

The Inner Struggle I

By

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BOOK ONE

HOPE AND GLORY

So that with our strength we may fight . . .

We may conquer . . .

We may go on . . .

We may face . . . our inner struggles

Intricately woven are the lives of the characters of Beginnings. I could not give them the laughter, their hardships, and triumphs if I didn't get the support for every page that I wrote.

For your help in this latest Beginnings Fiasco, I wish to thank . . .

Rob, I could fill a page thanking you for the tremendous support you gave in this book. You know how you helped, and you know how great my appreciation is, thanks. Steve, for tears shed. Not through sorrow, but through laughter. Even though no one else would probably laugh that hard. To Trish, for tears shed . . . ha, ha, I'm kidding. For all of your help and zealous over my people. Wait! Wouldn't that be OUR people now? Pages 528 to 533 are all yours. Lynn for your answering of all my questions. I know you think I'm whacked. To the ARC House, and the staff for their help and support in one of the story lines. Especially to John S. there, you were a great help, really. To R.S., to proving to me you truly are 'my Henry'. And finally, as always, to F. For standing over my shoulder, making me smile, guiding, and inspiring over every page that I write.

Thanks,

J.

NEAR BUT FAR

CHAPTER ONE

JUNE 27

Beginnings, Montana

(1)

“Son of a bitch!” Joe Slagel made a growling face, curling his top lip in such utter disgust as he marched across center town in Beginnings. He stopped to pull the radio closer to his mouth. “Did you spot him?”

A hiss of the radio and John Matoose came over. “Yeah Joe. Team three said they saw him moving fast by the back gate.”

“He’s not on his way back out is he? Keep that perimeter up, you hear me? This is a potentially dangerous situation which I have to get under control.”

“Gotcha’ Joe. What do you need from me?” John asked. “I can grab the tranquilizer gun and head to the back gate.”

“No, the son of a bitch is strong and big too. I don’t want to take a chance of making things worse. Just stay put down at the command center and I’ll have team three keep him in their focus while waiting on team four, then both can bring him in.” Joe switched channels as he kept moving. “Dan, come in.”

“Yes Joe.”

“Get your team up to the back gate. When you got him, secure him. Secure him good. And radio me an all clear when it happens. This could possibly turn into a code eight Dan and we don’t need general population getting worried or scared about it. Get back to me.” With a slam of the radio to his hand, Joe stormed towards the social hall. He moved quick, in fact Joe prided himself on moving faster than most of the men half his age. His hands shook as he reached for the handle of the social hall. One drink. That’s all Joe wanted was one drink. His blood pressure was up and with all of the commotion that erupted, he himself had to stay calm or else how would he keep the security staff from panicking. Calm. Joe took a deep breath as he walked into the empty social hall grabbing for a cigarette from the front pocket of his white button down shirt. He stuck it in his mouth, lighting it as he walked behind the bar. He gave a firm pat to ‘Sam’ the bartender mannequin as he poured himself a shot of moonshine.

Downing it, Joe wished at that moment he was ‘Sam’. Not a care in the world, not a worry. What Joe wouldn’t give for a peaceful uneventful strand of time in Beginnings. But he knew that wasn’t going to happen. Especially on this day. They hadn’t heard from Robbie who was out making another raid on a SUT camp. They almost lost Ellen and the baby, and now . . . and now this. This unexpected tribulation was not something Joe wanted to deal with but had to, and he had his security staff full force trying with diligence to get it under control.

With a rattle he laid down his glass on the bar and headed back out of

the social hall. He felt thirty percent better and more able to cope with the battle that he and his security teams were now dealing with.

(2)

The smell of it burned Robbie Slagel's nose so bad he could have sworn it was starting to bleed. He ran the back of his forefinger against his nostrils to check as he stepped away from the death scene he and his men stood before. The partially decomposing bodies baking in the hot sun was the minimal of what made Robbie's stomach turn. He walked his tall body further from the scene running his fingers through his blonde hair. Knowing he had to contact Beginnings, Robbie signaled his men to fall in and further themselves away from the bodies he and his men happened upon in the middle of a raid. A raid against the SUTs--he thought. A raid that turned out to be against something that wasn't created by science--like the SUTS. A raid against something the cold hard world they lived in now created, Savages. How victorious the savages must have felt in their defeat of a SUT troop. They hung their bodies as if they were trophies. But Robbie knew the savages weren't the winners at all, they were actually the losers. And they could very well be on their way--even though dead--to making Robbie and his men the losers as well.

Robbie moved even more away from the camp of death. He didn't want to look back, he didn't have to. Because what he stumbled upon was a frightening foreboding of what he would see again if he, and if Beginnings failed in their mission to stop the virus that the some of the savages themselves had died from.

He found a spot on the grass, plopping down and readying himself to call home. He stopped mid attempt and placed the phone to his lips. How was he going to do it? How was he going to call home and tell them about this? Robbie's job along with his men was to stop those who could bring the new plague to Beginnings. And after what Robbie just witnessed, he had the frightening realization that he and his men may have just become those Beginnings was trying to stop.

(3)

So closely Dr. Dean Hayes peered through the heavy plastic of the infant incubator to the tiny newborn who slept inside. Deep breaths the baby boy took, his abundance of black hair laying softly across his forehead. A tiny intravenous was in his splinted arm which was raised above his head. So small he was, yet every feature seemed perfect. Dean laid down the chart he held on the cart next to the incubator. He lifted slightly the legs to his baggy Levis and squatted down closer to the infant's level, looking at the

closed eyes and the puttering little mouth. He placed his hands in the protective gloves and brought them into the incubator, gently running his hand down the head of the baby to his back. He lifted the fragile looking arm examining and making sure that the needle for the IV was placed correctly. And then Dean just stared some more.

A subtle clearing of her throat, and with folded arms, Dr. Andrea Winters approached Dean from behind. "Precious, isn't he?"

First Dean raised his eyes in the plastic looking at Andrea and then he removed his hands and stood up. He ran his fingers through his dark blond hair and rested his hand behind his neck. "Honestly?" Dean tilted his head. "This has got to be the cutest kid I have ever seen born in Beginnings. And that is saying a lot coming from me."

"He looks a lot like his father, I mean biological father, don't you think?" Andrea smiled as she bent down some looking in the incubator.

Dean raised his eyebrows a few times. "Uh, let's not touch that one shall we."

"How are you with that?" Andrea asked.

"Let's just say the reality of it is starting to hit me right now. Now that everything has settled. And really Andrea, I don't want to talk about that. I want to talk about him." Dean handed her the chart. "What do you think?"

"Early as we thought. Eight or nine weeks is my guess. He still has the downing hair." Andrea opened the chart. "As you know, four pounds seven ounces. Went into respiratory distress about an hour ago. He's stabilized now. Which is consistent Dean with premature births. And seeing the trauma that this little one suffered, the fact that his APGAR readings were low, and he wasn't breathing when he was born, he's doing well. His weight will drop." Andrea nodded as she talked. "And chancing a smart comment, he's jaundice right now. His bilirubin reading is way up. We're gonna put him under the lights."

With a closed mouth and lowered head Dean raised his eyes. "You dealt with this for many years in the old world. Professional opinion, because I'm too close to it Andrea."

"Professional opinion?" Andrea breathed heavily through her nostrils then a smile hit her face. "He is going to be just fine. He has a little bit of a fight, but look at his mother. He comes from tough genes."

"Thanks Andrea. And speaking of his mother." Dean looked at his watch. "I promised Ellen I wouldn't be gone too long. I just wanted to check on him."

"How is she doing?"

"Amazingly well." Dean smiled.

"Good. And good job today."

He let out a quick relief breath. "Scarey job. I'll talk to you later." Dean backed up.

"Oh Dean, one thing?" Andrea stopped him. "Right now he doesn't have a name, first or last. What should we call him, chart him under?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. I'll get back to you on that one Andrea." Lifting his hand in a wave, Dean turned and left the nursery. He placed his hands in the front pockets of his jeans slowing down to look at the other two babies in there. So big they looked next to Ellen's son. Of course in every instance that Ellen gave birth, every baby always would have looked bigger. Dean guessed the exception to that was Joey. Then again, Joey's birth was not something Dean would ever know about. Courtesy of that little--rather big--ripple in time.

He walked down the corridor at a quicker pace to Ellen's room. He didn't mean to be gone so long, he probably wasn't, but he got caught up with the baby. He needed the moment to do so. To take in all that had happened and all that he learned in the past few hours. "Sorry." He spoke softly as he walked into Ellen's room.

Ellen grunted some as she lifted her body to sit more. She gave a subtle smile to him. "That's all right. You weren't gone long. How is he?"

Dean nodded. "Good. Cute El. Really cute. I'll wheel you down in a little bit. I just want you in bed for a few more hours. Deal?"

"Deal. You aren't lying to me are you Dean? He really is fine. Right?" She pulled her dark blonde hair from her face, then rested her head back against her raised pillows.

"Really fine. His breathing is back on track. But you know El, you're a nurse. All this was to be expected, he was really early." He reached for his chair that he had sat in before going to check on Ellen's newborn son.

"Dean." She extended out her hand. "You don't have to stay with me. You don't. I don't want to put that on you. You probably have other things you'd rather be doing now."

"Yeah I do. Sitting." He plopped in the chair and scooted it as close to the bed as he could get it. "Sitting with you." He grabbed her hand, cupped the other one over it and brought it to his lips and gently kissed her. "I thought I was going to lose you today." He brought his face closer to hers. "You couldn't imagine what was going through my mind. I was scared El, really scared. And now that the excitement of everything is over." He blinked several times. "I'll tell you, it's hitting me."

"I'm sorry Dean, I am really sorry for all that you found . . ."

"No." Dean shook his head, and he brought her hand down to the bed, leaving his rested upon it. "Don't apologize. Trust me when I tell you, yeah I was shocked, but you're Ellen. I know you Ellen. And I know, what you see isn't always what you see with you. Understand?"

"I understand. Dean, tell me something. Maybe it was the birth and all, but does the baby, does he still . . . does he still look the same?"

"Oh yeah."

"Oh boy." Ellen plopped her head back deeper into the pillow. She saw through the corner of her eye Dean lowering his head and with his free hand he roughly rubbed his eyes. "Dean?"

"Huh?" He slid his hand down his face, his eyes had become

bloodshot.

“Are you all right?”

“Tired.”

“You know what you promised me in the lab this morning don’t you? You promised me you would talk to me about what was going on with you.”

“Now’s not a good time El. Later, please?”

“I want to know. I’m in this with you.”

“And I’m glad.” His fingers squeezed around her hand. “But I’d rather wait until things calm down some so we aren’t interrupted.”

“I’ll wait, but don’t think you’re getting out of it.” She pointed with her head. “There is something though I need to know right now. And I’m a little nervous about it. It might not be a good time to bring this up, but I need to know. Did you change your mind about what we decided on?”

His fingers traced a small circle on her hand as he stared down at it with a solemn face, then as he raised his eyes to Ellen, Dean smiled. “No. I didn’t change my mind.” He watched Ellen smile in relief. “You and I have been talking about this for over a month. Aside from the fact with all that’s going on with me, I need to do this with you. I want to do this with you.” He brought his lips closer to kiss her and noticed Ellen had turned her views to the door. Dean looked also. He shook his head with a laugh. “Henry.”

The blackness and shininess of his hair that lay just past his shoulder, peeked through the doorway first, then he slid his tall thin body--almost in a quiet sneak--into the room. “Hey El.”

“Henry.” Ellen smiled his name.

Looking back to the door once more, Henry hurried to the bed. “I just wanted to check in and let you know that I wish I could stay.”

“I know Henry, you go on and do what you have to do.”

“It’s terrible out there El. Awful.”

“Then you’d better not hang around too long.” Ellen told him.

“You’re right El.” Henry moved to the bed and kissed her quickly. “I’ll check in again on my next pass by.” He backed up hurriedly. “Dean stay with her.” He darted to the door. “Oh.” He slid in a stop. “How’s the baby?”

Dean looked at Henry. “Good Henry.”

Ellen waved her hand. “Hurry Henry, go.”

“I’m going. I’ll be back.” He dashed from the room.

Ellen giggled as she listen to his footsteps tromp down the hall.

“This is going to be good.” Dean commented.

“Oh Dean that’s terrible.”

“No El. It’s funny. And I’ll tell you, it’s been building and building and I’m going to enjoy every second of it. And guess what? I have a ringside seat.” With a look of Dean arrogance, he sat back in his chair and smiled.

(4)

Joe had listened to it intently on the radio. The news that everything was under control brought a sense of relief to him, even though his security team had informed him it was more of a struggle than originally anticipated.

Tossing his finished cigarette from his hand, Joe slowed down as he approached his office at the utility buildings. He could see three of the security guys out front, one of which was Dan. And none of the three looked good. "What the hell happened to you three?" Joe cased them over, even Dan's long hair which was always pulled back neatly into a ponytail, had dangling strands.

"It was tough Joe. Really tough." Dan shook his head and ran the back of his hand across his mouth which bled some. "Four men were injured in the pursuit, unintentionally, but injured."

"You knew what we were dealing with." Joe told him. "Is he in there?" Joe, seriously motioned his head to the door.

"And secured Joe. I'll go in with you."

"Nah, I can handle it." Joe reached for the door.

"I'd rather be in there with you Joe. He's agitated and not very happy with being captured. It might not be safe."

"Well I can handle him, but, if you want to amuse yourself, come on in." Joe opened the door wider waltzing into his office with dramatic flare and intimidation. He was greeted by the noise of it. Banging, continuous banging of wood against the linoleum. It was accompanied with muffled grunts of a struggle. Joe snickered some, gained his composure and walked further into the office. "Frank, calm down."

One long deep growl came from Frank Slagel as he raised his mean dark eyes peering at his father. He grunted again, unable to speak from the gag placed over his mouth. His big shoulders tossed back in forth as he tried to free himself from the chair in which he was tied to.

"Now if you promise to not yell. I'll take this tape from your mouth." Joe bent down to him. He listened to the heavy hard breath Frank released from his nose. "Frank? Deal?"

Frank nodded.

"Good." Joe reached for the end of the tape slowly lifting it, then pausing before ripping it off his son's mouth harder than he should have. He pulled the small cloth from Frank's mouth. "Better?"

Frank screamed first, rumbling from his chest. "What the fuck is this all . . ." He muffled a 'hmpf' when Joe replaced the tape.

"Frank." Joe spoke pacifying to him. "We can do this my way or you can stay like this until your big ass calms down. Now, can I take off this tape or what?" He saw Frank nod again. "Now scream at me again and I'll smack the hell out of you while you're tied to that chair. And guess what? You can't do shit about it. Ready?" Raising his eyebrows once, Joe ripped

the tape hard from his mouth again.

“Uh!” Frank twitched his head. “My fuckin goatee better still be there.”

“Frank!”

“Dad! You got me fuckin tied up in a chair. And you don’t want me to be pissed?” His face turned red. “Don’t . . .” He saw the tape coming. “Put that thing over my mouth. I can’t believe you had eight of my guys chasing my ass around . . . ow . . . hey you hit me.”

“What did I tell you?”

“Knock it off!” Frank screamed. “Why were my men tracking me down like I was bigfoot or something.”

“Because you’re out of control.”

“Yeah I’m out of control. And wait until I get my hands on Henry. Wait.”

“Speaking of which.” Joe lifted his radio to his mouth. “Henry, Henry all is clear. You can stop running now.”

“Oh he’d better fuckin run. Three hours I chased him, most of which has been avoiding my own men. Tell him to run because he’s a dead man.”

“No he’s not Frank.”

“Yes he is.”

“No he’s not.” Joe backed up placing down the radio and he leaned against his desk. “I had your men grab your ass because you had to be stopped. You can’t be chasing Henry around Beginnings like you were sixteen years old. What were you gonna do when you caught him? Beat the hell out of him.”

“Well . . . yeah.”

“Well . . . no.” Joe mocked him. “I told you. I told you that I wouldn’t stand for this behavior if you ever found out that he and Ellen were together. Tough Frank, deal with it. You started it, you pushed it and now you have to live with it. And Henry can’t be running from you for three hours. He should be at the clinic where his baby is.”

“Oh no!” Frank shook his head.

“What do you mean oh no. It’s his baby.”

“Oh no, my baby.” Frank spoke with insistence.

“Frank, did you look at the kid? Really look at the kid?”

“Yeah. He has dark hair like me.”

“He also is very oriental like Henry. You’re not oriental Frank, at least the last I checked you weren’t.”

“But I have dark hair. And it’s my baby.”

Joe grunted and ran his hand over his own face to calm himself. “How in Christ’s name do you figure that?”

“He’s my kid. Ask Dan.”

Joe looked over to Dan. “You’re not going to tell me that baby is Frank’s are you?”

“Well Joe.” Dan lifted his shoulders. “It is.”

“The goddamn kid looks just like Henry.” Joe blasted. “How can you

say that?"

Dan scratched his head. "According to understand rules, whichever man is the primary relationship when the kid is conceived, that's whose kid it is. And Ellen was married to Frank when the kid was conceived. He had the understanding with Henry. So technically, the baby is Frank's."

"Yeah. I own the kid." Frank stated.

Joe waved his hand in an ignoring fashion to Frank as he spoke to Dan. "That rule can not hold true in cases such as this."

Dan disagreed. "Oh sure Joe it can and it does. The baby rule was established first. And it had to be in order to keep peace. Any man that enters into an understanding knows full well that if the woman gets pregnant the child is not his. It's up to the primary relationship to make the decision on whether he shares the kid or not." Dan said. "For example. Look at the Matoose's. Jenny has red hair, John with what hair he has is blonde. Their daughter has black hair like Patrick yet, no one questions whether it's John's kid."

Joe closed his eyes. "How do you keep track of all these rules?"

"Eh." Dan shrugged. "There's not that many. Besides, Trish in history has a copy of them she keeps for reference purposes."

Ignoring Frank's 'Come on Dad . . . Dad . . . Dad let me go . . . Dad?', Joe continued speaking to Dan. "You people actually wrote down rules? How come I didn't know this?"

"You did." Dan stated. "We thought you did. You gave the final decision on a lot of problems."

"Christ." Joe picked up the phone. "When you people came to me and said it's a rule, I merely agreed with the rule. I didn't think there actually were any." He began to dial, whining ahead of time knowing full well how Trish was going to answer the phone.

"Dad!" Frank yelled.

"Shut up Frank." Joe put the phone to his ear.

"Good after noon." Trish spoke so pleasant. "This is Trish in History, how can I help you?"

Joe closed one eye and took a breath before he said anything. "You can start by not answering the damn phone so old world professionally."

Trish giggled as if Joe was joking. "Your funny Joe."

"No Trish I'm not. And I want you to have a copy of the understanding rules ready for me in about . . ." Joe glanced at his watch. "Fifteen minutes. I'll be by to pick them up."

"But you have a copy Joe."

"I have a copy?"

"Yeah, I brought them up to you last year."

"Christ Trish, that was last year, I probably tossed them out thinking it was a joke. Get me another set. Thanks." Grunting, Joe hung up the phone and laid it down. "Now." He walked to Frank. "About you."

"Yeah." Frank struggled. "Untie me."

"Not just yet."

"What?"

"I need to have your word that you are not going to be giving the Frank attitude to Ellen. I won't stand for it, she's just as much my daughter as you are my son. Your word."

"You have my word." Frank sounded so agitated. "We have another kid now and we're going to work it out between us. Without Henry." He saw his father laugh. "What?"

"I don't think that'll be such an easy thing to do Frank, unless you plan on being the secondary relationship."

"Fuck that."

"No Frank, I don't think so." With a look of enjoyment on his face, Joe leaned again against his desk. "You see, Henry and Ellen . . . got married."

Very calmly Frank tilted his head. "Repeat that one more time."

"Henry and Ellen got married."

"That's what I thought you said." With flaring nostrils, Frank let out a bellowing grunt standing to his feet and bringing the attached chair with him. With all his strength he raced full speed backwards, crashing into the wall and smashing the chair apart. Raising his arms out, he flung the ropes from him, whipped open the door and charged out in typical heated Frank-fashion.

Joe saw Dan racing after him and he reached out and stopped him. "Let him go."

"But Joe." Nervously Dan pointed to the door. "He'll kill Henry."

"Nah, he won't." Joe walked behind his desk and sat down.

"Should we forewarn Henry, after all he thinks it's safe."

Joe thought about it for a second. "Let it go. I gave Henry the advantage long enough. After all there has to be some loyalty to my son. Right?" Joe pulled out a cigarette and lit it as he reached for the phone.

Dan looked at the door, visions of Frank pulverizing an unsuspecting Henry raced through his mind, he looked at Joe so calm. "Who you calling?"

"Oh Godrichson. He'll enjoy this."

Throwing his hands in the air, Dan moved to the door. "I'm heading back to work. Let me know when you hear from Robbie." He walked out.

Robbie. Joe stopped dialing. With all the antics that he was enjoying with his other son, he let the worrying of Robbie slip from his mind. And at that moment it returned full force. Switching his demeanor, Joe set aside calling Godrichson and began to dial again, this time he called Robbie, hoping he was in close enough range that Joe could speak to him. He needed to speak to him.

In the west division of the fields Henry emerged from the tall corn stalks. He clenched his radio with excitement and hooked it back on his belt. Raising his head up, he spoke softly. "Thank you." and in Henry fashion he took off fast back to town. Rounding by the field house, he lifted his hand in a wave to Cole, as he looked back, he saw it. It perched out from under the wooden structure used as an office and tool building. Henry stopped cold in his tracks turning around and going to it. A wild flower, so long, and blue. So perfect for something Henry thought as an item nature merely spit out by accident. Smiling widely, Henry bent down and picked it up. He brought the strong stemmed object closer to his face. Grinning even more, he continued in his speed off to town.

(6)

Frank merely made a grunting noise to everyone he passed in his storm to the clinic. That's where he pegged Henry to be going. Strong and tall he walked his big body, his arms swinging back and forth as he moved in long strides.

"Hey Dad." Johnny Slagel had stepped from the steps of the clinic. "Going to see Ellen?"

He didn't want to stop, but seeing how Johnny was his kid, Frank had to. "Henry."

"He's not in there." Johnny pointed back. "At least I didn't see him."

"You didn't go in Ellen's room that's why. Excuse me." Frank started to move.

"I peeked in."

Frank stopped and spun his head around. "You peeked? What is this peeking shit?"

"I, I didn't want to . . ."

"I hope to God John you aren't still acting this way. Now is not the time, all right." Frank held his hand outward as he scolded.

"No, no. I didn't peek in the room because I didn't want to talk to her. I don't think it's right that I do. I didn't want her around when my daughter was born, and I'd understand if she returned the sentiment. I just didn't want to put her in that position of having to tell me. That's all. And I only wanted to see how her and my brother were."

"So I take it you saw your brother?" Frank asked with a raised eyebrow. "What do you think?"

"Cute, really cute."

"That's all?"

"And little?"

"And?" Frank tilted his head.

"Um naked except for a diaper?"

Snarling at his son, Frank made a spin in the direction of the clinic and

took the steps in one extension of his legs. He thought as he barreled up the steps how much he hated to do it to Denny and Josh who were cleaning the doors. But if Frank didn't do it, then it would ruin his entrance into the clinic. His mean, 'stay out of my way' entrance. So without saying anything, Frank grabbed hold of the handle of the door, throwing it open, letting smack, first off of Josh and then off the wall. Frank knew which direction he had to go.

The rage Frank was feeling boiled his blood and hardened his footsteps so much that he caught the attention of Jenny Matoose who stood by the nursery window. Hunching and hoping she wouldn't talk to him, Frank was out of luck.

"Hi Frank." Jenny bounced in her walk to him, tossing her thick red hair over one shoulder. "Congratulations. Your son is beautiful."

His lip curled and his eyebrow raised. He tried not to, but a growl came out of him.

"What's his name." Jenny said to him as Frank, looking ahead walked by the nursery. "They don't have his name up?"

The high squeal of his boots from his sudden stop not only made a noise but a black scuff mark long and dark as well. "What do you mean they don't have his name up?" He turned back marching to the nursery window, he looked at the to basinets set close. "Where is he? Does Ellen have him?"

"No." Jenny shook her head. "He's way back there." Her index finger pointed against the glass.

Frank's eyes widened when he saw the incubator huddled in the corner of the room. "Why's he way back there?"

"They had him up front until he went into respiratory arrest . . . Frank?" Jenny felt the brush by her of Frank and she turned back to the window.

Frank's heart beat heavier when walked directly back to the incubator, his complete focus forward. It was the first time since the baby was born that Frank had saw him, and how different he looked outside of that blanket. "Oh my God." He stepped to the incubator, closing his eyes briefly as his hand ran over it. He felt a lump form in his throat when he peered down to the tiny boy so small, and looking more helpless than Frank had seen any of his children ever look. Frank felt as helpless as the baby looked. "Hey." Frank spoke softly, placing his hand in the protective glove opening. He flashed back to when Brian was in a warming bed. Brian didn't look so frail, and he definitely didn't have the intravenous, oxygen or monitors that this baby had. His huge hand trembled some as it reached for the baby's stomach. The moment it touched down, he felt the rise and fall of the body that was buried beneath his palm. "Hey little guy." Frank tapped on top of the incubator plastic. He smiled when the baby jolted some. "Did you hear me? Yeah."

"Of course he heard you." Andrea spoke behind him.

Frank tilted his head in disgust when he heard Andrea's voice. "I hope to God there isn't a smart comment following that like he heard me because I have a big mouth."

"No, not today." She moved closer to look with Frank. "He's doing better."

"What happened to him?" Frank asked.

"Besides being very early, he stopped breathing about an hour and a half ago."

"Shit."

"Normal Frank." Andrea calmly told him. "We expect normal lung functioning in a few days. We checked the ratio, it's good. We're giving him a steroid equivalent to make him stronger."

"So sad." Frank brought his face closer to the plastic. "He looks so defenseless. So helpless."

"He is right now." Andrea told him. "But with time and prayer I'm certain he will be fine. You'll see a difference in a few days."

"Look at his little arm Andrea. You have it strapped down."

"We have to keep the IV in there. He's a wiry little guy." Andrea smiled.

"Why isn't his name anywhere?" Frank looked at the sign that stated. 'Ellen's baby boy'

"I didn't put anything up because, well, to be honest with the way you have been acting the past few hours, no one knew what you were going to do."

"What do you mean?" Frank asked.

"There was some talk that you would disown this child because of . . . you know." Andrea smiled again running her hand down Frank's back. "I know we don't see eye to eye Frank, but let me just say to you, you coming to the clinic and being in here so calm is the best thing to do. Not raging to kill Henry is even better. I know you want Ellen back, and you handling this so unlike yourself, so mature . . ." She snickered when Frank gave her a look of disgust. "You're going about it the right way. Everyone said you wouldn't. I kind of thought you'd be like this. You know as well as I do, you go in there tearing Henry apart and you can forget about Ellen."

Frank smiled and touched the baby one more time. He retracted his hand from the glove. "You know what Andrea? You're right. Thanks. And I know exactly what I'm going to do now." He tapped her on the cheek and gave a smirk.

This surprised Andrea. "Did you change your mind about something?"

"You can say that." Frank stared down at the baby.

"I hope I didn't make things worse."

"Nope, better."

"Good. I'll let you visit with . . ." She stopped talking as she stepped back. "What is his name?"

"Nick." Frank nodded so assuredly. "Nicholas Robert Slagel."

(7)

Henry kept up his pace all the way to the clinic, he even ran down the hall so fast by Jenny Matoose that she didn't see him. Or at least Henry hoped she didn't. With his hands behind his back, and excited look of a kid upon his face, he bolted into Ellen's room. "Hey El."

"Henry." Ellen grinned.

Dean released the grip he held on Ellen's hand and sat back. "Passing by again Henry?"

"No, it's safe now. Everything is under control." He caught his breath and walked over to the bed. "I'm sorry for not being here." He kissed Ellen, then kissed her again.

"That's O.K. Henry, your life is so much more important. Dean kept me company."

"Thanks Dean." Henry grabbed a chair and pulled it to the other side of her bed. "Here El. I got this for you." He handed her the wildflower.

"Oh Henry." Ellen sniffed it. "That is so sweet. Dean? Isn't he sweet?"

"He's a pip." Dean rested his elbow on his knee and his chin on his palm.

Henry sat down and grabbed Ellen's hand. "I'm so glad you're O.K. El."

"Dean saved my life Henry."

Henry smiled at Dean. "I owe you."

"You'll pay too." Dean pointed his finger.

"Hey El." Henry spoke upbeat. "Guess who I saw when I was running down the hall?"

"Who?"

"Jenny Matoose."

"Aw Henry, what is she doing here?"

"Staring at the babies."

Ellen moaned. "I hope to God she's not planning on bringing another Matoose into this world. You don't suppose she was staring at our baby do you?"

"It make me cringe to think of it El. Besides, I couldn't see who she was looking at, she blocked the whole window." Henry paused. "Oh no."

"What's wrong?"

"What if, El." Henry leaned closer. "What if she's cursing the baby."

"Do you think she could?"

"Anything is possible."

Dean rolled his eyes. "Yeah Henry, so if the baby cries a lot watch out. She cursed him."

"Henry." Ellen squeezed his hand. "Have you seen the baby?"

"Not since he was born. I'm kind of afraid."

"You should be. He still looks the same. He still looks like you."

"No."

"Yes, he does."

"Now see." Henry lifted his hand. "I don't get it. How did that happen?"

Dean trying hard to contain his laughter or sarcasm, didn't. "Seeing how I'm the most qualified medically to answer that question, I will. You see Henry, I'll tell you how it happened. You two were having sex back when you weren't supposed to be."

Henry nodded his head. "But it wasn't that much though."

"It only takes one time Henry." Dean explained. "Was it one time?"

"Well . . ." Henry tilted his head. "Yeah."

"More than one time?" Dean asked.

"Well . . . yeah."

"Then you increased your odds." Dean raised his hand in a 'there you have it' manner.

Ellen shifted her views to Dean. "But Dean. It really didn't count. Did it Henry?"

"No Dean, it didn't count." Henry stated.

"How can you say it didn't count?" Dean rubbed his eyes. "Henry?"

"Well." Henry lifted his shoulders. "It wasn't that many times. And it wasn't real sex."

"What?" Dean sputtered in laughter. "How can it not be real sex? You conceived a child Henry, you had real sex."

Ellen was going to put her two cents in but didn't, a look of fright came over her. "Henry hide. Frank is coming."

"No El." Henry shushed her. "He's not coming. Joe has him."

"I'm telling you Henry, he's coming."

Dean nodded. "Listen to her Henry she has Frank sensors. That radar is going off. Beep-beep."

"For you information Mr. Smartie pants." Henry took on edge. "A radar doesn't make noise."

Dean indicated to the door. "Yeah, but Frank does." Thoroughly enjoying the tension that just filled the room, Dean sat back.

"Shit." Henry sprung up backing up. "Frank. Frank, I thought . . ."

Frank ignored him, and moved to Ellen. "Hey." He sat on the bed next to her. "How are you?"

Ellen apprehensively accepted the kiss he gave her. "Scared at this moment you're going to yell or hate me."

"Never." Frank shook his head.

"Are you going to beat up poor Henry?" Ellen asked.

"No, I'm not going to beat up . . ." Frank swallowed. "Poor Henry." He turned his head to the side and gave a hard to give smile to Henry. "I've calmed down a lot, and done a lot of thinking."

"Frank." Ellen grabbed his hand. "There's something you should know. Henry and I . . ."

"I know." Frank held up his hand. "And I've got one thing to say about that."

Henry winced. Thinking it was coming, he was for sure gonna get a good look at that linoleum he replaced, when his face hit it. "Frank listen to me. Let me explain."

"No need." Frank stayed calm. "Why didn't you guys tell me? I would have liked to have known. But, you didn't. I'm good with it. I think we can make this situation work for the three of us, now that things are somewhat settled."

It started out as a simple hard breath of laughing air that escaped Dean, then it turned to several and Dean started to laugh. "Oh shit. Henry and Ellen you aren't buying this act are you?"

Frank turned sharply to Dean. "Shut the fuck up Dean, this isn't an act."

"Yeah right." Dean stood up. "And I'm out of here. This is really disappointing, I expected much more reaction out of you Frank. You whimped out." Dean leaned down to Ellen and kissed her, snickering at Frank's 'hey.' "El, I'll be back later so you and I can talk. O.K."

Frank snapped his finger. "Dean, can you stay here for another minute with her. I want to talk to Henry."

This made Dean smile and he sat back down. "I knew it. Sure I'll stay Frank."

"Thanks. Henry?"

Henry looked at Frank. "We can talk here." He really didn't want to leave that room with Frank.

"Henry. I need to speak to you alone in the hall. Now."

"Frank can it just . . ." Henry shrieked as he was being led out. "Ow Frank let go of my ear."

Still tugging on Henry's lobe, Frank brought him in the hall and shut Ellen's door. Less than gently he released Henry.

Henry rubbed his ear. "You could have found another way." He shook off the pain. "I guess if you aren't beating me up, I can't complain." He watched Frank just stare at him. "Why do I get the feeling that this isn't a friendly talk?"

"Because you're a smart man Henry." Frank stepped closer. "As of right now, resolve yourself to the fact that you will pick me as the understanding partner in this so called marriage that you and Ellen have."

"But Frank that is Ellen's choice. I don't have a say so."

"Then get one." Frank told him strongly. "You get one in it. You hear me?"

"I didn't think you wanted to be the secondary relationship."

"I don't. But just like you Henry, I'm going to take it. And then, just like you, I will be everything she wants and I will take her from you Henry."

You hear me? I will take her from you. I have loved her for over twenty years and don't think I can't do it. You doubt me? Ask Dean." Frank grabbed a hold of his arm pulling Henry with him. "See the baby Henry."

"Frank I don't . . ."

"Look." With force Frank pulled Henry to the window. "Look at his name."

Henry swallowed. "Nicholas Robert Slagel? You gave him Robbie's name? I hate Robbie Frank. I hate him."

"He's my brother Henry."

"But it's our baby Frank, you really shouldn't have named our . . ."

"Stop." Frank held his hand up. "My baby."

"Our baby Frank." Henry lowered his voice. "Look at him."

"I did." Frank blew slowly. "Trust me I did. And he's my baby Henry. See, you obviously took the understanding I was having with you further than I was allowing. There's no denying it now. And since you excepted the understanding, you excepted the rules that went along with it. Correct?"

"Yeah."

"What's the rule on kids being born?" Frank asked. "Do you know?"

Henry stuttered as he saw the look in Frank's eyes, so glossed over they were, so serious. "It, it says that who ever is the primary relationship when the kid is conceived is the father."

"Conceived Henry. I was married to her when you and her conceived this kid. Mine Henry, not yours."

"What are you getting at Frank?" Henry asked nervously.

"What am I getting at?" Frank leaned his face close to Henry and spoke in mean whisper. "You fucked me Henry. You fucked me over big time. You took my life from me. And I will take yours. See that baby boy in there. Nick *Slagel*? Mine Henry, mine. And under understanding rules I have the say so to dictate who raises the kid. Isn't that right?"

Apprehensively Henry swallowed and answered. "Yes."

"So I dictate this. I will raise my son, me and Ellen alone."

"But that's not fair Frank."

"Fair!" Though Frank's volume level was low, his words were hard enough to go through Henry. "You wanna talk fair to me. Look at all that happened Henry, and then we'll talk fair. So listen to me. You will not be a part of that kids life. You will not raise him, I will. He will not call you Dad. He will not look up to you. You Henry, will not see his first step. You won't hear his first words. You won't have a thing to do with him. Got that? Enjoy him while he's here because once he's with me, Henry Kusakari will be nothing more to him than the fuckin maintenance man in Beginnings."

Henry's eyes closed tightly when he felt Frank harshly brush by him. Tilting his head as it laid pressed to the glass, Henry watched Frank walk into Ellen's room. Slowly he slid to the door of the nursery and walked inside. Staring at the incubator in the back, Henry with his hand in his

pockets walked to Nick. The name 'Nicholas Robert Slagel' burned at him and hurt him almost as much as Frank's words did. Sadly, Henry bent down resting his forehead against the side of the plastic while he stared at the steeping newborn. And with his heart so heavy, Henry feared at that moment, that for the rest of his life--like right there with the incubator--the son he helped to bring into the world, would be forever from his reach.

CHAPTER TWO

In need of a good oiling is what George Hadly thought when he hit the third sub-basement level of the lab where the scientists worked. The sound of squeaking wheels and mice filled the long room that looked more like a greenhouse more than anything else. "How's it going?" He approached a worker who watched one cage. Six or seven mice ran rampant inside.

"Good." He set down his clipboard, took off his black rim glasses and placed them in the pocket of his lab coat. "Almost ready to move on to phase two with these. Should we go ahead?"

"Not yet." George shook his head. "Can you hold off for a while?"

"Sure." He shrugged. "I don't see why not."

"Good. Walk with me." George began to lead the shorter, balding man out of the lab. "My contact in Beginnings said they hadn't heard from Robbie and his merry men. I'm going to assume that Mr. Slagel walked into our little set up. Which is good. My contact should let me know as soon as he starts his shift what they heard. My guess is Robbie will tell them what they saw, and knowing Beginnings as well as I do, they won't let Robbie and the men in until they show no signs of the virus." He continued to talk as he walked. "And since our squirmy Dr. Hayes has figured out one strain and pin pointed a four or five day incubation period, he'll safely recommend six days to Mr. Slagel for his men to stay out. Six days will pass, no signs of the virus and once they are in Beginnings it should hit them."

"And say something goes wrong?" The doctor asked. "They get sick perhaps before hand. Do we move on then?"

"We have to. And they're a smart bunch." George shrugged. "But I don't think they are gonna be smart enough to see this coming. We have to get Beginnings back. We need that communications room and fast. Too much time has passed and there is a whole other world on the other side of the ocean that is gonna catch up to us technology wise, and they'll be here before we can get to them. We have to start tracking what they're doing."

"It's a scary thought."

"Not yet. Like us, I don't think they quite have what it takes to get over here. But they'll get there. Hopefully not before we can gain the technology back and manpower to do so."

"Maybe if you told Beginnings the reason you need the communication center."

George scoffed loudly. "They won't give up their land and they certainly won't want any part in rebuilding the world that brought them down. They're happy and content peons in there. Nah, I'd rather wipe it clean and have a fresh start. What the hell, it's only a hundred or so people, maybe more now. We have more than that being created in biology for workers. And that's not to mention the nice little community building and changing down at Quantico." He glanced down at the time. "And speaking

of those two divisions. I'm heading out to Biology and then we're taking a vehicle down to visit the C.L.B. lab and Dr. Gafsky in Behavioral. They're making progress, seems we don't have the zombies like we used to."

The little scientist smiled at George. "I did enjoy when they didn't have thought process."

"Yeah I kind of did too." George moved to the door. "Thanks Stan for your help." George nodded. "And don't forget the department head meeting this evening after dinner." He started to leave again and stopped snapping his finger. "Grab Dr. Heinz in agriculture, I forgot to tell him the change in time. He's been so wrapped up in the growth formula he knows nothing but seeing how fast he can grow a string bean." Chuckling some George moved down the lab. He peered up to the ceiling and the lights that were seemingly getting brighter by the day. Power. It took what he had--personnel wise--to get the power back up and it was building now. And just like the bulbs above his head in the tunnels that ran below the former white house, George and his world were growing stronger by the day.

CHAPTER THREE

(1)

In Beginnings uniform--US military stockpile--Greg looked so official as he barked his orders to the men who loaded up the trucks just outside of Boise, Idaho. "Don't start the vehicles yet." He marched from the two trucks. "Conservation of gasoline gentlemen." Shaking his head at the anxious, group he walked to Robbie who sat on the ground just over the hillside. Greg knew upon his approach to Robbie, that his demeanor said more than any words could. Robbie sat against the tree, a knapsack beside him, the tote bag for the cellular phone in front of him. The radio nearby. "Robbie. The men are waiting."

With his knees brought close to his chest, Robbie dropped his arms letting them dangle over his legs. "They'll have to wait a bit more. I'm uh . . . waiting on a call." He lifted the phone some.

"What's wrong?" Greg lowered his body and his voice.

"You saw it Greg."

"Yeah, so, what's that got to do with us?"

"That's the future that all those time trips were trying to avoid."

"I thought of that. But Robbie. It's way out here."

Robbie gave an emotional chuckle. "Yep, and so are we."

(2)

Called to the communication center for a meeting? Dean thought it odd, why Joe would need to see him. Actually he would have rather not made the long trip down through the tunnels, but he had to go to the cryo-lab to get some of the files he and Ellen stored there. He needed to start working with her, sick or not. And there was a special file he had hidden there that he was bringing to her attention later that evening. There wasn't much more Dean could do on this day. He needed to be close to Ellen and the baby incase there were any problems. He had Johnny working on anti-serums of the virus at the mobile lab, and he had all the kids on this evening. So Dean headed to the communication center, Joe was the only one there. "Hey Joe." Dean walked in setting his files down on the counter. "What did you need to show me?" He looked around the center. "Not that I understand this place much."

"Talk Dean." Joe swivelled his chair from the monitor slightly. "I need to talk to you, and we're waiting for Frank and . . ."

"Frank's here." Frank announced himself walking into the center, heavy steps and heavy voice. "What's up?" He saw Dean. "Aw Dad, don't tell me were gonna have to listen to boring Dean stuff."

"Well Frank." Dean sat down. "What I usually have to say is only

boring to those who have failed to get passed the play dough creativity stage of their lives.”

“Now see.” Frank held out his hand. “You always have to have something smart to say.”

“And you didn’t start it?”

“No.” Frank quipped. “I was observing the situation.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “How can you take him Joe?”

“A strong imagination Dean.” Joe told him. “It starts when your children are young. You make them out to be more than they are, and unfortunately you still find yourself doing it even when they’re old men with grey hair.”

“Hey.” Frank ran his hand over his short black hair. “I’ll have you know, I’m not grey or old.”

“Sit down Frank” Joe instructed. “We’re waiting for one more. And we’ll wait no more.” Joe smiled. “Henry’s here.”

Henry slowed down as he peered at those in the room. “Hi Joe. Dean.” Henry closed the door to the center. “Frank.” He slowed down his pace, stopping at Frank.

Frank merely crossed his arms, and looked away from Henry. “Start this Dad.”

Lowering his head, Henry moved over by Dean.

Dean witnessed it, feeling it, somehow Dean knew it was a lot different of a feel than was in Ellen’s room a little while earlier. He leaned into Henry. “You O.K.?”

Henry nodded silently as he sat down then stared blankly at the floor.

Joe stood up. “We have a situation Gentlemen. And I brought each of you here to get your opinions, expert opinions on how to deal with it.” He swallowed harshly. “And it’s eating at me, because my own flesh and blood is involved in this. He’s smack dab in the middle of a major problem.”

Frank’s attention was grasped. “What happened with Robbie?”

“As you know.” Joe said. “We received a communication signal right outside of Boise. Robbie and his men on their way back from the latest series of runs were stopping by to investigate the signal. They encountered an attack. Not a SUT attack but they were hit by savages. Not a problem, a little different than what they were dealing with, but they took them out. Unfortunately, that’s not our problem. Robbie found the basis for the communication signal. A busted radio, and . . . eight dead SUTs. All hanging from a tree, all half eaten. Typical Savage pillaging. ‘Joe’s voice took a saddened effect. “Then they found more savages. These ones dead. Not dead by the hands of the SUTs but by an illness Robbie could only describe as . . .” He took a deep breath. “Plague like symptoms.” Like a well rehearsed move, Joe watched all three men close their eyes and lean back. “Problem. Robbie believes that some of his men may have been exposed not only to the bodies but perhaps infected Savages as well. That’s where you three come in. What do we do? They have to stay out there till it’s an all

clear, I suppose. Dean, how long?”

“Why?” Dean questioned. “Do they have to stay out there? Let them come home. They’re our men.”

“Yes, I agree.” Joe said. “And I’ll answer that. Two reasons. One, they could very well be the future you Dean, went into. And two, we have to keep this under wraps from general population, it will cause a panic and you know it. If they make it through the plague stages, are they safe to come back?”

“Yes.” Dean nodded. “But bring them in anyhow. For research purposes to stop this thing . . .”

“Aren’t you listening?” Joe walked closer to Dean. “Research to stop this? How in Christ name do you know that they aren’t what starts this? You don’t. You don’t know if in that future you went into, Robbie and our men brought it in. We can’t take that chance and you know it. Besides, can you safely quarantine sixteen men with a guarantee that what they may or may not have, will not spread?”

Dean shook his head. “Not with a hundred percent certainty. We can try.”

“Trying isn’t good enough. We have a community to worry about. Unless you can absolutely guarantee me that sixteen men can be quarantined, I don’t want to hear about it. Dean, I’d love to know my son will walk through those gates, but I have an entire community to concern myself with. How does it go? The needs of many outweigh the needs of one?” Joe took on a thinking look. “What bible reference is that?”

Henry raised his head some. “Uh Joe? I believe that was Star Trek, Mr. Spock.”

“You’re shitting me?” Joe shrugged. “You would know Henry. Anyhow, back to what I was saying. Dean, you know what I mean, you understand don’t you?”

“I understand.” Dean dropped his head. “And no, sixteen is way too many to handle. We don’t have the facilities at the mobile lab.”

“That’s what I thought.” Joe continued. “How long should they stay away from Beginnings?”

Dean thought about it. “There’s a four to five day incubation period. Day six, if they aren’t exhibiting signs of the plague, they’ll be safe. But Joe, they could be out there a while. The plague symptoms we have data on, if it’s the same one, runs for two weeks. Others may avoid exposure for that long, but they still may get it. If only a few come down with it at a time, we can be looking at up to eight weeks.”

“This I know.” Joe agreed. “But it’s a chance we have to take. Frank, you’ve been speaking to Robbie regularly on what he and his men have used as far as ammo goes. How do they stand right now protection wise, did you bring that info?”

“Yeah.” Frank checked out his clipboard. “Estimating what they probably used to take out the savages, I’ll say they have some, but their

probably running low. Enough to take out one more attack, but if they encounter more than that out there, they may be screwed. If memory serves me right, there's an Air force base right outside of Boise. I think."

Dean snapped his finger. "There is. Mountain Home."

Frank nodded. "That's the one. Robbie can probably surplus there. Hit the armory and such. Get some things. Maybe even dig up some M.R.E.'s if they're running low on food."

"Good thinking." Joe made a notation on his own clipboard. "Henry, gas, radio, phone, anything you can think of?"

"The phone batteries aren't going to last long Joe. They aren't. He's probably on his last one. And the radios could be out of range with all the mountains. I think you should keep them moving, have them stop at the Air Force base like Frank suggested, but have them head as close to home as you'd allow them. That way if they need supplies, we can drop it to them."

"And." Dean added. "If they're close enough and they have the new plague. We're close enough to them to bring me out there in protective clothing to get samples and give them medical attention."

Joe point the pencil he held. "That's a bridge we'll cross when we get there. As for now, Robbie's awaiting for the decision." Setting down his clipboard, Joe picked up the center's phone knowing that it wouldn't beep annoyingly when he used it. He called Robbie, connecting the call to the speaker system.

"Yeah." Robbie answered a half a ring into the call.

"Robert." Joe spoke up. "I have Frank, Dean and Henry here"

Robbie laughed. "Frankie, Cranky and Spanky. And you have me on a speaker phone Dad. I hate speaker phones."

"Deal with it." Joe lit a cigarette. "Robbie we decided on what you and I discussed." There was a long silent pause. "Robbie."

"I hear you. Are we staying put?"

"No." Joe told him. "Take the old main roads toward home, stop off at a Mountain Home Air force base, it's close to you now." Joe began to flip through the computer map. "I found it, it's about twenty miles from Boise. And then I need you guys to halt up somewhere around Rock Springs. It close to home and we'll be able to get to you if you need anything."

"Got that." Robbie sounded even sadder. "Dean, Dean it was bad."

Dean swallowed the news. "I can only imagine."

"Frank." Robbie called out. "Hey, I hear you're a dad again. Good Job. Dad says the baby is cute."

"Yeah he is." Frank responded. "I named him Nicholas Robert."

A short laugh came from Robbie. "Thanks Frank. I bet Henry was bitching like a woman naming the kid after me."

"No." Frank spoke harshly. "Henry doesn't mind. Do you Henry?"

Slowly Henry lifted his head, his voice cracking as he talked. "No. I don't mind."

A momentary gloating moment that was unseen came from Robbie. "Oh Henry. How's that microchip going?"

"Not." Henry answered. "Thanks for reminding me."

"Henry." Robbie's voice turned to a serious one. "I have something for you. I got it in Seattle. Check this name out. Cyborg-genic Lobel Programming. I have the program Henry."

Henry's eyes lit up. "You have it?"

"I think." Robbie said. "You'll have to check it out when I . . ." Robbie became silent for a second. "Henry, if I don't make it back, you have to get this. I think this is it."

Henry closed his eyes. "You'll make it back Robbie."

Blowing the cigarette smoke loudly from his mouth, Joe took over the conversation. "Robbie, you guys better get started before it gets dark. You call me tomorrow or earlier if you run into problems. You hear me?"

"I hear. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Good luck son. And I'm proud of you." Taking an emotional breath, Joe disconnected the call. He slowly faced the three men in the room. "I need an uplift. I think I'll let my daughter annoy me for a bit while I visit her. Is it going to be an alone visit or are any of you three bozos going to intrude?" He didn't get an answer. "Henry wanna walk me over and show me the baby?"

Henry stood up. "Oh sure Joe I'll . . ." He shifted his eyes to Frank. "You know what Joe, I have some work in Mechanics to do and I'd like to get it done so I can spend the evening with Ellen. I can't." He walked to the door. "I'll walk to the clinic with you though."

"Sounds good." Joe followed him. "Frank, Dean, thanks for your help."

Dean lifted his hand in acknowledgment as he watched Joe and Henry leave. Seeing Frank follow behind he stood up. "Frank, wait up."

Frank stopped, he flung his head back. "What Dean?"

"What's going on? Earlier you were fine with Henry and now the guys seems petrified of you and you're acting . . ."

"Hold it." Frank halted him. "I *acted* this afternoon. What you saw here is not acting. And if Henry is petrified of me, let him. He should be and he's lucky he's walking right now."

"Frank. You divorced Ellen, you can't be upset about them being married."

Frank laughed. "Married? That's the least of my worries. Their marriage means shit to me. Shit." His hand cut through the air. "And I'm not discussing this with you. Not you." With a gravel of his voice Frank began to walk, this time faster than Dean and ahead of him.

Just as Dean began to leave, he realized something, though he didn't know much about the communication center, he did know enough that it wasn't supposed to be left unattended. "Hey!" He called out echoing down the hall. "Hey!" He yelled louder. "Shit." He threw his hands in the air and

went back in. Alone, he looked around searching out a radio. "Left me alone in here." Dean found one and turned it on listening for the hiss. "They just better not say anything if something happens and I miss it. It is not my fault." Switching around the channels, Dean sought out Joe or someone from security to fill in. While he sat down to wait, he pulled his folders closer to review them. Through the tops of his eyes he noticed a volume adjustment, and Dean turned it all the way down. He figured Beginnings was already screwed if something should happen while he was on watch, he didn't want to hear it coming.

(3)

Frank grumbled in his walk back to his office. Grumbled, whistled some old song he barely remembered the melody to, keeping his mind--or trying to--off of worrying about Robbie. He did that until Joe yelled through his radio that Frank had his headset on and not only was he annoying Joe, but the community as well. Frank's mood could have been better. He knew it would start to get there as soon as he finished off some things in his office to be able to take advantage of the couple of days off Joe always gave the fathers when they had a baby born.

He passed the nursery ignoring the call of Hap. Figuring it was a nursery, what kind of security problem could they have, Frank moved faster. He never thought that a man pushing eighty could run so fast. Spinning around in hurried annoyance, Frank controlled himself while looking at the wrinkled man with the abundance of white hair. Control. Patience. "What!" Frank barked.

"No, no." Hap shook his old finger. "Let's try this again."

"I don't have time."

"Everyone has time for politeness."

"What do you want?" Frank asked harshly.

"I said we'll try this again."

Grunting and realizing that Hap had just been hanging out with Trish too much, Frank turned back around.

"Excuse me Frank." Hap tapped him on the shoulder.

"What!" Frank spun around. "Spit it out or I'm out of here."

"I give up on you. Here." Hap handed him a piece of paper. "Could you drop this requisition off at Mechanics for me please? The air conditioning isn't kicking on in the infant room."

"Are you fuckin kidding me?" Frank snatched up the paper. "Your old ass chases me all the way to the edge of town and you couldn't run this up yourself?"

"No." Hap gave a swift pat to Frank's arm. "Thanks." He smiled once more, turned around and headed back to the nursery.

"Now I'm a fuckin messenger boy." Gripping the paper tightly, Frank

marched back toward the utility buildings. Yes, he had to pass mechanics and Hap probably knew that. But what Hap didn't know was Frank didn't want to go into mechanics and see Henry. With one hard Frank-knock on the door, he opened it up. Peeking his head in he saw Scott sitting at the bench working on something that looked like a radio. "Scott." Frank walked in. "Hap wanted me to drop off this req. Where's the box?" Frank looked around for the familiar bin that always sat right inside Mechanics.

"Henry has it." Scott answered, his eyes glued to what he worked on.

"Can you give this to him?"

"You. I'm busy. He's in his office."

"What's the big deal if you to give it to him?" Frank asked in nasty manner.

Scott merely shifted his eyes. "Letting go of this wire I've been trying to get back into place. It'll take you three steps."

"Man." Frank tossed his head. "I get no respect." He took three hard steps towards Henry's office but stopped when Henry walked out with his tool bag.

"Hey Frank. How come you're here?" Henry asked in a usual Henry manner.

"Not by choice." Raising his hand that held the requisition, Frank laid it less-than-gently into Henry's chest. "Hap asked me to drop that off. Have your fuckin req box where it should be for now on so people don't have to go looking for your skinny ass." Frank spun and headed back to the door.

"Frank, do you have a minute?" Henry followed him. "Can we talk?"

"No." Frank threw open the door.

"Frank." Henry walked outside, pulling the door closed.

"Henry." Frank faced him. "I have nothing more to say to you. Nothing." He spit forth his angry words. "And you're picking the wrong fuckin day to even *try* to talk to me." Frank bit his bottom lip. "Back off." He held up his hand. "Just back off." He turned back around and headed to his office. He just wanted to finish off his day, go to the clinic, spend sometime with his kids, then head back to the clinic for the night. Keep his mind on those thoughts and nothing else could go wrong, or so he thought. Frank was surprised, not pleasantly when he opened up his office door. "John? What the hell are you doing?"

John Matoose stood before Frank's office's open closet. His hands laid flat on a box that was tiled out some. "Hi Frank." John grunted, shoving the box back on the shelf. "I thought I was filling in already for you. Aren't you taking the rest of the day off?"

"Yeah." Frank shut his office door. "And why are you going through my stuff?" He took off his shoulder harness tossing it on his desk.

"Oh." John shut the cupboard. "I was looking for those loose maps you have. Mechanics is making a techno run in about a month and I wanted to put it together. You know zoom in on areas we haven't touched."

"All the maps we hardly use are on the bottom. You know that." Frank

plopped in his desk chair.

"Yeah I do. But you're missing a ton of county maps for the surrounding states. You have so much shit in that closet, I don't know where to look."

Frank leaned in toward his desk. "County maps are next to the military installation maps."

"Yep. They are, you're missing some I know you had."

"Fuck." Frank stood up. "You need these now?"

"No." John shook his head. "It was something I wanted to work on tonight, Jenny and the women are meeting so . . . not important." John headed to the door. "Give me a call on the radio when you're done for the day. I have to get out of the house and I'm gonna work on those rounds schedules and communication center schedules I see you didn't finish." John pointed as he opened up the door.

"Sounds good." Frank looked at the two clipboards that still sat on his desk. Training schedules were done, everything else, almost there. "I'll give you a call."

"Thanks."

Picking up his pencil when he heard the door shut, Frank pulled the rounds schedule closer. "Let's see, Mark, you haven't done perimeter . . . hmm." Frank laid down his pencil and turned his head to his closet. "I know those maps are in there. Nah." He shook his head and reached for the pencil. "No." He stood up. "This will bother me the rest of the day. Fuckin John Matoose probably was looking right at them. He just doesn't know what he's looking at." He reached for his closet door, and opened it. "Holy shit! Where did all these boxes come from? Shit." Frank winced and remembered not only did he have his office stuff in there, but things that he had to take from his closet because Ellen needed the room. "Aw." He bent down to the boxes on the floor. "I might as well dig up that map of the region Robbie's in while I'm in here." He pulled out a box. "Fuckin John Matoose. Why am I in here?" He opened the first box, rummaging through the box half filled. He knew exactly what that box was. It was his 'hide me' box. There was an old shoulder harness, broken radio he forgot to take to mechanics--Frank took that out, he'd hide it in mechanics and bitch about it not being fixed. Reports he never turned into Joe because they were too wrinkled or dirty. A tube of lipstick? Frank held it up and smiled, he remembered it well. Ellen had grabbed so many tubes when they were beyond the wall and she insisted on liking and wearing the most hideous one. So Frank hid it. Frank stuck that tube immediately in his back pocket, he'd surprise her later with it and tell her he found it. Tossing that box aside, Frank walked into the closet. Going on the old theory that it's always the last place you look, Frank reached for the box furthest in the back. Frank knew the second he lifted the small box that it wasn't his maps, but he knew for certain what it was. In an essence it was his own memorabilia box. Not full of stupid shit like Ellen had, but dresser drawer shit he

unloaded and brought to Beginnings. Stuff he brought from base and left home in Ashtonville.

He opened that box and laughed at the deodorant, and the aftershave that set on top. Junk, that was all it was. Junk that found itself on the top of his dresser, and in order to make it look neat, he tossed it in that old shaving kit. Frank lifted that shaving kit and unzipped it wanting only to peek inside. And when he did he saw it. A beverage napkin, folded and yellow. The blue ink still vivid. And written on the napkin was a telephone number and the name 'Bill Nelson'.

Frank dropped from the squat on the floor to a sitting position leaning against his closet door. He remembered Bill Nelson, a man he met briefly once and never saw again. But he didn't keep that napkin for Bill's number, he kept it for the memory of that night . . .

"I'm out of here." Frank slammed his beer bottle down at the table his friends sat at in that corner neighborhood bar in Ashtonville. He tucked in his tee shirt into his jeans and laid a couple of one dollar bills on the table. "See you guys later."

One of his friends looked up. "Already Frank, it's early. Come on, you're on leave."

"Nah." He shook his head. "I have to pick my kids up first thing in the morning. Kelly will bitch if I'm late. I'll see you."

"Just stay longer, then go to Kelly's and stay there. You won't be late then."

Frank laughed as he headed to the door. "She hates me. Besides, I paid for my room already." Reaching for the glass door, it opened and Frank nearly pummeled the man who walked in. Another person Frank was acquainted with.

"You leaving?" The stocky older man asked. "I thought you were hanging out tonight."

"Nope." Frank lifted his hand.

"Oh Frank." He stopped him. "I was just at Patsy's. You know the bar down the street. I saw your buddy in there. Ellen."

"Ellen's out at bar?" Frank was surprised. "What's she doing there?"

"Drinking and laughing with a group of women. Dancing too. Well, drinking more. She hugged me Frank."

"Ellen doesn't hug anyone." Frank backed up. "Was she loaded?"

"Pretty much so, yeah." The man laughed.

"Fuck. All right. Thanks." Knowing Ellen well, Frank headed off to Patsy's to find her.

Had she not worn her hair so blonde back then, Frank would have never spotted Ellen's little body darting back and forth through the crowded bar. Totally annoyed at the extremely loud music whose bass and drums seemed to overshadow any other instrument, Frank made his way to

Ellen as she made it to the bar area. He smacked her lightly on the top of her head to get her attention.

She spun around, and grinned widely as she lowered the glass from her mouth. "Frank! Oh my God! We're at the same bar."

"How do you like that? What are you doing El?" He folded his arms. "You're drunk."

"Oh." She waved her hand at him and took another sip. "So what."

"So what? You have kids at home El."

"No I don't." She shook her head and set down the drink. "Pete's mom has them this weekend."

"And where is Pete?" Frank asked.

"At the hockey game. He's staying in the city tonight." She giggled and reached for her drink.

Frank stopped her. "Let's go." He took her hand.

"No Frank." She pulled it back. "I'm having fun." She leaned into him. "Men are looking at me." She winked.

"Yeah El, men are looking. You're fuckin pretty and now you're drunk and that makes it dangerous. Let's go."

"No." She smacked away his reaching hand. "I'm having fun with my friends."

"You don't have any friends."

"I made some. Look." She pointed to a group of women across the room, she didn't even see Frank roll his eyes. "I met the one, the tall one at Mrs. Sampson's Tupperware party tonight. We went out to get a drink and we met up with a bachelorette party. So there. Lots of friends."

"And how, miss social butterfly, do propose you're getting home. You aren't driving like this."

"No." She laughed. "Bill." She brought her finger to her mouth and looked around. "He must have gone to the bathroom."

"Bill?" Frank placed his hands on his hips. "Bill?"

"That's what I said. Look Frank." She lifted a napkin. "He gave me his number. He said he'll drive me home, don't worry about me."

"Give me that." He took the napkin and stuck it in his back pocket. "And Bill isn't driving you home. Let's go El, before you get yourself in trouble." He took hold of her arm and pulled gently. "Come on."

"Ow Frank." She smiled as she smacked him. "Hurt my arm, you big goof. Shoo, go away." She turned her back and leaned to the bar. "You're ruining my good time."

"Ellen." Frank stood beside her not even caring that he bumped someone out of the way. He leaned in toward the bar at her level. "I'm only looking out for you. Let's go home."

"No."

"El?" He put his face closer to her. "Don't piss me off or I'll carry you out."

Another voice mixed in close to theirs, a male voice. "Is everything all

right?”

Frank raised his dark eyes only to the man who stood on the other side of Ellen. “Fine.” As he went back to convincing her, Frank bit his lip and twitched his head when he heard Ellen say ‘no’.

Ellen turned to the man. “He’s trying to get me to leave with him. Pulled me too. Look at my arm Bill, he gave me a red mark.” She held her arm up.

The man stepped behind Ellen toward Frank. “You have a problem pal?”

“Aw no.” Frank shook his head. “Don’t even be asking me if I have a problem.” Frank stood up towering over the man. “Pal?”

Bill stepped even closer. “You think your size frightens me? Leave the lady alone, I’m warning you.”

“Don’t warn me.” Frank told him.

“I’m warning you.”

“I told you . . .” Frank grabbed his shirt, snatched Bill up and close to him. “Don’t warn me.” Quickly, and without Bill seeing it coming, Frank gave a fast jab smack dab center Bill’s face. He shoved him back. “Now see El, you got me into a fight.”

Ellen looked down to Bill who had lost his balance and tumbled to the floor. “Why did you hit him?”

“He warned me.”

“Oh sure Frank, that was real threatening to you, you asshole.” Ellen grabbed her purse, said ‘sorry’ to Bill and stormed by Frank.

Frank followed her out. “At least I got you to leave now, didn’t I?”

“You always do that. Why do you do that? And where’s your car, you’re driving me home.” Ellen stopped mid sidewalk.

“This way.” Frank walked up to her, laid his hand on her back, turned her in the right direction and brought Ellen to his car.

Frank took her home. Listening to her bitch the entire way. Thinking to himself how Pete would end up pulling one of his ‘change his mind at the last minute’ and come home to find Ellen drunk. They’d fight and Frank didn’t want to deal with that.

“No shower Frank.”

“Get in.” Frank held on to the shower door, the warm water splashing against his hand.

“Why?”

“You know why.”

“All right. But close your eyes, because I’m naked under this robe. Close them.”

Frank held his hand over his eyes and listened to Ellen fumble into the shower and close the shower door nearly taking off his hand. “You O.K. in there?”

“Dizzy.” She laughed. “You want me to just stand in here?”

“Sober up.”

The shower door opened. "Wanna come in?" She winked.

"You think you're real cute don't you? What would you do if I got in there with you?"

"Laugh." Ellen shut the door again. Only to have it reopen thirty seconds later and Frank stepped in.

"Laugh." He nodded arrogantly as he stepped to her.

Ellen giggled and moved closer to him grabbing his hand. "When's the last time you touched me?" She asked him.

"In what way?" His hands slipped into hers and his voice softened. "I grabbed your arm tonight."

"Touched me." She lifted his hand and laid it center of her chest. "When's the last time?"

"About . . ." Frank snickered. "Two months ago."

"Frank." She smacked him in the chest. "It was longer than that."

"No it wasn't. That was last time me and Kelly split up. Remember we were kissing outside in your yard. But . . ." He moved even closer to her. "We weren't naked. We're naked now." He lowered his head to her. "What are you gonna do about it? *Tease*." He brought his lips closer to hers.

"This." With that one word, Ellen was gone.

Frank felt her hands slide down his chest, the touch of them trailed her lips as she slid them down across his stomach and Ellen lowered herself before him. "Oh shit." Frank's eyes rolled slightly and his throat tensed up as he head went back. He tried to say her name, but no words could escape his mouth passed the soft moans he released. Frank's body swayed in that warm water enjoying only a few moments and he reached for Ellen bringing her up to him. He placed his hands to her face and pressed his lips hard to hers. So wide his kisses were, as he swept his mouth against hers, backing Ellen up against the shower stall wall. His hands roamed across the wetness that hit her body. Over her front, down her side and to her legs. Never stopping the kisses until he found himself against her. He lifted her leg and lowered his lips to her neck.

"Stop." She spoke in his ear grabbing his head.

"Stop? No, not stop." Frank continued kissing her in a biting manner from her neck to her mouth.

"Don't Frank. Stop." She lifted his head. "We can't."

"Yeah we can El." He tried to kiss her again.

"We've gone too far." She looked him in his eyes. "I'm sorry. I can't."

"El." Frank breathed heavily. "You're not serious. You can't be. We're right there." His nose brushed against hers. "We're closer than inches away here sweetheart." He widened his eyes.

"Frank."

"O.K." Frank set down her leg and stepped back. "We're really not?"

"I'm sorry."

"O.K." He extended his reach all the way to his left.

"What are you doing?" She asked him.

"This." With a squeak and a smile, and a shriek from Ellen, the hot water in the shower turned ice cold.

Frank stared one more time at that name on the napkin as he still sat on his floor. Adjusting the headset microphone, he called out. "Dad."

"Yeah Frank." Joe answered.

"Hey, are you with Ellen?"

"She's right here."

"Can I talk to her?" Frank's fingers fiddled with the edge of the napkin.

"What's wrong Frank?" Ellen came over the radio.

"Hey El. I have a name for you. See if it rings a bell. Bill Nelson."

There was silence. "Nope."

"Bill Nelson. It doesn't ring a bell?"

"No, it doesn't. Sorry. Bill, Bill. Nope."

"It doesn't ring a bell, think about it."

"I am. It doesn't."

"Come on El." Frank beckoned.

Instead of Ellen's voice, it was Joe's. "It doesn't ring a damn bell. Now knock the shit off and quit wasting the airwaves Frank."

"All right." Frank refolded the napkin, only this time he placed it in his back pocket. "Dad, just tell Ellen I'll be right there. I'll make it ring a bell."

"I'll tell her." Joe said so annoyed, because he knew damn well Frank should have realized Ellen could hear his big mouth through the speaker of Joe's radio.

Chuckling some and taking off his headset, Frank stood up and grabbed that small box. He tossed everything back in and closed the flaps. "Where were you again? Eh, I'll put you on top." Reaching up with the box Frank moved to shove it further back, and the box that teetered on the edge of the shelf fell forward and conked him in the head. "Fuck." Frank rubbed the top of his head and bent down for the box. It wasn't heavy and it was sealed. Written across the top was 'Robbie's stuff. Do not touch! Do not open!' Thinking screw that, Frank brought the box to his desk.

Pulling the flaps that Frank was sure were glued with a special secret Robbie glue, he opened the box. "What is this shit?" Frank began to pull out envelopes. He could see when he lifted the stack of papers, a sweatshirt. One he recognized, Ellen's. He lifted the papers and knew right away what it was. It was everything Robbie had collected in his investigation when Moses had attacked Ellen and Dean. He knew it to be fact when he read the last notes on the top sheet of paper. In Robbie's handwriting. *Dad says evidence is inconclusive. Investigation is over. Dad sucks.'*

Getting ready to replace those papers back in the box and seal it like Joe did the investigation, Frank saw them. How odd. He lifted them out and looked at them. The Beginnings equivalent to a photographer. Forrest Caceres. His name was scribbled on the bottom of each sketch that Frank

held in his hand.

Slowly he looked at them one by one. They weren't of anyone in particular, just scenes. There was a drawing of a man accosting a woman in some doorway. A man who looked like Moses. And another that confused Frank. It was a picture of a hand. A hand with scratches. And then Frank saw something else besides Forrest's name on the bottom. One word written right by the fingertips of that drawing. One word 'John'

Placing the sketches back in the box, Frank knew at that instant he would take it and do with the investigation like he did with that box--open it. He had to. He had no other choice. It was clear to Frank at that moment on why he felt so strongly about it now. Frank could have reasoned against it because the evidence was minimal. But it wasn't. The truth was, the meaning of the investigation hit him when the realization that he wouldn't have had that box to peek into had it not been for John Matoose standing in Frank's closet. And right there and then as Frank grabbed the box to take with him, another question hit Frank's mind. 'What was John Matoose really looking for in that closet?'

CHAPTER FOUR

(1)

The peaceful serenity and quiet lasted as long as his shower did. And the noise that came from downstairs in Dean's house pummeled him the moment he turned off the water. He knew he had to move fast. Just because Andrea's son Denny was downstairs with his kids was no guarantee total mayhem wasn't going to erupt. And to Dean, it sounded like it already had. Before venturing out into the cold hallway, he checked his reflection in the bathroom mirror to the small bump on his forehead which was already beginning to bruise. A bump brought on by another blurred vision episode. It wouldn't had been that bad had Dean only been around his children. But Denny had to be there when Dean walked right into that wall. Then not only was Dean pummeled with pain at that moment, but with the annoying laughter of a teenage boy as well. Forgoing the bump, he opened the bathroom door, only to be nearly knocked off his balance when his tiny daughter Alexandra sped by him so fast she was a blur. Holding tightly to his towel, Dean hurried into his room to change.

Grabbing the pair of cut off shorts he had out and a tee shirt, Dean got dressed. After speedily placing on his socks and running a brush through his hair, Dean searched out his shoes. "Where are my high tops?" He knelt down checking under the bed. "I just had them on." He stood back up looked around his floor, lifting the clothes he took off. "Where are they? Shit." Opening his bedroom door he saw his answer. "Alex."

Doing her 'I have to go to the bathroom' wiggle, she shuffled down the hall in Dean's high top tennis shoes

"Alex, give me my shoes."

She giggled. "Look Daddy they fit."

"No, they don't." He marched up to her. "And you go to the bathroom."

"No." She tried to get away.

"Alex, Daddy isn't playing around. He has to go talk to Mommy at the hospital and Frank will be here." He reached for her and she swung her arms moving away. "Alex." He scolded, placed his hands under her arms and lifted her. Seeing his shoes still attached to her feet, he swayed her back and forth until the shoes fell to the floor followed seconds later by a long stream of wetness. "Alex." Dean whined, holding her out.

Alex started to cry. "I'm telling Mommy, you made me pee my pants."

"I didn't make you . . ."

"Hey Dr. Dean." Out of breath Denny raced up the steps. "I heard her crying. Is she all right? What's the matter Alex?"

"Daddy made me pee my pants."

"Oh man Dr. Dean that's just not right."

Grunting and tilting his head, Dean extended Alexandra to Denny.

"Here help her change, I have to go."

"But Dr. Dean." Denny cringed as Alex was placed in his arms. "She's all wet. Yuck."

Joining the sentiment, Dean also cringed. "And so are my shoes. Shit." Picking them up with two fingers he carried them into his bedroom and sought out his work boots. He wasn't really caring about being the fashion statement. He only wanted to get to the clinic and talk to Ellen before Henry settled in with her for the evening. Not lacing his boots all the way, Dean flew from the bedroom holding his folders. "Denny, Frank will be by to get them any second. He'll feed them, just ask him what time he's bringing them back so you can be here. Thanks." Dean patted him on the arm and darted down the steps. He bent down to Brian in the baby walker and kissed him. And as he made his run to the front door, he brushed his lips on Joey and Billy as well. "I need a bigger house." Taking a breath, he opened the door. Frank stood there. "Hi Frank. Bye Frank."

Frank snickered. "Cute legs Dean. The boots add that special touch."

Slowing down his pace only to shudder at Frank, Dean continued to the clinic in his fast manner.

She looked better health wise to Dean that early evening, but other than that, Ellen looked as if she struggled. Sitting on the bed, the back raised up, she wore a long white tee shirt and her arms kept lifting and falling. Dean watched her from the doorway for a moment as he held on to his folders and Ellen's chart. Staring down at her hands that held a brush, her hair dangling down, Dean felt it when she raised her eyes and smiled when she saw him.

"Dean." She reached over setting the brush on the night stand, then she tucked her hair behind her ear. "I thought you were standing me up."

"Who me?" He walked into the room. "Never." He set the folders on the foot of her bed and held up her chart. He noticed she giggled. "What?"

"Look how cute you are Dean with your little cut off shorts and all. And the boots." She gave a thumbs up. "The boots add the special touch."

"Some how I heard that line before." He flipped open the chart.

"Why are you playing doctor with me? Not that I mind. But why?"

Dean felt for her pulse. "I'd like to get this out of the way and then we can talk. Besides, I am your doctor and the only one lately you let touch you." He set down her hand. "Sit back." When she did he noticed she was wearing boxer shorts under her long shirt. "El, those shorts aren't rubbing the incision are they?"

"No. They're loose and I have them pulled way up here." She lifted the shirt to show him the waist band nearly to her breasts. "See. They're Franks."

"Don't lower the shirt. I want to see" He pulled the waist band out of the shorts and examined her. "Are they tender?"

"Some. And there's some pulling. I'm tough though."

"Yeah you are." Dean smiled. And fixed her shirt. "Any dizziness?"

"Nope."

"How's the bleeding?"

"Less than I had with my other children. And I'd like to say those two pints you guys pumped into me right away made me feel like a new person."

"I have news for you Ellen. Guess who's blood we pumped in you."

"No, Dean. Don't tell me." Her mouth dropped open.

"O.K. I won't. But it was."

"Oh my God. Wait till Henry hears."

Dean set down her chart. "I see Melissa had you ambulating."

"Yes and I did well. I even took a shower. I feel good."

"Good. Then are you ready to ambulate yourself down to that nursery to see your son?" He watched her head drop "El?"

"I'd rather not Dean."

"Have you seen him since he was born?"

"No." She shook her head. "And I'd rather wait until he's not so weak. I can still see it when you lifted him out and he just . . . he just was so lifeless. I'd rather wait. Not yet. For the first time I don't think I'm strong enough to handle it. Of course I'm not even strong enough to put a ponytail in my hair, it hurts when I raise my arms."

"Well, I can't help you get the strength to see Nick. But . . ." Dean lowered the back to her bed, leaving Ellen without support to sit. "I can help you with the ponytail." He grabbed the brush and sat behind her on the bed. "I am the ponytail king. Ask Alex. Speaking of Alex, you know how you noticed the boots?" Dean asked as he brushed her hair. "Alex peed in my high tops. She was wearing them and she was doing that stupid dance." He heard Ellen giggle. "So suffice to say, they're soaked."

"Was she crying?"

"Yep. She said she was telling on me. Frank was there when I left, so, he can deal with it. High ponytail or low?"

"High please. It gives that face lift effect." Ellen smiled and tilted her head back. "Thanks for this Dean. Thank you. This is nice."

"Yeah it is." He reached for the band.

"And, you're legs are real cute." She reached over and touched his knee which was by her.

"Thank you." He whispered in her ear. "And you are all done."

Ellen felt Dean ready to get up and she stopped him. "Stay here." She leaned back into him. "You have kept me in suspense all day. What's going on with you?"

"You really want to know this."

"Give it to me."

"Maybe after you heal?" Dean gave an emotional snicker.

"Talking dirty to me Dr Hayes will get you everywhere and keep you in this bed, but right now you're in this bed to tell me what's up with you. I

need to know. How bad are things?"

A heavy sigh escaped Dean and he wrapped his arm around her front and rested his face close to hers. "They're not good."

Ellen swallowed harshly. "Maybe you can't be sure. Maybe you're too close to the situation."

"I'm sure. Henry helped me do another CAT scan. It confirmed what I thought."

"Which is?"

"Scar tissue is building up. Once the healing is done and the scar tissue is complete. My sight, my sight may just be gone."

Like they weighed a hundred pounds, Ellen's eyes closed. "Is there time Dean to prepare for surgery. Maybe you, Jason and Andrea can work a way to remove the scar tissue from the optic nerve."

"See that's where the problem lies El. It's not the optic nerve. It's the brain. It's the part of the brain that is sending signals to my eyes to see. It's getting blocked. And . . . it eventually will stay fully blocked. Right now, my glasses barely work. And unlike yesterday or the day before, I had another episode this evening. Two in one day. That's never happened. I suspect it will only increase."

Ellen's lips closed tightly as she grazed her hand down the arm that braced her. "Have you told Andrea about this?"

"No, you and Henry are the only ones who know. And it has to stay that way. If they know I'm going blind, that's it for me. What are they going to do for me? If I can't see, I can't work. If I can't work, how do I justify staying in Beginnings. What am I gonna do El? How can I live like that?"

"My God Dean, I have told you before. It's not your eyes that heal things. It's your brain. You know how to do it. And you are just going to have to learn how to do it without your eyes."

"Who's going to let me learn?"

"That's why I'm here. They don't have to know until you can prove how well you'll do without your eyes. I'll be your eyes Dean. I'll be your guide. It'll be tough if it happens, but I know you. You're so smart. You'll learn. You told me you'd teach me everything. And you will. Everyday that you can see, you will teach me how to see what *you* do."

"I'm scared El."

"And I'm right here."

Dean held her tighter. "I'm glad."

"There's still a chance Dean, that you won't lose your sight."

"We can hold on to that. We can. I'm just grateful that I know that you'll be here every step of the way."

"That's what we decided. It'll make it easier for me to be around. I'm just glad you still want me."

"Are you kidding?" Dean slid off the bed and faced her. "I love you. The only thing is, a part of me wishes you were going into this understanding with me because you want to, not because I need you."

"Wait a second." Ellen grabbed his hand as he backed up. "Don't for a minute think that the only reason I am going into an understanding with you is because I pity you. I have told you when I was ready for a real understanding it would be with you. I'm being with you because I want to. I'm only doing it earlier because you need me. We'll take our time. We'll do this right. It'll work."

"I've given some thought to having this work." Dean slipped his hand from hers.

"It will."

"No it won't." Dean backed up. "It won't, Frank won't let it. Right now Frank will make it impossible El, and you know it. Especially if he thinks we're just getting back together to get back together."

"You're not wanting to tell him the truth are you?"

Dean's head lowered and he lifted only his eyes. "For the time being, I'd rather not tell him at all."

"What?" Ellen laughed. "Not tell Frank? You mean miss the gloating thing you've been talking about doing?"

"For now, yeah.." Dean sat on the edge of the bed. "Look, for as much as you want to deny it, Frank has that control over you." Dean saw her mouth open to disagree, he covered it. "He will use his control even more if he knows were together, even if it is starting out because you're helping me. Let's, let's not tell anyone. The only one who needs to know, the only one who it matters knows, is Henry. O.K.?" Dean removed his hand from her mouth. "For now?"

"For the time being, yes. And, as long as everyone still thinks I'm involved with Robbie, poor Henry won't get any feedback from the guys about being selfish."

"Why do you do that?" Dean asked. "Why do you call him 'poor Henry'?"

"Why not?"

"Because poor Henry isn't poor. He has it all El. You, the baby. All." Dean stared at her for a moment. "All right serious relationship stuff and Dean blind stuff is now over." He stood up and grabbed a stack of folders and dropped them before her.

"What is this?" She asked with such a gasp. "I'm sick here Dean."

"And we're on borrowed time. So . . ." He grinned as he handed her a folder. "Mrs. Calaway-Hayes-Slagel-Kusakari. It's time to learn."

(2)

Henry glided in his steps to Joe's office. He led Scott, the fourth mechanic division worker in Beginnings. He was a lot like Henry, tall and thin. His hair was long as well, only blonde and always pulled back. "In here, you'll have to stop first thing in the morning. Well, first thing in Joe's

morning, which starts about seven. We usually start as you know, about five.” Henry opened the door. “Joe has the other mechanical request box, you have to pick them up here first thing. These requests are the ones that people put in their division or drop personally off here.” Henry walked to the third filing cabinet and to the small box on top. “Empty.” He tilted it. “It’s probably because Josh is still out collecting them. That’s his and Denny’s job. And when you sift through them, make sure that you pay no attention to the ones that are really bad. Josh and Denny think they’re real funny putting in fake requests. I can pick them out. What was the one last week? Fix Forrest’s waddle?” Henry shook his head with a smile. “Anyhow, just take them to Mechanics and do the ones you know are important first. Common sense.”

“Henry, we get so many requests.”

“Yeah I know. Forrest will be helping out. I just need to confirm that with Joe. Forrest is very mechanically inclined, you just can’t understand him sometimes. Just nod your head and tell him, ‘um . . . yeah sure.’” Henry winked as he leaned into Scott. “Works every time. And if you run into something you can’t fix, I’m around. Just look for me or ask John . . .” Henry saw the door open and John Matoose walked into Joe’s office. “John Matoose.” Henry held his hand out to John. “Speak of the devil. No pun intended John.”

“Yeah right.” John dropped a copy of schedules off on Joe’s desk. “What are you guys doing in here?”

“I was explaining to Scott here, Mechanics Division procedure on requisitions.”

“Why?” John asked.

“Because he’ll be filling in as head of mechanics while you’re filling in for Frank and I’m gone. Him and Forrest will be alone. You’ll help him though, right?”

“Where are you going? We’re not making any runs.”

“John.” Henry laughed as if he thought John couldn’t possibly be serious. Surely he knew. “Ellen had the baby. I’m taking my three days Joe always gives for paternity leave.” Henry turned to Scott. “Isn’t that a cool thing Scott? You know the United States was the only Country who didn’t do that? Now Beginnings does. I think it’s great.”

John scoffed. “Henry, Joe doesn’t know you’re taking this time off, does he?”

“I assume he does.” Henry said.

“You’re assuming wrong. You don’t get the time off.”

“Yes I do. Ellen had the baby.”

“And Frank’s the father Henry.” John told him rough. “Not you. Frank was primary relationship when that child was conceived, you were secondary. Therefore, it’s Frank’s kid. Therefore, Frank gets the time off.” John shook his head as if Henry was stupid. “When have you heard of the secondary father getting time off? Never. Patrick didn’t get time off when

me and Jenny had the baby.” He walked over other file cabinet to retrieve more blank reports. “See, that’s what pisses me off about secondary relationships in Beginnings. Us guys are being generous. And the secondary guy thinks he can set the ground rules. Well he can’t. There are established rules, there has to be, and you know that. That’s why these things work. And in them, the Primary sets all precedence in the relationship.” John found his reports. “You’ll find this out now that you’re primary. But as far as the baby thing goes. You still fall under the secondary status. Frank is the father.” John shrugged. “And under Joe rules, the father gets time off.” John shut the filing cabinet in time to see Joe standing in the open door just staring at him.

“And since they are Joe rules . . .” Joe walked in shutting the door and looking at Henry who looked so defenseless. “Joe can adjust them. You want time off Henry?”

Henry stammered his lips some and tilted his head. “Yeah but Joe. I don’t want to be the one who starts waves around Beginnings for having you break rules for me. Secondary relationships don’t get time off for the baby. That’s all right. I understand. Don’t worry about. Forget it.”

“Henry.” Joe walked further in the office. “The only reason secondary relationships don’t get time off is because none of the goddamn secondary fathers ever asked for it. I’d give it to them. Besides, this is only the sixth baby born under these rules. We have some more due. We might as well get this straight. But I’m not giving the secondary father time off as soon as the baby is born.” He saw John smile, Henry didn’t, and Joe took on an edge to his voice. “If they insist, I will. But, as a father who’s been there, I’m going to suggest to them, and to you Henry, you get your time off after the mother gets out of the clinic. That way, *you*, not the damn gloating, rub-it-in-your-face primary, you can take care of her and be there for her when she needs you the most. At home.”

Henry raised his head. “Thanks Joe. I’ll do that. Thanks a lot.” He gave a half smile and looked at Scott. “That’s all for today Scott. Since I’ll be there tomorrow we’ll get into this more.”

“Sounds good.” Scott walked to the door. “I’ll head back down to the nursery to finish up.” He waved his hand. “Henry, John, Mr. Slagel.”

Joe nodded his head as his one hand leaned on his desk. “Scott.” After Scott left, he looked back at Henry. “And I’ll help in Mechanics. I’ll get Godrichson and Forrest to help at Containment. Hell, that ought to be funny. Don’t you . . .” He stopped talking when he heard John grunt and slam the file cabinet. Joe watched him move to the door. “John. What is your problem with all this?”

“Fine.” John raised his hand. “I’ll tell you. It isn’t right. And Frank isn’t going to be happy about this.”

“Aw Frank can blow it out his ass for all I care.”

“Frank is the father Joe.” John pointed his finger standing at the open door.

"And Henry is the husband, so there." Joe tilted his head with a puckering look, then laughed as John stormed out. "Ha, made my day aggravating another poor soul." He hesitated in his reach for a cigarette when he noticed Henry, so down. "Henry, I gave you time off. If you really want it, you can take it early."

"No." Henry closed his one eye and shook his head. "That's not it Joe. I'd like to be home with Ellen."

"Then what is it?"

"Nothing." Henry took a sighing breath. "I'd better go. I want to finish up and head to the clinic."

"Henry." Joe grabbed his arm and spun him to face him. "Is it about what John said about Frank being the father?"

Henry's mouth moved a little, but he didn't speak, he only lifted his shoulder in a half shrug.

"Let me tell you something. It doesn't matter what my hard headed son says, that irritating know-it-all John Matoose says, or what the asinine stupid understanding rules say. " Joe placed his hand behind Henry's neck and gripped it with a fatherly hold, pulling Henry closer. "You are the father, O.K.? You." Joe gave a reassuring shake to Henry. "And thank you very much for the precious new grandson." With a smile and a surprise to Henry, Joe pulled Henry's head down and kissed him with a smack on the forehead. He stepped back rubbed his hand all about Henry's long hair, then Joe laughed. "I'm proud of you."

Henry's eyes instinctive closed and he quietly raised his mouth in a partial smile. "Thank you Joe."

"Now get the hell out of here and finish up so you can go sit with my daughter. That's your job Henry, you're the husband. You have to sit in maternity until they fall asleep and then you can sneak out."

Henry moved to the door, feeling a little better. "No Joe, I think I'll just stay until she *kicks* me out." With a nod of his head, and a look of appreciation and respect to Joe, Henry left to do what work he had remaining.

(3)

It was not something Dean wanted to hear when he returned to his house. Noise. An abundance of it, screaming at him before he even opened his front door. Little Brian scooted quickly by like a miniature Speed Racer in his walker his arms waving in the air as he squealed his baby squeal. Alex, and Joey dove from the back of the couch onto to Denny's back. And Denny, he screamed as loud as everyone. All were making noise but Billy. He sat on the couch, looking through a book, his one finger closing off his ear. "God!" Dean exclaimed as he stepped over the wrestling match. "I need a bigger house. And you can tell you guys were with Frank. What did

he do, feed you guys sugar?”

Denny, jumping up with Alex and Joey still hanging from him, ran his hand through his curly hair. “Yeah.”

“Yeah what?” Dean looked back trying to make it to the kitchen.

“Yeah.” Denny set down the two kids who hung from him. “He gave them sugar.”

“Frank gave them sugar.” Dean nodded. “Not even Frank would feed them plain sugar.”

“No.” Denny laughed at Dean. “Those stick powder things Josephine makes. You know the ones with flavored sugar.”

“Pixie Sticks.” Dean said.

“What?”

“Pixie Sticks, that’s what we called them when I was a kid.”

“Well we don’t call them here. We call them sticks with the powder stuff in it. Anyway.” Denny let out a long breath. “Frank had a contest. He made us put the powder on our tongues.” Denny stuck out his tongue. “And he made us hold it there until we folded. It burned our tongues Dean.”

“Frank is a sick man. And I’m a hungry man.” Dean headed to the kitchen. “Hey, who baked the cookies.” Hearing Denny’s ‘my mom’ Dean knew it was safe to grab one. Sticking it in his mouth and pouring a glass of milk, he headed back to the mass confusion of the livingroom. He stopped at the diningroom table. “What’s this?” He lifted a folder.

“Oh.” Huffing Denny walked to the diningroom. “Frank left that here when he picked up the kids. He was too busy changing Alex’s pants to notice. I’ll take it to him.”

“What’s in it?” Dean asked.

“I don’t know. I’m afraid to look. Frank might pull my ear.”

Dean rolled his eyes and open the folder. Figuring it was Frank’s, it was worth pissing him off and looking. “Sketches.”

“I saw those.” Denny looked over his shoulder.

“I thought you said you didn’t look in here.”

“I didn’t. I saw when Forrest drew them for Robbie.”

“Forrest drew these for Robbie?” Dean asked.

“That’s what I said. See, Robbie said he was writing a children’s book and needed Forrest to draw it. I kind of think it’s too scary for little kids don’t you think Dean? Especially . . .” Denny leafed through them. “This one.” He lifted the picture of a woman being accosted and he gave it to Dean.

The moment Dean looked at it was the moment Dean dropped it. “Shit.”

“See, even you’re scared.”

“Um, yeah.” Dean gathered up the sketches and placed them in the folder. “Do you know where Frank is now?”

“He said he wanted a drink before he went back to see Ellen.”

"Thanks." Dean lifted the folder. "Denny, watch the kids for me for a few more minutes, please?"

"Sure. Are you taking those back to Frank. Maybe he's going to finish Robbie's book."

Dean reached the front door and stopped, smiling at Denny. "I think you're right Denny. I think Frank *is* finishing Robbie's book. I'll be back."

Dean walked at a quick pace, feeling the chill of the evening summer air against his short wearing legs. A lot of people walked around and that told Dean that the social hall probably wasn't that crowded.

As soon as he walked in he spotted Joe, Jason and Forrest seated at the end of the bar near the door. "Hey Joe."

Joe spun around on his stool and he nudged Jason. "Uh Hi Dean, nice legs you got there." Snickering Joe returned into the bar.

Jason peered down also. "The gams and the boots." Jason gave a thumbs up.

Shaking his head, Dean looked at Forrest. "Would you like to comment on my legs too Forrest?"

"Ah new Done. Uh um newt a log mun. Uh um a boost mun. Boot of you wooed newt mind." Forrest reached out and laid his hand on Dean's chest. "Aw, smell boot fem." Chuckling, Forrest returned to Joe, Jason and his drink.

"Cute." Dean nodded. "Now if you three old guys . . ." He hunched at their unison 'hey' "If you three wise gentlemen are done. Have you seen Frank?"

Joe slammed his hand. "Christ Dean. He's right over there." He pointed to Frank who sat in a chair all the way across the social hall, his back faced the rest of the room while Frank stared at the stage where the band usually played. "How can you miss his big ass."

Clutching the folder closed, Dean walked to Frank. He watched Frank's head tilt back, finishing off what he had in his glass and then reach down to the bottle set by his right boot. Seeing him pour and bringing the glass to his lips, Dean from behind, extended the folder down in front of Frank, interrupting him. "Lose this?"

"Shit." Frank stood immediately up taking the folder and spinning to Dean. "Where do you get this?"

"You left it on my diningroom table when you picked the kids up."

"Oh that's right." Frank winced at himself. "Shit, I got so caught up in cleaning Alex up since you made her pee her pants that, I forgot I brought this with me. Thanks." He held the folder up and took a drink from his glass.

Dean stepped back. "Frank, can I ask you something about those."

"Nope."

"Sorry. It's just . . . never mind." Dean shrugged and turned around.

"It's just what?" Frank called out to him. "What?"

Slowly Dean turned back and walked to Frank. "This is gonna sound

crazy, but it's just that those sketches are illustrations of what Robbie thinks happened that night right? I mean that's what I gathered from them. Me on the floor, Ellen being grabbed by the door. Moses chasing her."

"Yeah. Get to your point."

"It's just, the one seems wrong." Dean raised his hand and dropped it. "I don't know. I'm nuts, forget I said anything."

Frank moved to a table and dropped the folder down on it. "Dean." He called and waved him back with the hand that held the glass. "Which one?"

Dean walked to the table. "This one." He lifted the picture of Ellen being grabbed by the lab door.

"Oh. That one. I thought maybe another one. You were passed out when this happened."

"Yeah I was. But . . ." He watched Frank finish off the drink. "Frank, I thought you were going back to see Ellen at the clinic."

"I am." Frank reached for his bottle.

"Then why are you drinking?"

"Why do you care?"

"I care about Ellen and you know how she's been about your drinking lately. I don't want her upset."

"Neither do I." Frank set the bottle down and the glass and moved them away. "So, the rest of these sketches look fine though?"

"Yeah. Why do you have all these out?"

"It was Robbie's investigation stuff. And my reason is pretty silly. Let's just say, and keep it quiet, that I'm looking back into it for my silly reason." He saw Dean accept that. "So tell me. Why do you suppose the one sketch that happened while you were passed out is the only one that looks wrong?"

"My silly reason too I guess. Taking the risk of having you laugh at me. I dreamt this." Dean pointed at the sketch. "I dreamt this very incident."

"Whoa." Frank held up his hands. "No where in any of Robbie's notes did it mention you having a dream about this."

"Plural Frank. Dreams. And why would I tell Robbie that?"

"Because Dean, you may have actually saw it and because you were hurt, your mind stuck it deep away. It happens to men in combat all the time. Memories come out in their dreams. What's different about it?" Frank slid the sketch closer to Dean.

"Frank."

"Come on. What's different?"

"Well for starters. See how the right arm is around her waist lifting her and the left arm is around her shoulders?"

"Yes?" Frank looked.

"In my dream. The left arm is under her arms, across her breast like this." Dean wrapped his left arm around his own chest demonstrating. "And the right hand covered her mouth."

Frank's eyes slowly raised. "What was El doing in your dream?"

"She kicked and fought and then passed out." Dean lifted his shoulders. "It's a dream Frank."

"How can you be so sure it isn't a memory?"

"Because in my dream *This*." His index finger came down on the sketch to Moses. "This wasn't Moses."

"Another survivor?"

"No, that's how I can confirm it's only a dream. This man here." Dean pointed again. "Was John Matoose." With a raise of his eye brow he stepped back.

Frank's nostrils flared and his face turned immediately red. "Oh I'll kill him if I prove this."

"What?" Dean laughed in ridicule. "You can't believe my dream Frank."

"What hand was covering Ellen's mouth?" Frank asked again.

"The right."

"You said she kicked and fought." Frank pulled out a sketch and tossed it down. "A right hand with scratches Dean. Look what Robbie wrote. John's name on this. And in Robbie's notes he had written that John had three long scratches across his right hand."

"Shit."

"Exactly." Placing his hands on his hips, Frank took a thinking break.

"As scary as it seems, you look in thought."

"I am. I'm thinking about how to do this right. I have to do this right."

"Unfortunately you have a only a few scratches on John's hand and my dream of course. And you can't back up a dream."

"But I can if it's a memory." Frank snapped. "The only thing is, we have to find out for sure if it is."

"What? A dream or a memory? How do you suppose you do that?" Dean asked.

"I don't know. But I'll figure out a way." With a closed mouth Frank bobbed his head slowly. He reached for his bottle and stopped. Clenching his hand he pulled it back from the moonshine and laid it on the sketch. As far as Frank was concerned, he knew for certain two people were aware who grabbed Ellen that night. Dean and John. And he had two ways to confirm his suspicion. One was to get John to admit it, the other was to get Dean's memory to the forefront. Unfortunately for Frank, both possibilities, would be nearly impossible to accomplish.

(4)

Horrified was how Henry looked when he charged into Ellen's clinic room. He stood in the doorway, arms dropped to the side. "El."

"No, Henry. I can tell by that look on your face. Things aren't good."

"I'm sorry El." He walked slowly into her room.

"There has to be a mistake. There has to be." Ellen dragged out her words as she sat on her bed.

"No El. I'm sorry. Melissa confirmed it. They . . ." Henry's eyes closed as he sat on the bed. "They gave you Jenny Matoose blood."

"No!"

"It's true."

"But how can that be? You and I have the same type blood. Why didn't they give me your blood?"

"I asked Melissa that. She said because we have rare blood they needed to have it around."

"But how can they give me Jenny's blood. I didn't think they could."

Henry, looking so down, lifted his shoulders in a shrug. "She said they crossed their fingers and hoped it worked. And it did."

"What am I gonna do Henry? You don't think I'll start acting like her do you?"

"I don't know." Henry sounded so worried. "I saw this movie once where they gave this guy another guys hand and the recipient received all the bad things about this guy."

"And her blood is running through my veins Henry. That has to be worse." Ellen brought her fingers to her mouth and quickly pulled her hand down. "Oh shit."

"What's wrong?"

"Jenny. Jenny does this." She shook her hand. "She puts her fingers to her mouth."

"El, we can't think like this."

"What if I start to get red hair. And freckles Henry. Oh God what if I get fat?"

"El, I'll still love you, even if you start to look like . . ." He swallowed harshly. "Jenny Matoose." He moved closer to her laying his hand on her head. "Let's not talk about this anymore. Maybe enough of your blood has taken over hers. Is that possible?"

"Let's hope. I didn't think it was possible for me to even get her blood. But if Dean said, I guess he's the one who would know."

"Well he should have known better than to give you her blood. He knows how you feel about her."

"So true Henry. And if they were going to cross their fingers at least they could have crossed it with someone else's."

"Good thing they didn't give you Os-Oscar's blood. Then you might stutter."

Ellen let out a long breath. "Imagine if they gave me both, Then I'd have red hair, freckles and st-stutter." She smiled. "How was work tonight Henry? Did you catch up so you can be off tomorrow?"

"No." Henry said. "I'm not taking off until you get out of the clinic."

"Then I can be home to take care of you El. Unless you don't want me to."

"Of course I do Henry." She laid her hand on his. "Don't be silly. Who else would I want to take care of me. Henry? You're not tired of me now that I'm not pregnant are you? You really liked me when I was pregnant."

"El, I really like you no matter what."

Ellen smiled pleasingly to Henry. "Are you staying for a while?"

"As long as you want me to."

"Good." She leaned back on the bed and scooted over. "Henry, let's hang out on the bed and talk like we do at home."

"Are you sure? I won't hurt you will I?"

"No. Come on."

"O.K." Henry smiled and walked to the bed.

"Henry wait." Ellen stopped him. "Turn the bathroom light on and pull the door closed some."

Figuring Ellen knew what she was talking about, Henry hurried over to the bathroom, shut out the light and pulled the door half closed. He moved to the bed.

"Wait Henry." Ellen held her hand up. "Shut the light off in the room."

Henry walked to the switch and shut it off, he smiled looking around. "Mood lighting."

"Just like our room. Now we can talk."

"Yeah." Picking up the quilt from home he brought Ellen, he flapped it out on the bed and over her. He watched as she lifted the side for him and he slid carefully into bed next to her laying on his side. "This is great. So did you have many visitors tonight?" Henry propped his head up on his hand and traced his fingers down her face.

"Joe was here, then Frank came in with this napkin. Some guy wrote his number on it for me and Frank took it off of me. That was years ago and he still kept it. Then Frank went down to see Nick for a while. Have you visited him?"

"No, not yet. I looked at him. But I didn't visit." Henry spoke soft. "Maybe it would be best if I kept my distance some from him."

"Why Henry, he's your son too."

"But he's more Frank's. And you know Frank's will make the baby live with . . ." Henry paused in his speech and his eyes took a far off look.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. El, I was thinking about something. Just listen to this. You know how you're going to have an understanding with someone. Well, maybe you should consider having it with Frank."

"No, that's all right."

"But listen to me El. If the three of us are gonna raise this baby, I mean if Frank is gonna raise this baby, shouldn't we all be in this together? Wouldn't that be the right thing to do?"

"No." She shook her head. "Not with Frank. Come on Henry, he wouldn't be a good one to have an understanding with. Besides, I'm going

to be with Dean. We talked about this.” She brought her face closer to his. “You agreed to Dean. He needs me.”

“What about after he done needing you?”

“Henry.” She whined pressing her head back against the pillow. “I can’t with Frank. I just can’t. Let’s not talk about that again.”

“You still love him.”

“And you know that.” Ellen took on a subtle look. “I will never stop loving Frank. I’ve loved him all my life. But as far as being with him, I can’t. I’m with you now Henry.”

“What about when the baby lives with him. Will you want to live there El?”

“No, and why are you going on about this? I don’t want to talk about this. I just want to spend time with you. And just so you know Henry. I like living with you. I really like living with you. Life with you is easy and fun, and you make me feel really good about myself. Trust me when I tell you. I am the marriage queen. I’ve been there enough to know when I have a good thing. And you Henry, are a very good thing.”

“Thanks El.” Laying his hand gently on her face, Henry lowered his lips to her. “Would it be all right if I kissed my wife for a little while.”

“Your wife would love that.”

Henry began to kiss her, softly and slowly on that bed until he heard the loud clearing of a throat. Separating his lips from Ellen’s he turned his head to see. “Frank.”

Frank turned on the light in the room. “Fuckin dark in here.” He walked to the bed. “And this is a clinic room, not a motel. Why are you in bed with her Henry, she just had surgery.”

Ellen rolled her eyes. “Quit it Frank we’re allowed. And why are you back?”

“I told you I would be.” He neared the bed glancing at Henry as he did. “And I stopped by to see our son. Patrick told me you haven’t been there yet today.”

“No I haven’t.” Ellen said.

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want to see him like that. Maybe tomorrow Henry and I will go to see him together.”

“Nope.” Frank held out his hand. “Maybe right now you’ll go and see him. You have to see him El. It’s not right. Come on. I brought a wheel chair. I’ll take you down.”

“Frank no.”

“El Yes.” Frank was insistent. “I’ll be with you.” He wiggled his fingers at her. “Let’s go.”

Ellen reached up to them. “Just for a moment, I’m very tired.”

“I know.” Feeling Ellen’s hand grab his, Frank braced her arm, moving to the bed and helping her up. “You all right.” He saw her cringe.

“Just a little pain.” She caught her balance leaning on Frank, she turned

her head to Henry. "Henry, are you coming?"

Before Henry could answer, Frank jumped in. "He doesn't mind if we go alone, do you Henry?"

Henry sat up and slid from the bed. "I don't mind. I'll wait right here."

Ellen looked at him with pleading eyes. "Please come."

"No El." Henry held up his hand. "You and Frank go ahead." He took a seat in the chair next to the bed and watched Ellen slowly shuffle from the room with Frank holding on to her as support. The moment they stepped from the room, Henry folded his hands upon his lap and his face took on the sad expression he hid a moment earlier.

"See." Frank's voice was near whisper as he placed on the break of the wheel chair. He had wheeled Ellen as close to the incubator as he could get her. "Look at him." He saw the quiet look on her face. Almost scared.

"Oh Frank, he looks so sad."

"Are you kidding. He's happy." Frank helped her from the wheel chair.

