toward the fields.

Frank grabbed the M-203 and loaded it with the chemical can, waiting and watching for Doug to be far enough away. Once he was, Frank turned, “Save you’re ammo.” He told his men, and he raised his weapon, aiming out. Finger to the trigger, he peered through the scope. With the depressing of the trigger, a loud popping sound, Frank released the chemical. The canister could not be seen as it left the gun, but the whistling of it could be heard as it fell into the trees. No more than ten seconds passed and the

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firing on the other side of the back gate stopped.

Taking a moment to catch his breath and let his heart rate slow from the rush of excitement, Frank laid on his back.

“You O.K.?” One of his men asked.

Frank looked to his thigh, the pant leg now formed a huge circle of blood. “Yeah, flesh wound.” He checked out the seeping of his injury, it didn’t look too bad. “But they fuckin’ ruined my pants.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The heaviness, the lack of control over his eyelids started to fade. Joe, who had been struggling for some time to open them, did. When his vision came into focus, it wished he hadn't. George stood there. Soon, Joe watched the view of the ceiling lower as his bed was raised to an upright position.

"Right on time, Joe." George stepped back folding his arms. "Got to hand it to you, my goodness do you look like shit." He lifted his pant leg and sat on the edge of the bed. "Created quite the diversion today. It almost was better than anticipated. Frank got shot. No, no, don't concern yourself he's fine. But not for long. My plan is coming along nicely. I have my forces building, no one knows. I've been keeping them fed, again, no one knows." George stood up walking to the foot of the bed leaning in. "Frank is an obstacle, I am very close to having him gone. Once he's gone, the rest falls into place. Dean and Ellen are working on the password. BOOM! Then all that's left will be Henry." George shook his head. "Poor Henry, I liked him at first. Now he's on my nerves. Gone." His hand flew about. "But Frank." George looked down at his watch. "He has a short fuse. That's works in my favor. Pretty soon he should be igniting that fuse again. If this doesn't do it, next weeks attack will. Cause you know he'll blame me. Blame me, come after me, and then he's out. He really doesn't have the proof to back his words or actions." George tapped him on the foot. "Maybe I'll get lucky and my men will actually win their attack. Not that I think they will, but I'm keeping my fingers crossed." George showed Joe his two twisted together fingers. They matched his mind. "Maybe I can distract Frank enough to let them get ahead of Beginnings. Heck, maybe I'll even get really lucky and Frank will get killed next week . . ." George's expression dropped when he saw Joe's eyes shift almost in a panic. Shifting his own eyes to the door, he saw what Joe was trying to do. Trying to warn the innocent that just walked in. "Josh." George spoke softly and calm.

Josh stared wide eyed at George and backed up.

"Not so fast." George stood up, placing a firm hold on the boy's shoulder. "Coming to see Pap?"

Josh tried to move, George's grip was tight, and fear of the leader filled him.

"Take a walk with me, Josh, you and I have to talk." George holding tight to Josh's shoulder, clenched his fingers to Josh's skinny arm. He stopped at the door looking back at Joe. "God, is my luck with me."

Joe could only see so far and George was gone. Filled with total agony and frustration, Joe closed his eyes and prayed. There was nothing else

he could do but pray to God that Frank caught up to George before Josh paid the price for so innocently walking in a room at the wrong time.

^^^

“All fixed.” Henry spoke as he walked into Frank’s office. “How’s that leg?”

“Better.” Frank rocked back and forth in the chair. “Will it hold?”

“I’m hoping. It’s not the right switch box. But maybe if you put an extra tower guard on tonight and a back gate guard on, we’ll be fine until I make a new one.”

“Good thing you can do that shit.” Frank stood up.

“Hey, I’m Henry. What can I say?” Just as Henry was going to sit, Cole walked in. “Hi Cole.”

“Frank.” Cole looked desperate. “We have a couple problems.”

“A couple?” Frank raised his eyebrows. “What are they?”

“I was discussing with Dan about the scouting party. He told me that George told him that it was canceled.”

“Mistake.” Frank waved his hand. “No way. I wouldn’t cancel it, and neither would George, especially after today. No, don’t worry about it. If asshole George did, he’ll change his mind. He better. What’s the other problem?”

“George again. I can’t get into distribution. The locks were changed.”

Frank quickly shifted his view to Henry. “Did you do that?”

Henry shook his head. “I don’t know anything about it.”

Frank looked back to Cole. “Are you sure?”

“Positive. I got that straight from the horses mouth. Take a look.” He handed Frank his clipboard. “Yesterday I was told by George to cut rations. I told him there was no reason to. He said cut them or don’t distribute. I refused. Guess what?”

Frank reviewed the distribution order while trying to remaining calm, he reached to his desk and grabbed his huge key chain. He hooked it on his belt. “We’ll see about this. Let’s go.” He walked ahead of Cole and out his door.

As a safeguard, Henry though busy, followed behind.

^^^

It wasn’t how cute Dean looked in those baggy jeans he wore, that raced through Ellen’s mind as she walked into the cryo-lab. Though it did cross it, the way he had to keep them on him with a belt the same as she did.

And she did snicker at him reaching up like a little kid to things placed too high above his head. But what took over her thoughts was, why in the world was Dean so engrossed over a bunch of motionless rabbits. "Hey Dean." Ellen snuck up behind him.

"Hi El." He opened the second cage checking out its occupants.

"Boy, I have to tell you." Ellen peered over his shoulder. "Whatever you gave these rabbits sure did the trick. The last one is starting to quiver. After effects or is he coming to?"

"I think." Dean looked into the last cage. "Coming to. He had the least amount."

"This stuff is really cool. You know what we should do?"

"I'm afraid to ask." Dean kept busy, examining his friends.

"We should give a dose to Henry and put him somewhere really weird. Or better yet. We should give a dose to Jenny Matoose, undress her and put her in bed with Os-Oscar. Let her wake up next to him."

Dean started to laugh. "That's funny, El. But the attack put us behind." He pointed to the computer. "Work."

"Mr. Serious, I see." Ellen headed over to the computers. "Hey, Dean? Do you think Frank got aroused when Jenny Matoose exposed herself to him? She said he did and plans to do it again. Do you?"

"Do I what?"

"You aren't paying attention to me." She opened the dictionary and began to type. "Think Frank got aroused?"

"No." Dean shook his head then pulled a rabbit from the fourth cage. "I think Frank was probably overwhelmed at the moment by the abundance of flesh that was standing before him." He heard Ellen swear. "Wrong word?"

"Wrong word, strike one. Back to Jenny. She tells me that she truly expected Billy to be a lot more . . . son of a bitch."

"Strike two?"

"Yep."

Dean knew if there was a third strike, he'd hear the worse language yet. But he was getting used to it. He waited for it. Momentarily, it would happen.

"Oh yes, I'm in."

"No way?" Dean ran back. "What did you type in?"

"Indonesia. Go figure. Hey want to guess what it's about?"

"Um . . ." Dean took a moment. "Food."

"Let's see." Ellen waited for the file to appear. "Dean. Oh, my God. You're right."

"They really are too easy with these. Print that up."

"Easy for you. You aren't pounding in the words. I'm getting good at

spelling though.” Ellen started the printing sequence, cringing at the loud printer. “God, these take for ever to print up.”

“You’re right.” Dean walked to the printer, adjusting the paper so it came out correctly. “Hey, while this is printing, you want to take a ride with me?”

“Gees Dean where? The store?” Ellen giggled.

“No. Jason has more rabbits. You up to it? We can check out that time machine.” He raised his eyebrow.

“Sure why not. I’ll see if he can find time to fix my watch, too.”

“El . . . never mind. Let’s go.” Letting the rest of the report print up. Dean walked with Ellen from the lab.

^^^

Frank banged the padlock on the door in frustration. “Son of a bitch, he did change the lock.”

“Problem?” George peeked his head between Frank and Cole.

Henry stepped in reaching out. “George you can’t change the locks on the doors without council approval.”

“Yeah I can.” George pulled from Henry’s grip. “Cole. Did you see my changes on the food distribution?”

Cole shook his head. “George I have to disagree. We have plenty. More than we need. There isn’t any reason to cut rations. I won’t do it.”

“Then you don’t get in.” George stepped back.

Cole turned to Frank who seemed to be turning red. “Frank. What am I supposed to do? I have twenty-two people showing up in an hour for their rations. I can’t get in here.”

“Step back.” Frank moved Cole from the way, pulled out his revolver and fired once at the padlock. “Now you can.” He dropped it to the ground, opening the door to distribution. “George, next time, you seek council approval first. Locks are my division, not yours.” Frank’s angry words spoke to him.

“Then the next time you want supplies to take a group of men out on a goose chase. You get *my* approval.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Frank stepped to him.

“Your scouting party. It’s a waste.”

“Excuse me!” Frank shouted to a walking away George. “Asshole!”

Henry cringed. “Frank, please.” He held his hand out.

Frank moved Henry’s hand from his way, marching to George. “Asshole. I’m talking to you. Did you miss what happened today? Five SUTs. Five showed up.”

“Then you probably took out the rest of them. No scouting party.”

George stated.

“Bullshit. That party will go out!”

“Then it will go out without supplies!” George’s voice was rough and raspy, he held his hand out firm in a point. “Back away, Frank. I run the community, which means I run you! And if you don’t watch you’re step . . .”

“Yeah, yeah.” Frank’s head bobbed back and forth. “You’re gonna kick me out. Old story. Get your shit together.”

“Get *your* shit together, Frank. I make final decisions.”

“Decisions *you’re* not capable of!” Frank argued loudly. “Something tells me you aren’t in the right frame of mind.”

“No.” George spun to him. “I’ll tell you who’s not in the right frame of mind. Joe. And if it wasn’t for you and your loud mouth, this community would see how much better it would be without his tyrant ass running things!”

Dean saw it as soon as they emerged. The smile from his face fell when he saw Frank. “Shit.” he took off running when he saw Frank drop his shoulder harness and charge full force to George who was reaching for his own revolver. “Frank no!”

Frank caught view of a running Dean as his hands reached forward, and George drew his revolver in defense.

“Frank, no!” Dean leaped forward giving it all he had, charging into the wall of strength that nearly grabbed George. “Don’t.”

“Back off, Dean, you don’t know what he said.” Frank pressed ahead.

“Frank.” Dean put his face close to Frank’s speaking so low. “Don’t, don’t go after him.” He tried with all of his small body’s weight to keep Frank back. “Don’t.”

“Dean . . .”

“No, Frank, listen.” Another inch, Dean managed to get him back another inch. “Don’t give him what he wants. He wants you out. We need you. He’ll shoot you or oust you. You have no solid reason to take him down.” He saw Frank kept staring at George. “If you make this mistake, this will be the last time you see the inside of these walls. Trust me.”

Frank stepped back a foot, he took the shoulder harness handed to him by Henry. He closed his eyes and shook his head. “Is it me? Why do I feel like I’m going overboard.”

“No Frank, it’s not you. But this won’t be for long. I promise you, not for long.” Dean finally dropped the hand that pressed against Frank’s chest. “Walk away. It’ll be over soon.”

Frank, clenching his jaws adjusted his harness. His hand swung outward past Dean, pointing to George. “You’re lucky. But let one person in

this community get hurt because of your lack of judgement and you're done." Frank stepped further back. "You're done." With his warning, Frank turned and walked away.

Along with the breath he held, Dean let his shoulders drop in relief. The tension of the moment had ceased. Silence engulfed. The calm before the storm. Dean braced himself. The rising conflict between Frank and George wasn't over, it was merely on pause.

^^^^

It was an outburst of laughter during their walk on the semi-empty streets of Beginnings. Frank walked behind Ellen, staying almost close enough to touch. His hands were folded behind his back, as he spoke to her, he leaned down to her. His face reflected the happiness he felt as he took an evening walk with her.

"Frank, I can't believe you remembered that." Ellen shook her head, still laughing.

"Please, that was our first vacation. We had what? Sixty dollars between us, so we hopped in the car and drove, and when we were halfway out of money we came back home."

"Where did we end up?"

Frank scratched the bridge of his nose thinking. "Wasn't it Barnesville Ohio or something." He shrugged. "I don't know. It was fun." He noticed they approached Dean's house. "This was fun."

"We just talked." Ellen stopped walking.

"No. You talked me through a bad time. It took hours, but you did it." Frank leaned down and kissed her on the cheek. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. I just wished you would have told me sooner how hard George was coming down on you. Maybe I wouldn't have performed sexually favors on him." She snickered.

With a breath, Frank shook his head. "Can you believe he insinuated that to me. He'll deny it, you know that."

"Yeah, but I believe you." Ellen's voice softened. "I always believe you."

"You're the only one. And . . ." Frank tapped his hand on the iron railing. "Go in. I have to get home. Josh should be back from his little perimeter shift."

"Tell him I said hello." Ellen stepped up the first step. "Goodnight, Frank."

Reaching out, Frank slid two fingers across her cheek as he stepped back with a slight smile and a wink. "Night."

Ellen stood on the step watching Frank until he disappeared from

her view.

Two words came to Dean's mind as he lay on his bed, pillows propped up behind him, reading a book--*She's back?* He lowered the book to the sound of footsteps walking up his stairs. He peered at the clock. "No way." His eyes shifted to the bedroom door. "El?"

"Dean?" Ellen smiled, mocking him.

"Everything O.K.? I mean, with Frank. You're back awfully early."

"He wanted to get home. But . . . he's doing better." She sat on the bed and took off her shoes. "What are you reading?" She scooted up on the bed sitting next to him.

"A book on DNA." He saw the less than impressed look on her face.

Ellen grabbed the book from his hand and began to flip pages. "Dean, this is not light reading."

"Why are you back? You've never come home early when you were with him before."

"It's a new me." She gave him back his book, then rolled to her side to face him. "And what did you think. I'd calm him down with sex?" She saw he didn't answer. "Dean. We're building. Remember?"

"Ah, yes." Dean nodded, rolled his body some and opened the night stand. He pulled out Rev. Bob's book. "Your instruction manual. On . . . friendship."

Ellen took the book. "And isn't Frank witty with that, no 'I' in friendship."

"Yeah. A pip. I thought of that you know."

"You did not." Ellen laughed hitting Dean with the paperback. "Look at us, Dean. Reading in bed like the old married couple. Aren't we cute?" Ellen propped the pillow behind her.

"Which one of us sleeps on the couch tonight?" Dean asked.

"You don't have to. You can sleep right next to me. As long as you don't try to cuddle and surprise me." She raised an eyebrow.

Dean started to laugh, but stopped when he heard Frank's voice.

"El!" he yelled from downstairs.

Ellen faced the door. "Up here."

Dean sat up. "No, don't tell him up here, we're on the bed. He's gonna get . . . Hey Frank."

"Dean." Frank approached Ellen, his face looked different, it looked worried. "Is Josh here?"

"No." Ellen asked as she slid off the bed walking around to him. "Frank what's wrong?"

"I had him scheduled to work until ten. I went home. He's not there. I called John Matoose. He said Josh never showed for his shift."

"Frank, calm down." Ellen placed her hands on his arms. "What could have happened to him. This is Beginnings."

"No. How could I do this." Frank shook his head. "How could I not check on him all day?"

Ellen closed her eyes. "A lot has happened. When is the last time you saw him?"

"Um." Frank tried to think. "I saw him right before two. He was stopping to see my dad. I have to find him." Saying no more, Frank turned and left the bedroom.

Ellen and Dean followed him.

As Ellen reached the last step, she ran forward stopping Frank from going out the door. "Frank, is there any chance he could have left like I did?"

"No El. Especially not today. Things are tightly watched. I have to find him." Frank looked panicked. "I have a bad feeling El. A really bad feeling. This isn't like Josh. God!" Frank ran his hand harshly across his face. "I feel like the worst parent. What if he's hurt, El. What if he's fallen and he's laying somewhere hurt? What if he's been laying there for hours, hoping someone can help him." He saw Dean through the corner of his eyes, grabbing his coat. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to help you look for him" Dean straightened his jacket collar. "If by some slim chance he *is* hurt, you'll need me. Get some flashlights, Frank, we'll search for him until we find him. All night if we have to. And I'm not letting you refuse my help."

"I'm not." Frank held his hand out to Ellen, placing it on her cheek. "I'll be back."

Ellen grabbed his hand holding it to her face. "You guys will find him. He'll be fine."

"He has to be El, or I'll never forgive myself." He kissed her quickly and headed to the door. "Ready, Dean?"

"Yep." Dean looked back one more time at Ellen, then followed Frank out. He saw it, though she hid it well from Frank, Dean saw the look in Ellen's eyes. She too was worried.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Frank squinted his tired eyes to the eastern sky. A sky that was just starting to grow light as he and Dean finished their climb to the top of the eastern section. "Josh!" Frank called out. His voice losing its enthusiasm and gaining a raspiness from calling out all night.

"You think he's up here?" Dean asked. A slip of the rocks and his foot slid to his right.

