

The Inner Struggle II

By

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TRIUMPH AND LOSS

Reaching into the darkness . . .

Pulling from inside, the strength to succeed . . .

The strength to overcome all obstacles . . .

To find our victories . . .

And to battle the losses we may have to face . . . within the inner struggles

INTRINSIC BATTLES

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

JULY 25

(1)

Out of a dead, deep sleep Henry sprang up to a sitting position calling out in a panic. "Violet!" He quickly looked to Ellen who laid next to him, still sleeping and undisturbed from his outburst. Henry breathed heavily, his heart racing from the horrible nightmare which was a repeat of the night before. But Henry smiled, he remembered the name of the little girl in the Willy Wonka movie who turned blue. That's what mattered. Minutes before five in the morning and he finally remembered. He knew it was going to bother him, he didn't think it would invade his sleep. Then again, how could it not? They went over to Frank's to watch the movie and he still didn't get the name. Every single time Violet would come on or someone was about to say her name Frank would either speak really loud, turn down the television set or just press fast forward. But Henry showed him, it came to him anyhow. And he debated before laying back down to sleep for that last fifteen minutes if he should wake Ellen and tell her of his revelation. He moved his hand to her shoulder to shake her but decided against it. It could wait.

He slipped down under the covers again and prepared to make himself comfortable with Ellen. Just as Henry's head touched the pillow the loud ringing of the phone right next to his ear made him jump back up. He grabbed it hurriedly so as not to disturb Ellen. Still groggy, Henry cleared his throat and answered the phone before the second ring finished. "Hello." He said in a whisper. "Dean? Dean what is it." Henry closed his eyes, though Dean said nothing, he knew something was wrong. "Hold on." Henry covered the phone with his hand. "El? El?"

Ellen moaned, probably thinking she answered him.

"El." Henry brought his mouth to her ear. "Wake up."

"What time is it?"

"Five. El, Dean is on the phone."

Ellen immediately rolled over to her back and lifted herself up with her elbows. "Dean?"

"He doesn't sound good El." Henry handed her the phone.

Removing her hair from her face, Ellen placed the phone to her ear. "Dean?"

There was a long pause of silence, then Dean's soft cracking voice spoke. "El . . . El, I . . . I need you El."

That was all Dean needed to say. She felt it. The hard flutter of her stomach when the pain of his sound went through her. "I'll be right there." She shut off the phone and handed it to Henry, flinging the covers off of her.

"El, what's wrong?" Henry watched her race out of bed and from the bedroom. He heard the water run in the bathroom. "El?" He got out of bed and followed her. "What happened?"

Ellen quickly brushed her teeth. After she rinsed her mouth she splashed water on her face and took the towel that Henry handed her. "Oh God."

"Ellen what happened?"

"Please." She looked up at the ceiling as she ran passed Henry. "Please don't let my gut be right. Please God." She bent down to the floor and picked up her shorts, tossing them on. "Look at my hands Henry." She held them out before buttoning her shorts. "I'm shaking." In a run she slipped on her shoes. "I have to go." She kissed him on the cheek darting by him. "I'll call you."

"El." Henry reached out grabbing her arm before she left the bedroom. "Do you need me to come with you."

"I think he needs me alone Henry. I'll call you." With a worried look glued to her face, Ellen took a deep breath and flew down the stairs opening the front door and not even shutting it as she ran out.

Her footsteps were the only sound on the quiet street, echoing as she charged the four houses down. She stopped before she went inside. Briefly she looked up, his bedroom light was still on. Feeling her heart beat in her ears Ellen opened the front door calling out. "Dean!" He didn't answer her and she followed her gut which told her to go up stairs. She did. "Dean!" Her breathing burned her lungs from the rushing and the excitement to get to him. Her entire body halted in a freeze when she stepped to the bedroom doorway and saw Dean sitting on the side of the bed.

His head was down, hanging down, his hair forward, as he sat there in just his boxer shorts. His elbows rested on his knees and he looked as if he watched something on the floor.