"It's hard to look at him."

"That's because you're only seeing the bad things. His size, the IV. But look El." He held on to her waist and brought her directly to the incubator. "Look how cute he is. And tough too. He's life El. Give me your hand." Frank grabbed her hand and with his, he placed them in the same glove. He led her hand to Nick. "Check out this. His body is smaller than my hand. And that means more time to watch him grow." He smiled trying to bring it from Ellen. "He'll be all right. I promise you."

Henry couldn't take the antsiness anymore as he sat alone in Ellen's room. So left out he felt, that he just wanted to go down to the nursery even if it was just to be near where Ellen was. The moment he got to the window and reached for the door, Henry stopped. And all that he was feeling back in Ellen's room was magnified right there and then when he watched Ellen and Frank. Frank standing behind Ellen, his one leg up, Ellen's back against him as if Frank were her chair. He held her close. Their hands intertwined on top of the incubator. Frank's face pressed cheek to cheek with Ellen's and they both smiled. Talked and smiled. Henry couldn't make out what they were saying, nor did he want to. Watching Frank's hand slide down Ellen's hair as he kissed her so softly, his eyes smiling a look of happiness as he stayed nearly glued to Ellen. Henry turned away from that window. It was there that he knew, the loneliness he felt before Ellen had become a part of his life was nothing compared to what he would feel if what he saw through that window became what he had to witness everyday of his life. And making Henry feel worse was the frightening possibility that

Frank could very well make Henry's fears a reality.

CHAPTER FIVE

JUNE 29

At what in the old world was known as Quantico Marine Corps Combat Development Command, George Hadly walked alone in pride. He listened to the training sessions of the army he was building. Cyborg Microchip Enhanced or CMEs and also Survivors who just wanted to join the cause.

George found them and took them, unlike when he was in Beginnings he was not selective. If they were bad seeds, they became a CME. Period. He heard the chanting reminding him of his old military days, and his gunfire in the back ground. The gunfire was something George didn't think he'd hear. Seeing how the weaponry division of Quantico was long ago, cleaned out pretty good by Frank none-the-less, on the very first run to pick up supplies.

But he knew as he strolled that things were looking better. It wouldn't be long until things were ready. And he also knew that if all went well, the training that his men were doing wouldn't be needed as hoped against Beginnings. Not just yet anyhow. And if that was the case, then 'the drop' he was getting ready to prepare for Beginnings would be unnecessary as well.

It all hinged on Robbie and his men. The ones that sat just a mere ten miles from their home, hopefully holding within their own bodies . . . Beginnings' downfall.

CHAPTER SIX

JUNE 30

(1)

It was the Rolling Stones that blared music in Robbie's ear as he laid sprawled out on that grass he hand picked to make short. Laying on his back, bare chested, and wearing only shorts, a slight glimmer of sweat formed on his hair filled chest as he baked. He had a huge grin as he listened to the music coming from the speaker of that cassette player Ellen lent him to keep him company. All Robbie kept thinking as he listened to the song 'Satisfaction' was about Linda Blair. And how Mick Jagger at that moment sounded more like the demon from the movie the Exorcist than he did a rock star. Though the batteries played the song extremely slow, Robbie enjoyed it. Everyone else, did not.

The music stopped.

Greg, with his hand on the tape player looked down at Robbie. "We gave you a half an hour of this annoying shit. Now we are asking you politely to stop. Just please stop."

"Aw Greg." Robbie propped himself up on his elbows squinting from the hot sun. "I'm rekindling my teenage years here. Listening to music, tanning in the sun."

"Driving everybody nuts?"

"I did that too."

"I bet." Greg sat down to join Robbie on the grass. "You can listen to that again when you have batteries."

"Which shouldn't be long. Frank should be here with a small supply drop. And I asked for batteries. Let's just hope Henry. The little . . . no, I'll be nice, he shares his woman with me, let's hope Henry gave him enough batteries." Robbie pulled out the waist to his shorts. "Yep I definitely got tan lines. I know for sure with all this hanging out, I'll beat Ellen this year on who will get darker."

"Why does it matter?"

"It does Greg. It's just something you have to understand." Robbie explained. "When I was a teenager I use to hangout with Ellen. We used to lay out together and see who could get darker. Then as the years went and we'd keep in touch, she would always be ahead of me."

"Because you were in the military?"

"No, because she cheated. The best thing that ever happened to Ellen was tanning salons. Or so she said." Robbie shrugged. "However, she had the baby, so I doubt she'll be out in the sun. And by the time we head home in two days, I'll have kicked her ass. What the hell else do I have to do?"

"You got me there." Greg through his hands up in the air.

"I do. And I'm going to finish just laying here without my Rolling Stones." Robbie grinned and sat straight up. "Maybe not." His head lifted

to view the sky when he heard it. "The sweet sound of motor noise. Do you hear it?"

Greg smiled also. "A chopper."

"Not just *a* chopper. But a Beginnings Chopper." Robbie stood to his feet whistling to catch his mens attention before the flutter of the helicopter came too close and drowned him out. "Frank's here!" Walking out into the openness of the grassy area where he hung out,. Robbie looked up to the sky waiting for his brother. And even thought the chopper would only hover enough to make a drop. Robbie would be grateful for the moment when he saw his brother. Frank was family and family was home. Home was Beginnings a place he had been away from for so long, and a place he couldn't wait until he returned to.

(2)

Dean moved around his clinic lab so fast his lab coat flapped behind him like a cape as if he were Batman. He moved better now that he had his high top tennis shoes back. There was just something that stopped him screeching to a halt in his boots. Unlike the slide he got with his high tops, he received whiplash with his work boots.

He had so much to get done. Clinic lab work to be completed. Virus work at the mobile lab and Ellen-the-seeing-eye-dog class, 101. One worker short--Ellen--meant hours a day they lost. Knowing this, Dean also knew that he and Johnny had their work cut out for them, especially until Ellen returned. Which by Ellen cabin fever standards. As soon as she can go, Ellen will.

Just about his last round through grabbing the clinic things he knew he could work on at the mobile lab, Dean's dash to the counter became interrupted when, like a tunnel vision, everything went into a blur. Immediately he tried to stop, stumbling some and feeling for the counter, so within his reach yet so far from his focus. The haze of it disappeared into a blackness and Dean's breath escaped him. Blackness? Always blurry, sometimes grey, never black. *No*, Dean thought. *Not now*. Seeing in his mind the lab he knew like the back of his hand, Dean reached outward in a feel making his way to the counter in front of him.

As he gripped for support, he closed his eyes tightly. He could feel the sweat from under his shaking hands. Slowly and with hope he opened his eyes. Grey and blurry and soon the room spun into focus. Dean couldn't move, not yet. He had to calm himself. He had to get his composure back. Frightened is what Dean felt at that moment. Frightened that what he had just experience was truly a taste of his future.

(3)

There was something about Frank's expression that was familiar to Joe as he watched his tall son step from the helicopter. Frank smiled, a huge grin shining across his face. As he stepped closer to Joe, he recognized that look. It was the same one Frank always had anytime when he was a kid that he stepped from an amusement park ride. Total enjoyment.

"Did you get a glimpse of him?" Joe asked approaching Frank with an extended hand.

"Getting tan Dad, laying there and getting tan."

"How was the flight?" Joe asked.

"I'm getting good. Dan said he barely got sick."

"Spot anything in the woods or surrounding areas?"

"Nope clean and safe." Frank leaned closer to his father as they walked.

"I think you would have heard the gunfire if we did."

"Thanks for that little tip smart ass. Now's here's another one." Joe handed him his headset. "Head your security division leader ass up to perimeter twelve. It's down. Seems a deer tried to play beat the heat and he got fried. Flipped his body up into the perimeter smashing part of the fence too."

"Fuck." Frank's hand cut down through the air and he placed his headset on. "We need that covered especially this time of the year with survivors sneaking in."

"You got it." They reached the hanger and once inside Joe handed him the clipboard. "I hate to throw this at you now. But you need to get up there. Henry wants to take his time off and we need to let him know where and how to set those beams."

"Henry can't take time off until he finishes that. There's no one else in Mechanics that can fix those beams."

"I know this. So head up there stat so he can finish up."

"Like I care." Frank mumbled as he took the clipboard.

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing." Frank walked to his motorcycle that awaited him. "I'll see of it looks like we'll need a guard up there too tonight. Just incase Henry can't fix it."

"Henry can fix it." Joe stated. "It's just a matter of getting it done before he takes Ellen home from the clinic."

Frank straddled his bike tucking the clipboard in the pouch that was strapped on it. "Well if that's all he wants to finish up for, then he can take his time. I'll take care of Ellen until he's done." Not wanting to hear what it looked like his father was going to say, Frank jump started his motorcycle and sped from the hanger and toward perimeter twelve.

Henry only raised his head some when he heard the sound of the stopping motorcycle behind him. He knew who it was, he didn't have to look. He did however have to look at his work and his watch, because he didn't want to be up at that perimeter too long. He could hear the shuffle of the foot behind him as he sat Indian style working on the beam he had to reattach once the fence was put back up. He shifted his eyes downward and saw the tip of Frank's black boot. "How was Robbie?" Henry asked as he worked.

"Robbie. And it's not like I fuckin spoke to him." Frank cleared his throat. "That is going to need fixed before sundown."

"I know this." Henry didn't look up, his words less the emotion, the same as Frank's. "As soon as I replace this broken piece then I'll have some men come up and put up the fence again. Then I'll get the beam on and working."

"It could take a while."

"I know this."

"Then just know this. While you're working on that, don't worry about Ellen. I plan on having her at the house tonight."

Henry immediately set down the beam and stood up. "I plan on being home with my wife this evening Frank."

"No, Henry, you should be planning on fixing that beam." Frank stared coldly at him.

"I'll get it to the point Joe or Scott can finish it up."

"And then what? Have them screw it up. It's your job Henry. Before you go on a paternity leave that you don't even deserve, finish your fuckin work first."

"I'll finish, so don't worry about Ellen. She doesn't need to go over to your house."

"Oh she doesn't?" Frank stepped even closer. "I have the kids until eight. If she doesn't need to go to my house, when will she see her children Henry? She had a life before you entered the picture, a life she can't ignore."

"She can see the children at our home."

"Yeah she can. But . . . she won't." Frank raised his eyebrows. "It's easier for her to be at my house with them all. As a matter of fact, I'm going to suggest that she stay there until she's well."

"She has her own home Frank." Henry watched Frank back up.

"No, what she has is a dwelling that she's staying at and not for long. Not if I have anything to do with it. And I will." Frank began to walk away. "Watch us next time we're together Henry. When we're really together. And you'll see what you and her will never have." Frank walked further away. "Watch us."

Henry clenched tightly to the tool that was still in his hand. He wanted to just throw it as if it were Frank's words. But he held tighter, turning only his head to see Frank leave. When Frank was gone, Henry released the

tension breath he held and continued in his work talking to himself out loud as he did. "Ellen will go home. She will. Not to Frank's."

(4)

Ellen sadly lowered the cellular phone to her lips. She closed her eyes pressing the phone she just hung up against her mouth. Opening her eyes, she raised them to Johnny who sat on the end of her bed facing her. "Thank you." She handed the phone back to him.

"I thought you'd want to talk to Uncle Robbie since he got his batteries."

"I did." She shook her head slowly. "I really did."

"Was he down, is that what he said?"

"No." Ellen gave a half smile. "He made jokes. I just miss him and I'm worried. I'm really worried about him."

"Uncle Robbie's tough. Hey, he's a Slagel." Johnny saw he didn't get a reaction. He took a loud breath and put the phone in his coat. "I just wanted to let you talk to him. I'll leave you alone."

"Johnny." Ellen called to him softly as she felt the bounce of him getting off of the bed. "Thank you. I know this was difficult for you coming in here with me."

"Difficult." Johnny closed his eyes and tilted his head in such a Frank-mannerism. "El, you don't know how difficult it was for me."

"I'm sorry we're like this."

"I am too." He reached out his hand. "I don't want us to be like this anymore. I don't. And I don't expect you to treat me the same, not after how I was with you. I was wrong. I was really hurtful and wrong. And you didn't deserve what I gave you. I'm sorry." He began to walk backwards.

"Johnny don't go." Ellen grabbed his hand. "Don't you leave. Come here." She pulled him to her. "There's nothing to forgive anymore. Just tell me you'll be back in my life again because I missed you."

"El." Johnny sat back down on the bed right next to her. "If you want me to."

"Sweetheart." She laid her hand on his face. "Whether you want to hear this or not, you have been nothing less than a son to me. I have always looked at you as a son. I love you. Thank you for being here." She kissed him softly on the cheek.

Pulling Ellen gently to him Johnny put his arms around her and embraced her. He held her for a while and pulled from the embrace. "I really should go. Dr. Dean has a ton of shit for me to do."

"Then you'd better do it. I want him to let me out of here."

"I'll stop by and see you tonight. I'll bring the baby. O.K.?"

"I'd love that." Ellen smiled.

"Oh." Johnny stopped walking out. "Dad says Henry will be fixing the

perimeter late. He said he was going to get you to go over to his house and see the kids while he has them. Is that where you'll be."

"Henry's working?" Ellen paused in surprise. "It must be important. Yeah, I'll be at your Dad's then."

"Good. See you there." Johnny walked to the door, and as he left, Andrea walked in.

Ellen jilted some in shock. "Aren't I popular today?"

Andrea walked in to the room slowly. "Want some good news?"

"Love some."

"Nick's bilirubin count is down and dropping. Three times in a row."

Ellen's head went back some in relief. "Thank God. How's his weight?"

"Down to four-three. But that's normal. And . . . lung ratio is good. Very good. It looks like that little boy of yours is doing well."

"Sit down." Ellen patted the bed. "How long do you think he'll have to be in here?"

"Let's see how he does off of the oxygen. And we're taking him off the lights tomorrow." Andrea sat down. "When his weight is up a little more, we'll let him go. Maybe a week?"

"Oh good.." Ellen plopped backwards onto her pillow.

"I really have to go. I just wanted to let you know that. I'll stop back. Right now . . ." Andrea stood up and looked at her watch. "Trish is due for a check up and you know how long I'm in there with her. All those damn questions that girl asks. She is fast becoming the most annoying pregnant woman in Beginnings."

Ellen laughed. "She's just excited that's all. She was here twice yesterday to tell me how cute Nick is. No Andrea, annoying was Jenny in her first pregnancy when her breasts got milk early remember? And she worried that every time those big things leaked that the baby was losing nourishment. It took all of us to convince her that what came from her breasts was for after the baby was born."

"Now see if I recall . . ." Andrea held up one finger. "You started that little panic episode. Weren't you the one who told her, 'oh my God Jenny, that's not right. Something is wrong with you?'"

"Guilty."

"And I'm running late." Andrea moved to the door. "One more thing. I put in for five work hours in that little betting pool going around."

"Which way?"

"Let's put it this way. You and Henry are still the only two who believe Hap is Trish's baby's father. If Jeff is the dad, you and Henry will be working for everyone else for a very long time."

"Or if Hap is, me and Henry will become very lazy."

"Valid point. I'll see you."

"Bye Andrea." Ellen said with a smile and stretched out her legs. She still had to wait for Dean to examine her one more time, then Ellen was

going home. As for that moment, she was going to relax and enjoy the peace. Because if what Johnny said was true and she was heading to Frank's to wait for Henry, then rest for the weary in that crazy household would not be imminent.

(5)

"Frank?" Joe said surprised as he approached Jason Godrichson's lab. "What are you doing here?"

"Me?" Frank pulled the door closed. "Um, visiting."

"Visiting?"

"Yeah, that Jason." Frank snickered. "He's funny. Bye dad." Frank rushed by him.

Joe saw it on Frank's face. The looking up to the sky he could care less about as he tried to make an obvious escape. "Frank. What are you up to?"

"Who Me?"

"Yes you."

Frank snickered, biting his lip bobbing his head back and forth. "Couldn't be, then who. Dad! Dad stole the cookie from . . ."

"Frank!"

"Dad!"

"You know I really have to wonder sometimes if you and my real son weren't switched at birth."

"Now why would you say that?"

"You're singing children's rhythms to me and you have to ask me that? Would you, have you ever seen me singing children's rhythms when someone is speaking to me seriously."

"No, but maybe you should try it."

"Good bye Frank."

"See ya." Frank lifted his shoulders in a shrug and walked away not thinking twice about his conversation with his father.

Joe, trying so hard to control his grunting, walked into the quantum lab.

"Hi Jason." Joe shut the door. "Why was my son here?"

"He was rambling on about something."

"What?"

"I don't know. I don't pay too much attention to Frank. He makes my head spin."

"Tell me about it. Smart move." Joe pulled up a stool next to Jason who stood by his computers. "Been doing some test runs in the time machine?"

"Have to keep her running Joe."

"Any idea when you want to . . ."

"A few days should be good." Jason typed some things into his computer. "Hey Joe. You don't think people would get angry to find out

we're still using the time machine when we decided not to, do you. I mean even if it is just going back to get good cigarettes."

"Who the people of this place? Jason they are totally clueless." Joe told him with a touch of arrogance. "How in the hell are they supposed to know about the time trips if they haven't discovered that we're still smoking Camel Filters."

(6)

Henry thought it odd when he passed Dean's lab earlier that he saw Ben from fabrics in Dean's lab talking to him. Both Dean and he faced each other, Dean with more of a look of concern than anything else. That was odd to Henry, but not as odd as the fact that as he stood in the empty nursery--empty but for Nick--he watched Ben run down the hall and race into Ellen's room. Thinking Ben must really want to visit Ellen, Henry returned to just staring at Nick.

"Hey Henry." Dean's call to Henry, so close and so unsuspected that it made Henry jump from his basinet stare.

"Hi Dean."

"Nick is doing good. Huh?"

"That's what Andrea told me."

"You ready to come with me Henry and get Ellen out of this place?"

"Yeah I am." Henry said. "I feel bad leaving this guy behind."

"It's not like you won't see him. Let's go."

"Dean." Henry called to him. "I need to talk to you for a second."

"Sure what's up?"

"It's about this understanding that you and Ellen will be having."

"What about it?" Dean gave his full attention.

"I was wondering if you thought it was all that good of an idea."

"Henry, are you not wanting me to have an understanding with Ellen? We talked about this for weeks. You and I sat down for over two hours and did rules. If you're worried about me sleeping with Ellen. I told you, it's more of a companion thing. And as far as sex goes. If you don't want me to sleep with her I won't. Sex is not the issue with Ellen, you know that. I need her."

"I know you do. Trust me Dean. And just so you know, I'd be a fool to think when there is an understanding, there isn't intimacy. That's just understandings. And I wouldn't want to put someone in the position I was in. I was made to feel guilty for touching Ellen. I know what sharing is, trust me. I can handle it. Just know it's not you. I was just thinking . . ." He looked back at the baby. "I was thinking that with the baby, and this is no reflection on you Dean, I was thinking that maybe it would only be right if the three that were raising Nick were indeed 'a three'. Maybe Ellen and I

should have the understanding with Frank.”

“Frank?” Dean started to laugh. “Henry, you don’t want to have an understanding with Frank. Unless you’re ready to give up Ellen. Frank? Did I do or say something?”

“No, no. Who it is isn’t the issue. Nick is.”

“No he is not. Nick doesn’t know. Henry why did you change your mind? Because I know you don’t want to have an understanding with Frank. You are way too reasonable of a man to really want that.”

Henry lowered his head. “I owe Frank.”

“You don’t owe Frank.”

“Yes Dean. I owe him everything. If he hadn’t let me be with Ellen in the first place I wouldn’t be with her now.”

“Oh that’s such bullshit.”

“No, Dean it isn’t. How would you feel about it if you were in my position. I broke every promise I made to Frank about that. Every one.”

“Henry.” Dean stepped closer. “Are you feeling guilty? This is not worth your guilt. It’s not. Trust me Frank wouldn’t feel it toward you, and he wouldn’t think twice about using that Frank-control over her to get her from you. Maybe Henry what it is, is that you just aren’t ready to really share her yet. I understand, I do. It takes a lot to do that. We can let it go. Don’t get yourself upset about it. All right?”

“No.” Henry shook his head. “Having an understanding has nothing to do with it. I told you. It’s just that . . .” He took a deep breath. “You know what? I’m not going to worry about it. You need her and will need her more. We planned on this. Forget I said anything. I’m sorry I did that to you.” Henry ran his fingers through his hair. “But not to change the subject, but changing the subject . . . What were you and Ben talking about?”

“Facing complete Henry ridicule at this moment, I was uh . . .” Dean dropped his head in embarrassment. “I was um turning him down. Seems he and Todd split.” He heard Henry snicker. “I should be pissed at you Henry. You and Ellen started this whole thing last year. But . . . I handled it in a mature fashion. Of course he was a little mad, saying he thought I led him on. But he left. He’ll get over it.”

“Ben didn’t leave.”

“He didn’t?”

“No.” Henry started to snicker again. “He’s in with Ellen as we speak.”

“He what!” Dean’s head spun quickly to the window. “Oh shit. Hurry Henry come with me.” Dean took off running from the nursery and down that hall to Ellen’s room.

Ben was probably one of the thinnest men in Beginnings. He even looked thin next to Ellen as he stood before her, arms folded, pressing his forefinger and thumb to the corner of his eyes as he slowly shook his head. “I didn’t mean to go off on you like that Ellen, I really didn’t.”

"Ben, I completely understand." Ellen held her hand up. "Rejection can do that to us."

"It's just that with all the times I spoke to you about him, you never, never once mentioned he wasn't gay."

"What can I say, I really thought he was."

Through his nostrils he took a slow breath. "He told me he's getting back with you."

"Ben, let's look at this. He's like the big smart guy around here. Maybe he just wants to uphold his image." Ellen shrugged. "But I will tell you something, Dean has made it perfectly clear that this understanding is for companionship purposes anyhow." She winked as she leaned into him. "What's that tell you, and look at me. Hmm? What do you think?"

"Ellen." Dean scolded as he walked into the room.

"Oh hi Dean." She smiled. "Ben and I were just discussing you."

"So I heard." Dean turned his eyes sharply to Henry who annoyingly laughed in the background. "Ben, listen, Ellen is . . ."

"No." Ben halted him by holding up a hand. "I understand. No more explanations or talk about this is needed." He smiled at Ellen. "Thank you Ellen. Dean." Ben walked from the room.

"You." Dean pointed at Ellen. "Are so wrong. You think it's funny. And stop laughing. It's not. You can't mess with the man's emotions because he's gay."

"Oh please Dean, I'd do the same thing if Jenny Matoose had a crush on you. Gay or not, it's fun to do."

"And speaking of Jenny Matoose." Dean moved closer to her extending his index finger closer to her face. "Is that a freckle I see on your cheek? Right . . ." He poked her. "There."

A look of utter panic took over Ellen. "Henry!"

Henry flew over "Calm down El, let me see." He moved Dean from the way and placed his hands on Ellen's face.

"Henry please tell me it's not true."

"I'm not seeing anything El. Wait . . . that might be." Henry cringed. "I think it is one."

"No."

"What have they done to you El." Henry looked at Dean. "What have you done to her?"

Dean shook his head with a laugh. "Henry, I'm kidding, there aren't any freckles on her face."

"Oh." Henry released his hands from Ellen. "That wasn't very nice Dean."

"Yeah well neither is her doing that to Ben."

Henry raised his eyebrows a few times bouncing from heel to toe speaking in a high whisper to Ellen. "Seems some one is a little defensive about some one."

"I'd say." Ellen agreed. "You know Henry it would serve him right if I

started looking like Jenny Matoose.”

“What if El, he realizes then that he really likes Ben. He shot him down.”

“And what would he do if Ben doesn’t want him.”

“He’d be a lonely man El. Lonely.” Henry tsked.

“Henry? Will I get Jenny boobs if I start to look like her?”

“Enough.” Dean grunted out that one word. “Ellen, lay on that bed, let me look at you then Henry can get you out.”

“Dean you are so forceful.” Ellen slowly lifted herself to the bed. “You aren’t wanting me to pose are you. You did say ‘look at me’ didn’t you.”

“Lay back.” He moved to the bed and reached for her shirt.

“Henry look how tough he’s being. Dean you aren’t going to order me around like this when we have the understanding are you?”

Dean bit his bottom lip and lifted her shirt. Lowering the waist to her shorts as he examined her. “Looks good.”

“It’s my body Dean, I always look good.”

Dean dropped her shirt. “Take her home Henry. I’ll be by later.”

All smiles after Dean left, Henry helped Ellen to her feet. “Ready El to go home? I have to finish up that perimeter but I shouldn’t be too long. Let’s hope. Joe says I can start my time off from when that’s done.”

“Take your time Henry.” Ellen held on to his arm as they walked. “But you know what? Instead of taking me home, could you just take me to Frank’s. I’m having dinner with him and the kids while I wait for you..”

Henry stopped walking. “You’re, you’re going to Frank’s?”

“He stopped by before you did and asked. I didn’t see a problem with it. Is that a problem?”

“No El.” Henry held her closer. “You shouldn’t be alone anyhow.”

“That’s what I thought Henry. Though I don’t know if I’ll still feel that way after being there. You know how that house gets like a zoo.”

Somehow what Ellen said faded to the back of Henry’s mind as he walked her out. He just couldn’t stop hearing her say, she was going to Frank’s. Everything past that was just icing on the cake.

CHAPTER SEVEN

(1)

"Shut up!" Frank loudly blasted across the commotion in his house. "Your mother us trying to rest here. Be quiet!"

Ellen winced as she lay on the couch. "Frank, you're just as bad."

"No I'm not." He had reached the point as he made it to her from the diningroom. The extremely loud game of Twister had to end. "Josh, you and Denny take the game up stairs. Please?"

Josh stomped in a pout. "All right. Come on guys. Denny, untwist yourself."

Relief hit Frank and then so did the walker Brian was in careening full speed into Frank's leg. He huffed as he grabbed his shin, stepping over the walker only to have Brian wheel himself some more nearly tripping Frank. "Whose fuckin brilliant idea was this to make this kid mobile." Picking up the walker he handed it to Josh. "Take him up with you too, And put the gate up I don't want him wheeling down the steps again."

"Got him." Josh set the walker down, shoved the board to twister in the seat with Brain and then gave the timer to Brian to hold--it went directly in his mouth--as he carried him up the steps.

"Better." Frank took in the silence and then sat on the edge of the couch next to Ellen's legs.

"Frank you're so tense."

"I'm sorry. It's just that I wanted you to rest after dinner and you haven't been able to."

"They're being kids. And . . ." She folded her hands on her legs. "Dean will be here soon so why don't you take me home while Josh has them upstairs."

"No El." Frank laid his hand on her leg.

"Frank, I have to go home."

"Why don't you stay here. Come on. I can take care of you." In a grip his hand moved up and down her thigh as he spoke to her so softly with so much depth. "Stay here with me. Please."

"Frank . . ."

"No, listen. It'll just be me and you. That's it, I'll take care of you. I can do this. You should be here."

"Frank, I live with Henry. He's my husband."

"I don't fuckin care."

This took Ellen aback. "Frank?"

"Forget it." Tossing his hand down, Frank clenched the muscles in his jaw and stood from the couch. He walked toward the kitchen.

"Frank?" As good as she could--but slowly--Ellen stood from that couch and walked into the kitchen. As she rounded the archway she saw Frank, he finished off a drink and poured himself another. "What are you

doing?” She edged her way to him. “Give me that.” She reached for the glass.

“After.” He stopped her hand. “I finish this.” He down what looked like a shot worth of moonshine and handed her the empty glass. “Here.” He raised his eyebrows and walked by her. “Let’s go. I’ll drive you home. I have the jeep out front.”

“Why are you drinking?” Ellen followed him.

“Why do you care?” Frank snatched up the keys. “Dean will take the kids. Who the hell do I have to be sober for?” He walked to the livingroom.

“Wait for me. I can’t move that fast.” Ellen hobbled.

“Sorry.” Frank stopped walking. “Do you need help?”

“No.” Shaking her head. She made it to him. “You shouldn’t be drinking so much. You drink all the time now.”

“Well thank you for your concern. But don’t bother.” He held the door open for her. “Need help in the jeep?”

“Fuck you.” Holding back her anger Ellen got in the jeep.

“Fuck me?” Frank fluttered his lips. “No fuck you El.”

“What?” Ellen gasped her words. “You’re kidding me? What in the world did I do to deserve this sudden Dr. Jeckle and Mr. Hyde treatment?”

Frank said nothing, he just started driving.

“Fine, be that way.”

“I am.” Frank shifted gears.

“Dick.” Ellen whispered looking the other way.

“Excuse me?” Frank bit his lip. “El!”

“Frank. Just drive me home.”

“Oh I am.”

Ellen was grateful for incision purposes that Frank didn’t do his normal screeching stop in front of Henry’s house. With a painful groan she tried to hide, Ellen opened the jeep door, ignoring Frank’s hand and she headed up the four steps into her house.

Frank followed her in. “You need anything?”

“No.” Ellen folded her arms and watched him start to leave. “What did I do Frank?” She saw him stop and his head dropped forward. “Tell me what I did.”

“You’re here.”

“I live here.”

“I wanted you with me.” Frank turned and faced her.

“And you’re upset because I didn’t stay with you?”

“No, I’m upset because you’re here.” Frank reached back and closed the door, then he stepped to her. “It’s in the way of us.”

“There is no more us.”

“There should be.”

“No.” Ellen shook her head. “You ended it a long time ago. You Frank.”

“And you wasted no time, none.” His hand shot back and forth. “No

wait, that's wrong. There was no time to waste because you were with him the whole entire time."

"It was an understanding."

"It was not my kind of understanding and you know it! And now you're here. Here with him. And everything you are and were, is thrown in my face!"

"I hope to God you aren't referring to the baby." Ellen stepped to him. "Frank, if you resent the baby, then . . ."

"Don't!" Frank's voice raised. "Don't you *even* insult me by saying that. I spent your entire pregnancy loving that child before he came into this world. And I love him now. I'm talking about this whole fuckin marriage thing between the two of you. Everything that happened before we split up."

"I knew it. I knew you were angry. You hid it well Frank, but you couldn't hide it for long."

"And you don't think I should be angry?" Frank laughed so emotionally. "Do you have any idea how it feels El to have loved someone your whole entire life, only to live in a fucked up world and them not want to be with you? Do you know what it's like? No. I'll tell you why. Because you have a choice. You have a choice who you want to be with and you don't need me. Let me let you in on a little secret here. I don't have a choice. And more so, even if there were more women in this world than men, I still wouldn't have a choice. Because it's one of two ways. I have you in my life or I live alone. I don't want a choice. You are all I ever wanted or want in my life. No one else. And raising a family with you is one thing I wanted to do with you, and I can't even have that anymore. You won't do that with me anymore. Next week, when Nick comes home. He'll come home with me and you, you'll be here." Frank swallowed and stepped back. "With your newest choice in life."

Frank was her magnet, and as usual he pulled at her. "Stop." She called out softly. "Just stop this. Things are different I know. Things aren't the way you want them to be, I know that too. Just tell me Frank, what can I do?"

"Do what you promised me you would do. Be there for me."

"I am here for you." Ellen moved to him. "I'm always here for you."

"And will you be there when Nick comes home?" Frank asked.

"Why are you wanting that responsibility? Nick is just a newborn. I want to be there when he comes home. I want to be there those first couple weeks."

"You can be."

"Yes I can." Ellen nodded. "If he lives here with me."

"No." Frank said strongly. "I don't care. Nick is my son. He will be raised as my son and like my children, he will be with me. You wanna be a part of the crucial first couple weeks of his life then you be there with me."

"Why are you putting me in this position?"

"A position?" Frank asked. "What position? This is your child Ellen. I'm not asking you to come to the house and be my lover. I'm asking you to come to the house and help me with that baby you and I sat for hours and talked about raising together." Frank stepped to her placing his hands on her arms. "I'm not asking you to give up Henry. I'm not asking you to move out of here. I'm asking you just to stay at the house for a while with me and the kids and with Nick. Will you? El?"

Ellen was silent and she closed her eyes.

"Forget I asked." Frank let go of her.

"Frank wait." Ellen stopped him from leaving. "I'll . . . I'll do it." She closed her eyes again. "I haven't been the type of mother I should be lately. Maybe now is the time I start to do that again."

"Thank you." He walked from the door, kissing her on the cheek. "I'm sorry we fought." He backed up again to leave.

"Frank, just so you know." Ellen called to him. "Henry will be around. He'll always be around. Don't think just because I'll be living with you, he won't come over."

"Doesn't matter." Frank lifted his shoulders in a shrug. "As long as you are there. That's what counts." With a change in demeanor toward Ellen, Frank stepped outside pulling the door closed. He stood on the porch thinking that it did matter that Henry would be around. But right there and then, he wasn't about to tell Ellen that.

(2)

Henry tucked the blanket under Ellen so tight, it was like he was tucking in a two year old. "How's that?"

Ellen smiled adjusting the pillow in the bed. "It's good Henry. Now are you sure you don't mind?"

"No. I can use some wine myself. Relax, you know. It's our time off together. I'll just run down to the social hall. I'll be back." He smoothed the covers and bent down kissing Ellen. "I love you."

"Henry?" She reached her hand up. "Thank you."

Giving a quick squeeze to her hand and a smile, Henry left their bedroom and then their house.

The social hall wasn't that far away and he just wanted to go to the stockroom to get a bottle of his homemade wine he had dropped off there. Walking inside, Henry knew he didn't want to be there. Six people were in there, one of which was Frank. It was in Henry's favor that Frank finished off his drink and rolled up his map as soon as Henry walked in. Hoping for nothing to be said, Henry lucked out. Frank merely left the social hall giving a quick look and raise of the eyebrows to Henry as he passed him.

Henry's heart slowed in beating when he realized there wasn't going to be any confrontation. Deciding on seeing if anything was behind the bar,

Henry walked behind 'Sam' the mannequin and hunched down. His hands sorted through the bottles that rested in a crate until he found one. Extending his reach with it first to the bar, Henry was greeted by John Matoose standing across from him as he rose to his feet.

"Henry." John gave a smile to him. "I wanted to apologize to you."

"For what?" Henry asked, just wanting to leave.

"For getting on you like I did at Joe's office the other day. I was wrong about you."

"Thank you John." Not that Henry cared what John thought, he was only being polite.

"Yeah I thought you were going to try to be the big rule breaker. Forgetting you know, that you helped vote on these understanding rules."

Taking a second as he stepped behind the bar to wonder when he did that, Henry recalled it clearly. Joe sent him to the community meeting as a council representative, and Henry did remember voting with everyone on them. Only he just remembered raising his hand with the majority and wanting to go home. He remembered nothing about what he said yes or no to. "*See* I'm not a rule breaker." What ever that meant to Henry. Clutching his bottle he just wanted to go home.

"Frank told me. And I want you to know that's really big of you."

"Thanks." Henry stopped in his stride to the door. "Frank told you what?" He turned and asked John.

"About you letting Ellen live with him after the baby comes home. He told me Ellen told him that after they had dinner."

Henry's heart beat once strong then dropped in a nose dive. He remembered right then what Ellen was trying to tell him about spending time with Nick. He also didn't realize the Pandora's box he had opened by telling her she *should* spend time with Nick. It made perfect sense to Henry why Ellen had a hard time telling him that. Maybe he should have let her finish. The truth was Henry finished it. In giving Ellen her peace of mind, Henry only backed himself in a corner he may not be able to get out of. How could he go back to Ellen and tell her she couldn't spend time with her son if it meant living with Frank. Henry couldn't tell her that. "Will you excuse me John."

"Henry, can I give you some free advice."

Knowing that there was a price tag on the advice anyhow--listening to John speak--Henry nodded slowly.

"I don't know if you know this, but I kind of get the feeling that Frank isn't wanting you to have much to do with the baby. He hasn't said anything to me, it's a feeling I get." John didn't speak like his usual know-it-all self. He actually sounded sincere. "It may not last long, then again it may. Seeing how you always stop by the nursery, maybe for your sake, you may want to consider hanging around that baby less. It won't hurt as much if Frank decides to have this one all on his own. From a father's point of view, it's the best thing to do. Distance is best."

“Distance?” Henry had to laugh at that. “How do you propose I distance myself from Nick? I live with his mother.”

“Yeah, but for how long?”

“Excuse me?” Henry asked.

“How long. If she’s moving back in with Frank for a while, how long will it be before it’s for good. You know those two Henry. That’s a history not even Dean could touch and he came pretty damn close.”

Cold words? Deliberate words? Or truthful words? What ever it was that John Matoose was trying to hit Henry with, the fact remained he delivered words to Henry that would ring through his mind. Losing the up-mood he was in when he entered the social hall, Henry left the social hall feeling like he just walked from another battle. And in essence he did. Only this was not a battle he was expecting to face, but now did. Blind sided by it, and now in deep thought, Henry knew one thing for sure. It was a battle he felt himself losing.

CHAPTER EIGHT

JULY 1

(1)

He had braided his hair, and done it well. Joe supposed to keep it out of his face. Out beyond the walls of Beginnings unless you have the means, you can't just cut it off. Though Joe pegged this new survivor as a little old to be wearing dread locks, he seemed to Joe, nice enough, friendly enough, and quiet.

Joe watched the thin black man fiddled with his hands nervously, tapping forefinger to forefinger in a slow rhythm as they drove to receiving. Joe didn't need a guard with him to escort this one. Three people in Beginnings had the unmistakable instinct when it came to survivors. Robbie, Ellen and Joe. And Joe's instinct told him this man who wandered through the field of the underdeveloped section was not a threat.

The survivor perked up, his head going back and forth as he drove through town and past the people that wandered the streets. He merely mumbled two words as he sat back again after it was from his view. "So clean."

"Beginnings." Joe stated as he tossed his cigarette out.

"Where are you taking me?"

"To receiving. There's a process all newcomers have to go through. If you want to stay, you have to go through it too."

"Civilization again."

Joe watched the man reach down to the bag he brought. "What are you getting?" Joe asked knowing there was nothing dangerous in that bag. There couldn't be, the two guards had checked that thoroughly before returning it to the man.

"My glasses. I want to see this place better." They were kind of bent and scratched some as the man put them on.

"Your only pair I take it."

"Yes." He sniffled and looked around. "Beautiful."

"As I said, Beginnings. And after we get you through processing and cleaned up, I'll make Jason give you an eye test. We can make you a new pair of glasses you know. Only two styles here." Joe pulled up to his office in the line of utility buildings. "Half square and round. Better than none."

"Who's Jason?" He asked as if he expected to know someone there.

"One of the doctors here. He's working in Containment, the place you'll go after processing." Joe led him to his office and opened the door. "Right now we have some paper work to complete on you. The physical will have to wait until you get to containment, I haven't a physician to spare to come up here." Joe unhooked the radio from his belt. "We weren't expecting you. You came in through an area that stopped being popular for stragglers. What's your name?" Joe walked to the file cabinet.

"Malcolm. I can be called Mel." He sat down.

"Mind if I ask your age Mel?" He pulled out the paper work taking it to his desk.

"Forty-eight I think." He closed one eye while answering.

Joe wrote this down, setting the radio on his desk. "And what did you do, if you recall, in the world before it ended."

"I was a um cable installer."

"No shit?" Joe smiled. "Good with communications are you?"

"Yes, I worked for the phone company before I got laid off."

"Even better. Mel, tell me, how did you find the area you walked into?"

"I could see your community from the mountain I was on."

"Really? Did you live there?"

"For a while. It seemed safe. It seems safer *here*."

"Yeah well it's a hard world out there now. Excuse me." Joe picked up the radio bringing it to his mouth. "Frank, I have the new one in my office. Feel like swinging by to bring him to containment on your way to town."

"No." Frank quipped back, a hiss followed.

"Tough. Get your ass over here."

"Aw. Fuck. All right. I have to talk to Godrichson anyhow."

Joe shook his head. "And then again, it's a hard world in here as well."

"Yes but safer than out there. I watched for a while. You don't have a problem with them. In fact the whole area is free of them."

"Who?" Joe asked.

"Those soldiers. They show up everywhere."

"Describe them."

Mel shook his head. "Soldiers, armed. They wear a patch on their arm. It's red and gold."

"A 'C' and 'S' intertwined?"

"That's them."

"SUTs." Joe whispered. "They were where you come from?"

"Yes. I pretty much ran from them after they took out the town I lived in. A small town such as this."

"And . . .that happens to be the next question. Where is or was home?"

"A small town called Willow Creek."

Joe thought about that as he wrote it down. "Never heard of it, what state is that in?"

"State? Providence. I'm from Canada."

The pencil dropped from Joe's hand. It was one thing that Malcolm said he ran from the SUTs he claimed were all over the place, it was another when he said this happened in Canada. "Dear God." Joe leaned back in his chair. "How far are they now?"

Robbie's shadow cast itself over Greg who read a book he had found while, like everyone else, picked through what was left of the small town they stopped in. "Check this out Greg."

Greg peered up. "What it is?"

"A diamond bracelet. Nice too."

"Why do you care about a diamond bracelet. It isn't any use for metals to melt down."

"Of course not. It's for Ellen." Robbie sat next to Greg. "I always bring her something back."

"And you have Robbie, from just about everywhere we stopped."

"I can't help it. It's the guy thing in me to spoil a woman." He reached for the book. "Gone With the Wind?" He laughed. "Romance Greg."

"No a good book Robbie."

"For a woman. Of course, hating to admit this. I liked the movie. El and I sat and watched it as a marathon one night."

"Why didn't you ever end up with her?" Greg asked.

"I'm not Frank." Robbie shrugged. "However, we did sleep together before we got to Beginnings. Pissed Frank off big time."

"I bet."

"So anyway. I got her something. If I don't, she'll ask." Arching up some he tossed the bracelet in his pocket. "And tomorrow, after twelve we can head on home."

"Home." Greg closed his book. "I really miss my son."

"He misses you too and you'll see him. Tomorrow. Dean says if no one is sick we can come home." He stood up. "And you know what Greg. No one will be sick at all."

"I agree Robbie." Greg smiled and watched Robbie bop along back to the others, possibly to show off that annoyingly shiny bracelet. But at that moment, Greg couldn't return to his reading. His thoughts drifted off and instead of basking in the sun, Greg was basking in the thought of going home.

(3)

Johnny chuckled as he pulled out slides from the stand. "Dr. Dean this is really stupid."

"No it's not." Dean flipped the switch on a microscope. "Does this one work Johnny?"

"I don't know check." He handed Dean a slide.

Dean took it and placed it on the stand. He adjusted the focus, squinting and lifting his head. It took a while but then he saw the sample. "Works." Dean handed the slide back to Johnny. "And you are making sure you check those off my list."

"This is really dumb Dr. Dean. Why am I gathering slide samples from

our collection?”

“Ellen needs to learn.” Dean walked to the computer, he lifted a stack of papers.

“Ellen does know these Dean. She knows what a red blood cell looks like. You’re gonna insult her taking over this stuff and teaching her like she was a student.”

“She is.” Dean grabbed a folder opening it. “Johnny the tests you ran yesterday aren’t marked down in here.”

“Yes they are.” Johnny walked to him peering over Dean’s shoulder. “Right there.” He pointed. “Gees, Dr. Dean., what, are you blind?” Johnny laughed and stepped back.

Dean said nothing, he just tossed the folder into the box he was preparing to take over Ellen’s.

“This is really stupid.” Johnny checked out a slide then placed it in the rack Dean awaited.

“So you’ve said. And make sure there are no repeat samples.”

“She’s gonna get pissed. I’m telling you. You go over there to work with her and you pull these out to test her, she’ll hit you.”

“John.” Dean stopped him. “Ellen, Ellen asked to do this.”

“She did?”

“Yes.” Dean told him.

“Why?”

“Why? Um . . . If I tell you, you can’t tell anyone.”

“Sure, I promise.”

“Ellen is suffering from major postpartum psychosis. It’s inhibiting her ability to remember certain aspects of her life, and she gets delusional as well.”

“You’re joking.” Johnny laughed. “You not joking? Can that happen?”

“Oh sure. Very common, wears off in a few days. I discovered it when I happened to say ‘hemoglobin’ and she said ‘what’s that?’”

“Shit.”

Dean nodded, and turned away from Johnny. “She even thinks, get this, that she is starting to look like Jenny Matoose.”

“I didn’t notice anything odd about her yesterday.”

“What can I say, it comes and goes. So to pacify her we’re doing a refresher course this afternoon.”

“Can I help?”

“Yes.” Dean said. “By finishing off those slides and stop saying every fifteen seconds that it’s stupid.”

“You got it.”

Dean watched Johnny--more serious this time--return to work. It dawned on him as he did, that Johnny may just have more of his father’s qualities than Dean had originally thought. And with all that was going on with Dean, that would work in his favor.

(4)

It was so quiet in the nursery when Henry walked in. Little Nick's incubator wasn't as predominant without the fluorescent light shining down upon it. The shutting of the door echoed across the room and Henry swore at that moment Nick heard it. His little arms jolted up. Looking around first, seeing Melissa sitting in the other room, Henry slowly pulled up a chair next to the incubator.

"Hey." He tapped his forefinger on the side. "It's me again. I know, you're probably thinking I was just here and I'm being the pest. But that was with Mommy and I wanted to see you alone. Look." Henry pulled from his back pocket what looked like a tiny teddy bear. Brown fabric sewn together in a bear shape. "I made this for you. It can keep you company when you're by yourself. I'll give it to Melissa to put in there with you." Henry set it on top of the incubator then scooted the chair as close as he could. "I wanted to tell you something." He spoke so whispering. "I know you don't understand, but at least I know I said it. I just wanted to explain to you why you won't be seeing me around any more. I'm sort of not allowed. And with the way things are, it's probably for the best I don't get in the way. Not that I don't want to be around you. I do. I really do. And I will be around, just not like I want to be. You see there are these things called laws. And, you have to have them in order to keep everything civil. You learn this when you get older. But according to stupid Beginnings' law, I'm not your father. I guess I knew this could happen when I was with your mom, but I never believed it would happen. I never thought I'd be staring down at something I helped to create. So Frank, you know that big mean looking guy that's always here, he's gonna be raising you. He's not a bad guy, right now he is, but he usually isn't. He's a good dad Nick. Just . . . just when he raises you, try not to act like him too much. Try not to swear as much. And definitely don't spit like he does." Henry cringed and shook his head. "And if you don't like when he throws you in camouflage pants like he does with Joey, you tell him. O.K.? Nick, know that just because I'm not forefront, it doesn't mean I don't love you. I do love you. I'm just gonna be kinda in the background watching out for you. And I'll always watch out for you." Henry winked and stood up. "I'll see you Nick." Sadly, Henry picked up the tiny teddy bear he made and looked one more time down to the baby. He walked from that incubator and to the other room where Melissa was. He hoped when he handed her his gift to his child that she would put it in with him. Henry needed it to be there. If he wasn't going to be around Nick, he just wanted something of him to be there instead.

(5)

“Dean!”

Startled and at loss of all motor control., Dean dropped the folders he held when Frank blasted his name across the lab. “God Frank.” He turned his head to look at him. “Must you make an entrance every single time?”

“Yes. But . . .” Frank stepped back. “I’ll try it again, because I’m in a good mood.”

“This ought to be good.” Dean shook his head and began to pick up his folders.

“Dean!”

Again they fell and Dean spun to Frank who stood there laughing. “What is it Frank?”

“One word. Listen to this.” Frank cleared his throat. “Hypnosis.”

“Good one Frank, and a big word too. My you are expanding that vocabulary of yours.”

“Shut the fuck up Dean. It’s my newest brilliant idea.”

“I have news for you Frank.” Dean picked up his papers. “Someone thought of that concept years ago, Nice try.”

“Now why do you have to be all sarcastic and shit. I come in here, being civilized trying to help you so you can help me.”

“Whoa.” Dean said with a laugh. “Back up. Help me?”

“Yep. Help you to remember what you saw that night that you say you keep dreaming about.”

Dean scratched his head taking a second to figure out what Frank meant. “You mean the Moses attack.”

“Bingo.”

“How are you gonna help me help you.”

“Fuck Dean, weren’t you listening. Hypnosis.”

“Hypnosis.”

“Yeah, it works in the movies all the time. We get someone to hypnotize you to jar that weak memory of yours. I mean if it wasn’t weak you wouldn’t be so afraid to remember what you only want to dream about.”

“What if it isn’t a memory Frank, what if it *is* just a dream.”

“It’s not.” Frank stated with such assurance.

“So you think hypnotizing me will do it?” Dean hid his sarcasm.

“Oh sure.”

“Who Frank? Who is going to hypnotize me?”

“At first I thought I would . . .”

Dean shrieked in laughter. “Sorry, go on.”

“So fuckin rude. But then I thought, hey there are other intelligent people in this community. So I went to Godrichson. He’s gonna do it.”

“Godrichson helps to screw up time, no way is he messing with my subconscious. No way.”

“Dean don’t be such a wuss.” Frank moved closer. “It has to be done.”

“Does he know what he’s doing?” Dean asked.

"He said he'll learn. I think he said that. I'm not sure if he said he knows or he'll learn."

"No." Dean stated strongly. "Forget it"

"Dean, you have to."

"No." Dean walked to his box. "And I'm leaving, I have to go. Forget it Frank. I'm not being hypnotized."

"Pansy."

Dean, carrying his box stopped midway across the lab. "What is wrong with you? If he succeeds in hypnotizing me that could be dangerous."

"Why are you being such a baby about this? I need you to remember what you saw that night."

"It's not safe Frank. And it's the mind you're messing with." Dean told him. "If you think it's so safe, you do it first."

"I don't have anything I need to remember. But if it will make you do it, sure I'll do it."

Dean tilted his head. "You don't have a problem being hypnotized by someone who might not know what their doing?"

Frank raised his hands and let them drop. "Nope."

"No, of course you don't. You have nothing to lose if Godrichson screws up your mind." Dean started walking again.

"Dean." Frank hurried to him speaking very seriously. "Will you think about it? I need this information. And I'll be the guinea pig if it will make you feel better. I will."

"I'll tell you what Frank. I'll think about it. But right now I have to go. I have a tight schedule. All right? I'll think about it."

"That's all I wanted to hear. Thanks." Letting Dean continue on, Frank figured if he was at the clinic he might as well go and see Nick.

He headed to the nursery opening the door and stopping when he saw Melissa reaching in to the incubator.

She tilted her head with a smile, halting in her reach. "Frank, perfect timing."

"That's me." Frank shut the door and moved closer. "Why?"

"Andrea says it's time to take Nick out of the incubator a few times a day to be held. Want the honors?"

"Are you serious?" Frank grinned. "Yeah." He took his revolver out of the harness and set it down on a table watching Melissa wrap the baby in a blanket and pick him up.

"I know I don't have to tell you how to hold him."

"No." Frank awaited the moment. And then he felt the smallness of Nick in his arms. "Oh my God." He grinned as he gasped with excitement. "Oh my God is he tiny." Frank cradled the baby closer to his chest and placed his lips on Nick's forehead. "Look how small Melissa."

"But beautiful."

"Isn't he though." Frank brought his lips to the baby again being careful not to let his goatee brush against the tender infant skin. "How long

can I hold him?"

"Andrea says he can be out one of every three hours. Would you like to sit?" She unfolded her arms and pulled a chair closer to Frank. "Just let me know when you have to go."

"Thanks." As Frank lowered himself, baby in his arms, his eyes peered at the incubator. "Melissa."

"Yes?" She stopped and looked back.

"Where did he get the toy." Frank motioned his head to the teddy bear in the incubator.

"Henry made that for him. Isn't it cute." She smiled and headed back to her work in the other room.

Frank looked once more at the teddy bear then at Nick as he settled into the chair to hold him.

(6)

"Now remember Ellen." Dean told her as he sat in the diningroom of her home. "Describe it to me as detailed as you can. Detailed." He raised his eyes in a thank you to Henry who set a cup of tea in front of him.

Ellen peered in the microscope. "You don't know what slide I have?"

"No."

"But if I know what I'm looking at, why don't I just tell you."

"Because I want to train you to see it."

"I do."

"No." Dean shook his head. "See it. Every detail of it. If there are abnormalities I want to know by your description. So think of it as a Dean quiz game."

"O.K." She shrugged and looked in. "Ready? Round top. It has a tail and . . ."

"A sperm."

"Can I finish?" Ellen asked him. "It's not a sperm."

"You said tail."

"You said to describe it."

"You did."

"Not completely." Ellen argued. "I'm giving fine details."

"A tail is fine details."

"If you would have let me finish."

"Go on." Dean held up his hand.

Ellen looked at Henry. "He thinks he's on Jeopardy or something, buzzing in first."

Henry snickered. "And he should have known it wasn't a sperm. Why would you describe a sperm?"

Dean answered. "Because there is one in the samples."

Henry's eyes widened. "Oh shit Dean, you brought sperm into my

house. And it's on my diningroom table."

"It's encased in glass Henry." Dean tried not to laugh.

"Still Dean." Henry cringed and stood up. "Can you get it off my table?"

"Henry." Dean tried to calm him.

"Who's sperm is it Dean?" Henry asked.

"Does it matter?"

"Yeah it matters." Henry stated. "If I don't like the person I certainly don't want his sperm in my house."

Ellen chuckled. "Henry lighten up. It's just a sample and it's dead now anyhow."

"And you." Henry pointed at her. "How can you be so calm about working with someone's sperm. There's something sick about that."

"Please Henry, I've handled lots of sperm in my life." She shifted her eyes to Dean. "No smart comments."

Dean shook his head. "I'm silent."

Ellen smiled. "Henry just . . ." She gave a sneaky look and reached into the sample box, she pulled out a slide. "Look Henry." She touched it to him. "Sperm."

"Uh!" Henry stepped back. "That isn't nice Ellen. That isn't. I just know I'm going to have bad dreams tonight."

Dean couldn't hide his laughter. "Ellen this man actually had sex with you?"

Ellen raised her eyebrows and looked into the microscope.

Henry scoffed. "I told you that it didn't count back then." His head jolted to a knock at the door. "And I'm saved. Go on with your sick game you two." Shuddering his body, Henry moved from the diningroom toward the door, he wasn't the least amused at their laughter that seemed to continue. Shaking his head, he opened the front door. "Frank."

"He doesn't need your gifts Henry." With a firm extension of his hand, Frank shoved the tiny teddy bear into Henry's chest and turned and walked away.

An immediate knot formed in Henry's stomach as his heart sunk as low as it could go. His hands gripped the toy as he stepped back and shut the door.

"Who was at the door?" Ellen asked.

"Um . . . no one." Henry looked down at the toy. "Probably just . . ." He swallowed emotionally. "Denny messing around again." Briefly he closed his eyes.

"Henry." Ellen's voice seemed so distant. "I'm just about to describe mucus come on over."

"In a minute." He shifted his eyes to the table, then sadly he walked to the steps to take the toy upstairs. He'd hide it away, hoping at another time he could give it to Nick. But right then, it was much too painful to have in his view.

(7)

It was a repeated action Frank became more and more annoyed with while he did his dishes. The soft rumble coming closer, the jolt of it, the crashing into him and the ricocheting of his knees into the cabinet under the sink. "Brian." Frank turned around, hands wet, and pushed the walker from the kitchen into the diningroom.

It was a game to the boy a few weeks over one. Laughing so hard he did, then charging his little bare feet forward careening his walker full speed into Frank's legs again.

"That's it." Frank shut off the water, grabbed dishtowel and dried his hands. "Need to be mobile or not. Your little ass is banned from this contraption." Frank picked up Brian who seemed to hold on to the walker with his feet. "Let go." Frank struggled with the baby lifting him and the walker high. "Let go." Frank gave a soft shake and the walker tumbled down with a bang to his foot. "Fuck." He kicked it out of the way. "In the living room." Under his arm he carried Brian and set him on the floor next to Alex who drew. "Watch him while I finish dishes."

"He'll eat my color sticks."

"So, it won't hurt him. Eh." Frank waved his hand at her. "Forget it. And go to the bathroom." He marched to the steps. "Josh." He yelled up. "Come down and watch Brian while I do the dishes." Frank looked at the baby who picked himself up and stood at the couch. "Now please." Hearing the confirming footsteps above his head Frank moved to the couch and towered over the baby who looked up to him. He pointed down. "Stay put."

"Da." The baby spoke the only word he knew.

"Yeah that's right." Frank told him. "And who's the coolest."

"Da."

Frank smiled and stepped back, as he did he watched Brian let go of the couch. Thinking his son was about to take a serious nose dive Frank hurried back and to his surprise he watched Brian step awkwardly--without holding on--to him. He shrieked about the boy's third step causing Brian to fall down. "Alex did you see that?"

"No." She colored.

"Ha, Brian you walked." Frank glowed and picked his son up. "Try again." He helped him to his feet. "Stand up." Brian tried to sit. "No, stand." Frank steadied the baby and moved back. "Come on." He held out his hands and Frank laughed loudly when Brian walked to him. "Oh this is so great!" He picked up the baby. "I have to show El." Excitedly he raced to the door stopping when Josh came down the steps. "Watch the kids I'll be right back. Brian walked."

"Where're you taking him. To practice it?" Josh asked.

"Yes. For Ellen." Holding the baby Frank flew from the house.

Dean saw Frank as he stepped from his house. Walking at an extremely quick pace, holding Brian like a sac of potatoes, the baby flopped about as Frank carried him. "Frank." Dean called out. "Bringing only one back?"

"No, I'm taking him to . . . Where are you going?"

"To pick the kids up."

"Wait." Frank raced into Dean's house through the door Dean was trying to close.

"Frank what are you doing?" He watched Frank sit on the floor.

"Sit down Dean. Come on."

"Why?"

"Just sit down." He saw Dean begin to sit. "Not there, closer, man, he's not that good yet. Soon." He waited until Dean sat down and Frank lifted Brian setting him firmly to his feet. He brought his lips close to Brian's ear. "Go to Dean. Go on."

Dean's mouth opened, his eyebrows raised and his eyes widened when he watched Brian step forward. Repeating Frank's actions, Dean shrieked scaring Brian into falling.

"Aw Dean, you made him fall like a drunk. Try this again." He lifted Brian up and smiled as Brian took the four steps to Dean.

"Hey." Dean spoke with enthusiasm lifting Brian into his arms and kissing him. "Good job." Dean laughed as Brian kissed him in that wide baby biting manner.

"O.K." Frank snatched him up. "I have to show Ellen this before he forgets." He carried Brian to the door. "I'll meet you back here."

"Frank." Dean called to him stopping him as he walked out. "Thanks. Thanks for sharing that with me."

Frank smiled, snuggled Brian with a kiss and raced the few doors down to Henry and Ellen's. He knocked once and became impatient. "El!" He opened the door then stepped in. "El." He saw her on the couch. "El you have to see this." He saw Henry walk in from the diningroom. "El, check out Brian."

Ellen swung her legs over the couch. "What am I watching?"

"Can you sit on the floor or will it be too much for you?"

"I can sit on the floor." She lowered herself down. "Now what?"

"Watch this." Frank's eyes lit up.

Henry stepped closer to see what was going on, he watched Ellen's excitement as Brian stepped to her. He listened to both of them laugh in such excitement, leaning to each other and making Brian do it over again. He kept hearing Frank's voice in his head, saying over and over, *'watch us the next time we're together Henry'*.

Frank clapped his hands as Ellen hugged Brian. "Make him come back to me."

Ellen set him down. "When did he do this Frank?"

"Just a few minutes ago. I had to rush and let you see. You would have seen it second but fuckin Dean stopped me and made me show him. Man." Frank tilted his head. "I saw it El. I saw his first steps. Brian is the first one of my kids I ever saw do that. I saw his first step. There's just something to be said about seeing your kid do something for the first time." He gushed. "Let him go so he can walk to me. Come on Brain." As Frank extended his hands out. He looked up at the same time as Ellen when they heard the front door close. Henry was gone.

Ellen looked up at the closed door. "I bet he went to get Andrea. I bet." Smiling she released Brian and let him walk to Frank.

(8)

It seemed that his own house was the only house with a light still on. Henry knew he had been gone a long time, but he didn't realize how long until he wandered back onto his street. With his hands in his pockets, Henry approached his house, not wanting to see who he did when he got there. Frank.

Frank stepped out onto the porch. "Where have you been?"

"Excuse me I'd like to go into my house now." Henry tried to get by him.

"Really? Do you realize that fifteen minutes after you left, El worried and wanted to go look for you herself. She sent me out to find you Henry. Three times I went out."

"Did you really look?" Henry asked with an edge.

"Yeah I looked. I was worried.."

"Yeah right." Henry took a breath and reached for his door again.

"Six o'clock you walked out. It's two in the fuckin morning. You were this close." Frank's words were sharp as his hand cut outward. "This close to me closing down the perimeters and going beyond the wall to find you. Security searched this entire community. We thought something happened to you."

"Then that would have worked out just perfect for you wouldn't it."

"Henry I don't think you realize . . ."

"No Frank, I don't think you realize. I don't want to stand here and talk to you. I owe you no explanation on where I was. I do however owe Ellen one and I'm going to give it to her. But don't worry, I won't tell her the whole truth on why I walked off. And I think you know why. You won Frank. You won. If you wanted to break me you did it. My heart is broken right now and I give up. It's a losing battle because you have to keep pushing and pushing the point, just like you did when you brought Brian over. You got what you wanted. You got Nick and you're family and I know damn well you aren't stopping until you get Ellen back too. Just keep

in mind Frank, right now she is still my wife and until you succeed in taking that away from me too.” Henry swallowed. “Stay away from her.” He brushed by Frank and walked into his house, closing the door and locking in. He stood there trying to control his breathing.

“Henry?” Ellen called to him from the couch.

“El. I’m sorry.” He walked over to her.

“Where were you? Everyone has been looking for you.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I left because I thought I was intruding and I started working on this special trap up at perimeter seven, you know how dense that area is. And I really lost track of time when I returned to my office. I’m sorry.” He knelt down before her.

Ellen let out a breath of relief. When her hand touched upon his head it fell into her lap. “Henry, what’s wrong?”

He shook his head.

“Henry?”

Henry raised his eyes. “Nothing El. Can we just go to bed? Please? I’m really tired.”

“Sure Henry.”

Henry stood up and held his hand out to her, as soon as Ellen used it to stand to her feet Henry took her in his arms and held her. “Thanks for waiting up for me.”

“I couldn’t go to bed without you, it wouldn’t feel right.”

“Thank you for saying that.” Henry gripped her tighter, kissing her on the cheek.

“Henry?”

“Yes?”

“You’re . . .” Ellen grunted. “Squeezing the life out of me.”

“Sorry.” Henry smiled and released her. “I just didn’t want to let you go.”

“Let’s see if you say that in another couple of years.” She grabbed his hand and walked with him to the steps.

“I’ll always say that El.” He stopped as they started up the steps. “I’ll always say I never wanted to let you go.”

“God Henry you sound so morbid.” She shook her head. “I’m not mad at you for working. I know how caught up you can get.” She started moving again. “I am however, mad at you for leaving me alone with Frank.”

“You are?” Henry smiled. “Good.”

(9)

How long did Frank stand outside on the street facing Henry’s house, wanting to go back in. A pull inside, he felt a need to talk to Henry. But when he watched the lights in the house go out, Frank knew it was time to go home. Some time in the journey back to his own house he took the long

way, the real long way. Through town and to the clinic. Nick was strong on his mind as well as Henry. Letting the night nurse know he was there, Frank walked into the dimly lit nursery and directly to a sleeping Nick.

He was quiet as he pulled up the chair close to him. Frank rested his elbows on his knees, bringing his cupped hands to his chin, flicking the roughness of his goatee back and forth across the tops of his fingers. Frank stared upon Nick. And the more he looked at Nick, the more he saw Henry.

Henry.

What had happened in the past five days. One week earlier he and Henry were discussing who would do what with the baby. Now Frank couldn't walk by him without striking out verbally against him. One thing was for sure, Frank knew that he couldn't possibly have that much contempt or hatred for Henry if he was so worried about him when he didn't come home. And the discovery of a certainty hit Frank as he looked at Nick. No matter how much wrong he was doing to Henry, no matter how much wrong he felt Henry did to him, Nick was the recipient of the most wrong.

Casing his eyes up and down the baby, thinking of Henry and all that happened in the last nine months, he spotted that right hand corner of the incubator. The one that held that toy that very afternoon. Frank closed his eyes briefly at that moment thinking of what he did, feeling the pain he caused Henry, and knowing what he felt had to be minuscule to what Henry felt. That toy stayed strongly on Frank's mind after he had made his first sweep of town looking for Henry. The same toy Frank searched the house up and down for while Ellen was taking a shower. Something so small, but it meant so much, in a good way and in a hurtful way.

Looking like a sneak, Frank lifted some from the chair peering into the next room to Glen who read a book. Seeing the occupied clinic worker, Frank reached forward and lifted the top to the incubator. Reaching into his back pocket he pulled out the small teddy bear Henry had made. He looked at it once gripped and almost buried in his hands, and then Frank sat that toy in the corner of the incubator where it belonged. Pressing his lips to the tips of his own fingers, he gently touched them to Nick's cheek, closed the top to the incubator, and sat back down to watch the baby some more.

CHAPTER NINE

JULY 2

(1)

"Any signs of illness at all?" Dean asked, looking up to the speaker in the wall of the communication center as if he were looking at Robbie.

"None." Robbie answered. "We all feel fine. I did a check of everyone about ten minutes ago."

"Excellent." Dean smiled. "All right. It's ten o'clock now. Two more hours, if still the same, pack up and come home Robbie."

"Yes. Thank you Dean. Dad?" Robbie called out. "You still there?"

"I'm here."

"See in about three hours." As Robbie hung up the phone his faded voice yelling to his men, 'we're heading home' was heard before the call was disconnected.

Dean ran his hands through his hair. "O.K., I have to head out. Let me know when they get here Joe, I still want to check every single one of them for infection before we let them inside."

"Got that." Joe stood from his seat next to Mark who was monitoring. He looked at the signal which still flashed from Robbie's location. "So close he is. Soon he'll be back."

With a pat to Joe's back, Dean walked by him. "Talk to you in a little bit." He hurried passed Frank who stood there.

"Dean wait up." Frank chased him.

"I'm busy Frank." Dean walked faster down the tunnel.

"Wait." With four long steps, Frank caught up to him. "Did you think about it."

"Yes." Dean said.

"So you'll do it."

"No. I thought about it. No."

"Dean come on. You have to do this. What will it take to get you to do this?"

"And what will it take to get you to see I don't want to be hypnotized."

"What are you afraid of?" Frank asked as they walked.

"Being an idiot maybe. Forgetting things I should know."

"Remembering things you put away in your mind?"

"Why are you so convinced it's not a dream?"

"Why are you so convinced it is?"

"Why are we going back and forth like this. It drives me crazy." Den stopped walking. "Look, I don't want to do it. But let me speak to Godrichson about it and then I'll give you a definite answer. O.K.?"

"I'll settle for that."

"Good. Now go to work or something." Dean shooed his hand as he went into the cryo-lab.

“Man, he has such attitude.” Frank looked down at his watch. “Maybe I’ll head to the clinic before I do my rounds. Yeah.” Tapping on the open cryo-lab door, Frank gave a gesture to Dean to let him know just because Frank was being nice to him lately, he still didn’t like him. For no reason at all Frank flipped Dean off and headed up to the street level.

(2)

Was Henry really hearing a baby crying, or was it just his imagination. He stopped to listen while picking up that folder for Ellen from the clinic lab. He knew there was no way he could hear a baby. Nick was the only one in the nursery, and that was pretty much a ways from the lab.

Walking with that folder Henry thought he heard it again. Turning in the hall he followed it. It ceased the closer to the nursery he got. It was his imagination. Ten or so feet from that long window, Henry felt pulled to do something he said he wouldn’t do. Go back and see Nick. Just one more time. It really wouldn’t hurt. Would it?

Tucking his folder under his arm, he pushed open the nursery door. Patrick was walking in from the other side.

“Hey Henry.” Patrick smiled and approached the incubator.

“The lid’s up.” Henry pointed and walked closer.

“Yep, I was getting ready to change him and take him out. But . . . you’re here.”

“Patrick I don’t . . .”

“Here.” He handed him a diaper. “You know how to do this.”

“No, really I don’t.”

Patrick laughed. “Any trouble I’ll be in the room doing Joe reports for clinic supplies.” He stepped backwards. “And make sure you keep him in the blanket when you hold him.”

Henry’s hand which held the diaper out, dropped when Patrick was gone. “Shit.” He looked down at Nick whose little legs kicked about. After setting the folder on the floor, Henry stuck his hand under Nick’s bottom and lifted him some. “Great. Sorry Nick.” Henry took a deep breath and opened the new diaper. He laid it in the incubator then reached for the pin on Nick’s diaper. Struggling some, and afraid of moving the baby, Henry opened it. “Remind me immediately to reinvent velcro.” Taking the pin from the diaper, Henry’s focus saw it, the teddy bear that he had made, the one Frank took from Nick the day before. In the midst of his wondering and shock about it, Henry pricked himself. With an ‘ow’ he brought his finger to his mouth still staring at that toy.

“Henry.”

His voice shot threw Henry like a knife. Taking his finger from his mouth. Henry shifted his eyes to Frank who walked in.

"I was watching you. What are you doing?"

"They had the lid off this thing and Patrick asked me to . . ." He lifted the new diaper and dropped it. "Sorry, I was changing him." Henry pointed to the teddy bear. "Frank did you or did Ellen . . ."

"Changing him?" Frank moved closer. He looked in the incubator to Nick, his diaper was half off. "Henry he's gonna piss all over the place if you leave his diaper off."

"Sorry. I'm lost. Frank, where did the . . ."

"Here." Frank stepped in Henry's place and grabbed the new diaper. "The trick is, you have to do it fast." Frank grabbed the baby's legs and lifted them. "And, this is my own little secret. You have to put the fresh diaper under his butt so you can do that quick action thing of switching the diaper. You have to, or else he'll pee on you."

"Ellen, uh, told me about that."

"Happens all the time." Frank put the new diaper under the baby and removed the old one. "Their little legs stiffen up like rigor mortis, but you can't be afraid to bend them. They won't break. You have to show them who's boss."

"He's a week old Frank."

"Never too early to start. There." Frank secured the pin. "All done."

"Frank, I'm sorry I was in here with him. And seeing how I was with such a simple thing as changing a diaper, maybe you're right about the whole thing."

"A diaper is not an easy task Henry. It takes practice."

"Practice." Henry shook his head. "Then I guess I don't have to worry about that do I?"

Frank stared silently at him.

"It's a good thing you showed up or I'd have to hold him. The only baby I ever held was Brian and I didn't do that well. I'll see you Frank." Henry stepped back.

"Henry wait." Frank wrapped the baby in a blanket. "Come here."

"I have to get this folder back to Ellen." He bent down to retrieve it.

"Forget that." Frank lifted Nick from the incubator. "Here."

"I can't Frank."

"Here." Frank stepped closer with the baby.

"I don't want to hold him Frank. If I do, I won't let him go."

Frank moved as close as he could to Henry. "Take him." Waiting for Henry's arms to hesitantly extend, Frank gently laid Nick into them. He positioned Henry's arms the way they should go. "Hold him close to your chest, they need to feel the heart beat."

Henry closed his eyes as he brought the small bundle closer to him. He let out a shivering breath as he felt--thought tiny--the body of the baby next to his.

"Last night, after you came home." Frank spoke softly. "I came back here. I sat Henry, for two hours and I stared at Nick. Just stared at him."

And as much as I love him. And as much as I want him to be my kid. He's not. He's yours. And stupid understanding laws or not, there's no denying it." Frank ran his hand over the baby's head. "I'm not going to stand in your way anymore Henry. He's your son." Frank pressed his lips to Nick's head and stepped back.

"Our son Frank." Henry spoke up.

Frank stopped walking.

"I always assumed he would be ours. I always assumed that you would be primary father. I just never assumed you'd want to push me out."

"I was pissed Henry." Frank faced him. "Really pissed. How could I not be? And this baby was the only way I could strike back at you and really get to you. And I realized last night, that was wrong. Nick will be the loser in all this. Not you, not me. Him."

"And he'll still be the loser Frank if we don't do this the way it's supposed to be. You, me and Ellen planned on raising this kid together. We should still do that. Ellen needs us to do that. She doesn't need for us to be tearing her apart. Because that's what's going to happen if we don't work through this. She'll be torn Frank. Torn. And I don't want her to be torn. I'd walk away from her before I'd let that happen." He saw a snicker on Frank's face as Frank's fingers stroked Nick. "Why are you laughing Frank, I'm being very serious."

"Well I was just thinking." Frank tilted his head. "I could really go back to being a Frank-dick and let you walk away from . . ."

"Aw Frank." Henry whined.

"But I'm not. Cause as much as I want Ellen back in my life, I want this kid in my life too. I can have them both if you'll let me be there Henry."

"You're not going to blackmail again me into making you be the secondary relationship are you?"

"Well . . ."

"Aw Frank."

"Kidding Henry. I know, it's her choice. But just do something for me. Something you *can* do for me."

Henry was apprehensive. "What's that?"

"I want to be a part of Ellen's life again. Just, just be in my corner on it. Please?"

"I'm always in your corner Frank."

"Thanks." Frank walked behind Henry to peer closer at Nick. "You know this kid looks way too much like you."

"He does. But you have to admit, he has Ellen's nose."

"Yeah." Frank nodded then snickered. "Poor kid."

"That wasn't very nice Frank." Henry looked at the baby then laughed.

"Henry I have to tell you, this baby is the cutest baby I have ever seen on my life. Everyone is talking about him."

"Really?"

"Yeah. He's gonna be the only oriental kid I know with blue eyes."

"Blue eyes?" Henry smiled. "How can you tell."

"Simple. The shade of grey says it all. Blue eyes. The grey of his eyes is too pale to be brown."

"See Frank, all this little stuff you know. You'll teach it to me right?"

"Yeah I will. First thing is first though." Frank moved around front of Henry. "You have held this kid way too long. Give him up."

"No Frank."

"Henry hand him over." Frank reached.

"All right." Henry gently handed over the baby. "Careful Frank, don't break him."

"Henry, don't be such a Jenny Matoose." Frank took him in his arms then quickly pretended he was dropping the baby. "Whoops."

"Frank!"

Frank laughed. "Just kidding." Frank placed his face close to Nick's. "Yeah, we'll drive Henry nuts yet, won't we."

Henry ran his hand down his own face to shuck the look of heart attack that was there. "Frank, you're such an asshole."

(3)

Joe was annoyed as he stood there with his clipboard, staring at Ellen who had her arms crossed and her finger to her mouth. "Ellen. Christ, today some time."

"Let me think Joe . . . ow Brian." She looked down at Brian in the walker and moved him with her foot. "How about, and the new guy."

"No, not the new guy. He just got here yesterday."

"But you said he was civilized."

"Yeah, but he's not even done with containment processing. I don't know what's taking Godrichson so long."

"He's not the survivor queen Joe. I am. And please don't let Forrest teach all the social skills classes. Diane stopped by this morning and said two of the survivors were now speaking with an accent. Speaking of Diane . . ."

"Nope." Joe tucked the clipboard under his arm. "I'll just grab this batch to give you something to do. Remember group talk only, nothing odd, you're still healing."

"But Joe, Diane had dropped one of her lovers."

"No."

"She looks like my mother."

"Ellen." Joe stopped himself from yelling. "No, no survivor women for me. They're all to whacked."

"You're just too fussy Joe. You need a little companionship."

"I have you , Frank , Johnny, Robbie and now Henry. Not too mention a whole slew of little ones, thank you Ellen for repopulating Beginnings."

"We all have to do our share." She smiled and it dropped from her face when the front door blasted open and in came Frank.

"El!"

Barreling behind him was Henry. "Let me tell her Frank."

"No." Frank moved Henry from the way racing towards Ellen.

"Frank." Ellen cringed. "Watch out for the ba . . ." She giggled when she saw Frank trip over the walker, getting somewhat tangled in it, losing his balance and stopping himself from falling. " . . . bee."

"Fuckin thing." Frank picked it up and moved it. "And why is he in the walker. He's walking now."

"Exactly." Ellen told him. "I'm not chasing him around. Especially since Joe is making me be maternal while I'm on a maternity leave without a baby."

"That's laziness EL."

"Shut up Frank." Ellen flung her hand at him and moved to Henry. "What happened? Why are you two all excited?"

"Get this EL." Henry told her. "I changed Nick's diaper. Not very good mind you, but I changed it. Five times."

Ellen's eyes shifted to Joe who looked as dumbfounded as she did, then to Frank who nodded. "Why was Nick needing changed so much. You just left here a half hour ago Henry. Five times in a half hour?"

"Practice EL." Henry said. "Frank was teaching me."

"Yeah." Frank added. "Of course fuckin Patrick yelled at us for wasting all the diapers. Tell her where we're going now Henry."

"Wait a second." Ellen held up her hand. "Going now? Henry, this is your day off, I haven't seen you at all. Yesterday Dean was here and then you ran away from home. He ran away from home Joe."

Joe rolled his eyes. "Figures. And before you two go darting off. Frank, what about your rounds?"

"I'll finish them after we go to fabrics. See, Henry is going to invent the diaper again."

"Aw Frank." Henry nudged him. "I wanted to tell. See EL, those pins are really stupid and they hurt too. There has to be a reason we did away with them in the old world. Well, we're going to do away with them now. I'm picking up supplies to try to make new ones. Joe can I have an authorized requisition for them?"

Joe's head spun. "Come to my office for them."

"But Joe. You're here." Henry stopped them.

"And you think I carry requisitions on me?"

"Yes." Henry nodded.

"I do, but come to my office anyhow for them. Frank." Joe turned to his son. "Finish off your rounds before you head off to dally with Henry. After that, what are your plans?"

"Why?" Frank asked.

"Answer the question, I have to know."

"Why?"

"Frank!" Joe scolded. "You're planning on hiding out again in your office aren't you."

"Pretty much so, yeah., Just until two, then I have PT with my men."

"How long will it take to finish your rounds?" Joe quizzed.

"God Dad, all these questions." Frank grabbed his head.

"Frank!"

"Bout an hour."

"Good, finish your rounds, go do what you have to do with Henry, then run to containment and pick up these men." Joe handed the clipboard to him.

"What am I suppose to do with them?" Frank asked.

"Bring them here. Ellen's having a class here. It'll stop her from being that crazy woman she became when Brian was born last year. And then you Frank . . . since you don't have much to do."

"I do too." Frank argued.

"Right. Stay here and make sure there is order."

"I can do that." He looked at the clipboard, bent down to kiss Brian, rubbed Ellen on the head and walked to the door. "Henry meet me at fabrics in one hour, and no flirting with Ben."

Henry watched the door close, he had a huge grin on his face. When he turned back to face the room, he saw Joe staring at him. "What?"

"I'm glad to see you smile again." Joe squeezed Henry's chin shaking his head some. "I'm glad things are better with you and Frank."

"Oh they are now Joe. Everything is fine."

Ellen stepped to the two of them, looking from one to the other. "Henry, you had a problem with Frank?"

Joe looked surprised. "Ellen you didn't know?"

"Know what? Henry what happened?"

"See El." Henry grew uncomfortable. "Frank and I uh . . . he uh . . . I . . ."

Joe finished for him. "Henry was insisting that you should breast feed the baby." Joe hid his snicker when he heard and saw the gasp of disgust. "And Frank was mad about that."

"Of course he'd be mad, that baby would starve." Ellen smacked Henry's arm. "Henry you know I don't get any milk. I'm upset with you Henry, I thought you knew me better. What is one of my big gripes about Jenny Matoose, she's always throwing her milking breasts in my face." She tsked and stepped back. "I'm getting some tea." She moved the walker from her way so as not to pull a Frank and she went into the kitchen.

Joe just shook his head when he saw Henry look at him. "She doesn't need to know."

"How did you know. I didn't tell anyone."

"I know my son." Joe moved to the door. "I was giving him one more day to shape up and then I was kicking his ass. But, he shaped up."

"Thanks Joe."

"No problem. Though I hate to do it sometimes, I have to keep peace in this place." Joe smiled and walked out.

Henry agreed with that until he saw Ellen storm by him and up the steps. "El?" She ignored him. Henry threw his hands up. "Peace. Oh sure Joe this is peace."

(4)

The moment of truth and debate. Dean had to make up his mind or he knew he'd never get Frank off his back about the hypnotizing thing. He walked over to containment on a break from his clinic lab work to see Jason who was working for Ellen until she returned. Jason looked comfortable sitting at Ellen's desk, fiddling with something in his hands. That new survivor Mel was seated, as if waiting, across from him. "Jason." Dean knocked on the archway. "Can I speak to you."

"Yes." He still kept his eyes down to what he made.

"What are you working on?" Dean asked him.

"A miniature log cabin. Ellen had this for hand therapy and I want to accomplish it first before I teach the others."

"Are you showing um . . ." Dean looked at Mel. "Him, the new guy." Dean snapped. "Hey you look different than yesterday. Your hair is gone."

Mel ran his hand across his now cropped hair. "Yes, that big mean guy gave me clippers and told me I'm not twenty-one, lose the hair."

"Looks good." Dean gave a thumbs up. "That was a lot of hair to lose."

"Yes, well, Joe took it and said it was needed elsewhere."

"What?" Dean chuckled then remembered this was Beginnings and everything was either done different or weird around there. "Anyhow Jason I need to talk to you about what you and Frank have been discussing."

"Enlighten me." Jason said. "But before you do, when is Ellen returning to work? This is quite boring."

"Another week or so. Getting back to what Frank and you talked about. You know hypnosis."

"Hypnosis?" Jason didn't move his eyes from his house. "No, what are you talking about."

"Frank didn't come in here talking to you about hypnosis?"

"He may have."

"Don't you know?" Dean asked.

"Nope, I don't listen to Frank."

"Forget it then." Dean moved back to the door. "See you Mel." Trying to get out of that office at that second became a physical impossibility for Dean. Frank stood in the doorway. "Frank, I just came to see Jason, he said he doesn't remember talking to you about hypnosis."

"Get the fuck out of here. Jason." Frank yelled in the office. "Didn't you and I talk about hypnosis."

"Yep." Jason answered.

"Don't you know it?"

"Yep." He answered again.

"See Dean."

Dean's head turned from Frank to Jason. "Jason, did you hear anything he just said?"

"Nope."

Dean threw his hands in the air. "Talk to me Frank when you get a real answer from him." Giving up, Dean began to walk down the hall. About five or six steps into his quick pace everything went blurry, very blurry. *Shit.* Knowing that Frank was there, Dean had to keep going, he could still see the door. And then, it was gone. All went black. *Shit. No, I can do this. I know this place. I'll just go to the door, When I get through I'll wait until I can see again. Hopefully it will . . .* BAM! Dean felt the searing pain to his face as he lost his balance and almost fell backwards to the ground. With his vision coming back he could hear Frank laughing behind him.

"This isn't fuckin K-Mart Dean. The doors don't open for you. Man."

Of all people to see him do that. Dean turned his head back to see a blurry Frank. He gave a half smile, hoped he wasn't bleeding and left containment.

(5)

"This isn't good Dean." Ellen's hands trembled as she placed the small bandage on his head. "You could have been worse."

"I know." Dean closed his eyes as he sat on that chair in her kitchen.

"I put a closure on this. You don't need stitches."

"El." He reached up and grabbed her hand. "I didn't come here to be bandaged. I came here for support. I'm getting worse El."

Ellen let out a breath. "There has to be something we can do."

"There's nothing we can do." He watched her kneel down before him. "El." He laid his hand on her face. "What am I gonna do? How am I suppose to take care of my kids if my sight goes?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we get there. I'll help you Dean. I'll be there."

"I know." He looked softly in her eyes. "I can't count on you to be there all the time. That's asking too much."

"Would you do the same for me?"

"Yes, I would."

"Then why would you think it's asking to much? I want to be there for you. I want to help you."

"I know you do. Do you know what makes this situation really

frightening? How am I supposed to help this community? We have Robbie and his men out there who saw the plague. It's coming El. It's coming and we're no where near beating it. And with my sight, we're in a race against time. There's a clock ticking here El. And it's moving fast. I'm scared."

Ellen closed her eyes. "I'm sorry this is happening to you."

Dean felt her head lower and press tightly to his gut. Her hands gripped his legs. "I am too El." His hand stroked her hair.

"What the fuck is this shit?" Frank bellowed into the kitchen seeing Ellen before Dean. "El, what the hell are you doing?"

Ellen raised her head, looking at Dean. "I'm uh, I was bandaging him Frank."

"Where? And your people are here. Where the fuck is Henry? I bet he snuck off to see the baby without . . ." He felt Ellen brush by him with an 'excuse me'. He watched her run into the livingroom. With his thumb pointed back, he faced Dean. "Was she crying?" He saw the demeanor on Dean's face. "Is everything all right?"

Dean stood up running his hand down his face then straightening his hair over the bandage. "Yeah. Excuse me." He moved by Frank.

Frank stood there watching Dean leave wondering if he should care that Dean was upset too. Deciding on 'no', he went into the livingroom and readied himself for what he thought was going to end up being an adult version of Romper Room.

(6)

"All right ladies, let's go." Robbie shouted to his men. "It's ten minutes after twelve and it's time to go home." There was a small amounting of cheering then the men, began to excitedly toss everything into the awaiting trucks. Smiling, Robbie yelled for Greg. "Greg!" he saw him laying down by the tree. "Let's go, nap time is over. Move." He stepped back watching Greg slowly get up. Robbie lifted his arm, waving Greg close and hurrying him. And then Robbie watched Greg sway, his bigger body stumbled, his knees buckled and Greg fell face first back down to the grass. "Greg!" Robbie raced to him sliding down in the grass as he reached Greg's toppled body. "Greg." Robbie shook him and received no answer. "Greg." Almost frightened Robbie braced Greg's arms to roll him over. Upon the grip of Greg's skin, Robbie knew. The burning he felt, the hot dry feeling. And seeing Greg's face confirmed it. So pale, so splotched, dark circles formed under his eyes. Robbie's breath escaped. He tried to control it, a hyperventilation that snuck up on him as he viewed his friend. Squinting his eyes he looked back to his men who were packing up. He thought of how to do it. There was no easy way. But he had to tell them, for sure now, they couldn't go back home.

(7)

Usually Joe never showed if anything bothered him. This did. Sitting in Frank's livingroom, the cigarette burning more than he smoked it, he was silent. Occasionally he'd lift his eyes to a pacing Frank to tell him to stop, but other than that he listened.

"I need samples Joe." Dean pleaded. "I have to go out there. I have to find out if this is our virus. Because I'll tell you, the incubation period is definitely longer."

"You can't go out there." Joe told him. "I can't risk it and you know it."

"I'll wear a bio suit. Tell him El."

"He can do that Joe. But . . ." She stopped for a second when she heard Frank step harshly and huff. "But, we also can drop a box in and have Marty do the sample. He's the unit medic, right Frank. Frank?"

"Huh?" Frank folded his arms. "Um yeah El."

"There." Ellen nodded. "Dean trained him. Have him do it if you don't want to take chance of one of us getting exposed."

Joe finished his cigarette. "That's not a bad idea. We dropped some supplies off to them. Dean, what else can you think off that we can drop the next time in a few days."

"We haven't any idea what their symptoms are so we can't treat them yet. Hopefully by the next drop we'll know that." Dean spoke. "Anything we send out, can not come back. I'm going to prepare a documentation for Robbie to keep track of the progress of the illness. Also, did you send gloves out to those men. They have to have gloves Joe. Because those who are not symptomatic by tomorrow probably weren't exposed the first time around. But . . . they are now."

Henry listened to Dean ramble, but he had a hard time staying with Dean because he kept looking at Frank. Frank looked disturbed, probably upset about Robbie. He kept walking then sitting, then walking, all while holding his arms close and seemingly wiping a chill from himself. "El." Henry moved to her whispering. "Is Frank O.K.?"

"I don't know Henry. Upset maybe?"

"He doesn't look good. Maybe he's sick."

"I'll ask him." Ellen walked to Frank who had just sat down again. "Frank?"

Frank jumped a little and turned his head to her. "Yeah?"

"Are you all right?"

"Fine." He ran his hand down his face the brought his hands together in a wringing fashion.

"Frank, you don't look all right."

"I'm fine."

"Frank." She laid her hand on his. "You're shaking."

"I said I'm fine!" He pulled from her and stood up. "I'm upset about Robbie. I need drink."

"Frank." Ellen started to follow him glancing at the faces who attention was grasped by Frank's out burst. "Frank." She went into the kitchen as he pulled his bottle down from the top cabinet. "Frank, stop it."

"Stop what?" He grabbed for a glass.

"You don't need to drink."

"Drop it El."

"No Frank."

"Drop it El." Frank's voice raised some more as he poured his moonshine.

"Give me that."

"Drop it El!" Frank downed it. "Just . . . drop it. O.K.?" He poured another shots worth.

"No I will not drop it. This is ridiculous. I worry about you."

"Don't."

Ellen fluttered her lips. "I wish to God it was that easy. I wish I didn't have to worry about you. But like it or not Frank. I love you and I care. And I'm worried. You drink all the time now, especially when things are rough or don't go your way."

"Oh, so you see me so much you can make this conclusion? Well I'm sick of you saying something every time you see me with a drink in my hand."

"I'm sick of seeing you drink." Ellen came back. "I think . . ." She saw Frank turn his back to her. "No Frank, listen." She spun him to face her. "I think you many have a problem."

Frank laughed an ignoring laugh at her, turning away again.

"Fine." She released his arm. "Be that way. But if you don't do something now it's gonna catch up to you and for the first time in your life Frank you won't be able to control something."

"Since when does one drink mean a problem."

"That maybe true, but when was the last time you had just one drink?" Tired of waiting for an answer and staring at his back, Ellen tossed her hands in the air. "I'm done. You know where I am." She backed up and then turned walking out.

"El." Frank turned around and she was gone. He stared down at the glass, the moonshine still settling in there. He brought it to his lips then lowered it. He closed his eyes in thought clenching the glass, hearing Ellen's not-so-subtle words racing in his mind. Though they may have been words that held a scariness to them, they were words Frank argued with in his head. Then as he went to place his glass down Frank stopped, finished off what was in there, set the glass on the counter and went out to rejoin the meeting.

CHAPTER TEN

JULY 5

Like a two year old, George Hadly took a temper tantrum in his office of his compound. He tossed plans and maps about. Paper flew every which way. It was not what he wanted. His scientists had failed him. In an attempt to create a strain of the new virus that would walk right into Beginnings, they failed. Two more hours, that was all the virus needed to hold off, two more hours and those infected would have started the chain of infection that would lead to the downfall of Beginnings. George knew they were no where near the cure. And with the time he had to use to build his second plan of attack, Beginnings could very well beat his best offensive. Perhaps George should not have put so much stock or hope in Robbie and his men bringing in the virus to Beginnings. George should have known better, Joe Slagel had a horseshoe when it came to luck. And if it was the last thing he did, he would snatch up that horseshoe, leaving Beginnings defenseless. And hopefully, with a deadly virus as well.

(2)

“Wait.” Robbie called out leaning toward Marty who was taking blood. “You know better.”

“I know I have to get this done.” Marty knelt over a man, a survivor they had picked up. “Dr. Dean needs this blood to check.”

“That’s not why I stopped you. Did you see what you were about to do?” Robbie asked.

“Yes, I was getting ready to fill a tube of blood.”

“No, you were getting ready to rub your eyes.”

“The sweat is dripping in them Robbie.”

“Yeah well if you rub your eyes something else will get into them too. This is a highly contagious virus. You heard Dean, and your eyes are an open door way for it.”

Marty took a moment to catch his breath before he continued on. “Thanks.”

“Sorry I yelled.” Robbie stood up, holding a clipboard. He looked at his watch knowing that in a few hours he would have to have everything ready for Beginnings when they came to make a drop and pick up supplies. He didn’t know why he had to document everything down. He spoke to Dean on a daily basis. Maybe Dean needed it as documentation. Something to have on file. And maybe just bury if Robbie could help to contain the virus outside of the walls.

Could this virus be it? Could this really be the one that started it all in the future? When Dean and Ellen made that future trip, it was made prior

to the finding of the communication center. And since they found the communication center, maybe with Robbie going out he sped things a little. Robbie hoped in a way that in the other future, the virus made its way in through them. Because if that was the case, staying outside of Beginnings just changed the future.

Robbie walked from Marty and the other man that laid next to him. He moved to Greg who laid on the ground two blankets covering him. "Hey Greg." Robbie squatted down next to him.

"Robbie." Greg shivered, fighting the fever that came over his body.

"How are you?"

"Not bad. This thing is not bad." He looked at Robbie with glossy eyes. "I'll beat this."

Robbie watched him shake, a big man such as Greg trembling beneath the blankets for warmth that surrounded him but he did not feel. "How's the head ache."

"Make, make, making me sick to my stomach."

Robbie stared at Greg more pale than he had seen since the original plague back in Ashtonville. Only this one was different. With the old plague, Greg would have been dead already. The suffering of that plague was fast, furious and deadly. But this one, it moved slow, taking its time in devouring the body in such a torturous way.

Slowly and with a silent nod, Robbie left Greg to rest. He had that report to finish for Dean and it wouldn't be too long until they arrived to pick it up. The only thing was, it really did seem like a long time, because the hours seemed to drag on. Sitting, writing, and taking care of the ill. That's all there was to do, that and wait.

ROBBIE'S REPORT

Date: JULY 5

Patients Name: GREG HENSON

Date of first symptoms: July 2nd Time of Onset: 12:15 p.m.

Body Temp: 103 Headache: Yes Mild Swollen Glands: Yes

Appearance of skin: Pale Touch of skin: Dry, hot

Is patient conscious? Yes Is patient alert? Yes

Any discoloring of skin? Some Describe: Lt purple under eyes

Blistering of skin? No Body cavity bleeding: No

Convulsions: No Nauseousness: Some Congestion: None

Vomiting: No Dizziness: No Can patient talk: yes

NOTES:

Dean, As you can see Greg and the other two are running neck and neck with the symptoms. I don't know what else to do but sit and watch them. How long will they be sick? Will they get better? Or will they only get worse? You have to let us know. As for now, for the rest of us, it's day three and counting.

Think of us. Robbie

CHAPTER TEN

(1)

Henry didn't mind being back to work, he missed being home with Ellen. Of course he spent so much of his time sewing and perfecting what he called "The Henry's" the newest rage in Beginnings diapers. Then again, Ben and the others in fabrics looked at him like he was nuts when he asked them to mass produce it. Ben's idea wasn't bad. He merely suggested that Henry have those who wished to have the new diapers, bring their old ones up to be redone. Saving on supplies. Henry agreed to that, after all, Beginnings wasted nothing. Not even all those dread locks that were cut off from the new guy Mel. Henry enjoyed what Beginnings did with them. He enjoyed it even more when Alexandra came home excited from school showing Dean her artwork of a horse. And there dangling from the back end of the animal was the tail, a dread lock. For the first time ever, Henry could have sworn he saw Dean cringe.

This day wasn't so bad, even though it was a Sunday, Henry didn't care about working. It did seem more and more to him that as the years went on in Beginnings so did Joe's policy that Sunday was a day of rest. Henry wasn't resting, Joe made sure of it. He told him he had to fix the things that only he could fix. Then he drove home the point to Henry that he got time off when no one else did.

Henry would mind if he thought he was missing something, but he wasn't. He had a few more items to take care of then he thought he go help Frank stock up for the drop to Robbie and his men. Hopefully that would eat enough time to allow Ellen and Dean to work on that guessing game that Henry hated to admit, but found rather dull. Everything Ellen described sounded the same to Henry, Dean had to be cheating, that would be so like him. And there were no kids to help with, well, Brian. Joe had the others at his house while he prepared for the weekly Slagel Sunday dinner. And as far as Brian went, Henry was still working on the baby aspect in his life. One step at a time he told himself over and over. The true test would come in a few days, as Andrea said, when Nick gets out of the clinic. Then Henry would see where his paternal instincts lie. He had high hopes, confident that he would do well. And, he and Ellen *were* going to stay with Frank for the first week. How that was going to work out, Henry still didn't know. Henry only wished Frank would get a move on with his fatherly tips. Yes, he spit them out so fast and out of the blue. But Henry was having a hard time grasping Frank's method to being a Dad. Deciphering what Frank told him borderlines as difficult as deciphering Alexandra's phonetic spelling of everything she wrote.

He finished fixing that catch lock on the outer door of the monitoring room of security. How that qualified as something no one else could fix baffled Henry. He set down his tools and opened the door. "All fixed Mark.

She won't stick and you shouldn't get stuck in here for hours again."

"Wouldn't have been so bad Henry." Mark explained. "But for three hours Frank kept saying he was coming to get me."

"And speaking of Frank. I'm heading to the hanger. Have a good day."

"Henry." Mark called out.

"Yes."

"Could you do me a favor." He lifted the stack of papers next to his blue mug of coffee. "I finished the weekly perimeter reports. Could you drop them off to Joe's office on your way there. I want to head on home and catch a nap before the game tonight."

Henry had to stop and think of what game. And then he remembered Frank's new game he invented. Frank was always coming up with new team sports aside from the obvious baseball, hockey and football. He called them strategic games and he got away with it too. Like the paint ball they played once a month, this game helped build maneuver intelligence. And to ensure that it was categorized as a military game, only the men who were security, and or reserve security could play. Henry actually was thinking about filling his evening with the game himself. "Is it still the same time. After dinner?"

"Yep."

"Good." Henry took the papers. "I'll run this up to the hanger. Oh Mark, Melissa does know about the game right? She was pretty pissed off last time."

"Marcus is my kid too Henry. I told her, she's all right with it. Besides now she sees it as a form of exercise Marcus just doesn't get anymore."

"Yes, well running around a field from a bunch of grown men will do that to you." Henry looked at his papers. "All right, I'm out of here. There's a lot of activity this week huh?" Henry noticed the size of the stack.

"Most of that came from the communications room."

"The communications room?" Henry was surprised.

"Yeah, tons of activity going on there."

"Why?" Henry saw Mark shrugged and figured Mark didn't put any stock into it. Leaving the monitoring room and latching the door that was now fixed, Henry's curiosity peeked. He searched out the Communications report weekly activity and pulled it forefront of the pile. "This can't be right." Henry looked at it as he walked with his eyes staring down. "Look at all this activity, For one week?" He flipped through the first page, stepped aside when he heard the motorcycle and Frank yelling 'Henry watch out' and continued reading. Feeling slightly nauseous from moving and looking at the reports, Henry waited until he was in Joe's office to read them better.

Once there, he hoped what he saw was wrong, but it wasn't. Why was there so much activity on a day to day basis in the communication center. It should be limited and done only at shift change. Henry read the activity from two days prior. "Eight a.m. enter, six after eight exit. Change of shift,. But what's this. Nine-forty-two a.m. enter. Nine-forty-three a.m. exit. Ten-twelve enter. Ten-fifteen exit. And this goes on." Henry flipped a page.

"Who the hell is bothering these guys down in communications?" Scratching his head Henry set the reports on Joe's desk. He grabbed a piece of paper, scribbling a note to lay on top. *Joe, take a look at all the activity in the communications room. Would like to add a keypad in communications to see who keeps going in and out of there. There shouldn't be this much activity. Four general codes, Security. Council, Monitors and general population. Maybe we can break it down. Henry'*

Thinking the note was long winded and he'd hear about it from Joe, Henry was certain he got his point across. Wives, friends, what ever, should not be bothering the men monitoring the communications room. And obviously these guys were being bothered.

Leaving Joe's office, Henry wanted to stop at his office before heading up to the hanger. He wanted to see how many keypads they had left they didn't need rebuilt. If he had them ready, he'd bring it up to Frank as well, get his opinion. And then Henry decided he would bitch at Frank for nearly killing him with the motorcycle.

(2)

"We're doing really good with these." Dean tossed some notes on the coffee table as he sat on the couch with Ellen. "It's quiet here."

"Joe has the kids." She reached forward for her tea. "You're coming to dinner tonight right?"

"Don't I always."

"No."

"No, you're right. I'll be there."

"Are you playing the game this evening?" Ellen asked.

"I'm not security. Besides, I want to take a look at Marcus when they finish with him. You know, for signs of fatigue."

"How did he do two weeks ago?" Ellen set her cup down.

"Better than the men who were chasing him. Of course, Melissa stopped the game early," Dean shrugged. "Anyhow, I was thinking of something." He leaned his one arm on the back of the couch.

"Uh-oh."

"What?"

"You have this look in your eyes. I'm still healing Dr. Hayes."

"No." He shook his head. "Frank has the kids tonight and I thought maybe you and I could just sit for a while."

"We're sitting for a while now."

"Yeah but it's work related. I'd just like to sit with you for a couple hours. We'll talk about the kids, whatever, just not about my sight or this damn . . ." Dean reached forward to the folder on her lap. "Virus."

"Oh Dean, there you go swearing and being forceful again." She snickered. "Sure, I'll come over."

“Without Henry?”

“Sure, Henry doesn’t have a problem with me seeing you alone. In fact, I’ll send him to help Frank with the kids. Put him in good practice for when Nick comes home. Henry really doesn’t mingle that much with the kids.”

“There’s a reason for that El.” Dean said.

“Yeah, Frank says two fathers are enough.”

“Not that. Henry is not . . . never mind.” He laid the folder on the coffee table. “I think I’ll check on Brian. He’s been sleeping up there an awful long time.”

“I’ll go with you.” She followed him as he stood from the couch.

“No, stay down here. I’ll be right back.”

“Dean?” Ellen stepped closer to him. “Can I ask you something? Are we having the understanding yet?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged. “I’m not real good at understanding understandings. Why?”

“Well, it’s just that, you haven’t kissed me yet. Henry, Henry as soon as Frank gave a go ahead, he kissed me.”

“Would you like me to kiss you?”

“Only if you want to. I mean I don’t want to force you into something that you don’t want to do.” She rambled. “After all, this understanding is primarily companionship based and I . . .” Ellen knew she was talking too much when she felt Dean pull her closer and press his lips to hers. Softly he kissed her. Then as he pulled back, just slightly, he bit his bottom lip, placed both hands on her face and pulled Ellen to him for more of a kiss.

“Whoa.” Ellen giggled after he was finished.

“That bad?” Dean tilted his head. “I know I’m out of practice.”

“Kiss me again.”

“What?”

“Kiss me again, hurry Dean.”

“Why?”

“You’re ruining it with all these questions.”

“Ellen. I . . .”

Ellen grabbed a hold of him and started to kiss him. She kissed him for a while and backed off to catch her breath. “I just realized how long it has been since I kissed you.” Again she kissed him. “Oh Dean, I remember I really liked kissing you.”

That was all Ellen had to say. Relaxing his arms, Dean placed them on her back, sliding the up and down as he kissed her. Slowly his hands moved, from her back to her hair to her face. He had to pull away but had a hard time doing so. Lowering his stance, bending at the knees, Dean stepped back. “I have to stop.” He shook his head. Looked at her then kissed her quick. “I’m going to check on Brian.”

“But Dean.”

“El.” He ran his hand down his face, stepped to her and kissed her. “I have to check Brian. But . . .” He reached out and slid his hand behind her

neck. "In answer to your question. Yes. Definitely yes." With a quick smack kiss he released her and moved to the steps. "This understanding is officially underway."

Ellen watched him walk up the stairs then she glanced at her watch. Whistling badly--she never was very good at that--she walked to the dining room and to the cabinet in there. She opened up the drawer and pulled out a notebook and a pen. Henry knew of the notebook, but as far as Ellen knew, he never looked in there. That was all right with her. If he wanted to, he could. It was her Dean notebook. And though the kiss had nothing to do with what was happening to Dean sight wise. It had everything to do with where they were emotionally when and if the time came that he would lose his sight. Ellen had to build that, besides wanting to, she had to. Dean trusted her already, but she needed him to trust that whatever happened to him, she would not leave his side. And she wouldn't.