"I don't know." Frank looked around. "Josh! . . . Where else can he be? We've checked everywhere. We've been searching for almost seven hours. This is the last place."

"But what would he be doing up here?"

Frank shrugged. "Maybe hiding. He does that once in a while, but he always comes when I call. Josh!"

"I can't believe no one has seen him since yesterday afternoon. He has to be somewhere for crying out loud, this is . . ." With the sound of shuffling feet, Dean cried out as the rocky hillside began to give away and he slipped right along with the rocks that let loose. It all happened so fast. Feeling the terrifying helplessness of air beneath his feet, Dean, in a desperate attempt to stop his fall, reached up. His fingers clenched immediately to the ground above him gripping with a hold he did not have completely.

"I have you." Frank's strong hand wrapped immediately around his wrist. "I told you it was dangerous."

"You aren't kidding. I could have been killed."

"Nah, it's only fifteen feet. Just crippled." Frank began to pull him up.

"That's good to know." Feeling brave enough, Dean looked down see how far he was from the ground. "Oh my God. Stop."

"Stop?"

"Lower me Frank." Dean's spoke with a drop to his voice.

"Why would I . . ."

"Lower me down there."

*No. No!* Frank's heart raced. It pounded so loudly in his ears, every other sound around him became lost in a distance. *It couldn't be.* As he slid his stomach forward on the ground to lower Dean, his eyes peered over the small cliff and he saw what Dean did. There close to the edge, at the bottom of the rocky hillside, buried partially under dust and small rocks, lay Josh. Josh lay on his side, one arm above his head, his eyes closed. "No!" Frank released Dean. "No." Lifting himself to a kneel, Frank pounded his fist to the ground. He dropped his head in sadness, his forehead pressing against the cold hard earth.

## Druga-Marchetti/Circle of Justice

Dean stumbled as he picked himself up running over to Josh. A sickening feeling hit him as he knelt to him, brushing away the rocks and dirt from Josh's bruised and bloodied face. "Frank!"

"Don't tell me. Please don't tell me."

"Frank, I need you down here. He's alive!"

Frank peered over the cliff. Dean looked back up at him, a smile on his face as he lifted Josh's head. Frank immediately slid his body over and dropped down. In a tripping, yet excited manner, he raced over to Dean. his trembling hand reached down and touched Josh's face.

"He's alive Frank. He's alive."

^^^

It was so loud in the early morning silence of Beginnings. Henry could hear her, he knew it was Ellen. The thumping sound. Soles of her shoes hitting against the pavement. Steady, moving fast, growing louder, and then he saw her. Ellen was running, running faster then he had ever seen her. He moved from the front of the clinic to meet her in the street. "El . . ."

"Henry, where is he?" She asked in a panic.

"They're on their way with him."

"Oh, my God." She held up her bangs looking out into the empty street. "What happened?"

"El." Henry pulled her into him. "Let's go inside."

"I can't." She moved tighter into him, trying to stop her body from shaking. "I knew when they didn't come back something was wrong. Henry what did they tell you?"

"The same thing I told you. They found him and were bringing him to the clinic." He pulled her back slightly. "Let's go in and wait." He slid his hand down to hers, grabbing it.

Ellen knew as soon as they stepped into the clinic doors and saw Andrea and Jason waiting, wearing scrubs, that it was bad. "Andrea." She released Henry's hand. "What did they tell you. Please tell me."

"Ellen, Dean said he's been hurt bad. He's unconscious and they were bringing him in."

"Oh no." Ellen covered her face.

"Calm down we don't . . ." The crashing of the clinic doors drew both of their attention. Frank came pummeling in, Josh in his arms.

Ellen ran up to him, panic hit her as she saw Josh's arms dangling over Frank's. "Frank, Frank is he . . ."

Frank shook his head, laying Josh on the cart.

Andrea immediately, penlight in hand began to examine Josh. "Dean, what do we have?"

## Druga-Marchetti/Circle of Justice

"Pulse, and respiration are weak. Major fall, Andrea." Dean took off his coat and stood next to her. "Three, maybe four broken ribs. Left lung punctured. Head injury and definite sign of internal bleeding."

Andrea placed her stethoscope to his chest. "You're right about the lung. Left one is gone. Let's get him down to O.R. Stat. Get cleaned up, Doctor. Jason and I will begin."

"Right away." Dean began to follow, but was stopped by Frank.

"Dean. Thank you."

"No problem, Frank."

"Dean, take care of my kid. Please."

With a closed mouth, Dean nodded and backed up.

Ellen could barely breath as she watched Dean run down toward the operating rooms. There wasn't a part of her body that didn't shake, inside or out. Seeing Josh, so helpless, so motionless, broke Ellen's heart. As her head dropped, she felt Frank's hand lay firm on her shoulder. Silently, she turned to him, and fell into his arms.

With so much worry, Frank and Ellen did the only thing they could do . . . wait.

^^^

"Here's where we stand." Dean, still wearing his operating room garb, approached an anxious and waiting Ellen and Frank. "Josh is stable but he's far from out of the woods. We controlled the internal bleeding. But our main concern right now is the head injury. He has a fractured skull and now there is some swelling around the brain. We've relieved some of the pressure, but right now it's just a wait and pray situation. I'm sorry."

Frank raised his eyes. "Will he die, Dean?"

Dean didn't answer.

Ellen did. "No Frank. They did everything they could. He's gonna be fine. I believe that. I really believe that." She clung tightly to his arm.

"Right now . . ." Dean continued. "They're bringing him to a room. You can see him, but I think you Frank, should go home and get some sleep." He saw Frank shake his head. "Don't argue with me. While everything is stable, you rest. You still have this community to protect and you aren't going to be any good walking around like a zombie."

Frank took a deep breath. "Maybe you're right. But how could this much happen to him. It wasn't that far of a drop."

"I was hoping you could answer that." Dean said. "You know the area. Is there anywhere up there he could have gotten hurt, then when he was trying to make it back to us, he fell down the hill?"

"Possibly." Frank answered. "I uh, I can't think now. But why do

you ask that?"

"The fractured skull, broken ribs, hip injury, they all are on the left side. Indicating he fell on that side. I mean, that's the side he was laying on. So . . ." Dean paused with question in his eyes. "Where did the injuries from the right come from? He has a lot of them. We think he fell up there somewhere and stumbled over that hillside."

Frank raised his hands. He didn't have an answer or a comment for Dean. At that moment he couldn't think. His mind was too filled up with how Josh was right there and then.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The finding of Josh the day before. Joe's lack of recovery. Frank's lack of sleep and inability to concentrate on his work. All things that made George smile. He held his loaded revolver as he took his position. He peered at the second hand of his watch as it moved in a clicking motion to the twelve. George was ready. It was perfect. It was time.

^^^

Dean stopped in his stride as he walked into Josh's room. Frank stood at the foot of the bed, holding on to the edge, watching the young boy. "Frank, you look like shit."

Frank shifted his eyes, eyes that were usually dark, were even darker. "Thanks."

"Have you been sleeping at all?"

"Yeah." Frank reached forward grabbing Josh's foot. "No change?"

"I wouldn't say that. The swelling on the brain has gone down. It's a good sign." Dean closed one eye and nodded. "I really think he'll come to in another day or so."

Frank's face finally smiled. "Really?"

Dean held up two crossed fingers. "Let's hope." He stepped back. "I'll leave you alone . . . oh." He snapped his finger. "I apologize. I do have good news. I think, no, I know, Joe is starting to get feeling in his right little finger. I was touching him with the lance and it twitched."

"You think he's coming back?"

"Yes I do. I've been checking his blood levels. That . . . virus seems to be decreasing in strength."

"You aren't giving up on that, are you? I mean, even if my dad beats it, someone else may not be strong enough to."

That thought had never occurred to Dean. The thought that George could possibly do it to someone else. "No Frank. I'm not giving up on it. I think you need a pick me up. Why don't you come with me and I'll show you Joe's progress."

"Yeah. I'd like that." He squeezed Josh's foot one more time and followed Dean. He stopped dead in his tracks when his he got the call.

Breaking up a bit, they called to him, and Frank new by the tone of their voice something had happened. "Frank. Frank this is tower one!"

Frank held his hand out, telling Dean to wait. "Yeah. I take it you see a SUT?"

"No Frank, not just a SUT, many. Frank. God Frank, there has to be

thirty, or forty. They just broke through the front tunnel gate.”

“Fuck!” Frank spun in a circle. “How . . . how did . . .”

“Somehow they downed the perimeter. They came from no where.”

“Lower the hatch.” Frank ordered.

“Can’t. It’s somehow . . . jammed. ETA three minutes.”

“Son of a bitch!” Frank switched to all call. “Squad four, Squad four. Take your positions at the front and STAT. Greg, Greg, come in.”

“Yeah, Frank. I’m on my way.” Greg called out.

“Greg. We have them coming through the tunnel. Fire at will. I repeat, Fire at will.” Frank took off running down the hall.

“Frank.” Dean followed him. “What can we do.”

“We have . . .” Frank stopped walking again holding tight to the earphone. “Yes Tower two.”

“Frank.” Steve called out. “They’ve taken the back gate. Fifteen maybe twenty, and they have a truck. They just rolled right in.”

Shaking his head in disgust, he had to stop and think. “Cole did you hear.”

“I already have my men arming up. They’ll be ready.”

“Excellent. But, if the gas does not work, pull out. We’ll take them out in town. And move the field workers not immune to the stuff out of there.” With heart racing, Frank thought of the next move. “Squad five. Head to center town on the double. Meet me and John at the armory. Now!” Frank looked down at his watch. “Dean.” He faced him. “Anyone in the front of this building. Move them to the back now. Get ready on the outside chance we have casualties.”

“I’ll do that. What about the people working in town?”

“I’ll send a man out to tell them to stay put. That gas of yours should stop them from going any further. Shit! How did they break the perimeter?” With the glass doors to the clinic not far from them, Frank switched the channel on the radio to the monitor room.

“Oh Henry let me see.” Ellen walked with him from the containment building.

“No, El.” He slipped a small cloth wrapped item in his front pocket. “I worked really hard on that transmitter. You’re gonna have to wait until we get to the clinic and see.”

“Will it work? Will we be able to locate Marcus if he speeds away again?”

“That’s what I’m hoping. Although I don’t . . .” Henry’s expression dropped when he heard the sound of gunfire, and it didn’t seem to be in the distance, it seemed close. “What the hell?”

Frank heard the gunfire too. He looked with oddity as his hands reached for the double glass doors. "That sounded close."

"Real close." Dean commented.

"Status, someone get me a status." Frank called out, a pause of silence. "There shouldn't be gunfire they're using the gas. . . . Status!"

A hiss in his ear, then a panicked voice. "This is Dan. Frank . . . Frank . . . ten of them just came up from the tunnels. They're shooting like mad."

With a fling of the clinic doors Frank barreled out, revolver held high.

"Henry?" Ellen saw the look on his face, then saw something else. "Oh shit."

Henry looked to where she pointed. A SUT, aiming high, pointed their way. Reaching for his own revolver from his waist, Henry stepped in front of Ellen when it happened. A shot fired out. Before Henry could even draw his weapon, it nailed into him with such force, it was like a blast of red water sprang out from the right side of his chest. His hand began to topple the weapon and it finally dropped from his grip when his body took another hit. Blood sprayed outward from the close range impact. Jolting, Henry began to fall as another bullet seared into his right thigh. As he fell to his knees he heard Ellen scream, he looked up to see the SUT aiming for his final blow. And in one sight, one blurry sight, he watched the head of the SUT explode as he hit the pavement and felt Ellen cover her body over his.

"Henry." She covered him, running her hand over his head. "Henry. Oh God. Answer me."

Frank saw another heading toward them, like the SUT he just dropped, Frank swung to his right, aiming like only Frank could do and taking him too, out with one shot. "El!" That was where he had to be. Gun fire rang out all around. He raced over to her as she laid protectively over Henry.

"Frank." Her words tearful. "Help him."

Her slow raising eyes held warning to Frank. The horror, the fear. He spun around, weapon ready just in time. Firing once, he took out the ensuing soldier. Relieved, he spotted Dan. "Dan! Henry's down!" Frank checked in every direction. Where was the firing coming from?

"We couldn't get into armory." Dan raced to them. "John Matoose got held up in the field. Our men are at a loss without weapons. So I sent them to the field and front gate to help."

"Good thinking." Frank reached to Ellen, she swiped him away.

"I took out two." Dan stated bending down for Henry.

"I got three . . ." Frank fired. "Make that four." He reached his hand down to Ellen. "El, get up. And run back to containment. Now!"

"No." She argued. Raising up so Dan could lift a motionless Henry. "I'm going to the clinic."

"El, go back. Now!" Frank ordered her. "Now!"

"No." She charged past him following Dan.

"Son of a bitch." Frank reached out to her, swept her up into his arms and spun to containment. "I told you to go to where it was . . ." On his fourth step with her he felt it, the painful shot to his shoulder. "Fuck, now I'm hit again." He raced toward containment. "If you would have just . . ." His eyes opened in horror as Ellen's head slumped. The bullet passed through him and hit her. Blood poured from her head "No!" Feeling her arm drop, Frank raced with his heart back to the clinic. As he reached for the doors, the force of another shot to his arm, knocked him forward nearly causing him to drop her. Adjusting Ellen, he fled inside. "Dean!"

Dean heard the panicked call of Frank as he was examining Henry. "Andrea take over." He raced to the hall and saw. He felt as if every bit of his insides hit the floor. "No! No!"

"Dean." Frank's breathing was so heavy, so rattled. "She's hit."

"No." Dean reached out, all he saw was her hair. Her blonde hair turned red. He saw the blood on Frank. "Please tell me this is your blood, not hers."

Frank raised his sad eyes to meet Dean's. "Both."

"This way." Scared, Dean led him to an examining room. "Lay her down."

"Dean is she?"

Dean's hands went immediately to her head, moving frantically her wet bloodied hair that stuck to her. Finding her wound sent a message to Frank. Dean's shoulders dropped, he let out a breath of alleviation as he clutched her face and dropped his head to hers. "It grazed her."

Frank's eyes closed. "Thank God."

"She'll be all right." Dean stood up then looked to Frank's wounds. "You've been hit."

"Twice." Frank began to reload his weapon. "Stay with her. I have to take them out." His back slammed open the door as he charged through it. Racing loudly, boots stomping, Frank was ready when he stepped out of the clinic. "The gas." He called into his radio. "The Gas. Have we used it yet? Someone answer me."

Coles voice began breaking up. "We got them at the back. All secure, Frank. They just dropped like flies."

"Yes." Frank moved out into the street, turning in circles looking



around. "Front gate?"

"Dead. They're all dead."

Through the gun fire that still rang out in town, Frank dodged shots, covered his head and ran down to the armory. Unlocking the steel door as he fumbled to the keys, Frank opened it just as a high pitched impact dented the steel frame not inches from his head. Inside he found them quickly. An M-203, and a box of Dean's chemical. Loading up the weapon and taking extra cans, Frank with animalistic rage, burst into the street holding the weapon high. Aiming up, he depressed the trigger to his weapon. With a pop of the gas can, Frank, like a second hand to a watch, spun quickly to his right, loaded another can, fired, and spun again. He turned full circle until he used them all. The silence of the shooting bullets, the silence of Beginnings told him they had won. At least this time they had. Lowering the gun, and trying to comprehend the rush that just happened, Frank headed back to the clinic. Crossing the street he finally saw what had transpired in the sanctity of his home. Two men lay shot in the street, numerous SUTs lay disintegrating on the ground. He could see the closer he made it to the clinic, the dripping remains from one of their enemy, slide from the roof down the side of the library building. Sickened in his heart and soul, he reached for the clinic doors. As he did, a jeep pulled up, John Matoose drove, Cole in the seat next to him.

"Frank." John jumped out. "I need help. I have three shot here."

Frank stepped back down, walking emotionless, still in a state of shock, he lifted one of the injured men from the jeep. Carrying him inside, Frank's head dropped, he wasn't even feeling the pain from his arm. He had to take a moment, he had to figure out how it happened. How did they break the perimeter. A perimeter many have tried to conquer before. How did they gather without notice and make their approach without ever being seen. Everything was done with ease. Too much ease. Beginnings was ready. Too ready. Moving down the hall, his chest heavy with each footstep he took to find Ellen, Frank searched for the answers. His gut called to him what those answers were. His instincts finally told him the cause of it all. Or rather . . . who was the cause.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

"Hold still." Jason hit Frank on the side of the head with the tweezers. "I'm almost done."

"Just hurry."

"I'm moving as fast as I can. If you wouldn't have taken so long to come in here, these would come out easier."

"I had things to handle."

"Got it." Jason paused, holding up the casing to his eye level, he stared at it briefly then dropped it into the basin. It clinked loudly.

"How's my wife?"