The lump, the lump in her throat grew when Ellen looked upon him. She shivered in her breath and took a step into the room. "Dean." Another step to him, her hand reaching out. "Dean."

"It's gone El."

His words throbbed in her head causing her already fast beating heart to literally pound. She closed her eyes, moving closer to him and laying her hand upon his face. "When?"

Dean's head moved into that hand. "About three hours ago." He spoke monotone. "I waited and I waited and it . . . it never came back."

"Why didn't you call me when this happened. Why?" Her fingers slipped into his hair as she lowered closer to him.

Dean raised his head, his eyes were open and they just stared forward, Not moving, just forward. "I'm sorry I called you. I didn't know what else to do. I didn't know who I could call."

"No matter what we have said to each other lately, no matter what. Know that I am here for you. Know that." Moving her hand to behind his head, she brought her other arm up and brought Dean closer to her.

"I'm scared El." His hands slowly reached out and laid upon her legs. They moved up to her hips and when Dean knew where they were, he leaned forward and dropped to the floor on his knees so emotionally. "I'm so scared." His desperate arms grabbed on to her and he buried his head in her stomach. "What am I going to do. I can't see El. I can't see."

Ellen felt and heard the soft emotional sound of sadness that Dean released. Her hands held onto his head, keeping him to her, then she too lowered herself to that floor with him and held him. And with everything he had, so scared, so confused, Dean gripped tightly to Ellen and he just clung to her.

(2)

"O.K. Thanks Joe." Ellen held her fingernails close to her mouth in debate of biting them as she spoke on the phone. She watched Dean, sitting on his bed still through her who entire conversation. "Yeah, no problem. I'll stop by. Thanks again." She shut off the phone, set it on the night stand looking into the mug and at the plate that sat there also. "You didn't touch your tea or toast."

"My head is still killing me."

"I'm stopping by the clinic."

"There's nothing that will work. I tried it all."

"Did you try the Apenetheral?"

Dean shook his head. "That's the strongest stuff we have."

"Then you'll take it. If nothing else works. You'll take it."

"It's IV only. Its too strong to give it alone."

"Then I'll start an IV." Ellen picked up the piece of toast. "When is the last time you ate."

"Yesterday morning."

"Lack of food isn't helping your headache and I can't give you the Apenetheral if you don't eat." She grabbed his hand and laid the toast in it. "I spoke to Joe. I told him how sick you were. He wanted to know if he should send Andrea . . . eat that please . . . over here."

Dean lifted his head up. "She can't come over."

"Well I told Joe that you are a doctor and I'll be here. He said you must really be sick if you aren't working. Eat that please."

A small bite was all Dean took. "Sick is an understatement."

"He also said Frank is only working half day today and he'll make sure that Frank picks up the kids for us. As far as tonight goes, we'll deal with that later. I'll stay, Henry will want too also. He's concerned."

"I know."

"What I'll do now is, run home, change and head up to the mobile and get Johnny situated with some batch tests on the mutated specimens. I'll pick up our notes and we'll review the combinations of agents and medications we haven't tried."

"You're leaving me?"

"Dean, I have to." Ellen tried to explain. "I have to, I won't be gone long."

"I can't be alone right now. I don't know how to be alone right now."

"You have to Dean. Half hour tops. We have to work and I have to get things in the lab in order for Johnny."

"I don't feel like working today." Dean reached out his hand feeling for the table to drop his toast.

Ellen stopped him and brought his hand back to his mouth. "Eat. Do you not feel like doing it because you're sick, or because you're down?"

"I'm sick."

"O.K." Ellen nodded. "But you know if you are better tomorrow, we have to move on. We have to work. Especially if we don't want anyone to know you lost your sight yet."

"How?" Dean asked with desperation. "How do we do it?"

"Like we have been preparing for. We can do this Dean. We can really do this. We've worked together to be able to work though this."