(3)

"Man." Frank shook his head once, looked at his hand and then picked up a sack to place in the helicopter. "Man." He looked at his hand again.

John Matoose who was packing a crate, glanced up at Frank.

"Man." Frank stared at his hand and walked over to the bench where more supplies sat. "Man."

"What!" John snapped unable to take it any more, unable to take another 'man.' "What Frank?"

"Oh." Frank walked to him. "Look at my hands. For as good as my body looks, my hands look old. Don't they?"

"This is what you're walking around in shock about?"

"Yeah. Look at them." Frank placed them under John's face.

"Frank." John stood up. "They look like the hands of a hardworking man who's about to turn forty."

"Whoa!" Frank held those hands up. "I said nothing about turning forty. Where are you getting that from?"

"Everyone know this Frank."

"I'm not turning forty."

"Yes you are. In August."

"No I'm not."

"Frank."

"John. I'm turning, thirty-uh-five."

"Bull shit."

Frank tsked loudly. "The nerve of you saying I'm forty." He shook his head. "You're just jealous because you don't look as good as I do and you're turning thirty-three."

"I am not thirty-three. I'm not even thirty yet."

"Yes you are. Look at your hands. Now they look old. In fact they look

older than mine. Let me see.”

“Will it shut you up?”

“Respect John.” Frank looked at his right hand. “You have more scars than me. Look at these ones on your . . .” Frank started to laugh.

“What now?”

“It’s just that.” Frank laughed again. “You’re gonna think this is funny. But . . .” Frank held up his hand and laughed harder. “Remember when Robbie was doing that investigation into the Moses attack on Ellen and Dean?”

“Yeah.”

“Anyhow.” Frank snickered. “Sorry.” He caught his breath. “He had written in there that you had scratches on your hand and that maybe *you*.” Frank pointed with a smile. “Were in on it. Isn’t that funny.” He shook his head and backed up. “Man, my brother and his imagination. Anyhow I plan on proving that wrong. Just so you know.” Frank winked at John. “I may be dumb about some things but when I want to find something out . . .” He made a clicking sound. “I do. O.K. enough fun, back to work.”

John stood silently breathing in what Frank had just said. What did he just insinuate? Did he just imply he was reopening the investigation? Surely Joe wouldn’t allow it. And if Robbie found nothing out through his badgering, Frank couldn’t. Or could he? Frank had a method of getting violent if his gut told him something he couldn’t prove otherwise. What was Frank’s gut telling him. John saw through it, the act, the happy act Frank gave. It was Frank’s forewarning to John, or was he being paranoid. He could be paranoid. Wondering how he got himself so tangled in the mess, John’s mind snapped back to when he first got involved . . .

“Hold it George!” John held his revolver steady as George began to jump in a jeep, readying to make his escape from Beginnings. “Get out of the jeep! Now!”

“What are you doing John?” George almost laughed at him and continued in his escape.

“I said stop!” John walked closer to George holding his aim on him steady. “I just heard Ellen to Henry on the radio. The shit you have done . . .”

“And you want to be the big hero and bring me in.”

“Not the big hero George. I’m just bringing you in.”

“Then if that’s the way you want it.” George stepped from the jeep. “If Beginnings takes me down, and they will. You will go down with me.”

“What?” John never released his aim.

“You knew, you knew about the scientists. I let you in on that one.”

“That is all I knew George.” John yelled. “You said they’d never be freed.”

“And the were.”

"You killed . . ." John took a breath. "You killed Miquel. You had me lock Frank up. You gave Joe a paralyzing drug."

"Blah, blah, blah. And you knew I knew more than I let on. Guilty by association."

"I'll just tell them the truth."

"And they'll believe you?" George stepped closer to him. "Right now John they will be looking to bring down any and all parties involved. And who are they gonna believe? Me or you? I'm the bad guy here John, I can say you were involved. Now, you will let me leave before they find out the whole truth from Joe, and he's awake now. You have to let me go."

"I'll shoot you right here." John clicked back the hammer. "I'll shoot you before I do that."

"And you think I'm alone in this? I'm not. I've been communicating with the outside world. If I don't show up, and I just called them, then this place his done. Done John. Now you will let me walk out of here or have the death of these pitiful people on your conscious. And my people can do it. We have the means. Means you can't stop."

John lowered his weapon.

"That's what I thought." George hopped in the jeep and started it. "I'll be in touch."

John's head sprung up. In touch? John thought George couldn't be serious. He didn't realize how serious George was until one week later, when George arrived back, handing John a phone and a base to recharge it. Telling John what he had to do. And it was simple. For John's family, for those he loved in Beginnings, for their lives, John had to be the inside man. He told John of the impending virus. How George and his people would use that to clean out Beginnings, unless of course, John helped to get those who could stop George out of the way. If he failed in helping, George would see that John watched his family pay. And to John, his family had no price tag. No matter what the cost, he would protect them.

(4)

"It's that little bitch's fault, that's who." George tried to gain his calm as he spoke with John Matoose on the cell phone. "You hear me John. She's putting this shit in his mind."

"You think?"

"I'm telling you. Why else would he reopen the investigation. I hate that big stupid mother fucker. I hate him. You have to get Ellen to stop. You should have killed her months ago instead of allowing that eccentric preacher to do his dramatic stoning of her."

"I know."

"Well get things moving John. I need Beginnings."

"George." John sat down in the chair in the communications room.

"Are you absolutely sure you're not sending the virus."

"I told you I won't if you can bring the Slagel's down and that Henry too. Leave Dean. Leave him, he's an asset."

"But Robbie and the men almost brought it in."

"Yeah, well almost doesn't count." George rolled his eyes. "You lucked out."

"And what about the future trip that showed the virus."

"Obviously in that future you screwed up somewhere. Hold up your end and I'll hold up my end." Abruptly George ended that call, wiping his hand across his brow. "Sure I will."

(5)

"Look how tan my legs are getting Dean." Ellen spoke perky and fast lifting the edge to her shorts as her and Dean sat on her front porch. "Henry loves tan lines. Of course I can't share any tan lines with him just yet. My body is still kind of frumpy from giving birth. Though not on the lines of Jenny Matoose frumpy, but frumpy none-the-less. What do you think Dean?"

"I think there is nothing frumpy about you. Hell Ellen, you never gain any weight with your pregnancies. How can you be frumpy?"

"That isn't what you said about me after Joey was born. You said I was frumpy."

"Oh I did not." Dean snapped back.

"How do you know, you don't remember that past."

"I know enough about myself to know I would never use the word frumpy. And I would definitely never use it to describe you. Why would I say that anyhow?"

"Because I gained weight."

"What Ellen? Did you break a hundred? I probably said that you did put extra weight on."

"Yeah."

"And then I probably told you, you need it."

"Yes." Ellen agreed. "See, you did call me frumpy."

Dean threw his hands in the air. "I give up."

"Speaking of which Dr. Hayes. How do you propose we make this understanding work if you have no patience for me."

"I'm not Henry. That's Henry's department." He saw Ellen's mouth open. "And don't gasp. When have I had patience with you?"

"You're not being very nice Dean for someone who wants to be in an understanding with me."

"Too late." He smiled then looked up to the bright sky. "We sealed this deal with a kiss."

"Speaking of the kiss. Though I thoroughly enjoyed it, we can't do that

anymore.”

“We can’t kiss anymore?”

“Not kiss. Kiss during work time. Henry’s rules you know. He’s says it’s not fair to him if we are romantic or physical during work time because we work together all the time.”

“You know El, for someone who believes in understandings, Henry certainly lays down a ton of rules.”

“That’s because he doesn’t want you having the leeway with me he had when I was with Frank. But still you have to admit, he’s being more generous with you than Robbie. You can spread your time out with me.” Ellen leaned forward toward her knees, holding back her blowing hair.

“He is being nice about the amount of alone time I get with you. I’ll give him that. I just have to figure out what all I can do with you during that time.”

“Well not too much. You’re getting old Dean, not much you *can* do with me after fifteen minutes.”

“Ha, ha, ha.” He nudged her some.

“And . . .” She held up her finger that Dean swiped away. “He also said if and when that time comes and you need me more. He completely understands. Henry’s good like that. I like Henry.” She smiled.

“I like him too. But, if we get intimate I’m still only allowed to be intimate with you twice a month.”

“Boy you two covered a lot in that little understanding meeting. Didn’t you? Look at it this way Dean. One, you’re allowed to kiss me. And two, it’s two times a month more than you’re getting it now.”

Dean couldn’t argue there. “You’re right.” He held up his hand. “El, when was the last time we were together. I mean, that we both know about.”

“What do you mean, both know about?”

“Well for example. I’d say the examining room. Wouldn’t you?”

“No, I slept with you after that.” Ellen closed her eyes. “That’s right. You don’t remember that because in your history that didn’t happen. Jason and his time machine. We slept together right before you died. But you didn’t die, so we didn’t get stuck in that hole to fool around in. Was the examining table the last incident you remember?”

“No.” Dean shook his head peering out. “After.”

“As in after the examining table and before the death lay.”

“Ellen.” Dean shook his head. “After the tunnel.”

“After?” Ellen brought her finger to her mouth. “I don’t remember us being together after.”

“That’s because it happened in the past where you were married to Robbie. And Robbie had an understanding with me.”

“Oh Dean you dog. You slept with me even though you knew it wasn’t the Ellen that you knew.”

Dean shrugged and nodded.

"Did I make love to you the same." She saw him shake his head. "I didn't?"

"Nope. You were . . . tame."

"I was tame? I was married to Robbie and I still was tame? How did that happened? You would think that if I was married to Robbie, I certainly would make love like him. Robbie takes control, he's like Mr. Stamina."

"El?" With a tilted head Dean looked at her. "You talk like you've slept with him more than that one time in Ashtonville."

"I do? Oh." Ellen folded her hands and stared out.

"El? Did you sleep with him more than that one time in Ashtonville?"

"It's really none of your business. And let's change the subject."

"You did."

"Dean!" Ellen ran her hand through her hair in nervousness. "Enough."

"When?"

"I can honestly say I never cheated on anyone with Robbie."

"All right. Seeing that you are hardly ever unattached. Ashtonville I know about." He glanced over at her, she winced. "It was more than that one time in Ashtonville?"

"Well . . ." She hem-hawed about. "Uh yeah." She hunched.

"And the only other time I know that you weren't attached was when we first came to Beginnings. You said I broke up with you for a few months and you lived with . . . God Ellen!"

"Dean."

"You said you lived with him as friends."

"We were friend."

"God Ellen!"

"Oh no!" She shook her head at him. "Don't even take a judgmental tone with me Dean. No, no. Even adding Robbie to the list of men Ellen has slept with, you still slept with two more women than I did. Not that I slept with any women, but talking totals here."

"El, we're talking years apart with the women I slept with."

"Similar with me."

Dean laughed. "Yeah El, but they didn't all know each other. They weren't brothers. They weren't friends and the weren't enemies. They didn't see each other on a day to day basis let alone at times, an hourly basis."

"Sure but Dean the women you slept with are dead. So there. They wouldn't see each other anyhow."

Dean grunted. "Does Henry know this? I bet Henry had a fit when he found out." He saw her eyes shift to the sky. "Henry doesn't know?"

"No Dean it's mine and Robbie's secret. I made a deal with him. He's allowed to admit to the one time when Frank busted us in Ashtonville, but he has to keep his mouth shut about the other times."

"What happened to Henry knows everything."

"Henry knows I slept with Robbie. That's all Henry needs to know."

Trust me, he'd never get over it. I still get questioned about what possessed me to sleep with Robbie in the first place. You're not going to tell Henry are you?"

"Not while I can use this information to my advantage I won't."

Ellen's mouth dropped open with a gasp. "You would blackmail me?"

"You'd blackmail me."

"True."

Dean stood up from the step he sat. He grunted and straightened out his knee. The one that always caused him pain. He wished at that moment when the incident of Frank shooting him was wiped from existence from the time travel ripple, so was the pain. No such luck. "I'm getting hungry. You want a sandwich?"

"Yes that'll be nice. A jam sandwich please. Josephine sent over some fresh strawberry jam."

"A jam sandwich it is." Dean opened the screen door.

"And could you check on Brian while you're in there, I don't know what Frank did to him last night, but the kid is still out."

"I'll check on Brian." Dean slipped into the house.

Sitting there admiring her tanning thighs, Ellen saw him in a storm heading to her. John Matoose. She smiled and waved.

"Ellen."

"Oh hi John." She said pleasant then rolled her eyes.

"What are you up to?"

"Who me?" Ellen pointed to her chest. "I'm hanging out getting a suntan. How about you?"

"Enough of the fake niceties. I'm not in the mood."

"Well I'm in a good mood and I'd appreciate it if you'd leave before you ruin that."

"Like you ruined my day."

Ellen laughed. She didn't plan on ruining his day, but if she did it unintentionally that was a bonus for her. "Sure if you say so."

"I know what you're up to."

"You do? What?"

"Don't be cute."

"I can't help it John, I am. You should get out once in a while and look at what women really look like. You're disillusioned by your wife."

"Ellen!" John yelled. "I sick of this. Knock it off."

"I'd be glad not to if I knew what I was doing. But I haven't the foggiest. And since I want a jam sandwich. I'm going in my house." She started to stand up only to have her arm grabbed and her body yanked right back down into a sitting position. She looked at the fingers that gripped her tightly.

John placed his face close to hers. "Listen you little bitch. I had enough of Robbie going after me. Don't you know how hard it is day to day with out some one breathing down your neck. You started this, you stop this.

I'm warning you." He saw her smile brightly. "What is wrong with you?"

"Hi Frank." She said perky.

"I'm not buying that."

"Don't." She leaned her head to the side to look passed John. "Hi Frank."

Something told John that perhaps Ellen wasn't lying at that moment. Maybe it was the presence he felt so close to his back. Slowly releasing Ellen's arm, he turned around only to see Frank briefly. That vision was shattered and blacked out by one of the hardest punches John had ever taken. He spun back around careening into the railing of the porch.

Ellen stepped out of John's falling body with a loud 'Yes!' she moved up a step so as to not get in Frank's way. "Go Frank, I love when you rescue me."

Frank charged forward picking John up. "I can't believe not only did you talk to her like that, but you fuckin touched her as well?" His words were angry but not as angry as the shove Frank delivered when he tossed John into the side of the house. Shaking his head in disgust, Frank charged for him again.

Just about the time Dean lowered the knife of jam to the bread, he dropped it when he heard Ellen's cheerleader style chanting.

"Go Frank. Hit him again. Yes!"

"What the hell is she doing?" Dean turned and jolted when he heard a banging and another excited comment from Ellen. Walking from the kitchen into the diningroom it didn't take Dean long to see what was going on. On his approach he could see Frank spinning John away from the house and hitting him. John flew backwards and Frank went after his defenseless body. "Shit." Dean raced for the door, smacking Ellen with the screen door when he ran out on the porch.

"Do it Frank!" Ellen shouted feeling Dean brush by her. "Hey!" She yelled at Dean. "Dean you can't stop them you're too little."

"Frank!" Dean charged to the two men. Frank getting ready to pummel John as he picked him up, and John swinging at the air and trying to catch his stand. "Frank stop!" Dean grabbed Frank's hand as it revved back.

"Back off Dean."

"You'll kill him."

"So what."

It took all that Dean had to hold on to that fist. It was obvious to him that Frank wasn't tugging too hard or else Dean would have gone into John as well. "Don't do this. Do this right."

"Dean, I'm telling you just . . ." WHAP! Unexpected Frank felt the blow to the side of his chin. Though the hit was not hard, it took him by surprise, taking Frank back a step and knocking Dean off of him. "Now see Dean, now I've been hit."

Dean felt the jolt of his body hit the ground. As he stumbled to his feet he fell back down when everything around him spun and went out of focus.

She could see it in his face something was wrong. Moving as fast as she could, Ellen ran to Dean who laid on the grass. He hadn't fallen that hard, but he didn't look right to her. "Dean." She crouched down to him bracing his arm. "Dean." She whispered and noticed the blank look on his face. His eyes stared outward with a look of loss and confusion all over him.

"I cant see El." He grabbed for her arm.

Moving to right in front of him Ellen laid her hand on his face. "I'm right here." She slid it down to his arm. "Let me help you."

Dean blinked, still looking so bewildered.

She couldn't get him to move. Ellen wanted to wait until he was ready. She had never seen Dean like that. He actually started to look scared. "It'll come back." She moved closer to him as he knelt on the ground. Staying with Dean in her focus, Ellen blocked out everything around her until she was forced to remember what was happening when Dean went down. Two gunshots fired in the air snapped her head up and her attention away from Dean. Henry stood there with a gun reaching down for Frank and pulling him off of John. Joe ran in quickly behind, moving to John, maybe as a sense of protection.

Henry pulled Frank back further. "Calm down."

Frank closed his eyes and breathed heavily. He brought his hand to the corner of his mouth. "Fuck, I'm bleeding."

"Not bad." Henry nodded to John. "Not as bad as him." He watched as Joe helped John up. "At least he can stand." He then saw Dean on the ground with Ellen. He moved a few feet to them. "What did you do Dean, try to break it up? I'm not even that dumb, I fired a gun." He didn't get a response only panic filled eyes from Ellen. "El?"

Ellen shook her head and returned to Dean speaking in a barely audible voice. "How's it going?"

"It's coming back." He let out a loud breath and took the embrace fully that Ellen gave to him.

Frank's mouth dropped open. "What the fuck is this shit." He indicated to Ellen and Dean. "I get beat up and she's all over him?"

Henry shook his head. "Oh sure Frank. You're beat up."

"I am. I'm bleeding. Look." He showed Henry the blood on his hand and watched Henry cringe. Quickly Frank wiped the still damp blood on Henry's arm.

"Frank!" Henry stepped back wiping his arm on his own pants. "You're an asshole."

As Frank started to laugh, forgetting about his anger he was reminded of it when he heard his father's stern yell. He spun to Joe who was balancing John. "What?"

Making sure John wouldn't fall again, Joe released him and walked to Frank. "What was this shit?!"

"Dad he deserved it."

"He what!?"

"He was . . ."

"I don't want to hear it right now. I'm taking John to the clinic. You, clean your ass up and meet me at my office in twenty minutes. You hear me." He didn't get a response "You hear me!?" Joe yelled louder.

"Yeah I hear. I'll be there." Frank placed his hands on his hips.

"And you better Frank, have a damn good reason for beating this man like that. You got that? Damn good." With a pointing finger Joe stepped back and went to John to escort him for medical attention.

Henry watched Frank as he stared at his father leaving. "Frank? *Do* you have a good reason?"

"Yeah." Frank sniffed, wiped his mouth and motioned his head to Ellen who was helping Dean in the house. "Ask her."

"Ellen?" Henry took a breath. "Oh boy."

"What?"

"Well Frank for as much as I love her." He stepped back when he saw the snapping look on Frank's face. "For as much as I care. Her word about John around here doesn't mean much. And you Frank were part of discrediting her."

"Shit." Frank ran his hand down his own face.

"Exactly."

"No-no." Frank held up his hands. "I had reason. Good reason."

(6)

The door to Joe's office slammed so fiercely it would have rattled just about anyone. Anyone that is, except for Frank. He sat in the chair waiting, biting his nails, looking at his fingertips, being cool and calm even though Joe projected everything but that.

"Don't get up Frank."

"I'm not."

"I was being sarcastic." Joe walked behind his desk with a storm to his stride.

"So was I."

"You beat the man Frank. Eight stitches in his right eye. Nine in his left. Six on his top lip."

"He's still alive?"

"Yes goddamn it, he's alive." Joe seemed agitated.

"Then I failed somewhere."

"What!" Joe's voice raised. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"With me? What the hell is wrong with you coming down on me for beating up the guy. First off, you never come down on any two men for fighting."

"You're right. I let who ever it is work it out. But you Frank, you aren't any man." He saw his son scoff. "You are the strongest man I have ever met in my entire life. You are driven by emotions. Your rage fuels your strength. You can kill a man with your bare hands. And that gives you a big responsibility to control what it is that drives you. You have to. If you ever let lose it on someone, you can kill them."

"I have."

Joe rolled his eyes and ran his hand down his face. "You're missing my point. You can't just get into scuffs for no reason around here."

"No reason?" Frank leaned into the desk. "The man should be dead. He should be made to pay for everything he did. What I gave to him was just the beginning. When he admits to what he's done, and what he's been a part of, I will take great pleasure in tearing him limb from limb. And I will get him to admit it."

"Admit what?" Joe threw his hands in the air. "That he had a confrontation with Ellen. He admitted that."

"Did he tell you he called her a little bitch. Did he tell you he warned her all while grabbing her."

Joe nodded. "He said he was harsh with her and he owes her an apology."

"Did he tell you he tried to kill her?"

"What?" Joe laughed. "Where is this coming from. One argument does not . . ."

"No Dad. Kill her when Moses went up to that mobile after her and Dean. John was there. He was the one who grabbed Ellen. Those scars on his hands are Ellen's mark of trying to fight who it was that held onto her. The no blood on Ellen's clothes. Of course there was no blood. John wasn't bleeding."

"Frank, where are you getting this from?"

"Robbie's investigation box. He had it noted about the scratches and the blood."

Joe started to laugh. "None of that was conclusive."

"And then there's Dean."

"What about him?"

"Dean remembers after he was shot seeing someone grab Ellen. Seeing this person as they carried her away. That person was John."

"Jesus Christ." Joe's expression dropped. "Why is this only coming to my attention now? This happened how long ago. Why didn't Dean say anything."

"Well because . . ." Frank slumped in his chair. "He thinks it's just a dream. He doesn't know it's a memory yet."

"Frank."

"Here me out. We're working on that. Jason is going to hypnotize him to see if it's a dream or a memory. Either way, I have to do this first."

"Frank." Joe tried to remain reasonable. "Listen to me. Robbie went

through this, all but the dream thing. None of this is conclusive.”

“I know this Dad and I’ve just got to get John to own up to it.” Frank spoke with passion. “Listen to me. Robbie had it noted in his notes that every single time John is provoked or threatened he strikes out, something else happens. He gets into a fight with Ellen, someone breaks into Henry’s house. Robbie fights with him, the circuit box is rigged. And there’s a lot of incidents. Me, I went about it a sneaky way, but I let John know today I was on to him. In a joking way, what happens? He goes directly to Ellen, as planned. I followed him because I knew that was what he was going to do. Just like Robbie’s notes said. He’s guilty Dad. Guilty and I have a feeling he’s the inside man for George. Not doing a very good job, but the inside man none-the-less. He’s communicating with George somehow.”

“I just don’t . . .” Joe’s eyes shifted down to the stack of papers on his desk. He saw the note from Henry on top and Joe took a second to look at the activity reports. “You think he’s communicating with George?”

“Yep.”

“What do you think he’s telling him. There’s not much to tell him.”

“I’ve been thinking about this.”

“Oh boy.” Joe kept his stare on the reports.

“What if he’s telling George about our Robbie attacks. Where Robbie is going to go. George knows what we’re up to. What if Robbie didn’t just happen upon this virus with his men, but it was a set up. Dean says the virus’ incubation is different. George sets them up with a virus. George knows through John that Dean pegged the five day incubation period. Knowing this, George hits them with a virus with a longer incubation period. They are virus free, they walk into Beginnings and then bam . . . they get sick, therefore starting our plague. He infiltrates us with our own men.”

Joe slowly stood up from his desk. “You amaze me sometimes.”

“I amaze myself all the time.”

Shaking his head in disbelief, Joe moved to the filing cabinet.

“Dad I may not be he brightest man in Beginnings, I know that. But my gut is usually right. And right now, my gut is screaming at me and I just can’t shut it up. The only thing I can’t peg is how John is talking to George.” He watched Joe rummage through the filing cabinet. “I mean, we have the communications room. We should have gotten the signal, our monitors that is.”

“Not if John’s making the call from the communications room.” Joe dropped reports in front of Frank. “Going in there and calling from there.”

“We should have a record of any indicators going off.”

“Not if he turns the tracking off.”

“How’s he doing that? We have a monitor in there?”

“Sends the monitor on a break. Shuts of the tracking, makes his call, turns the tacking back on, monitor comes back. It’s all here. Look at all this activity. I didn’t pay it much attention until Henry brought it to my

attention. This past week had a lot of activity. My guess, they were talking about Robbie and the virus.”

“So what we should do is catch him in the act.”

“So to speak, yes.” Joe handed him all the reports. “Review this tonight after your game and let me know if you can come up with a pattern here. I’m going to install a keypad down there like Henry suggested. And just so John doesn’t know we’re on to him, the number we give him will be a different number than everyone else’s. Only he’ll think it’s the same as let’s say security and councils. We’ll tell him it is, he’ll use it, we set it up through the system and bingo, we know when and how much he’s going in there.”

“We can bug that room.”

“Yes we can.” Joe situated himself behind the desk. “But first thing is first. You have to go to that clinic and apologize to him for pulverizing him.”

“What?!”

“Listen to me Frank.” Joe held up his hands. “You tell him you were upset the way he treated Ellen, you were having a bad day. You are sorry for beating him up.”

“I’m not sorry.”

Joe winced. “I know that hard head. But you’ll make it seem that way. I’ll go and lecture him on treating Ellen with respect, get him to apologize to her. We want him to think that the beating you gave had nothing to do with his connection to George. If we are going to bring him down, we are going to do this right.”

“So let him think he’s off the hook and bust him?” Frank saw his father shake his head. “No? We’re not busting him. We’re not killing him or throwing him out?”

“Sure we will, but we’re at war right now Frank. John is on the inside working for the enemy. I say, let him stay. Let him work for the enemy. Give him false information once we confirm he truly is talking to George. Let him give us what we need. Have him work for us, then when we have won. Then we deal with John Matoose.”

“Sort of like a double agent and he doesn’t know it.”

“Exactly. But let me tell you something Frank, you have to know your enemy. You have to get into his house. You have to find out his secrets. And who knows John probably better than anyone. Who’s closest to him.”

“I’d say his wife.”

Joe nodded. “Jenny. Get close to Jenny. Let her let you into their lives and once your in and trusted you have pretty much cart blanc of their house. Right now, if he thinks you’re on to him, he’s not letting you anywhere near him. That’s why we have to go through Jenny.”

“Get close to Jenny?” Frank drastically shook his head. “No way. I’m not getting close to Jenny. I’m not sleeping with her Dad.”

“I wasn’t thinking about you Frank, I was thinking about Ellen.”

“You want Ellen to sleep with Jenny?”

"Christ no." Joe slammed his hand down. "Befriend her . . . and don't laugh. Jenny is a very strong female ally in this community. She keeps the females all together. She coordinates them, has group meetings or something like that. Comes to me with problems they have. If Ellen befriends her, through let's say her need for female companionship, cause let's face it, Ellen has none. She just might pull the right chord in Jenny."

"Ellen will never do it." Frank stated.

"Yes, she would."

"Nope." He disagreed strongly. "I'm telling you. She won't."

"And I'm telling you she will. Talk to her tonight."

"All right." Frank threw his hands up. "Am I done? I want to go see the kids before the game. I still have the field to set up."

"You're done."

Frank stood up. "You still refereeing?"

"Yes. You boys can't play nice without me. And don't forget your clinic stop to John Matoose."

"I won't." Frank moved to the door.

"And Frank." Joe tapped the activity reports. "You forgot these." He waited until Frank picked them up. "And one other thing. Remember what I told you about controlling those fists of yours. You're usually really good about that."

"I know." Frank headed back to the door. "I don't know what came over me. I lost it."

"Even if you feel you have good cause, try not to lose it again on some poor unsuspecting soul. Especially people you have to live with."

"I will." Frank opened the door. "Thanks." He pulled the door closed and wiggled his jaw, speaking out loud. "He didn't say anything about John nailing me. Fuckin Dean."

"I heard that." Joe called from his office.

Frank looked puzzled at the door and lowered his voice to a whisper as he walked away. "He heard that? Man, and I thought the hearing was the first to go when they get that old."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

(1)

"Let's go you're out." Joe tapped Henry on the shoulder as he held the clipboard and pointed backwards to the sidelines of the field.

"No, Joe."

"Henry you've been hit. You took a shot center chest. That's a deadly hit. You're dead. You're out."

"Joe, that's not right."

"Why do you argue with me every game we play?"

"Because Joe, I'm the only one you always send out no matter if they get hit by a corpse or not. Dan shot me. Dan's been dead for ten minutes. So therefore I'm not dead."

"So therefore you're out. Get out Henry or you won't play next game."

"Aw." Henry stomped off the field plopping down next to Dan who was covered with red paint. "I hate you."

Joe stood watching the game. Four men remained and one of them was Frank. He could see Frank darting in and out rolling around acting like such a big kid. Soon he heard the popping gunfire and saw Frank, red paint on his thigh holding Marcus in the air. "We won! I caught him."

Joe lifted his whistled and blew three times loudly. "Games over. Fall in for scores." He moved across the field to Frank. "Good job."

"Sixty fuckin miles an hour and I got him." Frank held out Marcus who looked almost six but was barely one. The pudgy kid with a square head and no hair kicked his legs out and laughed a grunting laugh. "Marcus." Frank spoke to him. "If I put you down will you go with Joe?"

Marcus grunted and nodded his head.

Frank set him down and bent down to Marcus level. "Good job, rest up we'll do it again." Frank held out his hand and quickly retracted it. "What'd I tell you about that biting shit? Take him Dad." Frank stood back up.

Joe reached down for Marcus but stopped. "What is this? Who shot the kid?" Joe indicated to the red paint on his back. "Who killed the trophy?"

From the field, weeds high, Cole held up his hand. "Sorry Joe, I was trying to get Frank."

"Well that takes fifty points off your score. Come on Marcus, let's go let Andrea check you out to see if you can play another round." He held tight to the little boy's hand and brought him over to Andrea who sat reading a book, an umbrella shaded her from the evenings sun. "Check him out Andrea."

Andrea set down her book. "Come here Marcus, let me look at you."

"And why are you here today instead of Dean. Marcus is his study." He watched Andrea examine Marcus.

"Dean's not feeling well. I think it's stress."

“Stress?”

“Joe, you know he has an awful big load to carry on his shoulders with this virus.”

“So do the rest of us Andrea. I’m trying to keep it out so he doesn’t have to deal with it. I’m not stressed. Do I look stressed?”

“Old. You look old Joe.”

“Eh.” Joe waved his hand at her. “Where’s he at now?”

“Home. He and Johnny confirmed it today. Robbie’s men have our new virus. They just injected Rabbits or something like that to get a grip on it. And they said it’s mutated so they don’t know how well the agent they had reaction from will work on it.”

A huffing Frank joined them. “How is he? Is he ready? My men await.”

“He’s fine.” Andrea gave Marcus to him. “Just make sure your men are careful with those paint pellets, seems he has a small welt on his back.”

Frank stopped walking with Marcus. “No shit?”

“Those things hurt Frank.”

“Yeah I know but this kid has special skin. Wait until I tell Dean. That’s something he might want to know. He may be able to use that in our defense against them.”

Joe shook his head at his son. “Yeah sure Frank. When the Army of Marcus’ show up, we’ll paint ball them to death.” He laughed in ridicule at his son as he walked away with Marcus. Then Joe stopped laughing when the scary fact hit him that Frank may just have had a point. If they’ve burned skin samples of Marcus, they froze them, and received no reaction. Then why did something as simple as a paint ball, hurt him?

(2)

“Hands Dean.” Ellen told him.

A muffled ‘sorry’ came from Dean.

“Dean . . . hands.”

“Sorry.”

“Dean.”

“El, Shh.” He slid his lips from her neck to her lips, kissing her. He knelt into her on that couch, but not on her. The force of his kissed pushed her back some.

“Dean.” She giggled. “Why are you being like this?”

“We’re alone.” He kissed her again.

“We’re supposed to start out slow remember?”

“I’m moving slow.”

“Yeah, slow moving your hand off my butt.” She grabbed his hand pulling it away as it slipped under the edging of her shorts. “What happened to companionship first?”

“That’s O.K.” He kissed her neck, then her lips and then her neck

again. "We're companions."

"Dean." She lifted his head from her. "Behave. Why are you being like this?"

"One. We're allowed." Dean kissed her quickly. "Two, it's our alone time." He kissed her again. "And three. El, when I kiss you, you respond. You are really responding."

Ellen shifted her eyes downward. "So are you, Mr. In control."

"Oh." He waved his hand at her. "I can't help it. Shit happens. Who's coming here anyhow?"

There was a knock at the door.

"Henry." Ellen looked at her watch and pointed back.. "He said he'd be here at this time."

"Shit." Dean quickly pulled out his shirt when Ellen got up to answer the door.

"Hi Henry, right on time." Ellen opened the door wider for him.

"Hey El." He kissed her on the cheek. "What's up Dean."

Ellen giggled. "Sorry." She caught herself. "Anyhow, did you get all the red paint out of the shower when you got cleaned up."

"All done. You can come home now."

"Good. Henry, Dean was taking advantage of me. He was kissing and groping me. Tell him to behave. We're just starting this understanding you know." Ellen saw Dean cringe.

"Dean." Henry walked to the couch. "You can't be groping her. You're not allowed to grope her or touch her if I can't do it. That's part of our rules."

"Henry?" Ellen faced him. "Why aren't you allowed to grope me or touch me."

"Cause you just had a baby. Frank said that you shouldn't touch a woman that had a baby for at least three months after the baby is . . . a man." Henry whined. "I can't believe I believed Frank."

"There you have it Henry." Ellen said. "You can take me home." She walked to the couch and kissed Dean. "Night Dean, call me if you need me. Oh Henry, isn't that so neat to say that. Call me if you need me. This is so cool having phones back." She snickered and grabbed hold of Henry's arm.

"Goodnight El." Dean called from the couch.

"El." Henry leaned into her. "He wasn't groping and kissing you the whole two hours was he?"

"Oh no, just the last five minutes or so. Don't worry Henry."

"Good, cause I'd be jealous if he did." Henry waved to Dean and opened the door. "Night Dean." Henry pulled the door closed. "He had a bad day didn't he?"

"A scarey day Henry. It took hours just to get him to talk again. He was so quiet."

"What happens El if he ends up losing his sight? Then what? What's he gonna be like?"

"I don't know Henry. Thinking of that scares me."

"We'll be there for him." Henry slid his hand down to hold hers and they walked.

"Henry." Ellen stopped walking. "You spent the evening with him, how is Frank?"

"Frank. Miserable."

"Was he drinking at all?"

Henry was silent.

"Henry?"

"He had a drink after the game, yes."

"Oh." Ellen lowered her head in silence. "Henry, would you mind if I went over to Frank's before we settled for the night?"

"No not at all. We'll take Joe's jeep, I'll drive you."

"Thanks." They passed their house and moved towards Joe's in the next row.

"Why are you wanting to see Frank?"

"Well, just to check on him, and talk to him about this afternoon. You sure you don't mind?"

"I'm positive El. I want you to be there for Frank. In fact, after Dean gets through his troubled times, I would like for you to . . . to . . . consider Frank as a permanent understanding."

Ellen released his hand. "Where is this coming from?"

"Nowhere." Henry reclaimed her hand and walked closer to Joe's.

"Henry you act like the Dean understanding is a temporary one. Is that how you see it?"

"That's how I'd like it to be."

"Henry." Ellen was shocked. "You've always maintained that it was my choice. Right?"

"Correct." He nodded. "And it still is."

"But you're talking like this. This is the first time you ever showed a preference. Do you prefer me being with Frank over Dean?"

"As a matter of fact El, I do. The way I see it, with Nick, that's how it should be. Me, you and Frank is how it all started out. And it worked well. Please don't get me wrong, I'm not telling you that's how it has to be. Once again, it is ultimately your choice. I'm just saying it's just the way I want it to be."

"I see." Ellen moved to Joe's door. "We'll talk about this later, O.K.?" She kissed him on the cheek. "I'd rather not be with anybody but you."

"I know this. Thank you." Henry smiled. "But . . . it can't be that way. No relationship is that way."

"We'll talk later Henry. Right now I'll run in and tell my father we're stealing his jeep. Be right back out." She knocked once on the door and opened it. Before she stepped in, she looked back at Henry. "Just tell me one thing Henry. Don't you like Dean?"

"El, that's not it. I like Dean. I like Dean a lot."

"Thanks Henry." She smiled and walked into Joe's house.

"Just not as much as I like Frank." He whispered while placing his hands in his pockets and bouncing from heel to toe while waiting for Ellen.

(3)

"You aren't coming in Henry?" Ellen asked as she held the door to Frank's house open.

"No. Call me when you're ready to come home. I started a late dinner." Henry kissed her on the cheek.

"Henry, you can't just leave me here. I'll never get out of here unless you do that, 'let's go El, come on.' to me."

"You'll be fine." He kissed her again. "Call me." He held his hand to his ear and laughed. "That is so great to say again, you are absolutely right."

"Ten minutes Henry." Ellen smiled once more and walked into the house. She saw Josh laying on the couch, tossing a ball up into the air. "Hey Josh."

"Hey El."

"Finding constructive things to do with your spare time?"

"Um yeah. I'm counting see. Ninety-six . . ." Thump. " . . . ninety-seven . . ." Thump. "Ninety-eight."

"I get the point. Where's Dad?"

"Upstairs folding laundry."

"You don't think I'll get stuck into helping if I go up there do you?"

"Nah."

"Good." Taking a breath, Ellen slowly walked up the steps. The upstairs bedroom doors were closed which told her Frank had the kids in bed early. All but his bedroom. The door was open and the light was on. "Frank?"

"El?" Frank said so surprised as he folded a small shirt. "I was gonna come over to see you after I was done."

"You were?"

"Yeah." Frank held up a small green tee shirt. "Check this out. For Brian. Gemma in fabrics made Bri a pair of Cammy's too. Just like Joey. I figured since he was walking, might as well train him young."

"He's one." Ellen sat on the bed.

"Yeah, but he's already exhibiting signs of a true Slagel. Being a daredevil and shit, jumping down the steps."

"Like I said he's one." Ellen grabbed the tee shirt. "It's cute though. Did you pull out the other plastic gun?"

Embarrassed like, Frank tilted his head. "Yeah, but like everything else it went into his mouth. So that has to wait. Now Joey." Frank grinned. "Now that kid is a natural. He looks the part."

"He looks just like you. Exactly like you." Ellen laid down sideways on the bed watching Frank. "So, what were you coming over for?"

"You first." Frank folded the last item, removed the basket from the bed and laid on the bed on his side facing her. "Why are *you* here?"

"To see how you are."

"What do you mean?"

"After today, with your lopsided fight with John." She touched his small red spot on his lip.

"Ow El, war wound."

Ellen laughed at him. She propped her head up with her hand.

"Can you stay a while?"

"No, Henry is making a late dinner."

"One hour you can't stay? Please? I have to talk to you about something."

"It's gonna take an hour? God Frank, you've never taken an hour with me."

"Ouch that hurt." Frank rolled on to his back and reached for the cellular phone on the night stand. "Can I call him and ask?"

"You can ask, he's gonna whine. He's gonna tell you that I was . . ." Ellen paused before letting it slip out that she was with Dean. She remembered Dean did not want Frank to know. "That I was not with him all tonight."

"Was not? Man El." Frank began to dial. "You're picking up Henry accent." He laughed when she smacked him, then he heard Henry answer the phone. Frank covered the receiver and whispered to Ellen. "Watch this, this pisses him off." Frank cleared his throat and removed his hand. "Yes, may I speak to Henry please?" Frank hid his snicker.

"Frank." Henry sounded annoyed on the other line.

"Is this Henry?" Frank asked.

"Yes Frank it's me. You do this all the time."

Still holding a professional tone, Frank continued. "Henry, this is Frank Slagel, I was calling to talk . . ." Frank pulled the phone away from his ear when Henry yelled loudly at him. "Lighten up Henry, I'm kidding. Hey, can El stay here one hour? My idea, I have something I need to talk to her about." He reached out his finger and brushed Ellen's bangs away and smiled at her.

"Frank." Henry stated his name with typical Henry whine. "Come on, I haven't seen her all day. I could have seen her tonight but . . . but . . .but." Henry stopped himself, telling Frank Ellen was with Dean for two hours wouldn't be a good idea. "But I chose not to. Yeah, one hour. No more. And no touching her."

"Henry." Frank spoke with shock. "Would I do that?"

"Yes."

"You're right I would. However, I'll be nice. One hour." He watched Ellen mouth the words 'pick me up'. "El, says pick her up. What ever that means. All right bye." Frank started to hang up the phone but stopped. "Oh Henry? Guess what. El and I . . ." A short Frank snicker. "We're on

my bed right now, horizontal. Bye.” With a beep of the phone, Frank hung up.

“Frank!” Ellen scolded.

“Wait.” Frank stared at the phone. “Any second and . . .” Frank brought the phone to his ear when it rang. “Slagel residence, Frank speaking how may I help you?” He laughed. “Thank you. Bye.” Frank hung up the phone.

“What did he call back for?”

“To tell me I’m an asshole.” Frank reached over and set the phone down. “Now.”

“Now.”

“You and I have to talk. We need to talk.”

“Did I do something?” Ellen asked.

“Nope. But I’d like you too.”

“Frank no. I can’t. No. Besides the fact that I physically can’t make love to you, I . . .”

“Whoa.” Frank covered her mouth. “As much as I would like to be close to you. God knows it’s been forever, that’s not what I want you to do.”

“Uh-oh.”

“Now see. I didn’t even ask.” Frank took on a serious look. “First off let me tell you I’m sorry. I’m sorry for doubting you about John Matoose being in with George.”

Ellen immediately got excited. “You know? You have proof. Yes! Are you gonna beat him up again Frank. You’re gonna kill him aren’t you. No wait, better yet, drop him off somewhere so he’s stuck outside the walls.” She nodded with a huge grin.

“No, John is going to stay in Beginnings.”

“How can that be. That sucks.”

“But, it’s the only way we can get to George. If he’s working for George on the inside, it is a sure fire way to mislead George and eventually find out all we can about him.”

“I guess in a way that’s smart. What do you need me for? To testify against him. Of course I don’t know where I’m going to . . .”

“El.” Frank halted her. “God, how does Henry deal with the rambling. O.K., John isn’t just going to volunteer his George info. He may have a lot. We don’t know. We have to get close to him. I already apologized for beating him up so he doesn’t think I beat him up because he’s in with George. We have to find out what he does, when he does it and everything we can about his twelve hours he doesn’t work. Got that? We know he’s communicating with George. We don’t need to prove it. We need to get information on how he’s bringing us down. How he’s planning it. What he’s doing. Are you listening?” He waited for her to nod. “If we bust him and let him know it, George’s plan of action could change. This way if we find out through John, we can beat George for certain at his own game.”

"Frank you made a rhyme. That's cute."

Frank winced. "Thanks. Anyhow, getting close to John, is part of the plan. That's where you come in."

"Oh this is secret spy stuff. I get to be a spy for you don't I Frank?"

"Yes. You will report anything and everything to me." Frank told her.

"Everything?"

"No matter how minuscule."

"Even if its he doesn't wear underwear?"

"El." Frank closed his eyes. "You know what I mean. Patterns. Hiding places he could have. I'll check that out."

"Oh I love this." Ellen rambled again fast and furiously. "I love playing a spy. Remember when me and Henry were the spies finding that wall. I still remember you called us the misfits of mystery. Boy were you mean. But who was right Frank? Is that why you're asking for my help? Is it?"

"Fuck Ellen, you weren't this bad when you lived with me. Fuckin Henry killed you."

"Huh?"

"Nothing." Frank shook his head. "You were right about the wall. And I'm asking you because both my Dad and me think you're the one who can do it."

"Yes, Joe's in on it. It has to be big."

"El . . ."

Ellen smiled. "I get to follow him around huh?"

"No."

"Harass him again?"

"No." Frank shook his head. "I need you to get close to the man, not cause him to kill you."

"Oh." Ellen brought her fingers to her lips. "Let me think. Close." Her hand lowered and a horrified look came over her face. "Oh my God! You want me to sleep with John to get close to him."

"No!" Frank snapped back.

"Thank God." Ellen let out a breath. "What other way is there to get close."

"Not John, Jenny."

"Oh my God! You want me to sleep with Jenny!"

"El, fuck. No. Not sleep with Jenny, get close to her. Christ I can't believe you'd even say that. Anyhow." Frank changed his demeanor. "We think through Jenny we can inadvertently find out a lot about John. Be Jenny's friend. Her confidant. Can you do that?"

"I think I'm going to be sick."

"So you won't do it."

"Actually . . ." Ellen smiled. "This can be fun. But how? We hate each other."

"My dad thought of that. He said go to her for guidance." He heard Ellen laugh loudly. "El, she's the female ring leader around here. That's

probably why most of the women don't like you. In fact, get close to Jenny. Get close to the other women. Who knows what you'll find out."

"I don't have to type stupid reports do I. Joe gives me enough of those."

"No, but you do have to report to me on a daily basis. We'll review progress and anything you learned. So will you?"

Ellen grinned. "Yeah I'll do it."

"Thanks." Frank leaned to her and kissed her quickly. "Wait a day or two until the John getting beat up thing has calmed own, all right."

"Yes." She held up her hand. "Can I tell Henry? It would be fun to watch him cringe when he sees me and Jenny being friends. But it wouldn't be very nice to do. Can I or am I not allowed?"

"You can tell Henry. He has a rule to play in this too. I'll talk to him tomorrow about it."

"O.K. but let me be the one to tell him about Jenny. Promise."

"You got it." Frank let out a long breath as if the burden of the conversation was over.

"Frank?"

Frank looked at her in the silence.

"Thanks."

"For what?"

"Letting me work with you. I've never worked with you before. I'm glad you letting me be a part of it. And if it means talking like this all the time. I'd like that. I like when we talk Frank."

"I do too El."

"And you know." Her hand reached to his and her finger tips grazed across his rough ones. "You know if you ever need to talk to me, about anything, day or night. I'm here."

"I know this."

"Do you?" She questioned. "Do you know that if you're upset you can knock on my door? If things are hard for you, you can come to me to help you? Do you know this? I'd do anything for you Frank."

"Why . . . Why are you being all serious all of the sudden? You went from Chatty Kathy to Suzy serious. What's up?"

"I'm worried about you."

"Worried about me? El, why?" Frank spoke softly. "I've got my life together. I have my kids. I have a great new son. I have you in my life." He covered her mouth. "Not as much as I'd like, but I'm working on that." He let his hand go. "Don't worry. O.K.?"

"No, it's not O.K.. A couple days ago you said to me that I don't know what it's like to have someone you've known most of your life not want to be with you. Well you Frank, don't know what its like when the person you've known most of your life chooses not to come to you when their down and unload on you."

"I come to you. I come to you about everything."

"No you don't."

"How can you say that?"

"Because Frank. And you might get mad at me for saying this, but, you don't let it out, you drink instead."

"Ellen." Frank covered his face. "Are we talking about my drinking again? I don't have a problem."

"Maybe not."

"I have a few drinks at night, so what?"

"So what?" Ellen's pitch of her voice raised. "Frank are you gonna tell me you haven't been drinking more lately? A lot more lately?" Frank was silent. "You have. I saw it the other night. You were upset. You had to have that drink. Hon, that's not good."

"You're right."

"I'm right?" Ellen was stunned.

"You're right. I do drink more lately. And when I'm upset I have a drink to calm me. That's it. I don't have a problem. But . . ."

"Frank."

"Hear me out. But . . ." He held up his hand. "If you think it could turn into a problem. I'll cut back. How's that? I love having a drink El. But I won't drink as much anymore."

"Not everyday?"

"Is that what you want?"

Ellen thought about it. "You can't drink everyday. You can drink like you used to, a few drinks a week. But not everyday a few times a day. Will you do that for me?"

"Yes." Frank nodded his head at her.

"Why are you being so agreeable about this? I expected more of a fight."

"Because you weren't fighting with me on it." Frank ran his hand down her face. "You came to me calmly and as my friend and I heard you. I heard you." He kissed her quickly. "And if someone that's known you for over twenty years makes a serious suggestion, you have to put stock in it. Ellen I know the difference between Ellen bitching and Ellen concern. And you aren't bitching tonight."

"Thank you Frank." Ellen closed her eyes and smiled. "Thank you for this. You doing this means a lot to me. I was getting worried."

"I know. And just to show you it's not a problem, I will follow your rules. O.K.?"

"Not rules Frank, requests."

"Requests." Frank gave a sneaky grin. "Besides, it's the least I can do. If I can't give up my drinking, how can I expect you to give up your dignity by hanging around Jenny Matoose."

Ellen cringed some. "I would be doing that wouldn't I? But hey! At least I'll look really good when I'm standing next to her." Ellen looked down at her watch. "All right, we have forty-five minutes left. What do you

want to do.”

Frank raised his eyebrows a few times.

“Right.”

“You know, you could help me put your children’s laundry away.”

“I knew I’d get roped into that if I came upstairs.” Ellen slowly lifted herself from the bed and looked at the overflowing basket. “When’s the last time you did laundry Frank?”

“A few days ago. They’re kids El. They get dirty.” He stood up and grabbed the top of the stack. “Help?”

“Yeah I’ll help. You put the kids stuff away, I’ll put yours away.”

“Deal.” Frank lifted the basket to the bed and removed the kids clothing. “Be right back.”

Ellen lifted Frank’s tee shirts. “Are your drawers still the same?”

“Sort of. I kind of spread things out since I have more room.” He walked to her laying his hand on her face. “But I’d gladly give it all up again.” He smiled and stepped back. “Thanks for tonight. I’ll be right back.”

Ellen waited until he left and grabbed his small stack of shirts. She took them to his dresser and opened the drawer she remembered them being in. “Socks.” She moved to the next drawer. “Underwear. Man, Frank, you aren’t kidding you spread out.” Opening the next she saw it was the correct one, but she paused before laying in the shirts. There staring up at her was a half empty bottle of moonshine. Ellen laid the other shirts in there and took the bottle from the drawer. She closed the drawer with her knees all while holding up the bottle and staring at it with concern. Nothing frightened her more about Frank’s drinking then finding that bottle. After shifting her eyes several times from the bedroom door to the moonshine, Ellen left the bedroom. She walked to the bathroom and with out hesitating, dumped the moonshine in the sink, hoping the whole time that Frank’s new promise to her didn’t spin down that drain right along with it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

JULY 7

Robbie was filled with a sense of sadness, perhaps more emptiness as he watched the Beginning's helicopter hover near but not too near the ground to drop off supplies. Robbie stood there while the three healthy remaining men, besides himself, grabbed the two crates. He didn't smile nor did he flinch from the whipping chopper blades. He stood tall watching Frank. His brother hunched down some staring back at Robbie through the open side door of that helicopter. Frank's back pressed tight to the edge of the door to secure himself from falling when the helicopter began to lift.

Robbie watched Frank smile, and give a closed fighting fist to his brother that rang out 'proud'. A look only a big brother could give. It made Robbie's stomach twitch, keeping eye contact with Frank as the chopper raised up. But then Frank did something to him that he didn't expect. How long had it been? Certainly Frank had never done that to Robbie ever. And certainly not since the onset of the plague. But in essence it made a sort of sense to Robbie. Robbie and his men were the warriors battling a war they so desperately wanted to keep far from Beginnings. Did it still mean anything? It was always a form of respect. And to Robbie it meant more at that moment than any words Frank could ever say to him. The firm salute that Frank gave him went right through him. And with a shaking hand, Robbie returned it, keeping the fear from his face as he did. Fear that his last moments with his family would be spent watching them in a distance, if he saw them at all.

The helicopter left, and Robbie breathed deeply turning around to the men unpacking the crates. "Keep the medical supplies separate. Marty is down now and Dean was supposed to leave directions." He mumbled as he moved passed the food and supply crate. "Or something like that."

"Robbie." One of the men called to him. "Is this it. The directions?"

Robbie retracted his steps moving to the man who held out an envelope. A part of him shook when he saw the handwriting across the front. "No. It should be in there though." He took the letter holding it and closing his eyes briefly before walking away with it. Why was it there? It wasn't something he thought would arrive, but it was something he needed.

"Robbie this is for Greg. Can you give it to him?"

"Sure." Robbie took the second envelop chuckling at the badly written word 'Dad' on it. Walking with the envelopes to be alone and far from the others. He stopped at Greg who sat up on a blanket drinking a cup of water. "How's it going Greg?"

"I told you I would beat this, didn't I?" Greg's words were breathy.

"Yep, you did. Glad you're feeling better Greg. This is for you."

Greg smiled as he took the letter from his son. "Thanks Robbie. I see you got one too."

“Yeah.” Robbie grinned. “Ellen.” He tapped the envelope on his lips. “I’m gonna uh, go over there to read it. Maybe she wrote something dirty in here. Keep getting better.” Robbie spoke in a mock order to him and started to walk again.

“I will.” Greg said and then he coughed.

The cough made Robbie stop walking. When did that start? He was so in tune with what was happening to his men. The cough didn’t sound like the typical summer cough people get. It was deep, rumbling and thick, it lasted longer than it should have. Catching himself looking back at Greg who was red from his coughing spell, Robbie gave Greg one more smile and moved more away.

He took a seat on the grass, leaning against what used to be a park bench. But now was turned on its side, completely grown over and now part of the ground itself. He leaned against its firmness opening the envelope. Reaching into his pocket, Robbie grabbed a cigarette and lit it. Taking in a long first hit, Robbie read Ellen’s letter. *‘Robbie, I just wanted to let you know I’m thinking of you. I’m always thinking of you. Please be careful out there and come home to us. I need you. I know right now you’re probably scared. So am I. But know something, no matter what, no matter what you think. You will not be alone. I will not let you be alone out there. I promise you with everything I am. My little mind is already working. Take care of yourself. I will see you soon. I miss you and I love you. Ellen.’*

Robbie lowered the letter then he lowered his head letting her words sink in. Believing her when she said he wouldn’t be alone. Even if that was an impossibility, Robbie believed her, because at that moment it gave him something to believe in. Flicking the ash from his burning cigarette, Robbie brought the letter back up and he read it again.

ROBBIE'S REPORT

Date: JULY 7

Patients Name: GREG HENSON

Date of first symptoms: July 2nd Time of Onset: 12:15 p.m.

Body Temp: 98 Headache: No Swollen Glands: No

Appearance of skin: norm Touch of skin: Norm

Is patient conscious? Yes Is patient alert? Yes

Any discoloring of skin? None Describe: Na

Blistering of skin? No Body cavity bleeding: No

Convulsions: No Nauseousness: No Congestion: None

Vomiting: No Dizziness: No Can patient talk: yes

NOTES:

Dean, What were you thinking. I can't write it all here. See attached.

ROBBIE'S LETTER

July 7

Dean,

Greg and the other first wave two seem as if they are getting better. Is this the remission you mentioned in the last letter. Yesterday they felt better while seven others fell sick. There are four of us who aren't sick. But I watched everyone and it won't be long before the other three go. They are showing signs of fatigue. (You might want to write that down.) The other seven were like that the day before they became fevered. I've been careful. Almost too careful. But I guess that can't happen in a situation like this. these guys are suffering Dean. Is there anything you can do?

Thanks,

Robbie

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

His face was pressed so hard to the thick plastic wall, George's face was deformed and he looked more like a child peering through window. "Where the hell is he? I don't see him?" He looked into the observing room.

"Please." Dr. Colter Stevens pulled George back. "You're smudging." He reached to the table by the window, picked up a spray bottle and damped the area George pressed against, wiping it clean with a rag. "Now we can talk. He'll be out shortly."

"Will he be safe to talk to?"

"Now, yes., seven days ago. No."

"So the new program was a success?"

"Yes." Colter nodded. "Speaking of programs, I'm going to assume, because I have heard, that you did too, about the Seattle lab."

"I know, I know we lost it."

"Our scouting crews didn't find it."

"I know, I know. That arrogant Slagel probably has it." George folded his arms. "No threat. Why are you worried about it. Which cyborg-genic program did they get? Obviously not the new one, you just created it. Seattle was creating old CMEs. You Dr. Stevens are creating the better ones. So what if Beginnings gets their hands on the program. What are they gonna do about it? They only have two micro chips. The best they can do is reprogram the CME they have. That CME will still be an idiot. And though Henry is a smart man, he's not smart enough to rebuild another microchip and recreate the same program. He's not you. Christ I hope not. If Henry does do it, I'll be pissed." George's expression changed. "Is that him? What's he got? A book?"

"Yes, he still reads. He probably was using the restroom. Anyhow. Evan, as he likes to call himself, was a strong willed survivor we picked up in Tucson. Ran with the savages as you call them. We brought Evan in and operated on him tampering with the section of the brain that controls mobility. Hindering the signals so to speak, so his brain couldn't tell his arms and legs to move. Similar with a stroke victim. I have to tell you, Evan was not happy. He had a fit. Fortunately for us, he couldn't move. The only thing he could do was complain loudly and toss his head back and forth."

George began to laugh. "When are you people reinventing video? Now that I would have liked to see."

"Not wanting to ask why, I'll continue." Dr. Stevens went on. "After allowing him to heal for two weeks, we went in yesterday with the new chip and new program. And not only is Evan moving now, but happy as well. Through the program we increased the pounds per pressure his grip delivers."

"Can you do that?" George asked. "Isn't strength contingent on the person?"

"Ever hear the phrase, mind over matter. We have a female we're going to implant next."

"Whoa, wait a second. A female. They are few and far between. You can't waste a female."

"She's far surpassed the fertile years and she is frail and unattractive. We can spare her."

"Oh. All right." George shrugged.

Dr. Stevens opened the observation room door. "This way President Hadly."

"Thank you." George walked in and stood back some from Evan.

"Evan." Dr. Stevens called him forward. "Evan, pick up a demonstration brick and show President Hadly what you can do."

Evan smiled and walked over to a table where a stack of red bricks lay. Some of them broken, all of them dirty. He picked one up clenching it in the palm of his hand. Flashing his broken and missing tooth smile at George, Evan squeezed the brick causing it to shatter, crumble and fall to the floor from his hand like dust.

"Holy shit." George said with enthusiasm. "That's . . . wait a second." He walked over to Evan and reached for his hand. "Give me your hand."

Evan handed it out.

"Dr. Stevens, this man is bleeding." George held onto the hand. "Badly too. What good is the strength if it hurts the CME in the process. Truthful Evan does it hurt?"

"Yes." Evan said but didn't show pain.

George released the hand. "Problem with the program. You can't have an indestructible army if they are as easy to destroy as the average man."

"Biology is working on that." Dr. Stevens explained. "They're coming up with a protein that Evan has agreed to try. What they hope to accomplish with treatment is to get the same skin effect as we get with the accelerated creations."

"I see." George backed up. "Get this man a towel or something." He walked to the door and left the observation room. He stood outside watching for a while feeling pretty good about what he just saw. The experiments are not only working but getting better as time went on. And George was confident, no matter what Beginnings got their hands on, he was one step ahead of them. He knew this for sure. And he knew Beginnings wasn't as bright as they thought they were. Because they had inadvertently helped George to get where he was at that point in his technology. And according to his inside source John, Beginnings had yet to ponder the question on where all the scientists were coming from. An important question they should have been asking.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

(1)

Ellen felt the soft tickle of hair on the back of her neck followed by a light kiss as she stood in the doorway to the skills room at containment. She giggled and turned her head some. "Henry."

"Sorry I'm late."

"That's O.K."

"You look happy."

"I am. I'm working. Joe says I can work until Nick gets home in three days. Have you met Mel." Ellen pointed to the new guy. "He used to be a cable guy."

"That's what I heard. What did you want to see me about?"

"I have to talk to you Henry." Ellen held out her hand and took his. "Come to my office."

"Is this a serious talk El?"

"Very Henry." She led him in her small office. "Sit down."

"Uh-oh." Henry slowly sat in a chair.

"Yeah, I'd say uh-oh too if I were you." Ellen sat on the edge of her desk before Henry. "This is very serious."

"I won't do it again."

"Do what?"

"Whatever it is your mad about."

"Oh Henry I'm not mad at you. And when do you do things wrong. Never." She waved her hand at him. "The only time we argue is when it's over dumb things. And even then we get over it pretty fast. That's what I'm hoping will happen now."

"What's up?" Henry folded his hands and awaited the big news.

"Frank has asked for my expertise spy ability. He needs my help."

"Spy stuff? Aw El, how come you get to do the spy stuff and not me?"

"Because I'm me Henry."

"What kind of spy stuff?" Henry pouted. "I feel so left out."

"Don't feel left out Henry, I'm gonna need your help and support on this. And Frank says you have a role to play in this also."

This stopped Henry from slumping. "Frank needs my help spying too?"

"Oh yeah. And get this Henry, Joe's involved." Ellen winked.

"Joe's involved?"

"Yep."

"Oh it must be big."

"It's huge."

"How big?"

"Real big. I'll tell you." Like a big secret Ellen scooted her bottom a little more off the edge when Henry moved his chair in. "Frank believes

and knows what I said I have believed and known for quite some time.”

“Your kidding?” Henry knew exactly what she was talking about.

“Nope. And, he’s going to bring him down Henry.”

“How come Frank doesn’t just kill him. This is so unlike Frank.”

“True, but what did I tell you? Joe’s in on this. And Joe doesn’t like to kill people on a whim. They have to be pretty violent or my dead husband Pete. Anyhow, they are gonna get to John by using John while he’s using us. Make him work for us when he’s actually trying to work against us.”

“Oh that is so cool El. That is so cool. This is going to be fun.”

“Now the tricky part.”

“What’s that?” Henry asked with a slight bit of apprehension.

“Frank needs me to get close to John to find out all I can about him. Hiding places and such, things that he does, secrets he may have told. Others he may have involved.”

“He wants you to get close to John? Oh my God El! He doesn’t want you to sleep with him does he?”

“As a matter of fact Henry, yes he does.”

“No.” Henry stood up. “No.” He walked to the door. “I have to put my foot down as your husband El. No, you can’t sleep with him.” Henry’s head shook drastically flinging his hair about.

“Henry stop. I’m joking.”

Henry turned and grabbed his chest. “You had me scared. That wasn’t very nice El.”

“I know. Frank needs me to get close to John by getting close to and being friends with, get this, Jenny Matoose.”

First his lips fluttered and then Henry laughed. “Jenny?” He laughed even harder grabbing for the chair. As he sat down so came the serious look. “It’ll never work.”

“Will too.”

“Will not.”

“Will too!”

“Will not.”

“Henry!” Ellen yelled. “It will too!”

“No, El, it won’t. She hates you. You hate her. I hate her, when that happened, I don’t know. She hates me. It’s a big ugly emotional train we have between us in Beginnings.”

“Yeah but Henry, I really think I can pull this off. It may take some work but I think I can do it. You have to help me.”

“She doesn’t have to come over our house or anything like that does she?” Henry asked.

“She might.”

“Aw El.” Henry winced. “All right. But I can’t guarantee I’ll be nice to her.”

“I’m not asking you to. All I’m asking you to do is if she asks you about it, tell her yes I’m sincere. Easy enough?”

Henry bobbed in thought in his chair. "I guess. What is my part?"

"I don't know."

"I hope my part in all this is more than being supportive. That would just suck if I didn't get to play the spy. After all, you and I were Beginnings' first detectives."

"And Frank knows this." Ellen slid from the desk. "That's why he asked me, because we did so well with the wall."

"We got in trouble over that wall."

"Eh." Ellen threw her hand. "And we'll probably get in trouble over this as well. One thing though. I have to work for Frank. How is Frank to work for?"

"Mean." Henry told. "Yells all the time."

"Drill Sargent Mode?"

"Yep."

"Barking orders like you're his grunt?"

"Yep."

"If he thinks he'll treat me like that, he has another thing coming." Ellen sat down on Henry's lap. "When do you have to go back to work?"

"Now. Wanna walk and see the baby with me first?"

"I can't. I have to meet Frank here in a little bit. He says he's coming over for something important. You can go see Nick though."

"I will. But first . . ." Henry slid his hand up the side of her face letting her hair drape over his fingers. "Can I kiss you?"

"Of course Henry, you *are* my husband."

Henry brought his head up as Ellen lowered hers, he stopped. "El?"

"Hmm?" She brushed her lips against his.

"Never mind." He shrugged.

"What?" Ellen pulled back.

"Well . . . I was wondering. Don't get mad at me. But . . . what was it like for you kissing Dean again?"

"Nothing compared to kissing you."

"Good answer." Smiling the same smile as Ellen, Henry began to kiss her.

(2)

Frank's mood certainly wasn't up after seeing his brother Robbie. So bad he wanted to step off that helicopter and stand with him, yet he knew he couldn't do that. He dropped off the box that Robbie sent at the mobile, leaving it with Johnny and he returned his bike to the garage then trudged into town speaking really to no one. Frank wasn't really in the mood to talk, let alone face who he was going into to town to face. John Matoose.

Grateful that he didn't have to chase him down, his timing was perfect as he spotted John stepping from the clinic the moment he rounded the

bend. Silently Frank approached him.

It was awkward as expected it would be. Tension surrounded them both and ahead of time they knew not too many words would be spoken. It would be awhile before Frank would feel comfortable pretending to be John's friend again, and if he tried too soon, John wasn't that stupid, he would know Frank was doing just that, pretending.

"John." Frank raised his head in a hello gesture.

"Frank."

"Ready?"

"I'm behind you."

Leading the way, and dreading what he led John into, Frank brought him to containment. They went through the small office past Dan--they didn't say much to him--and into the hallway. Passing Ellen's office Frank saw her door was closed. Knowing that never meant anything, he decided to try there first instead of looking in the skills room first and having to be exposed to the survivors who lingered there. Telling John to wait, he knocked once and opened the door stepping in. "All right. I'm gonna try this again." He backed up and knocked again, opening the door a second time. "Still the same."

Ellen sat on Henry's lap and looked up to him. "What are we doing wrong Frank?"

"Try to be a little discreet." Frank took hold of Ellen's arm and led her from Henry's lap. "You have company."

"Hey." Ellen smacked his hand off of her. "It's you. Henry, tell him."

"Frank."

Frank rolled his eyes then positioned Ellen to stand at her desk. He lowered his voice to her. "Try to control yourself right now." He took a step back, opened the door wider. Frank lowered his head, running his hand down his goatee and staring at Ellen through the tops of his eyes when John walked in. He watched her try to be serious but he saw that top lip of hers twitch. "El. John has something to say to you."

"Ellen." John stepped before her with folded hands "First I want you to know that this is sincere." His head tilted back to Henry who sat in a chair, and who had just made a fluttering noise. His views returned to Ellen. "Ellen, the other day when we had our confrontation, I did something . . ." He looked back at Henry again.

Henry stood up. "Excuse me." He walked around John and kissed Ellen on the cheek. "I have to go. Bye." He hurried from the room so fast Frank didn't have time to stop him. He didn't however, hurry from containment fast enough so as his laughter could not be heard.

Seeming a little despondent, John continued on. "Anyhow, some things were said, and some things were done. And I was wrong. I'm sorry."

Ellen was quiet, shifting her eyes from John who awaited something from her, to Frank who shook his head at her. "Oh." Ellen let out a breath. "O.K. Thanks."

"Then we can put this behind us?" John extended out his hand.

Ellen waited for the 'O.K.' nod from Frank and she shook his hand. "Behind." She raised her eyebrows.

"All right." John stepped back. "Thanks. Bye Ellen." He walked to the door. "Frank."

"John." Frank held the door opened for him, the whole while biting his lip in disgust. When John was through, he closed it and turned to Ellen. "Quiet."

"But Frank I have to . . ."

"Quiet." He walked up to her and placed one hand behind her head and the other over her mouth whispering to her. "He could be waiting in the hall." Frank felt the slight shaking of her body. "Quit it."

Ellen tried not to laugh.

Frank held her like that until he heard the buzz of the containment door. "Now you can laugh." He took off his hand from her and saw the perplexed look on her face. "What's wrong?"

"It's gone. The laughing moment is gone. Thanks Frank." She folded her arms and leaned against her desk.

"Sorry." He pulled her to him and kissed her on the forehead. "Good job."

"See Frank see. I can act real good. Wait until I get a hold of Jenny today."

"Today?"

"Yep."

"You don't think it's too soon."

"Now I've thought about this. When will it ever be the right time for Jenny's mortal enemy to want to be friends. Never. So I might as well start this thing right?"

"I guess you're right." Frank said. "And I should be going."

"Did you see Robbie. How was he. How did he look?"

"Sacred." Frank raised his eyebrows. "He tried to hide it. But I know my brother."

"Thanks for taking my note to him."

"No problem." He took a step back running his hand down her arm. "I'll see you."

"Bye." Ellen felt his hand brush against hers and she grabbed it. "Thanks for letting me help you."

"No problem . . . Oh." He took a step to her, pointing at her with the hand that held hers. "In case I don't see you later, you can fill me in about Jenny when I see you tonight."

"Tonight?" Ellen asked. "What's going on tonight?"

"I'm coming over. We're all having a late dinner together when you get back from being with the kids at Dean's. Henry asked me this morning. Didn't he tell you."

"He must have forgot. I guess I'll see you then." She started to let go of

his hand when he began to leave, but Ellen gripped it again tugging him back. "Frank. I need to ask you something."

"Sure."

"I need you to be honest with me and I won't get mad at you or Henry over it. But . . . have you been forcing Henry to try to talk me into having an understanding with you?"

"Forcing Henry?" Frank asked. "What do you mean by forcing Henry?"

"Well, using that Frank power of persuasion, you know, guilt to get him to get me to do it."

"El." He released her hand and stepped to her. "I make no attempts to hide the fact that I want you back in my life. I tell it to you and to anyone who asks. I know you're leery about it. I do. You and I worked way too hard to get back to this point where we are now, to screw it up. And I did tell Henry I want him to have an understanding with me. He said it's your choice. The last thing I said to him about it was a week ago when I asked him to stand in my corner. I swear to you that's exactly what I asked him and the last thing I said to him about it."

"All right." Ellen nodded.

"Why, what's up?"

"It's just that . . . Henry always said it's my choice and he never tried to persuade me otherwise even when I had the understanding with Robbie, and Henry hates Robbie. But the other night he said he wants me with you. Henry's never done that, and he said it again last night. Not demanding mind you, but he spoke his mind. And he asked you over tonight too. It's so unlike Henry to try to influence me, that's all. And I just thought maybe you were saying things to him."

"Nope." Frank stepped back and threw his hands up. "But you know what El? I'm really sorry that his asking you makes you feel so bad. I didn't think being with me was such a bad thing that it upset you to be asked. And obviously, it does. I won't come over tonight. I'm sorry I even said anything to Henry."

"Frank." Ellen reached out to him pulling his hesitating body back by the waist of his pants. "That's not it. Please that is not it." Frank didn't turn around. "Come on Frank, let's not fight about this."

Dropping his shoulders Frank faced her. "How am I suppose to feel El?"

"Just know it's not you. It's not getting back with you. There's just a lot of things going on right now, a lot. And my mind has to stay focused elsewhere. A big part of me is needed elsewhere right now."

"It's not me?"

"No, it's not you. Though I have to say, the thought of having an understanding with you scares the hell out of me."

Frank looked puzzled. "Why? You think I can't do it. You think it'll be trouble don't you?"

"No."

"Henry and I could actually work it out so that . . ." He stopped when he saw her shake her head again. "Then what scares you?"

"Let's not talk about it." Ellen let out a shivering breath. "Go back to work. I'll see you at dinner tonight." She gave a slight smile to him.

"El, why don't you want to . . ." Frank grinned. "Never mind I'll drop it."

"You'll drop it? Just like that."

"Yep, I am the understanding guy. Get it? Understanding." Frank walked to the door.

"Bye Frank." Ellen laid her hand on his back leading him out.

"Make sure you sound sincere when you talk to Jenny."

"I will." She followed him into the hall. "Oh Frank?"

"Yeah?" He turned in a spin walking backwards.

"Same thing as last night. Remember . . ."

"I know." He held up his hand. "No drinking. Got it. I'm good." He winked and moved to the door, buzzing himself through and leaving.

Ellen looked at the closed door with a glance of pride and ease toward Frank. Standing there for a moment, she then gathered her thoughts back to containment again, headed into her office to do the one stupid report Joe needed and then she would leave for the clinic to see Nick.

(3)

The three of them stood in Andrea's small office at the clinic. Joe behind Andrea's desk, Andrea in a chair next to him, and Dean standing before them like an attorney pleading his case.

So upset Dean looked holding onto a letter he had just received from Robbie. His usually messy hair even more messy from running his fingers through it so many times. He argued. One hand on hip, holding back his lab coat. "Joe listen to me."

"Dean. I've listened. What do you want me to do? They can't come in. If I put it to a community vote, you know how it will get out. Rumors are flying about anyhow. I didn't want general population to know our men were sick, but somehow a lot of people do. Tell him Andrea what you've been hearing."

Andrea crossed her legs as she went into the explanation. "Dean, people are worried. They're worried we're gonna let this in. I have assured them, as a council member, we are not."

"Fine." Dean slammed the letter onto the desk. "Read your son's words. Your son Joe. He needs help. I don't see why we can't try to accommodate them."

"Listen to you for Christ's sake." Joe shoved the letter back. "Try to accommodate them? What, do they have a cold or something? No. They

have a highly deadly virus, that you Dean, have confirmed as the same on that wipes us out in the future. Accommodate them.” Joe shook his head. “There is nothing more that I would want than to have my son in here with me. I can’t. You know that. Robbie knows that.”

“Then let me go out there Joe.”

“No.” Joe shook his head.

“I’ll go.”

“You won’t get back in.” Joe stated strongly. “You won’t until you know the danger has passed.

“I’m immune. Ellen is immune. Henry, Frank and Johnny are too. Let two of us go out there. Me and Ellen. Let us try to give them medical attention.”

“What are you nuts?” Joe’s face turned a shade of red. “First as a leader of this community I say no. Second, you think as a father I am going to *not* fight you tooth and nail about wanting to take my daughter with you. I have one kid out there, another one will not go.”

“Joe.” Dean took a second to calm himself down. “We are immune. Maybe you aren’t grasping what I mean by that. That means we can’t catch it. I have confirmed that we can’t carry it. What residue of it that remains on our clothes will be dead and non-viable in twelve hours. Whoever would go out there with me, and I prefer that be Ellen because she knows this better than anyone. We stay in isolation for a day. We will not be a threat. Don’t you understand that?”

“Don’t talk down to me Dean like I’m an idiot.” Joe scolded.

“And don’t treat what I’m saying to you as if I am guessing. This is fact Joe. I know what I do. This is what I do. I will give you the fact that bringing them in here can be of a risk. A minimum risk. But sending me out there will not be. I know this. I will stake my life on it.”

“I can’t allow it Dean. I can’t take a chance of any contact whatsoever. Please understand that. Please see my point. We don’t know if they are the start of it all in the future we were warned about. We don’t.”

“You’re scared.” Dean stared coldly at Joe.

“Hell yeah I’m scared. I have a hundred and twenty-six people in here. Twenty-nine are children. Twenty-nine. That’s one quarter of our population Dean. I can’t take a chance no matter how small. We knew this going in. We have to prevent that future from happening and we will. And I realize you have run your tests on the samples Robbie sent.”

“I have to get out there Joe.”

“Tell me why.” Joe asked. “Tell me what you can do out there that Robbie isn’t doing now. What will it do?”

Her voice was not one they expected to enter into the conversation. Ellen. “It will show them we haven’t forgotten about them Joe.” Ellen entered Andrea’s office. “It’ll show them we care. I care. I worry about Robbie. If he sees Dean, and maybe me, he’ll see we haven’t left them out in the cold and that is so important.”

Dean swung his head around to her with a closed mouth and a 'thank you' nod. He reached out his hand and pulled her in, whispering to her. "Where did you come from."

"I heard you in the hall." She faced Joe. "Joe, listen. If you send Dean and I out there. Or even Johnny and Dean. We won't be a threat to anyone when we come back in. We won't carry it and to ensure it, put us in isolation for a day or so."

"Ellen." Joe stood up. "I listened to this argument from Dean. I understand all that. I do."

"Then understand this." Ellen walked to him. "I heard you say we have a hundred and twenty-six lives in here. How many of them Joe, are your family. You don't want to see them at risk? I know what your argument is for keeping Robbie and them away, and any of us far away from them. But here's some food for thought for you. If Robbie and his men aren't the ones who brought this into our home in that future, then it's still coming." Ellen softened her voice speaking in a hypnotizing passion, her fist clenched tight to her chest as she nearly stood toe to toe with Joe. "And we aren't ready for it. Let Dean and I go out there and just check them, see it face to face, to see what we're really up against. And by letting us do that and give them some of the prototypes we have, that is another way you can protect the people of this community. Joe, we are making progress, but if we were put up against the real thing right now, all the practice in the lab may just mean shit. Like Robbie and his men and Beginnings are at war with George and whatever he has running around out there. Dean and I are at war with this virus. Take us out of the simulator Joe. Let us go up against it and see what we really can do. We want to be ready. We need to be ready when and if it comes."

Joe stared at his daughter's face, so close, and her eyes that never left his. He took a breath through his nostrils and shifted his eyes to Dean. "You said twelve hours and anything you have left on your clothes will be non-viable?"

Dean closed his eyes. "Yes."

"What about those biohazard suits? How much of risk will you be if you wore those in there?" Joe asked.

"Joe." Andrea stood up. "You aren't . . ."

Joe held out his hand. "If I fly you two in there, wearing those suits. How much of a risk am I looking at?"

Dean shook his head. "Even less."

"All right." Joe looked at his watch letting out a breath. "Johnny, since he is immune, will fly you in there. Wearing those suits. Johnny will not leave the helicopter. Then we park the bird for twelve hours. You three disinfect and stay at the mobile for twelve hours. Can you do that?"

Dean clenched his fist with a smile. "Yes Joe we can. Thank you."

Andrea was still at a loss. "Joe, you're giving them permission to go out there?"

"Yes." Joe turned and faced her. "And no one is going to know about this. The only ones outside of this room who will know are Frank, Johnny and . . . Henry of course, he's gonna wanna know why his wife is being detained for twelve hours." He refaced Dean. "Can you have your prototype or whatever, ready by tomorrow morning?"

"Yes." Dean said. "What time tomorrow?"

"Let's say about eight or nine in the morning." Joe saw Andrea's mouth open. "Quiet Andrea, you and I will talk. Dean, if I send you out then, figure an hour the whole trip, I can have you three back in town and out of that mobile by ten, eleven at night at the latest. Sound good?"

"Sounds great." Dean held out his hand to Joe. "Thanks Joe."

Joe shook it. "Don't thank me. Thank her." He looked at Ellen laying his hand on her face. "You, Like Frank, really have your moments."

Ellen smiled at him. "Thanks Joe."

Joe kissed her on the cheek then gave a pat to her face. "To bad like Frank, they're few and far between. Let's go Andrea." Joe took hold of her arm. "It's time for that talk."

"Oh you better talk Joe Slagel. Diminishing *my* authority as a council woman." Andrea bitched at him as they left the office. Her voice faded as they moved down the hall. "Making me out to be the bad guy and you the good guy. Look at you right now, Dean and Ellen thinking you're all that."

Dean laughed and faced Ellen as soon as he couldn't hear Andrea anymore. "What can I say?"

"Well Dr. Hayes." Ellen took his arm and led him from the office. "You can say you'll do my share of preparations for this trip tomorrow."

"I can, can I?" Dean gave her a grateful look and stopped walking. "I can. I will. Thank you. He wasn't hearing me."

"I have news for you Dean. Joe has never heard you." Ellen snickered. "I have to go see Nick. I guess I won't be seeing you later than?"

"Oh you will. I'm heading to the lab right now. I can get it ready. I'll have Johnny help me, he's there." Dean started walking backwards. "I'll see you at the house tonight as planned." He hurried back to her, and kissed her on the cheek. "Thanks again for your help." Spinning around to walk forward, Dean stopped cold.

Ellen noticed. "What's wrong?" She moved to him.

"Nothing I'll be all right." He held up his hand.

Ellen rested her cheek against his shoulder, she could feel the vibration of his fast beating heart. "It'll come back. Take a breath."

"It already is."

"Maybe I will come up there with you. How's that? Keep you company and out of trouble with Johnny. Just for a couple hours till it's time to get the kids."

"Maybe that wouldn't be a bad idea. Are you sure you're feeling up to it?"

"Who me?" Ellen scoffed. "Please. Let me take care of what I have to

do and I'll see you there." She laid her lips on his cheek. "You all right?"

"I'm fine." His hand reached up to her face and he turned only his eyes to her. "I'm fine."

Ellen stepped back from him watching him move a little slower in his stride down the hall, she knew he was really fine was his pace picked back up. Wondering if it was a good idea to let Dean drive there by himself, Ellen concluded that he pretty much had to drive through an open field. So she put that thought from her mind and went off to see Nick.

(4)

"Frank are you there?" Henry asked through the radio as he positioned himself in front of the newly installed keypad down at the communications room door.

"I'm here." Frank responded.

"All right, I'm going to test this. Let me know what you see?"

"I won't see anything Henry I'm not at monitoring yet."

"I just asked if you were there."

"Yeah, but I thought you were asking if I was here. You know, on the radio, And I am. I'm here, but I'm not there."

"When you will be there Frank?" Henry stood with little patience wanting to get it over with.

"Just about . . ." The sound of a squeaking door came through the airwaves. "Hey Mark. I'm here now Henry."

"God Frank." Henry shook his head. "Let me know what you get."

"O.K. Let me steal one of these monitors. Move Curt." Frank positioned himself in front of the computer monitor. "Now what will I be seeing?"

"You should be seeing . . . wait, ask Mark if he reprogrammed this division on his end."

"Mark." Frank looked over to him. "Henry asked if you reprogrammed it on this end."

"Tell Henry to quit being so anal. Yeah I reprogrammed it shit, he asked me ten times already."

Frank snickered. "Henry, even Mark thinks you're gay. Anyhow, yeah he reprogrammed it. What am I looking for?"

"O.K. I put new codes in. Normally it would come up, communications room enter. It should now add user definition. Ready."

"Fire away."

"O.K. what's the first number?" Henry paused to think.

"Four, three, seven, six, five . . ."

"Frank."

"Nine, two, five . . ."

"Frank knock it off. All right I have it. Eight, six, seven, five."

"Three, oh, Ni-e-eye-een." Frank sang loudly. "I got it. I got your number on the . . ."

"Frank."

"Sorry, I can't believe I remembered that song and it isn't even in the jukebox collection. Wait, got it. Enter by user eight. Is that what you wanted to hear."

"That's it Frank. Thanks, it works."

"That's it? You made me come all the way here and that's it? Fuck Henry. Henry? Henry?" Hearing the dead air silence Frank pulled his headset off and tapped his hand on the counter watching the monitor. He watched as it flashed, 'distribution center open'. A few seconds later, 'mobile lab opened'. "Man." Frank stood up. "Is this what you people do all day? Sit here and watch everyone go in and out of buildings around here. This has got to be the easiest fuckin job in Beginnings." He walked to the door. "Denny and Josh are getting trained for this one and you guys are going full time back out on a beat." Frank pointed. "At least until winter when they need you at the green house."

"Oh Frank." Mark called to him before he walked out. "Keep in mind before you put Denny and Josh up here. We're the ones who shut down the perimeters for you when you need to go through them. Do you really want to leave that responsibility in the hands of those two?"

Frank's eyes widened. "You're right. Forget I said anything. They'd fry me. All right, I'm out of here."

Waiting until he knew when was gone, Curt swivelled his chair to Mark. "Good thinking about that Denny and Josh point."

"Yeah it was. Too important of a job to let two teenagers have anyhow. Besides, it's not all that easy. We work."

"We work."

Mark rocked back and forth in his chair. "Cards?"

"Sure why not." Curt stood up and walked across the room to get one of their many decks.

(5)

How perfect! Ellen thought. *Such perfect timing!* Jenny Matoose on her lunch break from teaching the kids at the school. Of course the thought of Forrest Caceres teaching them at the moment made Ellen shudder. But there Jenny was, sitting in the make-shift park area Joe had built around that flagpole center town. Sitting there eating a sandwich perched upon her lap. From behind Ellen moved to her, taking long, quiet sneaky steps. Faster and faster she paced, the theme song from the movie Jaws playing in her mind the closer she got. "Jenny!" Ellen said her same so loud Jenny's lunch nearly toppled from her lap.

"I'm leaving." Jenny started to get up.

"No don't. I have to talk to you." Ellen sat on that wall next to Jenny.

"You aren't going to hit on me are you?"

"Do you want me to?"

"I'm leaving."

"Jenny." Ellen grabbed hold of her arm and pulled her back down. When Jenny sat, Ellen sneakily wiped her hands on the side of her own shorts. "I want to talk to you about something."

"So you said. It's not about my husband is it?"

"Sort of. But not bad."

"What is it?"

"I need your help with something."

Jenny started to laugh. "What are you up to? You never want my help."

"This is a very serious request Jenny." Ellen cleared her throat. "I was thinking about something. Something that I think caused the confrontation between me and John."

"You tortured the man for months that's why."

"Maybe so." Ellen waved her hand. "But it just dawned on me while I was talking to Dean. I said something to him and he snapped at me. Snapped at me mind you. And it hit me, that maybe I'm the blame. Maybe it is me who makes people lose control."

"It is Ellen. You're annoying."

"So are you and you don't get people mad. Well, except me. Why is that?"

Jenny puckered a sour look on her wide face. "I'm nice, you're not."

"I'm nice."

"No you aren't."

"I am too, ask anyone."

"They'll say you aren't nice." Jenny stated and took a bite of her sandwich.

Ellen watched her chew, bits of red strawberry jam seeped from the corner of Jenny's mouth. Ellen gagged a bit, visually showing her disgust as she watched Jenny eat, and wondering if Jenny couldn't have gone without that high calorie sandwich. And just about the point where Ellen was going to say that, she stopped herself. "So I'm not nice. Am I the only woman who isn't?"

"Yes."

"Jenny, you're like the goddess around here."

"Oh now I know you're up to something."

"I am not." Ellen said with such a fake offense. "See, it's Joe's idea. My father said you sort of know how things are around here, that's why you're life is least complicated. He suggested I talk to you."

"And you're taking his advice?" Jenny asked.

"Yeah. So will you help me be less annoying. Will you help me be more . . ." Ellen swallowed. "Like you." She quickly turned her head pretending to sneeze when actually it was a slight release of the snicker that crept out.

"Right Ellen." Jenny wrapped the remainder of her sandwich. "I don't know what you're up to, but I'm not going to be part of a Ellen and Henry joke. Bye." She stood up.

"Jenny, you have jam on your mouth." Ellen held her hand out. "I'm very serious!" She yelled but Jenny ignored her and kept on walking. "Oh well." Ellen shrugged and stood up. "I'll try again tomorrow." Getting ready to walk away, Ellen noticed something wrapped and laying on that wall. Seeing what part of Jenny's lunch she forgot, Ellen unwrapped it. It was an uneaten piece of chocolate cake, and it looked like a Josephine cake too. Ellen stuck her finger in the icing, shifted her eyes around, tasted it and smiled. Re-wrapping the cake Ellen took it with her to Frank's office.

(6)

"Now John." Joe stood in an explaining manner in Frank's office talking to Frank and John Matoose. And so unlike Joe, he wasn't behind Frank's desk. He was leaning against the front, but not sitting behind it. "The way things are gonna go now is . . ."

"Frank!" Ellen burst the door open and flew in. "Guess what I just . . . just . . ." She slid to a stop, closing the door when she saw John Matoose. "Just didn't do? Knock!" She smiled and shifted her eyes about. "So what's going on?"

Joe rolled his eyes. "We're having a meeting, leave."

"But I have to talk to Frank."

"Talk to him later." Joe ordered "Leave."

"But I can't leave. I walked all the way up here and I need a ride to the mobile lab. Can I have a jeep?"

"No. Frank will drive you, wait outside."

"It's hot out there. Can't I stay?" She asked.

"No." Joe told her. "You'll interrupt."

"No I won't. I promise." She held up her free hand, the other still held tight to that wrapped cake.

"All right. But grab a chair and pull it to the corner. I don't want to hear a word Ellen."

"Not a peep." Ellen slid the chair, hunching as it screeched when she moved it to the corner. Like a scolded child she sat in the chair. And set her wrapped cake on her lap.

Joe waited until he saw she was situated. "As I was saying John. We've had some situations in communications and we need to make a few changes. We added a numeric keypad to the door to open it. There will be two codes. A general population code and a security and council code."

"Can I ask why?" John questioned. "What's been happening down there?"

"Well for example." Joe prepared himself to lie. "We busted Lloyd

down there with his partner, you know, kind of in a heated moment.” Joe drew up an utter look of aggravation when he heard Ellen tsk. “Ellen.”

“Sorry Joe. Just listening.” She un-wrapped her cake. “He’s gay you know.”

“I don’t give a shit. And don’t listen, just stay quiet.” Joe returned to John. “Back to what I was saying. I wrote down both codes for you.” He handed John a sheet of paper. “Don’t give the security code out to anyone in General population. Got that?”

“Got it.” John looked down at the two numbers listed there.

Watching John observe the numbers, Joe’s mind quickly went to Henry and how he programmed in four codes. One for security and council, and one for population. And the two left over went to John, bases covered incase he decided he would use a general population code. But from that moment on, it didn’t matter what code John used, the ones he held in his hands no one else knew. Joe turned to explain some more to him, despite seeing his son creep over to Ellen.

Frank couldn’t be more obvious as he made his way to Ellen. He whispered. “What do you have?”

“Cake.” Ellen licked her finger. “Good too.”

“Where’d you get the cake?”

Ellen looked at John who talked to Joe. “Jenny left it behind and I took it. It’s a Josephine cake.”

“It looks good. Let me have some.”

“No.”

“Come on El, Please. One bite.”

“All right. But a small one.” She picked up the cake and held it out for him to bite. “Don’t take a huge . . . Frank!” She yelled. “God, you ate half my cake with your one big bite. Now look at you. You have to be a pig and now you have chocolate on your face. And no towels.”

“Really.” Frank leaned down, gripped the back of her head, pulled her face close to his and in a kiss he smeared what chocolate he had on him, onto Ellen. “Thanks El.” He stepped back. “That was good.” Giving a thumbs up to her, he bumped into his father. “Dad.”

“Are you two done?” Joe asked.

Frank looked at the empty office. “Where’s John?”

“He left.” Joe said and walked to Ellen. “Give me that.”

“Joe my . . .” Ellen’s hands followed as Joe took her cake. “Joe.” She whined.

“Too bad.” He sat down behind Frank’s desk and smiled at the cake. “That’s what you get for bursting in here, and being annoying while I was trying to talk to John.”

Ellen pouted as she stood up. “I’ll have you know I had to sit next to Jenny for that cake.” She moved to the door, wiping the chocolate off her face. “Frank, will you drive me to the lab?”

“Sure El.” Following Ellen to the door, Frank stopped and bent down

to the last drawer of the second filing cabinet. He pulled out an old tee shirt and tossed it to her. "Here, for your mouth."

"Thanks." Ellen took it and wiped. "I can't believe I'm wiping cake off my face that I didn't even get to eat. Feel bad Joe?" She asked as she opened the door.

"Nope." Joe shook his head.

"I didn't think so." Ellen stood in the doorway waiting for Frank's leading hand to touch her back and she walked out with him.

Joe looked down at that chocolate cake after Ellen had left. He debated if he should feel guilty at that moment. He could have felt guilty if that cake didn't look so good, but it did. So foregoing the guilt like a cheating dieter, Joe indulged in Ellen's cake, enjoying every bite of it that Frank left behind.

(7)

Ellen immediately turned off the water in the kitchen sink at Dean's house. So quickly she did when she thought she heard the call of her name. Hearing the last of the dripping water, Ellen heard silence, no calling for her, only silence. She turned the faucet back on and continued in doing the dishes, a task she set aside. All because she hated doing dishes. But it was either that or bathing the kids and that task bothered her more. Why Dean insisted on never using that dishwasher was beyond her. Under Beginnings' conservation water rules, there were enough occupants in the house to run that dishwasher once a day. But Dean, like most people in Beginnings, he found them more of a bother than a help. Not Ellen and Henry, they found it a great place to hide the dirty dishes when there wasn't time to do them by hand.

"Ellen!"

She stopped clanking dishes when she thought she heard Dean's call.

"Ellen!"

She turned off the water grabbing the towel and drying her hands as she walked to the steps. "Dean are you calling me?"

"Please . . . please come here."

She could hear it in his voice, desperation. What had happened. Hurrying up the steps and walking over Billy and Joey who argued in the hall, she walked to the bathroom where she knew Dean was. She could hear Brian's whimpering cry when she got there. "Dean?" Stepping inside she saw Dean sitting on the floor by the partially filled tub. His hands clenched tightly to Brian who fought him. Dean just stared out. "What's wrong?"

"I'm afraid to let him go. I can't see him."

"It's all right Dean." Ellen grabbed the towel and moved to the tub. "Let him go." She looked at Dean's hands that held onto to the baby for life. "Dean." She knelt by him. "Relax. It's not going to come back if your pressure is up. Relax." Her hands touched upon his helping him to release

the baby. She wrapped Brian in a towel and picked him up releasing the water in the tub. Her voice changed to that 'parent talking to a baby' tone. "What did he do Bri? Huh? Was he making you take a bath longer than you wanted to?" Ellen turned her views to Dean who had brought his knees up close to his chest as he sat on the bathroom floor. "I'll get him dressed."

"I'm sorry El." Dean covered his face with his hand.

"Why are you apologizing?" She stopped in the bathroom doorway.

"I couldn't handle the situation. I got scared."

"Seeing, then not seeing is something frightening Dean. It's all right."

"No, it's not. How can I take care of these kids El?" He lifted his head up to her. "How much longer am I going to be able to take care of them?"

"You'll adjust Dean. It'll take time."

"Adjust?" Dean stood slowly up. "What would have happened Ellen if Brian would have fallen backwards. What if he got hurt? How would I have been able to help him if I couldn't see him?"

"Close your eyes Dean. Close them."

"Why?"

"Just close them." She waited until he did. "Now reach out your hand and find Brain." She moved quietly over.

Dean reached out to where he thought they were. His hand hit emptiness. "El?"

"Find him."

Using her voice as a guide, Dean shifted his body and his hand reached out touching upon the bare skin of the baby half wrapped in a blanket.

"Where is your hand on him Dean?"

Dean's fingers spread. "His shoulder."

"Keep your eyes closed and place your hand on his head."

"This is stupid El."

"Do it." She stayed calm.

Dean's hand moved up to the wetness of the baby's hair. "Hand on head. Point?"

"Seems to me Dr. Hayes, eyes opened or closed you had no problem finding him."

Dean opened his eyes. "I'm sorry I panicked. This was actually the first time my sight left me when I was doing something I couldn't sit back and wait for my sight to return. Doing that, would have left Brian unattended."

"You're thinking wrong there Dean. You were with Brian, how would that have been leaving him unattended?"

Dean stuttered some in his answer. "You're right."

"You're a very good father Dean. If need be, your instincts will kick in." Ellen leaned forward and kissed Dean on the cheek. "We'll get through this. Whatever ends up happening. We'll get through." Ellen stepped back. "But for now, we have more preparations. Let's get these kids to bed so we can work a little on my lessons before I have to head home."

"Sounds good. Still want me to do bed detail and you do dishes?"

"Most definitely. I hate doing the bedtime thing. And we've been standing here talking in this bathroom long enough. You'd better hurry and take this little guy before he . . ." Ellen closed one eye and let out a soft throaty whine. "Too late." She handed him to Dean. "He just peed on me."

"El . . ." Dean cringed when the even wetter baby was placed into his chest and she walked away. He followed her. "What are you doing?"

"Stealing a shirt." She went into his bedroom and opened a drawer.

"Not that one El. I like that one I'll . . ." He watched her lift off the wet shirt she wore. "Never get that back."

"Sure you will Dean." Ellen put on the fresh shirt. "And stop staring at me, you still do that."

"Sorry. And I won't get it back."

"Sure you will." She paused in her walking out of the room. "Of course." She smiled. "If you end up really losing your sight, you'll never know, will you?"

"Oh that's wrong." He walked behind her. "That's really wrong. That is such an Ellen thing to say. I can't believe . . ."

"Dean." Ellen stopped on the top steps. "Deal with the kids."

Still holding the wet baby, Dean watched Ellen go down the steps, a sense of gratefulness towards her hit him at that moment and then . . . something else. "God Brain." Dean balked and held the baby at an extended state as he carried him to the other room to dress him.

(8)

"And then we're sitting there . . ." Frank paused in his story, took a drink from his glass of wine and set down another plate on the table. "And we're not eating with those sticks Henry."

"Finish your story Frank." Henry continued cooking in the kitchen.

"Where was I?"

"You were sitting in the restaurant. Both of you had just had a fight with the people you were married to. Right there."

"That's right." Frank set down the final plate and picked up his glass of wine. "We're in the restaurant and this waitress sets down our coffees and turns to the next table. Anyhow, she bumps into something, I don't know what. And she fuckin dumps her tray on the floor. No big deal. A little interruption in my story I'm telling but no biggie. Then this woman stands up and starts to scream at this waitress, calling her dumb and so forth really laying into the woman."

"Poor waitress."

"Yeah whatever. That's not the point of the story. So, Ellen feels bad for her."

"Ellen feels bad?"

"Go figure." Frank shrugged and sipped his wine again. "So El is real

nice to this waitress, trying to cheer her up, the waitress cheers up.”

“Oh.” Henry removed the food from the pan. “As much as I’d like to tell you Frank that the story was funny. It isn’t. What was the funny part?”

“Fuck Henry I didn’t get there yet. I’m setting it up. So the waitress is hovering the table and I’m asking about gravy. Legitimate question, we’re in a restaurant right? El says I’m rude, like other people. So the waitress softens her voice. And says.” Frank softened his voice and took a female tone to it. “I don’t pay any attention to men.” Frank started to snicker. “Then El, not really hearing what the waitress said, tell the waitress, ‘neither do I. I started laughing, telling Ellen that the waitress liked her. Next thing you know the waitress lays the bill on the table, runs her hand over Ellen’s and winks.” Frank laughed and sipped more of his wine.

“Wait. For visual purposes Frank. Was she an attractive waitress?”

“No.”

“Too bad.”

“My sentiments exactly. Now if she was attractive it would have really made for an interesting evening.” Frank raised his eyebrows. “Unfortunately she wasn’t. Kind of looked like a female version of, no not even female, she looked like Todd from Fabrics.” Frank enjoyed the open mouth disappointment look on Henry’s face. “So there went . . .” Frank turned to the sound of the front door opening. He immediately walked into the kitchen and dumped the remainder of his wine out and rinsed the glass. “Don’t tell her I was drinking.”

“Frank, why are you hiding . . . hey El.” Henry smiled when he saw her walk in.

“Hi guys.” Ellen kissed Henry on the cheek.

“What about me?” Frank asked. He grunted when she smacked him in the gut. “Thanks El. And why are you wearing Dean’s shirt?”

Ellen stopped walking from the kitchen. “Why do you know I’m wearing Dean’s shirt?”

“I’m perceptive. Why are you wearing his shirt?”

“Your son pissed on me.” Ellen answered him.

“Which son? I have many.”

“What?” Ellen laughed her words. “Which one do you think Frank? O.K. if you must know, Johnny was walking down the street and he thought it would be a fun thing to do.”

“Seriously. Which son?” Frank followed her into the diningroom.

“Which one do you think? Brian.”

“What did you do, leave him without a diaper for too long.”

“Yes Robert Young.” Ellen rolled her eyes trying to ignore him. “Henry are we going to eat soon?”

“All done now El. Did you want to wash up or did you already wash up at Dean’s. Because we can wait for you.”

“It’ll only take a second to wash my hands.” She snickered and moved to the sink. “See Henry.” She turned it on and washed her hands while he

put the bowl on the table. "All done." She walked into the diningroom drying her hands.

"No El." Henry shook his head. "I mean because Brian went to the bathroom on you. Did you need to wash up. We'll wait."

"I changed my shirt." Ellen held it out. "What?" She noticed the stunned look on Henry's face.

"El." Henry looked offended. "El, that's disgusting. Tell her Frank."

"What?" Frank was confused. "Henry it's baby pee. There's nothing in it. Wait until you see what comes from a baby. Huh El?"

"Yep." Ellen agreed.

Henry walked up to Ellen and sniffed her. "El, I can smell it on you."

"Oh you can not." She pulled the shirt to her nose. "You're crazy. Frank? Can you smell it?"

Frank grabbed hold of the shirt and smelled. "Nope. Henry's nuts. Smells like a clean shirt."

"Both of you are immune to the smell." Henry's hand waved about and he backed up and sat down. "Don't be mad El if I stay a distance from you until you're clean. Because I'll gag. I will."

"Henry you always gag." Ellen giggled and sat down. "So what did you guys talk about?"

Henry dished out the food for her. "Frank was telling me about what happened with you two in a Bob Even's Restaurant one time."

"Oh Frank." Ellen shook her head. "Are you telling the lesbian waitress story again. What brought this up?"

"I was digging through some stuff at the house and came across all those pictures Robbie stuck on the window while you guys were quarantined last year." Frank helped himself to Henry's food. "So El, how was Dean? And why was Brian running around without a diaper for so long?"

"Dean's fine, why you care I don't know." Ellen started to eat. "Henry this is good." And then she started to ramble. "And Brian wasn't running around without a diaper. I was holding him after his bath. And I was talking to Dean because he just had another one of his ep . . . ep . . . ep." She shut her mouth and continued to eat.

"Ep what El?" Frank asked and noticed the eye contact between her and Henry. "What's going on? What did Dean have another one of? He's been acting weird lately. Is something wrong with him?"

Ellen wiped her mouth. "If you must know."

"El." Henry tried to stop her. "Don't."

Ellen ignored him. "I'll tell you Frank. Dean has been suffering from a nervous condition. He has these paranoid episodes and he gets real jittery. They last only a few moments but, sometimes I'm afraid he'll go over the edge."

Frank couldn't eat. For fear of choking he had to stop. First his shoulders started to bounce and then his whole body moved with the

laughter that he left out. "Sorry." he held up his hand as he leaned to the side of the stable and stood up. He paced toward the living room, laughed loudly and returned, a different and serious person. "For real?"

"Oh sure." Ellen told him. "We think it's the virus thing. We can't be . . ." A knock at the door interrupted Ellen. "Is someone coming over?"

Frank pointed back. "I'll get it. I'm already standing."

Henry leaned into Ellen when Frank left. "You shouldn't have said anything."

"So what Henry, Frank will forget about it." She looked up when she saw Frank standing at the table. "What's wrong?"

"You have a visitor El." Frank obviously tried to hide his snicker.

"A visitor?" Ellen slowly stood up and apprehensively peeked around the bend of the diningroom to see Jenny standing by the livingroom door. "Sit down Frank. I'll be back." Planting on a fake smile, Ellen walked to the livingroom. "Jenny."

"Ellen." Jenny folded her arms and did that flip of her hair thing she always did.

"How come your here? You're not mad because I took your cake are you?"

"No, Joe told me how you gave it to him to soften the blow of your failing to get my help."

"Repeat that?" Ellen stopped paying attention somewhere in her long explanation.

"I spoke to Joe and if you're really interested in being a part, and like every other woman in Beginnings you can prove it."

"Sure." Ellen threw her hands up. "How?"

"You can come to our weekly Moon Lodge meeting."

Ellen's eyes shifted in confusion. "Moon lodge? What is a weekly Moon Lodge meeting?"