"Ellen is fine. She's come to." Jason reached for the sutures. "Dean just went back to her to get her cleaned up."

"How's Henry?"

"Surprisingly well. He handled the surgery remarkably." Jason dabbed some blood away from Frank's wound. "He should be out of the anesthetic soon." He began to stitch. "He's a very lucky man. It could have been worse. The one to the upper chest area, left minimal damage. His leg will give him some trouble for years to come." He finished up. "May I ask you something Frank, without setting you off?"

"You can try."

"O.K." Jason stepped before him folding his arms. "Being that we have known these scientist want Beginnings to rebuild their own population. And knowing that they had the capabilities to make more SUTs, as you call them. Why, when we took out the Colorado site, did we not take out New Mexico."

"We were going to, then my Dad got sick. George canceled our raid. He said it wasn't necessary. And I warned him, I warned him this was coming. He canceled every defense idea I had. Shot them down. Was so sure they weren't attacking, that he refused to let us do anything that could stop them. Seems George was so determined to bring me down, he was allowing Beginnings to be set up in the . . ." Frank slid from the table. "Fuck. Fuck."

"What's wrong?"

Frank began to pace. "I can't believe how stupid I have been."

"Frank, what . . ."

"I have to take care of something." Frank grabbed his shirt and walked to the door. "Thanks, Jason. Thanks for the voice of reason."

"The voice of . . ." Jason jumped when the door slammed. ". . . reason? I don't think I made you reasonable. I think I worked you up." He grabbed the basin that held Frank's bullet. "Just like Dean said." He held it up with the tweezers. "Better let him know I got another one."

^^^

Frank headed to the regular rooms of the clinic. He had made a pass to see Ellen, but she was still being worked on. Wanting to put the waiting time to good use, Frank walked into Henry's room. He had to see him. "Hey." Frank spoke softly as he neared the bed. Henry was sleeping. "Just wanted to check on you. I'll be back."

"Frank?" Henry spoke sounding groggy and raspy. He opened his eyes slightly. "What's up?"

"Henry." With a smile Frank moved closer. "How are you feeling?"

Henry grunted, his eyes barely opened. "I've been better. Did we get them?"

"Yep. All of them. Not without injuries though. Henry, I want to tell you something. I want to tell you how proud I am of you. I saw what you did. I saw how you stood in front of my wife. You saved her life. And I will never forget that. Ever." Frank reached down and grabbed his hand. "I wouldn't have her if it wasn't for you. However . . . she still got shot in the head when I was carrying her."

"Oh my God." Henry's eyes opened.

"She's fine. Figures though, she has such a hard head the bullet reflected right off of it." Frank smiled. "I'll let you rest."

"Thanks." Henry closed his eyes.

"One more thing, if I can talk to you about it . . . Henry? Henry? Henry, I'm talking to you. Quit falling asleep."

"Frank please, I've been shot."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. I'll stop by later. I'll run it by Dean and see . . ." Frank saw that Henry had passed out again. Shrugging, he left the room, to go back to Ellen.

^^^

John Matoose reviewed the status reports of the men as he reached for the door knob of Joe's office. "George." He called out, eyes still peered to the sheet as he walked in. "I have those . . ." His head lifted. "Holy mother of God." The office was in total disarray. "George?"

A moan came from the floor.

"George!" John ran over to him, he saw his bleeding head. "What happened." He helped George to his feet.

"Frank." George grabbed his head. "I must have passed out. He came in here raging. He blamed me for the attack. John, he went crazy. Tore up the office, threw me around."

## Druga-Marchetti/Circle of Justice

“No.” John’s shoulder’s dropped. “How could he do this?”

“He’s lost it. I want him gone now. You know the rules. You go get him. You are now head of security. You get him so we can throw his ass out of here.”

“George are you . . .”

“Now!” George struggled. “Get six or seven men together. Frank will be hard to bring down. Now . . . Could I get you to help me to the clinic.”

“Yeah.” John took hold of his arm and began to lead him away.

^^^

Holding the silver basin in his hand, Dean stood in the room with Ellen. He stared down to that basin, rolling its contents back and forth, making an annoying clinking sound.

“Dean!” Ellen yelled at him. “I have a headache. Stop playing with the toy Jason just gave you.”

“Sorry.” He rolled it one more time then sat it on the counter. He walked over to the bed with her. “As I was telling you, you can leave as soon as we see you’re fine.”

“I’m fine. Just bitchy.”

“Hence the reason I got you cleaned up before you woke.” He grabbed a comb. “I figured, knowing you, if you saw yourself . . .” He began to run the comb through her wet hair. “. . . you would bitch.”

“Why are you combing my hair like I’m your daughter?” She snatched up the comb.

“Sorry. Habit.”

Ellen took over combing her hair. “But I appreciate you cleaning me up. You didn’t touch my body in some perverted way while I was passed out did you?”

Dean smiled and raised his eyebrows.

“Oh, are you sick.” She flicked the comb at him. “Either way. It was nice of you. And you even washed my hair.”

“I didn’t mind.”

“I didn’t think you would have.” She tucked her hair behind her ears. “I used to think when we lived together you had a secret desire to be a hairdresser. You used to like washing my hair.”

“No, Ellen.” Dean stepped closer placing his hands on her knees. “I just used to love taking baths with you.”

With a loud exhaling breath, Frank entered the room in his usual bad timing manner. “You know . . .” His loud voice made his announcement. “It is amazing the things you find out when you just walk in a room

unexpected.”

Dean turned his head to him. “It’s amazing what you don’t find out if you would just knock.”

“Get your hands off my wife, Dean.” Frank walked up to Ellen and kissed her. “How’s your head?”

“Good.” Ellen touched her temple. “How’s your arm?”

“Good.” Frank lifted her hair. “Do you realize we created a new bond? We shared a bullet. Pretty impressive. Huh?” Frank nodded his head, his hands on his hips. “What do you think, Dean?”

“I think you guys needed another bond.” Dean said sarcastically. “Cement things back together.” He rolled his eyes.

“I agree.” Frank clapped his hands once. “However, not to change the subject, but, I need to speak to you Dean.”

“Uh oh, about what?” Dean asked.

Frank looked at Ellen and took a deep breath. “You’re level headed, and you’re an original. I’m gonna run something by you and you give me your best and most honest opinion.”

“Wow, sounds serious.” Dean folded his arms. “Shoot.”

“Now, don’t laugh until you hear me out.” Frank held up his hands. “I was thinking, that perhaps George had a lot to do with the attack today on Beginnings. Think about it. The way he just took right over when my dad got sick. The way he let everything just go to shit, and he stopped every . . .”

“I absolutely agree.” Dean stated in his interruption.

“You do?” Frank asked surprised.

“You do?” Ellen asked also.

“I do. And . . . I think that has a lot to do with why he wants you out of the way. You’re a threat to his plan. That’s why I kept telling you to bide your time. Don’t give him what he wants.”

Frank breathed outward in relief. “So it’s been crossing your mind also.”

“For a while.”

Ellen’s loud ‘Hey’ grabbed both of their attention. “Why didn’t you tell me this, Dean?”

“Because you have a big mouth.” Dean answered. “And you Ellen, keep telling George shit.”

Frank held his hand up. “Wait a second. You have suspected George for awhile and you haven’t said anything to me? Why?”

“Because Frank, without proof, you would go after him and you’d be thrown out. We need you. And . . . I have to show you something.” He walked to the table and grabbed the basin. He handed it to Frank. “Take a look. Recognize these?”

Frank reached into the basin. His forefinger and thumb gripped a

shell casing. "E.G., Initials, yeah these are Edward's shells he makes. Beginnings shells. Where did you get them, from a SUT?"

"Nope." Dean shook his head. "Two of them came from Henry. One came from you. You were hit with friendly fire, Frank. Any chance you guys got caught in a cross fire?"

"No way." Frank looked at the casing. "These are revolver shells. There are eight issued revolvers. My dad, Henry, myself, Greg, Dan, Cole and . . . Fuck."

"George?"

Frank clanked the shell in the basin. "Son of a bitch. Fuckin George is a dead man. I'm gonna kill him."

The stern, monotone sound of John Matoose in the room, startled everyone. "Haven't you done enough already Frank?"

Frank turned around. "Excuse me?"

"Haven't you done enough already?" John walked into the room. "I just brought George into the clinic. He's been beat up. Says you did it? Any idea why he'd say that?"

"He's fuckin over the edge, that's why he'd say that."

"No, Frank." John walked closer to him, speaking more gruff. "You . . ." He pointed to him. "Are over the edge. Why would you do it?"

"I didn't do it." Frank gave a blow off attitude.

"Then where have you been? I've asked around. You just got here a half hour ago. Where were you? Account."

"No. I will not account for my whereabouts to you. You work for me, remember?"

"Not anymore." John stated. "Give me your gun. I need your gun, keys and headset."

"John, this is ridiculous . . ."

"No! I'll tell you what's ridiculous!" He shouted at Frank. "You went after an old man. An old man, Frank. And you stand here and deny it. Everyone heard you do nothing but threaten him lately. I just heard you now! Now hand over you equipment, you're coming with me." John held out his hand. "Now Frank. Don't make me call the men to have you dragged from here."

With a frustration breath, Frank took off his head set. He handed that, his keys and his revolver to John. "I'll go with you. But you tell me where."

"Where do you think?" John spoke coldly. "We have rules in Beginnings Frank. Rules. And breaking those rules means one thing." He grabbed for Frank's arm. "George has moved for your immediate ousting."

"No!" Ellen, knees buckling, reached and in a desperate pull for Frank. "John there's a mistake!"

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John stuck his face forward to her. "Let him go, Ellen!" He shouted.

"John!" Frank snapped back. "Don't. Leave her alone. I'm going with you. . . El. It'll be all right." He started to walk with John.

Dean moved forward. "Wait. John, can I have one minute with Frank? One minute?"

John hesitated, seemingly aggravated. "One minute." He stepped from the room.

Dean immediately closed the door. "Frank . . ."

"I didn't do this, Dean. I did not do this." Frank grabbed hold of Ellen who clung to him.

"I know this, you don't have to tell me that." Dean assured. "Look, they won't be able to oust you, not yet. Henry's down. No way will Andrea vote for it. Rules say three days until it can be put to community vote."

"I know." Frank rubbed his own eyes. "But what do we do?"

"Put your faith in me and Ellen. We'll get you out of this. We'll get the proof. I promise."

Frank swallowed harshly. "I'll hold you to that."

The door opened up. "Time." John immediately pulled Frank from Ellen.

"Frank." Ellen ran to him. "Frank."

"El." His hand slid across her face as he was pulled further and further away. "I love you. It'll be all right."

Ellen's body shook, her breathing went out of synch. She shuffled around in total confusion watching Frank disappear down the hall. "What's happening? Oh, God they took him."

"Shh." Dean walked up behind her and wrapped his arms tightly around her, holding her still, trying to calm her down. "We'll help him. We'll get him out of this."

^^^

Andrea placed the final bandage to George's forehead. "Nothing major, just a scratch."

"I thought I was a dead man the way he raged after me."

Andrea shook her head. "I'm going to apologize right here and now. But, I'm having a hard time believing this."

"Are you saying I'm lying?" George asked.

"No." Andrea shook her head. "Perhaps, you're upset and things seem worse than they actually were."

"I do not exaggerate. Take a look at my office . . ."

"Joe's office." Andrea corrected him. "And, I know Frank. I just don't think he'd do this without reason. Maybe you should just sit back and

think of why.”

“Why are you defending him? He nearly killed me.”

“I thought you don’t exaggerate?” Andrea tilted her head. “O.K., tension is high. We sustained an attack. His wife was shot. Henry was shot. And didn’t you, George, hold off a lot of his strategies?”

“Well, yes . . .”

“Then let this go.” Andrea took her tray of supplies and walked it over to the counter.

“I will not.” George slid off the table. “He is a time bomb. A threat, and I want him gone.”

“He is an original and you will not get my support!” Andrea shouted.

“I won’t need it.” George, in a huff, walked from the room.

Slamming her hand on the counter, Andrea flipped over her supply tray and its contents spilled to the floor. “Damn it!” She bent down to pick them up. “Damn it, Frank. What did you do?”

^^^

John Matoose unlocked the thick metal door and opened it wide. “In here.”

Frank shook his head in disgust. “You’re putting me in holding like some sort of survivor gone bad?”

“No, like an original gone bad.”

“I didn’t do this, John. Come on, it’s me. If I did, I’d own up to it.”

“I heard you just say George is a dead man, and that you were going to kill him.”

“Because George is the cause of all this. All of this. He let the SUTs in.”

“Listen to you, Frank. Do you know how stupid that sounds?”

“No.” Frank shook his head. “Just think about it John. The scientists want this land. We weren’t allowed to take out the rest of the scientist. We haven’t been allowed to do anything tactical when it comes to dealing with the SUTs. George wouldn’t allow it.”

“I’m not going to listen.” John pushed him back and shut the door.

“John!” Frank called from the other side. “He used us to start his project until the scientists awoke. Now he wants to put his plan in motion and we’re making it hard.”

“Stop it. What proof do you have? How can you say this?” John locked the door.

“It makes perfect sense. He had to know the whole time. Come on John, he was the president. He sought out people to work this. You know this, you were . . .” Frank stopped talking, he slid his hands down the steel



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door. He turned his back and leaned against it, speaking softly to himself. “You were there. You were with him.” Frank closed his eyes. “Son of a bitch.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Ellen's eyes were starting to cross from sitting at the computer, continuously striking out. She even went backwards into the dictionary, picking up the little words--words she skipped because they seemed too simple--and she tried them.

Needing to get air, Ellen made her way to the line of utility buildings. Her foot tapped a few times as she stood before Frank's office door. She was a bit nervous, anxious was more like it. She needed to see Frank. She needed to know how he was. If only just to ease her mind so she could go back to work.

Hating to knock on an office door, that at that moment no longer belonged to her husband, Ellen swallowed her pride and banged.

"Come in." John yelled from the other side.

Ellen rolled her eyes in disgust, opened the door, and smiled. "Hi John."

"Ellen." He lifted his eyes from his paper work. "What can I do for you?"

In a breath-type whisper, Ellen spoke. "I would like to see Frank."

"Nope." John kept writing.

"He didn't do anything, John."

"Right, Ellen. Have you seen George?"

"George banged his own self on the head. Just like he told everyone I blew . . ."

"Listen to you, you sound as crazy as your husband. Leave." John tried to work.

Ellen nodded her head, she told herself she wouldn't get anywhere if she got upset. "I want to see him. Take me to holding and let me speak to him."

"No." John spoke firm. "Rules are rules."

"Break the goddamn rules."

"Ellen!" John rose up from his seat. "Breaking rules is what got Frank into this mess. Now leave."

"I need to see my husband."

"You need to leave." John glared at her with full eyes.

"Why are you being such a dick? Are you enjoying taking my husband's job?" Ellen marched to the desk. "The desperate flunky finally has a shot at the big time and he doesn't want to give it up?"

"Leave before I throw you out."

She thought of a different approach. "Come on John!" Ellen pleaded. "Please. Please let me see him. This is Frank." Ellen's hand came

down, but she bit her lip. "I got angry. I insulted you. Be human and let me see him."

"I won't." John sat back down. "Maybe Ellen, maybe if you didn't carry yourself with such a bad attitude, I may have let you see him. Now see . . ." John shook his head. "Frank can't see his wife, because his wife is an aggressive, obnoxious, loud mouth, who doesn't know when to quit."

"And you know what John? Your wife is a fuckin nosey, conceited, whale of a bitch, but if that was you in there, Frank would let her in." Ellen moved to the door. "That's because my husband is a much better man than you." She opened the door. "Enjoy sitting in that chair John. It won't be for long." She slammed the door loudly, pausing in her walk to look to the entrance of the holding center. A guard stood out front. She took a deep breath knowing asking him would be in vain, and she headed back to town. She pulled her jean jacket closer to her, walking backwards, continuously watching the holding center. She knew as she walked, she may have swung and missed, but she hadn't struck out--not yet.

^^^^

Joe knew as soon as he saw Ellen walk into the room, something was wrong. It could have been the square bandage on her head, but more so it was her expression.

"Hey, Joe." Ellen knelt down next to him. "It's been a bad day." She grabbed his hand. "I've been walking around for over an hour trying to figure out how to tell you this." She pressed her lips to his hand. "The SUTs attacked Beginnings this morning, they came from everywhere. We beat them, but not without problems." She shrugged while tracing tiny circles with her finger on the back of his hand. "Henry got shot up pretty bad. Frank got shot in the arm. And look." Ellen pointed to her bandage. "I got shot in the head. Do you believe that?"

Joe wanted to smile for her, he wanted to make her feel better. But he knew by the tone of her voice, she was saving the worst for last.

"Joe. Frank, and Dean think George is behind this all. I believe them. George said Frank beat him up. They've . . . they've put him in holding, Joe. They want to oust him."