"How am I going to make it through a day when I can't even make it to the bathroom?"

"Like now." Ellen leaned into him. "I'll help you. Do you have to go?"

"What? You're gonna help me do that too?"

"Sure. Why not. You need help getting there and hitting the target, so to speak. Don't you?"

"Right now I do. I'm clueless."

Ellen took hold of his arm. "Then I'll help you. Stand up."

"Something just isn't right about this." Dean let her guide him out of the bedroom. His hand felt outward as they moved, trying to feel where he was at.

"What's not right about it?"

"Until I get the hang of it, you're gonna have to . . ."

"Take control?" Ellen opened the bathroom door. "Be your guide? I can do that."

"You won't feel funny about it?"

"Who me? Please Dean." Ellen helped him in the bathroom. "Now it's not like it's never been in my hand before, right?"

"Not in this capacity."

"No, you're right. But there's a first time for everything. And hell, I'm always up for new experiences. You know me. I'm Ellen."

"And I'm really, really glad you're here right now." Dean tried to feel where she was.

Ellen grabbed his hand and laid it on her face. She slid it from her cheek to her mouth kissing the back of his fingers. "I'm glad you want me. And . . .let's do this."

Dean slowly shook his head. "You sound almost too excited about this."

"I am."

"Swell." He heard her giggle, felt her turn his body some and felt her head rest against his arm for a moment. Though Ellen looked forward to helping him out. Dean did not look forward to being helped. And something so simple, something so instinctive, was now another obstacle Dean had to face in the long road ahead. One of many minor tasks that he could never take for granted again.

(3)

Joe watched Henry fidget in the chair during the whole entire meeting. Shift to his left, then right. Run his fingers through his hair, fuss some more. Joe tried to play it off, thinking it typical Henry antics, wanting to be somewhere else, and having to sit in a meeting. "Continuing." A shift of Joe's eyes to Henry then to Cole. "The metal run will definitely be moved up as I told you Cole. You and your crew will leave tomorrow morning, put you at the first site by noon. That'll give you eight good daylight hours to scrap there at Winnet, move to Mosley, then bunk at Jordan for the night, and scrap there in the morning before heading home. And of course . . ."

Joe's voice dropped to a mumble. "Get those tuxedos." He ran his hand down his face. "Any questions?"

Cole nodded. "Why are we moving it up so fast?"

"To be on the safe side." Joe answered. "The reconnaissance flights are showing a clear area. You'll only be an hour away and we can easily get to you if there is trouble. But right now, there is nothing in the area so we feel you're safe. Which in times like these, I'm glad we scrapped out further from home first." Joe picked up his pen. "Can I have you and your team meet with me tonight to go over the specific types of metals we have to locate for armory?"

Cole nodded. "Tonight? Eight?" He saw an agreement from Joe. "Good. All right I have to head back now." He looked at his watch. "I have to pass the buck, so-to-speak to the man in charge tomorrow."

"Who is that?" Joe asked.

"Haven't a clue yet." Cole stood up. "See ya later Joe." As he turned to the door, it opened and Frank walked in. "Hi Frank."

"Hey Cole."

"Bye Frank." Cole walked out.

Shrugging, Frank shut the door. "I guess I missed the meeting. Sorry I was late." He walked to his father's desk. "I was rushing around to get

everything done so I could pick up the kids.” Frank plopped in a chair and caught his breath. “Why *am* I picking up the kids instead of Dean?”

“The same reason I’m working in containment.” Joe said.

“Oh.” Frank nodded.

“Which by the way . . .” Joe faced Henry. “Have you spoken to Ellen lately?”

Henry lowered his mug of tea from his lips. “About twenty minutes ago Joe. She was at the mobile getting things together.”

Joe glanced at his watch. “Which means she’ll be here soon. I’ll let her know I want to stop by and check on Dean.”

Henry stopped again in his attempt to take a drink. “Oh no Joe. You can’t do that. He’s sick.”