"All of us adult women get together once a week. Usually Friday's."

"So it's a weekly bitch about men session huh?" Ellen smiled. "Oh I think I would like . . ."

"No." Jenny coldly stopped her, rolling her eyes at Ellen. "We don't call them bitch sessions. We call them support meetings. We discuss problems in the relationships that we juggle. We share remedies, solutions . . ."

"Recipes?"

"Ellen."

"Sorry." Ellen snickered. "Are these new?"

"No, we've been doing them for over a year, I think now probably close to two years, ever since understanding started."

"And every woman attends?"

"Everyone one but you."

"Why is that. Was I busy?"

"No Ellen we didn't tell you and frankly, no one wanted you to come."

"Oh I find that hard to believe. Some women like me. Trish and Melissa like me. And Josephine likes me. Andrea . . ."

"Short list."

Ellen tried to ignore the Jenny sarcasm, after all, if she lashed back out at Jenny then she would defeat her purpose of being close to her. "O.K. it is a short list. I'm honored to be invited. I can't wait. Is it this Friday?"

"Yes." Jenny told her.

"So seeing how it's called the Moon Lodge meeting, do I show up when the moon is out?"

"No, it's called Moon Lodge because that is what native American Indian women called their menstrual cycle and they had a special house for when they did that."

"Menstrual cycle." Ellen tried not to giggle. "Do we have on be on our period to attend? Because I'm not on my period right now."

"Ellen." With such annoyance Jenny said Ellen's name. "Just be there at seven if you want to come." She walked to the door. "And bring a finger food. And not rice cakes."

"Got it." Ellen followed her to the door. "I'm very excited about this. You should try to be nicer to me Jenny."

"Ellen, the only reason you know about this is because Joe came to me. I trust Joe. I wouldn't let you into these meetings if I was putting my trust in you. Because a part of me still feels you're up to something."

"Never." Ellen held the door open for her. "Bye Jenny." Once Jenny was safely out, Ellen shut the door and let her body shudder a few times. "Yuck." She shuddered as she went back into the diningroom. "Hey, you guys are done eating. How rude." She sat down at the table. "Guess what Frank. The women in this community have a weekly women's support meeting. And I've been invited to attend this Friday's."

"No kidding?" Frank patted her hand. "Good job. Are these new?"

"No." Ellen shook her head. "They've had them for two years. No one wanted me to come." She shrugged and ate.

Henry's mouth dropped open. "Aw El, that's terrible. I feel really bad. That isn't nice of them. See, no wonder I don't like many women in this community. They are so mean."

"They are Henry. Jenny says no one likes me."

"I like you El."

"Thank you Henry."

"Enough." Frank halted them before they could go into a Henry and Ellen babble frenzy. "So you're gonna go?"

"Oh sure if I want to get close to Jenny I will. Get this Frank, they're called Moon Lodge meetings."

"Moon Lodge?" Frank tilted his head in question. "Do they start until the moon comes out?"

"No, Moon lodge is a native American Indian thing. The Indian women called their periods Moon cycles."

"Periods? El do you have to be on your period to go? Are you gonna lie?"

Ellen giggled. "Don't be silly Frank, they only call the meetings that. And I have to bring a finger food. Henry can you make me some rice cakes?"

"Sure El." Henry picked up his plate and Frank's. "El, I'm gonna have some wine, do you want some?"

"I'll have some, thanks Henry."

"Frank?" Henry stuck his head out of the kitchen doorway. "Wine?"

"Um." Frank shifted his eyes to Ellen. "You know what Henry, no I'm fine thanks."

Ellen smiled widely laying her hand on his. "Frank, I'm proud of you." She leaned over to him and kissed him. "Very proud."

"See, I told you I could be good. You be a Jenny friend. I don't drink." He stood up running his hand over the back of her head as he went into the kitchen. He saw Henry just staring at him.

"Frank." Henry said his name with such scold. "You've been drinking all night."

"Shut up Henry." Frank said in a whisper as he grabbed a glass for some water. "Just, just do this for me and don't say anything. O.K.?" He took Ellen's glass of wine that Henry had just poured. "Thanks." Holding his water, Frank took a sip from Ellen's wine, placed a smile back on his face and rejoined Ellen at the table.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JULY 9

(1)

It was starting off to be one of the longest days of Dean's life and it wasn't even eight o'clock yet. Packing up everything they would be taking to Robbie, getting it to the hanger. Grabbing the bio-suits and gear from the mobile lab and getting that there as well. He was glad Ellen showed up to help Johnny with everything by the helicopter or else they would be running late. Dean had to have one more meeting with Joe--which he did--and two more stops in town. One for more note material to take to the mobile lab, and a short stop at history to insert the trip into the computers. Dean didn't plan on that, he thought the trip out was highly secretive. And it was. But Joe said it had to be documented somewhere, even if coded. So Dean and him decided that it would be worded 'virus prototype experiment visit. See Dean files.' Good enough.

For as much as he had to do for a simple one hour visit out to Robbie and his men, Dean was getting it done and staying calm. Of course he still was baffled by why Frank kept jumping out at him from around every corner and yelling 'boo' trying to startle him. Dean just chalked that up to another Frank immature behavioral tactic and ignored him.

Dean made it to history, his last stop. Happy Trish was there--she tended to sleep in too much during her pregnancy--he went inside. "Morning Trish."

"Hi Dean." Trish sat up and smiled at him. "What brings you to history this morning?"

"I have to make an entry."

"Oh. Hmm." Trish pulled out what looked like an appointment book and flipped a page. "You're not mentioned."

"It was a last minute thing."

"Joe usually lets me know."

"I just spoke to Joe, he said to come down and make the entry."

"I see." Trish picked up her glasses and put them on as if since she wasn't wearing them the first time, she may have missed it. She looked through the book again.

"It's not going to be in there Trish. He just told me about it. And . . ." Dean walked closer to the desk. "Where did you get this from? We don't make these."

"Isn't this pretty?" She closed the purple vinyl book. "Cole brought it back the last metals run two weeks ago. I think he likes me." She giggled.

"Swell. Can I just tell you the entry?"

"Do you know today's password? I can't make the entry without today's password."

"Yes." Dean slowed in his words. "I know today's password, Joe told

me.”

“Good.” Trish spoke perky and grabbed a form very slowly from the drawer. She picked up a pen. “Let’s see if this writes.” She scribbled, nothing. She grabbed another pen . . . slowly.

“Trish, I’m in a hurry.”

“Patience Dean.” She tried her pen. “There it works. Now before I fill out the request. What’s the password.”

Dean cleared his throat. “Yabba-Dabba-Doo.”

“Very good. I thought of that myself.” She readied to write. “What is it?”

“Virus prototype experiment visit. See Dean files. Put it in at eight-thirty a.m. today.”

Trish wrote and spoke it as she did. “See . . . Dean . . . files.” She made a hard period sound with her pen. “What’s this suppose to mean.”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Well I can’t make the entry. I have to clear it with Joe. Just so you know.”

“That’s fine. Thanks.” Dean started to leave and he stopped. “Oh hey, by the way Trish, someone told me you control the understanding rule book.”

“I do. I have the original one with the amendments handwritten in it. Then I have the one I worked on myself to make it really look neat.”

“Can I borrow one until tomorrow?”

“You mean like a library book?” Trish asked.

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“They don’t leave history.” Trish stated.

“I need to read them, I’m interested and I’m gonna have some time in my lab. Come on Trish no one will know. Be nice.”

“If I lend you one, you aren’t going to try to make changes in it like Frank did when he came by to see one.”

“No.” Dean laughed. “Frank came by to see one?”

“Oh sure.” She said. “About two weeks ago. He was being funny.”

“Frank funny?”

“Yep. He wanted to say that I forgot to add the amendment that it is all right to kill the secondary relationship male at anytime during the understanding or after.” She laughed. “But I knew he was fibbing. So what do you need the understanding rules for. To brush up for your understanding with Henry?”

“You can say so. But no one is suppose to know about it.”

“That’s nice of you to have the understanding with Henry. I’ll let you borrow the book.” Trish stood from her desk, grunting and then waddling her pregnant body to the file cabinet. “He’ll be a good secondary relationship for Ellen.”

"Secondary?" Dean shook his head. "No primary."

"Secondary right? Aren't you going to be the primary? I hope." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "I've always wanted you and Ellen back together."

"Let me let you in on a secret, me too. But being the primary relationship will be a little impossible seeing how she's married to Henry."

Trish handed him the rule book. "What do you mean?"

"Henry and Ellen are married."

"No they aren't."

"Yes they are."

"No they aren't Dean." Trish was insistent. "I mean I would know I am the warden of history. If someone gets married, I get the paper work. Reverend Bob always files it with me in a timely manner. I even make a special trip in on Saturdays if anyone gets married. And it's not a marriage if Reverend Bob doesn't give me the official papers. And trust me, I never got any papers on Ellen and Henry."

"There has to be some mistake. They said they got married April first."

"There you have it. But we can go check just incase my memory is messed up. I doubt it though." Scooting to the back history room Trish led Dean in there. She moaned as she sat down at the computer and quickly pulled up marriages. "Let's see, this is all marriage and dedications done this year. You say April first?"

"Yes." Dean peered over her shoulder.

"Nothing." Trish clicked on the keyboard. "Let's go ahead a few days to see if Bob forgot to file. The second . . . nope. Third, no. Fourth . . ." More clicks. "Not in here. See Dean. Not married." She spun the tall stool to face him and saw the wide grin on his face.

"This is great." Dean folded his arms and nodded. "Oh I'm gonna kill her for lying to me." He smiled wider then it dropped. "Shit. Trish, whatever you do, do me a favor." He laid his hands on hers shoulder. "Don't, I repeat don't tell Frank what you just told me."

"Why?"

"Just don't. Please. Not yet." Dean backed up holding that understanding rule book. "I'll let you know when it's safe." He darted out and ran back in. "And thanks. You made my day." He gave her a wink and took off running from history.

Dean knew the first thing he was going to do. As soon as he had Ellen alone in quarantine he was going to let her have it. But a part of Dean wasn't mad at all, he should have been worse. The whole deceit thing was overshadowed by the fact that Ellen and Henry were not really married. Then again, the fear of what Frank would do if he found out crept into his thoughts as well. With his head down in the Dean, 'don't talk to me I'm in a rush' mode, he paced himself fast through town.

"Morning Dean."

Just to be cordial Dean replied back. "Morning." His head raised to see

who it was and he stopped cold. "Reverend Bob." Another huge grin ripped across Dean's face. "Just the man I wanted to see this morning. You have a second?"

"Sure." Reverend Bob looked at his watch. "Just a second. Just kidding, what is it?"

"To be on the safe side."

"Huh?"

Dean waved his hand. "I'm talking to myself. But, did you by chance marry Ellen and Henry?"

"No I didn't."

"Thanks." Dean started walking again and again he stopped cold when he heard an 'uh-oh' from behind him. Afraid, Dean turned back to Reverend Bob. "What's uh-oh?"

"Well . . . Nah." He closed his eyes and shook his head.

"What?"

"Well, they did come to me and they asked me to marry them. It was April fools Day and I thought it was a joke. Especially when they said they wanted the super-duper speedo wedding, yeah, that's what they called it."

"And what did you do?" Dean asked him.

"Well I said, 'do you both'. They both said 'yes' And I said 'done.'" He shrugged. "They couldn't have possibly thought they got married could they? I mean, it was April fools Day. This was Henry and Ellen and . . . oh no."

Dean closed his eyes with a slow nodding head. "They actually believe you married them."

"Now they can't be that dumb. Can they?" He saw Dean still nodding is head. "Damn."

"Since they thought it, are they?"

"No." Reverend Bob shook his head. "No, we have procedures. Marriage classes to follow. Papers to file with history. We try to keep it very legal so there is a sense of seriousness about it. If we don't people will think they can get married as much as they want, whenever they want. I have to talk to them."

"Wait." Dean held up his hand. "Ellen and I are busy in the lab until tonight. Don't say anything, not yet. Let me talk to her first. Can you do that? Keep it from Henry and most of all, from Frank."

"Frank." Reverend Bob shuddered. "If he thinks they're married, he's just going to start all kinds of trouble when he finds out they aren't."

"Exactly. And let's face it, annoying as they are, they're happy."

"True." Reverend Bob agreed. "I feel awful, I really do."

"We'll work something out." Dean checked out the time and saw how much he had spent of it talking. "I have to run." He darted back. "Remember, nothing to Henry or Frank yet. Thanks." Holding up his hand to wave, Dean turned quickly to run. Just as he rounded the last building on his way to the hanger, Frank jumped out again with another loud 'boo'.

Flipping off a laughing Frank, Dean ignored him and continued on. Grateful for two things. One, he wouldn't have to deal with Frank for twelve hours, and two, he knew something Frank didn't know.

(2)

Robbie heard the Beginnings' helicopter hovering but there wasn't anything he could do about it. He didn't have anyone who could run over the grade for whatever they were dropping off. Even Greg and the two others that were in remission were weak. And the remaining men, all ten. Fallen victims to the new plague.

The silence captured Robbie's attention. No sound of a helicopter at all. The engines stopped. Was he that wrapped up in wiping down the fevered body of Marty to not even hear? A 'No' answer came to him when through the corner of his eyes he saw them. Two people looking more like spacemen in the blue suits they wore, then people from Beginnings. But somehow from the size of them both, Robbie knew who it was.

Dropping the cloth into the pail of water, Robbie rose up to his feet facing Ellen and Dean as they walked closer to him. "Ellen." He set down the pail and took off in a trot their way. "El!"

Placing the case she held on the ground, Ellen hurried to him. Through the head set in the suit she wore she heard Dean tell her. 'Leave the suit on El.' He knew her too well. "Robbie." Ellen switched on the external speaker. "Robbie." She reached him, her hands gripping tightly to his arms wanting so bad to embrace him but knowing it would be an awkward hold with the suit.

"El." He hunched down to her level peering into her face mask. "What are you doing?"

"I told you, you wouldn't be alone. You're not."

"God it's so good to see you." Robbie smiled "You don't know what this means. Even if it's through this." He grabbed her suit. "Hey El? It's Thursday." He winked.

"Robbie if I could kiss you and hold you at this moment, I would."

"I know." Robbie shifted his eyes to Dean. "Thank you guys for coming. Why are you here though?"

Dean held up the case he brought. "We came with a prototype we need to give those who are sick."

"That's everyone but me. And Greg and them who are in remission. Everyone has it now Dean."

Dean motioned his head up the hill. "Is that them up there?"

"Yeah." Robbie watched Dean head up that way and then Robbie grabbed Ellen's gloved hand.

"How are you handling this Robbie?"

"I'm doing all right." He took a shivering breath. "I'm tough."

"That you are." She walked with him.

"El? Before you go. Remind me to give you all the souvenirs I found for you. They're small, but I got you a few."

"No."

"No?"

"No." Ellen stopped walking and stood before him. "You bring me gifts whenever you come home. You're not home Robbie. I want you to give them to me when you come home." She smiled at him. "Now I'll talk to you later. Rest. We're here." She released his hand, took a few steps backwards and then went to join Dean.

"When I come home." Robbie spoke softly to himself shaking his head. He ran his hand across his sweaty and dirty forehead then watched Dean and Ellen as they approached each man who lay ill not far from where Robbie stood. Standing there watching them for a short while was rest enough. When Robbie stopped he started to think. And Robbie didn't want to think. He had to stay busy to keep his mind focused on helping his men. Even though he was weary and worn out and in need of the break he could have gotten, Robbie trudged forward to help Dean and Ellen.

(3)

"Bob, you don't smoke." Joe said calmly to Reverend Bob who sat across from Joe in his office.

"I would like to now. I used to."

"You may get sick." Joe held out a cigarette to him, then a lighter. He pushed the ashtray forward.

"Thank you." Reverend Bob looked at the cigarette. "Wow, you guys are still smoking camel filters. One hell of a supply you must have picked up." Shaking, he lit the cigarette.

"Tell me, usually when you're like this, Frank did something to you."

"No." Reverend Bob said and then coughed out the hit of the cigarette he took. "I did something. We have a situation and I need your advice. Confidentially."

"I like this." Joe cupped his hands behind his head and rocked back in his chair. "A religious man confessing to me. Go on. Shoot. I'm all ears."

"O.K. Here it goes." Reverend Bob scooted his chair closer to the desk. "I don't pay much attention to some people in this community. Especially those who really don't frequent my services. Not on purpose mind you, but I really don't pay much attention to their lives."

"That's about five people in this community. So what's going on with one of them."

"Two."

"Two?" Joe raised his eyebrows with a closed mouth look. "Which two?"

"Henry and Ellen."

"Christ . . . sorry Reverend. What did they do?"

"They didn't do anything. I did Joe and it could mean mayhem for you."

"Shit." Joe stopped rocking and folded his hands on his desk. "Go on. Give it to me."

"One day, nearly four months ago, they came to me and asked me to marry them. April Fools day. They wanted the quick ceremony." Reverend Bob watched Joe's face drop as if Joe knew where he was going already. "I said hardly anything. Honest. But . . . they took me serious. They think Joe, that they're married. They aren't. No papers have been filed with history. No real nuptials were performed. Nothing."

"So what's the problem?"

"They aren't married and they think they are."

"Marry them again."

"So you're saying tell them?" Reverend Bob asked. "Telling them is chancing Frank finding out. Frank finding out could mean trouble."

"Christ." Joe shook his head. "You aren't kidding. He'll do everything in his power to stop it. They think they're married. Then . . . make it official. Just file the paper work."

"Joe we have rules. You and I know we can't go insert things into history that aren't there."

"Don't insert. Just put it in for today." Joe gave a 'so there' attitude.

"We have procedures Joe. Procedures that we worked hard to make a marriage legal here. I would have to file the papers and the papers would need Henry and Ellen's signature. In order to get their signatures, I'd have to tell them."

"Reverend Bob you are really making much too much out of this. Look, who knows? Me, you, possibly Trish . . ."

"And Dean."

"Dean can be clueless at times. File the paper work. Forge Ellen and Henry's signature, no one is the wiser. They believe they're married, so nothing changes. So what if Ellen and Henry aren't married. You thought it was a joke. They think they are. Why change it? We'll make their marriage legal without anyone knowing. As long as know one knows we aren't following the rules, no big deal."

A strong buzzing sound rang through Joe's office. It echoed like a wrong answer on a game show. "Wrong!" Frank stepped inside of his father's office. "Now." Frank shut the door. "Now is the time you remember to keep the office door closed from now on." He walked further in. "Let's go back a little bit. I walked in here on the part where you Dad said, Henry and Ellen aren't married."

"Frank." Joe looked up at him. "Listen."

"No-no-no." Frank held up his hand and shook his head. "Are they or aren't they really married?" He waited for an answer. "Reverend Bob?"

Reverend Bob cleared his throat then nervously grabbed his cigarette.

"See Frank. It was April fool's day. I thought it was a joke. They thought it was real. There was no paper work. No license, nothing. It was a mix up. They believe they are married."

"But they aren't?" Frank asked and saw Reverend Bob shake his head. "Oh yes!" He clenched his fist. "This is fuckin great. Yes. Oh wait until I tell them." He turned around and grabbed for the door.

"Frank." Joe yelled out as he stood up. "Hold it. Be a little mature for crying out loud. Just wait a second and listen to me."

"O.K. I can listen." Frank folded his arms.

"All right. They think they're married. They aren't, so what. What difference does it make? If no one knows. Reverend Bob here can make it legal and no one is the wiser."

"I am. And we have rules Dad. Nope. Follow the rules. Sorry. They aren't married. I'm telling." He raced for the door again.

"Frank!"

"What!" Frank stopped again in total annoyance.

"They married each other one, so they think. They'll marry each other again." He saw Frank shake his head 'no. "No? Why are you saying no Frank."

"Because. The little 'sneak off and not tell anyone' marriage failed. They are the two most superstitious people I know. Serves them right. Good job Bob." He gave a thumbs up to Reverend Bob. "And, I haven't yet told Ellen how much her marriage to Henry bothers me. I will now. They won't get married. They may plan on it, but they won't, mark my words. And I have to go, I'm excited, I have to tell Henry."

"Frank."

"Oh you just have to stop me every time I make an exit." Frank turned around again. "Yes Dad. What now?"

"Tell him maturely. Break it to him nicely."

"I will. I won't even gloat, even though that will be hard." Frank nodded. "Anything else?"

"No go on." Joe waved his hand at him. "Just one more thing."

A squeak, a stop, a huff and then a turn. "Yes."

"Do you really think you can stop them from getting married?" Joe asked in doubt of Frank's ability.

"Oh I'm not going to be the . . ." Frank paused, he merely held up his hand to halt his father from saying anything. Frank looked at Reverend Bob, then at Joe, then he opened the door. "This is my big dramatic exit." Frank cleared his throat. "I'm not going to be the one to stop them Dad. One of them will back down, guaranteed. Finish and . . ." he stepped out and poked his head back in. "Goodbye." The door closed.

With a smack, Joe ran his hand down his face and reached for a cigarette of his own. "Don't blame me for him Reverend Bob. I'm still not convinced he's really my son."

(4)

A single click on the keyboard of the computer in the mobile lab and the monitor before Johnny switched pictures. What looked like a sea creature of some sorts filled with multiple colors flashed before him, Dean, and Ellen. He grabbed his sandwich which sat next to him. "Same." He took a bite and clicked again. "Same." Another click as he spoke monotone. "Same."

"Wait." Ellen grabbed his hand as she leaned over his shoulder. "Go back two."

"They're the same El."

"No, they aren't, go back." She glanced closer when Johnny pulled it back. "Look." Her finger touched the screen. "Look Dean, the tail of the virus. It's different. It curves slightly at the bottom and to the right, and look at the follicles." Her fingers traced. "Zoom in John."

Dean adjusted his glasses. "El, you're right. More of them."

"And we've seen this one before." Ellen snapped her finger moving to the next monitor. Her fingers worked the keyboard. "Come on." She beckoned the computer. "I know where we've seen it. Or something similar."

Johnny looked over at her. "What are you pulling up?"

"Slides of the future samples we took."

"Weren't all those samples the same?" Johnny asked.

"Not all." Ellen stepped back with folded arms. "I knew it. The first wave, the small wave. That's the same strain Robbie's men have. But look at Jenny Matoose's sample. Look close. So different. Differnet then both of them."

Dean rushed over. "Whoa." He looked in awe. "And here we thought she just contracted it at a different time." He ran over to the files. "I remember distinctively, us talking about this El. Jenny, Jenny. Got her." He grabbed the file and went back to the counter with it. "Remember El, we discussed this. She came down with the symptoms totally at a different time than the other plague waves hit."

Ellen nodded. "And we thought that may have been the reason for it being slightly different."

"Which tells me . . ." Dean viewed both samples. "We're not looking at a mutated form. We're looking at a totally different strain of our virus."

Ellen agreed. "Same virus, different strain. That explains the different stages of symptoms that are hitting Robbie's men. The longer incubation period. And if I recall, wasn't Jenny's remission shorter?"

"Yes." Dean said. "And instead of dying four days after coming out of remission, Jenny died in two." He closed the folder. "Here I was blaming it in my records on the fact that she had run herself down helping out with the plague. She couldn't fight it."

Johnny's 'uh-oh' captured both Dean and Ellen's attention.

"Uh-oh what?" Dean asked. "Uh-oh isn't science here, Johnny."

"And neither is what I'm saying uh-oh about." Johnny spun is stool to face them. "What we actually have is three strains of the virus in the future. If everyone in the future plague has, let's call it Strains 'A' and 'B'. Jenny has Strain 'C' And Robbie in his men in the present have strain 'B'.. Then how in the world did Jenny Matoose seem to be the only one who got a totally different strain in the future and from the present? One person out of a hundred and some doesn't get a totally different strain of a virus. That's not typically plague Dr. Dean, and you know it. That's . . ."

"Murder." Dean spoke softly.

"Exactly." Johnny grabbed his sandwich and took another bite. "And some pretty cool stuff if you think about it. Like who would give Jenny the virus deliberately."

Dean's eyes shifted to Ellen. "John Matoose?"

Johnny nodded. "Possibly. If he is working for George like Ellen has been saying, and if he is on the inside, then he would have been able to get access to the strain if say, Jenny wasn't getting exposed."

"Good thinking John." Dean said. "But John Matoose loves Jenny, there's no doubt about that. Why would he give her the virus, unless someone else is on the inside for George as well."

"Not exactly." Ellen interjected. "John's a weasel. If Jenny found out about him, to protect his ass he'd get rid of her in a heart beat. Because you know Jenny. If she did find out she would go to Joe, or Frank. Watching her community die and knowing that John was responsible, she wouldn't hesitate to turn him in. She's too self righteous. Which means . . ." Ellen smiled and spoke softly to herself. "Jenny does know a lot about John and Joe is right. So maybe . . ." She noticed they were watching her wondering what she rambled on about. "Sorry." She shrugged. "Unfortunately for Jenny, we can't worry about this right now. We have to worry about this." She pointed to he screen. "Our virus or viruses."

Johnny returned to his computer. "And Strain 'B' is getting an even slower reaction to any of our prototypes than virus 'A'."

Dean knew the reason for it. "That's because Strain 'B' is more violent and deadly. Let's up the ingredients in all twenty-two agents we have. Let's see if that works now that we realize we're working with a mightier sword. Sound good?"

Johnny stood up. "I'll start mixing the first five." He looked at his watch. "We should have at least enough time to mix them and see if they work while we're in here." He grabbed his sandwich and walked to the other counter.

Ellen let out a long breath. "Wow, I feel like I'm in a Sherlock Holmes novel or something, piecing all of it together and such. Thinking it's one way and finding out it's another. It exhilarating."

"Really?" Dean asked. "Mysteries are exhilarating to you?"

"Oh sure. I think." Ellen looked up. "I guess they are. Why?"

Dean grabbed her arm and pulled her with him. "I have a mystery for you to solve."

"Really Dean? Oh that sounds exciting. I'm a very good detective."

"You think." Dean looked at Johnny as he took her to the other mobile. "We'll be right back, I have to talk to Ellen." Getting an acknowledging motion of Johnny's head, Dean led Ellen out.

"Must be good." Ellen said as they walked to the livingroom.

"It is. Sit down." He held his hand out to the couch.

"Give it to me Dean."

"All right." Dean clapped his hands together. "Which couple in Beginnings say they are married, and think they are married. They joke around with everyone, but the joke is on them, because they aren't really married after all."

"Gees, Dean sounds like a riddle or a joke, not a mystery. Who?"

"Guess."

"Um . . . Jenny and John."

"Nope."

"Who?"

"You and Henry."

Ellen laughed. "Good one Dean. But who?"

"El." He sat down next to her. "You and Henry aren't married."

"Sure we are Dean. Reverend Bob married us."

"Let's see how I can say this." Dean took a moment to think. "I went to history this morning. Which by the way, do you know Trish has a purple appointment book?"

"Yes I do, It's pretty."

"Why does she have an appointment book El?" Dean asked.

"To keep track of who wants to come to history Dean, why else? Plus new history rules state you have to have an appointment to view. Joe approved that one last week."

"Don't you think it a little odd?" Dean commented. "I mean doesn't Trish seem like she's stuck in the old world?"

"Oh sure, but that's fine. It keeps things very professional in history. She likes to be business like. The only thing I can't make her understand is that she is never really gonna get a fax on that fax machine Cole brought her back. She keeps waiting and waiting." Ellen snickered. "I told Cole to get me one so I can fax. . . wait a second, what's Trish's fax machine have to do with my marriage to Henry."

"Nothing."

"Then why are we talking about it?"

Dean stopped to cringe and catch his calm. "El, listen to me. I went to history."

"You're not going to go off the subject again are you?"

"No." He shook his head. "While I was there I asked to see the

understanding rule book. She asked if it was for my understanding with Henry.”

“Oh she’s perceptive that Trish is. How did she know?”

“She didn’t. She thinks you and I are back together. I told her I couldn’t be primary, Henry was your husband. At which time she proceeded to show me Reverend Bob never filed the paper work, or license.”

“Maybe he forgot.”

“True.” Dean held up his finger. “Then I ran into Reverend Bob who told me he never married you. It was April Fools day. He thought you were kidding him so he played an April Fools Joke right back. He said he never really married you. You aren’t married”

Ellen shrieked and stood up. “Oh my God! I’ve been living in sin?”

“What?”

“Just kidding.” She sat back down. “This is funny. Wait, no it’s not. Shit.” She covered her mouth with her hand. “Does Henry know. I bet he knows now.”

“No. Trish isn’t saying anything and neither is Reverend Bob. I thought I’d tell you first so you could figure out how to break it to Henry before Frank finds out.”

“Frank.” Ellen plopped backwards on the couch. “We have to keep this from Frank for a while., he will have a field day.”

“And let me tell you something El. What were the reasons you two didn’t say anything when you thought you got married? You didn’t want to be stopped? Guess what? If Frank finds out, he’ll be watching you like a hawk this time because he will *not* let it happen again.”

Ellen took a long breath and sat up looking so calm. “Yes true. But we’re good right? I mean Frank doesn’t know. So we’re all right.” She stood up from the couch. “Let’s get back to work. I don’t want to think about this right now.”

“You have to think about it before we leave here.”

“I know.” Ellen moved to the other mobile. “Frank doesn’t know right? You’re sure?”

“Positive.”

(5)

There was a certain silent snicker that crept within Frank as he watched Henry working on the cooling unit in Fabrics. He snickered because Henry swore as he laid on his stomach reaching under the unit for something that rolled there. He snickered because Ben and Todd watched every wiry move Henry made. And he snickered, well, because he was about to be the bearer of good news. Or bad news to Henry depending on who looked at it. “Henry.” Frank crouched down beside him.

"Hey Frank." Henry grunted. "Almost . . . got . . . it."

"Henry." Frank lowered his voice to a whisper. "You have an audience watching you wiggle under here."

A loud 'bang' and then an 'ow' came from Henry and he quickly scooted out holding his tool. "Got it." He rolled over and then quickly stood up, shifting his eyes to Ben and Todd who went their separate ways back to work. "What's up?"

Frank snickered.

"Oh you are sick." Henry dusted himself off.

"You're a very attractive man Henry. It's bound to happen."

"Frank." Before Henry bitched he saw that Frank's comment had drawn the attention of Ben and Todd. "Uh, look." Henry motioned his head to them.

Frank slowly turned his head and received a bright smile from both Ben and Todd. "What? You don't think he's attractive?"

"Frank!" Henry tossed his tool in his bag.

"Henry take a walk with me."

"Frank." Henry leaned to him whispering in a cringe. "You know how that's gonna look after that comment."

"Oh so what?" Frank grabbed his arm. "You should be proud to be seen with me. Walk."

"Where are we going?" Henry pulled his arm away, grabbed his tool bag and followed him out.

"We have to talk."

"What's wrong?"

"You're not going to like this Henry." Frank turned his head, smiled then looked again at Henry with a serious look. "I'll try to tell you this as good as I can with out shocking you. O.K.?"

"O.K."

"You and Ellen aren't really legally married. Reverend Bob didn't perform a legitimate service he thought it was a joke and guess who's laughing now." Frank smiled then wiped it from his face. "Of course not me."

"Where in the world do you come up with these bad jokes Frank?"

"It's not a joke Henry."

"And I'm suppose to believe you?" Henry asked. "Why would you know this Frank anyhow?"

"Because I overheard my Dad and Reverend Bob trying to break the law and legally marry you guys without you two ever knowing that you weren't legally married." Frank took a breath. "So there."

"Right." Henry started walking. "This isn't funny Frank."

"I'm not joking. But . . ." Frank ran up to him. "Reverend Bob was . . . on April Fools day."

"Shit." Henry stopped cold. "This can't be."

"It's true Henry."

"El and I aren't married?"

"Nope, which means . . ." Frank poked him in the chest. "You've been living in sin. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Oh you're full of shit Frank. I actually believed you for a second." Henry shook his head.

"Henry. Ask my Dad if you don't believe me." Frank pestered behind him.

"You know what Frank. I will."

"Let's go." Frank pointed to his jeep. "I'll drive."

Reluctantly Henry stepped in and took the short ride where Joe was fixing something at the bakery. Henry and Frank stepped inside, stopped at the same time to take a deep smell, smile and then they found Joe in the back under a sink.

Frank leaned over the sink peering into the drain. "Hey Dad. What would happen if I turned the faucet on right now."

Joe looked up as he laid on his back. "My foot would go straight up your ass."

"Oh." Frank stepped back. "Henry needs to talk to you."

"What is it Henry, I'm busy helping you."

"Joe." Henry looked down through the drain peering through the hole at Joe. "Frank told me that El . . ."

"Yes." Joe answered.

"I didn't ask you anything.

"If you're asking me if what Frank told you is true. Yes, it's true."

"Joe, you mean to tell me Ellen and I aren't married?"

"Nope." Joe grunted. "Who the hell put these washers on last, Christ they're tight."

Henry scratched his head and stepped back. "It's a Slagel thing isn't it? Both of you are in this together."

With a deep echo from yelling back up the drain to them, Joe spoke. "Frank, he needs proof. Go get Reverend Bob and all three of you go to history."

Frank faced Henry. "You heard my Dad, you want proof?"

"Yeah I want proof." Henry walked ahead of him. "And I know you're joking. But if you're not. You're just loving this aren't you Frank."

"Who me?" Frank laid his hand on his chest happy he walked behind Henry so Henry couldn't see his smile. "I'm torn up that this has happened to my two closest friends."

(6)

"So you see Henry." Reverend Bob spoke with compassion as they hit the door to history. "That is how it went down. I am so sorry."

Henry's head swayed. "I can't believe this."

"Sorry." Reverend Bob opened the history door. "This should be your final proof."

Trish looked up from her book with a wide smile as Frank, Henry and Reverend Bob walked into her domain. "Afternoon. What brings you to history?"

Reverend Bob approached the desk. "We need to show Henry the list of marriages filed here."

Trish pulled to in front of her, the purple appointment book. She opened it. "You don't have an appointment. Would you like to make one?"

All three of them looked at each other.

Trish flipped another page. "You know the new rules. You can't view history without an appointment."

Reverend Bob tried to reason. "Trish dear. It'll only take a second. Henry needs to see."

"Please Trish." Henry asked.

Trish looked like she thought about it, then quickly shook her head. "I'm sorry. I need to prepare and if I break the rules for you, everyone who wants to review history will think they don't have to have an appointment. Then I'll have mass confusion in here."

Frank threw his hands up. "Who the fuck ever wants to view history."

Trish gasped. "I'll have you know, lots of people find it interesting reading. Especially the event files."

"Well, we have an appointment." Frank said.

"Where?" Trish asked.

"Right there." Frank pointed and shut her book. "So there."

"Hey!" She reopened it. "I'll make an appointment if you like."

"Then make it for now." Frank tried not to argue.

"How about . . ." Trish picked up her pen. "Tomorrow at two?"

"How about now?" Frank insisted then he leaned into Reverend Bob and Henry. "We're going in." Frank cleared his throat and motioned his head to behind Trish. "Hey Trish. You uh . . . got a fax."

"I do?" She turned her head and quickly turned back when she saw them rushing the back room door. "Stop!" She stood up. "I'll call security."

Frank stepped to her. "I *am* security!"

"Then you know rules are rules." She waved her finger at him. "And why do you want to see the marriages Henry. Just ask Dean, I showed him the whole list this morning."

Henry slid in a stop and turned around as she sat calmly back behind her desk. "You showed Dean?"

"Yeah." Frank pointed. "Why's that? Did he have an appointment?"

Henry stopped Frank from saying anymore. "Trish, did you know me and Ellen aren't really married?"

"Oh sure Henry." Trish said. "The paper work was never filed with me. Reverend Bob always does that timely. He's so good about it." She giggled.

"But Trish." Henry continued. "You heard me and Ellen call each

other husband and wife, for how long? Why didn't you say anything sooner."

"Well I thought that's what you called each other. You are dedicated and . . . you live together." She shrugged. "Lots of people did that in the old world."

"So you told this to Dean?"

"Yes." Trish answered.

Henry faced Reverend Bob. "And Dean told *you* this?" He saw Reverend Bob nod. "And you told Joe, and Frank overheard. Dean started this all?" He turned back to Trish again. "And all because you opened your mouth to Dean. Aw Man Trish. Dean?" Henry stomped and whined. "Dean?" he stepped back. "I can't believe you told him first instead of me." He saw she really didn't pay attention to him. "You know what Trish. You . . . you . . . you suck!"

"Hey!" Trish immediately stood up when Henry stormed out. "I'm telling Joel!"

Frank watched as Reverend Bob, looking so guilty, followed Henry out. Trying not to laugh and looking understanding, Frank laid his hand on Trish's shoulder guiding her totally upset being back into the chair. "You know what Trish, you don't suck. In fact. You're one of my favorite people in Beginnings today."

"Thanks Frank." Trish still looked sad.

"Keep up the good work." He moved to the door. "And you did the right thing. This needed to come out. Don't let Henry make you feel bad." He opened it. "I appreciate what you did." Walking out, Frank clenched his fist with a 'Yes!' and trudged off to find Henry and Reverend Bob.

(7)

It was late, as expected when Ellen and Dean left quarantine. They walked slowly to the row of houses which they both lived. Their pace not as fast as when they first dropped off the jeep at the garage.

Ellen stopped walking a house before her own. "He's still awake."

"Henry's an insomniac, what did you think?"

"Should I tell him tonight Dean?"

"As soon as possible. El." He placed his hands on her shoulders. "This isn't really that big a deal. So you aren't married, so what."

"I guess you're right. Hey." She smiled. "At least I have this to cheer him up if he gets upset." She held up a disk case. "The program to those SUTs."

"Let's hope that Henry doesn't get pissed, since he has been working on that for eight months."

"He'll be relieved." Ellen moved toward her steps. "Goodnight, Dean. Thanks for today."

"Night El." Slowly he leaned forward and kissed her softly, "Good luck."

"Thanks." She stepped up one step. "Dean?"

"Yes." He turned to face her.

"Are you happy that Henry and I aren't really married?"

"Yes and no. No, because if Frank finds out he's gonna screw up everything we have going. And Yes, I love you El. I don't want you married to anyone else."

"Not even Henry?"

"Not even Henry."

Ellen reached for the door. "What about Frank?"

"Night El." Dean smiled and kept walking.

Something told Ellen when she stepped into her home, it wasn't going to go as planned. That something was Frank who stood up from the couch the second she walked in the door. "What's going on?" She asked.

Henry slowly stood also. "Hey El." He walked to her. "How was quarantine?"

"Boring. And how come no one came to visit me up there?" She asked. "Did you forget about me?"

"No." Henry shook his head and led her to the couch. "El, there's something I have to tell you."

Ellen sat down. "Did someone die?"

"No." Henry sat next to her. "El, remember how we got married on April Fools day?"

"Henry." Ellen tried to stop him to tell him she knew, but Henry kept talking.

"Well, we were fooled El. Reverend Bob never really married us. It was a joke. We aren't married."

Ellen gasped dramatically loud. "Oh no!"

"Yes." Henry lowered his head.

"Oh no."

Frank rolled his eyes at her reaction. "Enough." He walked around the couch. "She knows Henry. This surprise thing is an act."

Henry lifted his head. "You knew?"

"Yes Henry, Dean told me."

"Dean?" Henry sprang up. "Dean has a big mouth El. He's gone and told everyone in this community, I swear." Henry stated to pace.

"Henry calm down." Ellen tried not to laugh. "It's all right."

"No it's not all right El. It sucks. It really sucks. And to top it all off. Joe yelled at me." Henry nodded once. "He yelled at me for yelling at Trish for opening her mouth."

"Henry." Ellen grabbed his arm from stopping his circle walk. "It's O.K., if you think about it, it's really kind of funny."

"Funny?!" Henry's voice raised. "It's not funny El! I thought I was married to you. I'm not. There's not one single thing funny about it."

Nothing.” With a turn of his heels, Henry stormed up the stairs, leaving the essence of his anger behind.

Frank whistled. “I think I’m out of here.”

“What did you do Frank?” Ellen asked him. “Torment him all day?”

“Who me?” Frank laid his hand on his chest. “El, I’m crushed. I’ve been very supportive of his moods.”

“You supportive?”

“Yeah. I’ve been a fuckin’ godsend. But . . .” Frank backed up to the door. “I’m tired of his menstrual moods. So I’ll let you deal with him now.”

“Frank.” Ellen walked to him. “We found something out today.”

“What’s that?”

“Robbie and his men have one of the two strains from the future. And while checking we realized there was a third. And only one person in the future, oddly enough had that isolated strain of the virus. One person.”

“Who was that?”

“Get this.” Ellen folded her arms. “Jenny Matoose.”

“I’m not real good with viruses and such. But that can’t happen can it? One person have something different.”

“Nope.” Ellen shook her head.

“Well then could someone have given it to her?” Frank asked.

“We think.”

Frank’s eyes widened in thought and then they shifted to the steps when Henry appeared. “We’ll talk tomorrow El. Thanks for letting me know that.” He slid his hand across her face then he reached for the doorknob. “Let me know what else you come up with. Night Henry.”

Ellen didn’t even know he was there. She turned around quickly after Frank left. “Henry?”

“I stormed up the steps El. It was your clue to follow me.” He walked by her and sat on the couch.

“Henry.” Ellen joined him. “Please don’t be upset about this. We’re not married. So what? We’ll just get married again.”

“But what if it’s a sign El. Maybe we ended up not being married because we weren’t supposed to get married.”

“True.” Ellen thought about it. “Or . . . maybe we ended up not being married because we’re not supposed to be married now.”

“Whatever the reason. It sucks.” Henry tossed his hand outward.

“Does this mean you won’t marry me again?”

“You still want to get married?” Henry asked.

“Oh sure I do Henry. I like being married to you. But maybe Henry the reason we’re not really married is because we weren’t honest about it.” She turned and faced him. “Perhaps if we weren’t so sneaky it wouldn’t have been a joke on us.”

“I took our vows very seriously.”

“Me too.” Ellen went silent. “Henry, we didn’t take any vows.”

“We didn’t?” Henry gave an odd look. “I thought we did.”

"Nope that was the dedication."

"You're right." He snapped his finger. "So then we should get married. And you know what El, let's get married for real. I mean instead of in Reverend Bob's livingroom."

"Yeah. And let's have a little ceremony. We can do Reverend Bob's little marriage classes too. Come to think of it Henry, didn't we think it was odd that he waived the classes for us?"

"We should have known right there El. When do you want to do this?"

"If we have a little ceremony. Me, you and Joe, then we should wait at least until the Robbie crisis is over. If you can wait that long."

"Oh I can wait that long." Henry said. "Besides, you won't have time to do those classes anyhow until the crisis is over. So it'll take a month or two. But you know what El, we'll be married for real."

"We will." Ellen patted his knee and stood up.

"And we'll have done it right. We should have done that the last time El. And it would have been so easy to . . ." Henry stopped mid thought, his expression dropped.

"Henry?" Ellen snapped her finger in front of his face. "Finish."

"No, nothing. Where are you going?"

"To get something to drink. Want something?"

"No. Go on." Henry stared out.

"Henry, are you all right?" Ellen asked.

"Fine El. Get your drink." Tapping his fingers against his thighs as Ellen left the room Henry had a hard flash back on why they didn't do it right the first time. The word 'Easy' is what did it. Marrying Ellen wasn't easy back then. Not because he didn't want to, but because he was marrying the woman that his best friend loved. Henry carried a certain guilt around at first because of that. He had a loyalty to Frank. A loyalty and debt that some would say Henry shouldn't have had. But when it all boiled down. If it weren't for Frank, Henry wouldn't have been with Ellen, and Henry knew it. He believed that. Maybe that was why Henry felt it so strongly when he saw the hurt and anger in Frank's eyes when he found out that he and Ellen had married. A part of Henry believed that the illegitimacy of the marriage was a justification of the betrayal Henry felt he had done to Frank. A betrayal no one could possibly understand. It was something Henry swore he would never do to Frank, but he did. And . . . was about to do again.

"Boy are you in thought." Ellen sat down again on the couch next to him. "Thinking about getting married."

"As a matter of fact El, I am."

"Good." She leaned to him and kissed him on the cheek. "Though it may take some time, we'll get there." She watched Henry's head drop. "Henry? Are you sure you aren't upset that it's gonna take so long. We can see what we can do about that. We can talk to Reverend Bob and see . . ."

"No El." Henry slid his hand over hers. "Waiting is fine. We can take our time. Really." He gave a sad smile and kissed her softly. "I can wait."

Releasing her hand he wrapped his arm around her and pulled Ellen into him. “We’ll do the right thing.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

JULY 10

(1)

Why he didn't see it his first pass through to the kitchen, Henry didn't know. Maybe it was because the house was so dark and his focus was on making a cup of coffee. But he saw it as he walked from the kitchen. The steam from the coffee nearly burning his nostrils as he paused to see it on the dining room table.

Wrapped in a cloth, it's five inch by five inch size sat there staring at him. Henry's name placed on a piece of paper in front of it. For as bad as he wanted to unwrap it, Henry unfolded the note with his name on. From Ellen it read, *'Henry, you were pretty down last night,. Thought you'd like to start this day off better.'* When did Ellen place the gift there? Was it there all night? Knowing Ellen she certainly didn't get up while he was in the shower, she had to have snuck from bed the night before to put it there. Which meant one thing. Ellen must have seriously napped in quarantine if she stayed up past him.

His heart told him what it was, but Henry couldn't wait to see it. And there it was. Cyborg-genic Lobel Programming was written on the front of the plastic case. Flipping it open to see the round disk for himself--not that staring at the shiny object would tell him anything--another note fell out. A small one, merely saying *'Hank, I think this is it. Robbie.'*

Henry stared at that disk for the longest time. His mind wandering to how long it would take him to learn the program. What all the program entailed. Would the program work with the way Henry hooked up the microchip? All of the answers to those questions and any he ever had on what exactly they could program the SUT to do, lay in the palm of his hand. But unfortunately, those answers would have to wait. He had a full schedule in Mechanics and Henry knew if he sat at that computer and played with that program, no one would find him.

Taking a long drink of his hot coffee, Henry flipped over the note Ellen gave him, grabbed a pen and wrote 'thank you' on the blank side. He shut the cover to the disk, picked up Robbie's little note and placed them both in his utility bag. Carrying that bag, his tool bag, and his coffee, Henry left his house that morning--as usual--before the rising sun. And like Ellen hoped, he did have a better start to this day.

(2)

The moans, possibly cries of pain woke Robbie from the sleep he was finally getting. How long did he sleep? One hour? Two? Not much. Because like the long night that rest behind him, the day was starting out

the same. The sounds of the day surrounding him drowned out by the cries of those who suffered at the hands of an illness Robbie was at a loss to help ease.

Rubbing his eyes he stood up and let the foggiess clear from his mind. He thought of his new routine. The wiping down of the fevered, the administering of pain reliever, the compassion and patience he felt himself losing. Everything he did was another painful step in a battle he wasn't ready to face. And as Robbie moved to his men, he saw yet another stumbling block that took him back. Though he expected it, like the virus, he wasn't ready for it. And it became even more of a scarey sight as Robbie stood in the just breaking day. He stood now the only healthy remaining man. Greg and the original two exposed had slipped from their remission back to the plague they had thought they beat. And Robbie realized at that moment, what remission really meant. Though it gave Greg and the two men time to rest and rebuild their strength, it also gave the virus time to do that as well. Only the virus was proving to be the stronger of them all. Because it shook Greg's body, and now was ravaging it far more violently than it had done in the first round of the fight.

(3)

"You know Henry, I think this is actually a good idea." Frank walked quickly down the row of houses. "Don't you?"

"Most definitely. I had my doubts when we first talked about it."

"Me too." Frank adjusted the duffel bag he toted around his shoulder. "This first week is so crucial."

"It is Frank. And we have a lot to learn about him. We might as well all learn together."

"True. I even have Josh staying with Johnny this week while we all adjust. Then after this week we can sit down and work something out like I have with Dean, right?"

"Oh sure." Henry told him. "But you know when Nick is with me and El, you are more than welcome to be over."

"And vice versa."

"Thanks Frank."

"No Henry." Frank stopped walking. "Thank *you*." Frank took on a serious look. "I really mean it. Thank you. I think things are working out between all of us. And I'm starting to be happy again and it's all because you're letting El back in my life."

"It's not that I'm letting her Frank. If it's going that way it's because it's meant to be."

"Still. I know you've said things to her. I appreciate it. But answer me this. Why are you saying things to her? I just need to know and be honest Henry."

"I'm saying things to her about you two because I think the three of us

is the way to go. After all an understanding works best when the two men get along as well as the men with the woman. We get along Frank. You're my friend. And we've proven that the three of us can do this."

"We can." Frank smiled and reached for his front door and walked in. "El is he sleeping?"

Ellen quickly looked back from her seat on the couch. "I don't know." She looked over at the small cradle a few feet from her. "Out."

"El." Frank laid the duffle bag down. "Aren't you holding him?"

"No Frank. Look at all this work. I'm recalculating formulas and going over future history files. He's sleeping, why would I hold him?" She turned her head to see Henry move toward her, stepping over the duffel bag center livingroom. "Hi Henry. Is that my bag."

"Yep." Henry walked to her, kissed her, smiled and then went to the cradle with Frank. "What's he doing Frank?"

"Sleeping again." Frank looked back at Ellen. "When did he eat last?"

Ellen let out an annoyance breath. "About ten minutes after your last visit an hour ago, Why are you guys back?"

Frank held his hand out. "To bring you your clothes and see Nick cause he's not in that clinic anymore." Frank leaned down into the cradle. "I think he needs exercise Henry."

"Exercise Frank?"

"Oh sure. When you hold a baby this small, it works their muscles just as much as you and I would say, running."

"No shit. Maybe we should hold him."

Ellen watched them linger over the cradle. "I'm gonna take my bag up. Frank. Which room has room for my clothes."

"Uh . . ." Frank looked at her then quickly to the baby. "My room."

"Henry?" Ellen called as she picked up her bag. "Where are your clothes?"

Watching the baby too, Henry answered . "Over our house. I can run home in the morning."

"Well I'll just . . ." Ellen backed up to the steps with her bag. "Take this heavy bag . . ." She was ignored. Henry and Frank took the baby from the cradle. "Take this upstairs. Fuck it." Giving up and admitting defeat at the hands of the tiny new addition, Ellen took the bag upstairs and into Frank's bedroom.

She slowed down the moment she stepped inside. Frank had cleaned it up well. She took her bag and laid it on the bed. The second her hand released the handle, Ellen found herself staring down at that bed in a daze of familiarity. She smiled and ran her hand lightly across the pillow in a warmth of remembrance.

Breathing outward her reminiscing, she unzipped the bag and looked at the clothes Frank had packed for her. So neat, folded tightly too. She reached down for the four shirts he had placed on top so as not to wrinkle, and she carried them over to the dresser. "Now let's see how much room

you left me Frank.” She opened the top drawer to the right expecting to see it half empty, and it wasn’t. It was filled to the top like it had been when Ellen lived there before. Wondering if her had done so, Ellen reached to the drawer next to it and discovered, Frank did. He rearranged the drawers like they used to be when Ellen lived there.

Placing the tee-shirts in the drawer neat, Ellen closed it and turned to walk to her bag again. A step or two into it, it dawned on her that the last time she was in that dresser was also the time she found that hidden bottle of moonshine.

It hadn’t been that long ago that she found it and that Frank had promised to control his drinking. Shrugging off her curiosity, Ellen finished going to the duffle bag and she pulled out the small stack of shorts. Thinking how good Frank packed for her, she took them to the dresser and laid them on top. Reaching for the second drawer, Ellen’s hands hesitated. A part of her wondered and had to know. And because of her desire to see if Frank was keeping his word, Ellen moved her hand to the second drawer on the left. Gripping the handles she pulled it open, as she did, she jumped at the soft call of her name.

“El?” Frank stepped into the bedroom. “You all right?”

“Just putting my clothes away. What are you doing here?”

“I have to go back to work. I wanted to say good bye. And, Henry’s alone down there so don’t be too long.”

“I won’t.” She smiled “See you tonight?”

“See you tonight.” Frank backed up to the door and then he stopped. “Oh El. Just incase I forget to tell you. Even though it’s short term. It’s good to have you back.” He moved to her laying his hand on her face. Very gently he pressed his lips to hers, then kissed her quickly again. “Thanks El. And I promise you, you won’t regret this.”

“I know I won’t Frank.” Before Ellen could say anymore, Frank had wrapped his arms around her and embraced her tightly, one that she returned..

“I’d better go.” Stepping back Frank kissed Ellen on the cheek. “See you tonight.” He walked to the door. “And pay attention to Nick.”

Just as she was about to say ‘I will’ Frank had winked and then he had left.

Ellen stood there before that dresser with Frank’s drawer still half opened. She knew Frank was gone and she knew where she was just seconds before he walked in. And right there and then, she was grateful for the interruption. “What was I thinking. I trust Frank. I trust him.” Grabbing on to her shorts that were stacked on the dresser, she opened her own drawer. Even if it was something so minor as checking out his drawer, Ellen felt guilty, because she was checking up on Frank. And she had never done that before. Without hesitation she shut Frank’s partially open drawer. But had she looked down, she would have seen that the bottle that she dumped and threw out not long ago, was simply replaced by another and

tucked in the side of that drawer.

(4)

Where was Dean? Joe questioned in his mind as he looked at his watch waiting for him in his office. Could Dean ever be on time for anything? They were to call Robbie from the office close to twenty minutes earlier. Joe would have himself, but Dean was supposed to give Robbie instructions on some medical procedure or something. Rubbing his eyes which felt strained from looking at food projections and preliminary work ups for a metal run in two weeks, Joe felt his elbow hit his ashtray and it toppled to the floor. "Shit." Bending down sideways from his chair to pick it up, Joe heard the door to his office open. "Bout goddamn time you . . ." He sat up and shut up when he saw it wasn't Dean who walked in. "Yes?"

Ben from fabrics walked in first, Todd a much bigger man behind him. Both of them stood before Joe's desk, both of them a foot apart with arms crossed.

"What?" Joe barked. "Are you gonna stare down at me or say something?"

Ben let out a sighing sound. "Joe, you have to do something about us working together." He spoke so femininely, his hand flying about.

"Like what?" Joe asked.

"We can't work together Joe." Ben continued. "I can't work with this man."

"Can't work with *me*?" Todd stomped his foot with an open mouth gasp. "Me? You can't work with me?"

"That's what I said."

"Who's the one who's being a baby about all of this." Todd pointed. "You."

"Me?"

"Yes you. Big baby. Crying because you don't have your way. Oh the grass is always greener now isn't it?" Todd nodded his head. "But when you see you can't pasture that field what do you do? You come running home. Well I don't want you and because of that, you don't want to work with me."

"I could work with you Todd but you stopped treating me with the respect I deserve there. Like today, when I mixed up that new shade of blue dye. What did you do? You criticized."

"I did not!" Todd strongly objected. "I merely stated it was a weak color."

"Criticized." Ben faced Joe. "He criticized."

"Why are you bringing Mr. Slagel into this. You think he can put you somewhere else? What can you do? I can field, but I'm not fielding. No-no."

"Joe do you hear how he talks to me? Lack of respect. I can't take it Joe. I can not work with this beast anymore."

"Beast? I'll have you know for two years I treated you pretty damn good. I was . . ." Todd stopped yelling when the door opened and in walked Dean. With a extended hand he pointed at him. "YOU!" He scolded toward Dean. "This is all your fault. We wouldn't be standing here if it wasn't for you."

Dean looked at them and at Joe, and then Dean turned around and walked back out the door.

Joe stood up from his desk. "No. Request denied. I am not putting either of you anywhere else but in fabrics. Tough. You aren't together anymore. Tough, deal with it, work around it." He walked to them and led them to his door. "And if I didn't give new work to my daughter and Dean when they broke up, I'm not giving it to you. Out." He opened the door. "And don't bother me with this again. Go . . . go to Henry, he's on council and he'll listen." As they stepped out, Joe shut the door. "Christ. And they scared away Dean too." Shaking his head he went back to his desk, tsked at the ashes on the floor and sat back down. As he did the door opened back up and Dean walked in.

"Is it safe Joe?" He shut the door in a sneaky manner.

"What kind of trouble did you start between them two?" Joe grabbed a cigarette and lit it.

"Must you smoke?" Dean fake coughed and sat down. "And it wasn't me. It was Ellen, she told, never mind. Are we going to call Robbie now?"

"I've talked to him twice." Joe pushed his work aside and pulled out his phone. "He's going a little crazy. He hasn't a clue how to take this blood right, especially when they're convulsing."

"It's not easy to do." Dean listened to Joe dial.

"Robbie." Joe spoke loudly through the noise of the reception. "How's it going?"

"It's going? Is Dean there yet?" Robbie asked.

"Right here." Joe handed him the phone.

"Robbie?" Dean called his name. "Listen, it's not important that you get the sample it they are convulsing too much. Don't try it."

"But you said you needed a sample of the blood when they come out of remission." Robbie said.

"True but you're working hard enough. Just let it go." Dean told him.

"Dean I have all the stuff right here. Just tell me."

"O.K. how bad is he shaking?"

Robbie looked down at Greg whose body trembled so badly it could have moved from his sleeping bag. "Bad."

"Robbie, after you've placed on the tourniquet, I need you to secure his arm between your arm and body. Got that. Arm extended. But make sure all of your supplies are handy."

Robbie positioned himself to do that. He placed on the tourniquet and

followed Dean's instructions. "Got it."

"Do you have the tube partially in the hub? The hub is the plastic thing with the needle sticking from it."

"It's ready."

"Do you see the vein?"

"Yes."

"Brace the vein between your forefinger and thumb with you one hand then insert the hub into the vein, with the other. Slow, but not too slow."

Robbie grunted some as he struggled with Greg. "He's really moving Dean."

"Then don't do it. Because you don't want to stick your . . ."

"Ow." Robbie exclaimed.

"Robbie?" Such panic filled Dean's voice. "Drop what you're doing and clean that out. Right now. Do you hear me?"

"I'm joking Dean. I'm joking. I got the blood. The tube is filling."

Dean let out a breath and looked at Joe who looked just as frazzled. "God Robbie don't do that to us. We thought you stuck yourself with a contaminated needle."

"I'm fine and I have the blood. Just tell Frank or whoever it'll be ready tomorrow."

"Thanks Robbie. Good job."

"Thanks." Robbie said. "And I have to go. I'll talk to you later. Tell my Dad I'll be in touch."

"I will." Closing his eyes briefly, Dean disconnected the call. "He had to go. By the background noise things don't sound good."

"It didn't sound good for a second when it sounded like he stuck himself. That would have been bad, Dean right?"

"Right Joe." Dean shook his head. "Good thing your son as a sick sense of humor. He's been lucky so far, but a stick with a dirty needle is a sure fire way to get it. He was lucky." Dean handed Joe back the phone then leaned in the chair letting his racing heart calm down and telling himself Robbie was only joking.

(5)

Robbie covered Greg fully then stood up still holding that tube of blood in his hand. He walked it to the case in which Beginnings would pick up the next day. After setting it inside, Robbie took a second to sit down. He plopped hard on the grass and ran his hand over his face. He had a hard time catching his breath, and his heart beat strong within his chest. And it beat even stronger when he brought his hand up to the focus of his eyes and he viewed the bead of blood that formed on the inside portion of his thumb. Blood from the very spot that the needle he had just used on Greg, slipped from his control and jabbed deep into his skin.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

(1)

Ellen cringed one more time at the noise factor in Frank's house, then she smiled and moved to the door. "Frank, you sure you'll be all right with all of these guys and the baby until Dean picks them up?"

"El, please." Frank scoffed at her while he held Nick. "Henry's here."

"Speaking of which, where is . . ." She smiled when Henry came from the kitchen. "What were you doing?"

"You forgot your rice cakes El." Henry handed her the plate. "You can't show up empty handed if all the other women are bringing something. That'll just give them something that they can talk about you with."

"Do you think they talk about me Henry?" Ellen took the rice cakes. "You don't think they'll be mean to me, do you?"

"Anything is possible El. But you know the age old saying. Kill them with kindness."

Frank shook his head. "Fuck that. Just kill Jenny Matoose with kindness, don't worry about the rest of them. And why are you wearing lipstick?" Frank extended his hand to her mouth. "Maybe if you just rubbed a little . . ."

"Frank." Ellen smacked his hand away. "I want to look good. And leave my make up alone. Do I look all right Henry?"

"Beautiful El." Henry kissed her on the cheek.

"Thanks Henry." She smiled at him then stuck her tongue out to Frank. "I should be going."

Henry reached for the door for her. "I'll wait up for you El."

"Thanks Henry. And if this gets too much for you why don't you go work on that program Robbie sent. You haven't done that too much today."

"Oh No!" Frank said loudly. "Henry stays right here. He has to learn El. He was real good when Nick was in the clinic, but now's the reality check. He stays put. At least until Nick is asleep for the night. And I'll wait up for you too." He kissed her on her cheek then hurried and wiped some of her lipstick off. "Better."

"Frank!!" Ellen yelled. "See what you did. I look pale now."

"You look better. And go."

"I'm going." Ellen breathed in a nervous breath and stepped through the door "Wish me luck with the wolves." Holding her rice cakes with confidence she trotted off to Jenny's house.

Frank closed the door and walked to Henry nearly tripping over Alex who flew by him. He laughed when he saw Henry panic. "We're fine Henry. In fact." Frank moved closer. "Hold Nick for a while. I have to do dishes."

"No, that's O.K. Frank." Henry stuck his hands in his pockets. "You can hold him."

"Henry hold the baby."

"Maybe if I sit down."

"You don't need to sit down, he's not that heavy." Frank held Nick to him. "Hold him."

"I'd rather not. I might drop him or break him."

"Break him." Frank laughed in ridicule. "You aren't going to break him Henry. What is it? Don't you like him?"

"Oh I love him." Henry backed away. "But he scares me. And he scares me even more out of the clinic. In that contained space he looked much larger. I'll wait until he's bigger. But you hold him Frank." Henry sat on the couch. "He likes you."

"He likes me because I'm the only one who holds him. God Henry, when you and Ellen have this kid, he's gonna feel abandoned."

"That isn't a very nice thing to say Frank. I'll take care of him. I'll learn,. But I'll wait right now. Why isn't he laying down anyhow, he's sleeping."

"Baby's always sleep Henry. And I'll lay him down." Frank moved to the basinet. "But when he wakes up, you're on preemie detail." Gently laying the baby down, Frank covered him, ignored Henry's whistling and he went to the kitchen to finish cleaning up.

(2)

The laughter, the chattering, the clanking of glasses just stopped to a dead silence the moment Ellen stepped inside Jenny's livingroom.

Jenny closed her door. "Your presence is known." She took the plate from Ellen. "Rice cakes?"

"It's all I can make." Ellen stared at the faces that stared back. Sixteen other women huddled in folding chairs, on the floor and on the furniture in Jenny's livingroom. She wiggled her fingers in a wave at them. "Kind of reminds me of the old Tupperwear parties. Are you our hostess Jenny?"

"Are we gonna have to ask you to leave?"

"No, I'll be good."

"Go have a seat we're ready to start."

"Just one thing." Ellen held up her hand. "How long are we usually in these meetings?"

"Ready to go already?"

"No." Ellen snapped sarcastically. "I want to know how long I get out of my house for?"

"It depends, three hours. Maybe."

"Great. I'll have a seat." She walked further into the livingroom, stepping over Melissa who sat on the floor, hitting her in the head with her leg as she did so. "Sorry." Ellen moved to the couch. "Can I?" She looked down at Trish who sat on the couch and Susan who sat next to her. "Can I

squeeze in here?" Ellen waited for Susan to move some. She sat down, knowing she had the good seat because the coffee table was filled with finger foods everyone brought. She leaned to Trish who sat perky and ready for things to start. "Trish." Ellen whispered. "Am I allowed to eat?"

"Oh sure. Help yourself."

"Thanks."

Jenny took her position standing before the women in the livingroom. "If everyone's ready, we'll get started." She noticed that Cindy, a thin woman with extremely short hair raised her hand. "Yes Cindy?"

"Should we be watching what we say tonight?" She pointed to Ellen.

Ellen looked up as she stuck the piece of celery in her mouth. "What?"

Jenny shook her head. "No, we're not walking on eggshells. Ellen wants to join our group. After all, she is in the same boat as all of us. The only difference is, she isn't as advanced in handling the situations as us. Perhaps we can help her. Right Ellen?"

Ellen chewed. "Right. I want to learn. And my God, who made this dip? This is excellent." She grabbed another piece of celery and dipped it thoroughly.

Jenny continued on. "We'll get the women's progress portion done first. Yes Ellen?"

Ellen swallowed her food. "Just curious Jenny. You guys aren't starting the next women's lib movement are you?"

"No." Jenny said.

"Good. Because I like not having to do as much as the men."

"We all do Ellen. We all like getting treated special. And we are, because they aren't that many of us left in this world. The men need us and we know it. And they know it too. The whole purpose of these meetings is to hash out problems we have dealing with being a necessity at times more than a asset." Jenny explained. "Problems, everyday mind you, that we all have juggling more than one man. Spreading ourselves around because it's the right thing to do, and smiling about it can wear thin. This is our outlet. This is where we try to make it tolerable when it's not. Understand?"

"Completely." Ellen held up her hand. "Go on." She grabbed for another vegetable.

"Continuing." Jenny looked at a sheet of paper. "I thought after women's progress portion and after we discuss what needs to be brought to attention to the community, we could do something a little different. Instead of our typical problem and solution time, we could incorporate that into the open forum discussion before our activity. But let's focus on Ellen today. Let's let her ask us questions and show her how we work. In agreement?" She waited for a nod from everyone. "Ellen? Is that all right with you?"

"Oh sure. I need all the help I can get. And what's this red dip." Ellen looked closely at the bowl. "It looks good, is it made with ketchup. Trish I bet you made this." Ellen reached to try it.

Jenny moved on with the meeting. "Progress time. I wanted to let you know I spoke with Joe. And he's giving consideration to our request to make the first menstrual day for all of us a work free day." Jenny stopped when she heard Ellen choke. "Problem Ellen?"

"No." Ellen shook her head. "Joe's actually considering that?"

"Yes. Special favor to the women who do special favors for the men. We deserve it."

"Sure we do." Ellen shrugged. "It's just funny. You know, of course he was being sarcastic, but that was also a Frank . . ." She heard a soft rumble of moans. ". . . idea." Her eyes shifted around. "Sorry."

"Getting back. If Joe agrees, I know some of you said you'd rather have it be your second day. I'm sure he'll be fine with that. We'll have to register your menstrual cycles with Andrea for verification. And ladies, I'm going to discuss with Joe that even though it's our day off, we don't have to deal with any children if we have them. We still get nursery privileges."

Ellen laughed loudly grabbing everyone's attention. "Don't get me wrong. I like this idea I do. I just can't visualize my father sitting seriously with you Jenny and discussing menstrual cycles. You know one time I tried to talk to him and Frank . . ." She looked oddly at another humming of moans. ". . . about it and they shut me up. Like now. Sorry. I'll eat my dip."

Jenny continued to read down her notes. "Here's what I have to bring to Joe's attention during this upcoming week. I want to discuss that when Beginnings makes shoes they think of us more and give us at least one more style to choose from. Flats perhaps? Instead of those dime store sneaker things we are made." She received a room full of applause. "I spoke to Ben from fabrics. He has designed a new pair of slacks for us. Something that will flatter us fuller figure gals. He said he can make them right away and in a nice shade of blue as soon as Joe O.K.'s. I'll move Joe along on that."

Ellen listened to Jenny ramble on about clothing items, ladies day at the social hall and such. And the whole time while she listened, Ellen couldn't help but laugh at the thought of Jenny discussing such trivial things with Joe. She knew Joe would hear about it from her the second she saw him.

"And finally before we move on to open forum and questions. I have picked the two who will bless our monthly dart game that will be tonight's creative activity. I have to tell you, all of you gave good reasons, but the two men who will be the targets tonight will be." Jenny walked to the dining room table and held up two large sheets of paper. "Cole from the fields." She showed a sketch of Cole with a target on his face. "And Richard 'the dick' Hartford from plastics." She held up another sketch with a target on it. "And let's remember to thank Forrest for our dart boards. He did a great job as always."

This whole thing grabbed Ellen's attention. "We throw darts at pictures of the men?"

"Yes. Once a month. And the men we throw darts at are chosen from entries I was given. You write down a reason and I chose the best two."

"I like this." Ellen smiled. "So let's say next month I want us to throw darts at Frank . . ." A rumble of moans. " . . . all I would have to do is write down why?"

"Yes." Jenny stated. "Easy enough. Now, before we begin open forum. Meredith, how was the helpful tips we gave you on dumping the extension partner you picked up."

Meredith, a tall woman, big and brawny held her hand up with a smile. "Wonderful. I followed the advice you gave. I was direct with him. I told him I was with him only to help him through that lonely period and he understood. Him and Kevin are speaking again."

"Good." Jenny nodded. "Anyone else have anything they may need answers to that we can Help. Yes Ellen?"

Ellen raised her hand. "You said you'd let me ask questions. I have one now if I can ask."

"Sure." Jenny folded her arms.

"What is up with old men in this community. Why are the seven old guys all snatched up? And snatched up not as extension partners as you call them. They're secondary relationships."

Jenny lifted her shoulders. "Ellen, they're taken right away. Maybe if you want an older gentleman you might want to let Joe know for the next survivor run. We told him to keep his eye out for some."

"What?" Ellen was shocked. "No, I don't want an older gentleman. I want to know why you women do?" There was a silence in the room. "Am I missing something?"

Melissa nodded slowly with a smile and closed eyes. "Obviously you are if you have to ask."

Ellen giggled. "This is a joke right? You just feel sorry for them?"

Melissa shook her head. "No Ellen, not at all. Those of us who are fortunate enough to have secured an older gentlemen do not feel sorry for them. We enjoy them."

"Enjoy them?" Ellen looked around. "You mean like stimulating conversation?"

"Stimulating yes." Melissa said. "Conversation, maybe."

Ellen's mouth dripped open. "Oh my God. You're joking. You actually have sex with them?"

Melissa looked oddly at her. "Of course we do. That's the only sex I find totally enjoyable and fulfilling." She saw more shock coming from Ellen. "They are gentle partners. Something happened to the young men in this world. They became rough. Not the older men. They are gentle and caressing."

"My Henry is gentle." Ellen commented.

Cindy decided to interject into the conversation. "That's what I thought about Dave too, until I slept with Glen, And I found out what gentle is. I forgot."

Ellen could feel her top lip start to curl. "But . . . but . . . their bodies.

Doesn't that take away from it."

Trish decided to answer that one. "Ellen." She laid her hand on Ellen's leg. "We all look the same when the lights go out."

"No we do not!" Ellen exclaimed. "We definitely do not. You could put me in a black room with a naked Dean, Frank . . ." She slowed at the moans that erupted. " . . . and Henry. And I'd know their bodies to touch them. Touch them mind you. None of those three feel the same. I'm a rear-end gal myself and let me tell you, I'll bet my life that Haps' butt in the dark feels nothing like Frank's . . ." The moans happened again. "Wait a second!" Ellen held up her hand. "Why do you women moan every single time I mention Frank's . . ." Moans again. "Name?"

Jenny crossed her arms as she answered. "Well to be blunt, none of us like Frank very much."

"None of you like Frank? None of you?" Ellen looked around. "What is wrong with Frank." She heard the moans. "And stop that."

Andrea who was silent spoke up. "You need to ask that. He's rude. He's rough and he's obnoxious. He isn't nice to anyone. And like you can't figure out what these women see in the older males, none of us can figure out what you see in Frank."

"I love Frank. I've known him all my life. And . . . I like him."

Andrea continued. "Would you still like him if you hadn't know him all your life?"

"Yes!" Ellen began to get defensive. "Frank's a great guy . . ." Moans that were louder rang out. "He is, and I find him very attractive, he's got the best body of all . . ." She cringed at the grumbling. "Not one of you women find him attractive?"

"Ellen." Jenny said. "Have you looked at Frank. He's . . . he's apocalyptically worn."

Ellen gasped loudly. "I can't believe you talk about him like that. Any of you. I feel bad. I feel really bad. He's my best friend and none of you appreciate him when you should. You ought to be ashamed of yourselves. Grumbling and moaning when his name is mentioned. What the fuck is wrong with you?" Ellen began to get hyper, standing up as she spoke. "Every single one of you can lay your heads on your pillows at night and sleep at ease knowing the animals of the world are kept outside our walls. Wanna know why? Because Frank trained our men to protect us like *he* does. Frank runs security. Frank *is* security. And the only thing in my book that stops him from earning a big fuckin 'S' on his chest, is the fact that he can't fly." She stormed from the circle. "And I'm going. Wait until I tell Henry about this." She moved to the door.

"Ellen." Jenny stopped her. "Why are you leaving? Because we are talking about Frank?"

"Yes." Ellen snapped. "I get very defensive about him. And for good reason. I'll admit that he's not the nicest man in the community, and I'm not saying you have to like him. I'm saying he should at least have your

respect for what he has done and does.”

“Ellen, we’ve always grumbled about Frank. But . . .” Jenny stopped her from leaving. “Frank has never had someone here to defend him. I defend John and have. Andrea has defended Joe. Melissa has defended Mark. No one thinks you’re wrong for speaking your mind and no one wants you to leave over it. That’s why this is open forum. We enlighten each other. And maybe you can enlighten us with some good Frank qualities so we can stop moaning about him all the time.”

“Well.” Ellen retracted her steps from the door. “I just spewed out most of his good qualities so we’re gonna have to rely on that list.”

Jenny smiled. “Come back to the meeting Ellen.” She motioned her hand to the room. “What you did, we all have done. And, you brought up a valid point about Frank.” Jenny gave a silencing look to the room for the women not to moan. “I think you’re right, Frank does protect this community well. And, I for on will thank him as soon as I see him tomorrow. Anyone else?” She looked to the women and saw a raise of hands. “Good.”

Ellen hid her snicker. How annoyed Frank would be if they actually all walked up to him and thanked him during the course of the day. “I like that idea.” She walked back to the livingroom sitting again between Trish and Susan reaching for more finger food. “Sorry for the outburst.” Ellen said, knowing she would have to make up for roaring like she did if she was to continue on her ‘be a Jenny friend’ plan.

“Quite all right.” Jenny held up her hand “We vent here. And maybe the reason for this venting has something to do with your newest problem.”

Ellen had to stop eating. Newest problem? Did she have a problem she didn’t know about. “Yeah, that’s probably it.”

“It must have been a shock.” Jenny commented. “To think you were married and to find out you weren’t. What are you and Henry going to do?”

“Well.” Ellen dusted off her hands. “We’re taking our time and planning a ceremony.”

Cindy’s interest was perked. “A ceremony? You mean like a wedding?” She saw Ellen nod. “Oh I can make a wedding cake. It’s been forever since I got to do that.”

Andrea scooted closer into the conversation. “Ellen you are going to have Joe give you away aren’t you?”

“I never thought . . .” Ellen couldn’t get a word out.

“A wedding.” Trish said excited. “A real wedding? Have we had a real wedding in Beginnings at all?”

“You mean with food and dancing and all?” Melissa asked. “I don’t think we have.”

Ellen held up her hand. “We weren’t thinking on . . .”

Jenny snapped her finger. “You know we *haven’t* had a real wedding here. Nothing big and certainly nothing like we had in the old world. Ellen you’ll need a dress. I could talk to Ben From Fabrics, he’s so tasteful and

talented. We're very close."

"Thanks but . . ." Again Ellen was interrupted.

"And if they're taking time to plan." Melissa said. "You should talk to Ben about a couple bridesmaids dresses. He could do that Jenny, couldn't he?"

"Oh I think he'd love to." Jenny looked down at Ellen. "How about that? There's never been bridesmaids in Beginnings."

Ellen opened her mouth to talk and nothing had a chance to come out.

"Oh!" Trish bounced her pregnant self in the seat. "Cole is making a metals run in a couple weeks. How big of a deal would it be for him to stop by a good mens store or tux shop. I could talk to him, he likes me you know."

"Men's store?" Ellen questioned. "Tux? What would . . ."

"Andrea could sing." Melissa injected. "Andrea sings so well. You'll sing won't you Andrea?"

"I'd be honored." Andrea reached out and grabbed Ellen's hand. "Thank you for asking."

Jenny clapped her hands together amidst the excitement chattering that filled the room. "Ladies I think we found our next group effort project. We're planning Ellen's wedding. This definitely beats the quilt we were going to work on."

'*Oh boy.*' was the only thing that could come to Ellen's mind. Figuring she had lost control somewhere, she grabbed another snack and sat back and listened to the planning. The women in the room had a new project that outshone the sewing thing. Her head spin as they spoke around her about clothing, food, entertainment and so forth. An old fashion wedding equipped with polkas. Ellen pegged it typical behavior in Beginnings. They always did find any reason for a party. And Ellen and Henry's seemed to be the next reason. Giving up, she let them plan. And as long as her work was minimal, it was 'what the hell' in Ellen's mind.

(3)

Frank watched the tiny little fingers of Alexandra run across the forehead of Nick while Frank held the baby in his arms, sitting at the diningroom table. He enjoyed watching her as she looked in such awe staring at her new brother. Her wet hair from her bath, dangling in her eyes.

"He's pretty." She said. "Can I hold him?"

"Sure." Frank smiled and teasingly tried to bite her fingers as they came close to his chin. "Then bed, all right?"

"O.K."

"On the couch. Go on." Frank motioned his head toward the livingroom. "Now you don't tell Billy or Joey. I'm letting *you* because you stayed here with *me* tonight."

"I want to help." Alexandra scooted herself on the couch. "I like helping."

Holding the baby, Frank knelt before her. "Now hold your arms right." He laid Nick in her arms and supported them. "There, watch his head."

"He's not heavy."

"No. Remember when Brain was almost this small?"

"Yes." She smiled as she held the baby.

"Now don't move him around too much. He just ate." Frank instructed, then looked up when he heard the footsteps and saw Henry coming down the steps. "There you are. What took you so long?"

"I had to clean up the bathroom after her bath Frank. Do you know she brings toys in the tub?"

"So do I Henry." Frank smiled then looked back at Alexandra. "Time for bed." He kissed her. "Go on up, I'll be up in a minute." He slowly took the baby back.

"Night." She slid from the couch and darted to Henry. "Night Henry. Thanks for playing with me." Quickly, her hair flipping about, she ran up the steps. Her bare feet made the tiniest of thumps as she did.

Standing up Frank looked at Henry who plopped so exhausted like in the chair. "What's wrong with you?"

"I feel really tired."

"Why?"

"You had me playing with children Frank. And then Alexandra. I swear you told her to wear me out."

"I told you Henry, her or him. And now I have to deal with Alexandra and you have to deal with . . ." He held the baby to him.

"No, Frank. I deal with Alex."

"Henry, this is your son. And to think I was about to have history make his name Kusakari. What the fuck? Hold him. I have to tuck Alex in."

"You won't be long will you?" Henry stood up.

"Why are you so afraid of this child. I changed him. I fed him. You hold him for five minutes. All right?"

"All right."

"I swear Henry. I'm keeping track of all this. And when the kid is older, you're doing make up time." Frank took a step to Henry extending out the baby into Henry's awaiting arms. "He doesn't bite Henry. Not yet."

"He's just too small Frank. Too small."

"But he's cute." Frank laid the baby in Henry's arms. "There." He watched Henry fiddle with the baby to hold him against his chest. "Good, you got it."

"I do?" Henry smiled. "I like holding him like this better. I don't feel like I'm going to drop him as much."

"You won't drop him" Frank moved to the steps and stopped. "Oh Henry?"

"Yeah Frank?"

"Remember how I was telling you about seeing a kids first. Experiencing your kids first. And how there's nothing like it."

"I remember that."

"Good." Frank smiled. "Because you Henry, just experienced a first. You're the first person Nick has thrown up on."

Henry let out such a sound of disgust it made even Nick jump. "Uh Frank." He held out the baby. "Hold him." Henry's eyes shifted down to his shirt and to the small amount of white substance on his chest. "Oh my God." He sniffed. "Oh it smells."

Frank laughed. "It does not." He took the baby. "And get a towel, the baby has it on his face."

"I can't Frank." Henry stepped back.

Shrugging, Frank took his two fingers, wiped the little bit of regurgitation from Nick's chin, then wiped those remnants on the leg of his pants. As he did that Henry grunted even louder. "What?"

"That's . . . that's sick. Excuse me." He barreled toward the steps.

"Man Nick. Whatever you do. Don't you dare act like that when you get older." Frank cuddling the baby--again--sat with him on the couch.

(4)

Ellen? Dean picked up his pace down the street of center Beginnings' when he saw her walking from the social hall. He watched Ellen stick her head back in and step back out. She stopped on the walk, bent down and tied her shoe. And Dean made it to her the moment she stood up. "Hey." He spoke softly.

Ellen shrieked and jumped, spinning around with her hand on her chest. "You scared me."

"What are you doing here alone?"

"I should be asking you the same thing Dr. Hayes. Who is with the children?"

"Check this out. I have a live in babysitter this week." He looked at Ellen's 'what?' expression. "Yeah. Frank's nomad kid wants to stay with me this week while you and Henry are staying with Frank. So, I thought I'd take advantage of him, like Frank and take some of my work back to the clinic. The kids were in bed anyhow."

"All of them?"

"Well, expect for Alex. She stayed to help Frank. So she said. Are you going home? Or rather to Frank's?" Dean asked.

"Yes. Walk with me?"

"I'd love to." Placing his hands in his pockets, Dean walked with her. "So you didn't answer me. What were you doing at the social hall. Did you have a fight with Frank or Henry?"

"No." Ellen shook her head and folded her arms. "The meeting moved

to the hall. They told me it always does. But, that was after we went and all took our drinks and had Blake entertain us for a while.”

“Blake the soap opera guy?”

“Soap opera God Dean.”

“Sorry.” He chuckled. “Entertain? What did he do, recite lines for you.”

“Uh . . . we sort of watched him rehearse and critiqued his progress.”

“His progress? You guys critiqued his acting.”

“Not exactly acting.”

“If he wasn’t acting, what was he rehearsing? Is he learning to play instrument?” He saw Ellen shake her head. “What else can the guy do. He has a hard enough time in inventory. You probably made the guy flex or something.” He saw her expression. “You did?”

“Not exactly flex. Dean, don’t worry about it.” She grabbed his arm and held it while she walked.

“No, you have my curiosity peaked. What is he rehearsing?”

“You can’t say anything. Blake is learning how to dance.”

“Dance? Why is he . . . Ellen!” Dean walked to in front of her. “Don’t tell me you have the man stripping for you women.”

“It’s a fine art Dean. And he’s so cute. Beside, the other women really appreciate it. He *is* my gift from Robbie you know.”

“I can’t believe that.” He started to laugh. “Is he any good?”

“Why, you wanna watch.”

“No.”

“Jealous maybe?” Ellen tilted her head and made them continue in their walking. “Anyhow, let’s just say he’s not as good as you were Dean that one time you . . .”

“Don’t!” Dean stopped her. “Don’t. You keep bringing that up.”

“You were the one dancing around like Tom Cruise in your underwear.”

“El. I was getting dressed and I had that stupid tape player of yours going.”

“Dancing.” Ellen stated. “And Frank thought it was funny.”

“You told Frank?” Dean closed his eyes and shook his head. “Changing the subject.”

“How did I know that was coming.” Ellen leaned her head on his arm as they walked.

“How was your meeting.”

“It was fun.”

“No way. Fun?” Dean seemed surprised.

“Yeah, it wasn’t bad. I’m glad I went, and I’m having a wedding you know. A big giant celebration”

“A wedding? Last I spoke to you this afternoon you and Henry were gonna plan a ceremony.”

“That’s the way it was.” Ellen stopped walking when she got to Frank’s house. She stood before Dean. “And now it’s a party. Complete with

everything.”

“When did you decided this?”

“I didn’t. The women wanted to do it as their next group effort. Of course with the way they’re talking, and what they want to do, to make everything, might take months.” She shrugged. “Hey as long as I don’t have to do anything, let them go.”

“You do know, taking months is giving Frank months to stop this thing.” Dean said.

“I know. I’ll handle it. And . . . I’d better get in. Thanks for walking me home.”

“Anytime. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Dean laid his hand on her face and leaned into her to kiss her. As he almost made it there, he felt Ellen slip from his fingers, and heard her ‘hey’. He opened his eyes to see Frank.

“Night Dean.” Frank said strongly and wiggled his fingers as Ellen tried to get from behind him. When she moved to her right, so did Frank, blocking her from getting to Dean.

Dean threw his hands up realizing at that moment why he didn’t want Frank to know about his and Ellen’s understanding. Because just like Frank blocked his simple kiss goodnight, Frank would find a way to block them completely. “Night El. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Ellen tried again to get to him--unsuccessfully. “Dean . . .oh.” She slammed her hands into Frank’s back.

Frank felt the nudge, he turned around to face her. “Hey. Why are you pushing me?”

“Why did you do that?”

“Why? Because I didn’t want you kissing him. That’s why.” He listened to Ellen grunt at him. “And don’t . . .” He grunted back at her. “. . . at me. I’m protecting Henry’s interest.”

“Oh protecting Henry’s interest my ass.”

“I am. He wouldn’t want you making out with Dean when he’s sleeping on the couch.”

“Right Frank. Making out with . . .” Ellen looked at the door. “Henry’s sleeping on the couch?”

“Yeah, why?”

Ellen hurried inside and giggled when she saw him in the dark room lit only by the light cast from the kitchen. Henry laid on his stomach, cheek flush against the couch cushion. His hair flung about, his arm dangled off the couch, and he wore only his boxer shorts. “What did you do to him Frank?” She whispered as she moved to the sofa. “As long as I’ve known Henry he’s never been asleep before midnight.” She knelt down close to his head, removing his hair from his face, and kissing his cheek.

“I didn’t do anything to him. I made him do the parent thing tonight. And don’t . . .” Frank grabbed her hand. “Don’t tuck his hair behind his ear. You make him look like girl.” He helped her to her feet. “We don’t need another thing for him to whine about.”

"What was he whining about tonight?"

"Oh everything. Holding the baby. Playing with Alex. He kept saying he sucks at the father stuff, I kept tell him, 'Henry if you would just do it'." Frank shrugged. "So." Frank pulled her away from the couch. "Are you tired?"

"No, not at all. Why? Aren't you?"

"No. I have an idea. You game?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Sure." Ellen followed Frank as he went into the kitchen. "What are we doing?"

"Stay here." He opened the basement door. "I'll be back."

Smiling as she listened in wonder to Frank going down the basement steps, she turned to go in the diningroom when she saw it on the counter. A short glass, empty. Picking it up, Ellen brought it to her nose and sniffed. She could smell the moonshine and it made her heart drop. She set it down when she heard Frank come back up.

"Ready?" He held something behind his back.

"Yes. Frank? Were you drinking tonight?"

The smile left Frank's face and he turned stone serious. "Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"Asking me if I had a drink. Yeah, I had one. You said I could have one once in a while. If you didn't mean I could do that El, why did . . ."

"No." Ellen held up her hand shaking her head. "I'm sorry. You're right." She tip toed up to him and kissed him on the cheek. "You've been so good. I'm proud of you."

Frank swallowed and closed his eyes. There was silence for a second and then he broke it stepping away from her. "All right. Ready?" He pulled out what he had from behind his back.

"Scrabble?" Ellen covered her mouth and laughed.

"How long has it been since we had a little bit of friendly competition?" Frank asked. "You up to it?"

"It's so unfair when I play you Frank." She walked behind him in the diningroom.

"Why is that?" He turned on the diningroom light. The flick of the switch caused Henry to moan loudly about the brightness. "Shut the fuck up Henry and go back to sleep." Frank set the board game down. "Why is it unfair?"

"Well, pegging me against you is like pegging you against Hap in a physical competition. There is no caparison. Do I have to spot you points?"

Frank shook his head and sat. "You think you're really funny. You've been hanging around with Dean too much." He lifted the lid and began to remove the game. "Care to make a little wager?"

Ellen took her seat. "Frank. I'm gonna win. I always win."

"Bet me." Frank began to choose his tiles.

"All right, you're on. What do you want to bet."

"If I win, You have to sleep in bed with me tonight. Just sleep. Nothing sexual."

"Frank." Ellen looked back at Henry who slept on the couch. "I can't do that."

"Yeah you can. I already told Henry I was gonna bet you in a game of Scrabble for it."

Ellen laughed. "Right, and Henry agreed to that wager."

"Yep. Dean syndrome. He had your cocky attitude. He said I can't beat you, so go on bet it." Frank set his pieces up on his holder.

"Henry agreed?" Ellen looked at her pieces. "All right. And if I win, you have to do something nice for Dean tomorrow."

"Like what?"

"Be his chauffeur. Drive him from the clinic to the lab when he needs it."

"Fuck that."

"Forget the bet them." Ellen said calmly. "Ready to play."

"No-no." Frank shook his head. "I'll take that bet. You wanna go first."

"No, you. I already have the unfair advantage of being smarter."

"I'm ignoring that comment." Frank stared at his letters. "I'll go first. Thank you." His fingers swirled around the tiles. "How was the period meeting?"

"Good. You came up in discussion." She saw him look at her. "The women don't like you Frank. I felt really bad about that."

"Why?" Frank asked.

"You mean, why don't they like you?"

"No, why do you feel bad? I could give a fuck whether the women of this community like me or not. Do you like me?"

"Yeah I like you."

"Then that's all that counts. Cause you're the only woman that matters." He leaned over to her, kissed her on her cheek, sat back again and gave a quiet smile. "O.K. let's play." He clapped his hands together. "And will you look at this?" He spoke so fake. "I have a word. 'Protein.'" He laid the letters down. "Double score and . . . I used all my letters. Fifty point bonus El." He slid a paper and pen to her. "Keep score baby."

Ellen's mouth dropped open. "You're cheating."

"It's scrabble. How can you fuckin cheat in Scrabble?"

"I don't know." She marked down his score. "But I know you are." She picked up her tiles and laid them down.

"Trip?" Frank snickered. "That's the best you can do?"

"Shut up Frank." Ellen wrote down her pitiful score, slumped down in her chair and debated if she should have made that bet after all.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN
JULY 11

(1)

It had been many things in Beginnings since it was discovered a little over a year prior. The cryo-genic portion of the cryo-lab, where fifty-three preserved scientists hung. An autopsy room. A storage room, a hiding files room. But now, it was Henry's room. His own little personal computer lab used to work on that microchip. It was private. It had a secured door. And though there were glass windows on one side of his little lab, they were sound proof and bullet proof so no one heard him or he heard no one, especially Dean and Ellen if they were working the same time as him. That was always detrimental to Henry, because he would listen to them instead of doing his work.

Henry was so excited about his program Robbie had found. He still was figuring it out, but was having fun doing so.

Joe rubbed his tired eyes as he sat with Henry. "This is why I had to be here at five-thirty this morning? It couldn't have waited until eight."

"Oh sure Joe it could have waited, but I couldn't wait until then. I have a full day in mechanics. Speaking of which." Henry picked up his radio. "Scott, come in."

"Yeah Henry?"

"O.K. just checking if you're there. I'll be there shortly." He set down his radio and returned to Joe. "As I was saying Joe. This thing will program the chip to enable the SUT to do what the chip tells it. The chip actually translates the messages to the body. For example. Say I choose . ." Henry's hand moved the mouse. "Assassin." Henry clicked on the program. "To you and me this looks like nothing but numbers and sequences. But once it is fed into the microchip. The brain of the SUT will tell him to kill and kill only. The only thing I can come up with, the fault, is that you have to train him what to kill." Henry shrugged. "How that's done, I don't know."

"So all of these programs are different types of soldiers?"

"Yes and no. Most are. There's one it says domestication. I'm thinking we could reprogram the chip and teach the SUT how to farm for the field. Because we really don't know if he's functioning enough normally to give him a weapon and put him in security."

"When do you think the chip will be ready to implant again?"

"Soon." Henry pulled his notes closer. "As soon as I figure out which program I'm going to make him. Unless . . . Joe you don't suppose, since we have two chips, that maybe Dean can leave the brain exposed and we can implant, try a program, take out the chip and put in the other one."

"I'm out of here." Joe stood up.

"What did I say?"

"That's sick Henry. Especially for you."

"Where you going Joe?"

"Home to catch a nap." Joe looked at his watch. "I can get an hour. And Henry, good work. I think." Joe reached for the door and pulled, the door wouldn't budge. He punched in his code and the door buzzed, Joe pulled again, nothing. "Christ."

"Just try again. It stuck on me this morning. It took like five tries."

Grunting Joe tried again and succeeded. "Fix this thing Henry. You're down here all the time anyhow."

"No I'm not. Just when I should be sleeping, that's all."

"That doesn't matter, fix it. You don't want to get stuck and have to have someone come down and get you out."

"I'll fix it Joe."

"Good. Talk to you later." Joe smiled at him and left the small back lab.

As soon as Henry heard the safety latching of the door, he spun his stool back to his computer, and finished up what he had to look at before starting his day in Mechanics.

(2)

It was typical of Frank's house. The middle of July and Ellen was freezing. Double blankets were pulled up to her chin as she lay on her side in a fetal position. The cold of the room woke her up, she knew it was early, she didn't even have to open her eyes to feel that. But then Ellen felt something else. Fear. "Shit." She flung the covers off of her and sprang out of bed, her eyes catching the alarm clock and the time of five-thirty a.m. Her heart raced. What had happened? Why didn't Nick wake up? With shaking hands she moved to the door and then stopped. Her views turned back to the bed she just left and her heart stopped racing so fast. Where was Frank? Did he leave for work all ready? Nick probably did wake up and him or Henry fed him. Just to be on the safe side Ellen wanted to check on the baby.

She grabbed a pair of sweat pants and walked from the dark, blind drawn bedroom into the hall. She moved to Alex's room and peeked inside. Alex was sound asleep, and in that room was the crib. Ellen didn't have to walk into the room to see the crib was empty.

Running her fingers through her tossed about hair, and keeping her arms folded tight to her, Ellen walked down stairs. As soon as she hit the bottom, she saw Frank on the couch. She could see his bare shoulders as he sat there in his boxer shorts. He had the coffee table pulled close to the couch and his feet rested upon it. His long legs were bent up and close together, and there sleeping comfortable in the grove of his legs was Nick.

"Frank?" Ellen whispered his name as she walked around and sat down with him.

"Hey El." He smiled at her. "There's coffee if you want some."

Ellen reached to the table and felt the mug he had sitting there "I'll

drink yours. It's still warm." She held it up. "Do you mind?"

"Help yourself. What are you doing up?"

"I was cold and then I realized I wasn't woke up at all by a newborn. Odd occurrence." She pulled her legs up curling some to Frank to steal his body heat. Her knees brushed against his side as she sat there sipping his coffee. "Why didn't you wake me?"

Frank shrugged as he stared at the baby.

"I didn't hear him cry."

"He doesn't cry yet. He sort of whimpers." He snickered. "Like his dad. Anyhow, I heard him. I didn't mind getting up." Frank grabbed Nick's hand. "Look at how small his fingers are El. His whole hand doesn't fit around my pinky. Look at this."

Ellen smiled and rested her head on his shoulder "Did Henry help out this morning?"

"Henry was up and out by four. You didn't hear him bumping into shit?"

"No. Obviously you did. You were the light sleeper last night."

"I had my reasons." Frank reached to her hands, took the coffee, took a drink and returned it. "I didn't want to miss it."

"Miss what?"

Frank turned his head slightly with a somber look. "Sleeping next to you. Sleeping near you. I only wish I didn't have to win that privilege in a game of Scrabble."

"Frank . . ."

"Cause I missed it. I really missed it." Frank swallowed predominantly. "I miss you." He looked back at the baby. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be like this. I promised myself I wouldn't say anything mushy to you. And . . . I did."

"That's all right." Ellen grabbed his arm snuggling next to him. "It makes me feel good that you miss me."

"Thanks." Frank closed his eyes, kissed her forehead then rubbed his cheek against the top of her head.

"Frank?" Ellen raised her head and Frank raised his, their faces were close. "I have to tell you something. A little confession. Last night, when I over reacted about having to sleep in bed with you. I put a little, no a lot, more into that. It really didn't bother me at all."

"I have a confession to make too." His eyes cased hers as he spoke soft "The first six words I laid down the tiles to last night. I set them up in the box hours earlier. I cheated to get a jump on the game."

"You what?" Ellen's eyes widened. "I can't believe you cheated. How does anyone cheat in Scrabble?"

"Like I said I set the box up. I know you. You only pick the tiles closest to you."

"I can't believe you cheated Frank. I can't believe you." She started to get up.

"No." Frank laughed as he reached out to her. "Don't please." He smiled widely. "It's funny."

"You cheated." She sat back in her position.

"And I think you knew." His hand rested on the side of her face. "Was it all that bad?"

"No it wasn't."

Frank stared at her for a moment in the silence. Ellen didn't pull back from him. Seeing that and feeling her so close, his fingers slipped behind her head and he pulled her face even closer to his. Closing his eyes and parting his lips Frank lowered his head down to her. Then he stooped and pulled back. "Sorry." His thumb brushed against her bottom lip. "I uh, better go." He kissed her quickly. "Can you put him back to bed?"

"Sure." Ellen reached down for the sleeping newborn. She hesitated in her reach to glance her eyes up at Frank who stared at her. "I'll take him. Going to work early today?"

"Yeah. I want to get done early and . . ." He leaned down and kissed the baby, then stood up. "I want to go find Henry. I want to talk to him. And check on him. Why he has to run about at four o'clock in the morning is beyond me. He is so damn preoccupied with that program. I know that's what he's doing. He just better not be doing that to get out of the middle of the night feedings. You have to talk to him El. He's too scared of this baby."

"I'll talk to him Frank. He's just so nervous about this. It's so new to him. He never had exposure to any babies. Be patient. You're doing great helping him. Thank you."

"I guess. It's fun." Pulling up his boxer shorts more, he moved from the couch. "I'll be back down." He headed from the steps, back tracked, leaned over the back of the couch and kissed Ellen on the cheek, leaving his mouth close to her ear. "More than you know, I appreciate how you're being with me now." Another kiss to her cheek and he went up stairs to get ready for work.

Smiling, Ellen cuddled the baby and stood up. "Hey, you're a sleep I can go back to bed myself." She walked to the steps, then heard that sound that Frank had described. Not a cry, not a wail, but a whimper. "Maybe not." She pulled the baby out from her chest to see him. He was wide awake and looked like he was ready to bitch. "My goodness do you look like my Henry when you make that face." She kissed the baby and smiled at him carrying him back to the couch.

(3)

"Done." Henry struck one last key hard. "Now to my other work." He ran his hand through his hair, picked up his tea and sipped it while ejecting

the round disk from the computer. He grabbed his case, and debated on whether to leave the computer running. Henry knew it would be awhile before he returned to his special lab, so he exited his computer, picked up his tool and utility bags, and cup of tea and moved to the door. After three attempts, the door finally buzzed open and Henry walked out, but not too far. He realized he forgot to power down. Knowing Joe would have a fit if he left that on for eighteen hours, Henry set down his bags, cup and case, and returned to the door which had already shut. "Damn it." He pressed in his code . . . nothing. "Come on." Twice, three times, annoyed and borderline angry, the door opened on the fourth attempt.

Was he nimble enough? Was his tall body long enough to try? Holding the door open with his foot, Henry extended himself as far as he could to get to that power strip. His fingers reached as he teetered in a bad balance. Just as his middle finger neared the red button, Henry fell forward and the door shut. "Shit!" In a near stomp, Henry shook his head and stood up. "All that for nothing. I don't care, this door jumps to top of the priority." Grunting a little, Henry walked to the power strip, and reached down his hand. The moment his finger partially depressed the red switch, a loud power surge rang out. It zapped forth with a large bright blue spark that illuminated the room even more, and the force of it threw Henry's body up two feet in the air and backwards. He landed hard on the floor. And his motionless body bounced with such a force against the linoleum that he literally rolled onto his stomach.

The sparks continued to fly out, cracking loudly as they shot upward like rockets, causing a smoldering on any surface they landed upon and a thick black smoke to follow. The ceiling light popped out in Henry's special lab, but the room wasn't completely dark. It was lit by the white and blue igniting sparks, the simmering orange flames that began to happen all while Henry lay on the floor. And Henry didn't move.

(4)

"Henry come on. What the fuck?" Frank shook his head in disgust as he walked toward the edge of town. "Answer me. I know your radio is on. Are you mad?" He shook his head again. "Henry." He switched channels. "Mechanics, Scott you there?" Frank nodded as he listened to Scott in his earpiece. "Is Henry there?" Frank stopped walking. "You talked to him. Shit. Thanks." Frank turned the channel back to Henry's. "Henry." Grunting, Frank gave up for a minute. "He's blowing me off. I'll find his wiry ass."

"Hey Frank." Joe caught his attention by calling out, otherwise his son would not have even saw him walk by him.

"Dad?" Frank spun to him. "What are you doing up this early?"

Especially on a Saturday.”

“Henry and that SUT program. He had me down in Henry World at the crack of dawn. I was going to go home but I thought I’d get things ready in distribution today for our guys.”

“When did you leave him last?”

“Bout twenty minutes ago. Why?”

“He’s radio isn’t working or he’s ignoring my call.”

“Why would he do that?”

Frank shrugged. “He might be mad. That’s why I wanted to talk to him.”

“He didn’t say anything about being mad at you. And trust me, usually he does. What did you do.”

“Nothing really. I slept with Ellen. Anyhow, I’m heading to find him. You said he’s in Henry-World?” Frank walked backwards.

“Wait a minute!” Joe trotted back to him. “You just don’t say something like that, and walk away. You slept with Ellen?”

“Last night.” Frank continued to walk.

“Did Henry bust you?”

Frank laughed. “No Henry knew about it a head of time. I told him I was going to.”

“And he let you? Are you two having an understanding. I thought he was having the understanding with . . . never mind. So why would he be mad if he let you?”

“Don’t know. He didn’t think I’d beat Ellen.”

“What!” Joe reached out and grabbed his son back. “You beat Ellen?”

“Bad too. But I had too or how else was I gonna get her to sleep with me.”

“You son of a bitch Frank. How can you stand here and talk like this is nothing. I have to do something about this. You realize this.”

“Not now. I have to find Henry.” Frank found the topside entrance to the underground tunnels. He lowered himself and look up when his father followed. “Why are you trailing me.”

“Because, you asshole. I’m making sure Henry kicks your ass, and when he’s done, I am!”

“Why? All because I beat Ellen?”

“Oh you just have attitude. If you weren’t my son, I’d shoot you right now! Right now!” Joe stormed in is walk with Frank.

“Fuck Dad, she deserved to lose once. She’s been fuckin beating me in Scrabble since we were kids.”

“Scrabble? You’re talking about a game?”

“Yeah, what else was I gonna beat her . . oh my God.” Frank started to laugh. “You thought?” He laughed again. “And they call me dumb.”

“Call it a momentary lapse of my senses Frank.” Joe watched Frank put in his code to the cryo-lab. “And since there isn’t going to be a fight. I’m . . .”

"Fuck!" Frank saw it as soon as he walked into the lab. The sparks and smoke behind the glass of the special Henry lab. "Find a fire extinguisher Dad!" Frank raced to the door. "And please, please don't let him be in here."

Joe scurried for a fire extinguisher trying to reason where Dean may have had it, and he spotted Henry's things. His heart dropped. "Frank." Panic filled Joe's voice.

"The fuckin door won't open."

"Frank he's in there. We have to get him out." Joe spoke rapidly.