*They can't do that Ellen. Joe told her through his mind, wishing she could hear. They can't. But if they do, I'll be out of this soon. My arm moves now. It moves. I just can't take a chance of anyone finding out. I have to let it come back. And when it does, if my son is gone, we will bring him back.*

"I have to help him, Joe. I have to help him."

"We will, El." Dean stepped in the room. "Don't worry. We'll break

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that password soon and we'll have the proof we need."

"Yeah." Ellen nodded slowly and stood up. "In fact, I want to get back to that. Go with me?"

"Sure." Dean gave a nod and laid his hand on Ellen's back. "How far are you?"

"Halfway through the letter 'L'."

"Then let's get cracking." Dean told her.

Joe listened to them with fear. *No Dean, forget the password. I'll be better soon. I will. Don't do that.* Joe felt as if he would die when he watched them leave the room. *Please dear God Stop them.*

^^^

George had to admit to himself, that he was starting to get really good thoughts when Ellen failed to emerge from the tunnel at a decent intervals. But she failed him, she came top side. He stood far back, lurking like a stalker in the shadows, watching Ellen move toward the clinic. Her head hung low, an air of sadness about her. How much time she had spent in the cryo-lab, how much further she should be. Though the thought of her not finding the truth and dying right away annoyed George, he took stock in the fact that it wouldn't be much longer. And that made George smile.

^^^

The sound of walking awakened Henry. He heard the faint footsteps drawing nearer. His sleep wasn't that heavy, anything usually would wake him, but this evening it was worse. Henry hated the fact that he kept dozing off, sleep was not something he preferred to waste his time on. He opened his eyes and turned his head to the door when he heard the feet stop so close to his room. Henry looked up and saw the figure which was a shadow from the hall light that cast behind it "El?"

"You're awake." Ellen stepped into the room. "I've been trying to see you." He pulled up a chair. "But every time I peek in the room you're sleeping." She grabbed his hand. "How are you, Henry? How are you feeling?"

"Sore, but fine. I heard you got shot too."

"Look." Ellen pointed. "I got shot in the head. Quite the accomplishment. Not many people who are walking around can say they got shot in the head. But . . ." She lifted his hand. " . . . I came to talk to you. Did they tell you? Did they tell you about Frank?"

"What about Frank?"

"He's in holding. They want to oust him."

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Henry closed his eyes. “El, they can’t do that. I’ll vote against it, Andrea will too. And if it goes to the community, it will never pass. The men are too dedicated to him.”

Ellen shook her head. “I don’t believe that. I don’t think it will make a difference what everyone decides. If George can set him up to be ousted. George can have him ousted.”

“What do you know about George?”

“That you and Dean have been trying to prove his part in the whole plague thing.”

“We haven’t had any luck.”

“Not for long. In fact . . .” Ellen stood up. “I have to go down to the lab and work some more. Get well, Henry.” Ellen leaned over to him and kissed him. “I need you. Frank needs you.”

“I’ll be better soon, I promise.” Henry closed his mouth and smiled a reassurance smile at her. He watched her leave and rested his head back. Then against what he wanted and strived for, he fell back asleep.

^^^

Ellen was surprised as she opened the door and the light was still on, more so surprised at the fact that Dean was reading something on the couch. “You’re still up?”

Dean turned his head back to her. “Yeah. I was waiting for you.” He set his book on the coffee table.

“Kids asleep?” Ellen took off her jacket and sluggishly she moved to the couch and sat down next to Dean.

“Yep. Tucked in. No luck?”

She shook her head and sat back. “They still won’t let me see Frank.”

“El? You didn’t try again after they sent me to come and get you?”

“Twice.”

“Oh, El.” Dean covered his face. “Did you get out of control again?”

“No . . . not really.”

“You’re not helping your cause. You’ve screwed it with John. Besides, what did I tell you about him? There is a very good chance he’s in on it all.”

“That would be par for the course.” Ellen leaned into Dean. “Do you think it’s possible that if John’s a part of it, so is Jenny. Then we can oust them both if and when we get the proof.”

“You would love that.” Dean smiled. “I’ll let you think that way too because it makes you happy. Listen . . . go to bed. We have another long day ahead of us. We have to help Frank out.”

“I know. And I will go to bed. But . . . can I just sit with you. Just a

little?”

“Sure.”

Ellen slid her head down and rested it on his lap. Like a child, she curled up in a ball, clinging to his leg. “I’m so scared for him, Dean.”

“Me too.” Dean closed his eyes and swallowed as he ran his hand down her hair. “Me too.”

^^^

One-fifteen A.M. was the time when Frank looked at his watch for the umteenth time. He had paced so much around the small holding room that he could have sworn he wore a hole in the floor. It was cold in holding, and there wasn’t anything Frank could do. No blanket on the bed, no coat. He still wore the bloody tee shirt he had on when he was shot.

He rubbed his arms with a chill as he leaned against the steel door. Almost in defeat, Frank slid to the floor. He sat, legs bent up arms crossed over his knees, and he rested his head on his arms. He raised his tired eyes to look once more around the room. As the reality hit him, so did the fear. His chest filled with the heaviness of it. It was real. It was really happening. And suddenly it dawned on him, if he had reached this point, how far out of the question would it be for him to be completely taken out.

Frank closed his eyes tightly, he didn’t want to look anymore. He didn’t want to think that the holding room could very easily be the last vision he would ever see if his home . . . Beginnings.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

"Damn it." Ellen cursed with aggravation as she fought desperately to remove her blood samples from her phlebotomy tray. There weren't that many of them, but she could barely hold them in her trembling hands. As she reached for the next one, a hand came down gripping hers. A hand so familiar, she could have sworn it was Frank's. She peered upward, her eyes following his forearm. "Johnny."

"You O.K.?" He took the sample from her hand.

"Just trying to get out of here to go back down in the lab. Did you take your father his clothes. I need him to change that shirt, I don't want him getting an infection."

"Yes, Ellen. I gave it to the guard. Why didn't you take it up?"

"Because I'd want to see him. They won't let me. John Matoose refuses to let me."

"He what?!" Johnny yelled, sounding so much like Frank. "We'll just see about that. Come on." He grabbed her hand, and in a pull, led her hurriedly from the lab.

With a loud bang of his fist to his dad's office door, Johnny flung the door open. "John!" He stepped inside. "Give me the keys to holding!"

"First off young man, you don't come in here barging like . . ."

"I'm not fucking around John!" Johnny glared down to him, his hand pointing downward. "Give me the keys!"

John hesitated in his answer, staring at Johnny. At his dark face and mean eyes that matched that snarl upon his face. He had the frightening makings of Frank. "No." John shook his head.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Johnny shook his head, his finger tapping hard to the desk. "Maybe you didn't hear me correctly. This is not a request. If I have to beat the fuck out of you I will. Now you will *let* my mother see my father!"

"Don't threaten me, you punk. She can't see Frank and that is final."

It was a shock hearing her voice in the office at that time. It carried, though she didn't yell. It carried right into the room and definitely through John. "You are wrong!" Jenny stepped further into the office. "You hear me John? Wrong."

John peered up to his wife. "This is none of your concern, Jenny."

"The hell it isn't." Jenny was adamant. "These aren't strangers. This is family. This is a very serious situation. Let Ellen see Frank."

John was shocked. "I can't believe you are siding with her over me."

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"It's not about me and Ellen. This is different. That is your friend in there. And standing here is your friend's wife. You will let him see his wife, or at the very least, let him speak to her."

"I'll be breaking rules."

"Then you break them." Jenny flung her hair over to her side. "You break them or I will not speak to you. John, if I were in Ellen's shoes, and there was a threat of you being ousted. I would hope to God someone would at least let me see how you were doing. Do this John. Let them speak to each other. It isn't right if you don't."

John rose slightly from his chair, shaking his head in disgust. He pulled a key from the chain and handed it to Johnny. "This will open the building but . . . She can't see him. She can speak to him through the door. That's it."

Johnny gripped the key and grabbed Ellen. "Let's go."

In the middle of being pulled, Ellen stopped. "Thank you Jenny. Thank you very much." With a rush she ran from the building with Johnny.

^^^

Frank slipped his clean tee shirt over his head, smelling it as he did. He ran his hand over his wet hair that he had just washed in the water they brought him. And he paced some more.

"Frank."

The call of his name sent shivers through him. It made his heart drop to his stomach. "El." He spoke her name in such relief, spinning to a stop and racing to the door. "El." He placed his hands on it. "I needed to hear your voice. Oh God, did I need to hear your voice."

"I needed to hear yours, too. How are you Frank? How are you holding up?"

"I'm fine."

"They won't let me see you." She placed her palms flush on the door. "I need so bad to see you."

Frank shook his head, placing his cheek against the coldness of the steel. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

"They're voting tomorrow to oust me."

"It won't happen. It won't. I'm gonna get the truth, Frank. I promise you."

"But what if George finds a way to get rid of me anyhow?"

Ellen could hear the desperation in his voice. The fear, she knew he was scared, and he had all night alone to think about it. "Frank . . ."

"I'll die out there, El. I'll die out there. Without you, and my kids I'll



become nothing but one of those animals.”

“I won’t let that happen. I will work every second to get you out. Please know that.”

“I do.” He closed his eyes tightly.

“Just don’t give up on me. Don’t give up.”

Frank swallowed hard as he pressed his face firmer against the door. He couldn’t speak right then, he had to be quiet. He physically couldn’t speak. He stayed by that door trying to feel Ellen’s presence, because that was all he could do.

^^^

“They let me speak to, Frank.”

Dean turned slowly around to Ellen’s soft voice that carried into the cryo-lab. “When?”

“Just now.” Ellen walked in further. “And he’s scared. He won’t admit it, but I can tell.”

“And he has every right. They want to take him from his home. And that is so wrong.”

“I have to ask your opinion. We need proof to stop this..” She moved to him. “Do you think the proof will be found before tomorrow night?”

Dean lowered his head. “Probably not.”

“Next question. Do you think they’ll oust him?”

“I think . . .” Dean raised his eyes. “I think the community will vote to let him stay. But . . . I think George is going to find a way to get rid of him.”

“O.K.” Ellen took a breath. “Now that you’ve reconfirmed what I’ve been thinking. I need to talk to you.” She lifted his hands into hers. “I need to ask a short term favor.”

“Yes.” Dean answered her, his hand trembling as he did.

“I didn’t ask you yet.” Ellen said.

“I know what you are asking. You want to leave with Frank. And yes, I will take the children if you do so. I’ll take care of them all.”

“It won’t be for long. And I can’t let him go alone, Dean. I can’t. He needs to know we believe in him and he’s not alone in the world.”

“El.” Dean raised her hands to his mouth and kissed them. “You don’t have to explain anything to me. I understand.”

“I don’t get it.” Ellen tilted her head. “How did you know I was going to . . .”

“I know you. And if it were you faced with getting ousted. I would do the same thing. And so would Frank.”

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“Am I being a terrible mother for doing this?”

“No.” He shook his head. “You’re not giving them up for Frank. You’re just making sure when he comes back to them, he’s the same man that left.” Dean released her hands. “But . . . we won’t have to worry about it. I have a gut feeling El, we’re breaking it soon. Real soon.”

Ellen smiled. “I feel that, too.” She walked over to the computer Dean already had turned on. “Thanks again, Dean.”

Dean smiled and went back to his work, he couldn’t tell Ellen, but he hated the thought that she wanted to leave. But he stood behind her reasons for doing so. He himself even thought of going with Frank on the same premises that the proof wouldn’t be far behind. But Dean knew he couldn’t do that. He wasn’t the one Frank needed to make living beyond the walls of Beginnings tolerable. There was only one person who could--Ellen.

^^^

The loneliness of the night, the silence of holding, was far worse than the night before. Frank sat on the sheetless bed rubbing his arms to warm up. The heels of his boots dug into the mattress as he sat there. He didn’t want to sleep. Though he had caught himself dozing off. He wanted to be awake every last second that he was in Beginnings.

There was so much on his mind. His father, how was his. And Josh, was Josh better? Surely if he wasn’t, someone would let him know. His family, the family that had grown so big since they got to Beginnings. A part of him felt they were fine. How much he would just miss them all if he had to leave. Frank’s eyes raised as he rested his chin on his arms. The lock on the door had turned. The door slowly opened.

George walked in followed by John Matoose and Greg. “Frank.” George looked sternly at him.

“What’s going on?” Frank shifted his eyes about as Greg and John Matoose grabbed hold of both of his arms and took him from the bed. “What’s going on!”

George stood toe to toe with him. “We moved the vote up. It was cast tonight. You’ve been ousted.”

“No!” Frank felt himself being pulled. “Let me say good bye to my kids, to my wife.”

“No.” George stormed up to him. “You are out of here now. Right now! Get him out of here.”

“No!” Frank struggled but couldn’t struggle enough. They nearly carried him from holding. “No, John, Greg. I’ll go, just let me say goodbye to my family. Let me see my kids and wife one more time. I have to see them.”

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He tried with desperation to reason with them. But before he knew it, the back gate was opened and Frank was on the other side looking in. "No!" He cried out stepping to the fence. "El! Ellen!"

Frank's head sprang up from his arm where he had fallen asleep. He rubbed his eyes and stood from the bed. His heart pounding. It was all a dream. A bad dream. Or was it? Maybe it was a premonition of a reality not that far away.

^^^^

"Enough." Dean snatched the dictionary from Ellen's hand as she sat before the computer in the cryo-lab.

"Dean." She typed in another wrong word. "Give it back."

"Nope." He turned her to face him. "It's three in the morning. Time to come home and get some sleep."

"I can't." Ellen tried to return to the computer. "In sixteen hours they vote to oust Frank. I have to do this."

"Then do it first thing in the morning." Dean ran his hand through his messy hair. "Johnny came and got me and said he couldn't get you to leave."

"And neither will you. I'm staying here until I break this thing."

"El." Dean fought with her as she reached for the dictionary. "Look. Let's go home. We'll get up early, take the kids to the nursery and be down here by seven. You need to sleep. If you don't sleep you won't do this right. And I will stay with you down here the whole time."

"You don't have to."

"No I don't. But I want to. O.K.?" He tilted his head in a pleading way. "Please?"

"All right. One second." She tried one more word and the computer shut down. She placed her book mark in the dictionary and underlined her last word with the date. She set it down next to the computer. "Done."

"Good. Tomorrow is another day." Dean told her as he waited for her to stand. "Tomorrow is our day." Letting her lead the way out first, Dean shut out the lights and followed her down the tunnel.

George watched. He had been waiting for awhile, really thinking Ellen would hit it. He waited until they were completely far from the lab, then he went in and turned on the light. "Sorry Ellen, the suspense is killing me." He walked over to the computer and picked up the dictionary. "Now how close are you to the word 'murder'?" He flipped open to her mark and gazed his eyes down to her date. George smiled. "Very good, very good." He

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closed the book setting it right where she laid it. Satisfied and knowing it wouldn't be long, George left the cryo-lab. Yes Ellen was close. The last word she typed in was *mundane*.

CHAPTER THIRTY

It was surprising to Ellen, so surprising that it took away her concentration from her password hunt. Dean slamming the rabbit cage, not once but six or seven times. Following that through with swearing. Swearing? She flinched in her stool when she heard the crashing sound of breaking glass. "Dean?"

"Sorry." He began to put things back.

"What's going on?" She slid off her stool and walked over to him. "I'm the one supposed to be frustrated here."

"I'm sorry." He reached for a cloth and began to wipe up the clear substance he spilled on the counter. "I thought I had it. This would have just been so easy if it just would have . . ."

"Dean?"

"Nothing Ellen. I just thought that if I could pull Joe through this then he could get Frank out of this mess. George would be history and that password search obsolete."

"You were coming up with a wonder cure for stroke patients?"

Dean just tilted his head to her.

Ellen saw the look on his face "My father didn't have a stroke did he? The lifeless bunnies. Your obsession with them. How long have you known?"

"Awhile."

"That's why the vial information is so important. George gave my father something in those vials."

Knowing that it meant his head, Dean answered her anyway. "Yes."

"You know . . ." Ellen backed up. "I should be really pissed at you right now. Really pissed for not telling me. But I'm going to save it. You work on what you were doing and I'll work on the password." She went back to the computer and grabbed the dictionary. "Back to work. Murals."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing, just the word I'm on." Her fingers clicked fast. "Shit." As soon as her eyes peered upon the word, something stirred in Ellen. The book dropped from her hands and she closed her eyes. Her hands immediately folded before her face.

"What's wrong?" Dean noticed her from across the room.

"I'm praying." Ellen's mouth moved and her eyes stayed closed.

*What an odd vision*, Dean thought as he watched her finish, open her eyes and look at him. "Done?"

Ellen smiled at him. "I'm going to do this. And I'm going to do this right now."

“Why do you say that?”

“It’s perfect. The next word.”

“You’ve said that before.” Dean commented.

“I’ve never felt so strongly about it before.”