“That’s why I’m stopping by.”

Frank raised his hand in a wave to get attention. “What’s wrong with Dean?”

Joe looked at him so annoyed. “Weren’t you paying attention? He’s sick. He called off of work.”

“You’re kidding?” Frank was surprised. “He must be sick. I don’t think I ever remember him calling off of work. Is it his uh . . .” Frank closed one eye and twitched his head several times. “Nervous condition?”

“What is wrong with you?” Joe asked perturbed. “No, it’s not his nervous condition. It’s a headache. And by what I gathered from Ellen, a bad one too. I spoke to Jason and he thinks it probably is a repercussion of the tension from the hypnosis. A migraine. And you know how bad them migraines can get Frank. Sometimes so bad you can’t even see . . .” Joe turned his head quickly to Henry who had started choking. “Having trouble drinking that tea Henry?” Joe looked at Frank again. “So that’s what’s wrong with him. He’s so bad, Ellen is staying with him to monitor him.”

“Fuck.” So shocked Frank acted. “Hey dad, you don’t think he’s gonna have a stroke do you?”

“What?”

“A stroke. You know, when a blood clot hits the brain and you can’t walk, or talk.” Frank explained as if Joe were clueless.

“I know what a stroke is. Why in the world would you say that.”

“A severe headache and all . . .”

“Frank.”

“Always a warning to a stroke.”

“Frank.”

“A man his age . . .”

“Frank!” Joe shouted his name. “No! And what’s this shit a man his age. He’s not that much older than you.”

“Yeah but *I’m* not the one with the headache. “ Frank tapped his fingers on the chair a few times. “What about a brain tumor.” He heard his father grunt. “Maybe his brain is bleeding.”

“Frank Christ.” Joe snapped. “What is this, wishful thinking?”

“Concern.”

“Sounds it to me.” Joe shook his head. “Let me think if there is anything I need . . .” His head lifted to the knock on the door. “Come in.”

Ellen poked her head in. “Hi Joe.” She saw Frank turn around in the chair. “Hi Frank. Joe, can I speak to Henry for a second?”

“Sure.” Joe told her. “How’s Dean? I was thinking of stopping by if he’s that bad. Give a hand with the kids.”

Ellen shook her head. “No, I’m hoping the medication I’m putting him on today will kick its butt. It’s strong, that’s why I have to be around him.”

“Ellen.” Joe’s voice took on concern. “Are you sure everything is all right with him?”

“Yeah Joe, positive. I just need a favor from Henry.”

Henry stood up. “Do you need me to come out side?”

“No.” Ellen waved her hand and walked in. She wasn’t her normal self, so down she seemed. “Henry, I just need you to stop at the mobile lab on your way home and make sure Johnny shut everything down. And make sure the small dim light is left on for the rabbits in the special lab. Last time Johnny forgot to leave that warming light on and two of them died.” Ellen shrugged. “Can you?”

“Sure El.” Henry stepped closer to her. “How’s Dean?”

Ellen’s eyes shifted to Joe then Frank. She didn’t answer she raised her eyebrows.

“I’ll be by later.” Henry laid his hands on her shoulders and kissed her. “I’ll help out.”

Frank stood slowly from his chair. “Are you feeling all right El?”

“Yeah sure Frank. Why?” She ran her fingers through her hair.

“You look tired.”

“I’m not.”

“Are you sure.” He pointed. “You have those dark circles under . . .”

“Frank!” Ellen swiped his hand away. “God! I can always count on you to make me feel good!” Snapping in her words, she turned around and stormed off.

Frank tossed his hands in the air. “What? What did I do?”

Not paying any attention to Frank, Henry moved to the door. “Excuse me Frank, Joe.” He ran out and spotted Ellen. “El.”

Ellen turned around and stopped walking, waiting for Henry to catch up. “Sorry about that.”

“No, that’s all right.”

“I’m just upset.”

“I understand. How are things going with Dean.”