"Come on!" Frank tried the code again . . . nothing. "Son of a bitch." Frank switched on his radio. "Security! I need a team at the cryo-lab. A fire squad . . . STAT!" He raced to the window. "And get me . . ." His fist hit against the glass when he saw Henry laying on the floor. "Henry!" he banged again. "Henry!" he stepped back. "Get me a medical team down here. Henry's down! Henry's down!" Out of control Frank felt his emotions boiling too as he grabbed a free table, lifted it up and hurled it at the glass. The table bounced back.

"It's bullet proof Frank, and shatter proof." Joe pressed himself flush against the window. "He's not moving."

Breathing deeply through his nostrils, Frank pulled out his revolver and charged back to the door. Extending it out, he unloaded his entire clip into the metal door and at the handle. Dropping his revolver he pushed on the door. It didn't budge. Clenching his fist, Frank's head flung back and he let out an emotional frustration growl and he charged back.

"Frank the flames!"

With his heart, Frank dug deep inside of him and pulled at his every emotion as he used all that he had in racing forth, full speed at that door. The weight and strength behind Frank made the loudest of crashes as he plowed shoulder first into the metal object, cracking it from the hinges, and sending himself into a spin into that back lab. A blast of heat caught Frank as he raised his left arm upward. So powerful it was, Frank flew back off his balance and out of that lab again. Picking himself up off the floor and shaking off the pain that should have brought him down. Frank plowed himself into that lab, sliding in on the floor and landing at Henry. Just as he lifted him, he could hear the sound of a fire extinguisher and Frank carried Henry from the lab leaving Joe to battle the electrical fire that began to flourish from all the oxygen that poured into that room.

Laying Henry's motionless body on the floor, the cryo-lab door burst open and six men raced in. But Frank paid them no mind. "Henry." His hand felt his neck. "Henry. Oh God."

"Frank!" Joe came from the back lab. "How is he?"

"He's . . . he's dead Dad." Frank's hand ran across Henry's face and as he looked down at his friend, his jaw began to twitch. "No!" He shook his head. Positioning himself better, Frank tilted back Henry's head and listened for breath sounds. None came out. Covering Henry's mouth with

his, Frank began to breath into him, four breaths to start, and then he listened again. Still nothing. "You got a new kid Henry and I will not let you die on him." Cupping his hands over Henry's chest, Frank began to do compressions, counting them out loud as he did, and breathing into Henry's mouth at the end of each cardiopulmonary cycle. "Henry come on!" Frank moved back to his chest, delivering the compressions with every ounce of hope he had. "Henry!" It was like a race against time for Frank, a mission and a fight he wasn't going to lose. A fight Henry wasn't going to lose. If it was the last thing Frank did, he would make sure of that.

A cough. A choking cough stopped Frank from administering any more air into Henry. Frank's body shook and he gave a simple laugh of relief as he lifted Henry's head up. "We have to get him to the clinic."

Joe closed his eyes and reached his hand over to his son. "Unbelievable." He felt his son's shoulders rise and fall from his heavy breaths. "Good . . ." Joe opened his eyes and saw it as Frank began to lift Henry. The painful look on his son's face. The white tee shirt he wore, completely black. And parts of it burned. Joe's eyes skimmed upward to his son's face to the deep red mark that went from part of his left cheek, across his chin and to his neck. The same injury that was on his arm. "You're burnt Frank."

"I'm fine." With a grunt, he stood with Henry in his arms.

"Let one of the other men take him." Joe gave support under Henry's back to help ease the weight for Frank.

"I've got him." Frank walked to the door.

"He's too heavy Frank. You're injured." Joe looked back at the men who finished putting out the fire. "One of you . . ."

"I got him!" Frank said strongly. "Just let me take him up."

Joe ran his hand across his own sweaty face, smearing the blackness that laid there. He watched his son move ahead of him, carrying the weight of his friend. Joe could see each step Frank took was a painful one, but he also knew his son was determined. And Frank was determined to be the one to bring Henry up to the clinic, just as he was determined to be the one to bring Henry back to this earth.

(5)

"Finally." With Nick fast asleep again and Alex still sleeping, Ellen knew she could catch a little sleep before she would have to do another round of newborn motherhood. She thought she'd get a nap earlier. Perhaps she shouldn't have taken that shower after Frank left, but she wanted to get one in during the day and who knew when Nick would go back to sleep. And even though this was only Nick's second day at home, he was fast proving himself to be a pure Henry off-spring with his lack of needing slumber.

After laying Nick in the cradle in the livingroom, Ellen walked to the closet to get the quilt they kept in there so she could lay on the couch. Reaching in the closet the oddity of a knock on the front door startled her. Checking first to see if it woke the baby, she turned and opened the front door. "Jenny?"

Jenny Matoose, holding her daughter, walked into Frank's livingroom. "Check your cell phone Ellen, your father's been trying to reach you."

"Reach me?" She chuckled. "He could have walked over if it was important." She went to the diningroom and picked the phone up from the table. "Shit, it needs charged. You came all the way over here to tell me my phone isn't working? Gee Jenny, that's awfully nice. But it's awfully early."

"I came here to watch the kids. Ellen, you have to get to the clinic."

Ellen felt her heart drop. "What's wrong?"

"There was some sort of electrical problem in the cryo-lab. Henry got hurt bad and Frank, he's hurt too."

"Shit." She flew to the door picking up her shoes that sat there. "Jenny do you mind staying here."

"No, that's why I came."

"Nick, he just fell asleep, he shouldn't need to . . ."

"Ellen go. I can handle them. Go."

With little information, and not wanting to take the time to find out more, Ellen sped off for the clinic.

"Joe!" Ellen raced to him the second she walked in. "Where are they?"

"In the back." He reached to stop her when she flew down the hall. "They want you to stay here until they know more."

"What happened Joe? What?" Ellen sounded so desperate.

"Come with me." Wrapping his arm around her, Joe led Ellen into the waiting room. "As near as we can figure right now, there was a problem with the electric in the lab. There was an electrical explosion and Henry got shocked, and then the fire started when he was out."

"Was Frank with him, is that how Frank got hurt too?"

"No. Frank got hurt when he broke into the lab to get Henry out of there. Henry. Ellen, Henry had . . . he was dead." He heard Ellen gasp. "Frank brought him back." Joe gave a proud smile. "But." With a twitch of his head he returned to a serious mode. "We don't know how Henry is. He's alive, I can tell you that. And Frank, he got burned. I'm hoping it looked a lot worse than it actually was."

"Is Henry burned too?"

"From what I saw, no." Joe led her to the couch. "But he hasn't regained consciousness yet."

Sitting down with Joe's arm still around her, Ellen leaned into him. "And we have to wait?"

"That's all we can do. Wait."

The age old saying, 'no news is good news' didn't feel like it held true for Ellen. She sat there with Joe, taking comfort in his hold. She kept trying to convince herself that all that mattered was that Henry was alive and Frank was fine. But the fact remained, no amount of convincing herself or hoping for the best would make her feel better. Seeing Henry and Frank for herself and hearing for certain that they were fine was what she needed.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

(1)

Robbie's tired and exhausted body had carried the last man into the small church he had spent all of the night cleaning out. Though there wasn't any power, it was shelter from the hot weather that teetered between rainy and dry causing the insects to feed on the helpless bodies of his fallen ill men.

Though most of them had slipped into remission, they still needed help. They still couldn't control their bodies as well as a two-year-old. And the weakness that they felt, brought out by dehydration and lack of eating the food sent to them, hindered any possible fight they could have had in them.

How long had it been since he had spoken, really spoken to any of them. None were talking. Greg and the other first two exposed, talked dazed. They said things that made no sense. They talked about events and called out people's names that Robbie hadn't a clue who they were. But Robbie answered them, he tried to take care of them the best he could, but he could feel his body weakening too. Not from any virus, but just from giving all that he had. Every second of his day was spent taking care of them. And Robbie had no choice, he was alone. And each passing day that went by he felt more and more alone. The only thing that made it tolerable was when he spoke to home on the phone. More so than that, seeing his brother when supplies were dropped off. Even from a distance, watching Frank standing in the helicopter door told Robbie one thing, he wasn't forgotten about. Something so simple as that, meant so much. And the grueling day he had to face ahead of him, would be a little less grueling because he would see his brother in a few hours. A little bit of home floating down from the sky, bringing him the little bit of hope amidst the madness that surrounded him.

(2)

"This will serve just fine. You can leave." George instructed a man who had walked him into a livingroom of a home located in the town that was once known as Quantico City. He dropped his body down on the sofa to relax and rest up before he had to continue his work. His day has started early, waiting at the gates of their training center for the troops that were about to come in. Twenty-two squads arrived back at Quantico as expected, they brought with them, between the squads, sixty-three survivors. Survivors that were being processed and readied to be sent to different

division. Some were viable, some would have to be made viable. All of them believing they were somehow being saved from the cruel world, fed and taken care of and given jobs to do. George chuckled when he thought of that. How much like Beginnings his world was sounding. Only his world wasn't secluded to a secured perimeter. It spread out, further than Beginnings realized.

But George was at a loss. His communications with his men had to be kept at a minimal and only the times that he was instructed by John Matoose that were safe, and unable to be detected by the monitors in the newly found communications room of Beginnings. That wasn't too often, so George's information had to be sketchy until his people arrived back to base.

He knew ten more squads were due back on this day also. Another fifteen the next. Aside from his troops arriving back. George had to send out his rested warriors. They were ready to go. North, well into Canada and south as far as deep Mexico. A shipment of food was due at Quantico from the farms not far from them. Farms that reported a flourishing crop. For George it was a busy day. Waiting for all to arrive, sending out what he had to send out and, not too mention settling into his new home. And to George it wasn't going bad at all. All he waited for now, to top off his day was to hear that the program for the CMEs was destroyed along with the man who tried to figure it out . . . Henry. And for *that* good news, George rested his head back, closed his eyes and waited. Because he was certain, the good news was coming.

(3)

"Frank hold still." Dean spoke so annoyed as he finished bandaging Frank's burns.

"Dean, come on, I've been here long enough." Frank's head tilted to the side so Dean could finish up on his neck. "And why are you bandaging me up?"

"It want these burns kept clean. I don't want them to get infected, especially . . ." Dean finished up and stepped back. "The ones on the face. If they get infected they'll scar worse."

Frank's eyes caught Dean's. "You think I'm worried about that?"

"No. But I am." He walked over to the sink to wash his hands. "And I want you on light duty for a week."

"What?" Frank laughed. "No way. I can't right now, not right now. We're in the middle of training the next batch of guys to go out. We have a run in a couple weeks. We have tactical maneuvers. A week I can't spare." Frank looked down at his watch. "How about a couple hours."

"How about not?" Dean dried his hands. "You dislocated your shoulder Frank. It was a bitch to pop back in."

"I do have to say that impressed me Dean when you did that."

"Gee thanks. But getting back to that shoulder. It needs time to heal. And . . . you mean to tell me you can't train your men without lifting or being Superman?"

"I guess I could."

"Good, then you will. Since you won't let me brace that shoulder, you have to not use it. Got that?" Dean instructed. "And keeping you from doing things will keep those burns from getting infected too. Walk your perimeters, train your guys, but physical participation has to be limited."

"All right, all right." Frank shook his head. "Anything else?"

"I mixed you up some medication for the pain. The topical I put on will wear off in a few hours and they'll hurt." He walked over to the tray and picked up the small bottle. He handed it to Frank. "And no drinking when you take this."

"Yes Ellen." Frank said sarcastically.

"I'm serious Frank. No drinking if you take this. I'll instruct Ellen about it." Dean picked up Frank's chart and a pencil. "And I wanted to tell you. Good job today with Henry."

"Thanks." Frank slid off the table and looked around for his shirt. When he found it he saw he couldn't wear it because Dean had cut most of it off of him. Tossing the remnants over his shoulder as if it could be some use to him, Frank began to leave.

"Frank?" Dean called out to him. "What happened in that lab today?"

Frank stopped just at the door. "Problem with the electric."

"Do you really think that?"

"Nope. I think it was set up. I think . . . let's just say I don't think Henry's accident was an accident."

"Can you prove that?"

"Me personally. No. I don't know enough about electronics. And I don't trust anyone else's opinion. Henry can tell me. That's why I have a guard on the door down there with strict instructions not to let a soul in there, until either me or my Dad can go down there and reprogram a code no one knows. That way everything will be untouched and the same until Henry is well enough to look it over."

"Henry was working on the SUT program. Is that gone, do you know?" Dean asked.

"No. My dad has it, it was outside the lab when the fire started. At least Henry will be glad about that. Hey Dean, when do you think he'll be up and about?"

"Hard to say Frank." Dean said. "The thing in Henry's favor is he's not one to be down for too long. So, a good guess would be few days or so in the clinic and another few days rest at home. But we wouldn't be talking about him being up and about at all if it wasn't for you."

Frank quietly nodded once and reached for the door handle of the examining room.

Finishing writing in the chart, Dean walked across the examining room to begin to clean it up. "Frank, tell Ellen when she gets a chance I want to talk to her. I want to instruct her on the follow up care for those burns."

"I'll tell her."

"I mean she might as well do it. She is still staying with you this week right?"

"Right." Frank started to leave. "And . . . hopefully, with the way things are with me and her, she won't leave after this week at all. See ya' Dean."

The few items that Dean held in his hand, toppled with Frank's words the moment he left. If Frank saw things going good now between him and Ellen, how much better would he insure them to be while Ellen lived there. If Dean didn't feel threatened before in his new understanding with Ellen, he certainly was feeling a twinge of it right there.

(4)

Across the glove styled bandage placed on Henry's hand, Ellen ran her fingers across his. The tips of his nails were the only portion poking through, even the area surrounding them were red. "Look at his hand Joe. He's burnt." She stared down at a sleeping Henry, lifting his hand gently. "How bad is he burned? His hands are so nice."

"They'll be nice again Ellen. You heard Andrea, they'll heal. They will. And Henry is going to be fine."

"I can't believe he almost died on me."

"Ellen." Joe rested his hand on her shoulder. "He did die." Upon his words he could feel the tension fill her body. "It was scary. The look on my son's face when he pulled Henry out . . . panic Ellen, and when do you know Frank to panic?"

"Never. And speaking of Frank . . ." Ellen turned from the bed. "I think we should find out what's taking him so long."

"They had to clean his burns."

"Is it bad Joe?" Ellen asked.

"He could have been worse."

Looking back at Henry, Ellen bent down and kissed him on the cheek running her hand across his face after she did. "I'll be back Henry." Holding on to Joe's arm, she let him escort her out of the room, when she stepped out she saw Frank walking down the hall. He didn't wear a shirt and his bandages showed predominantly because of it. "Frank."

Frank smiled when he saw her release Joe and walk toward him in a quick pace. Before he could say any words. Ellen had thrown her arms around him, and he returned the embrace.

"Thank you for saving him."

"El . . ."

"I'm sorry. I'm probably hurting you." She pulled back. "Look at you. How bad are the burns."

"Bad enough for you to have to be my nurse. Dean says they'll need cleaned out, or something like that. You have to check with him."

"Are you in pain?"

"Not much. Dean gave me some medication."

"No drinking with that Frank." Ellen pointed her finger.

"No drinking." He raised his right hand.

"What took you so long?"

"Oh, fuckin Dean. He used every excuse in the book so he could keep looking at my chest." Frank snickered. "So how's Henry?"

"Sleeping. Andrea says he'll be fine. He'll wake up soon enough." Ellen saw him peeking in the room. "You going to go in there and see him?"

"I will, but not now. I want to take care of something down in the lab. Dad? Can you come with me?"

"Sure Frank." Joe answered.

"Good." Frank leaned down to Ellen and kissed her on the cheek "I'll be right back."

"Frank?" Ellen grabbed his arm as he began to walk away. "Why are you going down to the lab?"

"To take a look. I was so consumed this morning I didn't look at the lab."

"But why are you going to look at it? To assess damage?" Ellen asked.

"No El, to start to find out what happened this morning. What really happened. I'll be back."

Ellen watched Frank leave with Joe as she stood in the corridor right outside of Henry's room. She knew exactly what Frank meant by his tone, and what he insinuated with his words. She thought for sure they knew what happened. A faulty electrical system. She had sat for two hours with Joe and he said nothing about it being anything else but an accident. Obviously, with Frank's demeanor and insistence at that moment, it was more than they let on. It was bad enough that Frank was injured and Henry lay in a bed unconscious and lucky to be alive. But now it was worse, scarier, because now something she didn't think of had popped into her mind, the possibility that someone had done it on purpose.

(5)

For the first time since he was a kid, Robbie felt like a child. Staring up into the blue sky watching the Beginnings' helicopter pull away and feeling that lost aching pull in his chest. Where was Frank? Since the whole thing began Frank had been the one who dropped off the supplies. Frank, even just his presence had given Robbie the push to go on.

Like the kid who longed to tag along with his big brother, that was how

Robbie felt. But now, without Frank showing up, Robbie felt much more left behind than he had. Perhaps it was the exhaustion he was feeling that exaggerated what was going through his heart, but Robbie felt down. What could Frank have to do that was more important than taking the twenty minutes out of his day it took to drop off supplies. Robbie spoke to his father, he hadn't said there was trouble. Hoping that he was overreacting, Robbie moved with his supplies back to the church where all of the men were.

Stepping into that church, bags across his shoulders, Robbie's mind flashed back years earlier. The church reminded him so much of the one that sat on the street corner in downtown Ashtonville. He remembered walking into that church, St. Michael's. Three days before they were to begin the runs to pick up supplies for Beginnings. Maybe it was the reality back then that made him seek out the feel of God, and maybe it was the reality of what was happening to Robbie now that made him think of that. But whether it was God's doing or not, it was his brother back then that made him feel better . . .

The last pew of that church in Ashtonville, Robbie sat in. The reason for the silence in that church was painful when it dawned on Robbie that he wasn't just sitting in an empty God's house, but an empty God's world as well. It surprised Robbie when he heard the doors to the church open. It was darker in there, the only light was what shone through the stained glass windows and Robbie knew he wasn't seen. Maybe Frank just wasn't looking when he walked in. Straight to the altar Frank walked, genuflected and blessed himself before kneeling on the kneeler in the first pew, his hands folded, his head down. Frank praying? In Robbie's mind the only remembrance he had of Frank talking of God was when Frank swore.

"Frank." Robbie's whispered--as if he'd disturb someone if he didn't. He stood up and walked to the front with his brother.

"Robbie?" Frank turned his head over his cupped hands.

"What are you doing?" Robbie slid in the pew.

"I'm fuckin' praying, what do you think I'm doing? Man."

Robbie snickered and knelt down next to Frank. "Since when did you start praying?"

"I guess I always did." Frank shrugged. "Maybe now I'm just a little worried about these trips we're making. You?"

"Yeah."

"This was my church you know."

"I do. I remember coming to Johnny's christening here. I used to think, I bet these are the only times Frank walks through the doors of this church."

"They were." Frank smiled. "I never was the big religious guy."

"That's because Dad used to shove it down our throats growing up. Making us get up early, get dressed, look neat and sit in church."

"So what happened to Jimmy and Hal? They still go to church . . . or did." Frank's head dropped.

"Frank? Let me ask you something. Do you, do you blame God for all of this?"

"Not at all. I blame man for all of this. God gave us all the choice to do what we want in our lives and somewhere we fucked up."

"That's pretty deep coming from you."

"Nah." Frank shook his head. "I just reworded it. I heard Dad say something like that to Andrea last night."

"So you think *He* . . ." Robbie motioned his head up to the crucifix. "You think He has the answers?"

"I think He's giving them to us in His own way. He kept us alive. Right now to me that doesn't seem like such a good thing, but I'm sure there's a reason for it. He's got his reasons. And I have to believe that somewhere, down the road, they'll be some good again in our lives. A second chance. And I'm gonna fight real hard not to fuck it up again."

"Dad's words?"

"My words." Frank gave a closed mouth smile to Robbie. "You asked me. Let me ask you. Why are you in church? You're not the religious guy either."

"A little peace maybe."

"Peace? Robbie there's not a soul around, you can get peace by walking in the supermarket down the street."

"Inner peace Frank."

"Whoa." Frank's eye widened. "Now who's being deep."

"I don't want to spend the rest of my life as angry as I feel right now. I don't. And I'm pissed. You know I worked really hard in my life to get where I was and now it means nothing. I started dating this girl, and she was pretty nice. Gone. Do you realize that since I was a teenager I had wanted to be with Ellen. Talk about having to go through some drastic measures to do so . . ." He saw the corner of the eye look he got from Frank. "Sorry."

Frank let out a slow huffing breath. "Let's not touch that subject again. Please. We're in the house of God, I don't want to get pissed at you again."

Robbie tried not to laugh. "Subject changed."

"Good. So are you finding your inner peace?"

"No. And my back is starting to hurt, can we sit now?"

"Yeah, mine's hurting too." With a grunt and a slight moan they both brought themselves into the pew to sit. "Better." Frank twisted himself to the left. "Remember Dad used to hit us on the back of the head with the hymnals if our asses hit the pew when we knelt."

"I remember him telling us that was the reason they made them hard backed." Robbie brought his one leg up and close to his chest. "I watched a

lot of people die Frank. A lot. You on the other hand slept through the plague . . .”

“Hey.”

“I never want to go through that again.”

“Hopefully Robbie. You won’t.”

A loud bang of the church door echoed in and so did Ellen’s voice.

“Hey. What are you two doing in here?” She walked up.

Frank held his finger to his mouth. “Quiet El.”

“Why?” She asked.

Frank looked at Robbie then at Ellen. “Um . . . respect. What are you doing here, are you here to pray too?”

“Who me?” Ellen held her hand to her chest. “Hell no. I’m here to get some candles.” She walked straight up to the altar. “Best place. Isn’t that why you two are here?” She looked at them and didn’t get an answer. “Wait a second.” She started to snicker. “Frank and Robbie Slagel praying? Oh wait until I tell Joe.”

Frank sprang up. “No-no. We were taking a break. We came to get candles.”

“Yeah.” Robbie stood also.

“Right.” Ellen scoffed. “You probably were having some deep, sappy conversation too, weren’t you?” She began to grab candles. “Big tough Slagels. Joe is gonna die.” She shook her head while shoving more candles in a bag.

Frank nodded his head up to Ellen. “Robbie, I think we should chase her skinny ass down and tie her hair in knots like we used to when she threatened to tell Dad.”

Ellen dropped her candle bag and looked at them, she fake snickered. “Sure.” She saw them staring at her. “Guys, that was fourteen years ago.”

Robbie motioned his head at her. “How much of a head start.”

Frank thought about it. “Ten second? Sound fair?”

“Sounds fair.” Robbie smiled. “One . . .”

“Guys.” Ellen backed off the altar and passed them. “Then you’re joking right?”

Robbie continued counting. “Five, six . . .” He stopped counting when he heard a panicked “Shit!” come from Ellen and she ran from the church, letting the door slam as loud as it did when she entered.

Frank walked up to the altar. “Look Robbie, she left the candles. Let’s go bitch at her for not finishing her work.”

Robbie’s mind snapped from that memory when he heard the slam of the church door where he stood. He turned around startled to see Marty slumping in his walk in. “Where were you?” Robbie asked the ill man.

“I had to get some fresh air.” He spoke weakly. “Do you need any help.”

"No. You just rest. I need you to get strong."

"You looked in thought." Marty held on to the pew and he helped himself to sit.

"I was." Robbie smiled.

"I take it that was a good thought?"

"It was."

"Had to be hard to do with all that's happening."

Robbie wanted to tell him it wasn't. How odd it was that such a bad situation caused and bred a good memory. How it was horrible back then, and somehow he found himself smiling on a bad day. And Robbie hoped at that moment, as he returned to his work, that this horrible situation so similar to the last, would somehow, in the future, end with a smile too. For that--how ironically--Robbie actually prayed.

(6)

It was Frank's turn that evening. And he returned to the clinic to do it. He had fed the kids, all of them, settled them down and got them situated for Denny and Josh who would watch them until Ellen got home. That's what they had done all day. Every two hours switching duty on who would sit with Henry. Though they both wanted to, they knew they both couldn't, and since both Frank and Ellen felt one of them should be there when he woke up, they switched turns, promising to call the other the moment Henry regained consciousness. Denny and Josh were prepared for that too.

Whistling softly, not loud because he got bitched at the last time he did that in the corridors of the clinic, Frank made it to Henry's room. He stopped cold when he heard voices. Whispering voices. "Hey." He smiled. "Shit Henry." A wider grin and Frank rushed to the bed. "You're up. Oh my God you're up." His hand rested on Henry's.

Ellen held the other hand. "Ten seconds earlier Frank and you would have been here. He just woke up." She picked up his water for him and helped Henry take a drink.

Frank slid the chair closer to the bed. "How you feeling?"

Henry cleared his throat. "Sore. Really sore. I know my hand is burnt." He held it up. "Is it bad El?"

"Nothing that won't heal." She smiled and ran her hand down his face. She felt Frank's hand stop her. "What's wrong?"

"Don't tuck his hair. Henry, she tucks your hair behind your ear when your sleeping."

Though seemingly groggy, Henry smiled. It dropped when Frank came into focus. "Frank, your face is bandaged, What happened?"

Frank fluttered his lips. "Ellen." He waved his hand at her. "She got vicious and clawed me like a cat." Frank clawed his hand and made a 'hissing' sound at Ellen.

"Don't let him kid you Henry." Ellen spoke to him. "Frank got hurt

when he . . .”

“El.” Frank interrupted her. “No, don’t. O.K.?”

Ellen shifted her eyes from Frank to Henry. “Frank had a run in with Marcus. He got bit.”

“No shit?” Henry asked. He then tried to lift himself more to sit and moaned in pain. “God my chest hurts. I know I got shocked. I must have fell on my chest.” With squinting eyes he pulled out the shirt he wore and saw the bruises center his chest. Immediately his eyes rose up and over to Frank. “What happened to my chest? This is no fall.”

“They uh . . .” Frank paused in answering. “They had to do CPR on you Henry.”

“Oh my God.” Henry looked horrified. “I got shocked that bad? I thought I only passed out.”

Frank shook his head. “Your heart stopped beating.”

“Remind me to thank Andrea or Dean or Jason when I see them.” Henry faced Ellen.

Ellen shook her head. “Don’t you dare thank them.” Ignoring Frank’s ‘El’ she continued. “Turn your head back to Frank and thank him if you want to thank anyone.”

“Frank.” Henry closed his eyes and swallowed listening to Ellen speak.

“Henry he went in there while the room was on fire. He broke down that door to get to you. He brought you back to us Henry, Frank did.”

“Frank.” Henry opened his eyes to him. “I owe you my life.”

“No you don’t.” Frank waved him off. “I’m just glad you didn’t die on me. You know I know nothing about raising an oriental kid.”

“No jokes Frank.” Henry was serious. “Thank you.”

“Just don’t try to kiss me right now.” Frank smiled. “Though I found your lips incredibly soft.”

Henry laughed and grabbed his chest. “Don’t tell Ben that. Tell me something Frank. Why were you down at the lab. Did you get a bad feeling or something?”

“No.” Frank shook his head. “Actually I thought you were blowing off my radio call. I was chasing your ass down.”

“Why would I blow off your call?” Henry asked.

“I thought you were pissed at me for sleeping with Ellen.”

Ellen’s eyes widened. “Frank, you make it sound like . . .”

Henry stopped her. “I know what Frank meant. And no, I wasn’t mad at all that you slept with her Frank. If I was, I certainly wouldn’t be now.” Henry looked with pride to his friend. “It’s O.K. Remember what we’ve been talking about? It’s O.K.”

“You know Henry.” Frank leaned into the bed more whispering. “Since you’re in here a few more days. What about . . .”

“Frank!” Ellen scolded. “You are such a dog.” She stood up. “Stop it. Henry don’t listen to him.” She leaned down and kissed him. “I’ll be back. I’m going to run home and make sure everyone is fine.” She moved to the

door. "And Frank, leave him alone. I know you."

"What?" Frank tossed his hands in the air with an innocent look. "I just want to sleep with you like last night. It's cold in my house."

"Turn the air conditioner down. I'm not sleeping with you two nights in a row." She walked from the room and walked directly into Dean. "Hi Dean." She smiled but didn't get one in return. "What's wrong?"

He shook his head at her and walked harshly away.

"Dean?" She followed him. "Wait. What's wrong?"

Dean spun around to face her in the hall. "I walk in to see Henry while I'm at the clinic. I'm standing in the door, ready to walk in and what do I hear?"

"What? What did you hear?"

"Ellen, did you sleep with Frank last night?"

Ellen started to laugh, waving her hand at him. "We didn't have sex Dean, we slept in bed together."

"It doesn't matter."

"Excuse me?" Ellen was taken aback by his tone.

"The closeness was there."

"Dean, why are you being like this?"

"How do you want me to be Ellen?" He started walking again. "Happy to know you're not only living at Frank's house but sleeping in his bed as well." He stopped again. "Tell me something. I don't stand a fighting chance do I? I never did. How can I, when the man you have the primary relationship with is rooting for the man who controls you most in your life."

"Dean." Ellen snatched him back by his arm when he moved onward. "Don't you think the timing is a little bad to be discussing this. I didn't do anything with Frank. I didn't touch him, kiss him . . ."

"Stop!" Dean pulled away. "It doesn't matter. Did you hear me? I'm glad I'm seeing this now instead of when I really thought we had something."

"But Dean we do. We're together."

"Bullshit." He argued. "And if we were. We're not anymore."

"No." She argued with passion as she followed him out of the clinic. "You need me. You need me to be there for you. How are you going to get through this in your life if I don't help you."

"So that's it?" Dean walked backwards in a rush talking to her. "You're only with me out of pity?"

"No, Dean I'm not with you because I . . ."

"Save it. Save it. I'll admit I need your eyes. I'll admit I need your help. But don't think you have to give yourself to me Ellen to do so. Don't do that to me. If I'm going to depend on you, I'd rather it be for your help only, not for you. Because letting myself go, letting myself be with you, thinking we have something, is only setting myself up for a hurt I can very well avoid. And to think it never crossed my mind that you were with me

because you felt sorry for me. I guess I was blind in more ways than one.” Wanting to say no more Dean turned his back to her and moved quickly to the living section.

“Dean.” Ellen raised her hand and let it fall as she watched him walk away. Her heart dropped like her hand and she immediately felt at a loss. Dean never looked back at her, he just kept moving.

CHAPTER TWENTY

JULY 13

(1)

Henry's breathing was easier. Though his chest still hurt, his deep breaths weren't as crushing as they had been the previous two days. And Henry was moving on this day. Allowed by Andrea to get up and get cleaned. He wasn't allowed before, he was being monitored too closely. But they granted him some leeway, not enough so as he could go home, but enough to take that shower he needed and put on something other than that shallow hospital garment they gave him.

Ellen made him smile when he emerged from the bathroom. She was wearing her white clinic lab coat. How long had it been since she wore that? Ellen hadn't worked in the clinic since her and Andrea had their falling out some seven months earlier. Was Ellen working again or was she just in the mood to wear that coat and fix his bed. "Hey El."

She spun around, dropping the sheet with a smile. "Look at you walking around."

"When can I go home?"

"A couple of days. They just want to make sure there isn't any after effects Henry." She moved to him. "You should put a shirt on, it's chilly in here."

"I'm fine. Can't you talk them into letting me go home with you El?"

"I can't Henry and I don't want to do that. I need you to be better." She laid her hand on his face. "And look." She pulled on her lab coat. "I'm working the clinic and containment for a couple days."

"Really?" Henry tilted his head with a smile. "Aren't you on maternity leave with Nick?"

"Check this out. Since Frank is injured and on light duty, Joe decided to let me work for a couple days and let him stay with Nick." She let out a long breath. "I don't need to tell you I'm enjoying it. So clinic work or not. It's work. Nothing against Nick, but everything against staying home."

"I miss you El."

"Ah Henry." She smiled at him. "I miss you too." She grabbed his hand. "And you've been out of bed too long. Let's get into bed."

"I'd like that." He grinned and moved slowly to the door.

"Henry?"

Henry closed the door and walked back over to her grabbing her hand. He led her to the bed and stood before her resting his hand on her shoulder and leading her to sit on the bed.

"What are you doing Henry?"

"I want to lay with you." He pressed the control button on the bed and lowered the back. "Please?"

"Just don't work yourself up and make that heart of yours beat too

fast.”

“Don’t scare me like that El. Frank was already in here yesterday telling me that once you have a heart attack you can never have sex again.”

Ellen laughed as she laid on the bed and moved over to make room for Henry. “Frank lies. And you didn’t have a real heart attack Henry, you just had a fibrillation. Your chest was paralyzed. You know Jason was saying if your fingers weren’t so calloused you would have been worse.”

Henry laid on the bed next to her on his side, letting his hand rest upon her leg. “Can we not talk about this?”

“My goodness Henry, you aren’t seducing me are you?”

“Nope. Pre-ducng you.”

“Pre-ducng? What is that.”

“Since I can’t seduce you, I’m pre-ducng you for when we can. So can I?” He leaned more into her.

“Just don’t hurt yourself.” Ellen trickled her fingers down his chest. “Look at your poor chest Henry.” She brought her lips to the center of his bruises and she kissed him softly.

Henry breathed in almost a shiver. He closed his eyes and lowered his head down to her. Kissing Ellen, he leaned his body weight more to her, running his hand up her leg that was bent.

“Knock-knock.” Jenny Matoose spoke so chipper as she opened up Henry’s door. She giggled covering her mouth. “Henry I’m glad to see you’re feeling better.”

Henry’s eyes rolled slightly as he pulled from the kiss and rested his head next to Ellen’s ear, “Why is she in here?”

Ellen turned her head to the door where Jenny stood. “Hi Jenny.”

“A new therapy Ellen?” Jenny walked in more.

“You can say that. It’s called ‘getting them *up* faster’ therapy. You ought to try it.”

“I would, but fortunately none of my men live as dangerously as yours. Anyhow, getting to my reasons for being here.”

Wanting to laugh at Henry’s ‘thank God’ in her ear, Ellen didn’t. She sat up some and gave Jenny her full attention. “Reasons?”

“Two of them. One, you have yet to register your menstrual cycle with Andrea. You can’t reap the benefits if you don’t.”

“I’ll do that once I figure out what it’s going to be.”

“That’ll be fine.” Jenny said. “Can you make a meeting at my house tonight, say seven? I spoke to most of the women, they can.”

Ellen thought for a second ignoring the heavy breathing of annoyance Henry placed in her ear. “I guess I can. Why?”

“We want to have a wedding meeting. We want to pick a committee since this is a group project, and start the ball rolling on things. You know, actually sit down and write up what we need to do, who gets involved and such. Picking of bridesmaids, who the groomsmen are going to be. All of this is so important when it comes to clothing sizes. Once we know what

we want to do, we can proceed with the preparations. All basic stuff. So you'll be there?"

"Sure, I'll come."

"Good. See you then." Jenny moved back to the door. "I'll leave you two to your therapy."

Henry waited until Jenny had left before he raised his head up. "Wedding meeting?"

"Oh yeah. There's going to be a big wedding in Beginnings in a couple of months Henry. Now what's going to actually happen isn't set in stone, but by the talk, it's going to be big. Complete with Bridesmaids, groomsmen, cake, music, the whole thing. Old fashion. It's the Moon lodge's big group project."

"A big wedding."

"Like in the old world."

"Who's having it?"

"Me and you."

"What?" Henry was shocked.

"Me and you Henry. All I did was mention we were having a ceremony and the women they took off with it. They were having fun, it helps my Frank-cause with Jenny so I let it go."

"Frank knows about it?"

"Oh sure." Ellen said. "He thinks doing this with Jenny is a great idea."

"He thinks us getting married for real is a great idea?"

"Well, no. He didn't really say anything about the us getting married part. I'm expecting that soon. But the preparations for it, he thinks is good."

"So you already agreed for us to be the showcase wedding?"

"Yes, why not."

"El, don't you think you should have spoken to me first?"

Ellen looked oddly at him. "I'm sorry Henry. I didn't think you would mind. I thought since we were getting married that you . . ." She felt him pull away and get up from the bed. "Henry? Henry what is it?"

"El." Henry ran his hand through his hair before looking at her. "I don't know if it's such a good idea."

"What? The wedding?" Ellen giggled at him. "Oh Henry, it's a party. Don't worry about it. We love parties. And it will be Beginnings' first big, real wedding. We're getting married anyhow, might as well take advantage of it right."

"El . . ."

"You're funny being nervous about it." She moved to him and kissed him on the cheek. And then in typical Ellen fashion, she rambled fast. "Henry, you never had a wedding. You and Amy were married at the justice of the peace. The closest thing I ever had to a wedding was when Dean and I got married by George, even then it really wasn't a party. And I'm kind of looking forward to it, especially after all the women keep walking up to me

and talking about it. It'll be fun. And I promise Henry I won't ask you to do anything to help. Hell, I'm not even doing anything. The women are. Something is wrong. What is it?"

"El, I need you to know I feel really awkward about . . . about . . ." He saw she waited for an answer. "I feel . . ." He watched the smile slowly leave her face. "Never mind. Forget I said anything. It's just the idea of Jenny being involved, it makes me feel awkward."

"Then I promise Henry, I won't let her pester you about it. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner, but you were electrocuted." She kissed him again. "And thank you. I really think Joe is looking forward to giving me away. Of course I think after this marriage he is instilling a 'no return' policy." Ellen giggled and stepped back. "And I really have to get back to work. I don't have many work days before I'm back at home with Nick until he's old enough to go to the nursery."

"Will you stop by tonight?" Henry asked as he moved back to the bed.

"No Henry, I'll stop by in an hour." She smiled at him as she walked through the door.

After adjusting the back of the bed up, Henry spoke softly as he climbed back into it. "A wedding." He blew slowly from his mouth.

"Almost forgot." Ellen darted back in the room in a rush. "I don't think I've told you lately." She leaned to him on the bed and kissed him. "I love you." With a smile, she hurried from the room again.

Henry stared at the door as he laid back in bed. "Oh El." He grabbed one of his two pillows and brought it to his chest, holding it close to him. Closing his eyes he rested his cheek against the top edge of the pillow. And he laid there in a lot more thought than he wanted to be in at that moment.

(2)

The sound of heavy artillery aggravated the headache that George had as he inspected the training of his men. It should have been a better day. Having just heard from John Matoose, it was certain now that Beginnings no longer had the CME program. That, according to John Matoose was lost in the lab fire, along with part of Henry's memory, so Beginnings was set back. And even though Henry wasn't dead, it still in an essence was a victory to George. Trying to concentrate on good thoughts, he held one ear shut with his finger while reading over notes and watching with a half eye, the pitiful marksmanship.

The military was building in a replica of what was once in the old world. Similar to what Beginnings was trying to accomplish only on a bigger scale. Ranking and structure of the military had to remain the same. It was a matter of respect and pride, George thought.

George approached the thin man, blonde and balding, slightly similar to John Matoose. He stood behind, marking down and keeping track of what

the twenty men shot. "Sargent."

"Sir." He spun to George, concentrating eyes forward and saluting him. His finger tips nearly pointed in his salute to the small half inch scar that garnished his temple. A remnant of the implantation of the new chip this Sargent received.

"At ease Sargent. How's our men?"

"Learning Sir, but their percentages leave a lot to be desired." So matter-of-fact he spoke.

"I see." George twitched his eyebrow in thought about how it didn't matter how much you programmed them to think and behave a certain way, only true training would get them to achieve what George had hoped for. A teacher with that caliber, George didn't have. "Keep working on them." Rolling his eyes slightly, George moved on, he was tired of getting annoyed at how poorly his soldiers were trained. And he knew they were, there was nothing he could do about it at the moment. The proof in their training was evident when twenty of them couldn't take out one of Robbie's Slagel's men. Of Course Robbie's men were trained in Beginnings, and that to George was another thing Beginnings had in their favor. And George firmly believed that one top trained man could take out an entire platoon, and entire platoon should not be able to take out one top trained man. Unfortunately George had none of those, if he did, he certainly wouldn't be cringing at every shot his men fired.

George stopped walking. What, was he stupid? He actually smacked himself in the forehead mid stride. What was he thinking? He had the technology now to wipe out a part of a memory while keeping the knowledge intact. So why wasn't he using that part of his technology?

Wanting to pick up his phone, and knowing it wasn't safe, he hurried down the hill toward the old CIA building where one of his biology laboratories were now located. He rushed through the first floor searching out the man he hoped would be in his office but wasn't. He was behind a safety wall of glass working. George caught his attention, calling him out into the corridor to join him.

It took a few minutes, but Dr. Raynes joined George. "Yes Mr. President."

"The immunization to the viral strain we issued on the Beginnings men. How effective is it once the man has been exposed or affected?"

"So-so, why." Dr. Raynes asked. "You do know that it is not a full antidote. It has to be given prior to exposure."

"I know this. Will it counteract the effects?"

"It can, slowly, and not with a hundred percent certainty. Why?"

"Get it ready." George snapped his finger. "I need a dosage that could be considered an antidote for a man about six foot two, two hundred or so pounds. Got that? He doesn't have it yet, but chances are he will. And I need it fast."

"How fast?"

"I'm shipping out two squads with it tomorrow. Two squads to ensure it arrives." George began to leave. "And pack it up so it doesn't go bad. It may take them two or three days to get to their destination."

"I can do that. I'll include four vials just to be sure. We have enough."

"Good, get on that. I have to get things situated. I'll be sending to you, the men of the two squads going out. They'll need inoculated as well."

"Sir." Dr. Raynes followed him. "Can I ask who it was that was accidentally exposed?"

"Not accidentally, deliberately, and it was a mistake on my part. A stupid mistake. All along I'm thinking getting rid of him is best, when it never dawned on me to bring him to us and make him work in our favor."

"Who?"

"Robbie Slagel." George said his name for the first time in a long time, with a smile.

(3)

Ellen squeezed her hands as she held them in the pockets of her lab coat. Squeezing the nervousness as she watched Dean from the clinic lab door while he worked. He had pretty much avoided her the day before, like the plague he worked on. And since some time had passed, Ellen figured it safe to talk to him. With a deep breath, a wide smile and a chipper voice, she walked in. "Morning Dean." She approached him and he moved aside.

"Ellen."

"How about *me* returning to work at the clinic?"

"I see." He walked around the counter.

"Did you see the samples I did bright and early?"

"Yep." He slid to her another sheet of orders. "You didn't do these."

"I was coming back for them." She kept her tone upbeat. "I went to see Henry. He's up and about."

"Good for Henry." Dean returned to his work.

"And he's doing pretty good for a man who supposedly has partial amnesia." She giggled. "Isn't that funny. I've been testing him for two days and he's answered everything right. Joe thinks I'm dumb. I know what he's up to."

"And I know what you're not up to."

"Excuse me?" Ellen asked with a smile.

"Your work." He pushed the orders closer to her. "They need done."

"Dean, I'm trying to talk to you."

"Ellen." He finally faced her. "I don't care. I don't want to have idle conversation with you. Now, do what you are here to do . . . work."

Ellen's mouth opened in a gasp. "I thought you'd be a lot better with me today."

"Why would you think that?"

"Because it's stupid why you're mad."

"You *would* think that." Dean turned away from her.

"You know what Dean?" Ellen stepped back. "Fuck you."

"Fuck me? No Ellen." He snapped at her. "Fuck you!"

"I can't believe you just said that to me."

"Why not? Oh wait, yeah, that's right, Ellen double standards again. You can do what you want and no one is allowed to say anything."

"Why are you being such an asshole?"

"Because I'm tired of being the nice guy."

Ellen laughed in a taunting manner. "I have news for you Dean, you were never really that nice."

"Come on Ellen, you can't come up with anything better than that?"

"I'm trying to stay calm here Dean."

"Don't."

Ellen stormed to him. "Boy you are just looking for a fight aren't you? Let me tell you something, you don't know what you just started."

Up from his work, Dean raised his eyes. "Ellen."

"You and your fuckin attitude."

"Ellen." Not only his voice, but Dean's eyes scolded as well.

"Holier than thou, stupid shit."

"You would think you would have gotten the hint when you walked in here that I didn't want to deal with you. Stupid shit, is thinking you can try edge me on more."

"I don't need to try to edge you on more Dean, I'm the master of pissing people off."

"Well Master, there is nothing you can do to piss me off anymore."

"You don't think?" Ellen raised her eyes.

"I don't think."

"Watch me." With a sweep of her arm in a dramatic move, Ellen cleared the counter of the thirty or so folders Dean had spread out there, spraying papers forth up in the air and all around.

Letting out a loud, shrieking grunt of anger, Dean threw his hand up. "What the hell was that about!"

"Pissing you off."

"You'll pick every single one of those up!"

"And you'll kiss my ass!"

The whistle and the semi-clap stopped their fight right there and then when Frank stood in the lab door holding Nick. "It warms my heart to see you two getting along like this."

Dean curled his top lip as he began to pick up papers that were everywhere. "Shut up Frank."

Frank snickered. "Quite the mess you have here Dean."

Dean snarled as he bent down and then looked at Ellen who stood with her arms folded amongst the mess. "You're just gonna stand there?"

"What? You think I'm helping you?" She snapped at him.

"If you aren't, then leave."

"No!" She yelled and bent down some to him. "Because it's pissing you off me standing here."

"You started this." He looked up at her.

"Bull shit Dean, you started this. Giving me your shit."

Frank held his hand over Nick's ear. "Language please."

Dean shook his head. "It's about time someone gave you shit." He picked up more papers. "And you know what El? You deserve it."

"Oh yeah.?" Ellen raised her eyebrow. "Well you deserve this." With her foot she gave a short swift kick and sent the papers Dean reached for even further.

"Ellen!" Dean stormed in a stand.

"Dean!"

"Guys!" Frank intruded with an enjoyable laugh.

A screaming 'Frank!' emerged from both of them.

Getting out his last laugh, Frank held his hand up. "Don't get me wrong, not that I'm not enjoying this immensely . . ." He cringed when they yelled his name again. "But . . . but mind you. I have never seen you two fight like this in all the years we've been here. And that includes when Ellen cheated on you Dean."

Dean saw red, his faced showed it too. If steam could protrude from him it would have, he marched to Frank. "You would just bring that up at this moment wouldn't you."

Frank shook his head. "No, you can't be getting mad about that now. There's a statute of limitations or something like that." He grinned widely. "This is so great."

Dean's hand pointed outward. "Tell me something Frank. I need you to prove something for me."

"You mean that I'm strong. Or how about that I'm sexy. I'll pose Dean." He heard Dean growl in anger. "Dean chill." Frank contained his laughter. "Man are you pissed. What did you do El? Good job."

Ellen shuffled her way through the papers, making more of a mess. "Let's go Frank."

"No." Dean stopped him. "I need to know something. Just something simple Frank. Did you sleep in bed with Ellen last night?"

Ellen spun around and faced Dean. "That is none of your goddamn business."

Dean lowered his voice to a whisper as he faced Ellen close. "Maybe not, but it would prove my point."

"A-bout what?" Ellen said so sarcastic.

"That everything you said to me in the hall the other night was just another Ellen tale." He turned to face Frank trying to hide his irritation at the arrogant happy look on Frank's face. "So did you?"

"Well." Frank cleared his throat.

"Don't answer him Frank." Ellen instructed.

"Well . . ." Frank continued. "Seeing how it really isn't any of your business, and more irritation hinges on my answer. I'll answer you." Putting his face close to Dean's, Frank smiled. "Yes."

"Frank!" Ellen yelled.

Dean's head spun to Ellen then back to Frank who laughed a single 'ha'. "Thanks Frank."

"No problem." He watched Dean begin to leave. "Oh Dean . . . she was naked too." Dean kept walking and Frank stuck his head out the lab door. "And Dean? I touched her breasts." Laughing he refaced the lab and Ellen too, she did not look happy. "What?"

"You're an asshole too."

"Yeah, so. I know this. Can we take Nick to see Henry now?"

"In a minute." Ellen stormed by him to catch glimpse of Dean leaving the clinic. "Dean!"

Dean flung open the doors more in Frank fashion than in his own and walked to the street.

"Stop it right now!"

Dean stopped walking. Holding his hair back he faced Ellen. "What is it?"

"This fighting is really stupid."

"I'm really mad El."

"And now so am I. Where does that get us?"

Dean was silent as he stared at her.

"Look I'm not going to argue with you anymore. And I'm not going to try to convince you of anything about us. After the other night and especially after today, I don't want to."

"If you're not going to argue Ellen, why are you saying this?"

"I need to. And you need to hear me."

"I'd really rather not hear you unless it has something to do with medicine."

"Fine." Ellen held her hands up. "That's fine." She stepped back. "If that's the way you want us to be, then that is the way you got it. From this moment on Dean, no more. I will work with you but that's as far as it goes. But let me let you in on a little secret Dr. Hayes. You didn't need to get so possessive and jealous over me. Whether you choose to believe it or not, I would have been there for you every step of the way, and not because I had to, because I wanted to. I wanted to be with you. But not anymore." She backed up. "And just to show you I'm a better person than you give me credit for, I'll clean up that mess I made in your lab." She started walking back to the clinic.

"Ellen." Dean followed her and took hold of her arm. "I needed you this time not to be with Frank. Especially this time. But you just couldn't do it, could you?"

Ellen's jaw twitched slightly as she looked in Dean's eyes. "I guess not." She pulled from his grip, turned her back to him and headed into the clinic.

(4)

It should have been something Robbie expected when the other two went. In actuality, he did. But it was something he didn't want to face. The quiet. No breath sounds, no movement. No shivering or calling out for help. A still Greg, laying in his make shift bed. His face holding a look of peace that had long been gone during his agony and suffering.

So unlike with the plague that ended the world, there was no convulsions at the end, no out of control illness. Just quiet, peaceful, death. It happened so fast, Robbie wasn't ready. The last he had checked on Greg was an hour before hand, and when he returned to him to wipe him down, give him something, Greg was gone.

The first survivor Greg was, ever to enter Beginnings' gate. He was the first to make it through the newly instituted containment process. He was the first to gain the complete trust of the originals and be treated as if he were one himself. And now Greg was one of the first to die from the plague that seemed to threaten the existence of the home he fought to protect.

The irony of it all baffled Robbie. When Greg left Beginnings not long before to go out and take on George's men, he never expected to return home. No good warrior ever does. Greg expected to face his battles, and if need be, die fighting for what he believed in. But he died in a battle he wasn't prepared for. Had it been a gun that faced him off, Greg could have stood tall. But there was no amount of defense that would have guarded him from what brought him down. In an essence Greg did stand tall against his defeater.

Covering Greg's body before Robbie would take him outside to bury him, he remembered the words Greg spoke to him when he first got ill, *'even if this thing takes me Robbie, I'm doing what I set out to do. As long as I die outside of Beginnings with this illness still inside of me, then I am protecting my home with my life.'*

And Greg did.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

(1)

“Dean’s just scared El.” Henry told her as she traced tiny circles on his hand as she stared at it while he lay in his bed.

“I know Henry, but he’s being really mean to me. And, and I threw his papers all over the lab.”

Henry snickered. “Sorry.”

“It’s not funny.”

“I know. Frank thought it was.”

“Frank basked in it. He didn’t ask why we were fighting like that, he just smiled about it.”

“Just understand.” Henry tried to get Ellen to see reason. “Dean was depending on you. He needed to count on you being there when the time came. And with Frank in the picture, all he could see is the way Frank is. And that is, Frank won’t let you near Dean.”

“I wouldn’t have let that happen.”

“I know that and you know that. But Dean is like I said, too scared to see that. Would you like to hear my theory on it?”

“Oh you know I do Henry.” Ellen sat up. “I love your theories. You have good theories.”

“Dean’s overreacting because he’s scared. We all do that. Remember the kid in kindergarten who held on to his mother and screamed and cried because he didn’t want her to leave. Well just like the kid, Dean screamed and shouted in hopes that you wouldn’t leave. And again like the kid, Dean’s just gonna have to see that no matter if you’re in the next room or down the street, you’re there. And you’ll be back.”

“But I’m not Henry.”

“Aren’t you gonna help him when he needs you El?” Henry asked.

“I will. How can I not? But I won’t be there for him in any other way.”

“Maybe that’s for the best.” He spoke softly.

“Henry? Why do you say that?”

“El, why was Dean upset? Because of how you and Frank are? Let’s face it El, you and Frank are getting closer.”

“We’ve worked very hard to be good friends again Henry. I’m not giving up that with Frank, just like I wouldn’t give my friendship up with Dean.”

“I know that. But right now Dean only sees that you’re gonna pull him along, and pull him along until you’re back somehow with Frank. And at this point in his life, with all that’s going on, he’s afraid of that happening and he’s getting defensive. Just give him time El. He’ll be nice to you again.”

“Thanks Henry.” Ellen lowered her lips to his hand and kissed him. “And I’d better go. I have the big wedding planning meeting tonight.” She

stood up. "I have to change Frank's bandages too." Leaning down to him, Ellen kissed him. "I'll stop by before my meeting. How's that?"

"I'd like that."

"Good. And I'll stop by afterwards, unless you don't want to hear what was discussed. You do want to hear don't you Henry?"

"Sure El." He smiled sadly.

"Good, for a second there I thought you were chickening out again." She started to leave. "You're not going to chicken out on me Henry are you?"

"Chicken out?" Henry shook his head. "Trust me no. I wouldn't chicken out of marrying you El. Just know, I want to be married to you."

Ellen waved her hand at Henry as if he were being silly. "I know that. And . . . I'd better go."

"See you in a little bit."

Ellen walked to the door then paused to look at Henry who seemed down. Figuring it was just his health, she winked and smiled hoping to pass her spirits on to him and she started to walk from the clinic room.

She debated in her mind on whether to stop in and see Dean. Wondering if he was impressed by the fine organizational skills she used to put the folders back together, Ellen used that as an excuse to talk to him. And she stopped in the lab.

"Dean?" Slowly, apprehensively she walked in.

"Thanks for putting the folders back together." Dean said, little emotions, if any, to his tone.

"I can't guarantee I did them right." She smiled, moving closer.

"What's up?" Sitting down, Dean turned his stool to face her.

Ellen let out a breath. "Thanks."

"For what?"

"You're not being as mean."

Dean shrugged and raised his eyebrows. "So what did you need?"

"I was uh . . . I was wondering if you were busy if you want me to pick the kids up from school and you can get them when you get Brian at the house."

"I can get them. I'm leaving soon."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah." Dean stood up. "Anything else?"

"I guess not." Folding her arms, Ellen started to leave the lab but stopped. "Dean, I'm not understanding this. I'm really not. I know you're scared . . ."

"Scared? You don't know how scared I am. You don't know what I go through each day, getting up twenty minutes earlier because that's how long it takes for my sight to come back in the morning. You don't know what it's like knowing that our men are outside of our walls dying of something I have to fight. How can I fight it without my eyes? And they're going El, they're going fast."

"So why are you pushing me away? I want to help you."

"I'll let you help me, but not the way you've been. We've been close El. We work together, we touch, we kiss . . ." He stepped to her. "But I can't figure out why you're doing that, or were. You came back to me because you knew I needed you. And I'm mad at you and I'm mad at myself for getting caught up in what was going on. It's one thing to need you for your eyes Ellen, it's another to need you for you. And I was reaching the point where I depended on both. I can't do that. Because when it's all said and done with, and I become self sufficient, then not only will my sight be gone, but then so will you too."

"You can't say that. You don't know."

"I do know. Look how easy it was for Frank to get you to sleep in bed with him." He backed away. "And can't you see what you're doing or why I'm mad. Ellen, right now in my life I needed to know that you'll be there. I can't take a chance of having to wait my turn in line. I can't. And maybe I overreacted. Yes, I did overreact. But just see my point. You're telling me you'll be there whenever. But that's not true, it can't be true. Frank is in the picture again. Not that he hasn't always been. But he's back again and you're letting him be there."

"Dean." She walked to him. "Remember when Frank and I had gotten back together? Remember how I promised you, I would never walk away from you. I'd be there for you as long as you wanted me to. I meant that. I did that. Frank didn't like it, but I did it anyway. And now you, *you* have to take the same attitude Dean. I'm not going to walk away from Frank."

"Have you ever?"

Ellen grunted slightly. "You're missing my point. I know you needed me, just because Frank is in the picture doesn't take me away from you. It's a different world now Dean, you've said it before. You can't have someone all to yourself."

"Don't."

"Excuse me?"

"Don't do that. Don't justify being with Frank while you have an understanding with me as it being a different world now. Don't do that, because you know damn well it will always be that way. And you're using the male-female ratio as an excuse because you can't make up your mind. And it's perfect for you Ellen." Dean started working.

"How can you say that? There are so many more men than women in this community, in this world. All of us women are being like this. Dean, I can't let those I care about be alone. I can't. As a friend, it's my duty."

"No Ellen." Dean snapped his view to her. "It's your fantasy."

Ellen brought her hand up, slamming it down hard on the counter. "I will not forgive you for that remark. I won't." She backed away. "You're the last one I expected to hear that from. I come in here trying Dean, trying to make things right with you. With all the shit that we've gone through, you have never treated me like this. Ever. This is not you, and if you losing your

sight is making you get like this, then I don't want you." She began to leave. "Contrary to what you think, I don't deserve this. Never in my life did I expect for you to be this way with me." She turned and walked to the door.

"And never in my life did I ever expect to need you so much." Dean watched Ellen stop, turn around and walk back in. "And I don't want to be like that. Being dependant on someone is not me. I'm so scared that there will be a time that I'll need you and you will turn around and walk out because Frank beckons."

"Dean." Ellen spoke softly. "You have to believe . . ."

"Ellen." Joe's sudden entrance in the lab halted their conversation. He didn't sound his annoying self, he sounded upset.

Ellen looked at him. "Joe, what's wrong?"

He shook his head as he stepped further in. "Are you headed home, I mean, to Frank's?"

"I was, why?"

"Could you get there now, so you can be there for a while before your little meeting tonight? Frank needs you."

"Is it real important Joe, Dean and I are talking." Ellen said.

"I think so. He's not handling this well. He's . . . he's drinking Ellen."

"Shit." Ellen closed her eyes and twitched her head.

Dean gave her a 'it figures' look and stood up. "Go on Ellen. Frank needs you."

"Joe." Ellen turned back to him. "Can't he handle the baby, is he in pain? Why is he drinking?"

Joe looked at her confused. "What do you mean? I think you know why. It's got him down."

"What?" Ellen tossed her hands up.

"Didn't Dean tell you? He was supposed to tell you." Joe asked. "Three of our men died an hour ago. Greg . . ." Joe's voice dropped. "Greg was one of them."

Immediately Ellen's eyes seared Dean's way. "If you want to shut me out of your life Dean, you do that. But don't you dare shut me out of our work." Her hand moved about. "I'm fighting this virus right along with you. I'm not your flunky. I needed to know our men died, not just because it affected my work, but because it affected me. If it was your responsibility to tell me, you failed me. Like you think I failed you. And if you wanted to prove your point that I'd walk away from you, you just did." She stepped from her closeness to him. "Because I'm walking away from you. Frank needs me." She grabbed the door to the lab. "And I really think Joe, you should consider putting me somewhere else in this community. From this moment on, I refuse to work with him."

Joe hunched some when the lab door slammed violently upon Ellen's exit. "Oh boy."

Dean slid his hand down his face as he watched that door. "I can think of a less 'G' rated comment to say at this moment."

"I could too, but I was being polite." Joe began to leave also. "Dean, let me tell you something. You and Ellen are part of a team. You have to work together as a team. You not telling her about Greg is not the way to do that. Now what you're working on isn't simple shit, it's vital, very vital. And if you can't put your personal feelings aside and work together, then I will go against everything I believe and I will separate the two of you. Because you can only beat this as a team, and if you aren't going to work that way, then you will never beat this thing. For two days I have ignored this shit. But that is two days of progress you have fallen behind. If it isn't settled by tomorrow, then I suggest you figure out who suits you better to work with. Because this community's life is at stake and it doesn't deserve to have its life hinging on whether or not you're getting along with Ellen at the moment. Got that?"

Dean closed his eyes. "I got that."

"Good." Joe pulled on the door which was actually stuck after Ellen's brutal exit.

"Oh Joe?"

"Yeah Dean?" He paused in his leaving.

"Maybe you should talk to Godrichson about putting aside his Regressionator work so we can use his skills as a scientist in . . . in my lab. He's not immune so I'll have to have him work with it on the computers but, I'll need him."

Sadly Joe placed his hands in his pockets and looked upon Dean "If that's how you feel."

"That's how I feel."

"I'll speak to Godrichson, you can start training him tomorrow." Joe walked from the lab but didn't get too far before he walked back in. "This is a mistake on your part. And I only hope it's not a mistake this entire community has to pay for."

Dean felt Joe's words still lingering around even after he had left. Dean knew so much was happening to him, the virus, his sight, and he felt so out of control. He didn't want to be out of control, but he just didn't know what to do about it or handle it. And that didn't help him, it only made matters worse.

(2)

"Frank?" Ellen called out his name softly as she walked into the house. "Frank?"

"In the kitchen."

Taking a breath first, Ellen shut the door, Joe's words that Frank was drinking raced in her mind. She visualized him a bottle of moonshine half gone in his hand. She paused briefly in her stride to the kitchen to check on a sleeping Nick and Brian. "Frank?"

"Hey El." So down Frank sounded as he stopped what he was doing and took a second to kiss her on the cheek. "You're back early."

"I'm sorry about Greg." She couldn't help it, her eyes shifted for the bottle. "I'm sorry about your men." She moved to him.

"I . . . I don't want to talk about it. O.K.?" He looked at her gently then moved by her. "I'll get the chair so you can do your thing to my burns."

"Sure Frank I'll . . ." She saw it, the glass. Partially full and she knew it wasn't water. Was it on its first fill or had he refilled it more than once. "Frank, it's a little early in the day to be drinking."

SLAM! The chair smacked the linoleum. "Drop it El."

Ellen huffed and turned to the bandages and supplies that he had on the counter waiting. "Man, the fuckin men in my life, the way they talk to me." She shook her head and turned on the water to fill up the basin.

"I'm sorry." Frank walked up behind her. "I really am. Go ahead." He laid his hand on his shoulder while talking to her back. "Yell at me. Yell at me for snapping and yell at me for drinking too early."

Ellen reached up her hand to his. "Let's just change these bandages." She faced him. "Sit."

"You're mad."

"Frank just sit. O.K.?"

"All right." Not taking his eyes off of her he sat down in the chair and removed his shirt.

"Where are the bandages?"

"I took them off."

"Frank, you know they aren't supposed to come off until tomorrow."

"One day, what difference does it make? They got on my nerves."

Ellen shook her head with a slight smile as she began to clean the area around his neck. "These are healing nice." She leaned in closer. As she did, she felt him moving. "What are you doing?" She kept working.

"Reaching for my drink."

"Don't reach for your drink Frank." Extending her arm out, she blindly dropped the cloth in the sink and grabbed the ointment.

"Can I reach for something else?"

Occupied with applying the ointment, Ellen spoke as such. "What else are you going to reach for?"

"Considering right now what's really close."

Ellen moved her eyes to the left and looked at where he looked, she snickered and returned to the ointment. "Be good."

Frank slowly breathed through his nostrils. "I'm trying, but it's hard."

"Frank."

"Not that . . . well."

"Frank."

"I'm good."

Ellen tsked at him, shaking her head slightly as she moved her fingertips to his chin. "Yeah, this is really looking good."

"El." So softly he spoke her name.

Why? Why did her stomach twitch when she felt his warm breath brush against her cheek while she leaned into him. She swallowed the lump that formed in her throat. "I uh . . . I'll say it again. What your poor body doesn't go through."

"It's not that bad, is it." More whispering, he talked to her.

"No." Another swallow and she closed her eyes as his nose lightly touched her. "There's nothing bad about your body at all Frank." Her eyes instinctively opened when she felt him getting up. Her views went from his face to his neck, to his chest as he stood to his feet staying so close.

"El." Frank slid his hand from her arm to her neck, then cupped her face between both of his hands and tilted her head back. His fingers spread out pushing away her hair and pulling her closer to him. Then instead of kissing her at that moment like he wanted to, Frank brought Ellen to his chest and held her in an embrace, resting his head on top of hers, as he slowly let his body feel against hers.

Ellen brought in the scent of him, the warmth of Frank as she breathed in. There was something different about this embrace, more different than any one he had given to her in a long time. And that became evident when she felt his cheek slide down her hair to her cheek and against her face as his lips moved to hers. So caught up in the fear she had of that moment of letting Frank kiss her, that the split second before their lips met, when Joe walked in with his 'sorry to interrupt' Ellen jolted back, not just a little but a whole body width worth of space. "Joe." She spoke surprised.

"Sorry Ellen. Sorry Frank." He said with a tilted head and with an embarrassed look he stepped back out of the kitchen. "I'll just wait in the livingroom. I don't want to spoil this for you."

Taking a long blink, Frank looked once more at Ellen then stepped back when his father left. "Did you want to try that again?"

"Frank I don't think we . . ."

"Nope, forget I asked." Frank held up his hand with a smile, then reached back for his drink he knew was there. "Moment's gone anyhow." Loudly his breath was heard and he brought it to his lips and took a drink.

"Frank."

"El." He winked and gave her a peck of a kiss on the cheek. "Let's go hear what my father says will spoil what uh . . . what we shouldn't have been doing in the first place." Raising his eyebrows a few times he placed his hand on Ellen's back and holding his drink he led her out of the kitchen to the livingroom. "Dad, what's going on?"

Joe stood up from the couch. "That was fast."

"What?" Frank finished his drink and laid it on the end table. "You thought we'd have sex while you were in the next room? Please, we only do that when you're in your office and Ellen's in her little processing . . . ow." He grunted as her hand back slapped him in the gut. "Room." He cleared his throat. "What's going on?"

"I just left Dean."

"You're right." Frank crossed his arms. "The mention of Dean's name would have spoiled it."

"This is serious Frank." Joe looked at Ellen. "Dean . . . Dean . . . he no longer wants to work with you Ellen. So starting tomorrow, Jason Godrichson will be assisting Dean in the lab."

Ellen felt pummeled. The news of it nearly made her fall over. "He said this to you Joe?"

"I'm afraid so. I'm sorry Ellen I am. But I can't take a chance. With both of you fighting, it could get in the way. Maybe in a few days or so things will calm down and he'll see you should be working with him."

"No." Ellen shook her head. "I have to sit." Gliding her hand downward to the couch, she used it as support as she sat. "He really meant that?"

Joe nodded solemnly.

"I can't believe it. I'm not a part of it anymore." Her eyes told the truth of how upset she was. "I worked so hard Joe, I really worked hard. He doesn't want me there anymore?" She said in shock.

"I'm sorry sweetheart." Joe sat next to her and rested his hand on her knee. "Maybe he'll see in little bit, how much he needs you and he . . ."

"No!" Ellen stood up and ranted so unexpectedly and so bitter. "I don't care if he needs me. He can do it without me. All of it. Every aspect of his miserable life." She stormed to the steps. "And I refuse to ever help him again. How can he do this? How can he be like this." She took the stairs. "We'll see who needs who and who comes begging. And I guarantee I won't be the beggar." She stopped mid steps. "Guarantee Joe. He can kiss my ass for all I care!" Ellen let out a soft, high pitch growl and stomped the rest of the way up the stairs.

Joe shook his head in disgust as he stood up. "This is ridiculous, really ridiculous."

"Yes it is." Frank agreed. "She acted like Alex stomping up the steps like that."

"No Frank, not that. This Dean and Ellen situation. Out of the blue they are at each others throats."

"Bound to happen." Franks stated with fact.

"Bound to happen? Why do you say that? They divorced and didn't fight like that."

"What have I been saying all along? He's got that little-man attitude, and she has that little-woman attitude. And just like the two toughest kids on the block are always bound to end up tangling, so are the smallest as well." Frank picked up his glass and stared at its emptiness in disappointment.

"None of this bothers you?"

"Nope. Happiest day of my life them not working together anymore. Hell, I'm so fuckin happy I feel like singing."

“Good, I’m glad this makes you happy Frank. Just don’t be so happy you feel like drinking.”

“Nah.” Frank tilted his empty glass more knowing he was trying to hide the truth from his father. And the truth was, for as much as he wanted to jump up and down in a gloating Frank manner, he wanted that drink even more. And the fact that he couldn’t, made his desire for it even worse.

(3)

Henry made a crinkling face as his lips swished from one side of his face to the other. He looked at Ellen while he did this face, over and over.

“You don’t like it?” She asked sitting in the chair next to his bed.

Henry held up one finger and placed another spoon full of the red substance into his mouth. Again he made the swishing face. “No.” He handed the bowl back. “It tastes like hot ketchup.”

“It’s supposed to be tomato soup.” Ellen stated. “Trish made it.”

“There you have it El. Ever since they recreated ketchup everything she makes is based with ketchup. Ask Jeff, all he does is complain.”

“Well what should I tell her Henry, she wants to contribute that as the soup for the wedding.”

“Let her, don’t hurt her feelings, we’ll just not eat it.”

“Oh, O.K.” Ellen set the bowl on the night stand. “It was a fun meeting tonight Henry. The women went on and on about what they are going to do. In fact, Trish and Jenny said that Cole can stop by Miles City after his run and pick up the tuxes.”

Henry coughed. “Tuxes?”

“Oh sure. I have to wear a dress. You guys have to wear tuxes. I picked the wedding party, since you kept changing the subject on me before the meeting.”

“Oh no, I’m afraid to ask. Who are your bridesmaid?” Henry asked.

“Only two. I thought we’d go with an ‘original’ scheme. Jenny liked that. So, Andrea is one of them, and . . .” Ellen snickered. “Jenny is my, get this, Frank will love this, my matron of honor.”

“What?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Ellen nodded with a smile. “And wait, it gets better. Frank is her partner because he’s best man. Then again Joe is the other guy in your wedding party.”

“Frank, the best man? No El, you can’t do that.” Henry said with concern. “That is so wrong.”

“Why is that wrong? He’s not your best friend?”

“Well sure he is but . . .”

“Then he should be your best man.” Ellen spoke fast. “Ben told Jenny that he’ll measure you guys, and as long as Cole picks sizes in the vicinity he can tailor them to fit. I hope you’re not mad about Joe being in the wedding

party.”

“I’m still stuck on Frank.” Henry closed his eyes tightly. “It’s wrong El to have him be the best man in our wedding. That is so wrong to do to him. It’s like rubbing it in his face.”

The smile dropped from Ellen’s face. “I’m sorry. You’re right.” She was quiet for a second. “Oh well, I’ll talk to him. Getting back.” She smiled again.

Henry raised his hand and let it drop with a slap. “I give up. Next thing you know you’re going to tell me Dean is in the wedding.”

“I don’t want Dean anywhere near the wedding.” Ellen was very serious.

“Another fight?”

“The last fight.” Ellen stated. “In fact, I’m not even working with him anymore. I’ve been replaced with Jason.”

“No. That is so wrong El.”

“I know and he’s so mad at me. For no real good reason. I’ve done worse to him, believe me I’ve done worse.” She shrugged. “But he shut me out and now I’m shutting him out as well.”

“Until he needs you when his sight goes.”

“Not even then Henry.”

“El.” Henry turned on his side to look closer at her. “You two have been working on this so you can help him. Work with him. Be his eyes.”

“He’s gonna have to find another seeing eye dog Henry, because I won’t do it. I won’t. In my book Dean Hayes means as much to me, no, less than any survivor we pick up.”

This made Henry feel bad, with all that was going on he didn’t know who to feel worse for. As far as he was concerned, they were acting like babies and both Dean and Ellen were feeding off of each other in some sort of competition to see who could make who feel worse. And at that moment, if Dean was winning in his score card, Ellen’s words just evened it up, because neither Henry or Ellen realized that Dean was standing right outside of Henry’s door when she said that to Henry.

Dean turned away. A little help is why he stopped by to see Henry after helping Andrea with an emergency at the clinic. But he didn’t get his help, because Dean never went into that room. He merely took the chart that he suddenly found he needed Henry’s eyes for, and he took it to his lab, hoping that the next day his eyes wouldn’t be so tired and he’d be able to focus in more on the spaces he couldn’t see to fill in.

(4)

Frank’s loud ‘uh!’ startled Ellen to scream just as loud as him the second she turned on the light in the bedroom.

“El!” Frank raised up his body some, rubbing his eyes. “The light!”

"God you scared me." She held her chest. "What are you doing in bed?"

"Fuckin trying to sleep. What else would I be doing in bed?"

"But I thought that was you sleeping on the couch."

"No, that was Johnny. His air conditioner is broken."

"Johnny?" Ellen giggled. "I thought that was you. He looks just like . . ." The smile dropped from her face. "Shit." She quickly turned her back to him and faced the dresser.

"You're saying 'shit' what did you do to him?" Frank asked.

Ellen hid her embarrassed look. "It's just that, I thought it was you and I kind of had this flashing thought in my mind when I saw him, whom I thought was you, on the couch. It was dark."

Frank smiled. "Is this a thought I'd like to hear?"

"Probably." She took a breath and faced him. "But you're not. I see you ended up with all the kids. How did that happen?"

"Dean had to go to the clinic with Andrea. One of Cole's kids, I don't know which one, broke their leg. Andrea had to do surgery."

"Dean was at the clinic? Funny I didn't see the prick."

Frank grinned. "Little people are often hard to spot."

"We have a house full then."

"That we do." Frank reached back, adjusted his pillows, then plopped backwards onto the backboard pile. "You getting ready for bed?"

"Yeah, I'm tired." She opened her drawer and pulled out a shirt. "It's later than I thought. I stopped by to talk to Henry at the clinic, then on my way here, I saw Joe and we talked for a little." She undid her shorts and let them drop. "Joe was doing that lecture thing to me, you know."

"A-huh." Frank's eyes went to her legs and then to her hands as they began to take off the shirt she was wearing.

"I told him that I wasn't in the mood to hear it. I was in a good mood and he was going to ruin it."

"A-huh." A grin hit him when her shirt went over her head.

"And then he changed the subject to the meeting, because he knew he was getting no where with me talking about Dean. I nominated him for king of the dartboard next month, you know. Frank, are you listening to me?"

"No." He watched her as she took off her bra. "But you do realize you're just about naked in front of me."

"Shit." Ellen hurried up and put on her night shirt. "Sorry. I was just going on and on."

"And then you stopped."

"And we'd better get some sleep."

"I think uh . . ." Frank cleared his throat. "That's not a bad idea right now." He smiled at her as he bent his one leg. "Night El."

"Night Frank." She walked over to the bed and pulled down the other side of the covers.

Frank sat straight up. "What are you doing?"

"Getting in. What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing. Why are you sleeping in bed with me?"

"Where else am I going to sleep?" Ellen started to lift her leg into bed but stopped. "I'm sorry, I'll go sleep with Alex."

"No, you can sleep here." Frank moved over more.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive." He laid back then rolled on his side to face her as she climbed in. He watched as her leg crept out further from that shirt she wore as she slid in. "Shit."

"What?"

"Was that Nick?" Frank sat up again. "I think that was Nick."

"I didn't hear anything."

"No, that was Nick."

"Frank." Ellen adjusted the covers over herself. "It wasn't Nick, lay down and go to sleep."

"All right." He swallowed and looked at her, then laid back down. "Night El."

"Night Frank." She laid on her side. "Turn out the light."

"Shit."

"What's wrong now?"

"My radio is next to you."

"I'll get it."

"No, I can get it." He extended his long reach across her body to the night stand reaching for the radio.

"Frank?" Ellen said his name as he brushed up behind her in his reach.

"What?" He answered as he took hold of the radio.

"Frank." She said his name in a long whine, feeling him, really feeling him behind her.

"El, I can't help it. What do you want me to do. You take off all your clothes in front of me then you get into bed with me."

"Oh my God."

"Sorry."

"You can at least move back."

"Do I have to?"

"Frank!"

"O.K., O.K." He rolled to his back and set the radio on his night stand. "I'm being good." He reached back and shut off the light. "Night El."

"Night Frank." In the darkness there was silence, and then she felt him shuffling, the covers moved about, the bed bounced and then Ellen heard him snicker. "What?"

"I can't sleep." He sat up and turned on her light. "Can you?"

"Yes."

"Come on El."

"What do you have in mind? And don't say sex."

“Scrabble?”

“Frank.” She whined his name.

“No, I know I can beat you.”

“You’re not going to cheat?”

“Nope.” He flung the covers from him. “And maybe we can talk. You can tell me all about your meeting.” He moved to the door.

“Really? You really want to hear?”

“No not really, but if Henry can listen. Why can’t I?” He opened the door.

“Gee Frank thanks.” She fluffed her pillow. “And bring me something to drink.”

Frank popped his head back in the door. “I will.” In his boxer shorts he headed to his steps, keeping his arms folded close to him to block out the coldness in his home. Of course that was the way Frank liked it. He was quiet as he made it through the first floor and to the kitchen being careful not to wake up Johnny. He turned on the kitchen light and grabbed the board game that had fast become Ellen and Frank’s new nightly routine while she stayed there. He set it on the counter and opened up the cupboard for glasses, he took them out then opened the fridge to get he and Ellen some of that tea she had made. Pouring the glass near full, he put back the tea, tucked the game under his arm and grabbed the two glasses. As he reached to flick off the light with his elbow, he stopped. He stood for a few seconds in the doorway and then he turned back in. Setting the glasses down along with the game, he went back to the cupboard, and without a second thought, like it was something so natural, he pulled out his bottle and added a shots worth of moonshine to his glass of tea.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

JULY 15

(1)

Robbie could barely lift his arms another inch. He had carried the last body he could out side to the graves he had dug all night. Eight men total were now gone and seven more remained. Himself included. An now as the days moved on, gone were the remissions that they all had been in. Robbie was bombarded, he was encircled with illness in every direction he looked. He tried to keep up appearances when the helicopter lowered the supplies and picked up the crate Robbie had waiting. He thought he did well. Perhaps Frank didn't see it on his face, he kept a further distance than usual, he had to. He didn't want them to see his weakness, his longing to be out of the situation he was in. He was a Slagel and he had to be strong, not matter what. But the truth was Robbie Slagel's dreams of going home became like that helicopter that flew away. They faded more and more with each passing minute.

(2)

His fingers rapped with enthusiasm and excitement on the yellowing paper he held. Impressed was the smiling look George gave the doctor who sat at the table before him, a radio in one hand, a pen in the other. "Brilliant, absolutely brilliant."

"It's only Morse code."

"Yes, but it is a way to communicate with all of our men in the field." George read the message again. "This seems like it's missing something."

"It is." Dr. Philips told him. "We came in mid message, but according to what we planned, they'll repeat the message every fifteen minutes for an hour. I'll just monitor the radio until then."

"What about my other guards?"

"Only two have CME's that can transmit morse code. They're due in three hours with their transmission."

"This makes me very happy." George laid the paper down grinning ear to ear. "Totally barbaric and less the technology we have, but smart. And now we can communicate with our men without Beginnings being able to pick it up, or be any the wiser that it is happening."

(3)

"Yes! I fuckin knew it!" Frank slammed his hand on his father's desk with a wide smile and such excitement. "Yes!"

"That's what it is?" Joe asked, putting out the cigarette he puffed on frantically.

"Yep. I knew there wasn't something wrong with my headset. Hearing that beeping in my ear when I made my rounds. Beep, beep-beep." Frank rocked back and forth as he sat in Joe's chair.

"So who's sending it?" Joe asked.

"Obviously it's George. It has to be right? Who else would know the communications room wasn't picking up that signal, him. Only the dumb mother fucker didn't think my radio would pick it up. Ha! I got it. We got it, and as long as we're smart and not say a word to anyone about this, we can find out exactly what their up to, not just where they are."

"An upper hand."

"And finally too. Since the little fuckin virus set up they tossed at our men, we haven't had a signal. And the longer we go without finding them, the more I feel they're getting closer."

"Speaking of which." Joe pulled up a chair and sat down "How are we set up for that?"

"Them arriving here?" Frank shrugged. "Getting there. We need a first response system, something besides our reconnaissance that will see them coming. If we do that. I don't care how big they are, we'll kick their asses."

"But, this could be a first response, right, this morse code they're sending?"

"Could be. Only . . ."

"Only what?"

"Only, it doesn't make sense." Frank picked up the paper he had written his translation on. "I think they're speaking in code."

"Yeah, Morse code."

"No code. Or German, something like that."

"German?" Joe questioned and held his hand out. "Let me see that." He took the paper from Frank. "What is this? You have written here, 'Ta esa ylyzogt og ta toll na baes nazobbobtz' what the hell is this shit?" Joe jumped to his feet.

"I told you, it's written in code."

"Written in code my ass Frank. You don't remember morse code, do you?"

"Yeah I do." Frank stood up.

"No you don't you moron."

"Hey!"

"Don't hey me. You don't remember it, do you?"

"Give me a fuckin break it's been forever since I decoded it. All right, so I'm a little rusty."

"Rusty." Joe viewed the paper. "Now are you sure, these dashes and dots are what they're suppose to be."

"I'm sure about that."

"O.K., then I'll get someone to decode this."

"Who?" Frank asked. "You have to be careful on who you get to do this."

"Well I think I know who I can give this to. Cole. We trust him and he won't say anything to Matoose about it."

"Does he know how to decode?"

"Well I'm sure he'll do a lot better than you. Besides, we'll find him something that will help him. Where, I don't know."

Before Frank could make anymore comments, there was a light knock at the door. "Must be Dean. Watch, I'll ask him how him and Ellen are." Frank motioned his head to the door. "Yeah!"

The door opened and as predicted by Frank, it was Dean. "Joe, Frank, glad you're both here."

Joe saw it, the look on Dean's face, it was fright. And Joe knew Frank saw it too, because his son didn't say anything snide. "What's wrong Dean? Did something happen at the lab, you were there."

"You could say that." Dean shut the door and took a deep breath, his one hand held back his growing hair. "I have to tell you something, both of you. Sit down." He motioned his hand to the chairs. "Please, Because this isn't going to be good."

(4)

Henry walked as if he were never ill. The bandages on his hand had been removed and the purple healing burn was the only remnant of his accident. He wanted to be home. His own bed, his own house, his own room. He thought they'd be going back to Frank's to be with the baby, but instead he got his wish when he was released from the clinic. He went home.

"Hap is dropping off Nick in a few minutes Henry." Ellen set his bag down by the front door as she shut it. "Are you tired? Did you want to lay down?"

"No." He shook his head with a smile. "This is great. I feel really good El." He turned to face her as she stepped near where he stood behind the couch.

"Good." She tipped toed up and kissed him. "I've missed you."

"How was staying with Frank?"

"Weird." Ellen took hold of his arm and led him to the couch.. "It was so much like . . . never mind." She sat down at the same time as him.

"What?"

"Forget I said anything."

"It was like when you were married huh?" Henry's head lowered and his eyes raised.

"No!" Ellen waved her hand at him. "That's not what I was going to say. I save that part of my life for you Henry." She kissed him on the cheek then rested her head against his arm. "It was like when he and I were more buddies than anything else. No pressure. Just friends. Except for the other night when there was no where to sleep and I had to sleep in bed with him, of course I told you about that little incident."

"Hey at least you kicked his ass in Scrabble."

"I did."

"El, is Nick staying here tonight with us?"

"No." She shook her head. "We'll take care of him for most of the evening. But let's face it Henry I'm not a get up and get the baby person in the middle of the night, and neither are you. Frank doesn't mind. He loves Nick."

"That's good. And with me getting hurt the day after Nick came home, I'm not in good practice. I need to practice El."

"And you shall, when Hap brings him over. Personally Henry, I saw the look in Hap's eye when he was staring at our tiny baby. You know what he was thinking of?"

"Being a new father himself."

"Or old." Ellen giggled. "Poor Trish."

"Will Frank be coming over tonight? Did he say anything to you about it?"

"I don't know. I would assume he would. He doesn't trust us with the baby yet." She leaned into him. "I can't say I blame him. Why? Do you need to talk to him? Can't you do it when you two do your secret thing this afternoon."

"I don't need to talk to him. Actually, I need to talk to you. Can I talk to you about Frank before he gets here?" Henry turned his body on the couch to face her.

"Sure. What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Henry shook his head then rested his hand on hers. "I just wanted to let you know, it's O.K." He nodded slowly.

"O.K.?"

"Yes. I actually am happy it's going that way."

"What are you talking about Henry?"

"Well the fact that you and Dean are no more and you and Frank are getting there again. The three of us El, we are what should be . . ."

"Stop." Ellen covered his mouth. "You're talking about an understanding with Frank again. Aren't you?"

"Yes."

"No."

"No? Why?"

"Because we haven't even talked about that and I like the way me and Frank are right now. You think an understanding between the three of us is the best way to go? You, me and Frank? Henry think about it."

"I have. I've thought about it a lot. And I know I told you I'd never influence you, but that's how I want it El. I really feel that it's the right way to be. It's how we started out, we share a child together."

"Henry."

"I don't understand El. You love him. He's been your best friend forever. What's the problem?"

"Why are you doing this to me?"

"Doing what? I want you to be happy."

"I am happy Henry." She laid her hand on his face. "With you. I'm happy just being with you." As she leaned into kiss him she heard the knock at the door. "And that would be Hap. I'll get it."

"El." He grabbed her hand as she stood up. "As much as I want it to be just you and me . . ."

"I know." Her head dropped. "Maybe I'll just keep my understanding with Robbie." She raised her eyebrows "And can we not talk about sharing me." She moved to the door. "I swear sometimes you just don't want to have the responsibility of having me to yourself. The way you wanna push me off. And to Frank too." She reached for the door and stopped. She waved her hand when she heard the other knock. "Henry, do you realize it wouldn't be giving him twelve hours with me? You know that. He'd never settle for that. He'd want more."

"I know. Things can be worked out."

"Oh stop. They can not." She ignored yet another knock at the door. She reached again for the door knob. "And another thing . . . Why you feel so compelled anymore to keep me with Frank and you is really over my head."

"Why you can't see I love you both and want us all to work together is over *my* head." "Oh Henry that was passionately said." She hurried from the door and kissed him on the top of the head. "You're cute. And we'll talk about this later." She mumbled and headed to the door for the final time. "Much later." She took a breath, opened the door and saw Dean. Without hesitation, she slammed the door shut on him.

"Who was that?" Henry turned around as she walked back to the couch.

"Dean."

"Ellen stop that." Henry got up.

"No Henry, don't let him in."

"El!" Shaking his head he opened the door. "Come on in Dean." He held the door open. "What's up?"

"I need to speak to Ellen."

Henry motioned his hand to Ellen who was on the couch.

"El." Dean walked to her.

"Though Henry is now a traitor and letting you in, I just want to let you know you're not welcome here."

"El, listen." He sat down on the couch. He held a small green canvass

bag.

"How's Jason working out? Him and his shaking hands." She said with sarcasm.

"El . . . " Dean tried to talk.

"I hope he smokes you out." She folded her arms.

"El shut up and listen." Dean scolded.

"Henry!" Ellen gasped. "Don't let him talk to me like that."

"Dean." Henry moved to the couch. "Be nice."

Dean held up his hand and calmed himself. "You're pissing me off Ellen, this is important and I wanted to be the one to come to you." He handed her the green bag. "Jason and I . . ." He paused when he heard her tsk. "Jason and I opened the crate Robbie sent. This was in it for you."

Ellen looked oddly at the green bag. "This?"

"Yes." Dean handed her a folded note. "This note was pinned to the bag."

Ellen took the note reading it out loud. "*Ellen, I really wanted you to have this stuff now. I really did. I guess all of it is my way to let you know you are always on my mind, no matter what. I miss you El. I love you. Robbie.*" Ellen set the note down. "I don't like the tone." She unzipped the bag. It was filled with small items. "What is this?"

"As near as I can tell, it's all the things he picked you up while he was out there running around." Dean reached his hand in. "The nail polish gave it away. He always grabs you that."

"But why?" Ellen took the bottle from Dean's hand, as she did her eyes caught his. "Why Dean?"

Dean swallowed harshly. "El." He took his eyes from Ellen's only to look up at Henry who stood behind the couch. "I wanted to be the one to tell you this."

"Tell me what Dean?" Her voice took on concern, she saw his hesitation and his shifting eyes. "Quit stalling. What is it?"

Dean's jaw twitched as he reached into his back pocket and pulled out a sheet up paper rolled up. "El, I'm sorry." He handed it to her. "Read this."

Slowly Ellen took the paper and unrolled it. "Robbie's report." The second her eyes laid upon it reading it, her hands began to shake and her heart dropped. "Oh my God."

ROBBIE'S REPORT

Date: JULY 15

Patients Name: Robbie Slagel

Date of first symptoms: July 15th Time of Onset: 9:15 a.m.

Body Temp: 104 Headache: Yes Swollen Glands: Yes

Appearance of skin: Pale Touch of skin: Dry, hot

Is patient conscious? Yes Is patient alert? Yes

Any discoloring of skin? Some Describe: purple under eyes

Blistering of skin? No Body cavity bleeding: No

Convulsions: No Nauseousness: Yes Congestion: None

Vomiting: No Dizziness: Yes Can patient talk: yes

NOTES:

Dean, I'm sorry. I thought I was careful, I guess I wasn't. I'll try to keep these reports going but I don't know for how long. I don't know how much I can do or how much longer I can help my men. They're bad now Dean, and, I'll be like them before long. Good luck, we kept it out. Huh?
Robbie

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

(1)

A hush took over the filled social hall as Joe stepped before every single adult in Beginnings that night. It was quiet, a few sniffles were heard. Not a child was present, it wasn't for them to be there. All of the children at that moment were in the care of Denny, Josh, and the only teenage girl in the community. A lot for them to handle, but Joe would join them soon at the school, him and Andrea, they were removing themselves from the meeting. Joe would go, but not without saying what he had to say first. "I want to uh . . . thank you all for showing up here on such short notice. We won't keep you long. I'm sure you've heard through the gossip what this meeting is about. So I don't have to tell you. Just so all of you know, this is not a council decision, it is a community decision. All of you live, work, and raise your families here and that is why it is in your hands. As a leader of the community I have to follow what the people I lead want. If I didn't do what was in their best interest, that wouldn't make me much of a leader. This decision you will make tonight, is yours. I know council takes your opinion on issues, and votes accordingly. But not this time. This is much more than whether or not distribution should be open later on Thursdays. This is life or death. This . . . is your decision. In all fairness, because of why we asked you here, not only council, but the remaining originals as well will not vote on this. There is too much of a personal stake in it. Andrea and I are leaving." He motioned his hand to Andrea. "We trust you'll make the decision you see fit for the place you live. We hold no grudges on any decision that is made. And I as head council assure you we will uphold what you decide. And because of the nature of this vote, majority will not rule. It must be unanimous for, or we go against. Henry will be here to legitimize the vote. Andrea."

Andrea stood up sadly and took Joe's hand. Being led out she stopped through the aisle of chairs. "Just let me say something to you all. Before you make a decision. Listen to Dean. Look into your hearts and before you refuse to raise your hand, ask yourself why you are here in the first place. In Beginnings." Gripping her other hand over Joe's as well she walked out of the social hall with him.

All eyes looked at Dean as he slowly stood from his folding chair. He was nervous and his insides shook. He knew what he wanted to say and he was wishing at that moment that he had written it all down, because a part of him was drawing a blank. "As a scientist I think the best way to say this to you all is to be factual. So, I think that's how I'll have to be." He looked down at the floor then back up to the faces. "Nearly three weeks ago, fourteen of our men plus two survivors that they had picked up were exposed to a virus. All of you know this. It was a general consensus that they not be permitted into Beginnings with this virus for fear of it.

Understandable. That's sixteen men. Where would we keep them with a virus we knew nothing about. Right?" Dean shrugged. "I know for a fact, that we would need more care givers then we could quarantine. And because of that, the chance of the virus spreading, no matter how careful, increased. So they did not come in. They stay outside our walls, ten miles or so away with this virus. Let me tell you about this virus. It hits the immune and digestive systems both. Total body breakdown with in two weeks of exposure. It is not airborne like the plague that wiped out our world. It is a blood borne pathogen spread through contact. It isn't as easy to catch as the common cold, but it's deadly. I'm not gonna kid you. How you catch it is to come in close contact with an infected individual. Sharing a glass, a kiss, touching this person too much without washing your hands after. Coming in contact with any and all body secretions. Blood borne." Dean talked slow as he paced about. "We've worked with this virus, Ellen and I, for months. This is the same virus that we are trying right now to stop from invading us in our future. There is only two ways to stop this future virus. One is to send our men out to stop those who will release it on us. Or two, cure it. We're not close, we need to be close. We need to know if what we have is working or failing. And because of our search for the cure we have a bases for what we ask you. Sixteen men came down with the virus. As of two hours ago, five men remain. All of which are ill. We can contain five men. Safely and assuredly without any risk to any of you of exposure. I'm not gonna lie to you, one of those men is Robbie. Robbie is an original and to us originals, he is our brother. I want him in this community, I want the other four with him . . . in this community. Besides the fact that we can learn from them, try to beat this thing through them. There are so few of them left, safety can no longer be an issue for bringing them in. Let's open our gate to them, lets bring them home."

Pete, one of the survivors stood up. "How can you say for certain that Robbie and his men aren't the ones that started the plague in the future."

"I can't." Dean answered.

"Then how can you justify asking us to let them in? It isn't safe."

"It is safe." Dean told him. "I can stake my life on it. I know. For months Ellen and I have been working with this. Have any of you gotten ill? How about the other viruses I work on? We practice safe handling and I can tell you we are a hundred times more cautious then what they did in the old world."

"Excuse me Dr. Hayes." Pete continued. "But this is bull shit. This has nothing to do with science does it? This has everything to do with Robbie Slagel."

Before Dean could comment, Ellen did. She had been standing off to the side with Frank and she stepped forward. "It does. At least for me it does. It's no holds-barred here. I want Robbie in this community. That is why I am here. That is my soul purpose for trying to get all of you to raise your hands to let him and the others in."

She was a silent woman, never saying much, but Sara wanted to speak her peace. "You don't care about the others do you Ellen?"

"To be honest, not like I care about Robbie. Robbie has a virus that can kill him. If he dies, him of all people doesn't serve to die outside of his home."

"And the others did." Sara said. "I lost one of my partners to this virus out there. He didn't deserve to die outside his home either. What makes Robbie Slagel so special that we should take a chance and let him in."

"What?" Ellen shook her head with shock at her. "How can you of all people ask that Sara? You, Pete, every single one of you have a home because of Robbie. I know what all of you were like when you arrived. I worked with you. I saw first hand and I knew what you lived like out there. Food? Did you have it at your beckon call? Medical attention. Clothes on your back. Heat when the weather got bitter? No. And I don't want to hear it, because most of you, plain and simple and cold, waited outside in that world for it to be handed back to you. Well it wasn't gonna be handed to you. You learned you have to work for it. And by God all of you work for it, all of us. But let it be known, when it came to you, those who came to Beginnings after we built it, Robbie worked a little harder for you than any of us. He let you in. He fought for you, and taught you how to live in a civilized world again. For a lot of you, you wouldn't still be here if it wasn't for Robbie. You'd be starving or dead outside and that's the harsh truth. Take it." Ellen held her head up. "Pete, you're arguing. You were one of the biggest trouble makers we had come into containment. Who didn't you fight with in there? You showed such violent tendency that even the survivors in there wanted you out. What happened? Robbie fought for you, he worked with you. Why? He liked you. He saw something in you no one else saw. And he was right. Sara, you're giving attitude about it. Why. You had reason to be thrown out also. You stabbed Robbie remember? During a social skills class when you first got here, you stabbed him when he looked over your shoulder at what you were cutting. I remember him fighting with council over it, telling them about what you went through before you came here, And to give you one more chance. They did. Here you are." Ellen stared about the faces of the survivors in the room. "I took a poll of the originals. We stood unanimous in our vote to let Robbie back in. I'm asking all of you, everyone of you, to take the same stand. It's only right. It's Robbie. Robbie." She said his name with passion. "You know him well. And if you let him die outside of these walls then trust me it is a sin on all of you for turning your backs on the man who helped you the most in here. And I'm not Joe, trust me I'm not Joe. I do hold grudges. Raise your hands, all of you. Cole, Ben, Dan, they will. The rest of you should too." Knowing there was no more to be said Ellen began to walk back to Frank. She ignored Dean's reaching hand and walked straight into Frank's arms that extended to her the moment she met him.

Frank held her tight whispering close to her ear. "No matter what,

know that you did good up there. You tried. Better than anyone.”

Ellen closed her eyes and buried her head in his chest.

Henry stood up “I . . . I need a show of hands. Please raise them of you think we should let Robbie and the others in.”

Ellen didn’t want to look, but she knew by the loosening of Frank’s grip and the soft spoken, ‘no, please’ he mumbled, that things were not good. She pulled from the embrace and looked around at the room. Aside from Cole, Dan, and Ben only about twenty others raised their hands up. “No.” Ellen looked at them. She heard Henry get ready to speak, she spun to him. “No Henry don’t finalize it.”

“El.” Henry through his hands up. “The vote was cast.”

“No.” She shook her head. “Raise your hands!” She shouted to them. “Now!”

Frank reached forward to pull back an upset Ellen. “El, come on.”

“No.” She swatted away his hand. “Dan, Ben, Cole and the rest of you who said ‘yes’. Thank you. Thank you so much for that. But the rest of you . . .” In her anger she spat fire through her eyes at them. “The rest of you who failed to raise your hands, you better lower your heads. Because you just delivered a slap in the face to us originals. And if this plague does end up crossing our soil. I hope to God I personally watch each and every one of you suffer.”

“El!” With such a scold Frank said her name as she stormed passed him fast from the social hall, slamming her little body past and into everyone she moved by on her loud and known exit. He took a second to take a breath and then he followed her out. “Ellen!” He called to her as she moved up the street. “El.” He caught up to her.

“Leave me alone Frank.”

“No. Look, the vote didn’t go your way. I’m crushed too, but talking like that isn’t going to help.”

“I don’t give shit Frank.”

“Well give a shit El, we live with these people. We stand with these people and we’re gonna have to fight our enemy side by side with these people.”

“It’s Robbie, Frank.”

“I know it’s Robbie.” His hand rested on her face. “He’s my brother El. My heart is broke. But don’t think for one second Robbie wouldn’t vote no to keep him out. He would. If he thought there was a chance, no matter how small, that what he had could spread, he wouldn’t want in. I know him.”

“I do too. And that’s why I want him back home.” Ellen turned her back and continued her march off.

“El.”

“Just leave me alone Frank.” Her voice faded as she moved down the street. “Just leave me alone.”

(2)

Henry watched the drink in Frank's hand more than he paid attention to anything else. Watched as the glass would empty and then refill. How many time? How many drinks? He looked at his watch when he heard the knock at Frank's front door. He hesitated getting up when he saw Frank reach for the bottle again. And though he saw Frank drink before, this was the first time he really saw that he was drinking. "I'll get it." Henry moved to the door and away from a silent Frank. "Dean?" Henry said his name in surprise when he opened it.

"Hi Henry." Dean walked in. "Can I speak to Ellen?"

Quickly, Henry looked back at Frank who stood up. "She's not here Dean. She said she went to find you."

Curiously Dean looked around. "I've been home. How long ago did she leave here?"

Henry checked the time again. "Half hour. Shit."

Frank walked over to them. "I'll find her."

"Frank." Dean stopped him. "Do you mind if I do? I think I know where she probably went to look for me."

"Dean." Frank sounded ready to argue. "I think I should . . ."

"Come on." Dean spoke with reason. "If she's not there, I promise I'll radio you. O.K.? But I'm certain she is there."

Frank, who had his hand raised in an argument mode, lowered it. "Radio me. I mean it!" He pointed and stepped back to sit on the couch.

"Thanks." Dean watched him, then turned to Henry. "I'll let you guys know."

Henry held the door open for Dean as he left. After shutting it he saw Frank get up. "Where you going?"

"Following him."

"Frank, no." Henry stopped him. "You've been drinking, heavily too. Don't. O.K.? Besides the fact that you get mad easier when you drink, Ellen will kill you."

"I want to know if she's O.K. Henry. And I'm not drunk."

"I know you're not. But you're upset, and she's upset. And I don't want you upset with each other." Henry reasoned. "Just wait here. I'll . . . I'll follow Dean."

"All right." Frank's shoulders dropped and he walked over and plopped on the couch. "Let me know as soon as possible. Please."

"I will." Henry walked to the door he paused before he left. "Frank, are you all right to be alone with the baby if he needs you?"

"I'm fine." Frank brought his drink to his lips. "Just go."

Wondering if he should, Henry justified his leaving in his mind to the fact he wouldn't be gone long. He hesitated just once more and then he left

to catch up to Dean who was well down the street ahead of him.

(3)

Ellen was exactly where he thought she'd be. Only she wasn't doing what Dean thought she be doing--looking for him. She scurried so fast around the mobile lab, she didn't even notice she left the door open. She had a small duffle bag, it was laid open on the counter and she'd walk to it, drop something and then move to another part in the lab. "What are you doing Ellen?"

Ellen jumped when she heard the startle of Dean's voice. "I'm busy."

"You're packing meds up. What are you doing?" Dean walked into the lab.

"I'm leaving."

"Beginnings?"

"Yep." She stated and returned to get another vial. "I'll be back. But I won't be back until I make Robbie well."

"You can't do that."

"Then I'll try. I'll try with everything I have. But I'll try."

"Ellen, look you . . ."

"Dean!" Her hand slammed on the counter. "Leave me alone."

"What are you going to do? Go out there by yourself?"

"Yes. I have to."

"How?"

"I have it all figured out. The jeep will be charged by dawn. Dan is working the back gate. Frank doesn't hit the back gate until after seven. Dan said he'd let me out. I'm going to be with Robbie. I have to."

"Ellen, I know why you want to do this."

"Do you?" She faced him her expression was so desperate. "I can't leave him alone out there Dean. I can't. He stood by me and helped me when this fucked up world ended. And I'm going to stand by him and help him now. And there's nothing you can do about it." She zipped up the bag.

"Yes there is." Dean unzipped the bag. "I can go with you." He began to examine what she put in there.

"What?"

"I'll go with El. I want to help him too. And you don't have the new anti serum in here at all. I'll get it."

"Dean." She grabbed his hand as he walked by her. "You don't have to."

"Like you . . . yeah I do." He nodded.

She watched him move about the lab looking for things. "It's a shame. We work out here, or at least I used to and we worked with the virus. They said nothing about it. What would be the difference if we worked on Robbie out here. It's the same thing and they wouldn't even know he was

here.” Her face suddenly lit up at the same time Dean stopped moving and he faced her.

“You’re not thinking . . .”

“I am.”

“So am I.” Dean rushed to her. “Can we?”

“We’d have to do it early. Real early before Frank or Joe could figure it out. We’d have to stock this place and do it tonight. We’ll need food and supplies for the mobile. Because once we’re in, we’re in until we prove it’s safe for us to leave.”

“We’ll have consequences to face.”

“Maybe not.” Ellen said. “Besides, all we have to do is get him into the lab. Any punishment we face will wait. Because you know and I know they won’t touch us or throw us out, at least for a few days..”

Dean ran his fingers through his hair. “Can we? Should we?”

“We can. We should.” Ellen stated.

“You can’t and you shouldn’t.” The third voice entered the room and spoke, Henry. “What are you guys doing?” He asked as he joined them. “I heard you. You can’t do that. You can’t. It’s wrong. And what were you going to do Ellen? Bring Robbie in here and disappear into quarantine for a week? Didn’t you think I would notice? Or Frank? You can’t do this. I can’t let you do this.”