“You’ve said *that* before.”

“Have you ever seen me stop to pray?”

“No, that was a first.”

“I’m going to do this.” Ellen sat up straight and hesitantly began to type, speaking the letters out as she did. “M--u--r--d--e--r . . . enter.” Her eyes lit up. “Yes, it opened one.”

“Oh, it did not, you don’t even sound excited.”

“Dean, yeah it . . .” The loudest scream Ellen ever made, came from her mouth and she jumped up from the stool, squealing her voice with excitement. “Dean! Dean! It’s the vial information.”

Her sound, her face, she found it. “Print it up.”

“Thank you, God.” She hit the print button and raised her eyes to watch Dean excitedly run to the computer. “We did it, Dean. We have, one, two, three, four . . . shit, pages and pages of it. Complete break downs, what they are. Oh, this is so . . . Yes!”

“What?” Dean stood by the printer. Fingers tapping waiting for the slow printer.

“Page six. Population control conference proposal by Senator George Hadly. And it . . . Dean, this must be very important, I think this file is going to disappear.”

“Why would you say that?” Dean asked, the fourth page beginning to print.

“There’s two little timers on here. One says, two hours forty-two minutes. The other says . . .”

Dean quickly made it to the computer. “One minute three . . .” His eyes saw both timers and the name on the box that headed them. “Guardian Fulmination Program . . . oh shit, Ellen it’s gonna blew up!”

“Oh, quit being so melodramatic.”

*Forty-five seconds*

“Ellen!” He grabbed her and began to drag her out. “Fulmination, explosion, same difference, get the hell out.”

“You’re serious?”

*Thirty seconds*

“Leave.” Dean ran to the printer.

“No.” She followed him. “You’re waiting for this, I’m waiting, too.”

“Ellen, please.”

*Seventeen seconds.*

“No, Dean, we have enough time, it’s almost done, we just need to

see George's name."

The sixth page was half way finished. *Eight seconds.*

Dean's hand held onto the paper.

"There's his name." Ellen yelled. "Rip it!"

*Three seconds.*

With a dramatic running rip, Dean tore the paper, grabbed Ellen's hand and ran toward the door.

Times up.

A rumble, not very loud. The sudden vibration turned violent and the quiet chain of events began. As if an earthquake, the linoleum floor beneath them began to rock, so intense was it, that they couldn't make it half way across the room. With diligence they stumbled as they tried to make it across the floor that swayed them as if they were on an amusement park ride.

"Dean!" Ellen grabbed for the table, trying to pull herself up. "I can't walk."

"Keep trying." Dean shoved all the papers he had into his shirt and reached for her with both hands. Half standing himself, he grabbed hold of her tightly, hoping together they could make it the fifteen feet out.

They tried to move, unbalanced so much as they did, bits of the roof falling like snow upon their heads. Computers slid from the tables they sat on, crashing to the floor.

Dean turned his head to the loud crack he heard behind him. In horror he saw as the floor, in some sort of running motion, began to disappear and drop to some unknown origin below. Like a carpet of destruction it rolled right to them. "Jump!"

There wasn't time. On his order, the quaking, yet solid ground they stood on--was gone. Smoke and air was all they laid under them. Dean dropped first. With desperate reaching hands, and instinct, he reached out to anything that fell around him. In his favor the caving of the floor stopped. Dean's hand slipped in the open space, clinging to the concrete. The moment his fall halted, over his head tumbled Ellen. Rolling down with her into the cavern below, a table and a computer.

Dean tried to reach her with his free hand, she slipped right from him. He wasn't fast enough. He watched her fall in a roll to the ground below, tucking her body into a ball and moving quickly out of the way of a large piece of floor that came pummeling down.

With a loud metal bending sound. Dean's safety, he's sanctuary, gave way and he too fell right along with it.

^^^^

"By now . . ." George looked down at his watch. "It should all be over with." He stood before a sitting Joe in his usual taunting manner. "Last

count, Ellen had twelve more words to get to it. I'm assuming she hit it as we speak." George raised his eyebrows. "Then of course if the fall doesn't get them, the second explosion will. Unless of course someone happens to go down there. But who would do that? Henry's shot." George tsked. "Frank, well, Frank is locked safely away. And no one really cares enough about those two to check on them. Two hours is nothing. However, when they don't emerge for a while, I'll suggest we look for them and then I'll have to do that fake concern shit." George rested his hand on Joe's knee.

*I felt that you son of a bitch, I felt that.* It took everything in Joe's power not to move his leg in disgust, giving himself away, and setting himself up for another fall.

"Anyway, Frank will be gone tonight. And Henry, Henry will just have to suffer a really bad infection. We have those in those vials you know. Hey . . ." George snapped. "That would mean pretty much all of the originals will be biting it. Do you realize Miguel was the first original I took care of? I liked Miguel, it was a shame what had to . . ."

"We all liked Miguel." Andrea walked in the room. "And what brought my husbands name up?"

George tilted his head to Andrea, curious about what she heard. She couldn't have heard anything, not her. She would have not even walked in the room if she did. "Am I sensing attitude, Andrea?"

"Absolutely." Andrea answered without hesitation. "Release Frank Slagel."

"No can do." George turned and began to leave. "Sorry."

"No George, you'll be sorry. It's a mistake. Frank is the steel wall that protects us. No one can do what he can do."

George shrugged his shoulders. "It's time they learn. Besides, we have a mini Frank in the community already. Have you seen Johnny?" George pointed as he walked out the door. "Another Frank."

Whispering and shaking her head Andrea knelt before Joe. "I'll do everything I can Joe. I'm fighting him on this one. I do have good news." Her hand grabbed Joe's. "Josh is starting to stir."

George stopped in his stride outside the door. Josh? To George that wasn't good, and a problem he had to take care of immediately.

^^^^

Their coughing from the smoke and dirt echoed in the empty room. It was dark, but their eyes soon adjusted.

Ellen heard Dean shuffle his feet near her. "Anything?"

"Nothing." He dusted himself off. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine. You?"



"Fine. Let me see that hand." He reached for it.

"It's O.K., just a bad scratch." Ellen held back her hair from her forehead. "There isn't anyway out?"

"None. I checked. It's just another room. A tunnel with no way out."

"A tomb."

Dean took a deep breath. "To put it bluntly."

"So it was rigged for this all along?"

"Appears so." Dean looked around, then up the open hole of the floor that hung a good fourteen feet above their heads. "Shit." He placed his hands on his hips and turned to her. "We have to get out. And fast."

"Why? Someone will come down and find us. It's just a matter of . . ."

"Ellen." He put his hands on her shoulders. "That second timer, it means there another explosion. Here . . ." He took her hand and led her to the corner. "See these wires, they lead to that box. The explosion will take place down here. Right down here. In . . . well it was two hours and forty some minutes."

"Can't you pull the wires out?"

"No I can't pull the wires out. I could cause it to explode prematurely."

"But you're a scientist."

"A genetic scientist, not a rocket scientist. God." Dean released her hand and looked at his watch. "Shit."

"What's wrong?"

"My watch is broke. It must have cracked in the fall." He tapped the face of it and brought it to his ear. "Gone. What time do you have?"

Ellen looked at her watch. "One o'clock."

"It can't be one o'clock, we came down here at seven."

"My watch has been broke, Dean. It always says one o'clock."

Trying to remain calm and not quite frustrated, Dean decided one more time to try to convey the serious of the situation. "El, this is bad. This situation is bad. We have to try to get out or this proof." Dean pulled it from his tee shirt. "Will mean nothing. We have to try to climb out. Help me gather all this stuff laying around, maybe we can stack it enough to get one of us up there for help."

"Good idea." Ellen began to look, nothing laid around big enough to make a difference. "Dean?" She held up a piece of the counter no bigger than a foot.

"I know." He shook his head. "Let's just try." He moved over to her. "We have to try."

^^^

George opened the little black case he pulled from his dresser. He stared at the bottles of Salicain and the syringes with it. "Josh, just a small injection will put you out of it until you too can get an infection." George closed the lid and placed the pouch--though it protruded--in his back pocket.

^^^

Through the rubble, Ellen made her way to Dean and sat next to him on the ground. "Dean how long do you suppose we've been down here?"

"I don't know." Taking a deep breath, Dean read from the sheets they printed. "Salicain."

"What?"

"Salicain, listen to this." He waited until Ellen scooted closer. "Used to replace anesthetic in surgeries, will cause complete paralysis if given in correct doses. Will also give the effects of a stroke in larger amounts."

"Joe."

"Exactly." Dean continued reading. "Aberal, in small doses will counteract Salicain. If patient has had prolonged exposure or numerous injections of Salicain. Two CC's of Aberal will cause an immediate recovery."

"We have to find Aberal." Ellen stated.

"Hopefully, it's . . ." Dean slipped to the next page and breathed loudly in relief. "Vial seventeen."

"We can help Joe?"

Dean smiled. "Yeah, we can, and believe me, Joe can proof everything about George. Then Frank will be able to . . ."

"What's wrong?"

The smile left Dean's face and he looked up.

"Oh." Ellen's head dropped. "We have to get out first." Ellen reached her arm through Dean's and held on. She rested her head on his arm. "I can't believe this is happening."

Dean brought his hand up and rested it on her cheek, he heard her softly giggle. "What? Why are you laughing?"

"I was thinking. Remember we went through that little phase of time and I was so mean to you."

"Ellen, when exactly do you think you started to get nice to me?"

"Always."

"Would this be before or after your continuous affair with Frank?"

Ellen gasped. "Moments from death and you're rubbing it in." She tried to lift her head but Dean held it there.

"No. A part of me always knew you guys were . . . well." He cleared

his throat. "And, I knew I wasn't that special person in your life."

"You have that wrong, Dean. I was the one who didn't know how special you were in my life."

Dean lowered his head, turning her face to him. "I want to tell you something. I want to thank you for being a part of my life. You gave me a lot, Ellen. You gave me something I never thought I'd have in my life. A family."

Ellen closed her eyes tightly. "The twins and Brian." She swallowed. "What if . . ."

"No." Dean pulled her head closer to his. "We can't think like that."

"Who's gonna raise them? They won't have anyone. No one Dean."

"If something happens to us down here, they'll be taken care of." He softly kissed her cheek. "Someone will watch them. They'll be fine."

"It hurts to think they'll be without us. Especially you. They are so much your life."

"Yes, they are." Dean pulled her closer. "Your's too."

"Yeah." Ellen smiled. "God, what I put you through. And making you help with Brian."

"No making me." Dean stated. "I'd do anything for you."

"I know."

Closing his eyes, Dean ran his hand down to her knee, he gripped it firmly, then opened his eyes to look at her. He raised her head from his arm that she leaned on. "If something should happen, know that I'm glad that you were in my life."

"Me too. And I know this is going to sound really morbid, but . . . I'm glad I'm not alone right now. I'm a little scared." She raised her eyebrow giving a fake smile.

"So am I. It's all right though." Dean looked at her really hard. "I love you, El. I always have and I always will."

Ellen felt it, that trembling in her throat, the emotions coming from within her. "I love you, too."

After a brief, awe, stare, Dean leaned forward and kissed her. "Thank you for that."

"Oh God." Ellen closed her eyes. "This can't be happening. We can't talk like this. We're gonna get out."

"And when we do we'll laugh about how silly we acted when we thought we were dying."

"We can't give up. There's too much at stake." Ellen said with hope.

"You're right." Dean stood up, helping Ellen to her feet. "I know we've tried. But let's try again."

"Let's do it." Ellen, with sad enthusiasm made her way with Dean to the small minuscule mountain they built.

^^^

George heard the call of his name and it perturbed him that he was being interrupted in his walk to the clinic. George stopped as he reached the main street of town. "What John. I'm busy.."

"I've been looking for you. I need to talk to you." John caught his breath. "Things are getting tense. The men, the men are angry. In fact they are down right outraged about Frank. You should know, the vote is not going to go the way you want it to. Frank won't be ousted."

"Yes he will. And don't try to ruin my day."

"George, if the community votes to let him . . ."

"John! I'm busy. Go to your office or something, it's yours now, be happy." George waved him off and headed back in his route to the clinic.

^^^

Ellen tried, she really tried, as Dean clung to her legs lifting her, her tiny fingers tried to grip to the slippery surface of the floor above her. There was nothing. Nothing to grab on to. The tips of her fingers barely grazed across. "Just . . . Just a little more." She grunted and with another futile reach, the pile that Dean stood on gave away and they both fell into a roll on the floor. "No."

Dean tightly shut his eyes, lifting himself to one elbow as he lay next to Ellen. "You all right?"

Ellen crossed her arm over her eyes and nodded. "I'm fine." Her words cracked.

"El?" He reached for her arm.

She shook her head.

Dean could hear the heavy breathing, the muffled sniffing. Soon the soft whimpers that emanated from Ellen became full blown sobs. "Ellen?"

"I can't believe this. I can't."

"Come on." He grabbed for her arm again.

"No. I'm never going to see my children again. They're never going to see me or you. It's over. It's really over."

"El, please don't cry." He pulled down her arm. "Please."

Her eyes were closed so tight and tears ran down her dirty face. Her body shook as she let out her every emotions.

"Stop." He wiped his hand over her face. "This is not you. This is not the Ellen I love. The Ellen I love is strong. Be strong with me." He caressed her face. "We're together."

"I'm so scared, Dean. I'm so scared."

"I know." He moved closer to her, brushing his lips against hers.

"I'm here."

"I always thought I'd never mind dying." She ran her hand over her eyes and took a shivering breath. "I don't want to die."

Dean didn't know what to tell her, he himself didn't know what to feel.

"I just wished it would happen, just get it over with. We don't know when or how much time is left. This is worse than death. Worse, this waiting. Why won't it happen?" Ellen shook her head trying to control herself, she opened her eyes and stared at Dean. "I'm so scared."

"I wish there was something I could do. Just know I'm right here with you."

Ellen brought her hand up slowly to his face, touching it. "You aren't scared?"

"Not anymore."

Her hand slipped behind his head. She brought him closer to her, and her lips up to his, she brushed them against his, then parted them more. She could feel the hesitation on his mouth as their lips met. She arched her back up to meet him, needing to feel him, needing to feel safe.

Dean didn't want to give in, he was afraid of that moment. An emotional one. Feeling her move more toward him, he couldn't hold back any more. Releasing the tension that held his head back from hers, he grabbed her face and began to kiss her.

Ellen felt the security of his chest when it met hers. His heart beat so strong she could feel it. The thickness grew in her throat as her tearful emotions tried to come through in their kiss. Her eyes felt the heaviness and another single tear made its escape as she pulled at Dean. She pulled at him with her every emotions.

He slipped his arm under her back, clutching her so tightly into him, moving with her and kissing her with much more intensity than he had ever done in his life. Dean didn't just kiss her with his lips. His kissed Ellen with his heart and he kissed her as if it was the last time he would ever do that. Because Dean felt for sure . . . it was.

^^^

"Hello, young man." George spoke softly in Josh's room opening the black case that sat on the bed. "Uncle George has a surprise for you." He held up a filled syringe. "Now this won't hurt. It's the same thing I gave Joe. Sort of gonna be like Pap for awhile. It has to be done, Josh. You know too much." He reached for the boys head. "And with Dean and Ellen dead in the lab. You are much too much of a threat." He lowered the needle.

"NO!" His loud voice called into the room and before George knew

## Druga-Marchetti/Circle of Justice

it, the tiny body of Oscar came pummeling in. He knocked George over into the heating unit and sent the needle to the floor. Oscar, ignoring the grip that George had placed on his hair. Snatched up the needle. With a swift elbow back into George, Oscar lifted himself from the floor, grabbed the case and flew out. He ran as fast as he could from the clinic.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Dean cleared his throat as he walked up behind Ellen who just sat on the floor. Her knees bent up, her chin resting on her arm. He slipped behind her sitting down, pulling her in between his legs, letting her rest back on his chest. "I guess you and I have proved that we can't be put alone in extreme situations."

Ellen chuckled through her emotions. "We've already proven that."

Dean put his arms around her tight, closing his eyes as her head pressed back harder against him. "Please don't tell me you're regretting it."

"Aside from the fact that there isn't any time for regrets . . . no."

Dean swallowed. "I'm glad. I didn't want to hear that right now."

"I wouldn't want to hear you say it either." She ran her hand back and forth over his forearm. "How much longer, Dean?"

"Not much. We've been down here a while." He pressed his lips firmly to her cheek and held tighter.

"Talk about closure to us."

"Yeah, well, I want to tell you. I'm am so grateful that the last moments of my life are with you. And I am glad that I got to be with you, make love to you, just one more time."

"I am too." She tried to move closer into him, but couldn't, she was already wrapped so tight with him. "I am too."

^^^^

"Oscar calm down!" John Matoose stood up holding his hand out to the rambling little man. "I can't understand you. Take a breath."

Oscar did. "G-George is b-bad."

"No he isn't."