“Henry.” Ellen looked at him. “We are doing this. Either we bring him in here or we stay out side the walls with him. Either or, I go to Robbie. I have to go to him.” Ellen, with Dean’s help unpacked the bag she had stuffed. “We’ll need a gun Dean if we’re going out there. Or do you think we can just use one of the ones Robbie has.”

“We’ll need one.”

“Stop!” Henry yelled. “Aren’t you hearing me? I’m on council El. I can’t let you do this.”

“Then don’t.” Ellen told him. “Don’t let us. We have it all set up.”

“But I know about it. I have to do something.” Henry said.

“You can.” Ellen walked to him. “You can turn the other cheek.”

Henry closed his eyes and let out a breath, he knew he was being ignored. He listened and watched Dean and Ellen get things ready and make up a list of items they would need to pull off that they were about to embark on. A part of him knew why they were doing it, a big part of him. And Henry had a choice. He could let them go or he could try to stop them. Telling Joe would only ensure that Ellen and Dean would just go and stay outside the walls with Robbie. And that to Henry was a worse move then bringing Robbie in. It was at that moment Henry discovered he had a third choice, and that choice was not to stand in their way but to help them. Help them to do it right and safe. And as Dean and Ellen began to prepare the lab, Henry weighed his choices.

(4)

Henry wasn't gone long, half hour tops. There was a nervous feeling that crept inside Henry as he walked into Frank's home. Perhaps it was because he knew something that Frank did not. Something Frank should have known, but couldn't, not yet.

"Did you find her?" Frank asked Henry the moment he stepped in and he was trying to be quiet too.

"Uh . . . yeah." Henry shut the door and stepped further in the house. "It's cold in here Frank."

"Where was she?"

"At the lab."

Frank nodded "Which one, there's fuckin three of them."

"Mobile." Henry walked around the couch to where he sat.

"Is she coming home soon.?"

What he wanted to tell Frank was, *'probably not. Not until late because see, Frank, they're taking all the food from Dean's house to the mobile, And . . . from my house too. Also they have a secret meeting with one of your trusted security guys to break out without notice and break Robbie back in.'*

"Henry!" Frank barked. "Is she coming home soon?"

"Soon. She said not to wait up."

"I need to wait up. I need to see her."

"How about I leave her a note and tell her to wake you." Henry thought that was a good suggestion, and that would satisfy him.

"I'll wait up. I mean how long could she be?"

"A week maybe?"

"What?"

Henry gave a fake laugh. "Joking." He sat down on the couch. Suddenly and with a soft tone of shock, Henry spoke his name. "Frank."

"What?"

"This bottle was half filled when I left here." Henry picked it up. "It's almost gone."

"No Henry." Frank took the bottle and poured the rest in his glass. "It is gone."

"Frank I know you're upset, I do."

"Henry."

"No listen to me." Henry reached for the glass before Frank could take it. "But you're drinking way too much. And you have been lately Frank, despite what Ellen thinks."

"Be my friend Henry, and just let me alone about it."

"I am being your friend Frank. That's why I'm saying this to you."

Frank leaned forward resting his elbows on his knees. He cupped his hands and placed them under his chin.

"Drinking isn't going to make it any better. You know that. Everything will still be there when you sober up."

"I know that." Frank ran the back of his fingers over his lips as he rocked back and forth in a nervous motion.

"So why do it?"

Frank nearly bit his fingers as he stared forward like a child being chastised. "I can tell you why I started to."

"Why is that?"

"When things were rough, it was just a little more accessible than *what* I needed to pull me through the rough times."

"Ellen."

Frank sadly raised his eyebrows with a quiet single nod.

"She's here for you now. Whenever you need her. And you know, all it will take is for the three of us to establish an understanding and it's set in stone forever. I'll make sure of it. You won't lose her again."

"I know. I wished it would happen."

"When it does, not if, Frank, you have to give this up." Henry held up the bottle. "In fact, you promised Ellen you'd cut back."

"I know I did."

"But you haven't. I know that, you know that, she doesn't know that."

Frank nodded again.

"You have to keep that promise Frank. I won't tell her you broke it, but you have to keep it."

"I want to."

"Then try."

"I have tried." Frank stood up.

"Try harder."

Frank placed his hands on his hips with his back to Henry, he closed his eyes tightly then turned around to face him. "See . . ." He held his hand out. "I want to. I am trying. I try." He shook his head. "It's just a little harder right now than I thought it would be."

"Frank." Henry stood up and walked to him. "You know what you're saying."

"No, that is not what I'm saying."

"Yes it is."

"No!" Frank snapped. "It's not. Things aren't easy right now Henry. They aren't. My brother, the plague, this battle with George and the SUTs. Things are nuts. There's a lot going on and I just, I guess I put the drinking as low priority."

"You have to rank it with everything else that affects your life, because it will soon affect your life just as much. If it already hasn't."

"It hasn't. And I'll control it. Just, just don't say anything to El about it."

"I'll help you if you need it."

"I know that. But I'm tough. It won't be a problem, trust me. I'll put my mind to it this time."

Henry nodded. "Good."

“And to show you I’m serious.” Frank took the drink from Henry’s hand and carried into the kitchen. “I’m pouring this out. And . . .” He saw Henry stood in the doorway. Frank opened the cabinet. “This too.” He grabbed a bottle and took that to the sink.

Henry observed him pour out his stash. It was a step Frank was taking and the right step. But it was also the first of many. And as Henry watched him he couldn’t help but wonder. If Frank was drinking when things got rough, how drunk would Frank want to get when he found out that Ellen was sneaking from Beginnings, going beyond the walls, getting Robbie, sneaking him in, and staying away in quarantine with him. And too make matters worse, Henry, his best friend, knew all about it and didn’t say a word.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

JULY 16

(1)

Hoping that Nick didn't wake up, Henry sat with his tea on the sofa of Frank's livingroom, feeling nervous and filled with guilt, knowing that his day started out with lies. Showing up at Frank's to take care of Nick while Frank went to work. Telling Frank that Ellen would be late because she needed to sleep. Hoping Frank hurried and left before Ellen and Dean arrived with all of the other children as well, and Henry's bags for staying with Frank once her and Dean became unavailable for a week. So many times as Henry sat there, he debated on just picking up his radio and aborting the whole thing. He sat wondering what phase of the plan they were on. Wondering if Ellen and Dean would be safe, and waiting for all hell to break lose if Frank happened to go to the back gate too early. And to know anything, Henry would have to just sit back, wonder and wait.

(2)

Just stay on the back road here until it pulls you out on a main road' Dan instructed to Dean and Ellen went he had let them through the back gate, telling security to down the perimeter for an animal who was too close. *'Go left, and a quarter mile up will be the exit to the main highway. We have the road where you're going kept pretty clear so you shouldn't run into trouble. Stay center of the highway and watch out for deer, they're all over the place. And though you don't want to, radio if you run into trouble. You're only fifteen minutes or so away . . .'*

"It's so dark." Ellen stated as they drove. "There's the sign, did you see it?"

"Yeah barely." Dean leaned close to the steering wheel.

"Why is it so dark."

"Its like driving through a paved forest Ellen, the trees will block off the sun." He turned the wheel to the right to take the ramp that brought them to the small town Robbie was in.

"I recognize this area. Look, the tents." Ellen pointed.

"I do too." Dean pulled the jeep over to the small grade that used to be a park at one time. He could see where Robbie had set up camp, and he remembered being there. Shutting off the jeep he stepped out with Ellen. He walked around to the back of the jeep and opened it staring at the supplies "Do you think we really need any of this. Were only grabbing them and bringing them with us."

Ellen looked around, "I don't think. It's pretty quiet."

"Let's just grab the medical case just . . . in case?"

"Sounds good." Ellen waited for him to grab it and she closed the jeep.

"It seems just a little too quiet."

"Yeah it does." They walked up the grade. "El?" Dean caught his breath on the hill. "Where is everyone?"

"Shit." Ellen's eyes widened and in a panic began to spin around in search. Looking down the side of the hill she could see the fresh grave and a small light coming from the church. "Down there."

"Let's go."

They picked up their pace running to the church, hurrying to get Robbie and the others, needing to do it fast so they could get back to Beginnings unnoticed. They had to get to the back gate before Frank did at seven a.m., and that time was only a half hour away.

Dean stopped walking as they hit the used-to-be walk of the church. Four bodies laid out front, the odor from the decomposition smacked them harder than the vision. "Shit." Dean covered his mouth.

"Dean." Ellen looked at the bodies. "Don't tell me these were the four ones left with Robbie."

"It can't be." Stepping over them, Dean opened up the church doors. It was lit by a lantern placed by the altar, not a sound came from that church. Not a soul was seen.

Panic filled Ellen from the silence. She opened her mouth in a jittery stuttering movement to call out. "Rob . . . Robbie?" She felt her face get hot and her eyes well up as she walked slowly up the aisle. "Robbie?"

It was weak, but it was a call. "El?"

She gasped with emotions, handed her bag to Dean and raced to the front of the church where the voice came from. "Robbie." He laid in the first pew and she slid on her knees to him. "Oh God."

"El." He tried to sit up, and his eyes rolled some. His face was so pale and splotted with purple marks. He had dark circles so deep under his eyes, and his neck was swollen.

"Oh my God." Her arms went around his neck and she embraced tight, so tight, she actually held him up. "Robbie." His body was so hot against hers.

Robbie thought he was dreaming until he gathered the strength to hold onto her. He let his face slide back and forth against hers, cheek against cheek, feeling the softness and coolness of her skin. The last time he had seen her or touched her it was through a suit. But this time he held Ellen and he held her with gratefulness. "You . . . you like my gifts huh?" He tried to joke.

"I like you."

"What are you doing here El?" Robbie asked.

"We're taking you home Robbie." She pulled back to look at him. "We're taking you home."

"Home?" His eyes closed and he leaned back into Dean who had slid behind him.

"We'll get you well."

"Will you stay with me?" Robbie asked.

"I won't leave your side Robbie." Ellen laid her hand on his face. "Now lets get you ready."

"I can walk." His words were breathy.

"You can, can you?" Ellen smiled as she laced up his boots. She grabbed his blanket.

"You kept your promise."

"What promise is that? I make many. I keep few."

Robbie tried to smile. "I wouldn't be alone to face this." He could barely open his eyes. "I'm not alone."

"No you're not. I'm just sorry it took me so long. I am really sorry I didn't do this sooner." She stood up. "Now Dean and I will get you out of here."

"Dean?" Robbie tilted his head back to see him. "You weren't moving in on my woman while I was gone were you?"

"Actually Robbie" Dean helped him to stand. "We hate each other now."

"Too bad." Robbie swayed as he was lifted to his feet, then he smiled. "Oh well." He leaned on both of them for support. "See, even on my death bed I have a sense of humor." He felt Ellen's hand slip. "El? What's wrong?"

"You aren't on your death bed Robbie." She faced him. "You'll beat this."

"El." His head wobbled as he lowered it to her. "Look around sweetheart. I'm good, I'm not that good to beat this."

"You're a Slagel Robbie. You'll beat this." She returned to helping Dean support him. "And I'll make damn sure you do nothing less."

(3)

Why Frank had that particular episode of the Simpson's on his mind at that moment was beyond him. And he chuckled about it as he did his rounds near the utility buildings. An out loud laughter he was glad--for sanity purposes--that no one was around to hear. And it just wasn't the episode it was the thought of how the people in Beginnings were like the Simpson's. As much as he wanted to be Bart--because Bart was the best--he was Homer. Ellen was Marge with better hair. Joe was Mr. Burns. But who would be Bart? It had to be Robbie. Robbie was a much better Bart. In fact, he remembered Robbie doing the same stupid crank phone calls. Calling the bar he knew Joe was at, just to annoy their father. That was until Joe threatened to call Robbie's C.O. and tell him Robbie was using government phones for illegal purposes. Robbie stopped--against his will--but he stopped. And Henry, who was Henry? Frank snickered when he came up

with his answer. Henry was definitely Lisa. Such an odd mind comparison Frank did, and never once did it cross his mind that he wasn't thinking in a security mode.

"Frank."

Snapping from his cartoon world, Frank turned to see Cole making his approach. "Cole. You're up early."

"I have to talk to you. Where's Joe?"

"Home I guess. Hey Cole, doesn't Henry remind you of Lisa from the Simpson's?"

"Who?"

"Never mind. What's up?"

"We have to find Joe, we have to find him now. We have a situation Frank. And it's not good."

Seriousness. Frank switched to that mode. "What's going on?"

"I decoded that message. I just finished. Read it for yourself."

Frank's eyes lowered to the paper Cole handed him and he read it. "Fuck." He adjusted his headset microphone. "Dad pick up."

(4)

He moved in a charge as he walked toward center town to meet Frank. Eight minutes so far had been used up getting things together. Joe held his radio tight in one hand, a cigarette in the other. "No we can not have a second gunner on the chopper Johnny. No one else is immune. We have to do this just you and your dad." He told Johnny who was at the hanger awaiting his grandfather and Frank. "So have her fired up and ready John. Fired up and ready. I have an ETA of four minutes till lift off and nine to get there, top speed."

"Got it Pap."

"Have rope already secured from the bird incase there is trouble."

"Got it."

Joe switched channels. "Cole, have those supplies up at the mobile. Anything that Robbie and his men have with them will have to wait until later. Right now top priority is to lift them out and bring them home."

"But Joe . . ." Cole called back. "The community decision."

"I'll deal with the community decision. It's one thing when our men are protecting us, its another when we fail to protect them." Joe stopped in his stride when he saw Frank coming out of armory. "Everything ready?" He asked Frank.

"Guns are loaded on the chopper, so is mine." He tossed an M-16 over his shoulder.

"Good. Keep in mind Frank, even though you are now immune, you keep that distance, no contact. I can't lose you to quarantine for more than twelve hours. All right, we're ready."

"No we aren't." Frank shook his head.

"What? You've had time."

"No shit." Frank looked at his watch. "I can't find Dean. I went to his house to suit him up to take him with us and he's not there."

"The lab."

"All three have been checked by my men. No Dean. Clinic either."

"Henry's house."

"Henry is at my house."

"Where's Ellen?"

Frank tossed his hands up. "Supposed to be at Henry's . . . Not."

Joe took a breath. "Maybe they're together."

"That's what I was thinking. I'm heading to my house now."

"Good, you do that." Joe backed up. "I'll make a sweep one more time at the clinic maybe he's sleeping somewhere. I'll meet you at the hanger." He moved further away. "And if you find Ellen, just ship her to the mobile to get things ready. I need only my immune people on this."

"Got it. What if we can't find Dean?"

"We go without him. But we go." Joe pointed as he moved on faster.

Frank picked up his pace to a run and headed straight to his house. They were wasting time and he needed to get moving, because time was something he hadn't any idea how much of he had.

It was still early when he barreled in the house. Not a sound was heard, not a child was up. He saw Henry reading something as he sat at the diningroom table. "Henry."

"Hey Frank, what are you doing here?"

"We have a situation. Tell me Ellen is here."

"No, she isn't." Henry stood up and walked to Frank. "What's wrong?"

"Tell me, you know where she is."

"I do. She's with Dean working."

Frank let out a breath of relief. "Thank God, now where the fuck are they working? I need Dean and I can't find his skinny ass anywhere." Frank turned on his radio. "Dad, Henry knows where they are." Frank covered his mouth piece. "Where are they Henry?"

Henry didn't answer he only raised his eyebrows.

"Henry!" Frank shouted. "Where?"

Henry swallowed. "You aren't going to like this."

Frank stared for a moment and uncovered the mouth piece. "Dad, I'll meet you at the hanger." He looked at Henry again. "Where?"

"They aren't in Beginnings Frank." Henry hunched.

"What!"

"They left about an hour ago. They . . . they went to get Robbie." Henry backed up suddenly when he saw the dropped mouth, red faced expression on Frank's face.

"No." He spoke softly. "Fuck no. Tell me Henry. Tell me they aren't out there."

"They are Frank. I know Robbie isn't allowed back in but they felt . . ."

"Fuck!" Frank cut his hand in the air. "God!" Frank brought his hands up. Huffing, heavy huffing began to come from him as he stepped back.

"Frank what's wrong?" Henry followed him to the door.

"This!" Slamming into Henry's chest came the paper that Cole had written the decoded message on. "I have to go." Yelling into the headpiece that the situation was now worse, Frank flung open the front door and raced out, leaving behind the essence of his desperation as he charged forth to the hanger as fast as he could go.

Henry was frightened as he looked down at the paper. What was it all about? Across the top of the paper were a bunch of scribbled letters. Under that, in Cole's handwriting, '7/15, intercepted message.' The moment Henry read it, was the moment he lost his balance and fell into the door that he had blindly closed. "No." He shook his head. "What did I send her in to?" He banged his head back once against the wood then read the reality of the words again.

. . . decoded--Have arrived. Ten miles west. We are near Beginnings men. Antiserum is ready. Will have secured Robbie Slagel and have him in possession by 07:00. Returning back immediately.

(5)

Robbie was heavy, and even though he walked, Dean and Ellen's lack of body weight and height struggled them as they brought him over that grade toward the jeep. Not only did Robbie weigh them down as they supported him but so did the four M-16 203's that Robbie--even though ill--insisted they couldn't leave behind because of Frank.

"Dean, I'm wearing down and we have to hurry." Ellen told him, holding on to Robbie's waist.

Dean stooped to catch his breath. "Let's leave the gear here and it may be easier to walk him down."

"I agree. Hold him." Ellen released her grip and set down the weapons and single duffle bag she held. She walked to Dean, pulling the two M-16's from him as well. "All right. Better?" She went to Robbie's other side.

"I think so." Dean grunted. "A little bit further Robbie."

It was easier bringing him down the grade to the awaiting jeep, not as tiresome and not so much as a struggle. Of course, if Robbie didn't help as much as he did, they would have never been able to place him in the front seat.

Ellen stepped away. "We'll hide him in the back of the jeep when we get closer to home."

"Good idea."

Robbie heard this. "Hide?" His words sounded foggy. "Hide?"

Ellen smiled. "Get him strapped in Dean. I'll go grab the stuff."

Dean agreed and watched Ellen go up over the hill. He held his hand on Robbie's chest to steady him up right in the seat then he hurried to the drivers side of the open vehicle. "The belts aren't real good Robbie. You're going to have to try to keep yourself up."

Robbie snickered even in illness. "Not a problem."

Shaking his head, Dean bent down some reaching around Robbie's waist for the belt. "Such a Slagel."

"Dean."

"No smart comment Robbie. I'm finding the belt."

Robbie coughed, his body shook. "Dean."

Feeling Robbie fuss in the seat, Dean backed up. "What is it?" He asked, then saw Robbie reach for the revolver between the two front seats. "Robbie what . . ."

"Ellen." Robbie's weak and unsteady arm held out the weapon.

Afraid to turn around but having too, Dean's head--like a clock--turned back. "Shit!" His eyes widened and his body went numb when he saw the line of them--more than he could count at that moment--standing before him, weapons high, SUTs. Then he heard it, the pumping of chambers coming from the weapons raised and aimed towards them. "Shit!" With a pounding heart and a stolen chance Dean leaped his small body outward toward Robbie, slamming into him and knocking them both to the ground in a roll. The second their bodies bounced, a gunshot rang out.

Dean climbed from Robbie pulling him closer to the jeeps protection. He heard more shots, the oddity of one in the distance. Lowering his head, Dean looked under the jeep, a blur, he couldn't see or focus enough to know what was going on. But he did know one thing, the firing stopped.

The unexpected kick from the firing of the weapon sent Ellen back and landing on her backside. Still holding the weapon she held it up to the wall--fourteen strong--of SUTs that had turned from Robbie and Dean and now headed her way. It frightened her more than she thought it would. She remembered her last encounter with two of the SUTS when she was beyond the wall of her home. Even though they were programmed to think one way, they still were male. And the thought of what fourteen of them would do to her made her, in defense, depress the trigger on the M-16, only in a panic, to find out the clip was jammed. "No." She tossed the weapon and brought herself to her feet in a sloppy stumble.

Down the grade? No. They blocked her. Behind her to the town? Ellen shifted her views. Two more. Doing the only thing she could do, she shot herself sideways and began to run. As fast as her legs could carry her, she ran toward the road below which look more like an overgrown field. Though there was no where to hide, it gave her hope that if she could keep ahead of them, somehow Dean could follow in the jeep and get her. "Dean!" She screamed as she ran , the SUTs running behind her. "Help me!"

Dean's hand slammed on the metal of the jeep as he felt his way around it. How could he find her? How could he help her when he couldn't even see where she was. The more she called, the more her voice went through him with a pain that was worse than if had he taken a bullet.

With the mouth piece of his radio lowered below his bottom lip, sunglasses shielding his eyes, Johnny peered out the windshield of the chopper into the sunny day in front of them. "The town's up ahead. We came in west Dad. I'm not seeing them!" He spoke loud over the chopper noise.

"They have to be out here!" Frank, standing in a ready mode, looked out the windshield also.

"Wait! Over the trees. The jeep."

"Dean and Robbie. Where's Ellen!" He watched them stumble to jeep and Dean look up.

"Dad, ahead."

"Fuck!" With a tight closed fist and horror filled eyes, Frank pounded his hand into the door of the chopper when he saw the line of men chasing after a running Ellen. "Get me in front of them!"

"Dad they're all moving."

Not paying attention to his son, Frank hurried his big body into the back of the chopper, picking up his weapon as he hit the door. He lifted his mouth piece to speak to Johnny and in one motion, he flung open the side door, adjusted himself to the blast of wind and raised his weapon in an aiming motion, bracing himself in the doorway of the chopper. "See me Ellen, see me."

"Can you get a clear shot?"

Frank twisted his head and aimed again watching Ellen zig-zag about in her run from the SUTs. "Ellen move." He beckoned.

It was more than the helicopter noise that captured Ellen's attention, she could actually feel his approach. Feel it within her stirring that extra charge of energy that gave her the push to keep going. Raising her eyes up in her stride she could see the hovering of the chopper, and then she saw him . . . Frank.

The reasoning came back and the fright left her. She would be fine. Seeing Frank aiming forward told her she had to get from his shot. As soon as this realization hit her and she shifted her run, so did something else. A gunshot, and then a burning, seared into the side of her thigh and Ellen dropped hard to the ground slamming her knees against the concrete buried beneath the high grass.

"Ellen!" Frank cried out seeing her fall into a disappearance and watching the SUTs move closer and faster. "Bring me in full speed from the side! Now John!"

"Dad what are you doing?"

Frank harnessed his weapon over his shoulder and behind him. He grabbed the rope that was secure and dropped it out of the door.

"Dad!"

"Full speed and steady John. It's our only chance. Now!"

Johnny looked back as he turned the helicopter in a tilt, picking up the speed and watching his father. Johnny smiled. "I know what you're doing." He spoke in the radio. "I'm bringing you in."

"Your aim better be good." Frank grabbed onto the rope and began to lower himself down.

"I'm the best."

Frank laughed as he hurried to the ropes edge, placing his foot loosely in the loop. "Prove it!" With whipping wind crashing into his face, sharp and hard like particles of sand being thrown full speed at him. Frank kept his eyes open as he held on to the rope with one hand, totally within Johnny's control as his body sailed with speed holding onto that rope toward Ellen.

The helicopter noise, the tromping of feet all prompted Ellen to ignore whatever pain she felt and get back on to her feet. Grunting and giving it everything she had, she stood, losing her balance only for a second before she saw the SUTs almost within reach of her. Turning and hoping that she could out run them more, her corner peripheral vision saw them stop to aim at her. "No!" She called out hearing the most paralyzing of sounds. The simultaneous pumping of chambers in a long line of automatic weapons. She couldn't move any faster, she just had to keep running, she didn't want to see it coming. And she didn't.

Slam!

Every ounce of her breath escaped her when she felt the wall of a body slam into hers, the gripping of a safe haven arm, and the rise of her body from the ground to safety all within the hold of Frank. Even the rush of the air that blasted her in her face couldn't make her inhale enough to set her breathing straight. So tight she felt him hold onto her and instinctively she clung back, her arms around his neck and her legs up and around his waist. She began to shake, her whole body trembled as she held on to Frank with the life he had just saved and they flew backwards on that rope from the SUTs that stood stunned below.

Frank bit his bottom lip, pressing her face close to hers as he held onto the rope. "Johnny." He called out. "Slow down and bring me out a little further. I'm dropping off and finishing this thing."

"Got it Dad. Be ready."

"El." Frank spoke to her. "Hold on. Don't let go of me."

She shook her head unable to speak.

Something at that moment made Frank laugh. Maybe it was the relief he felt from having Ellen in his arms, but he also knew it was not over yet. "Ready El?" The chopper slowed down and Frank released his foot, holding on to Ellen with all his strength and sliding down to the very end of the rope. "It'll be a jolt." Frank watched the ground below as he readied to release his fingers. "Ready and . . . now."

Ten feet from the grounds surface was as close as they could dangle. The moment he released his hold on the rope, Frank held Ellen with both arms, letting his legs be loose as they landed hard to the ground in a stumble and rolling a good twenty feet before they stopped.

Frank could hear Ellen's breathing, heavy, scare-filled as he tried to get up from her. His back ached from rolling so hard on his weapon. "I have to get up." He pulled from her arms. "Stay put!" Rolling onto his knees and standing in a run, Frank prayed his weapon wouldn't fail him as he lifted it high in an aim to the barrage of SUTs that stormed his way.

Though the SUTs kept moving, Frank did not. With his feet planted firm, weapon high and a view of their heads in the grass that was not quite grown enough to hide them, Frank began to fire. His sharp shooter marksmanship did not fail him.

Never did he flinch in his mission, or become unraveled. Even though there was only one of him, Frank had the upper hand. As he fired his shots--wasting not a single one--it became Frank's real life video game. With each shot he fired, he watched them drop, one at a time, lifeless into the field in which they ran. One at a time until there were no more.

There was no more running sounds. No more shuffling of heavy boots through the high weeds. Only distance chopper noises and Frank lowered his weapon. He spun around letting the excitement of what had happened finally hit him when he knew it was over. "Ellen!" He called out into the weeds, weapon dangling and his body moving emotionally drained in his search for her.

Ellen lifted herself to a stand and screamed with enthusiasm when she saw him coming toward her. In a limp she ran. Then ignoring the pain, she charged forth to Frank leaping herself at him and plowing her weight at him with such a force, she knocked them both off their balance and backwards into the grass. Still unable to form words and exhaling only sounds brought on by her accelerated adrenaline, Ellen clung to Frank as she lay on top of him on the ground.

Frank laughed, his chest bouncing her body as he did. He slid his hands from her back to her face, grasping it, lifting it, and staring at. So widely he grinned as he looked into her eyes, breathing so heavily in a synchronized inhalation rhythm with hers. He huffed, and so did his words. "How's . . . how's your leg?"

Ellen's out-of-breath words matched his. "Fi . . . fine. Just . . . just a scratch."

"Any pain?"

"Not much."

"Sure?"

"Yes."

"Good." He smiled again, holding her tight with his one arm and he rolled them together, placing Ellen on her back. His body weighed pressed to her, but not completely. His large hand ran across her face feeling it in a moment of silence. Biting his bottom lip with a grin, Frank took three slow breaths through his nostrils to put his breathing back in sync. Then gripping her face more, he parted his lips, still smiling and lowered them to Ellen.

"Don't kiss her!" Dean's voice shot out stopping them just before they touched. "Don't!" Her ran to them.

"Fuck!" Frank looked at him. "Why not?"

"Because if you do Frank . . ." Dean caught his breath. "Then you'll be stuck in quarantine with us for the whole time."

"Oh yeah?" Frank smiled. "Good. Thanks Dean." He moved to kiss Ellen again.

"Frank!" Dean yelled again, stopping them. "Beginnings can not afford to have you out of commission for that long. Not now, not with the SUTs so close."

A soft frustration growl rumbled from Frank's throat. He closed his eyes and lifted his body some from Ellen. "So close." He shuddered his body then whined. Sliding back he brought himself to his knees and held his hand to Ellen. "Can I at least hold her?"

"You can hold her." Dean held his hair back. "But don't kiss her!"

Standing up, Frank lifted Ellen to her feet, letting his eyes shift to the blood that poured down her leg. "You get into more trouble than any woman I have ever met."

"And you're always around to pull me out of it." Ellen gripped his hand tighter. "Thank you Frank Slagel . . . again."

"You're welcome Ellen . . ." Frank grinned because he knew what her last name still was. "Slagel." He gave a 'ha' laugh. "Again." With his words, he felt her arms go around him and he return the embrace, lifting her from her feet as he did. Holding Ellen, he could hear the stopping of the helicopter engines as it landed. "Now that the excitement is over with." Frank pulled back and his whole demeanor changed. "What the fuck is wrong with you two?" He scolded at her and Dean. "Sneaking out? Going against the rules. Didn't it ever occur to you that . . ." He stopped talking when he heard what sounded like singing. Bad, but weak. Releasing Ellen's hand his views followed that voice that sang a hero song. And passed Dean, sitting in the jeep, he saw his brother. So ill, looking so unlike himself. "Oh my God!" Frank began to run to him and he was blocked by Dean. "Let me get to him."

"Not too close Frank." Dean held him back. "Just keep a distance."

"Robbie." Frank slowed in his pace as he approached the jeep. "Hey."

Two feet from him, Frank lowered himself to one knee and his voice to his brother who could barely sit up straight.

"I saw Frank." Robbie tried to smile and his hand raised with a thumbs up then dropped harshly.

"They were coming for you Robbie. George wants you for some reason."

Robbie's eyes rolled and his head fell to the side. "I'm cool, that's why. They . . . they probably need me to help them reproduce the superior males. So they can . . . can take your big ass out."

Frank shook his head back and forth as he dropped it, his hand which dangled over his leg longed to reach up to touch Robbie who despite it all, still had his spirit. "Never would happen."

"Yeah." Robbie's eyes blinked slowly, it was so hard to keep them open, but he tried. "I shoot blanks." He rested his head back and slid his body down. His body shook as he coughed.

Frank shifted his eyes downward unable to look at Robbie with out feeling the pain. "You're gonna be fine Robbie. We're here. Whatever you need."

"I know." Robbie closed his eyes. "Take me home big brother. I'm so sick. Just take me home."

BLIND SIDED

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

(1)

Frank was so hungry even Henry's rice cakes tasted good to him as he paced about the mobile lab. He took a bite, crunching loudly as he looked down to Johnny who finalized the bandage on Ellen's leg. "Good job on that John."

Johnny lifted his head with a smile. "Thanks."

Frank nodded then looked at his watch. "Man, ten and a half more hours in this place. Fuck." He walked over to the special lab window where Dean was working behind. He knocked hard on the glass startling Dean. Frank wiggled his fingers in a wave and Dean merely flipped him off. "The little man attitude he projects." He shook his head moving back over toward Ellen.

Johnny stood up to his feet. "All done. I'm going to go see Uncle Robbie."

Ellen stood also. "Not too close." She instructed.

"I know, I know." Johnny stepped back. "I'll leave you two alone for a little while."

Frank shifted his eyes to the glass wall Dean was behind. "Yeah, real alone."

Ellen waited until Johnny had left and she took a step toward Frank. "We have a minute to ourselves here."

"That we do. Until the boy in the plastic bubble emerges." Frank pointed to Dean. "How long do you think that'll be?"

Ellen shrugged. "I don't know. He's checking out those four vials that you found with the SUTs. You know to see if it is actually an antidote. If it is . . ." She crossed her fingers. "We'll give it to Robbie."

"It is, I know it is. Why else would they have vials if they were coming to get a sick Robbie?"

"I think you're right." She stepped even closer to him. "Frank."

Frank stepped back.

"What's wrong?"

Frank moved to the window to look out. "So this is quarantine. Pretty boring huh?"

"If you're not working it can be." She moved next to him. "Why did you back away?"

"I had to."

"I understand, the virus?"

"No." Frank shook his head.

"You think I'm repulsive?"

Frank laughed. "No."

"What is it."

"El." Frank spoke so soft his voice was raspy. "I don't think you have a

clue how I feel right now.”

“I think I do.” She stared out the window.

“Do you?” Frank moved to behind her to whisper in her ear. “Today, out there, when I had you in my arms.” His hand slid to hers and his fingers slipped to join hers as he moved his body to right against Ellen’s. “It felt right. For the first time in so long, it felt so right. It took everything I had not to kiss you, when I wanted to. I really wanted to.” To Frank’s surprise Ellen turned and faced him. Giving a shivering breath at the closeness, he put his arms around her and pulled her to him. He spoke to her face to face, his lips moving in a hover over hers while he did. “And it’s difficult El. You don’t know how bad I want to say ‘fuck it’ and . . .” His hand slid up under her hair. “Kiss you and stay in here with you.”

“We can’t do that. And . . . we shouldn’t be like this.” She tried to pull back but he wouldn’t let her. “Frank.”

“Why shouldn’t we be like this?”

“It scares me. It really scares me us being so close.”

Frank felt her pull back and again he pulled her into him. “I think . . . I think I know you pretty well.” Frank winked. “And if you’re scared Ellen, then I know why you’re scared and I have one thing to say to you. Good.” Wanting to hug her, Frank stopped when he heard the pounding on the glass behind him. “Fuck.” He turned around to see Dean pointing and mouthing the words ‘no kissing’ “All right!” Frank shook his head and backed away. “He’s on my nerves and he’s getting beat up when he comes out.”

“Frank.” Ellen snickered his name.

“I don’t know how you’re gonna take it in here for a week with him. And you guys aren’t even talking. Even though, you were doing stupid shit like sneaking out.”

“I had to get Robbie.”

“And you ended up getting shot.” His hand pointed to her thigh, then he smiled.

“What’s so funny?”

“You do realize, that not only do we talk the same, we now have the same wound.”

Ellen looked puzzled at him. “We do?”

“Oh sure. Remember last year when we were chasing baby Marcus and he headed to the gate where the SUTS were? I got shot in the thigh when I went to get him. You stitched me.”

“That’s right. It’s the same scar?”

“Oh sure.”

“No it isn’t.”

“Yeah it is. Look . . .” Frank undid the belt on his pant and let them drop down.

Ellen chuckled. “What are you doing?”

“Right, you’re offended? Look.” He pointed to his right thigh. “Right

there.”

Ellen bent down to look. “Oh yeah, I see. It is the same.”

Frank looked down to view the top of her head. “El.”

“What happened here Frank.” Ellen’s hand moved up his other leg, laying on another scar.

“El I uh . . . arrow. Robbie’s trap.” He cleared his throat. “El.”

“What about this little one *right* . . . here Frank.” Ellen grazed her hand to another one. “Wow , your poor legs, For as much as I’ve seen them . . .”

“El.”

“ . . I never noticed how banged up they were.” She continued. “Here’s one, and another one and over here this long one is . . .”

“El, get up. I have to pull up my pants right now.”

“But I’m seeing all the neat scars on your legs. Gees Frank. Don’t be so modest.”

“El it’s not modesty, trust me. Trust me. Just know right now, I really should be pulling my pants up.” He reached his hand down to her to help her stand.

Gripping his hand, Ellen let her eyes skim up on the way to making it to her feet. Upon her standing, she snickered.

“Get my point?” Frank raised his eyebrows.

“Well . . . maybe just a little too . . .”

“Thanks.” He smiled, then reached down to grab his pants.

The second Johnny came back and saw his father reaching for his pants, was the second he cleared his throat and laughed. “Dad, why are you standing in the middle of those room with your pants down?”

“Modeling, what the fuck do you think I’m doing? I’m showing Ellen something.” Frank finished pulling them up.

“I bet.” Johnny snickered.

“John! Wounds, war wounds.”

“Oh I thought maybe you were into voyeurism.” He walked further in.

“Now see.” Frank tucked in his tee shirt. “You think you’re real funny with a comment like that. Well it can’t be voyeurism if no one can see. And fuckin Dean don’t count.”

“Oh yeah?” Johnny pointed to the window that faced outside. “What about them?”

Buttoning his pants Frank spun to see Henry and Joe standing at the window. “Shit.”

Joe pointed to his own radio and waited for Frank to place on his headset and for Ellen to pick up the radio. Joe brought his radio to his mouth. “Done? Are you making the best out of quarantine Frank?”

“What? I was showing Ellen something.”

“I bet.” Joe said sarcastically. “How’s Robbie?”

Ellen pulled up a chair to answer him. “He’s sick Joe. Right now he’s resting and Dean has him hooked up to an intravenous to re-hydrate him.”

“What about the antiserum that the message talked about?” Joe asked.

Ellen looked back to Dean in the special portion of the lab. "Four vials were found in a coolant activated case with the SUTs. Dean is working with those vials right now to see if that is what it is." She crossed her fingers. "Keep praying Joe." She looked back at Dean again. "Right now, from what I can tell he's waiting on results. He usually gets that impatient look on his face. Johnny?" Ellen turned to Johnny. "Go stand by the window and hurry him up." She snickered. "Oh Joe, look!" She stood up on the chair and placed her newly injured thigh close to the window. "I was shot."

"So I've heard."

Ellen stepped down. "And guess what? Frank saved me. He saved my life Joe. Came flying down in on a . . ."

"Ellen." Joe interrupted her. "It's getting boring."

Ellen was aghast. "What?"

"The whole Frank and Ellen rescue thing. It happens so often it's getting old. You get into trouble, my son has to do some dramatic daring rescue to bail your ass out. And . . . and mind you." His finger pointed. "Most of the situations you get yourself into should have been avoided. Right? What the hell were you and Dean doing going out beyond the walls anyhow? Don't think for one second when you get out of here you aren't paying some sort of apology debt to the community. You're just lucky that most of them haven't a clue you two went out there first. It was bad enough dealing with them when I sent out for Robbie."

"Oh my God Joe." Ellen spoke shocked. "I can't believe your bitching at me when I've been shot. And, and you should show more gratitude to your son. He's a hero you know."

"Ellen." Joe said with annoyance. "Frank is always your hero. To everyone else he does his job. Sometimes I think you put yourself in those dangerous situations just to see how far he'll go for you."

Ellen's mouth dropped open. "You're being so mean. Are you mad at me Joe?"

"Damn right I'm mad at you!" Joe screamed.

At the same time Frank pulled his earpiece from his ear, he saw Ellen pull the radio away from her. He leaned to her whispering. "A little hint from me El. Shut off the volume."

Joe's voice came through their radios. "A little hint from me Frank. Shut off your microphone."

Ellen rolled her eyes. "He's just pissy, that's all."

"Pissy?" Joe was irate. "Pissy is when someone forgets it's their turn to stock the bar at the social hall when I'm ready for a drink. Pissy can not be used to describe how I feel when I find out my daughter deliberately goes . . ." BANG! Joe hit his hand against the glass. "Turn the radio back on, I saw that!"

Ellen turned the volume back on. "Joe, yell at me later O.K.? I'm in pain." She made a cringing face.

"You're in pain?" Joe shook his head. "And another thing." He ignored

her 'here he goes again' look. "Why haven't you even acknowledged Henry. He's standing right here."

"Who?" Ellen asked.

"Henry." Joe stated.

"Who's that?"

"Ellen!"

Ellen nearly dropped the radio. "I'm mad at Henry." She finally shifted her eyes at Henry. "I'm mad at you Henry, go away."

Henry's eyes widened and he grabbed the radio from Joe. "What? Why are you mad at me?"

"You told Frank where me and Dean went."

"I had to."

"No you didn't. Frank didn't even torture you for the information, he said 'where are they?' and you ran at the mouth."

"It was a dangerous situation."

"No it wasn't, you hadn't a clue." She flung her head back. "Blabber mouth."

"I am not."

"Are too."

"Am not."

"Are too!" Ellen shouted. "And I don't want to talk to you anymore."

Henry grunted loudly. "You know what El, I was only trying to help you. I should have spoiled it for you in the first place. I should have opened my mouth sooner and let Joe lay into you about. I can't believe you're mad at me."

"And I'm not listening. And if you keep talking, look . . ." She held up the radio and turned the volume up and down quickly. "I'll make you stutter, and now you're silent." She shut the radio down.

"Ellen!" Henry yelled and watched her stand there staring at her nails. He then saw the snicker on Frank's face. "And you!" Henry hand hit hard into the glass. "You're just loving this aren't you? You're in there, I'm out here and you're probably brainwashing her."

"Henry!" Frank snapped. "Shut the fuck up, what did I do to you?"

"That snide look on your face Frank. I can't tell, I've seen it before. Mr. 'Save-her-life' I know."

"Oh you two are just a world of fun." Frank told them. "Henry, why don't you and my dad go off somewhere and be premenstrual together. Leave us alone, we're in a good mood."

"Keep in mind Frank." Henry said. "She's my wife."

"No she's not."

"You know what I mean. Hands off."

"She's not your wife Henry. What's her name?"

"Frank . . ."

"What's her name?" Frank asked again.

"Ellen."

"Ellen what?"

A soft grunt came through the radio. "Slagel."

"Ha." Frank snickered. "And what's my name?"

"Stop it." Henry got annoyed.

"You started this Henry. What's my name? Frank what? Slagel. Slagel. Seems like a match. Need I say more?" He grinned, especially when he saw Henry's facial frustration. "Oh stop it, I'm messing with you. In fact, I'm being good, aren't I El?" He pointed to Ellen who nodded. "See Henry. I'm not touching. And I'm not allowed anyhow. I have to be able to get out of quarantine. No exchange of body fluids here."

Henry closed his mouth and slowly nodded his head, "Would you if you could?"

"Oh sure, but that's beside the point. Good. I'm being very good. And we have more important things to talk about. Like, who is with the baby?"

"Hap is watching him at the nursery. He likes Nick since, well, you know Trish is expecting. But don't piss around after you leave here Frank. All those kids are just too much for me to . . ." Henry stopped talking.

Frank raised his eyebrows and placed his hands on his hips. "What? What? Too much for you to what?"

Henry motioned his head behind Frank to Dean who had emerged from the other lab.

Dean probably could have looked more like the scientist he was, instead of the confused mess he appeared. The way he stepped to them, stop, open his mouth, hold up his hand, fling back his head and finish off the routine he repeated by running his fingers through his hair.

Frank's head swayed back in forth. "What is it with him with building the suspense. Dean! What?!"

"O.K." Dean placed one hand on his hip holding back the lab jacket. "May I?" He held his hand out to Ellen for the radio. "Thanks." He depressed the button. "What is in those vials is definitely not a virus. It is an antiserum, not an antidote. My guess is they have no antidote, they've inoculated. Anyhow. I got a slow reaction when I tested the substance on a viral sample. A good reaction, a hopeful reaction, but slow. What ever it is, definitely was made to be given prior to infection."

Joe listened to his explanation but his heart still searched for an answer to the question on whether or not it would help his son. That's what was forefront on Joe's mind most. "What does this mean for Robbie. And give it to me straight Dean."

"Straight." Deans eyes moved around to those who watched him. "Robbie had entered fully into the virus stage of deterioration. With the right antiserum it can be reversed. This will reverse it but I don't know how fast, and that's where the problem lies. The symptoms of this virus are as deadly as the disease itself. We have to hope with care, that Robbie does not succumb to the symptoms before the agent I'm going to give him takes effect."

"So basically," Joe said. "It's like cutting off the cancerous limb and hoping it didn't spread?"

"Basically yes."

"Then I suggest you do what you have to do Dean."

Dean clenched the already prepared syringe he held in his hand. "Wish me luck."

Luck wasn't the only thing they wanted to happen when all of them watched Dean leave with the syringe. Results were what they needed and wanted most. And an air of silence took over the room as a hush, replacing the silliness of the arguments and joking around that had happened moments earlier. Though they stood with a glass window separating them, Frank, Ellen and Johnny in the mobile, Joe and Henry outside, they all stood in thought for the same thing. With all of their hearts they wanted what Dean had, to work on Robbie.

(2)

It was time for Frank to leave, yet Ellen stood in that doorway of Robbie's room watching him for a few more minutes as he stared so helpless at his brother laying in that bed. She could tell, she could feel the pull herself how much Frank wanted to reach out and nurse him, wipe him down like Ellen had done so many time while he held his bedside vigil with Robbie. But he couldn't. All he could do was keep his distance, hands folded over his goatee and watch.

"Frank." So soft Ellen spoke that her voice cracked a little. "It's time to go. You have to leave now."

"I know." He nodded. "He is so sick El. It's been ten hours since Dean gave him that drug. The only thing that has happened is he has gotten worse."

"We have to wait Frank." Ellen walked up behind him laying her hand on his shoulder. "Dean said it moves slow."

"But this virus doesn't. And why is he so sick already? None of the other men were this sick in this stage, were they?"

Ellen shook her head. "No. As near as we can tell, Robbie may have come down with it a day earlier than he admitted. He's strong Frank. He wouldn't give in to it. He wouldn't let it get him down."

"But it did."

"I'm sorry."

"He's my baby brother El." Frank slowly stood up. "It's hard to watch this."

"I know."

"Tell me this isn't going to be the last time I see my brother alive."

"I can tell you I will do everything I can to make sure the next time you see him, he's better. I'll try Frank, I'll try as hard as I can."

"I know you will." Frank took one more look back at Robbie. "I'd better go. Johnny's waiting isn't he?"

"Yes he is." She held out her hand. "I'll walk with you."

"You'll stay with him, right?" Frank asked as they left the trailer and moved to the mobile lab.

"I won't leave his side."

"Give him a kiss for me El."

"I will." She closed her eyes as they reached the door.

"Take care of my brother."

"You don't even have to say that to me. You know I will." She reached her hand up and laid it on his face. "Stop by and see me tomorrow and I'll let you know everything."

"I will." Frank leaned down to her but stopped before he instinctively kissed her. He stepped back, placed his lips to his fingers and laid his fingers to her lips. "I'll see you." He reached for the door. "Be good in here."

"I will." Ellen sadly folded her arms. "And Frank?" She stopped him as he opened the door. "Thank you for everything you did for me today. Even though Joe down plays it, I don't."

"You're welcome." Frank smiled. "And just so you know. My father only down plays it because it pisses you off."

"I knew that, I didn't think you did."

"Please, I'm the smart one here." He paused in his leaving when he heard her snicker. He shook his head at her. "Good night."

Holding the edge of the door, Ellen stepped to him. "Goodnight Frank." After he stepped out, she closed the lab door, refolded her arms and walked toward the trailer to join Dean. A few steps into her walk, she heard the lab door reopen. Ellen turned around to see Frank who had only stuck his head in.

"El . . . I love you."

Before she could say anything, the lab door had closed and she heard the starting of the jeep's engine. The only thing she could do was go to the window. She watched, fingers pressed to the glass leaving smudge marks, as Frank and Johnny drove back into town. She waited until the tail lights were no longer seen and she headed to the trailer to do what she had told Frank she'd do. Take care of Robbie.

(3)

Frank knew the moment he walked into his home just before ten p.m., and a little over the actual fourteen hours he had to put into quarantine, that Henry had a hell night. Flopped over the arm of the couch was Henry's

head. His arm hung to the floor, his long hair draping like a disguise over him so much his face wasn't seen. What had he done, sat down to take a break and just passed out? That was how it looked to Frank. And worried that his closest friend would end up with either a headache or one hell of a stiff neck, Frank decided to help him out. He slammed the door to the house loudly causing Henry to spring up to a sitting position and his hair to flop forward onto his face. "Sorry Henry, did I wake you?"

"I wasn't sleeping."

"Right." Frank stepped into the livingroom. "Nice hair."

Henry grunted and ran his finger through it to straighten it. "How was Robbie?"

"Worse."

"Sorry to hear that."

"How were the kids?"

"Difficult." Henry plopped backwards. "Good thing Joe stayed until they fell asleep. Actually it was good thing Josh and Denny were here to wear them out. Only I think their antics wore me out. I'm beat."

"Eh." Frank waved his hand at him. "It just takes practice and then you'll be a pro. You don't always get this worn out. Is Josh home now?"

"No, he's staying at Andrea's."

"Oh." Frank raised his head in an acknowledging nod. "Well, I'll let you get to sleep. I'm gonna head to bed myself. Goodnight Henry." He walked to the steps and stopped. "Henry? You aren't really mad that I spent all that time with Ellen in quarantine are you?"

"No." Henry shook his head. "Sorry I was like that. I was just upset that she was mad at me. You know how I get."

"Yeah I do."

"Is she still mad at me Frank?"

"Nah." Frank said dramatically stepping toward the stairs. "She's over it. Goodnight."

"Frank."

Frank's hand slid on the railing stopping on the second step. "Yeah?"

"Are you all right. Do you need to talk?"

"No. I'm fine. I just need to sleep that's all." He let out a long breath. "It's been a hell of a day. A long day." Gripping the stair railing tighter, Frank motioned his head in his final goodnight wave and walked up the steps. He felt a certain antsy-ness about him, an uneasy feel about the whole day. So down he was, after spending the entire evening sitting in a room with a brother who stopped talking and failed to come from the deep sleep he was in. Needing to have that touch of good, Frank stopped in both bedrooms on the journey to his own room. And before them, one at a time, he kissed each child, touched them and took a moment over each and every one to say a little prayer of gratefulness, thanking God for bringing them into his life. The healthy look that each one of them possessed took a tiny bit of the hurt away from Frank, but not enough.

Walking into his bedroom he closed the door, and undid his shoulder harness, draping it over the headboard of the bed. Sitting on the side of the bed, he took his keys and unlocked the night stand next to him. He grabbed his revolver and reached down, swung out the night stand door. Placing the revolver inside he saw it in there, and he needed it. After the bad day he had, he really needed. He pulled out the small bottle of moonshine he kept in there and replaced it with his revolver. Kicking the night stand door closed with his feet, Frank swung his body around to rest against the headboard, and he brought his legs to his bed. Bringing his knees up, and resting his wrists upon them, Frank stared at the bottle that he held with both hands. He told himself before he uncapped the moonshine, he needed a good reason to do so. After staring for a while in thought, he justified his doing so in one word . . . Robbie.

To forget the day, to forget the pain, Frank brought the bottle to his mouth as he lay on his bed and he broke the promise he made to Ellen, to Henry and more importantly to himself. Frank began to drink.

(4)

“Dean!” Such emotions filled Ellen’s cry out over the low humming motor sound of the suction machine. “Please! I can’t hold him much longer!” Her legs extended in a reach as far as they could possibly stretch. One leg off the double bed, the tip of her toes touching the base of the suction machine to hold it steady in its vibration. Her other leg was behind Robbie’s back, holding him up as she secured him with one arm, while suctioning the thick fluid from his lungs. Fluid that had backed up to the point that Robbie went into pulmonary arrest, turning blue and gasping for air he could not get.

His bare back burned against her bare leg. The high fever brought on convulsions that Ellen was surprised she handled. Perhaps she found the strength within her to do so. To fight with him as he fought what had him.

Robbie’s arm flung up, trying to swat away the tube that extended into his mouth, through his airway and deep into his lungs. “No Robbie. Don’t fight me. Please don’t fight me.” Ellen braced him more turning away her head from his moving hand. “Dean!” She felt Robbie’s head bang back onto her shoulder over and over. “Robbie hold on. Just hold on. Come on.”

The running thumps of his feet brought Dean charging into the bedroom. “It’s ready.”

“It’s now or never Dean.”

“We can do this El. We can do this. Brace him with everything you got.” Dean grabbed hold of the suctioning tube as he watched Ellen wrap not only her arms around him, but her legs as well. Dean brought his body to the bed, leaning the majority of his weight on Robbie’s leg as he

controlled the suctioning. "Almost there." He held Robbie's chin. "Almost done Robbie." He listened for the sounds of the moisture that ran through the tube, to slow in consistency. "Hold tight, just hold tight."

"Dean, why is he like this? Why is he so bad?"

"I don't know." Dean shook his head as he worked, watching Robbie's eyes roll totally to the back of his head.

"It's out of control."

"I know." Dean reached over and shut off the suction. "Keep him steady." Securing Robbie's throat, Dean removed the suctioning tube, when it emerged, Robbie gasped loudly. Grabbing his stethoscope, Dean placed it in his ears and then to Robbie's chest. He slid it over his shoulder slipping the diaphragm in between Robbie and Ellen's body. He listened. "Better. Much better." He took off the stethoscope and tossed it. "Ready El? We have to lower his body temp now."

"I'm ready."

Dean stepped from the bed and on to the floor. He braced Robbie under the arms so Ellen could slide out. Together, after a three count, they lifted him to his feet. Dean stood on one side, Ellen on the other and they dragged a slumping Robbie, who wore only a thin pair of boxer shorts, to the waiting bath tub Dean had already filled.

"Dean? How are we going to do this?" Ellen asked, standing before the tub.

"Care fully. I'll hold him, you finish undressing him."

Ellen released her hold once she knew Dean was secure, and she took the remainder of Robbie's clothes from him. "We'll never lift him Dean, he's out."

"Never say never." Behind Robbie's back where Dean's arm spanned across, was Ellen's. Dean's hand locked on to Ellen's wrist. "Lock our arms."

Ellen braced *his* wrist. "Got it."

"Grab hold under his leg. Get your grip." He waited until she did. "Now on three, using your legs, you lift him with me. Ready?"

"I can do this."

"I know you can. One . . . two . . . three." So loudly they grunted. But red faced and struggling they lifted Robbie and lowered him to the water not two feet away.

Upon Robbie's connection to the water, he somehow woke up and he began to thrash from the warm water that felt so cold against him. Both Ellen and Dean maintained a hold that grew harder with each thrash Robbie did.

"Dean, this is impossible. How are we going to keep him in here?"

"I'll hold him, you wipe down."

Ellen let go of her hold. "I have a better idea. He has to stay in there right?" She stood to her feet and hurriedly took off her shirt.

"El, what are you doing?"

She dropped her shorts then undid her bra. "Pull him up some." Undressing fully, Ellen stepped into the tub and sat down. She spread out her legs, one to each side of Robbie and with Dean's help they lowered him back first into Ellen.

"You have him?"

"Yes." Ellen nodded when Robbie stopped convulsing and he only trembled. Her arms wrapped tight around him as his head rested back to just under her chin. "I have him now. Hand me the cloth."

Dean did. And he watched Ellen proceed to carefully wipe him down. "El."

"I think he's calmed down now Dean. We're fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive, go clean up his room and change the sheets so its fresh when we put him back in bed. I just want to hold him and help him."

"All right." Dean stepped back. "But call me if you need me. Remember just because he's calm now doesn't mean he won't start again."

"I know. Go." She waited for Dean to leave and Ellen picked up the wash cloth, drenched it and wrung it out letting the stream pour across Robbie's chest. Once Dean was gone, Ellen held Robbie tighter. "Fight Robbie. You fight. Please."

"El." He weakly said her name.

"I'm right here." Ellen pressed Robbie's face close to her own. "Just hold on." She softly kissed Robbie on the cheek. The moment she did so, she felt an aching growing in her throat that tightened up the words she tried to get out. "Hold on."

Feeling the slight shake of his body, the rumbling of his chest and his breathing so shallow, Ellen clung to him even more. Pulling his back into her and holding his whole body with all of hers. "Just hold on and beat this thing Robbie." Seeing Robbie's hand reach out for something that wasn't there and hearing the mumbling of words that made no sense, Ellen planted her cheek to his. "I'll help you if you need me to. Hold on." Closing her eyes, she laid her lips to face and tasted the saltiness of her own tears as it rolled down between the connection of her and him. Such a sadness filled her while she held Robbie, such a hurt. Though she longed to give Robbie the strength she had, or the fortitude. She couldn't. At that moment, the strength would have to wait. She had none left herself, and all Ellen could do was hold him tightly, her body trembling with his, and cry.

(5)

"I know you're doing all that you can for my son Dean. Just let him know that we love him very much."

"I will Joe."

The final words of Dean's conversation with Joe stayed with him as he

gathered the things he would take back into the bathroom with him. Having to call Joe and tell him was so hard for Dean. How do you tell a father that his son had unexpectedly taken such a turn for the worse, that it made even Dean's head spin. A turn of the virus more violent than any of the reports of the illness Robbie had sent.

Dean heard no sounds as he approached the bathroom door. No splashing, no movement. It was almost too quiet and that scared Dean.

He held a robe out, laying it on the commode for Ellen who turned her head away from him when he walked in. She stared at the wall, her cupped hand brought to her mouth. Grabbing two towels, Dean set them on the floor, then knelt upon another at the tub's side. He pulled his stethoscope from around his neck and listened to Robbie's chest.

Ellen sniffled, then wiped her hand across her face. She spoke nasal, almost if her voice had disappeared somewhere deep in her. "I'm holding him Dean and he's not moving. I'm so afraid. I think I feel him breath, I think I feel a pulse. But he's not moving. He's not moving. I'm so afraid what I feel is my imagination. That I'm not feeling a heartbeat or a breath. Please tell me Dean. Please tell me he's still alive."

Slowly Dean lowered the stethoscope and set it on the floor. He swallowed. "Barely."

Ellen whimpered and held Robbie again.

"El." Dean grabbed the blood pressure cuff and wrapped it around his arm. "I can tell his fever is down some, enough to get him out of the tub. We have to get him out." He began to take his pressure.

Ellen listened to the ripping velcro sound. "How low is it?"

"Too low."

"He's dying on me Dean. He's dying." Ellen let out a single sob, then with tightly closed eyes she buried her head into Robbie's.

Dean listened to Ellen cry like he hadn't heard her do in so long. "El." He laid his hand on her shoulder. "Strength. You have to be strong."

"I can't."

"Bull shit. I watched a hundred pound woman help lift a man, twice her weight, Then support him. That's strong. And that's not just coming from your body, that is coming from within you. Use that, feed on that, cause we're not done yet." Dean slowly shook his head. "We are not done yet."

A long sniffle from Ellen echoed in the quiet bathroom. And she looked at Dean who stared at her. "Take hold of him Dean, we'll get him back to bed."

Dean slipped his hands under Robbie's arms and pulled his limp body forward so Ellen could get out. As the splash of the water occurred when Ellen stood up, Dean whispered to Robbie as he held him. "Don't give up on us yet Robbie, not yet."

(6)

Supporting Robbie up in bed, Dean watched Ellen's trembling hands as she worked placing in the shunt of the intravenous into Robbie. Into an arm that dangle down so as to let gravity fill his weakened veins with blood to strengthen them enough to take the IV. "You all right?"

"Can you reach to hold up my sleeve?"

"Yeah." Dean moved his hand down to hold back the robe that reached her fingers.

"I have it." Ellen laid a piece of tape across the shunt, then connected the tubing from the bag that hung from the stand at his bedside.

"Here, you want to hold him while I administer the meds."

"What are you giving him?" She walked over to the bed, slipping behind Robbie in a synchronized move with Dean as he slid out the other side. "Are his lungs clear enough for him to lay down yet?"

"Somewhat." Dean grabbed the first syringe he had prepared.

"Dean? The rabbits you injected with this so called antidote. How are they?"

Dean only raised his eyes.

"Dean, come on."

"The second died twenty minutes ago."

Ellen gasped. "But they weren't even close to that stage of the virus."

"I know. And I'm still standing on the premises that the virus isn't killing them. Once again, our symptoms did. For some reason this antiserum is magnifying, or speeding up the process. That's why I'm giving Robbie all we have. I'm just dumping it in him."

"What?" She watched him inject the first syringe in.

"Well, from what I could come up with, our A-17 actually worked with the antidote to speed up it's reaction. I've given it to the third rabbit and he's still hanging in there. I'm giving it to Robbie now. We need both to work faster, so I'm giving him an epinephrin syntheses to speed up the reaction and it will also open his bronchi for his breathing. I'm also giving him steroid equivalent to strengthen his lungs." Dean picked up another syringe. "And a fever reducer at a higher dose."

"All those together?"

"El, it's our best chance. Fight it with everything all at once."

Ellen sniffled again and ran the back of her hand under her nose. "I'm sorry to doubt you. I'm just upset."

"I know." Dean tossed out the last syringe. "Why don't you lay him back down again. There should be enough pillows there and we'll keep checking on him."

Kissing Robbie softly on the cheek, then running her hand over his wet hair, Ellen slowly began to slide out from behind him, trying to keep the transition from her to the pillow smooth and without his notice.

Robbie's eyes opened slightly. "El." He called out.

"I'm right here Robbie." She spoke softly still sliding out completely as she rested him back on his pillows.

His hand blindly reached out to the voice he heard. Robbie felt the softness of the robe she wore as it landed on the belt.

Wanting Robbie to know she was there, Ellen hesitated before she stood and got out of the bed completely. Stay there, she figured until he fell back to sleep and stopped stirring, then she would take her place in the chair next to him.

Robbie moaned barely audibly, a painful moan and his other arm came to her as he rolled on his side. He slipped his hand, almost in a search, under her robe. The robe opened some as his hand slid across her stomach and gripped tightly to her waist. With all of his strength he raised his head, eyes closed, and he dropped it weakly onto her chest, feeling his face against her skin as he pulled at her while moving closer. "Thank you."

Ellen looked up to Dean, so lost and confused and with eyes that conveyed her fears. She brought her hands to Robbie's head, slowly brushing her chin against the top of his wet hair.

Stepping to them, Dean adjusted the pillows under Ellen giving her more comfort in the lying position she was in. He brought the covers up over both of them and grazed his hand over Ellen's. "I'll check back." He received a closed eye nod in response and he walked to the door. He paused before leaving to take one more look back at Robbie who clung to Ellen like a sick, lost child. Clinging in hopes of something. Clinging maybe in fear. And Dean realized, for as much as Robbie needed the medication, Robbie needed Ellen as well.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

JULY 17

(1)

There was something unnerving about calling George at that time in the day. Anyone could walk in. But seeing how John Matoose hadn't had contact with him in two days, he had to call, like George wanted, within a certain time frame. It couldn't be before a certain time of the morning, George was out and about running things on his side of the world. And if it was later, he could be napping and George hated to have his naps disturbed. "As near as I can figure George, Frank went out to get Ellen and Dean."

"At that particular moment he went out at exactly the same time our CME's hit?"

"The way I got the story was, Henry broke down and told Frank."

"What about what you heard over the radio?" George asked. "You said it sounded like they knew Robbie was in danger."

"I asked about that." John continued. "Dan said that they were concerned about Dean and Ellen." He leaned back further in his chair in the communications room, his index finger trailed around the rim of his mug.

"Dean and Ellen. What the hell were they up to? If I was the leader their asses would have just stayed out there. It's Ellen, the little trouble maker. I hate that bitch." George sounded so angry in his telephone conversation.

"Yeah, well, join the club. And to make matter worse, her and Jenny have been speaking lately."

"Stop it. Stop it now. The last thing you want is for that impressionable wife of yours to get Ellen attitude." George let out a loud huff over the line. "All right, how's Robbie?"

"I haven't heard, but I don't think he's good. Not by Frank's demeanor this morning. They have him in the mobile lab."

"Keep me posted. I had a secondary plan of action incase we failed. And if Robbie pulls through, we'll get him. When is that run of Cole's coming up, the second plan hinges on that."

"It's been pushed back another week or so. Why is that so important?"

"See if you can get me some exacts on where he's off to. It's a simple metal run. One day right? We'll set him up and if Robbie is well, you know for a fact him and a team will head out there immediately. We'll grab him."

"I have to say George. Getting Robbie out of Beginnings is not going to make me sad one bit. But you do know he just might die. Then you're out of luck with this new plan."

"I've got another." George said so arrogantly. "Don't worry about it. And I'm disconnecting this call now. We've been on too long."

"George wait. What about the virus? You still aren't using it right?"

"Knock it off about the virus John. I told you what I'm doing."

John pulled the phone from his ear when he heard the abrupt disconnection. Shaking his head, he placed the phone away and to his surprise, just in time. The buzz of the door opened and Jenny walked in. John sprang up. "What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same." She carried a small box with her.

"I'm working, filling in for Steve's break. You?"

"John, you and I have to talk. You know it's Friday, you know Mary and Forrest teach for me while I do supplies and replenishing." She tsked and walked across the room. "And right now, I'm replenishing coffee supplies. You men sure drink it down here."

"That's right. I'm sorry I forgot that you do that. I don't know where my mind is at."

"How are the office supplies, pencils and such." Jenny lifted a clipboard from the box she set down.

"I don't know."

"Why? You're always here filling in. John." She tsked again. "Pay more attention."

"Why do I need to pay attention to what's here? I'm only down here for fifteen minutes at a time. Besides, they use no supplies, don't worry about it."

"All right. But if Joe yells at me. You know he won't distribute supplies unless it's an emergency." Jenny pulled out a canister and removed the lid. It contained coffee and she poured the grinds into the communications room's container that was nearly empty. She sniffed loudly. "These grinds smell bitter. Do they smell bitter to you?" She looked back to ask only to see John wiping his hand across his head. "What's wrong, are you sick?"

"No." He shook his head.

"You seem nervous."

"I'm just upset about Robbie."

"We all are. I spoke to Joe a little bit ago and Robbie is not good. And speaking of Robbie. I need you to go to distribution this afternoon for our time slot. I need bread and cream and I might not make it back. I'm going up to the mobile lab and you know how far out of the way that is."

"Why?" John asked.

"Boy aren't you absent minded today?" Jenny gathered her supplies. "I have a meeting at the house tonight. I need cream."

"Not cream Jenny!" John snapped. "The mobile, why are you going to the mobile."

"Apologize for that tone John."

"Sorry."

"Thank you. You don't want me to start calling you Frank now do you?" She heard her husband grunt and she giggled. "Anyway, I wanted to speak to Ellen. I want to go over . . ."

"No." He said strongly.

"No?"

"Don't go to the lab. I don't want you going up there."

"Sweet." Jenny grabbed her box and walked to John laying her hand on his face. "But don't worry, I won't catch anything, I'm going to stand outside." She tapped his face a couple times. "And I'm off to the next place." She kissed him quickly. "See you. Don't forget . . . distribution."

John let out a breath and placed his hand on his hip when Jenny walked out. And he hoped that sometime during the course of his day, he would have a conversation with someone where *he* was the one in control.

(2)

The slight fluttering movement of a rabbit's paw twitching against the bottom of the cage where he laid, was the only sound in the special lab at the mobile. Dean's stared silently into a microscope a notebook next to him, a pen in his hand. He was starting another journal on the virus. And the same as the last, he had his hopes that this would be the last journal, that sometime during the course of all his note taking and work, the answer and cure would come.

He pulled back from the lense rubbing his eyes and the blurriness, he had to pause again. The third time since he started viewing slides that his eyes went blurry. He wanted to go get Ellen to help, but like Dean, her sleep was limited the night before with worry and care for Robbie. She slept now, and Dean was certain that it was the first time during the whole night that she had fallen asleep, so he let her rest.

What had happened? What caused Robbie to take such a critical turn for the worse? Dean reviewed his notes over and over. Did he make a mistake by giving Robbie that antiserum? His preliminary tests showed that the antidote fought the virus, so why didn't it fight it in Robbie? In every blood sample he took from Robbie, the virus increased, not decreased like it should have. Robbie had shot from a second day victim to a tenth day victim in less then ten hours. And had Robbie been anyone else, Dean was sure, that Robbie wouldn't had made it through the night. He shouldn't have made it through the night. Not with his vital signs as low as they were. Not with his heart rate barely beating enough to circulate blood to the brain in order to function. His lungs so bad, Dean was ready for when they collapsed. But they didn't. Since he gave Robbie the antidote, everything Robbie experienced was now different than any future notes or any notes Robbie sent him during it all. Such a fighter Robbie had to be to hold on through all that.

And because of the differences, Dean wanted to be uncertain on what would happen next, but he wasn't. Making an notation into his journal before turning back to his microscope, Dean wrote down his views of

Robbie's next stage. Adding a last sentence to a paragraph-entry already written. After he finished, he dropped his pen, plopped his elbows to the counter and covered his face with his hands. And he prayed that the words he just wrote, the words he hesitated to write all night, were wrong.

July 17 - 7:45 a.m.- After viewing the samples of Robbie's blood again, a specimen taken at 1:00 a.m., it is apparent that the virus has grown even stronger. At this point, with the rate of deterioration that Robbie Slagel has achieved, it is no longer relevant to do any further samples. We have done all that we could and we gave it our best shot. Sadly, Robbie is not responding and it is becoming more evident that he isn't going to make it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

(1)

"Next on the agenda . . ." Joe who was leaning forward onto his desk, raised his eyes to a loud Henry yawn. "Henry, what the hell?"

"Sorry Joe." Henry held up his hand. "It's not you."

"It better not be."

"The baby Joe, he was up all night."

"Like father like son." Joe sat back and pulled out a cigarette. "Now you know how we used to feel before you had anyone in your life, the way you'd wake us all up."

"Oh I was not that bad." Henry waved his hand at him then quickly turned his head to Andrea who gave a 'hmm'. "I wasn't. Not like the baby."

"Wouldn't he go back to sleep for you at all Henry?" Joe asked.

"Frank. He wouldn't go back to sleep for Frank. And Frank, he plays with him. I told him if he would ignore the baby then the baby . . ."

"Henry." Joe interrupted him. "Why were both you and Frank up with that kid?"

"Frank made me get up. He said if he was going to get up with him, so was I." Henry sulked.

"Then why didn't you just let Frank go back to sleep if you have to be up anyhow?" Joe continued in is questioning.

"Oh no Joe. Not me. I don't do the baby thing well." Henry shook his head. "I'm learning."

Joe grunted and looked back down at his notes. "Back to our council meeting. Let's finish off old business. Recycling. So, let me get this straight. We're telling Stuart that he can only burn trash twice a month every other month?" He saw he had their agreement. "He wanted to switch it to twice a month every month. But . . . survivor smoke signals. I'll tell him in the winter we'll do it twice a month." Joe made a notation. "We're all in agreement that the seven in containment will work fields until we have divisions that they can be trained properly in. None of our division head want to train new people until this crisis is over." Joe said. "Let's face it, most of them can be called to security at anytime. We'll grant them that." He shifted the sheet of paper. "New business. Andrea, did all the women register their menstrual cycles with you yet?"

Andrea nodded. "Well, all except for Ellen. She . . ." Andrea's eyes went mean when she heard Henry snickering. "And Mr. Kusakari, may I ask what is so funny?"

"Sorry." Henry held up his hand. "I just keep picturing Joe trying to be serious when Jenny brought him this request. He probably just agreed to shut her up."

Joe grunted. "Tell the women tonight at your meeting that council approved the request. Yes Henry?" Joe acknowledged his waving hand.

"I didn't vote on it Joe. I don't remember, did I?"

"No." Joe told him.

"I'm on council, I should vote on it." He heard Andrea huff then saw her slide down in her chair. "Don't breath at me Andrea. It's not fair, I think my opinion should be heard about this."

Joe raised his hand and lowered it with a slap. "All right Henry, let the women have a day off their first day or not."

"Oh I don't see a problem with it Joe, sure." Henry said.

Another grunt from Joe. "Duly noted." He shook his head and continued. "I spoke to Clothing and shoes and they are trying to come up with a way to make the new shoes for the women. Ben said he has a great new color, they may all be blue at first, but we should have the first pair of . . ." Joe cleared his throat. "Flats, in about three weeks."

Henry snickered loudly again. "Sorry. Flats? Why are we making the women flats? Seems like a waste of materials if you ask me."

Andrea tsked. "Oh you would think that Henry. You men, you men get what ever you want around here, us women we have to . . ."

Joe held up his hand stopping her. "Andrea, let me explain it to him." Joe folded his hands and faced Henry. "Son, the women are tired of wearing those little tennis shoes we make them. They want a choice."

"They have a choice Joe." Henry stated. "They could wear boots."

"Boots?" Joe tilted his head. "Combat boots? Christ Henry, I don't know about you, but if the women in this community want to stay feminine, I'm for it. They want to feel good about themselves and why not? Just because your . . . whatever she is to you now . . . isn't feminine, doesn't mean the rest of the women shouldn't be. Combat boots."

"Joe that is totally untrue." Henry argued. "Ellen is very feminine, and I'm telling her you said that."

Joe rolled his eyes slightly. "You think she's feminine. Female maybe. Yeah, I'll admit she's very female about things. But feminine? Henry, how many other women in this community have been shot more than once if at all? Stabbed? Beat up on a regular basis? Not to mention the fact that everything she wears hangs off of her."

"In Ellen's defense." Henry held one finger up. "Everything is too big on her."

"Yeah Henry." Joe snapped. "But Ben from fabrics has told her over and over he'd take them in for her. Does she take him up on it? No. Sometimes I think my daughter leaves her clothes loose and baggy so they're more easily removed."

Henry gasped. "I can not believe you're speaking about your daughter like that." He turned his head to Andrea. "Can you believe he's talking about Ellen like that?"

"Yes." Andrea answered. "Next line of business Joe."

Joe couldn't agree with that suggestion more. He shifted his paper. "Finally, trivial stuff." A flutter of lips came from Henry. "What now?"

"Trivial stuff?" Henry smirked. "Like flat shoes and day offs for periods isn't trivial."

"To some people isn't Henry. Now shut up." Joe ordered. "And get some sleep goddamn it, you're getting on my nerves. And you look bad too."

"I look bad?" Henry was surprised. "No I don't. Do I?"

"Yes." Joe answered. "And you're having a bad hair day too."

"My hair is bad? Oh my God." Henry ran his hand through his hair. "Better?"

"No." Joe shook his head. "Want it to look neat? Shave it."

"Oh no Joe, I couldn't do that, I like my hair. Ellen likes my . . ."

"Henry!" Joe had enough. "Moving on to the trivial stuff." He pointed at him. "And not another word. You've been hanging around my daughter too much." Joe shifted his eyes down. "Something for you two to think about. The guys want to use the extra spot lights to set up at the field for night games when they start playing softball again. Blake our soap guy wants to have a theatrical performance every other week on Sundays, instead of once a month. I think we can let him do it, what else do we have to entertain us around here. And speaking of entertaining. Andrea, what happened last night at the social hall and why did they bother you?"

"They bothered me Joe because you have a lot on your mind." She told him. "And what happened was. It was karaoke night, Thursdays have been. Stew got mad because Edwin sang the song he wanted to sing and they started fighting. Dan broke it up and tossed them both in holding for three hours to cool down. It worked. All is fine."

"Joe?" Henry interjected. "I wanted to say, I like the idea of holding being used for cool down purposes. It works."

"You may like it Henry. I don't." Joe told him. "Too much like a jail and that's something we don't want to get in to."

"True." Henry added. "But . . . really, what wrongs do people commit around here. And if they commit a really bad wrong, they get tossed out. Fighting Joe, you and I both know you can't stop men from fighting. But if they get out of hand, like Dan obviously thought the fight was last night, then you throw them into holding in order to stop them from tearing each other up. In the old world if two men cause a disruption by fighting they were tossed in jail. Same premises."

"Jail." Joe shook his head. "All right, that's it." He pushed his papers aside. "I'll give the notes to Trish to type up for us. She has nothing better to do then stare at her date book. And I'll . . ." He stopped when there was a knock at the door. "Come in."

Cole opened up the door and stepped inside. "I'm here for our meeting Joe."

Joe's expression dropped. "I totally forgot. With Robbie on my mind, I'm sorry."

Cole pointed back with his hand that held the chipboard. "We can

reschedule, no big deal.”

“No.” Joe shook his head. “Who knows what’s going to come up and we’d might as well get the details out of the way. Have a seat, we just finished up.”

Andrea stood. “Joe? Can’t Henry handle this meeting with Cole? I mean, your heart isn’t into it. Why don’t you and I take a walk and talk about things.”

Joe thought about it for a minute. “You know what Andrea, that wouldn’t be a bad idea. Henry has to practice anyhow for when I retire. Right Henry?”

“Practice for what Joe?” Henry asked.

“Community leader. You *are* next in line.”

Henry’s eyes shifted in horror. “I wouldn’t have a clue.”

“Then it’s time you learned.” Joe smiled, patted Cole on the back as he grabbed Andrea’s hand. “I’ll leave you two to your meeting. Henry, update me later.” He walked to the door. “And sit behind my desk Henry. Do it. Get used to it.”

An apprehensive Henry stood up when Joe and Andrea left. He moved to behind Joe’s desk and sat in the chair. He shifted to his left, then his right, made a cringing face, stood back up and repeated his actions. “Oh this isn’t right.” Henry swivelled from one side to another, pulled the chair closer to the desk, then out. He bounced a little, causing a squeak.

“Henry, what are you doing?” Cole asked.

“Huh?” Henry remembered Cole was there. “Oh, this isn’t right. I’ll never get used to this.”

“Being a community leader?”

“No this chair. God . . . It sucks.” Smiling as Cole slumped sideways in his own chair, Henry folded his hands on Joe’s desk. “Now all I need to do is smoke. O.K., let’s start.”

Andrea held tight to Joe’s arm as they walked from the line of utility buildings. She rested her head against him while they moved. “You frightened that boy Joseph.”

“Henry? Everything frightens him.”

“You aren’t thinking of retiring soon are you? Don’t tell me you’re going to do that to us.”

“No not yet.” Joe looked ahead as he walked. “But it would be nice to just have my own little division to run, spend more free time with my family. Not have to worry about filling in at a different division everyday because someone calls off. And . . . I could be the emeritus and help Henry from the shadows. Not to mention I’ll soon become one of those older gentlemen the ladies all enjoy.”

Andrea chuckled. “You’ll never really be old Joe Slagel, trust me.”

“So I’ll never be enjoyed?”

“I doubt that.” Andrea laid her head on his arm. “I’ve got an idea that will help you. Take your mind off of things for a little while and help you feel better.”

“What do you have in mind Andrea? I’m a busy man. But I’m sure we can squeeze it in. Just keep in mind, my son is ill and I’m thinking about that, so there are no guarantees.”

“Joe Slagel.” She scolded then tsked. “Get your mind out of the gutter. And I’m not talking about that. I’m talking about prayer. I thought you and I could stop by the chapel for a moment or two and pray for your son. Together. You know what the book of Matthew says, ‘when two or more gather in my name.’”

“One of my favorites.” Joe smiled. “And I like your idea Andrea. I really do. My son needs all the help he can get.”

(2)

Ellen really wanted to speak to Joe in her dream. She really did, but how annoying that he didn’t take her seriously. Of course he wouldn’t. Not when she kept rubbing her nose and scratching her body. Everywhere on her, tickled in an irritating itch, a crawling of her skin. ‘*God!*’ she thought in her dream. *Why am I so itchy? Hey, why am I so itchy?*’ Suddenly while she dreamt, reality crept into her dream state, and as she laid-eyes still unable to open--she felt that tickling. From her knee to her thigh, then trailing to the inside of her leg. It felt like . . . a bug. ‘*Shit! A bug!*’ She freaked. And as her hand frantically swiped that insect from her leg, she opened her eyes, heard the slight snickering and her breath escaped her. With such a gasp she spoke. “Robbie.”

On his side he lay, grinning that smile only he could grin. Wide and bright. “Hey. This . . .” His hand rested on her bent knee. “Is so great.”

So rapidly she spoke, almost stuttering. “This is a dream, you’re sick. I know this is a dream.”

“Nope. I feel great. And I have to tell you El. This is one hell of a get well gift.”

She was so shocked she was speechless.

“And you’re naked too. I think.” He flipped her robe open a little. He gave a ‘ha’ when she closed it again. “You are. Nice scar.”

“Oh my God. You’re better.” She raised her hand up to his face. “You’re better.”

“Yep.” His hand slid down her thigh again and she abruptly pushed it back.

“How are you feeling. Really?” Ellen asked as she stared upon his arrogant Robbie look. He really didn’t look at her face, his eyes were elsewhere.

"Really? Not a hundred percent, but compared to the past two days, I could run a marathon."

"How long have you been up?"

"Awake or up?" Robbie asked.

"What's the difference?"

"El? You don't know the difference? Here." He grabbed her hand and began to pull it under the covers.

"Stop that!" Quickly she retracted it. "This is serious. I was worried about you Robbie. Really worried. Oh God I'm so glad you're all right." Emotional, she wrapped her arms around him in excitement and embraced him.

(3)

"What?" Dean spun quickly when he heard the shuffling in the rabbit cage behind him as he washed his hands. The sick rabbit, the one who was on his deathbed not an hour earlier, sprang up from his lifeless position and headed to the cup of water. "What the . . ."

"Dean! Dean help!"

"Shit, Ellen." Quickly rinsing his hands then drying them, Dean flew from the special lab and toward the mobile where Ellen's cries for help were coming from.

"Dean!"

"El." He barreled to Robbie's room, heart racing, fearing what he would see. Feeling for sure that Ellen had awoken and found Robbie dead. "El . . ." He slid to a stop holding on the archway as he raced into the room.

"Tell him to let me up." Ellen looked up from the bed, Robbie half on, her kissing her neck.

Robbie spoke muffled from his kisses. "Dean go away. We missed yesterday it was Thursday."

Ellen grunted as she smacked Robbie on the head. "Let me up. Dean."

"Robbie. Oh shit." Dean held back his hair. "You're alive. I thought you were dead."

Robbie stopped kissing Ellen and edged back. "I can see this is going to be impossible with another person in the room."

Ellen took advantage of her freedom and jumped out of bed, closing her robe. "It would be impossible for you right now if we were the last people on earth. What's the matter with you?" She reached down and smacked Robbie. "Genuine concern I give you and what do I get in return?"

"Well . . ." Robbie pulled the covers closer to his body.

"Sick, just sick." Ellen commented. "Tell him Dean."

Dean shook his head in astonishment. "Wow. Robbie are you feeling

that strong?”

“Honest? Not as strong as I’d like to be.” He smiled. “But strong enough to not miss the opportunity when there’s a naked woman in bed with me.”

Ellen placed her hands on her hips and bent down leaning forward to the bed. “For your information mister I was not naked.”

“El, you were. Laying in bed, no covers and . . .” Robbie pulled on the robe separating it. “Naked underneath.”

Ellen shrieked and jumped back behind Dean. “I’m telling Frank about this. Out of the goodness of my heart I take care of you because I thought you were dying and I get molested? Better yet, wait until I tell Joe.” She gave a ‘so there’ look to him.

Dean merely mumbled one word, ‘Joe’ and he dashed from the room, brushing by Ellen, as fast as he could.

Ellen pointed back to the door. “See, he’s telling first.”

Robbie smiled, laughed slightly and plopped backwards on the bed, he pulled the covers all the way up, and closed his eyes with a peaceful look.

“Robbie?” Ellen spoke soft. “You all right.”

“All the excitement.” He opened one eye. “I’m a little dizzy.”

“Well is it any wonder?” Ellen tightened the belt to her robe and moved to the bed. “You nearly died last night and you’re being an animal.” She proceeded to tuck the covers in around him tightly. “You still have to rest Robbie. You do.” She reached down and touched his forehead. “And you’re still a little warm.” She grabbed the stethoscope off the night stand and sat on the other side of the bed. “Roll on your side for me.” When he did, she listened to his back. “Cough.”

“Aren’t you gonna grab my . . .”

“Robbie. Cough.”

He did, it was thick, barely rumbling and tight. “You’re still filled up.” She took the stethoscope off, set it down, then fluffed the pillows up behind his head. “I need you to rest. O.K.? Please? I’ll get you something to drink and eat.”

“El.” Robbie grabbed her hand as she started to leave. He pulled her gently to sit back down. “I know I was joking around this morning.” His fingers trailed around hers and to the palm of hers hand. “I was just so happy when I woke up and I felt good, and I was alive. I thought I was dying for sure last night. And I know what you did for me.” He cupped her hand between both of his and he brought it to his mouth, kissing it with closed eyes. “And I am so grateful.” His warm breath brushed against her fingers tips. “Thank you. I’ll never forget it.”

“I would have never left your side.” Ellen extended out her fingers and touched his lips. “Never.” She saw his eyes raise to her. “I’m so glad you didn’t die on me. I don’t know what I would have done without you in my life Robbie.” She leaned forward as he sat up some and she hugged him, kissing him on the cheek. She pulled back, looked at him, and realized that

the joking around was gone and now replaced with a solemn seriousness. And knowing that, she embraced him with gratitude again.

(4)

His hands were on his hips as Frank stood side by side with his father. He tapped his fingers in an impatient arpeggio manner across the bottom edge of his belt. He stared ahead, with those Frank-intimidation eyes. "So what do you think Dad?" He tilted his head in his question.

"Don't know." Joe answered.

"Is he just going to stand there?"

"Looks like it." Joe said.

"And not speak?"

"Looks like that too."

"Fuck." Frank shook his head and huffed. "If he's gonna deliver bad news. Why's he making us stare at him for so long?"

"He said it wasn't bad."

"You don't think he's going to take off his clothes and flash us do you. I mean that's a scary thought. He's a little guy."

"Not according to Ellen." Joe raised his eyebrows a few times.

"Don't even go there." Frank ran his hand harshly down his goatee. "What the fuck."

Dean wondered as he looked out the window, why Frank and Joe kept staring at him. And he knew they were talking about him as well. They waited with Dean, but did they have to stare like he was some sort of entertainment? And they didn't even try to speak to him over the radio. They just kept looking at him as if he were a fish in a bowl, or they were waiting for him to do a trick or something. "El, come on!" He yelled irritated. "Frank and Joe are plotting out there, I know it."

"In a second. We're getting ready." She yelled back.

"Ready?" Dean spun his head curiously.

Frank threw his hands in the air. "What the fuck? Where did he go?"

"Gone." Joe stated.

"You don't think that was it do you? You don't think he called us up here just to display himself?"

"No Frank, I don't."

"Then where did he go?" Frank peered closer to the window. "That's it." Frank raised his fist to pound on the glass, and just as it almost touched, he stopped and his arm dropped. "Oh shit."

Wearing a crisp white tee shirt, his military pants, hair combed and freshly shaven, Robbie stood at the window. He used Ellen as support, trying to make it appear that he just stood close to her rather than needed

her. He pulled up a chair and sat down.

Joe's heart pounded nearly from his chest when he saw his son sitting there. Was this the same man that Dean had called him the night before and told him was dying. Was this the same man who Dean was certain would not make it through the next day. "Robbie." Joe lifted his radio to his mouth.

"Hey Dad. Frank."

Frank blinked several times in awe. "Robbie, you were so bad last night. Look at you walking around. How are you?"

"Better." Robbie watched Frank's hand lift to the glass. "And watch those smudge marks Frank. We don't want people thinking you and Ellen gave an encore performance of her last time in quarantine."

Frank snickered especially when he saw Ellen smack Robbie's leg.

Joe looked at Frank. "What the hell is he talking about?"

"Must be the fever." Frank returned to looking at his brother. Though he still looked pale, he looked better than he did. "I'm glad you're better. I am really glad you're better."

Robbie scooted his chair closer to the window. "Last night Frank. Ellen, she really was there for me."

Frank smiled at Ellen, a grateful smile.

"She bathed me Frank." Robbie told him.

"I told her to take care of you."

"She did." Though Robbie saw it on his farther's face, Frank did not, Joe's squeamishness on where his youngest son's story was going. "She . . . she got in the tub."

Changed look on Frank's face, but not too drastic.

"Naked Frank." Robbie grinned. "We took a bath together last night."

Frank's mouth closed tightly and his eyes shifted to Ellen.

Robbie went on. "She washed me, touched me, got aroused and took advantage of . . ."

"Robbie!" Frank shouted. "Enough! Fuck."

Robbie laughed. "I'm kidding. But we did bathe together."

Frank turned off his microphone and whispered to his father. "Why do I get this feeling I am never going to hear the last of the bath thing?"

"You won't." Joe told him.

Frank put his radio back on. "El." He called her. "Even though you took a bath with my brother. Thank you for being there with him."

"I told you I would be Frank. I had to. It's Robbie." She reached her hand up to the glass ignoring Robbie's 'here they go again' comment.

Frank brought his up as well, placing it over where hers was. "I owe you."

"No you don't."

Frank softened his voice. "Then I guess I don't get to show you my gratitude."

"Depends. What do you have in mind?"

Frank held up his finger, reached to his father, took Joe's radio and shut it off. He then brought his mouthpiece close to his mouth and whispered. "Put it to your ear and I'll tell you."

Ellen giggled with an ornery smile, paying no mind to the rolling eyes of Robbie and Joe. She turned down the volume and brought it close to her ear. Just as she did, she felt a tap on the shoulder, and Dean reached down for the radio.

Frank's jaw tightened and he twitched his head to one side when Dean took the radio. If he could have reached through the window and strangled him at that moment he would have. "Dean. Give it back."

"I want to say something Frank."

"Right now? Right at this moment. It couldn't wait five fuckin seconds until I talked to Ellen."

"Nope." Dean jumped back with a laugh at the loud bang against the window Frank delivered. He indicated to Joe to pick up his radio, and when he did, Dean began to talk to them. "I just wanted to say, and I'm sorry for interrupting dirty-talk-time between you and Ellen Frank. But I wanted you guys to know. Robbie shouldn't be alive right now. He certainly shouldn't be sitting in this chair. His vitals, his breathing and blood pressure were so low, he was a heartbeat from death. I'm running tests right now to make sure he's not just in remission. My gut tells me something worked on him. He's still sick, and weak. Don't let him kid you. But he's better. And last night was one of the hardest nights Ellen and I ever faced with anything we fought and a long time. I also realized something Joe."

"What's that Dean?"

Frank nudged his father with a whisper. "Dad, don't encourage him to keep talking."

Joe snarled at Frank. "Go on Dean."

"Thanks." Dean took a deep breath and looked at Ellen who sat next to Robbie. "Us originals, we have a bond, we do. But you Joe, your family has such a bond . . . I can't even describe to you what I saw last night. And I know you've always treated Ellen as a daughter. But I don't think I realized until last night, how much she really is your daughter Joe. Blood or no blood, she is a Slagel. The way she was with your son. I really believe, Robbie would have given in if she hadn't been there and been his strength. I just wanted to let you know that."

"Thank you Dean." Joe said to him.

"You're welcome." Dean smiled and handed the radio back to Ellen who held Robbie's hand. "Talk dirty to Frank."

Ellen raised her eyes with a 'thank you', and took the radio.

Joe watched Dean return to the lab, the airwaves were silent. He turned to Frank. "That was really nice of him to say. Don't you think Frank?"

Frank scoffed with a flutter of his lips. "Right, he wants something."

Joe tossed his hands in the air. "I give up. Talk to Ellen."

Just as Ellen was about to speak, she noticed Robbie's stature had worn

down more. "Frank, Joe. I'm gonna take Robbie back to bed."

Robbie stopped her. "No, El, I'm fine."

"Robbie." She faced him. "If you want to be strong you have to rest. You still have to fight this thing."

Robbie nodded. "All right."

Ellen stood up at the same time as Robbie. "Frank, will you stop by later and see me?"

"You know I will."

"Will you tell Henry to stop by also. He hasn't even tried to call on the radio or phone."

Frank nodded. "I'll tell him. But in Henry's defense, he's a walking Zombie from being up all night with the baby."

Ellen looked happy about this. "He got up with the baby? Did you have to help him at all?"

"Help him?" Frank snickered. "El, I asked him to heat the bottle and he burned it. But I made him stay up to watch and learn. He'll learn." Frank winked.

"Thanks. And we'd . . ." She motioned her head to Robbie. "We'd better get some rest." She grabbed hold of Robbie's arm. "Bye Frank. Bye Joe."

Frank stood there watching Ellen and Robbie until they were no longer in his view. He stepped back from his close peer through the window. "You think he'll be all right Dad?"

"Fine Frank." Joe stated with so much confidence. "I think he'll be just fine." Hearing Dean's words about Ellen running through his mind were only a confirmation of what he already felt to be true. And Joe breathed a little easier now. Robbie was home. Robbie was better. And one crisis, one of many in Beginnings, was finally over.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

(1)

"The virus is still present, but definitely decreasing." Dean told Ellen as he stared at the computer shots of his slides. "Robbie's not in remission."

"What happened Dean?" She asked. "Did that antiserum finally kick in?"

"I don't think." Dean shrugged. "If you ask me it has to be a combination of what we used. I mean, rabbit three and Robbie, both had the exact same things given to them. Rabbits one and two only had the antiserum."

"That just doesn't make any sense." Ellen stated as she stared at the screen with him. "What was in those vials was an antiserum. Not an antidote. The results we are seeing here are the results of an antidote. Correct?"

"Correct."

"So where did the antidote come in?"

"It has to be the serum we got from the SUTs."

"No." Ellen shook her head.

"No? Ellen, yes." Dean spun around to face her. "Where else is it coming from then?"

"Us. Our agent seventeen. We had good results with that."

Dean fluttered some in his words. "Granted yes. But . . ." He spun back to the computer and started showing slide after slide to her. "None, not this one, or this one, or this one shows the defeat of the virus. What we are witnessing with Robbie, is the defeat of the virus. *We* aren't doing that. If we were, then we would have done it earlier. And . . . and mind you." Dean spoke so corrective to her. "A-17 would have worked on Greg and the others. We gave them that with the steroids and all. It has to be their antiserum. It finally kicked in. It sped up the virus to the point it burned itself out."

Ellen waved her hand in a scoffing motion. "Oh that is the stupidest theory you have had yet."

"Stupid?" Dean stood up speaking so dramatically. "*Stupid* is *thinking* that somehow, an agent that we've used before, *somehow* miraculously, without change mind you, started to work."

"Oh listen to the way you talk to me. You're an asshole Dean."

"Asshole." Dean swayed his head and sat down.

"Combination, it has to be it. A combination of the two."

"That's what it has to be. Now, if that proves true, which we will check, then we've beaten this thing as long as we can recreate what they have in their antiserum. Otherwise we're out of luck. Unless of course, according to your theory A-17 actually works. Which it wouldn't . . ." Dean got a bright look on his face. "Unless."

"Unless?" Ellen hurried to his side. "Unless what?"

"Ellen, what is an antiserum or inoculation?"

"It's giving someone an immunity to whatever."

"Yeah but, how is that done?" Dean quizzed. "Think about it."

"Giving a small dose of the virus, small enough not to harm, but large enough to make the body think it has it."

"Small pox, polio. Remember those vaccines. How were they done?"

Ellen wondered where he was going. "Synthesized versions. The most effective vaccines were the ones made with the live . . . the live . . ." She smiled. "Virus."

"Exactly." Dean smiled also. "What if our agent seventeen actually does work, but it works on the original strain, not the mutated form. Which would mean that the antiserum is created with the virus taken directly from the host. Whether the host be an animal or test tube. The antiserum is the virus, original virus in a milder form."

"And when you injected Robbie, that antiserum virus took over the mutated one and our agent seventeen beat the original virus. Therefore beating the illness all together."

Dean nodded. "So in essence if we want to beat this thing, right now, if A-17 works against the original strain, we give our victims the original strain, taken directly from the host and then give them A-17."

"Dean, even though we're further ahead then we were three days ago, we still are out of luck. We don't have the original strain."

"Good point." Dean slumped on the counter.

"And . . . this Henry style theory game we have going, is good. But, we're wrong. If the antiserum was taken from the host, and that host virus took over Robbie's virus, we would have seen the difference. Just like the future samples were different than the ones Robbie had. So should the host sample too, right?"

"You're right. We would have seen the change in the virus itself. Obviously it didn't happen." Dean returned to the computer screen. "Robbie samples. Robbie at eight a.m., Robbie at ten a.m., Robbie at . . ."

"Holy shit!" Ellen commented loudly as she moved to the screen. "Look Dean, it changed."

"Where?"

"Right there. Minor but change. You probably weren't looking for a change in the virus, that's why you didn't see it."

"I wasn't." Dean said. "I was only looking for diminishing."

"Well you missed it then. Check out the right top portion."

"I can't Ellen, not right now. My eyes are pretty bad. Could you describe it for me. What the change is."

Ellen was silent.

"El?"

"I'm sorry Dean." She backed up.

"What?" Dean in a spin stood up and followed her. "You're kidding

me right? What was all that work we did El? I trained you to see the way I would, so you could tell me. So I could work. My eyes are blurry right now, things aren't crystal clear. This is one of those times we trained for."

"Yeah it is."

"O.K., so why won't you help me now? What's the problem?" Dean spoke to her back.

"The problem is Dean." She turned and faced him. "All those plans, all that training went out the window the second you chose Jason to work with you. And since you're working with him, then I suggest you train him to be your eyes, because I refuse to be."

"This is bullshit. We are working together now. That ought to tell you something."

"That tells me your stuck and you have no choice right now."

"Wrong. That is wrong," Dean told her "I was mad at you. We're getting along fine right now." He saw her turn away. "We're not getting along fine?"

"Do you think just because we made it through a crisis that everything that transpired between us is swept under the carpet?"

"I thought so."

"And everything you said, all the mean things, and the way you are, I should just forget about?" Ellen asked with an edge.

"You haven't?"

"No."

Dean laughed angrily. "We haven't fought in days Ellen. Why in the world would you . . ." He grunted in frustration. "Never mind. This is so typically female of you. And it's just like a woman to throw it back in your face when your least expect it."

"Am I throwing it in your face Dean?"

"As a matter of fact . . ." He followed her as she paced. "You are."

"Good."

"That's wrong," Dean pointed. "And it's wrong that you won't help me."

"No Dean, it's wrong that you assume I would. I'm not. Find someone else to be your seeing eye pet, because I'm not. And my suggestion to you, if you want to see the changes in the virus, then you should wait until your sight becomes clearer."

"That's pitiful."

"Excuse me?" Ellen crossed her arms with attitude.

"It's pitiful how you've sunk to the depth where you have to be so callous and so mean."

"And you weren't?" Ellen's arms waved about with her every loud emotional word. "You weren't callous and mean to me for no reason? And yet you want me to forget about how you started this whole thing. When you have yet to apologize for how you overreacted."

"Is that what you're waiting for an apology? I'm sorry! I'm sorry I was

like that to you.”

“Thank you.”

Dean breathed outward and dropped his head forward. “Now . . . now can we get passed this and work together?”

“Nope.” Ellen raised her eyes.

“What!?” Dean was so shocked that his one word reached a high pitch. He graveled in anger when he received a ‘I don’t care’ expression from her and she turned her back to him. “You know what Ellen, forget what I said about you being typically female. You’re not. You’re being typically Ellen. But if I were Frank. I could say, do, act, treat you any way I wanted to. And all I would have to do is give you some half ass, lame, pathetic apology and you would run to me at the snap of my fingers. Why are you like that with him and not me?”

Ellen spun to him. “Because you’re not Frank! And you will never be Frank! Don’t even flatter yourself by putting your name in the same sentence as his.”

Dean’s breath escaped him as fast as his heart beat from her words. Through his anger and frustration his hand slammed down hard upon the counter. “I can’t believe you would even talk to me like that. Me of all people.”

“This argument with you is over Dean, drop it.”

“I will not drop it.” He charged to her. “I was ready to end this shit and put it behind us.”

“You’re ready to end it only because you need me.”

“Well I don’t need you anymore! I don’t want your help. If you were the last person on this earth I wouldn’t come to you.”

“It’s funny how you can say this all now Dean, like I’m the bad guy, when you were the one who started this war with out any basis for confrontation.” Ellen backed up from him, “And this is over. I’m not arguing anymore.”

“It’s not over.” He stepped to her. “What you said . . .”

“Over!” She threw her hands up.

“It’s not . . .” Stepping forward Dean swayed some, his hand reached to the side for support of the counter when he felt the blood rushing feeling fill his head and everything went immediately black. “El.”

Ellen saw the expression and demeanor totally change from angry to scared. Instinctively she stepped to him, but stopped. In silence and debate she stood for a second, her jaws twitching. She swallowed so harshly the lump in her throat barely moved. “You were saying it’s not over. I think it is.” She stepped back even further watching as Dean swayed his head back and forth gripping one hand so tight to the counter’s edge his knuckles were red. He reached to his side, trying to find his stool, trying to find something to sit on. Ellen closed her eyes tightly then stepped to him. “Dean.” She spoke softly and grabbed hold of his arm. “Here.” She led him to sit.

With his eyes still forward, Dean sat down. "Thank you."

Ellen leaned closer to behind him. "This isn't getting us anywhere Dean. No where. I don't want to fight with you. I don't." She stood upright.

"El . . ."

"Jenny?" Ellen said the name with an odd tone.

"What?"

"Jenny Matoose is here."

"Where?"

Ellen moved to the window. "Aren't you the lucky one right now Dean, she's wearing an awful shad of blue. She looks like something out of a comic book. Where *is* Henry now?" She pulled up a chair and picked up the radio.

Despite Ellen off-the-wall reference to Dean's blindness, he wished he could see what she was talking about. But then something hit him, a thought as he heard Ellen talk in the radio. Where *was* Henry?

(2)

"I feel really awful Joe." Henry walked with Joe part way toward the mobile lab. "And I don't mean to be like this. But I am."

"Why Henry? Did she do something to you? Ellen has that reputation."

"No." Henry shook his head.

"Maybe Henry, the novelty of having someone just wore off. You were alone for a very long time. You may have confused your feelings."

"Oh no Joe, that's not right. I love her, I really love her. I loved her, before her and I began this thing. Only I couldn't do anything about it."

"So what's the problem?"

Henry stopped walking, placed his hands in the pockets of his blue work pants and looked up to the sky.

"Henry? Are you trying to pull back from her?"

"Not intentionally."

"But you are."

"I know." Henry said sadly.

"Why?"

"I don't know."

Joe was wise, he had been around the block once too many times. By the look of Henry, Joe knew Henry wasn't as confused about things as he appeared to be. And all Joe had to do was get him to start talking and he knew Henry would open up like a bad wound. "Henry suppose, suppose you were looking at the situation as an outsider. What would the Henry-theory be on what was going on?"

"Theory?" Henry's eyes lit up. "Well Joe, I would say that perhaps guilt

was playing a big factor in it.”

“Guilt? Guilt about what?”

“Having her. Having her all to myself when it was never meant to be that way. Having the woman that your best friend loves with all of his soul. Knowing your best friend needs her probably more than you. Knowing that you wouldn’t have her in your life if it wasn’t for your best friend. And worse, knowing that you wouldn’t even have a life to share if it wasn’t for your best friend.”

“I see.” Joe nodded slowly. “And what has my son been saying to you Henry? Has he been throwing this shit in your face? Has he? He’s playing on your good nature Henry and you can’t let him do that to you. I’ll talk to him.”

“No Joe.” Henry spoke softly. “Frank hasn’t said a word to me in quite a long time. He hasn’t brought any of this up at all. It’s me. It’s all me.”

“And you’re debating right now on being chivalrous and giving her to Frank?”

“Right now?” Henry stated. “I’m more in debate on whether getting married is the right thing to do.”

“You mean because of Frank?” Joe saw Henry nod in agreement. “I can’t make you feel right Henry about what you think you may be doing to Frank or not. Or about marrying Ellen. My personal opinion, marry her. You’re the best one for her. I’ve never seen her happier. But I can tell you, if you decide that you aren’t going to marry Ellen, then she better be the first one to know, and you better make it clear why. And do it before this wedding thing takes off any further. Because if you don’t make it crystal clear to her why you aren’t marrying her, then she’s gonna get the same impression that I’m getting right now.”

“Which is?”

“That you just don’t want to be with her anymore.”

“Oh my God Joe, that is the farthest thing from the truth. I want to be with Ellen. I need her in my life.”

“Then why are you trying to give her up for Frank?”

“I’m not. I just want Frank to be a part of her life and if I marry her . . .”

“What? He can’t be a part of her life? I got news for you Henry, my son will always be a part of her life. He’s always going to be her first love. He’s always going to be her knight in shining armor that hits her like an aphrodisiac every time he comes to her rescue.” Joe pointed at him with seriousness when he spoke. “But like others in this community, you can let him be in her life without giving up yours with her. But if you keep backing up to try to see the solution clearer, then son, you won’t have a choice in the matter. You’ll have backed up too far and too long for her to want to reach for you.”

Henry smiled slightly. “You’re right Joe.”

“Goddamn right I’m right. About what? I said a lot.”

"About backing up. That isn't right. Not at all. It's not fair to her, or to me. And I want Frank in her life, but I don't want Frank to be the only one in her life. And I guess . . . I guess I've been backing up to let that happen. To let them sort of get together."

Joe understood. "Trying to create a threesome, when all your doing is creating a couple perhaps?"

"Perhaps."

"See, and you probably were wondering why I'm the Dear Abby of Beginnings."

"No, not at all." Henry snickered. "But can I ask you one more thing? Very seriously."

"Sure Henry."

"Is it still wrong for me to be debating on the marriage. I mean, can't I be the primary relationship in her life without being her husband?"

"You really don't want to marry her?" Joe asked him.

"I wish that was the case, Joe. But the truth is, I want to marry Ellen. I want to be her husband. And I don't really expect you or anyone to understand the reasons why I feel I shouldn't be."

"No." Joe shook his head. "I understand your reasons. Just don't make any snap decisions and when you feel yourself in debate. Do yourself a favor, talk to Ellen about it. Talk to her before you decide. All right?"

"I can work the marriage part out Joe alone without bothering Ellen with it. I can. Thanks for your help."

"Henry . . ."

"And I should go see her." Henry smiled brightly backing up in an attempt to make a quick exit. "I want to see her. I miss her Joe."

"Henry." Joe tried to stop him before he dashed away in Henry fashion. But he couldn't. He merely received a fast wave goodbye and then a blurred vision of a leaving Henry. After their long talk, Henry left feeling he had reached a solution. Joe knew that wasn't the case. Henry merely solved some things, but in the process came full circle to what started it all in the first place. And Henry had no more answers now then he did when they began. The only difference now was, Henry was just going to be with Ellen full fledged when he decided to break her heart or not.

(3)

"Jenny, I must say that I am touched you stopped by for this." Ellen huddled toward the window in her talk with Jenny.

"It wouldn't be very fair Ellen, you're part of our meetings now. If you have something that needs brought up, then it will be brought up."

"Tell me Jenny." Ellen spoke in a whisper. "You aren't going to do that special craft tonight are you?"

Jenny giggled. "Now I remembered that you wanted to do that. No,

two weeks Ellen. We'll wait two or three weeks. And you know what you have to bring right?"

"Oh sure."

"Good. So you haven't any ideas you need told?" Jenny watched Ellen shake her head. "Any thing for the forum, problems or such?"

Ellen's eyes lifted and her head motioned back. "How bout something about him?" She indicated to Dean.

"Oh." Jenny nodded. "I read your entry for the game. Is he still being like that?"

"Terrible Jenny, just terrible." Ellen heard Dean's gasp, but she was sure Jenny didn't. "Throw that in your open forum."

"Well I can give you my opinion right now. Dean needs to grow up." A loud 'hey!' came through Jenny's radio. "Yes, grow up Dean. Be a big boy and share your toys."

Dean had enough of Ellen's snickering at Jenny's comment. He stood from his seat marching with intimidation over to that window and reaching for the radio. "Give me that and get back to work."

"Hey." Ellen smack his hand. "I'm speaking to my new friend. See Jenny, see how he is with me. You're seeing first hand. All because I slept, slept mind you, in the same bed as Frank. How immature."

"And childish." Jenny added. "You should have had sex with him and then that would have shown Dean."

Ellen still struggling with the radio, depressed the button. "I would have Jenny, but I had that after-baby thing happening with my body."

Dean grunted and let go of the radio. "Fine, go talk to Jenny." He took a step back. "Faker."

Ellen giggled. "What was that? Faker. Oh Dean, bad word. And I'm telling Henry how mean you're being to me."

Dean stopped walking and moved to her. "Oh yeah. Well tell him, if you ever see him again."

"What's that suppose to mean."

Jenny tried to interject. "Ignore him. He's playing mind games with you because he knows you're stuck here."

Ellen held out her hand. "Explain Dean. What's that suppose to mean?"

"Where is he El? You're extra limb? I think he's avoiding you. Where is he El?"

Ellen grinned widely and stood up. "Right there. Henry!" She waved like an excited child.

Dean tossed his hands in the air. "I spoke too soon." He went back to his work bitching under his breath at the 'gang up on Dean' hour that wasn't going to end now.

Jenny turned around to see Henry stepping from the jeep. "I'll let you two alone. I'll stop by tomorrow to let you know about the meeting."

"Thanks Jenny. Sorry I'm missing it, I really am. I liked it last week."

She watched Henry near. "And great shade of blue you're wearing."

Jenny smiled and turned her radio off, she stopped at Henry before walking by him. "Here's our groom."

"Your what?"

"Groom." She tapped him on the cheek then kissed him there. "Cute."

Henry's mouth dropped open in disgust and he immediately ran his hand over the spot she touched. "God." He felt that saliva build in his mouth from his gag.

"Bye Henry."

"Uh!" Henry raised his shirt up to wipe the water from his eyes. "And where did you get that color from?"

"Ben." She wiggled her fingers, knowing she irked him and kept on walking.

Still open mouthed, Henry walked in a cringing hunch to the mobile window. He looked back one more time at Jenny, shuddered then turned to Ellen. "She kissed me El."

"She knows you don't like her."

"God it was sweaty." He wiped his face again. "Tell her not to do it again or I'll have to be rude."

"I'll tell her. Henry." She stood close to the window. "I'm so glad you're here. I miss you."

"I miss you too El. I really do. And I'm sorry that I've been so busy. I was wrong."

"That's O.K."

"No, it's not. And I want you to know I wish I could be in there with you."

"You can Henry." Ellen grinned. "Come on in. Stay with me."

"I can't El."

"I know." She sulked. "But you're here now. I'm glad."

"And you know what, I promise you're gonna see me all the time now. Every spare moment I have I'll be here. O.K.?"

Ellen smiled at him. "O.K. Thank you. I was beginning to think you didn't like me anymore."

"Never El." Henry shook his head. "But if you keep letting Jenny kiss me. I'm going to have to do something drastic. I'll . . . I'll . . . kiss her back . . ."

"No!"

"Yes El. And then . . ."

"No Henry don't say it." She pulled the radio away.

". . . I'll kiss you."

Ellen let out a loud shriek of disgust. After laughing, she pulled her chair up to sit and talk to Henry. She missed that. And she smiled so much as she talked to him, joked with him, and she was more glad he was there, than Henry could ever realize.

(4)

He was hungry, and the evening was setting in. Robbie knew the way Dean and Ellen worked, if he waited for them to eat, then he could actually be waiting well into the next day. He felt a bit rested, he could have been more. But arguing during the course of the day while he tried to rest, interrupted his sleep. He never knew two people could have so much to argue about. And especially, Dean and Ellen.

He got up from bed, feeling stronger, yet still feeling slightly in the fog and he walked down the back hall of the trailer to the kitchen. He could smell food cooking, and knowing that either Dean or Ellen cooked, frightened Robbie a little. He was well aware of their culinary capabilities. He moved to the stove and lifted the lid on the pot, a brown substance. It didn't smell half bad and looked as if it were trying to be a stew. Grabbing a bowl and figuring done or not, it wouldn't matter when it came to taste. Robbie ladled himself some and went into the livingroom.

Ellen's TV/VCR unit was there, and tapes too. Rummaging through the tapes, he saw that a lot were his favorites. All apocalyptic movies. The people in Beginnings loved apocalyptic movies. They always were a source of entertainment, not too mention ridicule at how badly the post apocalyptic future was portrayed by Hollywood.

Holding his bowl, Robbie popped in a video, they were there for a purpose, he might as well watch them, and he plopped down on the couch. His rear-end hit upon something and he flung up. Looking down he saw he sat on a note book. A Beginnings note book. Reading the words across the cover 'Ellen's do not touch' Robbie knew it was something private so he opened it up.

Mean things Dean said?

Mean things Ellen said?

Things that couldn't be taken back?

All of them were categories in a list Ellen had begun to compile. He laughed as he read the lists that Ellen had made. But it confused him. In all the years he had known Dean and Ellen, never had he known them fight or say enough mean things to each other that could take up even one line in a notebook. Yet there Robbie sat reading not one line, but two whole pages worth. Had things gotten that bad between Dean and Ellen? Were they that badly at each others throats? They had to be, and with that thought came the one that if they had slipped that far from each other, then the chances of them ever being a couple again grew slim. Smiling at that thought, Robbie returned to reading Ellen's notes. He wanted to get them all read before she came back. Not that he cared what she thought about him looking in her notebook when she wasn't there, but because he just didn't want to hear Ellen bitch.

(5)

"No see, here's where you're wrong." Frank spoke as he sat at his diningroom table that evening. His tone was borderline argumentative, as if he were waiting for a fight. "I'm bigger, much bigger." His huge finger pointed down to the color sketch that Alexandra had made. "Your dad is a little man. Little Alex. You have to get your perception right if you want people to take you serious as an artist."

"But he's big to me." She looked so perplexed, holding on to the side of her face, while resting on her elbow.

"Of course he is, you're like three feet tall." Frank sat back. "But other wise it's good. Very good."

"Did I draw Mommy good?"

"Uh . . ." Frank looked closer. "Mommy's good. Her boobs aren't that big."

"Mommy's boobs look big to me."

"Again, you're little, everything looks big to you." Frank stated so scholarly.

Alexandra's eyes shifted to the livingroom to Henry, she leaned forward in a 'big secret' mode to Frank. "Pop."

Frank leaned in closer, whispering also. "What?"

"Uncle Henry's hand. I didn't make it purple. Should I?"

"No. It won't be purple for long." Frank kept his voice down.

"Why is it purple? Did he color it?"

"No, he got burned."

"How?"

Frank grinned. "Your dad." He tried not to laugh at the horrified look on her face. "Oh yeah, Henry had to get a shot and he wasn't being good, so your dad burned him."

"Will he burn my friends if they're bad when they get a shot?"

"Probably." Frank told her. "You never know about it."

Henry had heard enough. "Frank, don't lie to her. That isn't very nice."

Frank scoffed. "Henry what do you know?"

"I know Dean didn't burn me." Henry looked at Alex. "Your dad didn't burn me Alex."

"I know." Her little legs kicked as she sat in the big chair. "Uncle Frank is funny."

"See Henry." Frank stood up from the table. "I'm funny. And how is feeding Nick going?" He walked toward the livingroom.

"I think he's done Frank."

"Already?"

"Oh sure." Henry stood up awkwardly holding the child. "He's overflowing."

"What?" Frank snickered in his words. "He doesn't overflow."

"Yes he does look. This white stuff is coming out of his mouth. "I give him some bottle, I pull it out . . . he overflows. Done." Henry set the bottle

on the coffee table.

"You've burped him right?" Frank saw Henry's expression. "You didn't burp him. Tell me Henry, you burped him."

"When was I supposed to do that?"

"Certainly before he finished most of the bottle." Frank snapped.

Henry leaned in. "Well I didn't know that Frank. No one told me that."

"Henry, anyone with half a goddamn brain knows you have to burp a baby."

"Why? Why do I have to burp him? He's a person can't he do that on his own. It seems rather disgusting me making him burp when he doesn't want to."

"Henry." Frank took a calming breath. "It's something you have to do. They can't do it. You sat and watched me feed him. You saw me patting him on the back. What the hell did you think I was doing?"

"Making him tough?" Henry shrugged.

"Fuck." Frank shook his head in irritation. "So he hasn't burped yet."

"Not that I know."

With a grunt, Frank held out his hands. "Give him to me."

"All right." Henry turned Nick around and securing his head, extended him to Frank.

The moment Frank took hold of the baby, a loud rumbling came from the small child who faced Henry, along with something else. Nearly the entire contents of the bottle Henry gave him projected from Nick's mouth in the same form it entered and it landed directly on Henry's leg. "There." Frank smiled at the baby. "Now you feel better huh? I bet your hungry now." He reached down and picked up the bottle. "Henry?"

"I'm gonna throw up."

"No you aren't." Frank waved his hand at him as he sat on the couch to feed Nick.

"I am Frank. I know I am. It smells."

Frank leaned forward sniffing at the leg of Henry so near to him. "Like milk. It's baby puke Henry, baby puke doesn't smell."

"Uh." Henry grunted in further disgust at Frank's lax attitude toward infant regurgitation. "I'll be back.." Henry took off darting toward the stairs.

"See." Frank spoke soft to Nick. "I don't know who throws up more. You or your dad." He sat there for a while feeding the baby, letting Alexandra hold him, yelling at Billy and Josh and wondering what the hell was taking Henry so long just to change his pants.

Fifteen minutes, it took fifteen minutes for Henry to come back down and when he did, Frank knew what the hold up was. Wet head and all, Henry had showered and he wore a pair of shorts as he sat next to Frank on the couch.

"Why?" Frank asked. "Why did you feel the need to clean up like that?"

"It was disgusting Frank."

"But it's your kid."

"Our kid, and right now you handle the disgusting things, not me." Henry stated with a shaking of his head. "He looks asleep."

"Infants do that you know." Frank stood up carrying Nick to the cradle. "And you have to learn Henry, I can't keep doing it all. The kid is going to be confused enough."

"He's not going to be confused Frank. We'll share him like everyone does with the kids."

"Point taken." Frank laid Nick down. "Confused."

Henry looked for Alexandra. "Not confused Frank, I'll show you. Alex. What's your dad's name."

"Which one, I have two." She said.

Frank bobbed his head as if to say, 'need more be said?'

Henry continued. "Alex, would you like to only have one dad?"

"One Dad? That's silly Uncle Henry." Like Ellen, she waved him off. "No one has one Dad."

"But if you could, would you like to?"

"No. You need two dads. One to teach you smart things, and one to teach you fun things."

Henry smiled at Frank who looked pleased with the answer. "There you have it Frank."

"There I have it." He sat down next to Henry. "The only thing I can't figure out is what fun things Dean teaches. I think she's confused."

"So are you." Henry said.

"No, I know who the fun parent is. And it isn't Dean or Ellen. They get too annoyed too easy with these kids."

"You're a good father Frank."

"I haven't always been. Ask Johnny. Maybe that's why I try so hard to be . . . to be . . ."

"To be the father to every available kid in Beginning?"

"Not every kid, just the ones closely connected to Ellen." His eyes shifted back toward the cradle.

"Your going to be a big part of Nick's life Frank."

"I know."

"For as much as you share responsibility with Dean, that is how much you'll share with me. If not more Frank. I'm not good with this kid thing. At least not yet."

"Really Henry?" Frank folded his hands as he leaned forward. "We're gonna do the same thing as me and Dean? Fifty-fifty?"

"Yes. But to be honest Frank, right now it's gonna be seventy thirty and not in my favor." He watched Frank snicker. "I can remember when Ellen was pregnant with Nick." Henry spoke, the look upon his face so solemn. "I can remember getting so excited about being a part of this baby's life. About how you and I Frank, would raise this kid together, and between us, this kid would know all there was to know. And I still feel that

way, whether I provided the genes to make the kid or not, he's still our kid. And you, me and Ellen are gonna raise Nick together with his brothers and sister."

"You, me and Ellen." Frank tossed his head side by side. "Sometimes Henry, I think that's the way it'll be. Then other times I think it's gonna be you and Ellen, and then me. Can we do this? Really, if El isn't with me too, can we do this?"

"She will be Frank."

"How can you be so sure?" Frank stood up immediately. "I mean, we did it her and I. We put things back on track. We're there. But that doesn't always mean anything. I remember, oh God it was years ago. My brother Jimmy was getting married. He was in Norfolk. Anyhow, I remember it was during a time that Kelly and I weren't together." Frank shook his head. "Which was many. Anyhow, I went alone to Jimmy's wedding. I thought I'd be alone. And when I got there for the weekend, I saw my father had brought a date." He smiled. "Ellen. Ellen was my Dad's date. His escort. I remember being pissed she didn't tell me that she was going to be there and she said she didn't even know. My dad was in New York for a while and he stopped and picked her up. They even had to go out and get her a dress. She was . . . she was beautiful. I was separated, she wasn't with Pete and the way we were that weekend made me start to think that, you know, maybe this is the way it should be in my life. Maybe that mistake I knew I made, could somehow be corrected. We got along great. We kissed, no sex, she wouldn't put out." He chuckled. "But that was it. I tried to talk to her about it. About us. But she kept saying she couldn't. Things couldn't change that much in our lives. We were getting older and she went on and on. We made a lot of mistakes her and I. Mistakes that if found out would have hurt a lot of people. We should have corrected those mistakes then. But we didn't. And we repeated those mistakes here. I guess what I'm getting at in my long winded story. Is that, just because things appear one way. Like they did that weekend. It doesn't always mean they are that way. Understand?"

"I do. But Frank, you have to stop and think. Maybe you guys didn't get there for good back then because it wasn't meant to be. You may have done that and screwed it up for now. You wouldn't be together now."

"We aren't." Frank commented.

"You're getting there."

"Are we?" Frank asked, uncertain.

"I believe so. Her and I, we talked. We talked about this. She still loves you Frank."

Frank went back to the couch sitting down with Henry. "Why doesn't this bother you. Why are you so willing to let her be a part of my life. And don't kid yourself Henry, we'll have sex. And I won't lie to you about it like you lied to me."

"I'm sorry Frank." Henry's head dropped. "I didn't lie, I just didn't think it counted all the time."

"Didn't count?" Frank let out a laughing breath of disbelief. "And lets not get into that. All right. I moved on. I'm passed that. But I need you to answer my question. Why doesn't it bother you?"

"You're my best friend Frank. And like you shared with me, I share with you. To be honest, you're the only person I really can do this with and not be bothered by. She is your soul mate, and that is something I can't take away. And it is something I *shouldn't* take away. I want it to be us three. In this world where it has to be that way, you, me and Ellen is the way I want it to be."

"You're being honest. Can I? How can we? I'm not my brother Henry. Six hours isn't going to do it. And I don't want to screw you over. But I need El more than six hours."

"Sometimes you will, sometimes you won't."

Frank was confused. "What do you mean?"

"Well Frank, there will be times when you need her twenty-four hours straight and then there will be times I'll need her as much. I've been thinking about this. Why can't we have the most different understanding in Beginnings. Why can't we, share her and really share her? No set times, just doing what the name of the relationship means. Understand. I understand when you need her, you understand when I need her. But most importantly, we both are gonna have to understand and accept what Ellen needs. She may need you, or me, and then she may need . . . she may need what neither of us can give her. But Frank, if we work together on this. There should be no base between the two of us that we can't cover and make her happy."

"So what you're saying is, there won't be any Tuesdays you, Wednesdays me thing?"

"No."

"Even when she's your wife."

Henry lost his breath for a moment. "You just said that like it didn't bother you."

"It does. But Henry . . ." Frank leaned in to him with a nudge. "Let's face it, it won't be the first time I slept with her when she was another man's wife. Only this time, I'm not hurting anyone."

"This can't be about sex Frank. It has to be about Ellen."

"It's not about sex Henry." Frank spoke quietly. "Far from it. I love her. I need her. More than you realize right now, I need her."

"I think I do realize it Frank."

Frank sat back on the couch. "I lost her from my life when I gave her up. Like I said before, things seem like they're one way, but are they?"

"I believe if they aren't there right now. They will be." Henry spoke with such certainty. "But we have to work on it Frank, both of us. No more taking anything for granted anymore. Every step of this relationship will take work."

"Like I said before Henry, as long as I have you in my corner. You're really important to Ellen. I think, no, I know you've made her a better

person. You've made me a better person. And because you're in my corner, I expect for you to tell me when I'm not working."

"Don't worry about that Frank. I will."

There was a long pause of silence, and to break it, Frank clapped his hands together once and sat up from the couch. "Why do I feel like we just closed a business deal?"

"Not a business deal Frank, an emotional deal."

"An emotional deal? Thinking about the word 'deal' Henry. Should we have even started one without Ellen?"

Henry's expression dropped for a moment. He just wanted to make things right. And they weren't really starting the understanding, just starting ground rules. Planning so to speak. And that was how Henry justified it to himself. Planning. And seeing how Ellen hated any planning, she certainly wouldn't mind if they did that part for her. Would she?

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

JULY 20

(1)

Frank grunted. He huffed and he grew more irritated by the second during his training on what seemed to be a really hot morning. “No. No. No!” He blasted. “What did I tell you? Don’t lock your knees. If you lock your knees you’ll pass out. Face forward too. And I won’t stop you either because you have been warned. Got that?”

Little Joey, looking so much like Frank with his nearly shaved head, nodded. “Yes dad.”

“Good. And Marcus.” Frank pointed at him. “I know you understand me. No locking them knees.”

Marcus sort of growled, a friendly growl, that let Frank know he understood him.

“All right.” Frank stepped back. “Enough for today. Good job. Go ahead back in the house.” Frank pointed ahead to his front door.

“Training them early.” Joe snuck up behind him.

“Trying. They’re tough. Can’t start too soon.”

“What about Billy?”

“Billy is Dean. And like Dean, if the old military was back, when Billy grew up he’d sap out and be an officer or something.”

“You know some people didn’t think of officers as people who sapped out.”

“Obviously those people weren’t enlisted men, were they?”

“You have a point.”

“So what’s up?” Frank asked as they headed to the house.

“Two things. One, why aren’t you working?”

“I’m going to work. Just later, Dan is doing my rounds. I wanted to get them off to school today. With Henry, who knows what they’ll look like. Besides, I was tired. Fuckin Henry talked my ear off all night.”

“He’ll do that. And he wonders why that baby doesn’t sleep. A small payback from all of us I guess.”

“Pay back to Henry?” Frank laughed as he walked into the house. “Well if it’s a Henry payback. I’m paying the debt.”

“Second reason.” Joe followed him into the house. “Can you spare an hour this afternoon, Jason needs to see you over at containment.”

“He hates me.”

“Yeah, well, we all can’t be part of the Frank fan club, can we?”

“I guess not.” Frank shrugged. “His loss.” Frank walked to the kitchen. “I’ll come over. Say around one after I finish my midmorning rounds.”

“Sounds good.” Joe checked out his watch. “Now I’d better find Henry, there’s something he needs to fix and I didn’t want to put the req in the requisition box.”

"Why?" Frank asked as he poured a cup of coffee.

"Because of where he has to fix it. The mobile."

"What the hell can they possibly break at the mobile?" Frank wondered as he set down his pot of coffee.

"Something in the trailer. Which works in Henry's favor, no contact with Dean, Ellen, or Robbie. And I can't say he'd want to contact them. Robbie said this morning he's going nuts. Ellen and Dean bicker constantly. And quit smiling about that."

"Sorry." Frank raised his mug to his lips. "So why are we hiding the fact that Henry has to go to the mobile?"

"I just don't want people to panic, that's all." Joe began to leave. "And don't forget about this after noon."

"What about it?" Frank asked as he followed Joe out.

"One O'clock."

"O.K." He moved to the door with Joe. "One o'clock for what?"

"Frank!" Joe barked. "Containment. Be there. It's important."

"Got it." Frank held the door open for Joe. "Even though he hates me."

"Well go there just to irk him." Joe saw a smile hit Frank. "I thought you'd like that." Joe stepped from the home. "Oh and by the way. You wanted to get the kids off to school. What makes you think you know more than Henry?"

"I do. I've been doing it longer."

"Really. Then why aren't they there when school started an hour ago."

"Fuck." Frank heard his father snicker as the door shut. Hurriedly he headed up the steps to wake all the kids up. He slowed mid stairs when a part of his mind flashed to his and his father's conversation. "What the hell do I have to go to containment for?" Scratching his head, Frank shrugged and headed the rest of the way up the stairs. He figured he'd find out when he got there at the time that they decided. But some reason, Frank forgot what that was.

(2)

Ellen's hands stayed firmly on her hips, her head went side by side, and her body moved as much as her words did in her raised tone she threw at Dean. "And it's no wonder your ass was never promoted past First Lieutenant. They probably figured you would never know if they did anyhow, so why waste the promotion."

Dean shook his head trying not to laugh in anger at her. "Where the hell is that insult coming from?"

"Your lack of knowledge."

"My lack of knowledge about what."

"Office products."

"Oh there it is." He held his hand out. "Thank you Ellen. Thank you very much for explaining that to me. And here I always wondered why I never made captain. What is it I don't know?"

"This." She held up a small stack of reports. "You paper clipped them wrong."

"I did what!?" His questioned reflected how ridiculous he thought she was.

"Clipped them wrong." She slammed the papers. "Any moron knows that the big side of the clip goes in the back, not the front."

"And any moron knows that it doesn't make a damn bit of difference."

Somewhere, maybe it was the constant turning of his head, maybe it was the remnants of his illness, but somewhere Robbie began to get dizzy. "You guys have me confused." He held up his pencil. "By saying, 'any moron' does that constitute mean things said. I need to know if I'm going to complete Ellen's list properly." He saw them both turned their heads to him. "I'll mark that down as a 'yes'. And I'll stick it under 'mean things Dean said' right under where it states Dean insulted my penis."

Dean's mouth dropped open. "I never said anything to you about . . . forget it. Slagel mentality."

Robbie held his pencil up. "Dean . . . insulted . . . Robbie's . . . intelligence." He marked the end of the sentence with a hard dot. "Wow, this is fun. El, I hate to interrupt this ping pong match of insults that's been going on for . . ." He looked at his watch. "Fifteen minutes. But I would have at least thought you'd put it on hold to talk to Henry."

Taking her stares from Dean, Ellen looked to the window. "He's not there."

"No." Robbie said. "He's in the trailer fixing that bad outlet that sparked on you twice."

"Henry's here?" Ellen smiled. "Why didn't he come over. Why didn't he tell me?"

"Not allowed?" Robbie guessed. "Ask Dean. He knew."

Ellen saw red. "You knew!? Why didn't you tell me?!"

"First of all." Dean spoke defensively. "I don't have to explain myself. Second, I didn't want you to know because I didn't want you two to get close or touch. Because God knows if you did *that*, he'd be here in quarantine with us for twelve hours. And it's bad enough I put up with you, I don't need to put up with that constant, rambling, female-style, old lady gossiping you two do."

"Oh really?"

"Really." He laid his hand on the counter leaning close.

"Watch this." With speed, and before Dean knew it, Ellen flew from the mobile lab. "Henry!" She raced, hearing Dean chase after her. His tennis shoes thumping against the floor at the same speed as her. "Henry."

"Hey El." Henry stood by the sink, the outlet exposed. "Don't come too close or else . . ." He knew exactly why Dean screamed loudly 'no!'

when Ellen threw her arms around his neck, and cut off his words when she placed her lips directly to his. "Oh my God El." Henry stepped back. "Why did you do that. Now I'm . . . I'm" He grinned. "I'm in here with you for twelve hours."

Ellen smiled too. "Isn't that great Henry?"

"Yeah I missed you." He looked at Dean who folded his arms. "Isn't that great Dean? We'll have fun."

"Swell." Ready to kill Ellen, Dean tossed his hands in the air in a give up fashion and spun to leave the kitchen nearly walking into Robbie who still held the notebook. "What are you doing Robbie?"

"Keeping score." He closed the notebook. "And Dean, she's winning now."

(3)

Dean tried to work, he really did try. He kept trying to block out the conversation that went on and on, but despite his head being buried in the computer their voices kept intruding. No matter how many times he let out that huffing breath, slammed his hands or even turned around to tell them to shut up, Ellen and Henry kept going. And to make matters worse, Robbie would edge them on. A form of Robbie entertainment, Dean deducted. How anyone one could derive that much pleasure out of irritating people was beyond Dean. At least Henry and Ellen sort of did it unintentionally. But Robbie, he actually planned sometimes on ways to do it.

Dean had to stop working. And this time it had nothing to do with the chattering. It had everything to do with his eyes. He sat staring forward pretending to work, while sitting in total darkness. Did they notice? Would they. It was the first time in three hours Dean actually wanted them to keep talking. Because as long as Ellen and Henry kept their conversation up, they didn't notice what went on around them. And if they didn't notice, surely Robbie wouldn't. And Robbie--like everyone else--was to be like Dean was at that moment . . . in the dark.

The ceasing of chattering. Total silence. Dean began to panic. Either they figured out what was happening and they were staring at him like some freak. Or he just went deaf as well. *Why did they stop stalking? Are my eyes rolling funny? Shit.* Dean try to figure out what was going on without asking. Then he heard the simultaneous whines from Robbie, Ellen and Henry. And Dean wanted more than anything to ask what was going on. But he couldn't do that.

"Aw El." Henry griped. "No. Stay here."

"I have to Henry." Ellen spoke perky squeaking her chair as she stood up.

"Please, please, please don't."

"Henry I have to." Tapping him on the cheek, she moved to the window. "I'll be back."

Hard, Henry plopped his elbows on the table, and like a child, covered his ears with his hands causing his hair to stand up and out on the sides of his head. "Let me know when it's over with."

Ellen picked up her radio. "Jenny." She stood closer hoping to block Henry's view of her.

"Hi Ellen." Jenny shifted to her right. "Why is Henry in there?"

"Oh." Ellen spoke so annoyed-like. "Dean's fault. He was so happy to see Henry, he kissed him."

"You're kidding?" Jenny seemed shocked.

"No. And he's suppose to be the big scientist. To think, he was just asking me today why I thought he never got promoted past lieutenant."

"He really should have known better."

"Call it reaching for affection Jenny." Ellen looked back at Dean to get a charge out of his irritation, but he kept his back to her. "Anyhow Jenny. How come you came up?"

"Ben finished his preliminary sketches of the bridesmaid dresses." She held them up. "What do you think? We need your approval."

Ellen peered through the window to closely check out the drawings of the dresses. "Not bad. What color?"

"Blue."

"Figures. Good. I like . . . Except . . . can we lose the bow on the backside."

"My sentiments exactly." Jenny tucked the sketches under her arm. "Nothing worse then having a large rear-end with a large bow on it to match."

"Couldn't have said it better."

"I should be going. Ben said he'll have the shell of the dresses done in a week so we can start the fitting of them. And if you hear from John, I wasn't up here."

This grasped Ellen attention. "Why? Aren't you supposed to be here?"

"He just gets a little weird when I mention I'm going to be here, so I'd rather him not know. He isn't happy about us talking now Ellen. And he isn't happy about you joining the women's group."

"So neither is Henry, that makes it even. But now . . . " Ellen held her hand back. "I should go talk to him because he's here and it really drives Dean nuts."

"You do that then. But don't drive him too nuts. You still have a few days left in quarantine."

"True. Bye Jenny." Waiting for Jenny to leave and for her to yell across her radio a long goodbye to Henry, Ellen walked back over to the section of the lab where Robbie, Henry and Dean were. Dean's back was still too them. "Sorry Henry."

"Just promise me El. Promise me you won't stay friends with her when

this whole thing is said and done.”

“I promise you Henry.” She leaned forward to kiss him and Henry backed away. “What’s wrong.”

“As much as I want to kiss you El.” Henry stated. “I can’t. I have to be able to go back and help Frank with the kids.”

“Oh Henry.” Ellen pulled up a stool and sat next to him. “I bet you’re a wonderful help.”

“I am El. And guess what I learned how to do?”

“What’s that?”

“Burp a baby.” Henry said with a nod. “Yeah. Only I can’t figure out if the child really needs help in burping or if it is some sort of secret sick parent thing to torture your children when they keep you up all night.”

“They do look tortured when you burp them.”

“And they leak bad if you don’t.”

“It’s a no win situation Henry. Like being here with Dean.” She hid her giggle when Henry snickered. “See.”

“I see.” Henry spun around to look at Dean. “And why is he being so snippy today?”

“He always is anymore. He’s being very mean. Remember how he was when we were in quarantine before. Nasty.”

“Oh you aren’t kidding. And jealous too El. Don’t forget jealous.” Henry told her then looked to Robbie. “You’re lucky Robbie, that he’s not being that way with you. Or is he?”

“He is.” Robbie said. “In fact Henry, he sunk as low as to include me in one of his and Ellen’s arguments and he insulted me. No, wait, he insulted my penis.”

Dean wanted to spin around in his own defense. But his eyes weren’t fully back yet. And unfortunately he had to yell with his back facing them. “Will you guys just take it somewhere else?! It’s bad enough I have to listen to you talk and talk and talk. And now I have to be part of a conversation that I’d rather not hear let alone be the target focus.”

Ellen bobbed her head. “See Henry. See how he is. And he wonders.”

“He isn’t very nice El. You aren’t being very nice Dean. Bet if it was the other time in quarantine, he would never send us into another room.”

“That’s because he was scared to let us be alone. If he only knew.”

Sight back or not, Dean spun his stool around. “If I only knew what?”

Ellen shifted her eyes about. “Uh-oh, sorry Henry.”

Henry swayed his head. “It’s all right El. Don’t worry, it’s obvious now.”

Dean was even more curious. “What is obvious.” He watched them look at each other. “No. You guys had sex while we were in quarantine? How did I not know this?”

Ellen had the answer. “Oh simple Dean, like a child, we waited until you were sleeping. But it wasn’t much. Once maybe, no, twice. I think. Henry?”

Henry placed his index finger to his lips. "Let me think, I think it was three times. I can't be sure El because it really didn't count back then."

"So true, so how can you count up what doesn't count?" Ellen asked.

"Or not count what does?"

"Does it count or doesn't it count?"

"It doesn't count."

"So do we count it?" Ellen hunched at Dean's loud grunt. "Now see I'm confused now, Dean threw me off. Do we count what doesn't count, or do we not count what doesn't count? I know we count what counts. Or don't we count what counts."

"We don't count what doesn't count." Henry knew he had the answer. "We count what does. But all along we should have been counting what doesn't count instead of not counting it all. True?"

"True." Ellen agreed. "But Henry . . . if we counted what didn't count then doesn't that make it something we count and not something that doesn't?"

"Nah. It still is something that doesn't count, the only thing is, we're counting it."

"ENOUGH!" Dean shouted at his highest level. "God! It always counts and never doesn't count, you always have to count it! When doesn't it count?"

Ellen looked at Henry then at Dean, then back to Henry. "Boy is he confusing. What in the world are you trying to say Dean?"

After a shallow groan, Dean tossed his hands through his hair. "Why do you say it doesn't count?"

Henry couldn't believe Dean asked him that. "Because Dean . . ." He let out a heavy sigh and tsk. "There's times it doesn't count. Right Robbie?"

"Uh . . ." Robbie's eyes shifted about. "Sorry. I lost track way in the beginning on what you were counting what counted or didn't count." Robbie grabbed his head. "Fuck. I see why Dean is confused. I am."

Ellen was totally baffled on what they were confused about. So to be nice, she clarified it. "We were just deciding in whether or not you should count the times of intimacy that didn't count."

Both Dean and Robbie, at the same time, said the same thing. "It always counts."

Henry was just taken aback at their lack of understating the situation. "It doesn't always count Dean."

"Yes it does!" Dean argued. "The only reason you want to say it doesn't count is because you shouldn't have been doing it in the first place. So you justified it as saying it didn't count. Why that is, is beyond me. From the first time you did it, it counted."

Ellen took a deep thinking breath. "O.K., even though I don't like Dean, he has a point. What have I been saying all along Henry? The first time counted, but the times in between that time and the time we were in a primary relationship, they didn't count."

Henry shook his head in argument. "I have to disagree El. The first time didn't count. No way did it count."

"But we kissed Henry. And it was very emotional. It counted."

"No El, especially that time. It didn't count. Please say it didn't count."

"No Henry." Ellen said. "It did. I want it to count."

"But I don't."

"Oh that's silly. Just because . . ."

"El."

"Just because . . ."

"El." Henry tried to stop her with a growling, soft voice. "No."

"Oh." She stomped. "All right. But I still say it did count."

"Whoa . . ." Robbie held up his hand. "I'm really curious now. Ellen wants the first time to count and Henry doesn't. Why?" He waited for an answer. "Why El?"

"I can't say anything Robbie. Henry wouldn't like it. Even though he has nothing to be ashamed of."

Seeing Henry's face turn a slight shade of angry red, Robbie decided to feed on that. "Why should he be ashamed? Did you guys do it right under Frank's nose or something?" Robbie wanted to know. Obviously it was something good. And he wanted it to end up being something he knew that Frank didn't. Just so he could take the bribes to release the information. "Or say mean things about Frank during it?"

"No." Ellen giggled. "Frank was no where to be found. Actually he was, he was in Beginnings. But the fact that we were outside the wall has nothing to do with why Henry's ashamed. He's just being that way . . ."

"El." Again Henry stopped her.

"We're amongst friends Henry. I won't say anything." She looked at Robbie. "I can't say anything. But I will tell you he's ashamed because things kind of finished before they started. You know, that sort of thing." She winked.

"El!" Henry was horrified, and it was worse when Dean and Robbie started to snicker.

Ellen was lost. "What? What did I say? I didn't say anything."

"Oh man." Robbie stood backing up. "This is great. Henry finished early the first time. No wait, he didn't get started."

Ellen looked at Robbie as he backed away. "Why are you laughing?"

"This is great. He . . ." Robbie pointed to Henry who hid his head beneath his arms. "Screwed up the first lay he got and you still did him after. And not only do I have this valuable information to pass on to Frank and to throw in Henry's face. But . . . I also have a great new nick name for Henry. So fitting."

Dean saw that neither Henry or Ellen wanted to bite at that remark. So *he* did. "What new nick name is that Robbie. Share."

"O.K.," Robbie gave a 'what the hell attitude' as he walked toward the trailer exit of the mobile. "From this moment on I will call my good man

Henry . . . Zippy.”

(4)

Seven people weren't many to be in containment, but even seven people made noise. They moved, they breathed and they acted like human beings. Not zombies. So why, when Joe walked into the skills room of containment, did he find those seven people like that? Sitting straight up in a circle of chairs. None of them moved. None of them spoke and nor did they even acknowledged Joe when he walked into the room. Jason was the only one who moved. He stood walking slowly around the men. His one arm draped across his waist, the other hand rubbed his chin. There was a weird enjoyment look on Godrichson's face. One that Joe couldn't understand. Yes he too enjoyed the quiet moment that was rare in containment. But seeing the vision before Joe actually gave him the creeps. What had Jason done to them. "Jason." Joe whispered

"Oh hi Joe." Jason was taken from his deep staring thought. "Just on time."

"I'm frightened Jason. What the hell did you give these people? Some new drug?"

"Who them?" Jason pointed. "No. I did it Joe."

"Did what?"

"I learned the art of hypnosis and rather good too if I might add."

"Well that certainly is a useful skill to have in Beginnings." Joe said with sarcasm.

"It is when you need to jar someone's memory. Like your ape-like son has been asking me to do for Dean."

"Oh shit." Joe remembered. "It's been so long I had forgotten about it."

"Sorry, but even I need time to acquire mastery in an area. So, I took the spare time I had. Which isn't much and I mastered it."

"All these people are hypnotized."

"Yep." Jason nodded. "They can't hear you, or see you. They are in their own limbo worlds right now waiting for the post hypnotic suggestion I am about to give them. My little gift to Ellen."

"A post hypnotic suggestion is a gift?"

"Oh sure Joe, especially in containment. And these people knew they were being hypnotized, they agreed to help me out. I am going to tell them whenever they hear the word 'Molotov' they will respond with immediately ceasing what ever they are doing and finding the nearest place to sit. I picked a word not often used. That way if Ellen needs to get order in here, she just needs to say that word."

"That's not exactly right is it Jason? A good idea, but not the right thing to do."

Jason let out a breath. "I guess you're right." He took on a thinking look. "But I need to convince Dean it works. Frank said he won't do it unless he's convinced. I figured doing a post hypnotic suggestion would do it as proof."

"Yes but you know Dean. He'll argue it. He'll say they really aren't doing it under a suggestion, they are helping you out. You'll have to try something else if you want to get him to be hypnotized."

"I got Os-Oscar to stop stuttering." Jason held up his pencil making his point.

"No shit?" Joe nodded with a closed mouth approval look. "Still, hate to be the damper here, but Diane can get him to not stutter by rehearsing what he has to say." Joe shook his head. "Now if it was Frank you had to convince, and speaking of which is that why you want him here?"

"Yes to show him that I learned it."

"Good thing all it will take is your word, he's dumb enough to believe you even if you lie. What does he know. And . . . isn't he suppose to get hypnotized as proof to Dean that it's safe. Wasn't that the contingency on Dean's doing it or not."

"If I recall." Suddenly a bright smile hit Jason. "You know, we can hypnotize Frank and while he is under . . . Nah."

"No, no. I know where you're going. Convince Dean to do it by suggesting to Frank he do something completely out of character for him, or something he wouldn't do."

"Exactly."

Joe grinned wide. "You know, it would have to be something funny. A payoff to him from me."

"Of course we'd have to remove it quick after Dean is convinced."

"Of course." Joe said.

"We could have the key word make Frank speak intelligently."

"No." Joe shook his head. "Not funny enough. How about making him sing Julie Andrews tunes."

Jason started to laugh. "Or dance a ballet. How about something completely out of character. We could make the key word trigger him to think he's best friends with Dean."

"I can do you one better." Joe held up his finger. "And this is good." He proceeded to tell Jason his brilliant idea on what to do with Frank. The thought of it actually had them laughing so loudly, that it nearly brought tears to their eyes.

"Joe, we're mean."

"True, but for only what?" He shrugged. "Twenty-four hours?"

"Should we really?" Jason took that after-laugh breath.

Just as Joe was about to answer, the buzz of the containment door was heard followed by a heavy stomping of boots. If that wasn't a tell-tale sign of who was there, the loud booming voice definitely was.

"All right!" Frank shouted as he walked. "Where the fuck is everyone!"

I'm here."

Joe turned to Jason. "What was it you were just asking me?"

(5)

John Matoose took off his headset, his earpiece irritating his earache that had been creeping up on him for the past two days. It hung around his neck as he flew the helicopter, wide circles moving in closer to home in his reconnaissance afternoon flight. He thought about George as he flew. His flying time, being his only time lately to have silence and think. If he even looked in deep thoughts in Beginnings, some one would always ask him what was wrong. Then again, in Beginnings, everyone seemed to do that. He thought it annoying. He guessed that was one thing him and Frank had in common.

Circling in his mission, John hoped he would not see what he was checking for afoot. George troops, Caceres Society soldiers, CME's or SUTs as Beginnings called them. So close they were a few days earlier when Robbie was brought in, that now Beginnings flew three reconnaissance flights a day instead of one. Take no chance. And despite John's help with George, and despite what he told George, when it came to Beginnings as a whole, he really didn't want to take a chance either. Perhaps that was why it bothered him so much. He loved his home. And a part of him, though he knew much, still feared for the safety of his home. Because John's insides were calling him, telling him there was something he just wasn't being told.

He had that feeling the entire time when George lived on Beginnings., Especially when he found out about the cryogenics that lay beneath the town. The same lab George insisted no one needed to know about. It was stupid on John's part back then for even believing George. He should have said something to Joe about it, he didn't. And because of what he knew he was as guilty as George was, even if he was kept in the dark.

So what was George's next move? After the failed Robbie attempt, George said he had a backup. What was it? He was failing to mention to John exactly what it was. And that worried John. Maybe that was why he checked so closely for ground troops moving in. Not just a squad or two, Beginnings could handle them. But an entire movement, Beginnings would suffer loss. Knowing exactly what George had, to John, some times, was worse than not knowing at all. And he feared George pulling an attack. He feared George releasing a plague. John didn't trust George, he didn't like him. He knew the reasons he worked on the inside for him. And John also knew Frank suspected him now. The way Frank looked at him anymore said it all. And especially since Henry's accident, Frank had been worse. John knew with the way Frank sealed off that room, changed the code and everything else, he was planning and working on a major investigation into it. A waste of time John thought, an accident was all it was, and he knew

that if he was found out about his part with George, that accident would be pegged somehow on him. John remembered telling George about Henry's lab exploding, and he remembered the advice that George gave. Telling John that no matter what--even though it was an accident that was dropped favorably in George's lap--it was going to point any already suspicious fingers John's way. And though nothing had been said yet--he gathered that was due to the side tracking with the Robbie situation--John knew it wouldn't be long before anything was mentioned to him. And he was ready to defend himself on it.

But at that moment, he was ready to defend his family. That's what he was doing. And perhaps that was why John's heart dropped so drastically when he saw movement in the thick forest that lay on the hillside at the underdeveloped section of Beginnings. The only section not secured by a perimeter beam. The section George knew well. Were all these thoughts of George, a premonition of sorts. Did George finally break his word and decide to hit physically instead of waiting for the surrender of Beginnings in intimidation of his size? John hurriedly and sloppily placed on his headset. Like a snake in the grass, that is what the movement seemed like from his overhead view. And the movement drew closer to the hillside that would lead whatever it was, into Beginnings' land.

(6)

Frank laughed loudly--hyena mode--as he walked around to all seven men sitting in the hypnotic trance. "Nothing." He'd touch them, poke them, flick them. "Oh this is so great. We can create our own SUTs without operating."

"No we can't Frank." Joe snapped. "They're human beings. Christ." He shook his head. "So you see now why we called you here."

"Oh yeah. Wait until Dean sees. Can we leave them like this until they get out in a couple days?"

Before Joe could snap at Frank again, he turned his back on him and faced Jason. "You tell him."

Jason shook his head. "No Frank, we can't. But . . . we need to know if you are still going to go under first to ensure Dean that you aren't asking him to do anything you wouldn't."

"Oh sure." Frank said. "As long as you guys don't poke me in my head or put me in a dress while I'm under." He saw his father and Jason look at each other with a snicker. "Don't even try anything funny. I'll know. I'll use my strong mind to fight what ever it . . ."

A hiss. Helicopter noise. A panic John Matoose. "Frank, Frank come in."

With his hands on his hips. Frank's head slowly raised up with serious eyes, as he adjusted his mouth piece. "What's up?"

"I got movement Frank." John spoke. "Coming in through the foliage ascending the U.D. section. Fast and hard. Looks big."

"SUTs?" Frank asked and snapped his finger to his father.

"I can't tell. But they're moving Frank. It's either a large group or something from a goddamn horror movie." John's words picked up speed.

"Hold on." Frank covered his mouth piece as he moved toward the skills room door. "Dad, I need you at armory STAT . . . Hold on John." Frank switched channels moving with Joe fast from containment. "Units seven and eight, this is an all call. I have a code five coming in from the U.D. Section. All men report pronto to armory." Frank flung open the containment door moving in a near running pace. "How's it looking John."

"Closer Frank."

Frank looked to Joe who moved as fast as him. "We need preparative weapons for unit eight, they'll man town, I'm moving out unit seven to the section. Fuck."

Another hiss. "Frank. Frank!"

"Yeah John. We're on our way."

"Frank, they're not SUTs. Dear God, they're . . . they're . . . savages!"

Frank stopped walking the news barreled him. His head swayed in disgust. "Fuck!" He returned to his radio. "Situation moved to a code seven. I repeat a code seven. Tower! Hit the goddamn horn now!" His face was reddened as he punched in his security code at armory and unlocked the door. Joe ran passed him inside, at that instant the horn set up center town, their warning system started blaring. Three short blasts. A pause and three more. Repeating itself until the people of Beginnings understood it. They were aware of it. The signal told them to take cover, stay inside. "John! John! I you need to fire at will. I repeat, fire at will upon them. I'll get my man out of there. We're on our way." Frank saw four of his twenty run in.

"I'm on it Frank." John readied to fire.

"Dad we'll need grenades. Let's arm half with 203's." Pulling out weapons, in a hurried move ready to distribute, Frank switched channels. "David!" Frank called to his guard in the underdeveloped section. "David come in. David."

There was no answer.

"David are you there?" Frank called out again.

(7)

Ellen nearly dropped the beaker from her hand when the distant sound of Beginnings sirens started to ring. "Dean?" She looked at him.

Dean shook his head, looking as shocked as she did.

Ellen turned quickly to Robbie, then Henry racing in the lab, a look of needing to leave so upon them. "Robbie, Robbie what's going on?"

Robbie moved to the window. "The perimeters been broke." He faced

them. "And by the sirens, it's not just one man."

(8)

David rolled Sara over on to her back, kissing her in their final stages of lovemaking amongst the high over grown grass in the under developed section.

She giggled and reached to kiss him stopping and turning her head to the side. "Is that your radio?"

David listen. "I think." He heard the call of his name. "That's Frank, probably wanting something or other." He scooted from Sara, a smile on his face, reaching for his radio a few feet away. "Yeah Frank."

"David pull back. Get the hell lout of there Now! Pull back we're on our way." Frank shouted as he raced from armory, waving his arms about gathering his men.

David was confused. "What . . ." His head sprang up when he heard what sounded like a charge of hooting, "Indian war calls" coming from the distance. "Shit!" He stood up slowly hearing the firing of a helicopter gun and as he raised above the hiding grass, the whistle of it sailing through the air was heard seconds before the long arrow seared into his gut.

Sara screamed.

Frank's eyes filled with horror when he heard the second voice, a woman's voice, screaming. "David. Shit . . . Who's out there with him?" Frank asked, spinning around through the living section. "I need you and you." He pointed to two men for unit seven "I need you on the rooftop of containment and the bakery. Two of you I want positioned backing us up, positioned by my house. Mark, I need you pulling the kids from the nursery to containment. Cole, get the kids from school. Get them in containment, locked in. Then both of you secure the area. Let's move!" He charged out, leading his unit of men with him, instructing them what to do, then calling another unit to armory as back up in town.

There were at least twenty-five, maybe thirty. A pack as Beginnings would categorize them as. Because that was what the savages ran in. Sara still screamed, making the fatal mistake of running to David's side after seeing him drop. The moment she reached him--still holding her shirt she picked up as she ran to him--was the moment, up from the grass, the savages jumped screaming back at her in a mocking, smiling manner.

Dirty they were. Dressed barbarically in tattered clothes, half of which they did not wear. Sara backed up and they charged for her. She spun to

race toward town, only to feel her long black hair grabbed and her body snatched back. Hands, lots of them, touched her. They touched her breasts, groping, pulling. Grabbing harshly. Hands moved about her, feeling her. Fingers dug between her legs with force as she felt her body being pulled against her will.

David heard her horror cries out, bleeding, in pain, and weak he tried to stumble to his feet in hopes to locate his gun. He had no idea how many there were. Had he known, he would have expected it. He didn't. He too was grabbed, dragged by his hair and pulled twenty more feet into the field then tossed face down harshly. He felt the burning of the arrow going the rest of its way through, and he was certain his death was seconds away. David was wrong. What happened next was worse than death to him. He was lifted to his knees, head held back, and he was made forced to watch as eight men gathered around Sara.

John Matoose felt so at a loss, not able to pinpoint his shots at those who gathered around Sara and David, and only able to fire at those who moved toward town. Doing his part to help out his men that rushed there. Failing to help David and Sara. He saw Beginnings men moving fast to the under developed section. But in John's heart they weren't moving fast enough. He banged his hand on the wheel of the chopper and continued to swoop down and fire, hoping to divert what he too could witness happening.

"NO!" Sara screamed feeling her slacks being sliced from her along with her skin, and then ripped from her body with such magnitude it flipped her over, causing the back of her head to bang. She didn't pass out. She wished she would have. Kicking her feet as hard as she could, she spun her self over, and in a get-a-way attempt, lifted to her knees in an attempt to run.

The rough hands grabbed hold of her hips, sliding her knees over the ground. She felt the back of her body, along with her knees, lifted upward and pulled back. The hard pain she experienced as her body was slammed into the savage that had her, shot into her stomach. The deep pain as if her insides were being ripped from her, repeated over and over as the savage slammed himself harder, and with total control of her body, again and again. And when he finished, he threw her from him, laughing as he did.

Sara didn't realize her far she had been lifted from the ground. Her hands that had dug into the soil in her fight, cracked and broke as her body landed on them. Still she was not giving up. Again she tried to stand. Blood flowed from her, not only from the cuts but also from the violent invasion of her body that just happened. It was not over yet.

Just as her toes made a standing connection with the ground. The hard-

breaking hit to her back sent her forward smashing her face to the earth, her legs were grabbed and she was flipped to her back. And she couldn't even scream because the foot that landed on her throat, securing her down, began to block her airways.

They fought over who would have her next. Each of them grabbing at her legs, spreading, lifting them as they knelt, placing themselves in between her.

Sara lost even more of her breath when the savage that was stealing her, fell forward on to her from a hit he had taken from another. A bigger man took his place, ripping her legs open more and punishing her while pleasuring himself.

Her body went numb as he took her like an animal, pounding himself into her with such a disgust look of satisfaction. All she could do is let it happen, ignoring him along with the ones who found great pleasure in urinating upon her while she was being abused.

Maybe it was the loud sounds of gunfire that snapped her from the protection world she placed herself in, it had to be. And they drew closer. She closed her eyes feeling a sense of saving and feeling her body being dropped to the ground. They let her go. Beginnings men were there. She started to cry, her salty tears down her face and burning her open wounds. She opened her eyes, to see those who encircled her starting to flee. And she knew she was safe. Ignoring the pain that swept up her back and her legs, she reached out ward to roll over and crawl for safety. Just as she reached her stomach and reached her hands out, her hair was grabbed again, her head tilted back. With all the pain her body was in, she didn't feel anything but a pinch. When they released her head, she thought she was fine until she felt the blood that poured from the large gouge sliced into her throat. Sara's body plopped back down in that deep thick grass that hid what happened to her from the Beginnings men that transcended in defense upon the savages.

From his own leg it stuck out from, Frank broke the arrow off just below the head, and raised his M-16 firing across in a straight line, taking out two savages. "No!" He screamed to one of his men. "Don't pull that out!" He rolled down on the ground, keeping low and he made it to Barry. Protruding from Barry's leg was an arrow. "Don't pull it out. Break it." Frank snapped it off. "Now stay put, stay ready and stay low!"

Though he only had eight men out there, Frank refrained from bringing in any more. The savages were not like the SUTs, they crept through the field each of them trying to make a pass by Frank's men and failing as they tried. Yet the others stayed behind, hiding in the nature's brush, inhibiting good shots at them.

Frank made it to each one of his men, whispering and telling them the same thing. Pulling them back and lining them up low in the grass in a

straight row across. Letting them fire. He pulled his mouth piece closer. "John." He whispered, hiding his voice with in the firing. "They aren't moving are they."

"They're idle Frank."

"Pull back some. Let me know when they move."

"Gotcha."

Frank waiting, eyes staring ahead and he listened to the fading chopper. He held up his hands in a cease fire to his men The gun fire slowed and then . . . silence. "On my call." Frank mouthed the words as he positioned himself one leg up, the same as he had his men do.

There was silence for a while as if nothing was happening out there at all.

"They're getting ready Frank." John told him.

"I hear it." Frank listened to the ruffling. The minutes seemed like hours in the anticipation of the next move.

"Now Frank."

Frank listened, snapped his fingers to his men, raised his weapon and so did they. "On my call." He mouthed the words again, then bringing his fingers to his lips to keep them silent. He swore he could hear his heartbeat.

And then he heard what he was waiting for. His timing had to be right, or his entire plan would be flushed. The 'war cry' out that the savages always made in the run attacks. Upon hearing that Frank charged to his feet. "Now gentlemen!" The running savages finally opened them selves up in their charge. And in the savage's mistake, laid Beginnings advantage. The twenty-two savages that remained, met with the continuous and fatal gun fire of the eight Beginnings men, though some injured, who stood up before them in a surprising synchronization from the grass.

At that point the gunfire needed was minimal and the time wasted was nil. "Hold your fire!" Frank ordered when he knew he had witnessed most of them fall and he heard no more sounds of movement. "Check for any alive! If you find them. Shoot them." Frank tossed his M-16 over his shoulder and pulled out his revolver, extending it. "Look for our two people." Frank moved through the grass, nudging his boot at every savage he came across. If he even thought they moaned or moved, Frank would shoot one single bulled into their heads. "Dad." Frank called over the radio. "Have the clinic ready, we have a few injuries and we have two people in this grass we're searching for."

"No signs of them Frank?" Joe asked.

Frank took a deep breath. "Not yet. What the fuck happened Dad. They didn't just appear in the woods, They had to have been there."

"I don't know Frank. How are you doing. Are you O.K."

"I got arrowed. Big deal." He looked down at his bleeding leg and saw a savage. Frank kicked him. "Hold on Dad." A single shot was fired. "All right, we'll be in, send me some more men out to help search this field. It's huge."

“Got it.”

Wiping the sweat from his head, Franks peered out looking again, listening to the voices of his men as they called out for David and Sara.

“Frank!”

Frank’s head jolted to the panic call of Jeff. He rushed over where Jeff stood alone. “What.”

Jeff stepped back. “David.”

Frank knelt down some to the bloodied and shirtless body. Placing his hand on David’s shoulder, Frank rolled him over, seeing the blood on the stomach and the sliced throat. “Fuck.” He closed his eyes and spoke into the radio. “David’s dead.” In disgust he bit his lip and just as he stood to his feet he heard another cry coming only from twenty feet away. “No.” He knew by the sound of that call out, what the two men found was not good. A part of him didn’t want to see, but he knew he had to. Frank could see as he approached, the two men that called, were stepping away. His quick run in slowed when he saw what they had uncovered.

If Frank didn’t know who Sara was he wouldn’t have even recognized her. Her nude body was covered in mud and blood, her hair was wet and sprawled across and stuck to her face, below her neck a large puddle of blood formed. There wasn’t a inch of her skin not bruised or cut. He couldn’t even bring himself to reach down and see if she were alive. By looking at her, Frank knew that she was dead and to Frank, she was better off, because death was probably better than Sara facing the rest of her life living with what she had just gone through. And it was obvious to Frank, by her body, what that was. He too stepped back, head down thinking, how what happened in that field could have gotten so out of control that the savages may have made it into town before Frank and his men were even ready. And with that thought, the vision of Sara’s body became--in a sudden fear--every woman in Beginnings, and then Ellen. Frank’s mind and heart raced with a overwhelming sickening feeling, and for the first time ever, and from something he seen, Frank walked a few feet into the field and threw up.

CHAPTER THIRTY

(1)

In the lab, Dean and Ellen watched. That's all they could do. Robbie wanted to do something more, he stood by Henry listening to the phone conversation. Henry's end of it. The 'I sees' told the three of them less than the expression on Henry's face when he turned off the phone and set it on the counter. He stared at it for a few seconds trying to think of how to start. Joe had just bombarded him with information. It was information that would make them want to go scurrying into town to check on things, but like Henry, neither Robbie, Ellen or Dean could do anything but stay where they were. "Like we thought, it was a break in the underdeveloped section. It could have been worse, much worse. We prevailed. But what I was told isn't good." Henry spoke so sad. "Beginnings, we uh . . . we just had a first."

(2)

The liquid swished as it returned back into the bottle after being pulled from Frank's mouth. He slammed it hard on the containment desk, then wiped the back of his hand across his mouth.

"Frank." Joe reached for the bottle and Frank pulled it back.

"Dad . . . not now." Briefly he closed his eyes and he shuddered at the images of Sara and David that popped into his mind, and with that, he took another drink. "Here." He handed Joe the bottle. "I'm done." He looked at his watch. "Now where the hell is he?"

"Take it easy Frank, he'll be here. I know this is going to be hard, but staying calm will work best." Joe placed the bottle on top of the filing cabinet.

Frank leaned back in the chair rocking some. "I'm far from calm."

"I know. But you guys all did a good job out there."

His lip raised a little in disgust and before he spoke, Frank ran his hand harshly down his face and across his goatee before slamming it on the desktop. "Not good enough."

"Yes Frank. No matter what . . . good enough." Joe heard Frank grunt. "What's wrong, is that leg of yours bothering you?"

"No, not at all. It was an arrow. I swear to God I've been hit with more arrows than the entire fuckin US Calvary combined."

Joe wanted to say no more, especially when the door to containment opened and Johnny walked into the front office.

"Hey Dad." Johnny shut the door. "You wanted to see me?"

Joe saw the look on his son's face as he stood from the chair. "Easy Frank."

Frank held his hand up to Joe. "Johnny, I'm sure you know what has happened here this afternoon."

Johnny nodded his head slowly and somberly. "I do. It's sucks."

"It sucks?" Frank walked around the desk. "You aren't fuckin shittin it suck. Sucks. Twenty-nine savages John, poured in from the forest behind the underdeveloped section. Poured in down that steep hillside, well on their way to hitting town. Do you know how much damage they could have caused before we got them all. They're animals John."

"I know." Johnny agreed. "I heard David and Sara are dead."

"They're not just dead John. David, he had a three foot arrow shot straight through his gut, his throat was sliced. He was dragged. And Sara, she isn't just dead either. They not only raped her, God knows how many did that, but they beat her, cut her, pulled her and pissed on her John. One of ours, our people, like she was nothing." Frank spoke with an edge. "My job is security. Protecting these people. I failed my job today John. Do you know that? I failed because part of my job . . ."

"Dad, where are you going with this?"

Frank bit his bottom lip. "Shut up and listen! I failed my job because it is part of my job to assign the right people to the right job. They are all links in a chain, and when one link fails to do their job, then the whole fuckin chain breaks and I fail. The people of this community lose."

"Dad, I don't think David failed you."

"David?!" Frank's voice raised even more. "I'm not talking about David, I'm talking about you!"

"Me?" Johnny said with almost a laugh. "What the hell did I do?"

"You flew the reconnaissance flight last night and this morning, did you not?"

"Yeah." Johnny answered.

"I know for a fact John, cause I did it myself, that region at seven p.m. was clear when we walked a foot perimeter."

"So. What are you getting at."

"Two things." Frank held out his hand. "One, if they came in during the night, you should have seen them. If they didn't, and they came in this morning. *You* should have seen them. What they were would not have been made out, but you should have seen something was in those woods. Even without moving you would have seen them. Are you not looking John? Do you know what you're suppose to be looking for when you fly these things. Because if you don't I'm training someone else. Laziness, especially with the flights can not be tolerated. And it was pure laziness that you didn't see these things in the first place! You should have spotted them. An hour ago I put two of my men, without shirts in that area and told them to stay low. I went up ain the bird and I saw them. I saw them John."

"You were looking for them." Johnny spoke with defense.

"And so should you be too. That is your job to look for them. To assume that they are there. To spot them. How in the fuck did you miss

twenty-nine men?!” Frank blasted him.

Feeling the heat of his father’s words, breath and presence, Johnny grew angry. “You know what Dad.” He stepped back. “Fuck you.”

Just as Frank dove forward for Johnny, Joe flung himself in-between stopping him. “Frank. No.”

With a tilted Head, Frank’s facial muscles twitched. “You better walk away John, right now! Cause I’m this close . . .” He cut his hand threw the air over his father. “I’m this close to fuckin killing you right now!”

Joe pressed his back up against Frank to keep his distance from Johnny. “John,” Joe spoke with scold. “You will apologize to your father.”

“I will not!”

“John . . .”

“No Pap.” Johnny shook his head. “He’s pissed because I’m not him. Well we all can’t be the big super hero Dad, and because you didn’t get there on time to save Sara and David, you can’t put that on me. You can’t save everyone! And too bad Dad, we all fail.” Johnny’s face turned red. “But we all don’t find blame somewhere else. And it’s fucked up that you’re putting this on my head. Fucked up.”

Joe felt the pressure of Frank, what he really wanted to do was just let is son go and let Johnny have it. But Joe couldn’t do that. Joe was angry and his words and tone conveyed it. “Talk like that to your father again and I’ll deck you myself, you hear me. You little son of a bitch! Just like you said, we all fail and we shouldn’t find blame elsewhere. Well you failed John, you failed to see those savages. You were asked a head of time if you wanted to fly these missions. No one made you do it. You wanted to. So don’t act like you’re doing us a big favor! And as far as your father goes, you should treat him and give him more respect than you are giving him right now!”

“Respect him? He’s putting this shit on me, his son. And so are you for that matter. I didn’t see them! Like I said, we all can’t be my father. Lord knows he does very little wrong.”

“How can you talk like this?” Joe argued back. “Instead of belittling him because he is coming down on you for not doing your job right, you should be thanking him for training his men good enough to take out three times as many men.”

“Next you’ll tell me pap, I should be like him.” Johnny turned and moved to the door opening it.

“You should.” Joe told him.

“Why is that Pap? Because he protects us. Yeah, I’ll give him that, he does his job better than anyone can. But I have also seen some of the shit my father’s done. Shit that was unnecessary during his course of ‘protecting us’. And what it all boils down to in the end is that my father is nothing but a cold hearted killer. So forgive me for not wanting to be that.” On his final words, Johnny walked out of the containment office, slamming the door.

Joe expected when Frank moved quickly to the door, that he would

open it and fly out after Johnny. He didn't. Joe merely jolted when Frank slammed his hand into the side of the filing cabinet, then grabbed the bottle from on top. "Frank. Let it go. He's angry, he's saying things he doesn't mean."

Frank was eerily calm as he finished his drink and set the bottle back on the file cabinet. "That's what I hope Dad. But I'll tell you what. You better talk to him. Because the next time I see him. I'm killing him. I'm a cold hearted killer you know." Frank opened the door to the small office.

"Frank, where are you going?"

"Dan is gathering the women of this community for me. Them and I are having a long talk." He pulled the door closed.

"Oh boy." Joe picked up that bottle of moonshine, he took a long swig, gasping afterward. "God help the women of this community right now."

On a Frank-rampage, ignoring the pain in his leg that should have caused him to limp, Frank made his way to the social hall where Dan was bringing the women. Frank slammed the door hard to shut up what he thought was an instant headache--the chattering and crying--and he stood before them, hands on hips, looking more mean than any of them probably ever saw him.

Perhaps it wasn't a good idea for Jenny to speak up at that moment, but when was Jenny ever known to be silent. "Frank, what is this all about? We're all upset and . . ."

"One thing." He spoke deep, his voice was raspy. "One thing to all of you. Anything could happen in this world now. Anything. If I *ever* fuckin catch a single one of you with one of my men when they are on watch. He will have to deal with me. I will kick his ass. Our watches are serious. They are not meant for any of you to be at. And go on try it, I guarantee when I finish with the man you visited, he won't want you back." With a hard turn of his body and no time for any comments, he left a silent social hall, slamming the door again upon his exit.

(3)

How long did it take for them to remove the bodies and clean up Beginnings? Longer than Frank wanted it to.. History and details of the attack had to be documented, and by the time Frank got home from that and the meeting with Andrea and Jason, Henry was already there, released from quarantine.

No amount of water was going to make Frank feel better. In fact, Frank was feeling worse as he stood in that shower. The events of the day were now coupled with thoughts he had long buried deep into the back of his mind, thoughts of Ellen. For the first time in his life, Frank realized

what rape meant. He knew the word, he knew the crime. Yet he never truly understood the violence of it until he saw Sara. And with that understanding came the remembrance of what happened to Ellen not even a year earlier. He remembered when he found out, how sick he felt over it. But as he stood in that shower, thoughts and visions of Ellen he did not want to have, he felt even sicker. Before, he only could guess what she had gone through, but now he knew what she had gone through, and Frank's heart broke for Ellen all over again.

He headed downstairs after his shower, still feeling so down. He was going to congratulate Henry on a good job putting the kids to bed, but that was a short congratulation when he saw Josh coming from the kitchen with a covered plate of food. And Frank knew Henry did not do it alone

"Night Dad." Josh showed him the plate. "I'm stealing chicken. Dean's out of food."

"You aren't staying here?" Frank asked him as he walked toward the door.

"No way." Josh shook his head. "I have Dean's house all to myself, and Denny. But here, everyone is here. Night Dad. Night Henry!" Josh raised his hand to Henry who sat on the couch.

Frank gave a firm pat to Josh's back as he opened the door for him. "Night Josh, thanks for all your help with Henry."

"You're welcome." Josh stepped out and stopped. "Oh and Dad. Good job today." He gave a thumbs up then turned and kept on walking.

A slight smile of appreciation was all that Frank could muster up as he closed that front door. He turned around to Henry who sipped from a tall glass. "Hey." Frank walked over and grabbed it, smelling it. "Wine? Why are you drinking Henry?"

"Oh bad day in quarantine."

"I bet." Frank set the wine down then sat down next to Henry on the couch. His eyes seemed to not want to leave that glass, wanting so bad just to pick it up. His fingers tapped against each other for a little. Then he sat back, ran his hand down his face, and turned to Henry. "So it was bad then?"

"Yes. Dean and Ellen, all they do is bicker. Bicker, bicker, bicker."

This made Frank smile, probably the first real smile all day. "Do they know what happened?"

"I told them."

"And how is Ellen?"

"She seemed down. Real down after hearing about Sara."

"I figured as much." Frank leaned forward. "I'm worried Henry. I'm worried right now about her."

"Why's that Frank?"

"Well, maybe it's silly of me. No . . . no, it's not. I guess as you know, she had a hard time facing it, and didn't let any of us really know. And I thought, because it stirred it in me, it stirred the memory in her." Frank

shrugged. "It's making me feel down about it all over again. I guess I'm worried it will make Ellen feel down now too."

"What?" Henry asked. "Down about what again?"

"You aren't paying attention are you? Sara's rape. Don't think that's gonna hit Ellen hard? Or am I thinking wrong. Maybe I'm thinking wrong."

"You probably aren't."

"And right now Henry, I feel really bad. I feel like I'm living it all over again, finding out all over again. That pain is back, and I can only imagine what El is feeling. I'll tell you, when I saw Sara, I got sick. I got sick because of what they did to her. And then, it was worse because I remembered what happened to Ellen. I don't know, some how, it became more real to me."

"Frank?" Henry's voice dropped. "What are you talking about? What happened to Ellen?"

Frank didn't answer, he just stared at Henry's clueless eyes. *'Shit, he doesn't know. He really doesn't know.'* Frank cleared his throat. "Nothing Henry."

"No Frank. Don't say 'nothing'. No. You can't just start saying something and then shut up. What happened to her?"

"Henry . . ."

"No, Frank." Henry's voice raised emotionally and he closed his eyes, talking his thoughts out loud. "We were talking about Sara and what happened to . . . Frank." Henry opened his eyes. "Oh my God, was Ellen raped?"

Frank only raised his eyes. "Henry, if she didn't tell you, she probably doesn't want anyone to know."

"Oh my God." Henry blinked in surprise. "She never mentioned it to me. Never. No wonder you feel so bad Frank. Now wonder you keep thinking of her."

"You can not tell her you know Henry. You can't."

"I promise, I won't. When did it happen? When you were kids?"

Frank shook his head, hesitating at first before answering. "It happened last year when she was in Colorado. Two SUTs were . . ."

"Two?" Henry was horrified. "It makes sense, that's what happened to her breast."

"Yeah. It was violent, and after seeing Sara it just made me really see what happened to Ellen again."

"I understand that. No wonder you're so down Frank."

Frank raised his eyebrows as a response. "Tell me something though Henry. Didn't you ever wonder what happened to her one breast?"

"Oh sure. And I asked her about the scar."

"What did she tell you?"

"Well . . ." Henry drew up an embarrassed look when he reflected on how he believed her. "She told me that she got into a cat fight with Joanna Holmes and they were scratching and pulling hair and Joanna bit her."

Frank snickered some. "You believed her?"

"Oh sure, why not. She was very good with the details on that. I guess it was her way of covering up her pain."

Frank nodded. "Pain that can easily come back. Henry? I'm uh . . . I'm thinking of going up there and talking to her. What do you think?"

"If you feel she needs you Frank, you go on and go."

"It's not just her. I . . . I need her Henry. Today, the loss of two lives, the near attack on Beginnings, I need her bad. More than you realize I need to just talk to her."

Henry watched Frank's views shift to the wine and stay there. "Then you should really go Frank. If she's what you need."

"She is. But is it too much to ask of her. She may be dealing with her own feelings."

"Then you deal with them together." Henry stood up grabbing the wine and walking so casually with it into the kitchen as if he were finished. "Go on up Frank." Henry returned into the livingroom. "I think it's for the best."

"I do too. Thanks Henry." Frank stood from the couch. "I won't be long. If you need anything with the kids just call Josh."

"I will Frank, go." Henry watched his friend smile a look of relief and hurriedly head to the door. He was glad that Frank felt a little better. Henry, on the other hand, his head still spun. So knowing that Frank was gone, and knowing that he no longer had to be sober, Henry went to the kitchen to get his wine, because even though he didn't show it to Frank, his just learned news about Ellen . . . pummeled him.

(4)

Robbie was at wits end. He had all he could take and he couldn't take it anymore. He was at the point where his blood nearly boiled and his ears felt hot. It no longer was amusing, it was Valium justified. On his last draw, he flung the covers off of him, charged from his room down the hall, threw open the trailer door, flung opened the lab door and bellowed out his announcement. "Shut the fuck up! Shut UP! Both of you."

Dean and Ellen ceased their argument as soon as he shouted, they both looked at him.

"I'm supposed to be getting well. You're driving me nuts!" Robbie grabbed his head. "Work damn it, you're a team. I am sick and tired of hearing the yelling. It is getting old and it's childish. No one cares El which side goes up on a paper clip. Who cares Dean, if Ellen hands aren't on the home keys. And Ellen, if he likes his hair parted on the left side, fuckin let it be. Why? Why are you two fighting over stupid fuckin shit like this? Why?"

Ellen began to answer. "Robbie, see we. . . ."

"I'll tell you why!" Robbie shouted. "There's something wrong with you two. Something really wrong! Now end it now, separate or do your

work quietly. Either way. Shut Up!”

After the initial shock wore off of Ellen, she faced Dean so snide. “He’s right. We’ll separate. I’m going in the other trailer.”

“Oh No you don’t.” Dean raced out from behind the counter. “You have work to do.”

“No I don’t. I’m leaving.” She began to run for the mobile door. “Besides, I don’t want to be around you anymore. You suck!”

“Hey!” Dean dove at her, throwing his arm around her waist and dragging her back to him. “You’re staying put!”

“Robbie!” Ellen scream. “He’s physically accosting me.” She struggled. “Beat him up.”

Robbie shook his head and moved to the door. “No way El, you guys are the same size. Fair fight. See ya.”

Ellen grunted in her struggle when Robbie left. “Let . . . me . . . go!”

“No.” Dean tried to pull her back. “I’m sick of this shit. Work.”

“Let me go . . . you prick.” With her last word, she kicked her foot back, nailing Dean in the shin, then she gave him an elbow shot to the gut. “Ha!” She fled for the door.

He caught his breath, then jumped at the door too, getting there the same time as Ellen and blocking and latching the door. “Don’t try it. This is stupid. You’re here to work and fight or no fight. You’ll stay here!”

“I’m leaving. I’ll stand out side, it’s safe.” She spun around and ran toward the other door.

Before she could get too far, Dean reached out, grabbing the edge of her pants and pulled at her.

“No.” She pulled away in a spin facing him. “What is the matter with you?” Leaping out with both hands she landed them open Dean’s chest shoving him back. “Huh?”

Dean closed his mouth tightly growling. “Don’t hit me again Ellen.”

“You hit me first.” She shoved him again.

“I said . . . don’t hit me again.”

“Tough. You hit me first.”

“El!”

“You.” Again, two hands out she tossed them into him. “Hit me.” Before she could pull away, Dean grabbed hold of her hand, pulled Ellen forward to him, gripped behind her neck, and kissed her unexpectedly.

With a smack of his lips and an outward breath, Dean released her.

“You dick.” Ellen raised her hand in a slapping motion in such dramatic twenties movie fashion, only to have it halted as it launched for Dean. He held it tight in his. “Dean, let go of my hand. I’m defending my honor.”

“Right Ellen.” Dean spoke with sarcasm, letting go of her hand, placing both hands on her face then kissing her again. He felt her lips so tense at first, but then they widened with his, parting for more intensity and moving fast with speed of anticipation.

Ellen let out a slight moan when Dean's hands slipped under her hair, pulling her up and into him more as he kissed her. She had two choices at that moment, get even angrier, pull away, and chew his ass out or continue to kiss him. So Ellen placed her hands under his lab coat and onto Dean's back, sliding her fingers up in a digging grip as they kissed and their bodies pressed closer.

If Frank felt bad enough when he headed up to the mobile lab, he felt worse when he arrived. Arrived to see Ellen and Dean in a tight embrace kiss, directly in front of the window. He could have knocked on the glass, he could have called on the radio, but Frank didn't do either. He felt lost and he also felt his anger starting to build. So quietly and with his head down, Frank left the mobile lab and went back home. Knowing he wasn't going to feel any better on this night.

(5)

Henry set the glass of wine from which he sipped, down on the small metal table next to his computer set up in Frank's basement. "Final . . and . . ." He depressed the enter key. "Yes!" Henry widely grinned. "I am so cool. It's done. Domestication program . . ." Before he could say finish, the loud slamming of the door above his head and stomping feet rattled his things and the liquid in his glass. "Frank?" Surprised that he was back, Henry leaving his wine there walked up the stairs, hearing the banging of cabinets. "Frank?" He called out stepping into the kitchen to see Frank pouring a drink. "I thought you went to see Ellen."

"I did."

"That was fast."

"I didn't speak to her Henry." Frank downed the entire contents of his glass then poured another. "She was busy."

"I see, working on the virus?"

"No, working on Dean." Frank grabbed his bottle and glass and moved to the livingroom. "They were kissing Henry."

"They were kissing?" He didn't get an answer and he followed Frank. "Maybe you made a mistake Frank."

"Henry, their fucking faces were pressed together. They were kissing."

"I can't believe it." Henry said stunned as he sat on the couch next to him. "Maybe Frank, they just made up. You know how those two get."

"Yep." Frank looked at his watch. "And knowing how those two get, they should be just about in the thick of things right now."

"No." Henry shook his head. "Why didn't you stop them?"

"What right do I have to stop them Henry?" Frank asked, lifting his

glass. "I have no right."

"Yeah, but I do." Henry stood up.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm calling her. You're wrong Frank, it wasn't what you thought. It couldn't have been."

"They were kissing Henry."

"It probably was one kiss."

"Does it make a difference?" Frank asked with edge.

"Of course it makes a difference Frank. One kiss is a kiss. No more."

"You should be mad about that."

"In this world now Frank, you have to give some leeway. Like it or not." Henry explained. "But leeway or not, I'm still allowed to be pissed. I'm her primary."

"Let it go Henry. You're probably right. It probably was just one kiss."

"Then you'll go back up there and talk to her instead of . . . instead of . . ." Henry's eyes drifted to the bottle. "Just sitting here."

"No. Not tonight."

"But you need her. She may need you."

"Henry." Frank finished his drink. "My whole reason for going up there was incase Ellen was down." Frank stood up from the couch with only a glass he just refurbished. "And if she was down, she certainly isn't anymore." With a raise of his eyebrow, Frank walked to the steps.

Henry watched as Frank walked slowly up the stairs, and he spoke out loud to himself, softly. "She might not be Frank, but you still are."

(6)

"Dean." Ellen spoke his name so soft, so close to his ear and with a gentle instructiveness. "Over just a little."

"How's that?" Dean asked in a whisper back.

"Good. Good. You're doing good."

"I can't believe I'm doing this. It's been so long."

"But you're acting like a pro."

Dean snickered. "I'm a little nervous."

"No, don't be. You have to practice. You have to." Ellen told him so understanding. "This is probably something I'm gonna make you do quite often."

"You know I used to like doing this quite a bit." Dean said.

"Really."

"Really, and in my early years, I was good at it."

"You're still good at it Dean." Ellen smiled at him. "And remember . . . Out of everything, this is something you don't really need your eyes for."

"It helps."

"No it don't. The term 'do it with your eyes closed' applies here. It's all

in the feel. I should know. You have to feel it. If you can feel it, you can do it. Close you eyes."

Dean did.

"Do you feel it?"

"Yeah." Dean smiled. "In a way this is fun., Shoot on the dark."

"Are you ready now?"

"I think so."

"All right. "Ellen took a deep breath staring at his closed eyes. "Put it in all the way."

"Fast or slow?"

"Come on Dean, I think you know how. Do it fast but not too fast."

"With my eyes still closed?" Dean asked.

"Most definitely. You are there trust me. You can do this. Put it in."

"O.K." Dean closed his eyes tighter. "But if I mess up and go in the wrong place, you can't bitch."

"Never."

"Right." Dean took a breath. "Here it . . ." His words were stopped when the cellular phone rang. "Shit."

"Keep going." Ellen told him. "I'll get it in a second."

Dean tried but stopped. "I can't. The ringing is breaking my concentration."

"All right." Ellen stepped back. "Take the tourniquet off the bunny while I get that, we've cut off her circulation enough. Unless you want to do it while I'm on the phone." She picked up the cell phone.

"No I'll wait." Dean set down the needle. "Like I said before, it has been so long since I took blood from a rabbit, especially with my sight now, I'll wait for your guidance."

Ellen gave a smile to Dean, part of which stemming from the less tension that seemed to be around them, and she answered the phone. "Hello?"

"El?" Henry said her name.

"Henry." She smiled again. "Hi."

"What are you doing?" He asked calmly.

"Oh I'm here with Dean."

"Doing what?"

"Working." She said. "Why?"

"El? Were you with him tonight?"

"All night Henry. Why?" Ellen asked him.

"Were you working the whole time?"

"Sure." Ellen shrugged, give a look of confusion to Dean.

"So you weren't kissing him?"

Ellen went silent.

"El?"

"Henry I . . ."

"You were."

"Henry." Ellen walked from the special lab to talk in private. "What's going on?"

"Were you kissing him tonight El?"

"I kissed him. Yes."

"Why Ellen?" Henry's voice took on edge.

"Henry." A nervousness took over Ellen. "Henry we were fighting and we kissed after we were fighting. You're mad."

"Yes I'm mad. Why did you have to kiss him?"

Ellen stuttered some in her answer. "I thought it was O.K., I thought because of the understanding."

"There isn't an understanding El. You said it was over. I thought it was over."

"I'm sorry."

"You can't do things like this Ellen. Even though I believe in understandings, it still isn't right that you do one behind my back. I should know."

"I'm sorry Henry." Ellen sounded so sad. "It was just one kiss. I swear to you that was all it was. I'm sorry."

"If you're going to have an understanding with Dean, you have to let me know this. How am I supposed to know that it isn't over when you tell me it is."

"You're right."

Henry's long breath came through over the phone. "And I'm sorry I yelled. I'm sorry I got mad. It's not me to be like this. I'm just upset right now. When Frank came home and told . . ."

"Frank?" Ellen was surprised. "What does Frank have to do with this. Henry, you aren't mad I was kissing Dean because of Frank are you?"

"To be honest with you, yes. I'm upset El, he came home, he needed to talk to you. He didn't. And now he's really down. He . . . he's drinking."

Ellen closed her eyes and pulled a stool to sit down on. "Drinking. Explain Henry, One drink, two?"

"Many El. Fast too. And I don't know what I'm supposed to do about it. I can't take the bottle from him like he's a child. Aside from the fact he'd kick my ass, that's not helping him, it's only stopping him momentarily."

"Please tell me he's not drinking because he saw me kissing Dean."

Henry paused in his answer "I think he's drinking because of his day. He had a really bad day El. Two people died, he had that close confrontation. He got hit with an arrow and to top it off he got in a huge fight with Johnny. And you know Johnny, he says things that are so hurtful."

"So he came to talk to me, saw me kissing Dean and then went back home."

"Yep." Henry stated. "Right to, in Frank's book, the next best help . . . drinking."

"I understand now Henry why you got so upset. You wanted me to be

there for Frank, and I wasn't. In Frank's view, I chose Dean at that second."

"He needs you El." Henry said. "So you understand why I got mad?"

"Of course I do Henry."

"You're not upset with me about it?"

"No. Not at all. I'm upset with myself right now. I want to help Frank. I don't him to drink when he's down. You know that's not good. What can I do?"

Henry let out a sigh of relief. "You can be there for him. So you think you can now? Be there for him. You think you can do this for Frank?"

"Oh sure Henry. Where is he now?"

"Upstairs."

"Put him on." Ellen requested. "Please." She sat back listening to Henry walking about. His footsteps clear, and so was his knock on Frank's door. There was too much silence, muffled words and that worried Ellen. Somehow she expected Henry to get back on the line. But he didn't. Frank did.

"Yeah." He said without emotions.

"Hey Frank." Ellen tried to sound chipper. "What are doing?" She didn't get an answer. "You know what? I'm up here. I'm done working for the night. And I am completely bored. Any chance you coming up to visit?"

"I thought you'd be a little busy with Dean."

"Oh no. We're not working. We just finished. Come on up."

Frank covered the mouth piece of the phone and looked up from his lying position on the bed to Henry. "What did she say about the kiss?"

"She said they had just made up and it was one kiss. No more. Just a kiss Frank." Henry smiled at him.

"Are you putting her up to this?" Frank needed to know.

"Nope." Henry shook his head. "She wants to see you. She wants . . . get this, she wants to be there for you, with you. She just told me that."

"You're kidding." Frank waited for another shake of Henry's head and uncovered the receiver and brought it back to his mouth. "Hey El. I'll be right up."

"See you in few."

Frank disconnected the call and sat up from the bed, a charge of adrenaline hitting him. "Thanks Henry." He handed Henry the phone. "Thank you. I'm going up."

Henry watched his friend leave with so much more excitement, made Henry feel better about calling Ellen and sending Frank up there. Ellen was what Frank needed. But Frank's sudden change of demeanor wasn't what told Henry that Ellen was the thing needed to help his friend. The fact that Frank, on his way out, reached for his glass, stopped and left without touching anymore moonshine was what did it for Henry.

Ellen placed her phone down on the counter then walked to the window of the special lab. She stood there watching Dean as he--so pleased with himself--was on his third rabbit in his 'taking a blind blood sample' task. She had to go in and tell him she was finished for the day, and she'd explain why to him. Frank was on his way, and he needed her. With all that happened in Beginnings on that day, Dean would understand why, and even more so than that was the fact that with all that was happening in Dean's life, how could he not understand the urgency when somebody else needed her aside from him. And with those thoughts of confidence, Ellen went in to see Dean to tell him. And Dean did not let her down. He didn't get angry that she dropped what she was doing with him on the spur of the moment. He didn't let it bother him that she was walking from their work, work that had been strained due to fights but wasn't now. He merely did what Ellen thought he'd do. He understood.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

JULY 23

(1)

Ellen knew someone had to be there when she arrived back at Frank's house. Though most of the house was dark, a light from the diningroom let her know before she even walked into the house, that someone was up and about. At least she hoped. She thought she would be expected. She never imagined that she wouldn't be heard when she walked into the house. Nor did she even imagine both Henry and Frank were still there. Even though it was still minutes before six am, she thought for sure one of them would have left for their job. But they hadn't. They stood at the diningroom table, and as Ellen watched quietly, unnoticed, she saw little Nick laying on the table before them.

Frank shook his head. "No, Henry, what did you do to him?" He picked up Nick.

"I fixed his hair." Henry said with a smile.

"You can't do this with his hair, and why did you bathe him anyhow. I bathed him last night."

"He threw up Frank." Henry stated. "I didn't want him to smell. Besides, look how good I bathed him."

Frank breathed slowly through his nostrils looking at the abundance of black hair not only parted in the middle, but laying flat and combed back too. "God Henry." Frank picked the baby comb. "You can't make a baby look like this. He looks ridiculous."

"Oh no Frank. He looks cute."

With a grunt Frank lifted the comb. "Look at all this hair. What the fuck do you have in your genes anyhow. Fuck. I thought I was hairy." He reached over and pulled out Henry's tee shirt. "And you don't have any body hair. What the hell Henry. Do all your hair genes go to the baby's head."

"That isn't very nice Frank. He just has lots of hair."

"You just have to comb in subtle Henry, not fuckin stylish like, he's a baby." Frank placed the comb in Nick's hair and tried to comb it. The moment the comb entered the black hair, it stuck and wouldn't move. It was as if the comb hit a brick wall. "What . . ." Frank made a struggling face and tried to comb the hair some more. "What is in his hair."

"Hair Hold."

"Hair hold?" Frank tossed the comb on the table. "What is hair hold?"

"You know, it's that stuff we make, that woman use to hold their hair styles in place. It's made from fruit, it's like the old-world hair styling gels."

"It's like fuckin glue Henry." Frank tried to lift the hair. "It won't move. How much did you put on him."

"A lot Frank. He has terrible hair. You can't do anything with it."

"He's a baby!" Frank tried not to yell. "You're not supposed to worry if he has good hair days or bad."

"Now see, I have to disagree. It's never too early to start worrying about your hair. Maybe if we train it now it won't get out of control when he gets older."

"Maybe if we train you now. Besides Henry, I'm shaving this kid's head as soon as he gets older. He isn't walking around with a big black rag mop on his head. Of course now, thanks to you, it's a fuckin' helmet. Here, wash it out." As Frank went to hand Henry the baby, he smiled when he saw Ellen. "El."

Ellen took a step closer. "I thought for sure someone would have been outside of quarantine waiting for my release."

Before Frank could fully hand him the baby, Henry made his escape and hurried to Ellen. "You're out early. You weren't supposed to get out until this afternoon."

"Dean finished the test. Robbie's fine. The virus has been completely gone and his blood samples show he is now immune. So we waited the twelve hours and came home."

Henry put his arms around her and then softly he kissed her on the lips. "This is so great. You're home. Look Frank, Ellen's home."

Frank tried to act cool about it. "I see. And look Henry, here's your kid with the hard hair."

"I see." Henry said and looked back to Ellen. "I'm glad you're out. I'll stop back here today and move my stuff back home."

"Are you leaving Henry? I just got here." Ellen asked.

"I know but if I go now El, I can get my stuff done and I'll be home tonight with you. Otherwise if I start late, I'll finish late."

"O.K." Ellen said with some disappointment. "You go on. I'll get the kids off."

"Thanks." Henry kissed her on the cheek. "Bye Frank."

"Henry!" Frank held up Nick. "His hair."

Henry gave a thumbs up.

Ellen called out to him before he left. "Henry? Joe said since we're out, the meeting is moved to eleven. He said Frank will be in that area at that time."

"Got it." Henry started to leave again.

"Henry?" Ellen called to him again. "One more thing." She waited for him to look back. "Jenny called me last night. She said you haven't been to see Ben. Cole leaves in five days. You have to let Ben measure you."

"Tomorrow El, I promise. O.K.?" Henry smiled. "I'll stop at the mobile or containment to see you later."

"Henry I . . ." The door closed and Ellen threw her hands up in the air. "Frank? Why is he in such a hurry?"

Frank walked to Ellen. "Probably to avoid getting out of fixing Nick's hair back. Besides he's always in a hurry. Check out Nick."

Ellen tried not to laugh when she looked at the ‘Alfalfa from the Rascals’ looking baby. “Oh shit.” she reached her hand to Nick’s hair and felt the hardness of it, and then Ellen laughed. “Oh shit.”

“See what I’ve been dealing with. Bad El, he’s bad.” Frank started to hand her the baby but stopped. He looked at her. “Glad you’re out.” He winked and leaned down to her kissing her on the cheek. “I’m really glad you’re out. Because now . . .” Frank gave her Nick. “He’s yours.” Before Ellen could return him, Frank stepped back.

“Look at him Frank.” Ellen whined. “How much stuff did he put in his hair.” Ellen knocked on the solid hair. “What made Henry think of putting this stuff in his hair.”

“Probably the same thing that made Henry think that if he put three diapers on Nick at one time e wouldn’t have to change him so often.”

Ellen’s eyes immediately shifted up. “He didn’t.”

“Yesterday.”

“Shit.”

“It gets better.”

“Oh no.”

“Oh yeah.” Frank nodded. “At least he put a diaper on Nick. I get home last night, Brian is without one.”

“Why wouldn’t he put a diaper on Brian? He knows Brian’s still a baby.”

“True.” Frank held up his finger. “But according to Henry, or Henry thinking, Brian’s wearing a diaper was more of a choice than a necessity. So Henry figured it was getting disgusting and it was time for Brian to stop being so lazy. I guess somehow Henry thought Brian just didn’t want to use the toilet and he decided to force him along.”

“Henry decided to toilet train Brian?”

“Now see, that’s was my first reaction.” Frank told her. “I came home and said, ‘wow, Henry, he’s a little young, but a good thought trying to toilet train him’ and guess what Henry said. He said. ‘Toilet train? You mean you have to train them to use the toilet?’”

“Oh no.”

“Oh yes. Good luck with him. And don’t have any more babies to him El. I love this kid, but I refuse to raise anymore Henry babies until he learns how to do it for himself.”

“You think he’ll ever learn?” Ellen asked.

“At first I did.” Frank answered. “But now . . . Nah. He’s too busy to learn. He never wanted to have full responsibility in the first place and you know it. That’s just not Henry. And you can’t hold it against him either.”

“I don’t.” Ellen adjusted Nick. “And I can’t hold the baby against me either. His hair hurts my chin.”

“Well according to Henry he just wanted the baby to have a good hair day.” Frank smiled, kissed Ellen on the cheek then Nick. “And it’s getting late. I’d better run.”

"You're leaving me too."

Frank slowed in his stride to the door. "I have to start my rounds El."

"I know, go on go. I'm sorry. It's just that . . . never mind, go. I'll see you later."

Frank hesitated. "El . . ." He stared at her. "Hold on." He placed on his headset, and turned on the radio. "Scott, this if Frank. You think you can do my perimeter one and two checks. I'll get you earlier tomorrow in exchange. Thanks." He took off his radio, walked back in the living room and tossed the headset on the coffee table. "I'm home for an hour."

Ellen smiled widely. "Thanks Frank. So does this mean you'll wash this baby's hair."

"Nope. You'll wash his hair. I'll make breakfast."

"That's fair. Can we eat before we wake up the kids?"

"I'd like that." Frank ran his handover Nick's head as she held him. "Not as much as I would like this kid's hair to be soft and bushy again."

"I can do that." Ellen received a smile from Frank and watched him step away. "Frank? Can I ask you something?"

"Sure." He came back to them.

"Why do you think Henry as put off getting measured for his tux."

"Because it's fuckin stupid to have a tux." Frank told her.

"But you got measured."

"How do you like that? And I don't even want you to marry the guy." Frank sensed the overwhelming, immediately awkward silence that happened. "Aside from that, he probably just doesn't want Ben measuring his inseam."

"Frank." Ellen shook her head.

"No El. It might bother him. I, on the other hand . . ." Frank sniffed quick and loud. "I like to impress people."

"All kidding aside Frank. Is he just that busy?"

"Sure he is. He said he finished the SUT programming and I'll tell you El, he's been working on that day and night while you were in quarantine. We have him set up here."

"Good." Ellen let out a silent breath of relief. "Thanks for telling me. And Frank, thanks for not saying anything about me marrying Henry. Running a big 'foot in mouth' risk right now . . . you could make things difficult, but you haven't, I appreciate it." She tip toed up and kissed him. "Thanks again for not saying anything."

"I don't need to say anything El. Why say anything at all?"

"I guess I thought you would try to stop it."

Frank shook his head. "When is this wedding?"

"They're saying one to two months as soon as everything is done. Why?" Ellen looked apprehensive. "You're gonna try something aren't you."

"Nope." Frank closed his mouth tightly and shook his head. "Why start trouble."

"Thanks Frank." Ellen smiled at him.

"Sure." He moved back toward the kitchen. "Why start all kinds of trouble when it's not going to happen anyhow. And El?" Frank looked back at her very seriously. "My gut tells me this wedding isn't going to happen."

Ellen stood speechless holding Nick. She didn't know how to respond to Frank's final comment. Either Frank was up to something or he really truly believed that Ellen wasn't going to marry Henry. Either way, there was a reason for his calmness about the wedding. And Ellen shrugged off what he said as she headed upstairs to clean up the baby, hoping that if he wasn't up to something, that he wasn't upset when he found out his gut was misleading him.

(2)

Joe stretched out his arms as he leaned back in his desk chair. So loud it came across, as if he were throwing out every ounce of tiredness in his body. "So Jason we're done."

"Tired Joe?" Jason asked.

"Old." Joe answered "Sometimes I think too old for this shit. Gene got sick during his shift last night at the clinic. I had to fill in there, then I figured, hey, I'm up. So I go see Cole to finalize the metals run he's doing. Oh yeah, A.K.A. tux run." He and Jason both snickered at the same time. "I ended up helping him fix that damn tire on the tractor, and this mind you is all before six. Now that doesn't include me having to go to the nursery and work for Raz--until Hap got there--because his shingles flared up."

"Busy morning."

"Yep and it's not even eleven. And you know what happens at eleven." Joe raised his eyebrows with a single nod. "The wayward testosterone Ellen fan club will be here for a meeting. Oh joy." Joe ran his hand over his forehead. "Sorry, don't mean to bitch your ear off."

"No, no. That's fine. Hey at least there is a bright spot to this day huh? Frank's test of my hypnotic skills?"

Joe smiled widely. "That's right. Right after the meeting too. Hey at least if Frank, Dean, Henry and Robbie drive me nuts I have something to look forward to."

"Cole's not coming to the meeting? I thought you said the metal run would be coming up."

"I'll have a private meeting with him later. You know as well as I do Jason, throw one more person into a Beginnings meeting and you have chaos."

"I was wondering Joe." Jason spoke. "How does Cole feel about picking up the tuxedos."

"He laughed. But he's pretty busy on the run so he's taking one of the older gentlemen to put in charge of that."

"Is that safe?" Jason asked. "It could be dangerous out there."

"Yeah I know, but when Cole spread the word about needing one of them, they all volunteered. And let's face it Jason, they may be getting older but not one of them is a weak man."

Jason agreed. "Something about this world now Joe. It just doesn't let one get old. Like you."

"Yeah well I wished I get there. Sometimes I think I'm ready to retire and do a single job like the other men."

Jason began to laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"Well, that just means if you retire, Henry's the man. Scarey thought Joe. Henry is so high strung."

"He'd learn. He's a good guy. The best one we have to take my place. The only downfall is the fact that my daughter can easily influence him. Therefore getting her way on stupid requests like . . ." Joe held his hand out. "The one they presented to me a couple weeks ago. The women want one night a week at the social hall to be ladies night and they want to have Blake strip."

"He's been training though Joe."

Joe added. "Had to have Cole yell at him. Cole said Blake wouldn't lift the other day because he didn't want to mark his body."

"Now how did that happen?" Jason asked perplexed. "How did he live in the unscathed world and still look so good?"

"Vanity Jason. That's what it is. Vanity."

"But why do the women want him. There are plenty of guys that could do it. This Blake guy he's not bright."

"That's probably the reason." Joe said. "Beside you can't take away from the fact that he's a good looking guy."

His 'Thank you' was his introduction to his entrance into Joe's office. Frank shut the door with a smile. "I love to hear you guys talking about me so highly when I'm not around."

Joe rolled his eyes "Sit down Frank. We were talking about Blake."

"Oh man." Frank pulled out a chair. "Are you guys wanting to watch him strip too." He snickered at his own humor.

Jason stood immediately up. "I'm gone Joe. See you at containment. Frank." He looked down to Frank. "I look forward to hypnotizing you." He laid his hand on Frank's shoulder

"Uh Jason?" Frank's eyes shifted to Jason's hand. "Why? You aren't gonna put something in my mind to make me like you are you. Since you and my dad have this thing for good looking guys."

Jason gave a gentle squeeze to Frank's shoulder stepped back to the door and winked with a smile. "You never know big boy. You never know."

Frank's eyes widened. "Dad! Don't let him make me gay. I swear to God if I wake up from being hypnotized and I'm gay, I'll fuckin kill him."

"Pipe down Frank. You won't be gay."

Henry's immediate snicker as he walked into the office, overshadowed Frank's outward breath of relief. "You thinking of turning gay Frank?"

"Don't get any ideas Henry." Frank held up his hand. "Especially since I know you used to have that crush on me. I'm not turning gay. Man . . ." He shook his head. "What is it about me that the gay men in this community are attracted to me?"

Joe tossed his hands in the air. "What can I say Frank? When you're blessed, you're blessed."

Frank ran his hand down his own chest as he took a long breath in. "Yep." He saw Henry just staring at him. "What!?"

"There's something wrong with you Frank." Henry sat down. "Sometimes I wonder about you."

"Me?" Frank said with a huge smile knowing he had irritated Henry. "Why?"

"You get the biggest kick out of making yourself out to be the gay men in this community's sex symbol. You should hear him Joe. I think he likes it. And with you being such a neanderthal Frank, I thought for sure you'd be bothered most by it."

"Henry." Frank spoke with arrogance. "Why let it bother me. I'm very secure in my sexuality. You on the other hand aren't. That's why it bothers you every time Ben checks out your butt."

"Frank I am secure with my sexuality." Henry spoke defensively.

"That's not what he people in this community think. Everyone thinks you got Ellen pregnant as a secret cover up for the fact that you're gay."

"Oh they do not think like that."

"They do too, ask hem."

"You're an asshole Frank." Henry slumped in his chair. "And Joe aren't we having our meeting?"

"As soon as Robbie and Dean get here" Joe answered.

"Can I tell you about what I did?" Henry asked.

"Nope. Save it."

"But it's important Joe. I finished the SUT program I have the chip ready."

"Henry." Joe brought his hand to his temple. "I told you to save it. Why did you just blurt it out?"

Waving his hand at Frank who gave his typical agitating 'yeah' Henry explained. "I need to have brought up today the fact that we need to have that chip implanted right away. In fact, as soon as possible."

"What's the rush?" Joe inquired. "We've been working on it for months. It can't wait now?"

"No." Henry shook his head. "It's brain surgery Joe. And I think we should do it before Dean loses his . . . loses his . . ." Henry caught himself

and he tried to think fast. "Loses his . . ."

Joe stared at Henry with a tilted head. He waited, watching Henry's open mouth. And then Joe had enough. "Loses what?"

Henry jumped back. "Uh . . . his uh . . . His mind Joe. Dean is headed toward a nervous break down."

Frank scoffed. "He isn't that fuckin close. Trust me I know. I've jumped out at him enough times to try to break him."

Joe was a little shocked. To hear Frank say it was one thing, to hear Henry comment on Dean's mental state was another. "Are you serious Henry, Dean is breaking?"

"Um . . . yeah Joe." Henry hated lying but he couldn't tell Joe the truth. "But don't say anything. What ever you do. When Dean gets here don't let him know that I told you."

"Told Joe what?" Dean asked when he walked in. "What did you tell Joe Henry?"

Frank snickered. "About the fact that you like to wear women's underwear."

Dean's mouth dropped open. "Shut up Frank."

Frank laughed again. "Whoa Dean, you scare me."

Giving a scoffing face, Dean pulled up a chair and sat down. "What did Henry tell you that he shouldn't have Joe?"

"Well . . ." Joe took a second to think. If Dean was going over the edge he certainly didn't want to be a Frank and help him out. So with quick Joe thinking h gave his best answer. "Henry was complaining that the lab up at the mobile isn't as clean as he'd like it."

"Oh Henry is full of shit." Dean commented. "It's fine."

Joe looked at Henry. "Is that the reason you didn't want Dean to know? Because it really is fine? What the hell kind of trouble are you starting Henry?" Joe looked back at Dean. He looked upon him with concern and spoke so pacifying to him. "Don't worry about him Dean. You have much to much to worry about. In fact I was thinking after this virus scare is over. I was thinking about you taking some time off. Lord knows you need it and you earned it more than anyone."

"Hey!" Frank interrupted them. "What about me? I need a vacation."

Dean took in Joe's tone ignoring Frank--again. "Maybe I'll take you up on that Joe. Some time off with my kids . . ."

"Our kids." Frank interrupted.

"My kids." Dean stated again. "Will do me some good."

"Dean!" Frank yelled.

"Frank! God are you annoying today." Dean looked at him. "What?"

"Now see, I'm trying to be nice to you. And you just go on and on giving me that Dean little-man-attitude."

"Why do you say that?" Dean asked with edge. "Why do you say . . . little-man-attitude."

"What? I'm gonna say big man attitude? Look at you Dean, you're

little.”