"Yes. El-Ellen and Dean dead. K-killed them in th-the tunnels. M-must get-get Frank."

"Why are you saying this?" John asked.

"Heard h-him. He-he hurt J-Joe. Try to-to hurt J-Josh."

"How do you know?"

"Here." Oscar handed John the black case. "Was give-giving shot to J-Josh. S-says he will b-be like J-Joe."

John slowly lifted the lid to the black case. He peered at the bottles and single syringe. "You got this from George?"

"And th-this." Oscar handed the other syringe. "M-must get-get F-Frank."

John with anger, snapped the lid shut. Without saying a word he

moved from behind the desk.

---

^^^^

Frank heard the jingling of the keys as he paced around his room. Fearful when the door opened, he turned around. "John."

John opened the door wider. "You got your proof. Get out of here."

Frank sprang to the door. "Should I get George?"

"Frank." John took a deep breath. "Have you had Oscar spying on George?"

"Yes." Frank smacked himself in the forehead then saw Oscar. "You helped me again. Thanks pal."

John moved closer. "You better not get George. You better find your wife."

Frank's eyes peered back to John, he finally saw the expression on his face. "What?" He saw John point to Oscar. "What Oscar?"

"El-Ellen's dead. D-Dean and El-Ellen dead in l-lab."

Without waiting for anything, Frank took off running, he had to get to the tunnels. He prayed the whole way there that Oscar was wrong.

^^^^

"Ellen! Ellen!" Frank's voice blasted out.

"Oh, my God!" Ellen and Dean both sprang up. She excitedly looked to Dean. "Frank."

"Ellen!" His voice drew nearer.

Dean closed his eyes in relief. "I never thought I'd be so happy to hear that big mouth."

"Frank!" Ellen shouted as loud as she could. "Frank, help us!"

"El!" He was right there.

Ellen looked up and saw him looking down. "Frank, you have to get us out of here, there's gonna be another explosion. Hurry."

Frank laid on the ground extended his hand down. "Dean, lift her to me."

Dean grabbed hold of Ellen.

Ellen stepped forward. "No Dean, you go, you're much more important. You have to help, Joe."

"Ellen." Dean pulled from his back pocket the papers and shoved them at her. "You go help, Joe. I'll be fine. Frank is here." He placed his hands on her hips. "Ready."

"Yeah." Ellen held her hand up and felt herself being lifted. Her heart dropped as her fingers touched Frank's and in a second, he had gripped



her.

Frank clenched tightly to her. "I have her, Dean." Using both hands his raised Ellen to safety. "El." He touched her face.

"Thank you." She began to run from the room. "Sorry to rush. I have to help, Joe. Get Dean out of there."

Frank spinning from his less than warm welcome, laid back on his stomach looking down at Dean. "Give me your hand."

Dean shook his head. "How do you propose you're going to reach me?"

"Don't doubt me." Frank extended his hand down. "Back up and get a running start."

"If you say so." Dean stepped back. "Hey Frank, if you do get me. You'll be my new hero."

"Shut up and go for it."

Dean took a breath and ran forward, leaping up and feeling the security of Frank's huge grip around his wrist.

"I have you." Frank said with certainty.

"I never thought I be so glad to see you, Frank." Dean brought his other hand up to Frank's.

Frank as a double security, brought his other arm down and clenched Dean. "I have you."

^^^

"Got to save Joe." Ellen sped into the clinic lab, nearly knocking over Jason.

"Ellen what happened to you." Jason asked.

"Go to save Joe. Vial seventeen." She rattled out of breath as she lifted the lid to the vial case. "Have you. Syringe." She fumbled around knocking things over. "Two CC's."

"Is that the antidote?" He questioned.

"Got to help Joe." Running her hand over her face Ellen, sliding as she ran, hurried to Joe's room.

Joe saw her walk in, his heart beat in relief.

"Joe." Ellen knelt before him, grabbing his arm. "I am so sorry. I am so sorry you've been like this." She pulled out the syringe and injected it into his arm.

Joe felt it, he felt the warm sensation as it made it into his blood. Suddenly, as if he was awakening from a dream, he began to feel the cool air around him. He felt it hit his skin as if it wore a blast from an open door. He started to shiver.

"Joe?"

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Joe's mouth dropped open and suddenly he gasped.

"Joe!" Ellen hugged him. She felt his arm move and his hand on her back. "I'm sorry." She backed up. "Can you talk?"

"Ellen." He said her name with such ease, his voice cracking from non-use. "I thought you were dead." He brought his hands up to her face feeling it over and over again. He lowered his head to her and kissed her. "I thought you were dead." He couldn't touch her enough.

"Hell no. We beat his damn explosion. Frank is getting Dean out now. Lift your arm."

It shook as he lifted it, but it moved. He clenched his fist, open and close.

"Joe, look." She held up the paper. "We got it. All the info to get rid of George."

"Thank God." Joe closed his eyes.

"It's gonna be hard. But I'm gonna get you dressed and you are going to walk out of here. You Joe, are going to be the one to bring that son of a bitch down."

"I am. Thank you, Ellen." He gripped her hand. "Help me to do it."

^^^

John Matoose grabbed hold of Greg as he made his way from the utility buildings. "Greg have you seen George?"

"No why?" Greg answered.

"Find him. Get your men together and find him. Bring him in."

"Why?"

"Just do it! Arrest him, take him into holding like the criminal he is." John stormed past him. "I'm heading into town to look."

^^^

Joe moved slowly, but he moved. Ellen held one arm, Jason the other. The looks as he walked down the streets of Beginnings said it all.

"See Joe." Ellen held tight. "They all missed you."

Jason held tight to Joe also. "Joe, this will be minimal. You'll be walking on your own in about two hours, slow but walking."

Ellen nodded. "And he's gonna walk right up to . . ." Ellen filled with rage the minute she saw him. "George." She released Joe's arm. "George!"

The surprised look on his face said it all when he saw the little woman barrel forth. "Ellen what . . ." His words never came out of his mouth. Clenched fist ready, Ellen nailed him with all of her weight, sending

him back a foot.

"You bastard." She beat on his chest. "You did it all! You did it all. All of it was you!"

"What are you talking about?"

"We have the proof. You ended this world. You destroyed every single person on this earth. Even the ones still alive. You did it. And you still want more, well . . ." Ellen's eyes shifted. "No." Her fury to George was lost as she shoved passed him "No!" Her legs moved but they couldn't move fast enough. Her heart came through her chest. "No!" Her emotional cries echoed across Beginnings as she charged for Frank who held Dean in his arms. "No, Frank. Tell me he's all right. Tell me he's all right."

Frank lifted his eyes. "El, the second explosion . . ."

"No." Ellen started to tremble, her whole body shook as she desperately tried to see Dean. "No, he's not dead. Tell me he's not dead."

"I'm . . . Ellen, I'm sorry." Frank knelt, laying Dean down gently to the ground. "I'm so sorry."

As her arms swept under his head, Ellen's back arched, her head flung back and her heart cried out. It cried out long and hard from her soul. She pulled Dean's head to her chest.

"El." Frank reached for her.

She didn't speak. She cried, screams of her anguish as she clung Dean closer to her. Holding him, wishing with everything she had it wasn't true. Wishing that she wasn't holding Dean, so still, so lifeless in her arms.

"El, please. Someone!" Frank called out in desperation.

She rocked him in her arms, pressing her lips to his face. "No, no, no." She kissed him again. "No, not you . . . Dean!"

Frank's head spun with his wife's anguish. His father ordering John to take a fighting George away. Every ounce of what was happening around him seemed to be in the distance. Spinning around his head as if some sort of horrible nightmare.

Andrea flew by Frank. She stopped cold as she watched Ellen embrace Dean, crying out so loudly that Andrea had to cover her ears to block out the hurt. "Ellen." Andrea reached down and Ellen hysterically swung back. "Ellen!"

Frank moved behind Ellen trying to hold her, trying to get her to let go of Dean. He had never seen Ellen like that and it frightened him. "El, please." He felt her body against his chest shake. Shake violently in her tears. "Andrea, help her."

Andrea stepped back and ran to the clinic.

"El." Frank clenched her. "I'm so sorry." He pressed his head to her bent back. He too gave way in his emotions as his hand ran up and down her. "I am so sorry."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Ellen's cries, the pandemonium--though hours gone by--still rang loudly in Frank's ears. His bedroom was quiet, as he sat in a chair watching Ellen, rolled into a fetal position, asleep on the bed. He rocked back and forth watching her, just watching her.

*I never thought I be so glad to see you, Frank.* He heard Dean's voice in his head. Dean grabbing onto his hand, a hand he thought had him. Frank opened his fist and stared at his palm. He could still feel as he held on to Dean. Frank closed his eyes tightly, seeing the memory that was just still so vivid. What went wrong?

*Frank, something's happening!*

*I have you Dean, I have you.* Frank pulled on him, seeing Dean's eyes as they lifted to right before the edge of the floor. Then it happened. A massive sound of pressure exploding. Sending up through the hole, thick black smoke and massive amounts of debris. It was if the floor below Dean exploded upward. Everything shook violently.

Dean's hand. He felt the fingers from Dean's hand slip from his own and then there was silence.

Frank tried. Tearing the long counter top from the far wall and using it as a ladder down. Seeing Dean laying there. Trying to figure out what had got him, what had killed him. Hoping against all hope as he lowered himself down to Dean, that he was still alive. He remembered when he felt for a pulse, a pulse that wasn't there. Then trying with such desperation to revive him, to bring him back. But he knew, he knew as he grabbed Dean's head, cupping it to tilt it back, that it was over. The blood that poured outward into Frank's palm, Dean's blood, said it all.

Frank leaned further into his hands as he thought of that. As he brought his forefinger and thumb to the corner of his eyes to stop the emotion that came forward, he heard Ellen softly speak.

"Please tell me it was all a dream." She whispered.

Frank lifted his head, standing up as he did. "El."

Ellen swung her legs over the bed. "Please tell me Frank, I had a bad dream. Tell me . . ." Ellen burst into tears. "Tell me cause the last thing I remember is seeing you hold Dean."

Frank reached out his hand to her. "It's not a dream."

"No it has to be." Ellen stepped back. "See . . . because it's all a blur. I don't remember it. It has to be a dream. Or why else would I wake up in your bed?"

"We uh . . . we had to sedate you. You were pretty bad." He took another step forward.

"Dean's gone?"

Frank lowered his head.

"Please tell me you didn't bury him already."

"No, he's . . ." Frank didn't want to say it. "He's at the clinic, in the . . ." Frank couldn't bring himself to say morgue. "He's at the clinic."

Shaking her head and wiping her tears, Ellen moved by Frank.

"Where are you going?"

"I have to see him."

"No El, don't."

"I have to see him." Ellen opened the door. "Because Frank, I can't remember . . ." Her shoulders raised and another emotional burst brought more tears. "I can't remember if I said goodbye."

"El." Frank followed her, but she ignored him, but he kept trying. "El."

She stopped on the steps and looked up. "I'll be back." She walked down the rest of the way. As she stepped into the small entranceway she saw Joe.

"Sweetheart." He stood slowly from the couch and walked over to her. "How are you?"

"I have to find my coat." Ellen looked around. "Frank, where is my coat?"

Joe immediately looked at Frank when he saw Ellen frantically searching.

Frank held out his hand to his father as if to tell him he'd explain later. "El, please."

"I have to find my coat!" So frazzled she was as she searched, her words conveyed it.

"It's not here. Maybe it's still in the cryo-lab."

"I have to find it Frank! That was Dean's coat!" Ellen paced around hysterically "He gave that to me when we left Ashtonville. That was *his* jean jacket! Dean's, Frank. I have to find it."

"We'll find it, I promise." He put his hands on her shoulders. "I'll find it." He walked over to the banister and handed her his leather jacket. "Wear mine." He extended it for her to place on.

"Thank you." She slipped her arms through. "I'll be back."

"El, let me go with you. Don't go alone."

"I have to Frank. I have to say some things to him. I have to say them alone."

"I understand." Frank lowered his head.

With a trembling hand, Ellen reached for the door.

Joe reached out, stopping her. "Let me go with you. I'll wait outside. Let me go."

## Druga-Marchetti/Circle of Justice

Ellen grabbed Joe's hand, she grabbed it with her life. "I am so glad you're back with us, Joe."

"I wouldn't be right now if it wasn't for you." He laid his hand on her cheek feeling the wetness of her tears.

"Or Dean. He wouldn't leave that lab until he had the information." Clinging to his hand she slid it from her face. "But I have to do this alone. I have to." Slowly she opened the door, pulling her arms so far into Frank's huge coat, and she stepped outside, it was dark.

Ellen knew where he was. She didn't need anyone to tell her. Slowly, barely making a walking sound, she moved down the furthest hallway to that room. The silver door screamed at her. Her heart pounded with every step closer to it she took.

She laid her hands flat upon it, bracing herself before she stepped inside. Feeling the coldness of it, the cold air that seeped through the seams of the heavy door.

Closing her eyes, feeling as if she had no strength, she opened it, immediately turning away when she saw him. Center of the room was a long table, a blue cloth covering who she knew was Dean. Pounding her fist once against the door, Ellen took a deep breath and faced it. Faced the truth.

Her sliding steps were the only sound there. If her heart beat any faster that too would have been heard. She stood before the table awhile before she could bring herself to pull down the sheet. When she did, she did it slowly. And when she saw Dean, the reality hit her, causing her to gasp and her heart to immediately break right there and then. "Dean." She ran her hand over his face, her fingers feeling the shape of it, touching his closed eyes, running over his lips. She reached down under the sheet and grabbed his hand, bringing it to her face, rubbing the back of it across her cheek. Wishing so much that his fingers would just grip hers one more time.

"Dean." She whispered bringing her face so close to his. "I know . . . I know you can hear me. I have to talk to you." Her lips quivered as she spoke to him. "I can't believe that this has happened. I can't believe you left me like this. You weren't supposed to. You were supposed to be around forever, confusing me every time I'm near you." She bit her lip in, removing the tears that fell on them, tasting their saltiness, sniffing loudly. "I just need to tell you how much I will miss you. My heart is broke. It is really broke right now. You are so important to me. I wish I would have told you more, how important you really are. You were such a big part of my life. Now I feel like a part of me has died. What am I gonna do? Huh?" She ran her hand across her face. "What am I gonna do not seeing you everyday." She leaned down even closer to him. "Thank you, thank you so much for our one final

memory. I have never regretted being with you. And our last time together will be a special gift to me. Something I will always treasure. I think you know that.” Sadly she laid his hand back under the sheet. “I just had to see you one more time. I’ll miss you so . . . so much.” Leaning to him, Ellen wiped away the tear that fell from her onto his mouth. Slowly she laid her lips on his, kissing him softly. “I love you.” She told him, her voice raspy. “Goodbye, Dean.” With one more kiss, Ellen stood up. She touched her hand on his face and turned from him. She couldn’t bring herself to cover him back up. She just had to go, she had to walk out. Dropping her head, feeling guilty for walking away, Ellen took a deep breath and opened the door.

At the far end of the hall stood Joe. Pulling the door closed, Ellen ran to him. She ran straight into his father arms and buried herself in his chest. “He’s gone, Joe. He’s really gone.”

Joe didn’t need to speak any words, he held her tight, holding her head close to him. Just holding her.

^^^^

Ellen didn’t want to speak to anyone, and it seemed everyone, though not many, tried to talk to her as she went back to Frank’s. Couldn’t they tell? Couldn’t they tell she just didn’t want to be bothered?

Her neck hurt and her head pounded as she walked into the house. There wasn’t a soul in the livingroom. “Frank?”

“Up here.”

Ellen took off his coat laying it back on the banister. Like it was a mountain to climb, she walked up the steps. Reaching the top she saw Frank coming out of the second bedroom.

“Hey.” He looked nervously at her. “The kids are all asleep.”

“Do the twins know?”

Frank shook his head. “I figured you’d want to tell them.”

“How do I do that? How do I tell them that they will never see their father again?”

Frank didn’t have an answer.

“Will you help me tell them?”

“God, Ellen, yes.” His hand reached across and touched her cheek. “I’ll stay with you every step of the way.”

Ellen leaned into his hand. “We’ll tell them tomorrow. I can’t handle it right now. Can I stay here tonight? I don’t want to go home to that house.”

“El, I want you to stay here all the time. I want you home. This is your home. You need to be here.”

“I can’t do that Frank.” Ellen walked to the bedroom.

“Why?” He followed her. “This is your home, El. Stay home with

me. We'll get through this. You need me right now."

Ellen faced him. "I do."

"Then it's time." He moved closer to her. "It's time that we put everything behind us and be together right now. We have to be together right now."

"We shouldn't even be together right now."

"Why would you say that?"

"It should have been me that died in that hole. You should have pulled him out first. This community needs him more than me."

"Yeah, but I need you. And don't ever let me hear you talk like that. Ever. You think Dean would have wanted you left behind? Do you think Dean would have ever forgiven me or himself if you died down there instead of him? No." Frank's argument conveyed his angry emotions. "Dean loved you way too much. He would have wanted it this way."

"It's not fair, Frank."

"No El, it's not fair. It was wrong that this happened. He was a huge part of your life, and everyone's life in Beginnings. This was a loss. A loss I can't even comprehend yet." Frank raised his eyes up, swallowing to catch his emotions. "In my mind, and in my heart, this is the worst loss Beginnings has ever suffered."

"Thank you for saying that. And thank you for all you've done today. Please don't think I forgot about you." She moved closer into him.

"I know you haven't. We'll get through this. Let me help you get through this." As he lifted her lowered head to look at him, he reached with his other hand to the dresser a foot away. "Here." He handed her the jean jacket. "I got you his coat." He watched Ellen take it, her eyes watering up as she did. She cradled it immediately into her chest. With no more words, Frank took hold of her and held her tightly. He felt her sob within his arms, her body quivering in her silent tears. He held her strong. Even when he felt her legs begin to give way, Frank held her up, he had to be for Ellen . . . her strength.



CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Brushing her hand over Henry's white shirt and black tie, Ellen looked up to him with sadness, trying to smile. "You look so handsome."

Henry grabbed her hand and brought it to his lips. "Thank you for coming and helping me get dressed for this."

"I needed to see you. I needed to be around you." Ellen fixed his tie. "Are you sure you're feeling up to this?"

"I have to be there El. I have to say goodbye to Dean."

"We all do."

"Don't feel you have to help me there. I know you have a lot on your mind."

"I need to help you there, Henry." She reached to his hospital bed and handed him his cane. "I think we should stand together today."

"It's a bad day."

"I know." Ellen shivered as she breathed. "Everyone is so sad. Frank is even wearing a tie today."

"I wish we could do more for Dean instead of dressing up."

"We'll all be there. That's what counts." She held on to his arm as he began to hobble slowly with his cane. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yeah." Henry moved on. "Are you?"

"No." Ellen shook her head. "All I do is cry. But I try not to, it's just so hard."

"I know. And, if you just need me, know I'm here for you."

"Thank you, Henry." Ellen leaned against his arm as they walked, trying to fight the tears as they crept up on her again.

^^^

Joe was walking like he used to. It had been three days since Dean's passing and his awakening from the hell that George had placed him in. Staring at the revolver one more time, Joe opened the door to holding. "This is the day."

George sat on the edge of the bed, he only turned his head to Joe.

"We couldn't deal with you until we've dealt with Dean. We bury him today you son of a bitch. Any regrets?"

"None."

Joe held the revolver up then laid it on the bed next to him. "You're out of Beginnings today. In that gun is one bullet. One single bullet. You can use it to take your own life if you want."

"What happens if I use it to take yours?"

## Druga-Marchetti/Circle of Justice

“Then you’ve signed your death warrant.” Joe moved to the door stepping into the archway. “I’ll be back after we’ve buried Dean. And you’ll either be dead or waiting to leave. I have to tell you George, the community is outraged that I just don’t shoot you myself. But you know what I say? I say, what a perfect circle of justice it will be to know that you will die in a world you made into such a monstrosity.” Joe walked through the door. “What a perfect circle of justice.”

^^^^

It was all so foggy to Ellen as she made her way back home after Dean’s services. Everyone in the entire community gathering around the one small grave site set in the undeveloped section of town. A place her and Dean often went to talk. He deserved to be the only one buried in Beginnings itself. It was only fitting that he be laid to rest within the walls he helped to build. All Ellen remembered of the funeral as she walked through her front door, was the feeling of Frank’s strong hand on her shoulder while he held a crying Alexandra. She leaned to Henry while gripping Billy tight to her. Even Brian sensed the sadness, he whimpered in Joe’s arms.

Reverend Bob’s words ‘we gather in heartache to mourn the loss of our brother, Dean Michael Hayes’ were the last thing Ellen remembered. The rest of the service was a blur.

Ellen sat on her bed watching Frank undress and he undressed like he was in a hurry. “Are you going somewhere, Frank?”

“I . . .” He faced her. “I have to take care of something.”

“Please don’t leave. Not now.”

“El. I’ll be back.” He threw a tee shirt on, ran to the bedroom door and opened it. “Come on in.” He opened it wider for Henry. “Henry is staying with you.” He raced to the bed and kissed her on the cheek. “I have to take care of something. I love you.” He backed up, looked at Henry and ran from the room.

Ellen watched Henry sluggishly make his way to the bed. “Sorry you have to babysit me.”

“No problem.” He sat next to her. “You have to babysit me. Frank’s offered for me to stay here until I’m well. Josh and I are gonna bunk. You are gonna be our nurse.”

“I am, am I?”

“You are.”

“Where’d he go in such a rush, Henry?”

“I’ll let him tell you.” Henry reached down and grabbed her hand. “You’ll have to hear it from him.”

“Does it have to do with Dean?” Ellen asked.