Dean grunted and adjusted his chair further from Frank.

Frank scooted his chair even closer to Dean, and Dean moved his further, Frank followed.

Joe took all he could. “Boys! Knock it off! Christ what is this? Musical goddamn chairs. This isn’t first grade it’s a meeting for crying out loud. And as soon as Robbie gets here . . .” Joe needed to say no more. The final member of the meeting walked in. His appearance took Joe aback. Robbie had lost weight. Lots of it. His face was pale and dark circles still colored under his eyes. Joe immediately turned to Dean. “Should he be working?” Joe stood up to his son. “When I saw you this morning it was still dark. Are you feeling all right?”

Robbie shrugged. “Fine.”

Joe moved closer to him laying his hand on Robbie’s shoulder and squeezing it, feeling bone. “Dean?” Joe faced Dean. “How much weight did he lose?” Joe pulled at Robbie’s clothes and the looseness of them.

Dean blinked several times. He guessed he had just been with Robbie so much he really didn’t notice how much weight Robbie had lost. He knew he lost some. “Um . . . we weighed him in at one . . . wait a second.” Dean reached down to the folders he brought in. Robbie’s virus was one of the things being discussed at the meeting. He flipped open the folder. “Ellen weighed him in a . . . no, this can’t be right.”

“I knew it.” Joe told him as he grabbed a chair for his son then returned behind his desk. “He lost a lot didn’t he?”

Dean shook his head. “Not according to this. Ellen has him weighed in at two-hundred and three pounds.” A sudden thinking look hit him and he started speaking softly to himself. “Which means all medication and treatments given would have been given according to that weight. Not the new . . .” Dean reached out without taking his eyes off the folder, he grabbed a pencil from the top of Joe’s desk and he began to take notes. “I’ll have to recalculate.” He lifted his head, adjusted his glasses and turned to Robbie. “Robbie, when we’re done, can you come down to the clinic with me. I want to weigh you. I need to know how much you did lose. Because us over medicating you could have had something to do with what cured you.”

This shocked Joe. “You mean the antiserum we found didn’t do it?”

Dean closed the folder. “Not alone it didn’t. It ended up being a combination of occurrences. That caused Robbie’s getting well. But I gave a dose of one of our agents according to what Ellen had here. Obviously I gave a bigger dose. I have to recalculate, in connection to his weight now, what the dose I actually gave him was. It probably won’t make a difference, but it never hurts to be sure.”

Frank laughed in a ridicule way. “You know Dean, for a big shot little scientist, you sure are stupid. How could you not know he didn’t weight two hundred pounds.”

"And you would?" Dean asked back.

"Fuck yeah. I can tell you exactly what he weighs."

"Right Frank."

"I'm telling you." Frank stood up. "Robbie, stand up for a second." He waited until Robbie did. Frank ran his hand over Robbie's back, across his arms, then he lifted him briefly. "Thanks." Frank clapped his hands and sat back down. "One seventy-two."

Dean snickered at him. "Just like that. So accurate. You're gonna tell me not only are you He-man, super man, but now you scale man as well."

"One seventy-two."

"On the nose?" Dean edged on.

"Exactly."

"Right." Dean spoke sarcastically.

"Bet me."

"That he's exactly one seventy-two?"

"Yep." Frank nodded.

"I'll bet you. What do you want to bet?"

Frank thought about. "O.K., no matter what time, day or night, no matter what the other one is doing, they have to change Brian's diaper when it's needed."

"So what your saying is if I win, ten o'clock at night, I can come down to the social with Brian when I have him and make you change him?"

"Yep." Frank nodded. "And I get to do the same. The winner gets to interrupt the loser for one week no matter what they're doing and the loser has to stop."

"What if the loser is having sex?" Dean asked.

"Yep. So when I come knocking on that bathroom door of yours Dean, the fantasy must stop for diaper duty."

Dean grumbled some. "You're on." He stood up too. "Come on Robbie, Ellen has a scale back here in the examining room." Dean walked to the door behind Joe's desk, not paying any attention to the fact that Joe had tossed his pencil in the air in meeting time defeat. "In here." He opened the door.

Robbie followed Dean in. "Dean, you're gonna lose."

Joe leaned further back in his chair, he stared at Henry when Robbie Dean and Frank disappeared into the other room. "Why do I even bother Henry? You and I will have our meeting as soon as I get rid of these three." He jolted forward when he heard Dean whined loudly, then Frank laugh after. "Dean lost."

Dean stomped from the back examining room. "Shut up Frank."

"Day and night. Ha!" Frank plopped in his chair next to Dean.

Sulking, Dean leaned. "How did you that? How did you guess his weight so exactly?"

"Easy." Frank told him. "I weighed him in here about two hours ago. I saw him and I said, 'man Robbie are you skinny,' so we weighed him."

"You what!" Dean sat up. "What the hell was all that dramatic feeling him and picking him up?"

Frank shrugged. "I don't know. You bought it though, didn't you?"

"You cheated Frank." Dean pointed. "And all bets are off."

"Shut the fuck up Dean, they are not. You did not make it contingent on whether I had weighed him already or not. To bad . . . " He saw Dean's mouth open. "Shut up . . . you lose." He stopped Dean again. "Baby."

Like a tattle tale, Dean turned to Joe. "Joe!"

"Dean. Enough." Joe picked up his notes. "Now we'll start, get you three out of here and then Henry and I can have a real meeting. First." He cleared his throat shutting up Dean or Frank before anymore can be said. "Dean, I need you to meet with Jason and I at the clinic tomorrow morning for that little experiment you agreed to participate in." He held up his hand. "Before you say anything, Frank is doing it after my meeting with Henry." He shifted to the next item. "Virus update Dean. What do you have on it?"

"We're getting close. We think that we can, without doubt, cure the original strain of the virus."

Joe nodded but hadn't a clue what he was talking about. "So you beat it?"

"No, not at all. The original strain we beat . . ." Dean saw he was losing them. "All right. We have witnessed three forms of the virus. There is the one we brought back from the future trip. The one which infected Robbie's men, and then the host virus. The original virus."

"Which you've seen when?" Joe asked. "When did you see the host virus."

"When we gave Robbie the antiserum."

Joe's eyes widened. "So it wasn't an antiserum it was actually the virus. Was this a set up?"

"No." Dean shook his head. "It was definitely a antiserum. The only thing Joe, it just didn't work on those already infected. George, for some reason wanted it to work on Robbie. But it wouldn't have. See, an antiserum, a good one, is done by injecting a small amount of the original strain or host virus into the person to build up immunities. When we injected Robbie with the antiserum it had a negative effect. Instead of curing him it actually gave him the host virus. The host virus therefore took over the virus in Robbie's blood. And by a shot in the dark, one of our agents, combined with other little things, kicked it's ass."

Joe looked pleased. "So we're out of the woods here?" He smiled. "When they release the virus on us, we'll beat it with the combination and that agent of yours."

"No." Dean hated to tell him. "Unless they inject each and everyone with the host virus, it will mutate and we won't get it."

"But you'll be able to cure those who have the host virus?" Joe asked. "To infect us they have to drop it on us right?"

"Right." Dean said. "But those who catch it say, second wave we will

not be able to cure. So in an essence we're still at a loss. Unless, we get the host virus. Then what we would do is inject those second or third wave people with it and repeat the process that happened to Robbie. Which brings us to another problem."

Hating to hear, Joe tortured himself. "What problem is that?"

"As I said before, the symptoms are as deadly as the virus. We still stand a lot of risk losing lives to the symptoms. But I guarantee we save a lot more lives than we lost in that future I went into."

Robbie raised his hand in question. "What if they don't drop it on us, what then. What if they send a few infected people in here. Those people wouldn't have the original strain would they? And if that was the case, no one would be cured."

Dean shook his head in disagreement. "I'm going to say no on a couple points Robbie. One, George would have to send at least twenty people in here with it. It's not airborne. They'd come down with it while in containment. How many people would they physically come in contact with? Ellen? She's not a carrier. You? You no longer are a carrier. And as far as Joe and Jason go or Dan. How much physical contact will they have with these survivors. Not much. George knows this, He knows it won't get out of hand that way."

Frank decided to go further on Robbie's question. "What about if he injected these people with the original strain."

"Then we'd have a bunch of the host in which we could use to infect others in order to cure them. But . . . it won't happen. When you directly inject someone with the host sample of the virus, they almost immediately become ill. Therefore doing away with any incubation period. If George say . . . air drops it in, we will immediately have everyone infected. Which won't be so bad because we can beat it. Ellen and I are gonna start producing our agent for the masses. However, like I said before, we don't know how he's gonna do it, if he does it. And then there's our worse case scenario. If everyone comes down with it all at once and they don't have the original strain. Which is nearly impossible. Because the only way everyone is going to come down with it at the same time, is if they are all exposed to the same source. A source with the original strain."

Joe understood. "But if that happens, the masses would fall ill after the source with the original strain. And by that point you would know who had the original strain and you would be able to use their blood?"

Dean nodded. "Yes as part of our cure. But lets not get ahead of ourselves Joe. I know all of this sounds good, like we have beaten this. But there's something I can't beat. And that is the symptoms. Only the person infected can do that. Example Robbie . . ." Dean pointed to him. "And look at the toll the virus took on him."

Robbie ran his hand down his own chest. "I'm still the best looking man in Beginnings though."

Frank rolled his eyes. "And the skinniest man now too."

Dean reached down to his pile of folders. "There is something I'd like to say." He grabbed one and set it on Joe's desk. "And this goes no further than this room. It can't. The only reason I'm letting Ellen know this is because she helped figure it out. But for security. Andrea, Jason, Johnny, no one is to know we've beaten the original strain. As far as me and Ellen mass producing agent 17, we're doing that in the cryo-lab after hours. We have to. As much as I trust Andrea and Johnny and Jason. I can't take a chance, even minor, that it gets to John Matoose. Because if John Matoose leaks to George that we've beaten the original strain he may change the virus. Or just as easy hit us with a second wave. We don't want that. We need him to hit us with the original strain or have someone among us with it so we can use their blood."

Though Joe understood, he still saw problems, security leaks or not. "But he still could hit us with the second strain whether he knows about the cure or not. And then we're screwed."

"Not entirely." Dean opened the folder. "As long as George is clueless, then we still have our, 'fingers crossed' ace in the hole host." He saw their lost looks. "In the future we brought back samples. In the future there were three forms of the virus. The ones who came down with it first. The ones that come down with it second and . . . the original host. We confirmed that sample with the antiserum. The original host was in the Beginnings future."

Amongst the ruffling chairs, Joe spoke up. "You know which people infect us? You know the carriers?"

"Carrier." Dean spoke. "And this person did not start the plague. They were the only one with the host virus. This person came down with it in the middle."

This confused Joe even more. "How can be Dean? How can one person come down with the original strain in the middle of a plague. That would be nearly impossible . . . unless." Joe let out a breath and sat back. "They were injected with it."

Dean raised his eyebrows. "That's what we think. That's the only way it could have happened. So, we let George think we have no cure. His person injects this person, And when they get sick, we have our host to cure the others in Beginnings."

"Who?" Joe asked. "Who is it?"

Dean pushed him the folder. "Jenny Matoose. I think she finds out about John and he hits her with it. Which means he's gonna have the original strain on him. And if we can possibly even divert him hitting her with it, then we can find it on him. Keeping Ellen on Jenny is good. We can monitor what Jenny finds out, the closer Ellen is to the situation. And they talk. I didn't think it was possible, but this wedding thing is making them act like friends.. With Ellen right there, we're one step ahead than we were in the future. We watch and see what happens with Jenny. Because she can be the key, if the future holds true, to beating this thing if they don't hit us with the original strain."

Joe brought the folder closer, peering down to it as he spoke. "So behind the scenes, you guys have the original strain beat. To everyone outside this room, you are working on a cure. Which you still will." Joe instructed. "And we watch Jenny. Because obviously she finds something out that causes her death. But she won't die in this history, will she Dean?"

"Nope. Not as long as she has the original strain she won't." He looked at the pleased faces. "Unless the symptoms kill her. We still have those to consider." He hunched at the moans that emanated because he had to add that damper to his hopeful answer. "Sorry."

"All right. That's done." Joe continued.

Dean stood up. "Can I go Joe. I have so much to do."

"Yeah sure go ahead." Joe told him.

"Thanks." Gathering his folders from the floor, Dean smiled at everyone but Frank, then hurriedly left before he could be pulled into anymore discussions.

"Dean?" Joe called out but it was too late. "Eh." He pushed the folder aside. "He forgot this, I'll give it to him later. O.K., Frank. Your turn, tell Robbie why he is here."

Frank turned to Robbie. "Starting tomorrow, you fly reconnaissance morning and evenings."

Robbie was shocked about that. "What about Johnny?"

Frank looked at his father first. "Johnny won't be flying them anymore. He chose not to." He tossed his hands up. "You all right with that? Besides, you aren't strong enough yet to really work."

"I am too." Robbie spoke defensively. "But, no problem. I'll fly them. But not tonight. Tonight is my understanding time with Ellen." He saw his father shake his head no. "Dad, come on I need that time. Unless . . . Henry? Can you schedule me a different time with El?"

"Nope." Henry shook his head. "Sorry."

"What do you mean sorry?" Robbie asked. "Come on Henry, don't be such a prick."

"A prick?" Henry's voice raised "Robbie you just spent seven days with her in quarantine. No."

"Prick." Robbie sat back. "Did I tell you Henry we bathed together in there." He saw Henry's irritated look. "Yeah, you knew that. Did I tell you Henry? She touched my penis."

"Robbie!" Henry shouted. "You're not helping matters."

"You could help matters. But you won't." Robbie spoke snidely. "Because you're a prick. I know it's a big conspiracy to get Ellen and Frank back together. Don't touch her Frank, or I might have to kick your ass."

Frank scoffed. "Yeah right. Even on your best days you couldn't take me. And now, all I have to do is blow on you and you'll fall over."

"Frank." Robbie laughed at him. "You're getting old Bro. I can take you even now."

"Could not."

"Could too."

"Prove it."

"Let's go." Robbie stood up.

"You're on." Frank stood also. He saw Joe staring up from the desk at them. "Dad, do you mind?"

"No go on have fun."

Frank smiled. "Thanks. Let's go Robbie. Let me kick your ass." He motioned his hand to the door.

"Don't take a heart attack on me Frank. You know how you old guys get." He opened the door.

"Don't break Robbie, you know how you skinny guys get" Frank followed him out.

"Frank." Joe called to him waving his hand for him to step in.

"Yeah Dad?" Frank poked his head through the door.

"He still sick. Take it easy on him."

"Not a problem." Frank agreed. "I'll let him beat on me for a while. Coming home with a black eye should breed a little sympathy from Ellen." He backed up and shut the door.

Joe turned to Henry. "You don't mind him saying that?"

"No Joe not at all."

"Why is that?"

"Let's finish our meeting and I'll tell you." Henry moved to adjust his chair closer to the desk, stopped to smile at the yelling of Frank and Robbie outside, then proceeded in his meeting with Joe.

(3)

If it didn't bother Dean enough that he forgot his folder at Joe's office, it bothered him even more that he had to remember about forgetting it when he was almost into town. Turn around, walk back up, and then have to zig zag his way to Joe's office door around Frank and Robbie who rolled around like two ten year old boys wrestling in the grass. Complete with elbow drops, clothesline moves and commentating. How immature Dean thought it was, wishing his every step to Joe's door that somehow Robbie would get the best of Frank.

Raising his hand up to knock, Dean overheard Joe and Henry talking. Though he shouldn't have, he listened before interrupting. Their voices were so close to the door as if they were getting ready to leave.

"So what you're telling me Henry." Joe spoke. "Is that Frank and Ellen will be having an understanding? Will that work?"

"Oh I think so Joe. Frank and I talked. El and I talked. We're all in agreement."

Joe gave a 'hmm' and reached for the door. "Forgive me. But I thought for sure Ellen told me she was going to have an understanding with Dean. That's not gonna happen?"

"Not anymore Joe. It was only going to be temporary anyhow, to help

Dean through a problem he was having. And even if he still does need her, it'll only be a temporary thing."

Dean forgot about knocking, forgot about his folder because he had heard enough. Hearing Henry's words confirmed a fear that he had when he and Ellen first talked about an understanding. The fear that Ellen was only with him because he needed her. And knowing Ellen, how much could he actually count on her to be there if she wasn't in it with her heart. Angry and hurt Dean turned from that office door, yelled to Robbie to kick Frank's ass, then walked even faster back to town.

(4)

It as a tedious task to George, standing there acting so impressed while bored to the point he nearly fell over twice when he started to fall asleep standing up. But it was his project and he had to watch those mice experiments. It reminded him of the days when Dean used to bore everyone with once a week medical updates. How glad George was back in those beginning Beginnings days when Dean finally got the hint and only shared his knowledge when anyone asked. George often wondered *did* anyone ever ask? He for one never did. But perhaps maybe if he did, he may have some bases of knowledge when listening to his own scientist. But he didn't. And why his scientists didn't grasp the concept of why they had to hand in reports in layman's terms was beyond George.

And after an hour, so was that mice experiment. So George excused himself from the lab play, hoping to make an exit, hide out for an our and catch his afternoon nap. He had his own plan to get ready. He had men to get out. It was only five more days until the Robbie-plan-two was going into effect. Robbie was better, he wasn't sick anymore, he was strong. But George knew when he finished with him. Robbie would be much stronger.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

(1)

“Oh my God! Frank!” Ellen leaped up from her chair in her office and ran from her desk when she saw Frank, holding the side of his face and stumbling through the door. “Oh my God!” The closer she got she saw how dirty he was, the blood that formed at the edge of his nostril. “What happened to you.”

“El.” He spoke weakly, wobbling.

“Here.” She grabbed his arm and helped him in. “We should get you to the clinic.”

“No. I just need you.”

“Frank.” She said his name with such concern, helping him to sit down in the chair. “What happened to you?” She walked to in front of him pulling down the hand that covered his face. She gasped at the bruise and small cut on his eye brow. “How did this happen? Did a bunch of men attack you, What?”

Frank moaned in pain.

“I never saw you like this.” She ran her hand down his face. “Let me go get you some ice sweetie.” She ran her hand gently down his face again and darted from the room.

Frank turned his head to the door. He grinned widely, clenched his fist and pulled it close to him with a silent ‘yes’.

“Here.” Ellen ran back in.

Frank’s happy demeanor switched back.

“Now tell me what happened.” Ellen began to wash off his face. “How did you get beat up.”

“Robbie.”

Ellen’s hand lowered. “Robbie? But he’s never been able to beat you, and now he’s sick.”

“I know El. Why do you think I look like this? I couldn’t . . .” He gave a fake flinch of pain when she touched him. “I couldn’t . . . hit him. He’s not strong. He got mad at me and hit me. And kept hitting me.” Frank’s head dropped. “What was I supposed to do? Beat him up? I couldn’t do that.”

“You did the right thing.” Ellen handed him the ice to hold on him. “Wait until I bitch him out.”

“Please do.” His head dropped again. “I feel so bad.”

“Ah Frank.” Ellen hunched down closer to him. “It’s all right.”

“El.” He raised his eyes. “Could you just . . . hold me.”

Ellen’s expression dropped and she stood straight up. “Frank, you’re an asshole.”

“What?” His head sprang up. “What did I do?”

“You had me. You had me up until you said ‘hold me’ When do you

ever say that?" She grabbed the wet towel and tossed it at him. "What is wrong with you. I should have known. When do you whine? Now, what really happened? And tell me the truth."

"Robbie and I were fooling around. Having fun."

She gasped outward. "I knew it." As she tried to step back, Frank reached for her pulling Ellen to him and she landed on his lap. "Frank."

"This will make me feel better El." He swung her legs over his.

"Frank." She struggled to get from his lap.

"Shh." Frank watched his own hand as it moved to her leg and slowly up it, he grinned then shifted his views to Ellen who stared. He softened his voice. "You're not trying to get away." Frank swallowed "Why?"

"I like . . ." She watched his hand creep to her thigh. "I like . . ." It slid around to the side and her eyes moved to meet Frank's. "I like this."

"Good." His other hand moved up her back and his fingers gripped behind her neck. "I like this too." Moving his body up and Ellen into him, Frank brought his hand from her leg to Ellen's face and softly spread his fingers across her cheek. "I like this a lot." Tilting his head sideways, he brushed the tip of his nose against hers as he playfully moved his parted lips in for a tease kiss. He pulled back, snickered, closed his eyes and brought his face closer to Ellen's.

"Frank!" Joe called out.

"Uh!" Frank's head pulled back immediately from being startled. "Fuck Dad. Thanks a lot."

"Sorry." Joe stepped in with Jason. "We're ready."

So excited Ellen jumped from Frank's lap. "Oh I've been waiting for this. Jason told me all about it."

Joe hurried and looked at Jason. "You did, did you?"

Ellen held her hands in a prayer fashion. "Can I stay Joe, please, please, please. Oh can I stay. I won't make a sound. I won't make a noise. Please, please, please can I . . ."

"Ellen!" Joe hollered. "Christ. Stay. Sit at your desk now!"

"Thanks." Ellen smiled and moved to behind her desk. "Not a word." She pretended to lock her lips closed.

"All right. Frank stay seated. Jason . . ." Joe instructed. "Shut that door. We'll do this in here." He heard Ellen giggle. "Ellen."

"Sorry Joe." She held up her hand. "I'm excited."

Frank looked up at Jason. "Now remember, this might not be easy. I have a very strong mind. And don't try anything funny."

Joe's head snapped back to Ellen who laughed again. "Last warning Ellen."

"Sorry Joe." She hunched in her chair. "I'll be good. I promise."

Ellen still laughed. Despite the fact that she was verbally chastised and nearly bodily thrown from her very own office, she still laughed. She didn't think Jason would be able to do it. Actually it took Jason several attempts to put Frank under, but he did. And when Jason started talking to Frank, that's when Ellen couldn't hold back. And that's when Joe tossed her out. It should have bothered Ellen, it didn't. She headed to the clinic to share the funny story with Dean. Amusing herself the whole way. Having to stop in the street to laugh, then to do that little dance she does to stop herself from having to go to the bathroom anymore.

She giggled like a mad woman walking up the steps to the clinic, stopping to smudge her finger prints on the just cleaned glass doors. She knew Dean would be there, they had decided to stay away from the mobile on this day--a break--and do of their work what they could in town. But right now, Dean was working on clinic stuff and Ellen knew that. He probably was bored and needed a time out, what better way to break his monotony than to tell him something about Frank that he'd really enjoy.

She stood in the doorway watching him. He worked at the far back counter, his lab coat doing that Batman thing as he moved back and forth. Finally when he stopped Ellen snuck up to him. She wrapped her arms around his waist, resting her chin on his shoulder. "Guess who?" She kissed him on the cheek.

Dean removed her arms. "I'm busy."

Ellen looked down at her hands. Hands that a second earlier were flush against his chest. "What's wrong?"

Dean turned only his head back, looked at her for a second and returned to his work.

The look in his eyes said it all to Ellen. "All right." She held up her hand. "Now I know I didn't do anything. At least I don't think I did. Gees, for the past few hours I've been in containment." She received no response. "Let me think. What did I do today? What does Dean get mad at Ellen about?"

"This is not a joke. I'm pissed."

"When aren't you anymore?"

"Why are you here?"

"Obviously it's to fight now. What did I do?"

"One word." Dean faced her. "Frank."

"That's an awful big word. What about Frank? What did I do today with Frank . . ." She snapped her fingers. "I know. You're mad that I had breakfast with him."

Dean shook his head totally annoyed with her.

"You're not mad that I had breakfast with him?" She watched him turn his back again to her. "You didn't know." She saw his eyes shift back at her. "O.K., I'm getting somewhere. You're mad *now* that I had breakfast with him? You're mad that I . . ." She shut up when he turned his head and gave

a scolding stare. "Dean, are you sure you're going blind and not mute because I'm not getting anywhere with you."

"Ellen knock it off. Just leave. Go find Frank. You *are* having the understanding with him now. I'm temporary, so do me a favor and leave me alone."

"Why don't you do me a favor Dean. Why don't you flag the fuckin door when you're mad at me so I can avoid walking in here unarmed. Hell . . ." She tossed her hands up. "Where you get this shit from is beyond me. And you know what? I'm not even justifying anything you just said with a comment, because you are ridiculous. I come in here with every intention of lightening your day. To make you laugh and you yell at me." He stood silent looking at her. "And now, now you stare at me! What's the matter Dean, can't you focus?"

"See!" Dean finally spoke up again--loud. "See how you get so low, and throw my sight in my face? And you wonder why I don't trust you."

"No Dean, I never wonder why you don't trust me. I've fucked you over once too many times and you think I'm doing that now." She lifted her shoulders. "I thought I wasn't. I guess I am. But could you do me a favor, could you give me the exact details so I can actually do it. If I'm going to be accused of dogging you. I'd like to at least enjoy fucking you over like I did when I was with Frank."

Dean clenched his fist and rumbled a growl of frustration before slamming his hand. "Do you enjoy that? Do you enjoy being that much of a bitch?"

Ellen stormed to him. "Not as much as you enjoy being that much of a dick. And you know what Dean? You make Frank look like a saint."

"Ellen who the hell are you kidding? Jesus Christ himself could walk in this lab and you'd tell him he looks bad compared to Frank."

"I can't believe you just said something like that. That is really blasphemous."

Dean laughed loudly at her remark. "And that comment is coming from the woman who is personally seeing that Beginnings is becoming another Sodom and Gomorrah?"

Ellen shrieked. "I'm leaving."

"Go."

"I'm going."

"Good."

His loud, long clearing of his throat, followed by a snicker was all Frank had to do. But then of course he wouldn't be Frank if he didn't have something smart to say. "Is it my imagination or are the love sparks just flying about in this room."

Ellen turned to look at Frank. "Hi Frank." She smiled, her demeanor changing, and then as her top lip quivered from hiding her laughter she ran to the other counter.

Dean saw her do this. "I thought you were leaving."

"Nope." Ellen shook her head. "I have to stay. Especially now. Say hello to Frank. Say Hi to Frank, Dean."

"No I'm not saying 'hi' to him." Dean looked at Frank. "Why are you here?"

"To see El. Like it's any of your business." Frank walked in. "We having lunch today together?"

"Not today." Ellen pretended to work. "I'm having lunch with Henry. I won't see him until later. Remember he works late in Mechanics on Thursdays."

"That's right. Robbie's coming over after his flight for dinner. We have to fatten him up you know. So you'll be at the house with the kids tonight with me?"

"Until Dean picks them up. Then I'll stay with you and Nick. Huh Dean, tell Frank you'll pick the kids up."

"He knows I'm picking him up." Dean commented.

"Tell him again."

"No Ellen. He knows." Dean grew irritated.

Ellen huffed in frustration. "Who knows?"

"Ellen." Dean snapped. "You've been hanging around him too much. And can you two take this conversation somewhere else. I'm busy."

"Dean." Ellen shifted her eyes to Frank. "Tell Frank about why . . ."

"No." Dean turned to him. "I'm not telling him anything. Just go."

"Not tell who anything?" Ellen quizzed.

Dean's eyes widened. "What is wrong with you? This is a payback for our fight isn't it?"

"What were we fighting about? Better yet. Who were we fighting about?"

"El." Frank called her. "I'm heading out. I'll see you at home tonight. And don't cook!" He instructed. "Robbie's eating with us. And . . . Dean, I want you to know, I did that hypnotizing shit. It worked. I'm fine. Tomorrow is your turn."

"Swell." Dean shook his head.

"Frank." Ellen raced out. "Don't go, stay."

"I have to go El." Frank smiled. "Robbie has an appointment with Andrea to get on this protein stuff and I want to be there to go over an exercise and build up program for him with her. Unless . . ." He leaned down to her ear. "You tell me you want to go back over to containment in your office and pick up where my Dad interrupted." He laughed when he heard Dean slam something. "What's the matter Dean?"

"Go away." Dean said "Bother someone else."

Ellen held on to Frank's arm. "Frank don't go. I . . . I uh need your help, Dean's too. Dean?" She let go of Frank. "I'm gonna play a word association game with my survivors. Can you help? Frank stay." She hurried and grabbed a notebook. "O.K.." She held her pencil ready and looking sneaky. "What is another word for hotdog?"

"Weiner." Dean answered and rolled his eyes at Frank's snickering. "What? You know another one?"

"Yeah." He said. "A Frank. Ha, see how good I am at this."

"Aw." Ellen whined. "Let's try it again. Dean, what is a one syllable word for when you are short with some one . . ."

"Dick." Frank yelled out.

"No." Ellen told him. "Let me finish. It's when you try to explain something and you explain it in a short way."

Dean shrugged his shoulders even though he wasn't up for her word game. "I don't know."

"Come on Dean." Ellen beckoned. "Think, one syllable. All right, finish this sentence. I need to be honest with you, can I be quite . . ."

Frank snapped his fingers. "I know. Straight forward."

Dean gasped. "What is wrong with you? She said one syllable you idiot."

"Dean!" Frank yelled.

"Frank!" Dean snapped back.

"I love you Dean."

From Dean's dropped open mouth, came Ellen's shriek of laughter followed by a 'thump' when her head hit the counter. Stunned, Dean stepped to Frank. "W . . . what?"

"Huh?" Frank asked back.

"What did you just say to me?"

"When?"

"Just now." Dean said.

"I didn't say anything."

"You did too." Dean argued.

"I did not." Frank shifted.

"Frank . . ."

"I love you Dean."

Again Ellen shrieked and laughed and Dean spun to her then back to Frank. "You did it again."

"What?"

"Frank you just . . ."

"I love you Dean."

"See!" Dean held out his hand. "You said it again."

"Said what?" Frank began to get annoyed.

"What you just said."

"I didn't say anything! Man are you fuckin gone. No wonder everyone is talking about your nervous condition, wait until they hear that you're hearing voices now too." Frank shook his head and walked over to a laughing Ellen. "See Dean, even Ellen can't take you serious. I'll see you later El." He bent down to kiss her.

Ellen could barely speak, barely catch her breath. Holding her stomach she turned her cheek for Frank to kiss. "Bye Frank."

Shaking his head, Frank backed up. He started to leave, stopped, looked once more at Dean, shook his head and then finally left.

Dean's mouth still hung open. "What the hell was that all about? I know you heard that."

"We're fighting remember. I don't know what I heard." Ellen walked to the door.

"El . . ."

"Bye Dean."

"El."

"I came to see what I wanted to see and now I must leave. I'll see--no pun intended--you later." She let out a 'whew' from her laughter and halted at the door holding up her hand. "I will leave you with this to ponder about until you pick up the kids tonight at Frank's. What did Frank do today? What was I trying to get you to do? And when you finally inadvertently did what I was trying to get you to do, what happened when you finally did it? Figure it out." With a wiggle of her fingers, another snicker, Ellen left the lab.

Dean ran his hands through his hair and then tossed his hands up. "She forgot to say 'riddle me this'." Backing up, Dean reached for a stool and grabbed a piece of paper. "Now what did she just say?" Thinking about it, Dean wrote down Ellen's clues so he could try to make heads or tails out of what she said so he could make heads or tails out of what just transpired with Frank in his lab. While writing down and thinking back, Dean began to laugh.

(2)

Dinner was nearly done, Robbie would be there shortly, Dean was going to be late getting the kids. Everything was ready for a family dinner. So where was Ellen? Frank wondered. What in the world was taking her so long to bathe Alexandra. He knew Alex was fighting about getting a bath, but did Ellen need to be up there that long? Frank knew what *he* did when Alex started her whining. Fill the tub, take off her clothes, toss her in and get her out. Five minutes tops. Of course doing it Frank-style meant getting wet.

Wanting to have everyone together, Frank finished the drink he wanted to sneak in before Ellen came down and he went up to find her. Outside the bathroom door he heard the reason for the delay. The bathtub water wasn't running, the shower was. The water-muffled two voices told him what was happening. Wanting to hear what they could possibly have to ramble on about, Frank walked into the bathroom silently, closing the door he crept through, and sitting down, using the commode as a seat. He placed his elbows on his knees leaning toward the shower curtain. Listening to Ellen and Alex--mother and daughter--cackling like little girls, and

obviously taking a shower together. That must have been the only way Ellen could convince Alexandra to get clean. Frank enjoyed the moment, really enjoyed it. Especially when Ellen would give her 'Ellen' tips to her daughter. Keeping in his snicker of enjoyment, he closed his eyes and took in the moment listening.

"See Alex, you put your leg on the edge of the tub like this." Ellen showed her daughter. "Watch Mommy shave her leg and do the same. Only yours isn't a real razor. You have to live with those hairy things still for a while." Ellen shaved and her daughter mocked with her own fake razor.

"The water is dripping in my eyes." Alexandra spoke of her wet hair.

"Mine too. Usually I save the hair washing for last, but you jumped the gun. Here, give me your razor. Final washing time." Ellen took her daughters razor, and her own and set them down. "Little tip Alex, always use the guys razor. They bitch every time." Ellen giggled and so did Alex. "Now we are gonna wash every part of our body. It's important to stay clean. The secret to living a successful life in a post-apocalyptic world is to . . . never mind. You're a woman, all woman are successful. There really isn't that many of us. Hell, look at Jenny Matoose, men love her. Go figure."

"Mommy, where did you get that scar." Alex pointed to Ellen's stomach where she had her cesarean section.

"This one?" Ellen handed Alex the soap. "Your father knifed me. Yep, got real mad at me and stuck a knife in my stomach.."

"Did it hurt?" Alex asked as she washed up.

"Real bad. Especially when he tried to remove my stomach." Ellen nodded. "Boy was he mad."

"Did Uncle Frank ever try to take out your stomach?"

"No, Uncle Frank does worse. He just steals my heart instead." The sudden flinging open of the shower curtain made both Alexandra and Ellen shriek. "Frank!" Ellen scolded. "Quick Alex, cover your private parts. Frank, go away!"

Frank grinned as he shifted his eyes down to Ellen, rubbing his fingers over the bottom of his goatee. "Dinner is done."

Alexandra peeked out from behind Ellen's back. "Uncle Frank? Are you staring at Mommy's scar."

"Oh yeah." Frank said then looked at Alex. "Let's go Alex." He grabbed a towel. "Let's get your little naked butt out of this shower and dressed for dinner."

"O.K." She edged her way to Frank letting him wrap the towel around her and lift her from the tub.

"Go get dressed." He ran his hand down her hair. "Hurry." He listened as Alex left, to the water stopping. "Need a towel El?"

"Please." Ellen stood in there waiting for the reaching arm. Nothing. She poked her head out. "Frank?"

Frank held the towel, but waited for her.

"Be nice." She held out her hand, covering herself with the shower

curtain.

"You know El." Frank stepped to her. "You bathed with my brother. You could shower with me."

"I could, could I?"

"Yep." Frank lifted the shower curtain. "Make cleanliness a Slagel thing."

"Stop that." She smacked his hand away. "Behave. Go down stairs."

"I'm being good." He handed her the towel. "See you down stairs." He winked at her, touched her face gently and moved to the door. "Oh and El? Thanks."

"For what?"

"Just . . . thanks." Giving her a closed mouth look he opened the bathroom door and left.

Ellen shook her head, tossing the towel around her. "Only Frank would say 'thanks' after being a peeping tom." She stepped from the shower, that thought on her mind. But little did she know Frank seeing her naked was far from what he thanked her for.

(3)

Robbie was walking in the door when Frank reached the bottom of the steps. He peeked around then smiled to Frank. "Why is it so quiet?"

"Shh." Frank held up his hands. "You'll set off the jinx factor. The kids are upstairs. Come on in."

"What smells good?"

"Dinner." Frank was less than descriptive.

"Wow, really?"

Shaking his head at his brother Frank moved to the diningroom. "Let me just finish putting out the plates . . . and." He stopped when he walked by the cradle, he spun around to Robbie, a slight worried look upon his face. "You haven't seen Nick yet have you?"

"No." Robbie grinned. "Is he awake, can I hold him?"

"Yeah but don't say anything about the way he looks."

"What? Is he ugly?"

"No!" Frank snapped. "Just don't say anything."

With his hands in his pockets, Robbie walked to the cradle and peeked in at the baby whose back faced him. "Look at all the hair he has. Man . . . not even Joey had that much hair."

"Yeah well, that's a gripe of mine. . . .OK." Frank tugged at his arm. "You've seen enough."

"Wait, I want to . . ." Robbie screamed, loudly too, and it was followed by probably the most belly sustained laugh that he had in quite long time. "Oh my God Frank."

"Enough." Frank covered his own face with his hand.

"Oh my God Frank." Robbie reached into the cradle and lifted Nick. "He's . . . he's . . ."

"He's what!?"

"He's Japanese!" Laughing one more single loud laugh, Robbie held Nick. "What did I tell you? I told you and told you those two were banging. But no, you didn't believe me when I said that did you. Now who's the one who's . . ."

"Give me your kid." Frank snatched Nick off of him.

"Your kid? Frank? Look at him."

"Yeah well his name is Nick Slagel."

"But his genealogy is Kusakari."

"But the genealogy part of him can't fuckin even burp him let alone have him for more than three hours." Frank laid his lips to the baby's head. "So there."

"Henry's all right with this? He let's you play Dad to his kid?"

"What do you mean 'play Dad' I am being a Dad to this kid." Frank said defensively. "I look at him as if he's mine."

"And you don't see Henry?" Robbie snickered. "Sorry." He held up his hand.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Frank laid Nick back down.

"So when will Henry want him back? You know so he can be the Dad."

"Never. It's a share thing. Only right now, Henry prefers to let me have control until he gets older, than he says he'll participate more."

Robbie nodded, he saw the reason in that. "Understandable. He wants to wait until he sleeps through the night."

"Nick better sleep through the night by the time Henry wants to raise him, because I have a feeling Nick will be pushing eighteen by the time that happens." As he covered Nick, his raised eyes saw Ellen standing behind Robbie. "Hey El." Frank smiled. "Robbie was making fun of our kid."

"Dick." Ellen shoved Robbie. "He's cute isn't he."

"He looks like Henry." Robbie commented. "Exactly like Henry. I hope to God he doesn't whine and stomp and pout like Henry when he gets older."

Frank shook his head with a huff. "You think I'll let him get like that? El, will I let him . . ." His question to Ellen stopped when he heard the knock at the door. The light knock. Frank flung back his head and moaned. "Dean."

Ellen giggled. "I'll get it. You get dinner."

"No." Frank stopped her. "Don't answer it, we're all having dinner. I'll get it and send him away, he's early."

Shrugging, Ellen let Frank go past, then her and Robbie watched as he opened the door.

"Go away." Frank said as he opened it then shut it. As he turned from the door there was another knock. "Dean!"

"Fra . . . um." Dean held up his finger. "Why are you being so rude?"

"You're early. We didn't eat yet. Go away I'll bring them to you later." Frank told him.

"I'm not here to get them. I need to speak to you. Can I come in?" Dean peeked his head in.

"Aw." Frank stomped. "For a second." He held the door wider.

"Thanks." Dean smiled and stepped in. "Robbie. Ellen."

After Robbie's hello, Ellen placed on a bitch face. "Dick."

Dean's smile dropped. "What was that?"

Robbie answered for her. "She said Dick. As in a short name for Richard. Another name for a penis or you. Or me for that matter. It's her word of the day. Don't feel bad Dean I was just called it too." He grunted when he received his nudge from Ellen.

With a 'hmm' Dean stepped further into the livingroom. "I won't take up too much of your time Fra . . . uh . . ." Dean cleared his throat after stumbling in his words. "Anyhow. You came to the lab this afternoon."

Frank nodded. "Yeah. Is that what you wanted. Bye." He reached for the door.

"Not so fast." Dean stopped him. "You said I heard things today."

"You did."

| "I don't know about that Fra . . . um, I don't know."

"Dean. You're the one who's fuckin going nuts, not me. You heard things."

About that point in the conversation, Robbie edged his way to the kitchen whispering to Ellen as he passed her. "I'm finishing setting the table. I can tell this is going to be a nowhere conversation."

"Robbie wait, you'll . . ." Ellen pouted then shrugged. "Miss it." She grinned, crossed her arms and stepped closer to Frank and Dean.

Dean continued. "You said you were hypnotized this afternoon?"

"Yep." Frank answered.

"Do you remember anything about it?"

"I remember it all. He put me under, woke me up. Hell, I didn't even think I was hypnotized, they said I was." Frank lifted his shoulders then dropped them. "Is that all. You're interrupting my family time."

"One more thing. I have to know. I think I have it."

"Have what?"

"This . . ." Dean held up his hand to an impatient Frank. "Ready . . ." A slight silent pause and Dean said the next word with such clarity and pronunciation. "Frank."

"I love you Dean."

Dean's shriek, Ellen's outburst and Robbie's breaking of glass when he heard that from the kitchen.

Frank looked at Dean then Ellen. "What? Ready for what? And Robbie what the fuck did you break in there?"

Dean clapped his hands together. "I knew it."

"Knew what?"

Dean snickered. "One more time . . . Frank."

"I love you Dean."

Robbie raced into the livingroom. "What the hell is that?"

Frank spun to him. "What?"

"You." Robbie told him. "Why are you saying that to Dean?"

"Saying what?"

Robbie looked at Ellen who laughed so hard he knew he wasn't getting an answer out of her, he then looked to Dean for one. "Dean?"

"O.K." Dean caught his breath. "Your brother was hypnotized. I think they put a post hypnotic suggestion into his brain. I knew they did. El, did they?" They all watched Ellen walk from the room. "Anyhow, when I say . . . Frank."

"I love you Dean."

Dean joined Robbie in laughing. "See Robbie."

Frank tossed his hands in the air. "See what? They didn't put any post what ever in my brain. No way. I'd know."

Dean raised his eyebrows. "Frank."

"I love you Dean."

Robbie gave the high squeal laugh then shoved Dean playfully. "You have to knock it off. It is way too much."

Frank had listened to all he wanted to. "Enough! What is going on . . . Ellen!" He called into the kitchen for her.

Robbie decided--because he knew Frank would believe him--to be the one to tell him. "Jason must have put a suggestion into you. So that every time . . . what is it Dean? When you say his name?" Robbie got an agreement from Dean. "When Dean says your name. You Frank, you tell Dean . . ." Robbie laughed. "You tell him you love him."

"I do not . . . Ellen!"

"Say his name Dean." Robbie requested.

Just as Dean opened his mouth, Frank's hand pummeled down covering it. "Ellen!" He looked horrified. "El!"

Finally calming herself enough to come out of the kitchen, Ellen walked into the livingroom. "Oh what now Frank?"

"Is . . . is this true. Do I tell Dean that I love him when he says my name."

"Afraid so Frank. But its only . . ."

"Fuck!" Frank shouted as loud as he could. "Fuck! I fuckin knew he'd make me gay. How did I knew he was going to do that?" Frank walked in fast circles. "And not only am I gay, but I'm in love with Dean! Uh!"

Ellen tried to calm him. "It's a joke Frank. They'll remove it tomorrow."

"No. They'll remove it now! I am not spending the rest of my night gay. Robbie . . . get Dean out of here. I don't want to have him say something else that triggers me kissing him."

Ellen edged on more. "Oh he already said that, you kissed him twice already."

Frank's eyes widened. "When?"

"Just now." Ellen answered. "Don't you remember?"

Looking even worse, Frank ran to the diningroom and picked up the phone and began to dial.

Dean had his enjoyment for the evening. "I'd better go. Now for sure I feel safe in letting them mess with my mind. Thanks Robbie and Ellen." He walked to the door. "I'll get the kids in an hour or so when I finish at the lab." He turned around listening to Frank bitch at Godrichson on the phone. "Uh Frank?"

Frank lowered the phone. "I love you Dean."

With a snicker, Dean walked through the door. "Thanks." Shaking his head, he left.

With a beep of the cellular phone, Frank walked over to Robbie and Ellen who tried to look as if they weren't enjoying the moment. "He's coming over in an hour." He checked out their faces. "What?"

Robbie lifted his hand. "Don't look at me. I'm offended by all this. El?"

"Me too. To think, this really throws a monkey wrench into the Dean, Frank and Ellen triangle."

"Ha, ha, ha." Frank said snidely. "Very funny. Well it's over in an hour. And I'm not letting Dean in the door. Also, you lied El. There was nothing put in my head to make me kiss Dean."

"Oh Frank." She sounded so somber. "I am so sorry." She shrugged and smiled. "Oh Well. Can we eat? I'll get the kids." Quick, before she could get in anymore trouble she dashed in between Frank and Robbie and to the steps.

Frank pointed to the kitchen. "I'll just put dinner on the table."

"In case I don't tell you.." Robbie grinned. "Thanks Frank."

"For what?"

"This is turning out to be a great evening. I get my understanding time, sort of, with Ellen. I get a meal. I find out my new nephew is Japanese and to top it all off . . . I find out my brother is in love with his exwife's exhusband." Robbie snickered. "You gotta love Beginnings."

(4)

"Damn it." Henry cursed when the tiniest of screws slipped from his fingers and rolled down to the floor. He set down the soldering iron on its stand and bent down to the floor in search of an object he thought for sure he wouldn't find. And he had better find it too. Metals told him making those tiny screws were a pain in the ass and they weren't going to do it if Henry kept insisting on dropping them.

Henry didn't see it, nor did he expect to. So he had to do it, he had to

break down and pull it out. He walked over to his closet in Mechanics and pulled out the metal detector. How many times that instrument came in handy when he would lose a screw outside. How every time he put the detector on he would think back to the old world and when he wouldn't think twice if he lost a screw. And now everything, no matter what, it was never was wasted in Beginnings. If it was of no more use in one way, it was either conformed or made to be used in another way.

'Beep' it went off in Henry's ear and he bent back down to the floor over where his metal detector hovered. There it was, and not only that tiny screw but another one as well. Thinking that the screws were probably on their way to that special place where all lost objects go and are never found again, Henry scooted out from under his work bench banging his head on it as he jumped to his feet when his Mechanics door burst open and Jenny Matoose yelled.

"There he is!" She belted out.

Holding his head whining from the pain, Henry thought he had lost consciousness and slipped into some dream state. Was there a raid? Why was Jenny Matoose raiding his Mechanics office? Slowly he turned around.

"Let's get him!" Jenny yelled pointing at Henry.

Henry screamed when she and Ben came racing to him. "What?"

"Hold still Henry." Jenny told him. "Ben, get out that measuring tape now. We have him."

"Wait a second." Henry stepped back as Ben held the tape to him. "Go away. I told Ellen I would do this tomorrow."

"I'm not Ellen Henry and I don't believe you. For some reason you keep putting this off and putting this off. It takes ten seconds. Hold still." Jenny held on to a wiry Henry.

Ben tsked as he knelt before Henry. "You are gonna have to hold him a little more still. Henry." Ben raised his eyes to him. "I'm going in for the inseam now. Are you sure you want to jiggle around."

Henry stopped moving.

"Good boy." Ben told him. "Now is this all that painful." Ben took a measurement and wrote down. He then stood up and grabbed Henry's arm, extending it.

"Jenny can you let me go now?" Henry demanded. "Thank you. I'm getting measured. All right. Why you had to accost me is beyond me."

"You were putting it of." Jenny told him.

"I would have done it tomorrow." Henry said back.

"Done." Ben stopped measuring. "We can leave the nervous groom alone."

"Love to." Jenny walked toward the door with Ben. "Oh and Henry, There isn't much time. Reverend Bob says you didn't even schedule a marriage class yet."

"Not much time?" Henry scoffed. "Jenny we have months."

"No we don't. We thought we would, but things are coming along

nicely. Right Ben.”

“So true.” Ben added.

“See Henry. And everyone one is excited and they want to push this thing through.” Jenny opened the door, allowed Ben to walk through first then turned back to say an annoying goodbye to Henry. It was when she did that, that she noticed he had turned toward his work bench, laid his hand upon it and stared down. Jenny’s voice dropped the enthusiastic, sarcastic tone. “Everyone is excited Henry. Are you?”

Henry turned his head to her. “Yeah . . . I am.”

“Please act it. This is the first event like this in Beginnings and we’re all working so hard. Ellen, whether she wants to admit it or not, is excited, I can tell. It’s just that so much work is going into it.”

“Where are you going with this Jenny?” Henry asked.

“If you aren’t going to go through with this Henry, say so soon. Please say so soon.” Jenny received silence back and then walked through the door of mechanics.

Henry clenched his knuckles even harder against the surface of that table. Staring down he could see the white on his fingers as he clenched them. “Why can’t I be more excited about this Why?” He asked himself in total frustration. His mind spun on how everything became so different so fast. A month earlier he thought he was married to Ellen, he was happy. He loved calling her his wife. But now Henry stood there on total debate of ever calling her that again. His mind and his heart were full of the reasons for it, but they flew around him so fast that he couldn’t grasp a single one of those reasons. Knowing right there that all thoughts and concentration for his work were gone for the night, Henry decided to pack it up and just go get Ellen early, because that’s what he really needed to do.

There was something old-world about the night, Henry noticed as he walked to Frank’s house. At almost every house he passed someone was sitting out on the porch. Talking to the person sitting on the porch next to them. It was an epidemic that spread that night. It was hot. Henry himself preferred to stay in where the air conditioning was, but that was Henry, always wanting to be cold.

He heard the laughing as he rounded the last row of house. That unmistakable deep laugh, Frank, told Henry he too had jumped on the band wagon and sat outside.

“There he is.” Ellen’s excited voice carried to him.

Henry looked at her with a smile as he saw Ellen walking quickly his way. “Hey El.” He gave her an embrace as soon as he met up with her. His embrace took her a little by surprise. “How was your night?”

“Fine.” Ellen kissed him on the cheek. “I’m ready to go home.”

“Good.” Henry broke from the embrace and took her hand walking over to where Frank sat on the porch. “Hey. How’s the baby?”

“Sleeping.” Frank lifted a glass to his lips. “Why, you wanna take him

home tonight?”

“Oh no, not tonight Frank.” Henry explained. “I have him tomorrow night, remember? Anyhow, why is everyone sitting outside?”

Ellen grew excited as she gripped Henry’s hand. “Jason said there was going to be a meteor shower tonight. We’re all waiting. But nothing has happened yet.”

Henry looked oddly at her. “How does Jason know that? He’s kidding all of you.”

“I told you El.” Frank spoke loud. “There’s fuckin something wrong with the guy. Henry, he made me gay tonight. Gay. And I loved Dean for a little bit.” Frank shuddered. “Did you know about that?”

“That you were gay for a while?” Henry asked. “Oh sure Frank. Everyone knew.”

“Man, the power of hypnosis.” Frank shook his head. “You knew it has to be strong if it got me.”

Ellen released Henry’s hand. “I’m going to say goodbye to the baby. I’ll be right back out.”

Henry nodded watching her walk into the house then watching Frank lift his glass again. “What are you drinking Frank?”

“Why?”

“Frank.”

“I’m having a drink Henry. El knows. One drink.”

“Has it been, or is it going to be, your only drink tonight Frank?”

Frank closed his eyes and let out a breath, as he started to talk, the screen door opened and Ellen walked back out.

“I’m ready.” She ran her hand over Frank’s head as she stepped by him. “Ready Henry?”

“Um . . .” Henry looked down to Frank. “El, do you wanna hang out here for a while and wait to see if Jason is right?”

“No, I’m pretty tired Henry. Can we go?” Ellen looked back at Frank. “You really don’t want us hanging around anyhow, do you Frank?”

“Nope.” Frank shook his head. “To be honest. I need a Henry-break. He’s so hyper. How do you live with the guy.” He stood up. “I’m heading in anyhow. Night El.” He leaned forward kissing Ellen on the cheek. “Thanks for tonight. I had a great night.” Closing his mouth tightly with a smile, Frank raised his eyebrows in a goodnight gestures and with his glass in hand, turned and went back into his house.

“Ready Henry?” Ellen asked him as he just stared at Frank’s door. “Henry?” She snapped her finger in front of him.

“Should we leave El?”

“Of course we should.” She told him pulling his hand and pulling at him. “Let’s go home. Henry, I just got out of quarantine, you promised to spend this evening with me.”

“You’re right.”

“What’s wrong Henry?”

Henry's head dropped as they walked.

"Did something happen tonight?"

"Aside from the fact that Jenny accosted me and made Ben measure me in my office?"

Ellen giggled. "She didn't."

"She did. I felt so violated El."

"Aw Henry I'm sorry. You should have been at Frank's tonight. It would have made you happy. You should have seen it Henry. Frank telling Dean he loved him."

"I'm sorry I missed it." Henry smiled. "I bet it was funny."

"It really was." Ellen noticed the less-than-genuine smile. "Henry what is it?"

"It's Frank El."

"What, what happened." She stopped walking. "Were you two fighting. Did something happen this past week when you were living together? He didn't make a pass at you Henry did he? I mean he was gay for a while."

"No." Henry said with a chuckle. "That's not it."

"Well what is it?"

"He . . . he's drinking El."

Ellen waved him off. "He always drinks." She started them walking again. "It's O.K. to have one. I told him that. Don't be silly Henry, he's doing so good with it. Right?"

"El . . ."

"Henry." Ellen stopped walking. "He is doing good with it right? Don't tell me he broke his promise to me."

Henry opened his mouth to speak but stopped. Telling Ellen that Frank did indeed break his promise, not mildly but majorly wasn't going to help matters at that moment. If he wanted to help Frank, making Ellen mad at him wouldn't do it, it would only make matters worse. "You're right El. Maybe I'm overreacting."

"Of course you are Henry, you're just concerned for your friend. So am I."

Ellen wasn't kidding when she told Henry that. Throwing his arm around her neck and pulling Ellen to him, Henry closed his eyes and laid his lips to her cheek for a long time as they walked. And if Ellen realized how much concern Henry had over every aspect of Frank's life, she would realize how much it was taking over every aspect of Henry's.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

JULY 24

(1)

"Take a deep breath." Jason spoke in his soft voice, it's hypnotic factor ringing through as they sat in Andrea's little office. Joe behind Andrea's desk. Frank to the back--arms folded--and Jason standing before a sitting Dean. "Where are you now Dean?"

"I'm . . . at the window with Ellen." He spoke slow, his eyes closed.

"And what are you two doing?"

"Ellen's bitching." Dean smiled. "She's hungry. We're getting ready to eat Frank's stew." His head twitched.

"What is it?" Jason asked.

"A note. A note. El? Where did this come from?"

Joe stood up quietly and leaned toward Jason. "I thought you said you were tapping into his memory. You said nothing about sending him back there." He spoke in a whisper.

"I didn't send him back there Joe. You heard me." Jason held his hand up. "Dean?"

Dean jumped in his chair.

"Dean." Jason called to him. "What do you see?"

"Bill's dead. El, we have to get out." His head turned from side to side. "The banging, the banging. Who's banging?"

Jason took notes. "Dean, watch it from a third party. Step back. You're watching your . . ." Jason watched Dean jolt again then hold out his hand. "Dean." Jason used a firmer voice. "Step back. What's happening?"

"I just . . . I just shot Moses. No!" Dean's head flung to the side.

Joe grew with concern. "He's slipping into that. Is this safe?"

"It happens." Jason answered. "The books said it was safe but we have to pull him out if it gets dangerous. I don't think it is."

For the first time, Frank spoke. "Pull him out. We'll try another time."

"Ellen." Dean called out weakly his body shuddered in the chair and his head dropped forward.

Jason shook his head and moved closer to Dean. "Dean. Dean answer me. Dean remove yourself from it. What do you see. Where are you Dean."

A long breath came from Dean. "I'm on the floor. I can't move. My eyes, my eyes are blurry. I can feel the blood."

"Where is Ellen?"

"I hear her. Oh God I hear her screaming. I can't do anything about it. I can't move. Someone help her! Help her!" He let out a short breath. "El."

"Is she there Dean? So you see her?"

"In the door way." Dean said. "El . . . I see her. No! No! He got her. Fight El."

"Who has her Dean?" Jason questioned. "Focus in. Who has Ellen?"

Frank paid even more attention. "Come on."

"It's not . . . I can't make out his face, he's behind Ellen. Moses."

Frank tossed his head downward. "Son of a bitch. It was Moses." He felt so defeated until he heard Dean say, 'Moses is there too.' Frank snapped his attention to Jason. "Ask him if Moses is the one that has her?"

"Dean." Jason called out. "Does Moses have Ellen? Is Moses the one that has Ellen?"

"No, Moses is the one next to him . . . No, bring her back. They're leaving."

"Who are they? Moses and who?"

"I can't make out who it . . ." A deep grunt, loud and strong came from Dean and his head fell forcefully forward. After a silent second of hypnosis, Dean frightened the three of them into a jolt when he gasped inward loudly and his head flung back and his eyes rolled behind his head. Dean's hands gripped the arms of the chair, and he struggled with all of his breath.

"Pull him out of there." Frank spoke strong. "Pull him out Now!" He raced over to Dean who held on to the chair while his body convulsed. "Dean!" Frank tossed his view to Jason. "Get him out of this thing!"

"Watch out." Jason stepped forward. "Dean. Dean listen to me. Dean!" Jason kept calling despite Dean's struggling. "Dean! Listen to me. When I count to three you will be out of it and back here in Andrea's office. One . . . two . . . Three."

Dean stopped shaking. His head returned to a normal position and he looked around the room at the three faces who stared at him. "I'm sorry." He stood up, swayed and grabbed his head.

Frank grabbed hold of him in support, thinking Dean had some repercussion of being hypnotized. "Are you all right?"

Dean's still looked fogged. He rubbed his eyes and tried to focus. His head felt like it was going to explode. "I'm sorry I couldn't help." Still off balance, Dean hurried from that office. Because hurrying from that office was hurrying from that nightmare he felt he had just had.

Joe walked from behind Andrea's desk, taking in the stunned looks of Frank and Jason. "What happened to him."

Jason shrugged "I don't know. Maybe at that point in time Dean was in traumatic pain and he relived it. It's hard to say. We can try again. He definitely saw who ever it was with Moses. But right now his mind just doesn't want to focus in on him."

Frank had his own questions. "Could something else had happened? Something else up there that he just doesn't want to remember? Because it certainly looked to me like Dean was experiencing a piece of a puzzle we didn't know we were missing."

Both Joe and Jason faced Frank, both of their interest became peeked with the new validity of Frank's brought-up point.

(2)

Ellen assumed when she heard Dean walking into the clinic lab so soon after he left, that the hypnosis session was a bust. Knowing how strong Dean's mind was, Ellen did have her doubts on whether it would actually be successful. So instead of talking about it and making Dean feel bad for being unable to do something Frank did, she continued in her gathering of things, rambling on as she did. "I have your notes already for you to take to the lab." She tossed a file in a box. "Beakers are in here, enough for you to do a mock up mass production of our agent 17. Let's see." She tapped her finger to her lips. "You should have plenty of work time at the mobile. The twins are playing with Katie, Denny is watching them, they're staying at Andrea's tonight. You know that. Good weekend Dean, huh? No kids at all for either of us." Ellen shrugged. "Of course how often do I have the twins? Isn't Joe a glutton for wanting to play super Pap tomorrow? Anyhow. Josh has Brian for you, Johnny is taking Joey . . . you're free and clear." Finally, she faced him and saw the reason for his silence. Dean slumped forward both hands held on to his head. "Dean?" She walked over to him. "I'm sorry you couldn't be hypnotized."

"I was."

"What happened?"

He raised his bloodshot eyes to her. "Not now El. My head is killing me."

"Dean are you all right?"

"No." Dean shook his head. "No I'm not."

"You went under, right?"

"Yes."

"Did you go back to that night?"

"Yes. And I'd rather not talk about it."

"Why?" Ellen asked.

"Because it doesn't make sense. None of it makes any sense."

"What doesn't make sense Dean." Ellen wanted to understand. "Did something happen when they brought you back there?"

Frank's entrance into the lab, shutting the door made Ellen and Dean both turn to him. "That's what I want to know. Are you all right Dean?"

This surprised Ellen, Frank being concern. And by Frank being concerned, Ellen knew something out of the ordinary transpired in that office. "He has a bad headache Frank."

"Dean." Frank moved to him. "You flipped out. You looked like you were struggling, And this was after you said Moses and the other man took her away. Did you see the other man?"

"Yeah I did." Dean ran his hand down his face. "But Frank, I couldn't focus on his face. I'm sorry."

"No, that's all right. We can do this again if you want. But tell me what you meant when you said 'it doesn't make sense' what doesn't?"

"You're gonna think I'm nuts."

Frank fluttered his lips. "Doubtful. Especially after what I saw you do. Tell me."

Dean shook his head. "Nothing indicated it. Nothing. I have to be wrong."

"Dean." Frank spoke calm and with reason looking at the pale face of Dean. "Tell me what you're talking about."

"It can't leave this room. Not yet. Not until go under again and see if it really happened."

"What?" Frank asked again.

"You won't believe me."

"Try me." Frank put his hands on his hips.

Dean took a breath first, looked at Ellen then Frank. "When I was under I felt like I was laying on the floor. I could feel my gunshot wound. I watched Ellen being take away. But after she was gone, this is where the strange part happened. I felt like I had another blow to my head Frank. I felt like my hair was being pulled and my head was being lifted. "Dean looked so confused when he talked. "It could have been a dream I was having at that moment. But if the hypnosis jarred my memory, then we just learned something we didn't know. Right before I blacked out I saw . . . I saw a tip of a boot." Dean lifted his head to Frank. "Someone else was in that mobile."

Frank's breath escaped him, but only for a second. What Dean said made a lot of sense. It confirmed a part of the incident. The theory his father had on there being a survivor from outside. How much easier it would have been for John Matoose if that was the case. A third party helping Moses out with Ellen, allowing John to stay in Beginnings and never be missed. The only thing that didn't make sense to Frank was why this third party kicked a down man, tried to take out a downed man. Did this person think they finished Dean off? What did he have to gain by doing it? For fun? Why waste the time to do so? Why take the chance on being caught? Unless the third party totally understood the importance and the relevance of Dean seeing more than he should have. And if that was the case, Frank was certain that Dean knew more--a lot more--then his mind was letting escape.

(3)

Ellen pulled the last velcro tab over on Nick's diaper, finishing up changing him as he lay on her bed "Done." She bent over to him, kissed him on the nose, then picked him up. "Here Henry." She walked the baby over to him. "Now he's fed, changed, bathed and good. As long as his digestive system doesn't kick into overdrive, you'll be safe until I get back home."

"Oh I'll be fine El."

"Are you sure. I won't be long."

"Positive. I'm getting good at this stuff. I practice you know." Henry looked down to Nick. "Besides, Josh is home right if I need him."

"Right. He has Brian over Frank's. Keep in mind I'm right over at Jenny's if you need me. Frank is . . . well Frank is wherever they are having that metals run meeting and Denny is three doors up."

"Got it." Henry followed her out of the bedroom. "I can do this El. I know I can."

"Of course you can Henry. I have faith in you." She turned her back to him at that moment so he really wouldn't see her doubt.

"Have fun at your meeting." Henry told her as they walked to the front door.

"I will." She faced him and kissed him. "And no doing Nick's hair."

"I won't." Henry kissed her goodbye. "Oh El? Uh . . . what can I do with him. Is there anything we can do?"

"Not really Henry. You can sit on the couch with him. Read a book or watch a tape."

"I can do that." Henry smiled with excitement. "Thanks."

"And remember. I'm right up the street."

"Got it." Confident, Henry shut the living room door. He held Nick out at arms length as he moved to the couch.. "We're gonna sit on the couch. Now. You want to?" He looked at the baby's face whose skin had pushed up from Henry's thumbs that rested on his cheek. "O.K. You sit here while I get a drink." Henry leaned toward the couch setting Nick down to sit there. He adjusted him nicely with his back against the back of the couch, "I'll be back." As Henry stepped back he watched Nick slide to his left then fall on the cushion face first. "No, no." Henry lifted him back up and tried to leave, but again Nick fell. "Shit." He re-sat Nick, moved away, watch Nick fall. "Uh-oh. Shit." Henry tapped his index finger against his lips. "What am I gonna do? You're broke already." Picking Nick up Henry ran to the door hoping to catch Ellen to see if she knew how to fix him. Because Henry wasn't about to spend the entire evening with a broken baby.

(4)

Dean couldn't believe the time when he actually arrived back at the mobile. Having set up for his mass production of agent 17, he thought for sure after dinner with his kids he would be able to get right back up to the lab and begin to work. Which would have been the case, had Henry not caught him on the way out the door. Any other interruption would have been fine had it been any other person. But Dean had to waste twenty minutes alone convincing Henry that the baby was not hurt. That he didn't

need to examine him and that Henry would cry too if he was sitting in a wet diaper. Why Henry couldn't understand that just because Ellen recently changed him didn't mean that the baby wouldn't need to be changed again. Finally after directing Henry in someone else's direction, Dean managed to get to the lab. His head was still hurting from the afternoon trip into his subconscious mind. Pounding was more like it. It didn't seem to matter what he took, the headache was not going away. Feeling that twinge of nausea begin to hit him from the pain, Dean pushed through his work, reading over his clipboard notes and mixing up his mass batch of agent 17 to test that evening.

(5)

Jenny Matoose rolled her eyes slightly and let out a long breath as her back leaned against her front door that she just closed. She spoke softly in a whisper to herself. "Please don't come back. Please, please, please don't come back." She stood upright walking into the livingroom where all the women gathered. She picked up her notebook. "Now . . ." Another outward breath. "Where were we?"

Ellen raised her hand. "Jenny, ladies, I'm sorry for the interruption. I don't think Henry will come back again. We gave him solid advice this time. Thanks Trish for the help."

"Oh." Trish waved her hand. "No problem. Hap loves babies. Especially since . . ." Trish ran her hand over her large round belly then giggled. "Anyhow, he's not doing anything tonight. I'm sure he'll help Henry out."

Jenny was hoping that was the case. "All right, since I feel we won't run the risk of any more Henry interruptions to ask us silly questions about why the baby is sleeping in the middle of the evening, we can go on. During this past week." Jenny's face took on a saddened look. "We lost, we lost one of us. Sara. Peter, Sara's secondary is not handling this well. Joe has informed me that he hasn't showed up at work all week and Andrea says he needs help. I need one of you to volunteer for comfort time with him to help him through. We're not talking relations, comfort only. Can any of you squeeze about an hour or so a day in with him?" She saw a raise of a hand. "Thanks Bev. O.K., one more. Cole has told me that Everett is being nasty again. He's being snippy with the men he works with in the field and tense. Disruptive and unbearable to work with. Last I recall, and Cole confirmed this, was someone helped him out eight months ago. Cindy, that was you. I know it's a bit to ask, any chance you helping him out?"

Cindy shook her head "I can't. My period is due tomorrow and I won't be able to help him out for at least five days, then that will run into Mike's time and he's been ill and I haven't been with him in a while. Sorry."

"That's all right." Jenny said. "Anyone else. Can anyone spare a little

time?" She heard moans. "I know he's not the most attractive of men. I would do it but John prefers I stick to helping only those out in security. Anyone?" Her shoulders dropped in relief when she saw Sissy raise her hand. "Thank you. I'll make sure he bathes and I'll have Cole plant the notion in his head about it being a hand out so you don't run into the problem Cindy did when he claimed to have fallen in love with her . . ." Jenny noticed Ellen raising her hand. "Yes Ellen?"

"I'm sorry." Ellen looked so baffled. "Please forgive me, all of you. But Jenny we aren't prostitutes. Why are you scheduling these women like they are? I don't understand."

"You do understand Ellen."

"No, really, I don't."

"Let me see if I can explain." Jenny said. "You know, there aren't that many of us. Ellen, if only eighteen of the men in this community were getting affection, then imagine what the tension would be like. There would be fighting, there would be deception. There are some things that only a woman can give to a man. Now I'm not talking sex. Because you and I know that there are men in this community who have sex with each other. These men aren't gay, they have needs. They want a woman, but can not have one at their beck and call. And them, and especially those who have no contact at all can only take so much. That's where we come in. We step in, we help out, we walk away, tension lowered. Trust me, it works."

"What do your primary's say about it. Your secondary relationships?" Ellen looked around the room as she asked. "Even those of you who have what you call extension partners. What do they say when you go off and sleep with another man just to help him out? I'm lost. Jenny, how does John handle you just going out and hooking some man up?"

"You seem so offended Ellen." Jenny said.

"No, I'm not. Trust me, who am I to pass judgement. Confused. Really confused."

"All right." Jenny held her hand up. "John doesn't see it as me going out and hooking some guy up. He sees it as me doing what I can to help out. At first, I'll be honest he didn't handle it well. I didn't handle it well. And it was all his and a few other men's suggestion. They came up with it because they felt bad that they had someone. And you can ask any of the men, it's great for their tension to be relieved, but it's another thing to have someone you can walk up to at anytime and put your arms around and have them tell you it's all right. Have someone to share your bad day or good day with. John and the others who had this felt guilty for having this. It was an act of kindness we were to think of it as. But I not only speak for myself, I speak for Melissa, Cindy, Trish and a couple others who have been here for a while. It was difficult. I would come home, I'd feel cheep enough but then I would have to deal with John who did nothing but look at me like I was some sort of whore. And I was only doing what he wanted me to do. Trust me Ellen, there is nothing more that I want than to just be with John and

John alone. I can't. You can't. None of us can. There would be more dissension amongst the men if that was the case. But we adapt, all of us. Now it seems natural. And it took that adjusting on my part and John's. John started seeing the change in the men he asked me to be with. And it wasn't that often, but when he asked, he saw the difference it made. All the men did. That's why we do occasionally go and help a man who needs it."

"How can you do that though? Walk up to him because it's requested of you, sleep with him and walk away. By all means, I am not Saint Ellen, but how can you stop yourself from feeling cheep?"

Melissa spoke up to answer. "You remove yourself from it. You don't think of it as sex. There isn't feelings there You think of it as something you have to do, a job. Like I am sure there have been times in your life as a nurse when you helped someone that you didn't like. Like those times, you help them, do what you have to do, remove yourself emotionally from it and go on. And it's not like we do this everyday. What it usually works out to be is once every other month or so. Not much."

Ellen slowly nodded her head then shook it. "I wouldn't be able to do that."

"You don't think you already do?" Jenny asked.

"I don't." Ellen said.

"You do." Jenny insisted. "Ellen, though you don't ever involve yourself with a survivor, you have your own circle of men who count on you. Who need you. Whom you help out. For three of the four men, you have been their only intimacy or sexual contact since they've been here. The only thing is, you don't know how to help them out physically without starting a world of trouble."

Ellen should have been insulted, but she wasn't. A dose of truth was in that Jenny-statement. "That's because they all don't like each other."

"No, that's because two of those men, Dean and Frank, can't share. I think they're learning. I think they know now that if they want you, they have to learn to let go and allow you to be with someone else when needed. Those two being without you may have taught them that."

"But I suck at understandings. Branching out and being the evening's fulfillment for one of them . . ." Ellen whistled. "Imagine how screwed up I'd be."

"You don't do understanding well because you don't do them right. You try Ellen, to have a full blown relationship with both men. You try to give them all the same and you just can't do that. You have to give more to one according to their needs. And as far as being the evening's fulfillment for one of them, you could do that. Especially with Henry being your primary. He would understand that. He wouldn't think twice about it. You would, because you would let your heart get too involved. I know you care for all of them. But say you are in a relationship with Henry, and Frank is the understanding. Say Dean was down, Dean needed you. You should be able to go to Dean, be with Dean and not feel guilty about it. And, mind

you, not let it effect your relationship with Henry or Frank.”

“I’m confused.” Ellen reached down for a finger sandwich, they looked so good. “I really am.”

“Any of us are here for you Ellen, Any questions you have. Any help you need. Or of you just need support to know what you’re doing is right or if you’re doing it wrong, come to us. That is why we have these meetings. Do you think any of us could be like we are if we didn’t support each other? All of our understandings work because we learned. You’ll learn. Trust me.”

Ellen chewed her sandwich. “There is something else I’d like to learn?”

“What’s that?” Jenny prepared herself to answer any question.

“You mentioned I have a circle of four men.” Ellen grabbed another sandwich, she really enjoyed them. “I’m assuming they are Frank, Henry, Robbie and Dean. Am I right?” She looked at those who nodded and took a bite of her sandwich. “I never thought of them as my circle . . .” She giggled. “I guess that’s right. But you also mentioned that I have been the only sexual contact for three out of four of them. I really would like to know. Which one of you did Robbie sleep with? Not that it is any of my business mind you. But I really want to know.” So eager Ellen looked for the news. *Was it Trish? Cindy? Nah, Cindy was too skinny. Melissa.* Ellen guessed Melissa.

Jenny shook her head. “Robbie has only been with *you* here in Beginnings.”

This shocked Ellen as she munched. “Robbie has only been with *me*? He’s such a dog.” Ellen brought her hand to her mouth in a thinking mode. “Dean.” Ellen tossed her hands up. “It has to be Dean. I cheated on him when we were married. Only fair, who was it?” She looked around the room thinking that one of them was probably afraid to own up to it. “Come on, I won’t get mad. I want to know. It really would make me feel less guilty for cheating on him. Who? Please?”

Again, Jenny shook her head. “Sorry to not relieve your guilt, but it wasn’t Dean.”

“Fuckin Frank!” Ellen stood up. “I’ll fuckin kill him!” She tossed her sandwich down. “That asshole. He’s such an asshole!” So red her face was. “He’s the one who condemned me when he was sleeping with someone else? Prick!” Ellen deepened her voice in a Frank imitation. “Oh El I could never be with someone else. Never.” She brought her voice back up to Ellen mode. “Yeah right. Who, which one of you was the . . .”

“Ellen.” Jenny laughed, stopping her. “It isn’t Frank. And knowing the way we all feel about him, do you honestly think any of us would have slept with him.” With a cringing face Jenny shook her head.

“Oh.” Ellen picked her sandwich up again as she sat down. “Henry?” Her eyes widened then she giggled. It had to be early on when Henry was with someone because she knew he had told her it had been a long time. Obviously by the way their first encounter turned out. “Who?” She giggled

and bit her sandwich. Ellen knew it had to be Jenny, it had to be because she was well aware of Henry's stand on survivor women. "Who Jenny?"

"It wasn't any of us." Jenny told her.

Ellen thought quickly, who wasn't there? *Josephine*? At that thought of Henry and an eighty year old woman she started to laugh then she realized. "Oh. . ." Her tone dropped sadly. "Sara, huh?" She bit her finger sandwich.

"No Ellen." Jenny waved her hand then covered her mouth in a silly school girl fashion as she giggled. "I thought you knew. Henry was one of the men in this community who had turned to another man for intimacy. Gosh." Jenny raised her eyes. "Oh I remember, do any of you? The trouble we thought there would be when Henry was in love with Frank?" She saw they all nodded and laughed. "Remember." Jenny didn't notice the deep red to Ellen's face. "Oh gees." She laughed. "Frank of all people. John thought for sure Frank would kill Hen . . . Ellen!" Jenny finally took notice of Ellen who stood up holding her throat and turning blue. "Oh my God! Someone do the Heimlich maneuver on her. Hurry!"

(5)

"Thanks Josh." Henry handed Nick to him as soon as he walked into Frank's house. "I really appreciate you helping me out. Hap kicked me out."

"No problem Henry."

Henry ran his fingers threw his hair, looking so frazzled. "I just don't know what to do. I can't get the air to escape him."

"You mean like, get him to burp?" Josh asked.

"Oh." Henry cringed. "That term just doesn't sound right. Anyhow, I tap his back and tap. I think he did but I'm not sure. I don't want to beat the child unnecessarily."

"Of course not."

"So thank you. I don't think he needs to eat. Hap changed his diaper and . . . ow!" Henry's eyes gazed down to his leg where the sudden pain emanated from. Little Brian looked up with a wide smile and a baby laugh. "Why is he in the walker. Doesn't he walk now?"

"Yep." Josh sat down on the couch with Nick.

"Should he be in the walker? I mean should we really encourage him to be so dependant on a mechanical device to get around." Henry pointed at him

"Go on take him out. But I'm not chasing his little butt around here. He's safe in there."

Henry bent down and rubbed his shin. "For you maybe. Hey Bri." Henry rubbed his head. "And why does Frank insist on dressing this one year old child like a militant soldier."

Josh rolled his eyes. "It's cute."

"I really hope he doesn't make Nick into one." Henry placed his hands in his pockets. "It looks like the tray to this walker is dirty, maybe I should .

..”

“Henry?” Josh interrupted him nicely. “You know what? If like you need something to do while I take care of the babies. Which by the way I rule at. My dad said I need to finish the laundry.”

“Oh my God!” Henry sounded so upset. “He expected to you to laundry while you were taking care of the baby? Was he nuts? You can’t do that? How can you . . .”

“Henry?” Josh stood up. “Would you kind of like, help me out and like, do that for me. I am taking care of Nick for you.”

“Oh sure Josh. Wait until I tell Frank about this. He really expects too much out of you.” Henry walked to the kitchen not seeing the sigh of relief Josh gave as he did so. He walked down the basement steps and saw the small load of laundry in its pile on the floor. Dark colors . . . easy enough

Checking the washer, Henry removed the clothes that were in there and placed them in the dryer. He picked up the pile of dirty clothes, one article at a time, holding each piece by two fingers and at arms length as he dropped them into the washer. Henry looked up to the shelf for the bottle of soap, lifting it he saw it was empty. “Great.” Turning his head he saw the white cabinet. Remembering that’s where Frank stored the extras he walked to it, opened it up and lifted the refill bag of soap. As he did, he saw something that he really shouldn’t have. Behind that refill bag, seemingly hid, was a bottle of moonshine. Surprised by this and thinking it was old, Henry took it out and held it up to the light. There were no particles floating about in the half empty bottle. Which told Henry it wasn’t as old as he thought. Replacing the soap but not the moonshine Henry wondered why it was there? And most of all he wondered why it was hidden. And knowing the problem with alcohol that Frank had been having lately, Henry realized the answers to his questions.

Maybe he shouldn’t have left Frank’s house immediately, the hidden bottle of booze so predominantly on his mind. But Henry was bothered by it. Frank was hiding it now? For what purpose? From whom? The bottle was another warning flag to Henry that Frank was much worse than he had thought. He went to where the metals run meeting was, of all places, the social hall. When Henry walked in there he saw Frank standing before a map, hand spread out on it, a table of men before him. Henry’s eyes shifted to the table and to the empty seat, a drink glass was there. As he raised his eyes he saw Robbie who attended the meeting. Robbie listened as he fiddled with his guitar, a cigarette dangling from his mouth. They made eyes contact only briefly. Not wanting to interrupt, and feeling the silliness of his searching out Frank hitting him, Henry turned and left the social hall.

“Did you want to see me Henry?” Robbie asked.

Henry turned around in his walk. Robbie followed him out? “No, Frank.”

“Is everything O.K., I’ll go get him.”

“No. Don’t bother him. I . . . I was just . . . never mind.” Henry shook

his head and started to walk again.

"Henry." Robbie chased him "Something is wrong. What is it?"

"It's stupid why I'm here. It can wait. I'll talk to Frank about it later."

"O.K." Robbie tossed his hands up.

"Robbie." Henry called to him as he walked away. "You're his brother . Can I tell you something."

"Sure."

"I'm worried about Frank and his drinking. Should I be?"

Robbie took a serious look. "I noticed him drinking more. But what makes you worry about it. Is there a reason to worry more?"

Henry lifted his shoulder and lowered them with a slow drop. "I don't know. I think there is. Maybe I am over reacting. But . . . I was doing laundry at his house Robbie and I found a bottle of moonshine hidden behind the soap. He has one in the kitchen. Why is he hiding a bottle in the basement."

Robbie let out a slow deep breath. "He's not hiding a bottle in the basement Henry."

"But I . . ."

"Trust me. If he has one in the basement. He has them everywhere. And if that's the case . . ." Robbie motioned his head toward the living section. "Let's go."

(6)

Dean clicked his fingers on the keyboard of his computer. "No." He shook his head as he looked at the image on the screen. "This can't be right." He lifted the clipboard and reviewed his notes. "This can't be right." He leaned his aching head on his hand staring at the screen and the picture of the virus untouched by his agent 17. "This is the original strain. It worked on it before." He picked up the clipboard again, looked and slammed it down. "What the hell happened?"

(7)

They felt it the right thing to do, sending Josh with both babies over to Henry's house. Seven bottles. All different sizes, all with different amounts of moonshine in them sprawled out on Frank's table. Henry and Robbie sat at the table staring at them.

Robbie closed his eyes briefly. "This is bad. All this hidden? This is bad."

"I know." Henry folded his hands and lowered his head.

"Who would have thought. Frank?"

"I saw it coming Robbie."

"We all did." Robbie noticed the look on Henry's face. So sad, so down. "Henry what is it?"

"It's all my fault. All of this." He pointed to the bottles. "I caused this."

Robbie had to laugh at such the ridiculous notion. "Right Henry. You put the bottle to my brother's mouth and told him to drink? I don't think so."

"I pushed him to it."

"How do you figure that?" Robbie was shocked.

"I know when Frank started drinking regularly and heavier and that was when I started being Ellen's primary relationship."

"So why do you blame yourself. My brother gave her up. You didn't take her from him Henry."

"Didn't I?" Henry finally looked up at Robbie. "I know them two. Break up, back together. I did nothing when they broke up the last time to help them out. I made your brother a promise. I promised him I would never make Ellen mine. I promised him I would always do whatever I could to keep them together. Do you know why I promised him these things? Not because he's my best friend, but because I was alone. I was very alone. And your brother went against everything he believed in and he shared what he had with me. And because of that, my life meant something again. Having Ellen in my life made me smile again. Frank gave that to me. In my gratefulness I gave him my word. In my selfishness, I broke that word."

"They weren't together Henry."

"Who was to say that they wouldn't have worked this out?"

Robbie shook his head. "I can't agree with you. I have to argue with you. Life got hard for Frank, too bad. He needed Ellen, too bad. He turned to the bottle because of that. That is not your fault."

"Don't you think I could have helped matters by recognizing he needed her. Don't you think I could have helped by not being so flagrant and open about my relationship with her. She bore my child Robbie when Frank assumed it was his. We thought we were married, and whether or not it turned out to be invalid. We did it behind Frank's back."

"Then Ellen's the blame too."

"And now Ellen is the key to stopping it." Henry closed his eyes and sat back.

"No Henry. Frank is the key."

"Frank is the key to recognizing his problem. Ellen is the key to helping him through it. If Frank doesn't have her, he will have no incentive to quit. If she is in his life he can do it. Robbie." Henry leaned forward. "You know and I know, alcohol is a weakness. The addiction is a weakness. Giving it up is a fight that will wear you down and make you weak. Who is it that Frank can be like that in front of? Ellen. Ellen is the only one he will let his defenses down in front of. He will not fight it if he has no one to tell him it's all right to struggle. It's all right to feel like your losing. He's not going to listen to us. He's not. And it is my responsibility, my love for my friend and my indebtedness to him, that I have to be the one to get her to help him. At any risk. At any cost."

"Then talk to her."

"There's a problem there Robbie." Henry stood up slowly placing his hands in his pockets. "And the problem is, Frank needs to have her in his life. For him to get through this, she has to be with him as much as she is with me. At least until he is through the rough spots."

"O.K." Robbie nodded.

"O.K.? Robbie in order for her to do this, she must be free." Henry's eyes met Robbie's. "She's not free. Is she?"

Robbie went silent.

"Robbie."

"What are you asking me Henry?" Robbie closed his eyes.

"I think you know."

"What about Dean? Are you asking the same of Dean?"

"I will. But right now, she's not with Dean is she? She has the understanding with you." Henry re-took his seat. "This is your brother. You need to step back for your brother's sake. You need to tell Ellen why you are doing so. That someone needs her and she should be available for when this person needs her most, Robbie . . . this is your brother."

Robbie's jaws clenched and he stared at Henry. "Since I was fourteen years old I wanted to be a part of her life."

"I know."

"You gave that to me. Like Frank gave it to you." His voice held emotions. "In this world now, you know how much it means." He brought his clenched fist softly to the table.

"I could be what you always call me Robbie, a prick, and end it. You know that is something I can do under understanding rules. But I won't. It will be your choice. You will end it with Ellen or she will end it with you. I am merely asking you to do it. For Frank. We can help Frank out. We can get Ellen to help him out."

Robbie's eyes closed again and he leaned back in his chair. "Fourteen years old." The corners of his mouth lowered as if gravity itself were pulling at them. He opened his eyes and shifted his views from Henry to the bottles. He let out a slow breath of disappointment. "Frank."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

(1)

"No, this isn't right." Dean pulled up the 'recipe' of agent 17 on his computer. "I mixed it right, I didn't miss anything." He shook his head. "Why aren't you working. It's right here." He flicked his finger on the screen. "And this matches this." He picked up the clipboard. "Unless . . ." He stood quickly from the stool and when he did a rush of blood hit him and his head filled with an enormous pain and Dean tilted in a sway, grabbing the counter for support and waiting for the pain to subside. It didn't. He closed his eyes trying to ignore it and with the help of the counter as support, he made his way to the filing cabinet. He bent down to the second drawer, his head throbbing as he did and he pulled out his journal, the latest with his notes. Flipping to the section Dean knew it would be, he focused in on his notes. Though they were blurry he could see enough to confirm what he believed. "Son of a bitch Ellen. Damn it," He tossed the journal to the counter and while pressing his fingers tightly to his temple he went back over to the computer. "Damn it. You cost me a whole night's work." He bitched to himself. "I said make a change to the dose per weight. Not a change to the weight of the agent. Damn it, it was too weak." Frustrated and feeling worse physically, Dean corrected Ellen's error in the computer getting more angrier with each key stroke he hit.

(2)

They were greeted with hooting, an unusual occurrence, when the Moon Lodge women's group entered into the social hall. Ellen knew the cause, a security meeting, how many of them were actually drunk by that point? Cole was. He could barely stand, in fact Ellen laughed when he fell to a chair because of his drunkenness and held on to Trish for support, laying his head on her pregnant stomach and looking as if he were about to nap.

The women immediately mingled as soon as they walked in. They were the big celebrities. Jenny danced with Patrick, Andrea sat next to Jason at the bar. As Ellen skimmed the large room she saw Frank. He played darts and laughed. She smiled when she saw him. Did he not see her? He probably didn't even notice, she stood way to the back of the large--not only in numbers but in size as well--group of women.

Frank, rubbing-in his victory game to Mark, turned his head to see the women, his cringing face smiled when he saw Ellen. Finishing off his drink he lifted his head, set down his glass and walked over to her. "Hey, what are

you doing here?”

“I’d like to ask you the same. But seeing all your security guys. I figured this is where the big metal run meeting was.”

“It was. I’m glad you’re here. Wanna hang out?”

“Nah, go hang out with the guys. You don’t do that very often.”

“El come on.” Frank shook his head then hunched to her level. “I’d rather be with you.”

Ellen stared up at him then smiled. “All right.”

“Can we sneak off in a corner some where?”

“We can do that. We can sneak off.”

Frank bit his bottom lip with the orneriest of grins. “You’re kidding?”

“Nope.”

He laughed. “This is great. All right. What do you want to drink?”

“Um . . . nothing. Let’s just go to a table.”

“Let me grab my drink.” He backed up.

“Frank.” Ellen grabbed his hand. “You don’t need to that.”

“El, one drink.”

“Frank I watched you finish one when I walked in here. Was that your first one?”

“El, I’m out having a good time. One more, Please?”

Ellen folded. “One more. That’s it, you’re shut off.”

“One more.” Frank made his way through the gathering maze of people over to the bar. He didn’t see Ellen when he grabbed his glass and his bottle. Checking once more for her, he poured a drink, downed it, then poured another. As he lifted his glass to carry with him, he felt his arm being pulled so roughly the glass slammed to the bar splashing up the moonshine. “El?”

“Why did you do that?” She asked with such anger.

“Do what?”

“Sneak in an extra drink?”

Frank didn’t have an answer, his facial muscles twitched as he turned his views from her to think.

“Frank. Why?”

“El . . . please enough. All right?”

“No it is not all right.” She finally released his arm with firm point to him. “You . . . you have a problem. You promised me you’d stop this drinking. You didn’t, did you?”

“El . . .”

“You didn’t. Did you?!” She nearly screamed over the noise.

Frank took a deep breath. “No.”

“Fuck Frank. You promised me. You gave me your word. I see what’s more important.” She backed up.

“El wait.” He chased her, grabbing hold of her arm.

“No Frank.” She swatted him away. “You disappoint me and it’s not often I say that to you. I give up on you.” Shaking her head, she turned

harshly from him and raced out of the social hall.

"Ellen!" Frank chased her. "El please wait." He caught up to her placing his hands on her arms. "Look at me." He placed his face close to hers. "Please listen."

"What."

"I'm sorry." He watched her turn her head. "No, El. I'm sorry." His index finger turned her chin to make her look at him. "I am. I broke my word to you. I won't break it again. I promise."

"Can you make that promise Frank?"

"I swear to you I'll make the promise. But give me one more chance. Don't give up on me."

"Frank, I'm angry because I'm worried about you. Worried that you can't quit."

"I can quit."

"You didn't."

"I didn't really try. I'll try now. Please." He leaned closer to her. "This is the first time I have ever broken my word to you. Let me make it up to you."

Ellen closed her eyes. "You have to keep your word this time. You have to show me you do not have a problem, because Frank, I believe you do."

"No, I don't. I'll prove it to you. Please."

"O.K." Upon her words she felt the embrace of Frank as he held her tightly. "Frank . . . I can't breath and my stomach hurts as it is."

"Why does your stomach hurt?" Frank released her. "Are you sick?"

"No." She shook her head. "Andrea had to do the Heimlich maneuver on me. I started to choking tonight."

"No shit. You all right?"

"Yeah I'm . . ." She heard her name being called in the distance. She knew the voice and knew by Frank's disgusted look who it was. "He sounds mad."

Frank looked behind Ellen. "He looks mad."

"Shit." Ellen closed her eyes.

"Want me to beat him up?"

"No." Ellen shook her head with a laugh. "I'll deal with im. Why don't you go home and I'll meet you there."

"I thought we were hanging out."

"I'll tell you what. We'll go off somewhere and hang out when I get to your house. Sound good?"

"Sounds great." He kissed her quickly. "See you there." Backing up Frank wiggled his fingers. "Bye Dean."

Dean ignored Frank as he watched him leave, he wasn't in the mood. "El."

"Yes Dean." Ellen tried to smile but saw it coming on his face. "What did I do now?"

"You screwed up." Dean poked his finger at her. "You screwed up big time. You cost us time. You could have cost lives."

"Ow." She hit his hand. "You poked me you asshole. Physical abuse."

"El! This is serious."

"What the hell could I possibly have done Dean?" She threw her hands up.

"Remember when I gave you the notes and told you to make the changes in the computer for agent 17. Well you did it wrong. The whole entire batch was wasted because it didn't work."

"I screwed up?" Ellen fluttered her lips at him. "How do you know it was me and not you? You are the one who can't see Dean."

His nostrils flared and his heavy breaths let her know she had crossed the line. "Fuck you." With no more words, Dean left Ellen on the street and stormed off to his home not far away.

(3)

Frank was upbeat as he approached the front door of his house. Ellen would be there shortly, Josh was probably asleep. He and Ellen wouldn't even have to sneak off, they'd have the house pretty much to themselves. Pretty much whistling, Frank stopped when he walked in and was surprised to see Robbie and Henry stand up and stand before the diningroom table. "What's uh . . ." Frank shut the door. "What's going on?"

Robbie's face turned red. He had been waiting for Frank. "What the hell are you doing Frank?"

"What?" Frank walked closer then his whole expression dropped when Robbie stepped aside and exposed the diningroom table full of bottles. "What is this shit?"

"You don't know?" Robbie closed in on him. "Look at it Frank! You don't know what this is? I'll tell you what this is. This is your downfall."

Frank huffed and his face felt hot. He glared at Henry then Robbie. "What the fuck were you guys doing going through my stuff? Huh? None of this is any of your business!" Frank moved to the table.

Robbie stopped him harshly. "It's not our business?!" He spoke so roughly. "Fuck you Frank, this is our business. You are our business. You are screwing around. You have a problem."

"I don't have a problem."

Henry was more calm, perhaps because he was more down than angry. "Frank, you have a problem. Why are you hiding bottles in every room and closet except were the kids sleep?"

Frank placed his hands on his hips and he raised his eyes to the ceiling closing his mouth tightly. He stood in silence for a moment, then with a loud growl of frustration he swung his arm outward toward the table, smashing it down into the bottles and clearing the table of them with a

thunderous crash. His hand that began to bleed from being cut came hard to his face, running down it as he blindly reached for a chair and emotionally sat down.

Henry and Robbie stared at him, looking so lost as he sat elbows on the table, face buried in his hand, sitting amongst the mess he had just made of his table and ironically, the mess of his life.

Robbie walked to him. "This . . . this has to stop. This secret can stay between us, but it has to stop big brother. I swear to you."

Frank nodded. "I know."

Henry closed his eyes with some relief to hear Frank say that. Of course it wasn't the first time he heard Frank say that. "Frank, we're here for you. We'll help you. But you got to want to help yourself first."

"I know." Frank's hand cleared from his face and slammed on to the table. Suddenly a look of panic hit him. "Fuck."

Henry's eyes shifted around. "What's wrong?"

"El . . . El is coming over. You can't let her see this." Frank stood up. "She's coming over now. She can't know. Promise me you won't tell her anything about this."

Such debate Henry looked in. "Frank . . ."

"Promise me."

Henry looked at Robbie then Frank. "We promise."

"Good." Frank bent down to the floor. "I have to get this cleaned up." He hurriedly began to pick up glass.

Henry started to bend down also. "I'll help you."

Frank stopped his reaching hand. "No, this is my mess. Believe me this is my mess. I'll clean it up. Robbie . . ." Frank raised his head to his brother. "Cut El off. Tell her, tell her I need a rain check. I'll see her later or something. Please?"

Robbie slowly nodded "Sure Frank. I need to talk to her anyhow."

"And don't say anything." Frank ordered.

"No, I won't." Robbie sadly took one more look at his brother and Henry, then waked slowly to the door to wait outside for Ellen.

The moment Frank heard the door closed, he dropped to a sitting position on the floor staring at the wet carpet and the broken glass.

Quietly, Henry sat down and joined him on the floor. "I know you don't want my help Frank. I don't care. I'll help you get this place in order." Henry started to help Frank clean up. So symbolically it was. Not only was it Henry's first step in helping Frank clean up his house, but it would also be Henry's first step in helping his friend clean up his life as well.

“So funny.” Ellen giggled as she walked with Robbie. “This used to be mine and Frank’s place. The hill.”

“It’s one of the best views of town.” Robbie turned her to face Beginnings afoot. “Isn’t it?”

“Why are we up here Robbie?” Ellen turned back to face him. “I should be frightened you’re gonna hit on me, but you seem down. What is it?”

“We have to talk.”

“Uh-oh.” Ellen hunched. “What did I do?”

“Nothing.” Robbie slowly shook his head. “I love you El, you know that?”

Ellen lowered her head. “I know.” She raised it with a smile. “I love you too.”

Robbie smiled pleasingly. “I think I have loved you since I was a teenager.”

“Robbie why are you saying this?”

“Just listen to me. I . . . I know why you started this understanding with me. I do. I’m not dumb, To irk Henry is why.”

“Robbie, I want you to know that . . .”

“El Shh.” He placed his finger to her lips. “But you don’t fool me. I know you care about me. The way you were with me when I was sick. I’ll never forget that. And . . . though you pretended, you liked our Thursday nights. They’re weren’t many. But you liked them.”

“That’s what I was going to say. I loved our Thursday nights. You always make me laugh.”

“And I always will. But El, you know and I know that . . . I want to be with you. Even if you won’t put out.” He chuckled. “I want to be with you. But I can’t right now.”

“Robbie? What are you saying?”

“We have to end our understanding. We have to.”

Ellen was surprised by this. “You’re ending it?”

“There’s someone in Beginnings that needs you. Really needs you to be there and things are going to get worse for him. You have to free to be with him. You know that don’t you.”

“You know?” Ellen swallowed. “Henry told you about . . .”

“Henry only told me someone needs you.”

Ellen let out a breath, Dean would die if Robbie knew. “Then you understand.”

“Very much so. It’s important, especially in this world now. He needs you. If you can help him, you have to help him. I’m just sorry it’s at my loss.”

Ellen laid her hand on Robbie’s face. “Thank you. You’re very special Robbie.”

“And so are you El. To me.” His hand pulled hers from his face and he held it. “Just know, even though we weren’t physical. Know that I liked the

idea, no, I loved the idea of having you in my life. Being able to say, 'hey, I got someone.'" He flashed that smile at her. "And even though it was short lived. It was worth it all knowing that."

"Wow." Ellen stepped back some. "That was pretty deep coming from you."

"Well . . ." Robbie shrugged. "I'm the sensitive Slagel brother. What can I say." He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. "Can I ask something of you though."

"Uh-oh."

"No." He shook his head. "Seriously, very seriously. Can I kiss you? It's just been so long since I had that."

Ellen moved closer to him, her hand reached up and her fingers rolled across his lips as she raised herself and her lips to meet his. So softly she placed them to his, letting her hand slide from his face to behind his neck.

A shuddering breath came from Robbie as he apprehensively pulled Ellen into him. His arms wrapped tightly around her as he pressed his lips firmer, yet still gently to hers. Separating her lips with his, and barely breathing as he moved his mouth with slow emotions.

The long kiss ended as apprehensively as it began. With that deep nostril breath Robbie pulled his lips from hers, still holding Ellen tight and taking a moment to stare into her eyes. "Thanks." He raised half his mouth in a smile and wrapped his arms around to hold her.

(5)

Henry. Ellen felt a little nervous when she heard the shower water stop. She laid on her bed, on her stomach flipping through an old tabloid magazine she dug out of her memorabilia box. And she stopped reading when the water stopped. It would be the first time all night she faced Henry since she had left for her meeting. He wasn't there when she got home or when she got out of the shower. And while she was in the kitchen somehow Henry slipped into the house rather quickly and into the shower before he even said hello. She smelled the moonshine scent that trailed him as she followed him up the stairs. She remembered him saying he didn't think she'd be home. And he spilled on himself. Ellen had to end the conversation through the bathroom door and water noise, explaining to Henry that her throat hurt too much to yell. Though it did, Ellen didn't know what to say to him, or how to act when she saw him.

"Hey El."

Ellen slammed the magazine shut when she felt his lips hit her cheek and his wet hair smack her face "Hi Henry."

"Did you say your throat hurt?"

"Um . . ." Ellen rolled onto her side and watched Henry, standing with his back facing her as he dug through his drawers for a tee shirt. "Yes. My

stomach too.”

“You aren’t getting sick are you El?” He faced her as he put on his shirt then turned back to face the mirror to comb his hair.

Ellen watched him and her eyes went to his backside. As soon as the thought of how cute his backside looked in those boxer shorts hit her, she started to snicker.

“What?” He turned around.

“Nothing.” Ellen’s lip quivered. “Henry. How do you feel about Frank?”

Henry chuckled. “He’s my best friend. I love him.” So stunned by Ellen’s reaction he walked to the bed. “El?” He removed the pillow from her face. “Why are you laughing?”

“Have you always . . . loved him?”

“Ellen?”

“Henry, be honest with me for a second. Cause I know. O.K., no more hiding the truth. I know.”

“O.K.” Henry sat down on the bed with her.

“When did you stop, you know, loving Frank, or haven’t you.”

“I just told you . . . El, why are me asking me this?”

“Because Henry, I know.” She laid her hand to his knee. “I have to tell you though. I was a little nervous about facing you after I found out. I was afraid of how I’d feel. But I guess it’s funny. Sorry, It is. But I’m all right with it. I understand why.”

“Understand why, what?”

“Henry. I know all about it.”

“Know about what?”

“Do I have to spell it out?”

“Yes, because I haven’t a clue what you’re talking about.”

“O.K.” Ellen took a second to be serious. “I know.”

“What do you know?”

“Why didn’t you tell me Henry, didn’t you think I’d understand?”

At that point Henry had given up. “Understand what?”

“The fact that you were gay.”

“What?! I was never gay.”

“Oh sorry. You’re right. The fact that you had relations with another man. Henry, I found out about it tonight. I was a little shocked.”

“Oh my God.”

“No, no.” Ellen sat up “Don’t worry. I’m O.K. with it.”

“El, I never . . .”

“I was a bit surprised to find out you were once in love with Frank.”

“Oh my God!” Henry stood up quickly. “The women told you this? Why?”

“Because it’s true.”

“No it is not!” Henry’s hand went immediately through his hair. “They all think this?” He began to pace in circles. “And they thought I was in love

with Frank? El, I love Frank . . . stop laughing, but not like that. Trust me if I were ever to be intimate with any man the thought of it being Frank would never cross my mind. That's, that's . . . that's really scary." Henry fell down in shock to the bed. "And you believed this?"

"Oh sure Henry. Why wouldn't I?"

Stunned Henry's wide eyes shifted to Ellen. "Well, you, I, uh . . . you should know me better." Henry seemed so offended at her.

"But you're so sensitive Henry."

"El!"

She giggled and edged her way to him. "I'm glad that was untrue. I really am. Of course when they told me I was eating and I started to choke."

"Really choke?"

"Oh sure and my face turned blue. I looked like something from Willy Wonka and The Chocolate Factory. What was her name?"

"The spoiled rich girl?" Henry looked up to the ceiling, a thinking face perched upon his face. "Pamela."

"No Henry, wasn't it Amanda?"

"Come to think of it El, was it a normal name?"

"No it wasn't. I can still see her wearing that fur coat. Didn't it begin with a 'P'?"

"I think so." Henry moved even closer to Ellen. "I just know this is going to bother me all night."

"We'll figure it out Henry. Oh . . ." She snapped her fingers. "I know, I have that movie in a box over Frank's." She swept her legs over the side of the bed. "Let's go over there and watch it and really drive Frank's nuts." She nodded. "Want to?"

"El I don't think . . ."

"Come on Henry, you don't have to even get dressed." She hurried to the door. "What's wrong?"

Henry raced quickly through his mind what Frank was doing when he left. He didn't need for Ellen to catch him still scrubbing that carpet. "El, um, go on down, I'll be right there."

"Don't change Henry. It'll be funny watching Frank's expression when you show up in your underwear to watch that movie." She reached out and grabbed Henry's hand "Come on. Unless you don't think he wants to be bothered."

"Come to think of it El. Us going over there might be just what Frank needs." Henry pulled his hand from hers and went to his dresser. Not to throw on pants, he really didn't care if he wore those, but to check his hair. He could go out of his house with out pants, but with messy hair . . . never.

Walking to Frank's house, Ellen and Henry had to pass by Dean's. Holding Ellen's hand, Henry felt her slow down and then stop. "What is

it?”

Ellen looked up to the second floor of Dean’s house. “He’s still up.”

“Is that wrong?”

“It’s just late for Dean that’s all.” Ellen shrugged, leaned on Henry and continued walking to Frank’s.

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His bent legs were brought directly to his chest as Dean sat on his bed. His arms around his legs, his forehead pressed tightly to his knees as he rocked back and forth.

The pain, the pain would not go away or even let up. He could feel the sweat that came from his face drip down across his legs. Nothing he had taken had even put a dent in the suffering he was experiencing. Nor did Dean think it would. The sharp searing pain spun around his head, encircling it with a pressure that felt like a band tightening with each passing second. In a sitting fetal position, he stayed atop his bed, knowing that sleep would not come for him on this night. A part of Dean was afraid to sleep, even though he knew it was going to end up being the longest night of his life. But by the way that Dean felt, so sick, he wondered if he’d even make it through the night. He felt for certain . . . he was dying.