“Yeah, yeah it does.”

~~~~~

Joe opened the back gate slowly sneering at George who stood with a single bag. “I have to say I’m surprised you chose to do this.”

“I’ll be back, Joe. I’ll be back to take you all down.”

“No you won’t.” Joe shut the gate and locked it. “You won’t survive out there. You just don’t have the makings to beat the elements ahead of you.”

“Wanna bet.” George was adamant.

“Sure I’ll bet you. How’s this? If in one year you return to this back gate. I’ll let you in. Heck, I’ll even give you the run of things again.”

“You really believe I won’t survive, you cocky son of a bitch.”

Joe tossed his keys up and caught them. “Yep.” He stepped back and lifted his radio to his mouth. “Back gate. Perimeter up.” Smiling, Joe turned around, placed his radio on his belt and walked away.

George stood there watching him, feeling angry at Joe’s lack of confidence in him. George *would* make it back, and on his return he’d bring Joe painfully down. He still had forces out there. Forces that Beginnings knew nothing about. He knew where to meet them and that’s where he would head.

Saying in his head his goodbye to Beginnings, George turned to the dirt he would have to take. The first step in his long journey. But that thought was short lived. Out of the brush, making his presence known, Frank emerged. “Frank.”

“Where you going, George?” Frank spoke coldly as he stepped to him.

“I’m leaving Beginnings.”

“Really? Did you actually think I’d let you walk away with all that you’ve done?”

“What are you gonna do? Kill me Frank? Ask your father, I’m as good as dead out here anyway.”

“Even knowing how measly of a threat your fuckin ass is, *we* the people of Beginnings can not take that chance.” Another step closer and the reality of what Frank was feeling showed on his face. “*I* can’t take that chance.”

“You can’t do this Frank, if you kill me that makes you a cold blooded killer.”

“You know what George? I *am* a cold blooded killer. I accepted that. I am that. This world that you helped create, did that to me. *You* did that to me.”

George stepped back, dropping his bag and stumbling over it. He didn't fall because Frank grabbed him fiercely and snatched him close.

"You caused so much suffering. I'm not talking about what you and your people did to our world. I'm talking about what you did to the people of this community. You made us suffer. We're still suffering. And I think you should to." There was an eerie calmness about Frank. An frightening aspect of things to come.

"No. Frank. Just let me . . ."

"This . . ." Frank, closed fist, hurled George with his punch to the ground. ". . . is for trying to oust me!" He dove forward picking George up and nailing him again. "That was for what your people did to my wife!" Watching George try to crawl, Frank picked him up. "Miguel . . ." Another hit and blood shot forth from George's mouth. "Josh . . ." Frank moved him back a little with every hit. "My father." A harder strike. "And Dean . . ." The pain Frank felt when he said his name was evident in his final blow to George. Holding George's shirt he brought him close to his face, breathing the heat of his outrage on him. "What you did was a crime. Punishable by death."

George could barely see through his bloody focus. He felt Frank's grip and felt his feet lift from the ground as he was brought to Frank's eye level. "If you kill me, you'll burn in hell for this."

"Then I'll burn in hell with you." Clutching tightly, Frank took one more step. "You know George . . ." He grveled in bitterness as he spoke. "I think my dad spoke to you about justice. Well, since you wanted the land of Beginnings so much, I think it's only fitting that you should die in Beginnings." With his final words of wrath, Frank with a loud grunt and all his strength, lifted George higher and hurled him backwards into the live perimeter fence.

George let out a long scream as his body shook, and convulsed as it stuck to the metal protector. A foul smelling smoke emerged as his body began to fry. It took longer than it should, George fought every last second of his life. But he did not win.

Frank watched. He had too. He watched the final seconds of George's life. Feeling nothing. Watching his head slump, then his body drop, leaving behind, still stuck to the fence, pieces of his head and back.

Frank ran his hand over his mouth as he breathed heavily. Without a second thought to what had happened, Frank lifted his radio to his mouth. "It's over. Down the back gate."

^^^

Joe waited for his son on the front step of his house. He watched Frank walk closer. He stood straight, head held high, shoulders back. Not an emotion on his stone face. He stared straight ahead as if he were looking past his father. Straight through him to see where he so much wanted to be . . . back home.

“Frank. I waited out here for you.” Joe said.

“I appreciate it.” Frank stopped before the step. “How will she react?”

“She doesn’t have to. It’s up to you if you want to tell her. But you know your wife, she stands behind you no matter what.”

“Yeah, I know.” Frank’s jaws clenched back and forth, he still felt so much rage. “Where are the kids?”

“Billy’s already over Andrea’s and . . .” Joe’s head jolted when the door opened.

Jenny Matoose emerged. She held Brian in her arms, and Alexandra’s little hand.

Like Frank was her magnet, Alexandra jumped to him and he swept her up into his arms. Her little legs wrapped as much as they could around his big body, her arms clung so tightly to his neck she could have strangled him. Frank felt the softness of her cheek against his. He closed his eyes and gripped her head holding her so close to him. He got a shiver of heartache when he heard her tiny voice whispering in his hear. A voice that spoke so soft, a young voice that held ages worth of sadness.

“Mommy said you went to get the bad guy who took my daddy. Did you get the bad guy, Uncle Frank?”

So hard to speak one simple word. Frank thought it would never emanated from his throat. “Yes.” He pressed his cheek tighter to her.

Alexandra felt it against her. She touched her delicate lips to his rough face, whispering again. “Please don’t cry.”

He shook his head and embraced her one more time. Pulling slightly away, he ran the back of his hand across the corner of his eye, then over Alexandra’s face where *his* single tear fell. He took a deep breath, a long snuffle through his nose. He reached out and touched little Brian’s head.

Jenny Matoose held her hand out to Alexandra. “I thought I’d take the children with me for a little while. I think you and Ellen need some time right now.”

Frank nodded and tried to pull Alexandra away. She held tighter shaking her head. “Sweetie.” He ran his hand down her long brown hair. “It will be just for a little bit, then I’ll be right over to get you.”

“You promise you’ll be there?”

“I promise you, I’ll be there.”

With an agreeing nod of her head, Alexandra let Frank set her down.

Jenny grabbed her hand and walked with her. "Take all the time you need."

Frank closed his mouth tightly, thanking her only with an expression.

"You all right?" Joe asked as he reached and opened the door.

"Yeah, I'll be fine." Frank stepped in, Henry stood in the living, waiting.

"Frank is it done?" Henry asked.

"Yep." Frank took off his coat and merely tossed it across the room. "Where's Ellen?"

"She's upstairs. I just left her."

"Thanks Henry." Frank patted him on the back as he walked by him. Taking another breath, Frank slowly headed up the stairs.

"Let's go, Henry." Joe gripped his arm. "If you're going to be staying here, I'll help you get some things."

"Thanks, Joe."

"Sure." Joe reached for the door. "And I want to talk to you. In fact, you and I my boy, *really* need to have a talk."

"About what?" Henry asked as he was guided out.

"Let's just say . . . while I was under the Salicain, the simple fact that I could possibly hear and comprehend what was being said to me, seemed to elude everyone in this community. Especially you."

"Oh shit."

"Exactly."

^^^

Before he opened the closed bedroom door, Frank paused. He took off the tee shirt he wore. A shirt that was splattered with George's blood. He wanted to tell Ellen first, not have her see. Of course by what Alexandra said, Ellen somehow already knew. Slipping it over his head, he opened up the hall closet and set it in the hamper. Reaching out he opened the door. Ellen was straightening up his dresser. "Hey El."

Ellen looked at him curiously with her sad eyes. "Where's your shirt?"

"I threw it in the hamper. I had . . ." He stepped to the dresser.

"Blood?"

"Excuse me?" Frank, nervous, reached his hand out for the drawer.

"You didn't want me to see. I know you didn't want me to know what happened."

"But you do."

"I know you." Ellen said.

"I was going to tell you. I just didn't know how you'd react." He

opened his drawer and pulled out a shirt.

“You take care of things Frank. And it was only right that you took care of this for me and Beginnings.” She stopped him before he placed on a fresh tee shirt. She took it from his hand. “Hold me.”

Doing what he was asked, doing what he wanted, he put his arms around her. “I wish I could have taken care of it sooner.”

Ellen rubbed her face against his chest, feeling the security as he held her. “You did all you could do.”

A part of Frank knew that to be true. Things happened that could not have been changed. But even doing everything within his power, even taking out George, it would never be enough. Dean was gone. There was no replacing that.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

In her dream she desperately and without emotions, worked on the woman who so much suffered with the third stage of the virus. Ellen was frustrated, not knowing what to do, suctioning the body fluids that projected from the woman's mouth. Easing her suffering against her better judgement.

"Ellen." She heard Joe's voice but continued working on the woman. "Dean's gonna work this section with you."

"Good." Ellen looked up at him, the very first thing she saw was his eyes, his translucent green eyes. She never noticed his face at that moment during the plague, but in her dream she did. *Dean*. "I'm done with this one." Ellen began to wheel the cart away, she heard Joe ramble off something, but she paid no mind. At that time in the plague, Ellen had reached her wits end. When she looked up again, Dean stood there staring at her.

"Can I help?" He asked.

"Next one. You can start to prep . . ." She felt him staring. Why? Back then she didn't want to deal with it, but in her dream she wanted to feel that more. "Is there something wrong?" *No. Ellen, don't, do it right this time, even if it is only a dream Remember this time, he was the one that helped Taylor*. "Am I doing something wrong?"

"No, why?"

"You're staring."

He blushed and lifted his eyes at her. "I'm sorry, I was just thinking, with all that is going on, you're the first beautiful sight I've seen in days."

*Do this right. Do this right*. "Thank you Dr. Hayes. I needed to hear something nice."

"No, no, no." Dean shook his head drastically, starting to laugh at her.

Ellen, holding the suction hose tilted her head. "What?"

"Ellen, stop." Dean held up his hand. "You're suppose to tell me that it is a little inappropriate to be flirting. Don't you remember?"

"Yeah, but Dean . . ."

"No, Ellen, do it right."

"I don't want to do it right. I was mean to you that day." Ellen pushed the cart to the next patient.

"Yeah but that was you. And then you and I argued about the pillow thing . . ." Dean's hand waved back and forth. "This is so like you to change it like this."

"Christ, Dean, this is *my* dream." Ellen shut off the suctioning. "I can change it to do it right."

"If you want to do it right, do it correctly."



“Why are you arguing with me?”

Dean walked around the patient and touched her face. “I loved chasing you. You were such a challenge. Come on El, fight with me.”

“No Dean, I want to be nice to you.”

“Then I’m not hanging around.” He backed up. “Forget it. If you aren’t going to dream things right, then I’m not going to be in your dreams anymore.”

“Hey!” Ellen yelled at him watching him walk through the maze of dying people. “This is my dream Dean, you can’t dictate my dream. Dean? Dean?” He was gone. “Dean?” With a shudder, Ellen jumped to a sitting position in her bed. The room was still dark, her breathing was heavy. She held her hair. Running her hand over her face, Ellen had to stop and place herself in reality. She had to do that quite often after waking. So many nights since Dean died, she had dreamt of him. A part of her hoped and wished they would never stop.

“Look, Alex.” Frank walked into the bedroom holding her on his hip. “Looks like you aren’t the only one having a bad dream. Hey, Mommy can she sleep in here with you?”

“Um . . .” A bit confused Ellen pulled back the other side of the covers. “Sure.” She looked up at Frank who was dressed. “Where are you going?”

“I have to go to work.” He laid Alexandra in bed and covered and kissed her. He walked around to Ellen. “I’ll stop by containment and see you in a little while.”

“Don’t go.” She grabbed his hand. “Look Frank it’s not even six. It’s too early for you to leave. Why are you leaving?”

“El.” He looked down as she grabbed so tightly to his fingers. “We have to make another gas sweep.” He knelt down. “Johnny spotted ten of them yesterday living in Miles City. We have to take them out.”

“But you have to wait until daylight.”

“I have to get things ready.” He leaned down and kissed her. “I have to go.”

“Frank.” She pulled at his hand.

“El.” He spoke firmly. “I have to go.” Again he kissed her. “I’ll see you in a little bit.” He pulled his hand from her and moved to the door. Frank stopped and failed to open it, he returned to her bedside. “El, look. I know mornings are the worst for you. If I didn’t have to do this now, I’d stay right here with you. But I can’t. O.K.?”

Ellen nodded. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I’m like this.”

“I understand.” He touched her cheek and walked to the door.

“Frank . . . Be careful today. Please?”

Frank looked back one more time at her. “Always.”

## Druga-Marchetti/Circle of Justice

Closing her eyes, Ellen listened to him leave. She laid down on her side, next to her daughter.

"Mommy, I'm here." Alexandra whispered.

"I know you are, honey." Ellen pulled her daughter closer to her chest, cradling her with her body. "I know you are."

^^^

Everyone and anyone who dealt with the clinic gave their try at Ellen. It was a daily task to her trying to avoid their pestering. Containment stayed her safe haven. But she knew it wouldn't be for long. One of the very few people she allowed to visit her there would eventually corner her. She just never expected it to be Henry. "I can't believe you're doing this to me." She spoke softly, her head barely raised from her folded hands.

"Sorry, El." Henry shook his head. "It's time to face the clinic. They need your help."

"Who?" Ellen asked sarcastically. "I was the peon over there. I stuck people with needles, remember?"

"You did more than that and you know it. You worked with Dean."

"I pestered the hell out of Dean. I talked his ear off." She watched Henry shake his head. "No? Come on Henry, I assisted him."

"Then if you didn't do all that much there, then why won't you go back there and help."

"Help what?" Ellen became annoyed.

"Help them figure out all those years of research Dean did."

"There are two doctors and an almost doctor over there, let them figure it out. I can't go there. I can't."

"Why?"

"Because it's too much of Dean. Too much." Ellen leaned forward placing her elbows on her desk.

"I would think you would like that, Ellen. Don't you miss him?"

"Fuck you, Henry I miss him with all my heart." She leaned on her hand.

"Then be where he was, it'll bring back good memories."

"I don't want memories, I want Dean. And as long as I don't go to that clinic it isn't quite real what happened."

"El." Henry reached his hand out. "It is real what happened and you know it. It is time El, to do it. If you don't want to work at the clinic that's fine. But help them. You two did so much work, there's so much just laying around that needs to be put together, help them to do it."

Breathing slowly through her nose, Ellen sat back. "Will you go with me?"

## Druga-Marchetti/Circle of Justice

“Where? To the clinic?”

“No.” Ellen stood up and reached out her hand to him. “You said it was time. It is . . . to face this.”

^^^

Jason , like a turtle peeking his head from a shell, looked over Johnny’s shoulder as he sat at the computer in the clinic lab. “Nothing?”

“Nothing.” Johnny rubbed his buzzed head. “I’m telling you Jason, he didn’t write things down correctly.”

“Oh you’re mistaken. He had to, he was a brilliant scientist.”

“Yeah well . . .” Johnny stood up from the stool. “A brilliant scientist that thought he was infallible. Basics. Basic medication is all he listed the ingredients for. Other things like the complicated anti-infection agents . . . zilch. No wait, I’m lying. Watch . . .” Johnny tapped on the computer. “This agent, look, he started but never finished.”

“You’re joking. I saw him pull that one up before. If he didn’t finish, how did he know what he did or didn’t do?”

“Simple. Just like he told me millions of times, and I never took him serious. He’d point to his temple.” Johnny pointed to his own. “And he’d say, ‘up here Johnny, all up here’.”

“This is ridiculous.” Jason through his hands in the air. “Andrea, anything in those journals?”

Andrea shook her head. “Nothing I understand. I’m clueless. He has little made up names for things. I know what they make, but ‘how to’ is the question.”

Johnny interjected. “His little ‘Dean’ acronyms, are what are screwing us. Not the formulas.”

Jason, in total frustration ran his hand over his hair. “This man suffered from an intense case of paranoia when it came to his medication. He wanted to be the only one who knew. That is the only thing I can come up with.”

“Nah.” Johnny disagreed. “He was just lazy when it came to marking things down right. He just would get too excited and move on to the next thing.”

Andrea agreed. “That was our Dean. What about Ellen? She worked with him.”

Jason shook his head. “Ellen is useless. She won’t even talk to me about it. Never in all my years of science has anyone refused to keep track of their research completely. Never. I can’t have this. Beginnings can’t have this. Excuse me. I’m rattled.” Spinning in his heels from yet another vain attempting day at figuring out Dean’s work. Jason went back to his own lab

where he understood the work. His own work.

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“El.” Henry’s voice echoed in the darkness. “This isn’t exactly what I mean by facing it. This is over the edge facing it. Are you ready for this?”

“This is how it has to be done.” Ellen stared at the ajar door to the cryo-lab. “Could you go in first and light that emergency light you have.”

“Yeah.” Henry walked past her.

Ellen waited, holding on to her boxes until she saw the dim light. She took a deep breath and stepped inside. It didn’t matter how big of a breath she took, when she walked into the nearly destroyed cryo-lab, she couldn’t breath. Her chest felt heavy.

“You all right?” Henry grabbed her arm.

Ellen started to shake, she looked to her right, to the large hole in the floor. “So much happened down here. So much happened.”

“Maybe this wasn’t a good idea.”

“No.” She shook her head. “It isn’t. But it has to be done. You said you think I should help with his work right? Well there was a lot of work done down here that wasn’t brought up.”

“Really? I didn’t know that.”

“No one did.” Ellen handed him the larger of the boxes. “Over in the actual cryo-room is a metal box. It’s heavy and nailed to the floor. In there are files, about seventy, put them in there. And we’ll need to see if we can salvage at least one of these hard drives from one of these computers.”

“I can do that.” He watched her take her own box across the room being careful not to fall through the missing floor that took up half of the huge lab. “What are you doing?”

“I’m grabbing all his disks he hid down here. And he had a bunch of different experimental agents we were trying out.” She opened the cabinet. “Plus, things that he used to make them.”

“He had all this down here?”

“What we did down here was future things for Beginnings. Upstairs was immediate. I also, at my house have his back up tapes. Dean did that you know, backed up everything twice.”

“Yeah I know.” Henry smiled and moved to her. “You’re going to do this aren’t you? You are going to make sure that all his years of work aren’t for nothing.”

“I’m going to try my best. But I don’t think I can do any better than Jason, Andrea or Johnny. I’m a nurse and not a very good one. Dean was a scientist.”

“Yes he was, but you have an advantage no one else has. You

worked closely with him. You, Ellen, know how his mind worked. All his secrets, the way he did things, are all right here.” He touched her head. “Up here.”

“Dean used to say that. But I don’t think so Henry. I don’t feel like I know anything about this stuff.”

“Yes you do.” Henry spoke with so much pride and assuredness. “And the moment you start working on it, it will all unlock itself.”

^^^

Back to his office, back to his normal disgusting shaking of his head as he read things over, was Joe. “Aw, Ellen.” He tossed a paper to the side.

“I heard my wife’s name.” Frank opened his father’s office door, bringing in a blast of cold air.

“Your wife released three people while I was out of it. Two of which should have been put elsewhere. One seemed like it was a practical joke.” Joe raised his eyes to Frank. “Is it snowing or is your hair getting that grey.”

“I do not have grey hair.” Frank touched the top of his head. “Not much, that is.” He pulled up a chair and sat across from his father.

“How did the gas run go?”

“Good, got them all. Scouted the hillside, found some remains. Same old, same old.” Frank sniffled.

“When do you think you can go to New Mexico?”

“I told you I’d get a team together for you whenever you want.”

“I need *you* to go, Frank.”

“I can’t leave my wife. Not now, not the way she is.”

“Yeah.” Joe dropped his pencil and leaned back in the chair. “She’s not getting any better. How are you with that?”

“Surprisingly fine. I know that Ellen and Dean were close. It would shock me more if she *wasn’t* depressed about it. Hell, she spent everyday with the guy. They have kids.” Frank shrugged. “El has been my friend forever. Besides being her husband, I have to be that friend right now.”

“Sometimes you shock me by what you say. So any idea when you think you can leave her for a few days? I know we’re dealing with the SUT problem, but we have to take care of the factory if you get my drift.”

“Dad, I have a hard time leaving her in the morning. She grabs my hand.” Frank held it up. “And her little fingers wrap so tight around it, it’s like she’s so afraid I’m not coming back. I have to tell you, I’m not knowing what to do anymore. Never in all the years with Ellen has she ever let me hold her so much. She clings to me. Clings. It breaks my heart because I can’t make her feel better.”

“You will Frank, you will.” Joe reached into his pocket and pulled

out a cigarette and lit it. "I'll give it a few more days. After that, you'll have to get that team together. All right, tell me about Miles City."

"Dumped a shit load of Dean's chemical on them. Which by the way, we are running low. We'll need more for our raid. Jason have any luck?"

"None. You know who knows how to make it, don't you?"

"Ellen." Frank ran his hand over his face. "I can't even get her to put a band-aid on a cut. I'm not going to get her to make a biological weapon."

"She knows the recipe. And I wouldn't give up hope. Henry radioed in. He and Ellen went down to the cryo-lab to pick up some research." He saw Frank get antsy. "Before you get upset, yes it is dangerous there. But she went and filled three boxes. She's going to go to the clinic and work again. But only at night. Hey, that's a start."

"I guess." Frank lowered his head.

"Miles City?" Joe asked.

"Oh yeah. Walked though it, everything is good. They're all dead. And . . ." He reached in his pocket and laid a bunch of folded papers and three photographs before his father. "Take a look."

Joe saw the photo. It was of him and his sons. "Where did you . . ."

"Robbie's stuff. He must have left it there. Notes he wrote, too. I read them. You should, too. It kind of makes you remember the old Robbie. The Robbie that we all knew, not the one that came to Beginnings." Frank stood up.

"Thanks, Frank." Joe laid his hand over the articles, then slid them closer to his body. "Oh, by the way. How was flying?"

"Greg puked all over the place because I couldn't keep it steady." Frank reached for the door and opened it laughing. "It was pretty funny though."

"I'm sure it was. And I'm sure you'll get good."

"Oh, sure I will. What don't I do good." He smiled and closed the door.

"What an arrogant son of a bitch." Joe shook his head then looked at the second photograph and sadly the name escaped him. "Robbie."

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Jason brought his cup of coffee to his lips, sipped and grabbed the lit cigarette that burned before the ashtray. How he truly didn't want to start smoking again, he hadn't for five years, but being around Joe didn't help matters.

He puffed a long drag then laid it back down, flipping the pages to his notes. "Now see Dr. Hayes, this is how you're supposed to write . . ." A loud power surging sound frightened him from his seat. At the far wall he

faced, he saw the reflection of a flashing light. “One weird snow storm that must be brewing out there.” He looked behind him to his window. The darkening sky looked clear, and then he saw it. A rabbit. It sat alone on his floor. “How did you get out of your cage.” Jason slid off his stool reaching down to the rabbit. “Are you another Houdini?” He raised the rabbit to his eye level and noticed he wore a rope necklace. Hanging off of it, strung though the thin rope was a thick folded piece of paper. “What’s this?” He set the rabbit on the counter and took the rope from his neck. Untying it, he slid the note free and unfolded it. His eyes widened as he read the long message. “Son of a gun.” He rubbed the bunny’s head, then in his excitement kissed him. “Son of a gun.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

"Yes Jason?" Joe opened his front door. "It's kind of late."

"I know. I really need to speak to you." Jason spoke upbeat.

"Sure, come in. If it's about Dean's work. I'm not in the mood to hear bitching. Ellen is trying her hand at it."

"Oh, good." Jason stepped inside. "But she's not what we need. She can help, but she's not what we need."

"What's up? You look kind of nervous."

"Excited is more like it. Can we sit?" He motioned his hand to Joe's couch.

"Sure." Joe walked over and sat down.

Jason wiped his sweaty hands and sat down next to Joe. "I've been giving a lot of thought to this Dean situation. Now I've been working hard to find out where he was going. So has Andrea, and so has Johnny. But the truth is, Beginnings suffered a major setback when it lost Dr. Hayes."

"You're not telling me anything I don't know."

"To be blunt Joe. If something happens, medically big, we're screwed. I don't have the knowledge to do anything about it. That's not my field. Ellen, she knows a lot more than she realizes, but she's not going to be ready to do anything about it completely for a while. She has to train herself and that could take years. We don't have years."

Joe huffed loudly. "Are you here to make me miserable, because you are doing one heck of a job." He reached to the table for a cigarette. "I know how badly we need, Dean. I know how bad things will get without him around."

"It was a shame, Joe, what happened."

Joe raised his eyebrows. He noticed that perhaps Jason looked happy. "Are you well?"

"Very much so thank you. As I was saying, I've been working. You know, fate sometimes deals a cruel hand. There's nothing we can do about it, but take the slap in the face and move on."

"You're right." Joe glanced down to the picture of Robbie that sat on his table.

"And sometimes someone cheats fate. And that isn't fair. It just isn't fair." Jason rattled on. "But don't you think Joe, in instances where someone cheated, that if you could redo it all, take it all back, you should be able to?"

"Jason." Joe slapped his hand on his knee. "Take it back? Sure we all wish we could take it back, but we can't. Now where in the hell are you going with this conversation. You're bringing up things right now I don't want to deal with."



## Druga-Marchetti/Circle of Justice

"You have to." Jason smiled. "I came here for a reason tonight. A very good reason tonight." He handed Joe a folded sheet of paper, the letter the rabbit brought. "Take a guess, Joe. I don't know, a . . ." Jason bobbed his head side by side. "Psychic, clairvoyant, uh, futuristic guess, on where that note came."

After a brief glance down to the note, Joe raised his eyes to Jason.

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"Hand me that blue journal, Frank." Ellen continuously stared at the computer screen.

"This one?" Frank held it up.

"Yeah." She glanced at it and opened it. "I appreciate you coming here with me. I know this is boring for you."

"Nah, boring would be sitting with Henry. I enjoy watching you."

Ellen turned a page in the journal then clicked on a key. "Hand me the red pen."

Frank moved it to her reach, then kissed her on the cheek. He slid his stool over. "You know what you're working on?"

"I know what I'm looking at. Right now, I'm going through every single remedy he did. Thanks for asking Henry to sit with the kids."

"Sure." Frank slid his elbow on the counter, leaning his head on it. "He was there anyhow. Always. Watching old soap opera tapes none-the-less."

Ellen tilted her head and smiled.

"El?" Frank touched her lips. "Was that a smile?"

"A brief one yes." She returned to the computer. "Aw, Dean. Damn it. We did this one, where are the notes? No." She scribbled on the journal then tapped on the keyboard. "Dean, you wrote this backwards. Shit."

Frank was happy, very happy, Ellen was working and complaining.

"Excuse me." Joe called out, knocking on the doorway. "Frank. Can I have a moment with your wife?"

"Sure." Frank folded his arms.

"Alone." Joe motioned his head backwards.

"All right." He whined, kissed Ellen and walked away. "I'll be back."

Ellen reached her hand back missing Frank's as he left. Within seconds she felt Joe sit next to her.

"So, Ellen, how's it going?" Joe asked.

"It's going." She turned her body to face him.

"I'm glad to see you doing this."

"It's tough, Joe. I'm taking it one step at a time. If I can help make sure everything Dean did was not in vain, then I'm doing my part to keep

him alive.”

“How are you doing?” Joe questioned with heart.

“I’m doing. I’m taking that one step at a time also.” She reached forward grabbing his hand. “It’s so hard. Coming in here like this. Wishing and needing to see him. I can’t believe he’s gone, Joe. I can’t believe it.”

“I know.” Joe’s hand reached to her face. “It’ll get easier.”

“I don’t see how. I loved him, Joe. Truly loved him. I never realized until he was gone, how big of a part of my life he was. I guess that goes that way with everything.”

“It does.”

“So did you come here to check up on me?”

“Nah.” Joe shook his head. “I didn’t come to check up on you. I came, in fact, to make you a very happy woman.”

“Joe.” Ellen closed her eyes. “I love you very much. And as my father, I know you want to just help me through this.”

“I do. I want to take it all away for you.” Very assuredly Joe spoke. “I’m going to.”

Almost wanting to cry, Ellen laughed emotionally. “I wish you could. I wish to God you could. But the truth is Joe, you came here to make me very happy. You can’t, no one can. Nothing . . . can. The only thing that will take it all away, the only thing that will stop my heart from breaking, is if Dean walked through that door. And you and I both know, *that* will never happen.”

Joe’s hand, the hand she found comfort in, slid in a father’s grip to her face. He let his forefinger wipe the tear that ran slowly down her cheek. Scooting closer to her, he brushed his lips against her nose, then moved back an inch. “Sweetheart.” He smiled at her, he smiled widely. “That’s not necessarily so.”

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