Ellen blew out slowly. “He’s so down Henry.”

“He’s gonna be, especially today El. This is the first day without his sight. It doesn’t matter how prepared he thought he was for it. The reality has hit him.”

"I know. I thought I was ready for it too. But when I saw him, when I looked into his eyes that seemed to have lost his soul, it killed me. And he's afraid Henry. He's so afraid. He can't walk across the room without panicking today. He called me three times and I've only been gone a half hour. I have never felt so needed yet so helpless to do anything. I'm trying, I have been with him for the past seven hours and I'm trying to be upbeat and optimistic for him but my heart is broke. This is my friend Henry and there is nothing I can do for him."

Henry had no words to say to Ellen, he wished he did. The only thing he could do at that moment was take her in his arms. Try to give her some of the strength he had and hope that the day that was seemingly so bad for her, would somehow get better.

(4)

George looked as amused as a child with an Easter basket when he received the news. Cole and his crew were moving out three days earlier? How easily George had Joe pegged to do that. Did Joe honestly believe that if he moved his crew out ahead of schedule all would go well because his reconnaissance flights were showing an all clear? Joe wanted to take advantage of that clear situation. But didn't he learn that just because his piolet didn't see anything, it didn't mean nothing was there. Beginnings recent invasion proved even the best Beginnings piolet are fallible.

And now there was something more out there for them. George had twelve CME's posted not far from where Cole and his crew headed off for. It was a plan in motion George had ready since Robbie exhibited signs of getting well. Twelve men waiting, close, but far enough out of reconnaissance flight surveillance. Cole and his men would hit their sites, first two, problem free. They'd halt for the night thinking all was well. Then communications would get a signal in the morning close to where Cole was. Minor situation, Cole could take care of. And knowing the way Beginnings thought, they would send, as a safe guard, Robbie. It is his job. He'll get there, get cocky when he discovered it only was two CME's. Get comfortable then . . . Robbie would get hit with the ten remaining men. Of course Robbie would emerge unscathed. But to Beginnings . . . he would be missing when it was all said and done.

(5)

The sound of Robbie and his band practicing acoustically in Joe's backyard that evening, seemed to carry all through Beginnings. Ellen listened to them as she did the dishes, keeping the window open, trying to bury herself into what they played instead of what had been happening all day and

evening at Dean's. Henry was there now, it was a big help with the kids. And Robbie, though a few houses up, he made her smile. He'd play that song from that spoof of a spy movie where the rock and roll star went to Moscow. Robbie played it, sounding so much like the actor, claiming the song, 'How Silly Can You Get' was actually his theme song. It was a stupid song, but it made Ellen smile. The same song that Robbie had played numerous times before and made her cringe, had become on that evening, a song she longed to hear over and over. It seemed to be the only song they played that somewhere in the song there wasn't something that reminded her of Dean's troubles. Like the jilted lover listening to soft rock radio, everything Robbie and them played had something in there that struck a chord to Ellen.

The kids were being kids in the livingroom, loud and having fun. Ellen was glad Dean's headache had finally left. He still was down, but at least he wasn't ill. As she rinsed the last of the dinner's dishes, Ellen wondered whether she took a long time because there were so many, or because she had escaped the situation for a little while and wasn't ready to go back. But now she had to. She had no choice.

Drying her hands, she shut off the kitchen light as she walked into the livingroom. Henry had Joey and Billy in some sort of card game. Alexandra, as usual, drew pictures. And Dean, he tried so hard to appear to his children as if nothing was wrong. So much in his usual every evening fashion, he sat on the couch, Brian on his lap and papers spread out all around him like he was working.

Why this vision bothered Ellen, she didn't know. Kids were bright and sometimes they saw things adults didn't see. They also accepted things a lot better. Of all people on the earth, during this troubled moment in his life, Dean's children were the ones who would be the least judgmental of him.

Ellen reached her hands to Brian, catching herself in the expectance of Dean handing him to her. "Dean." She made her announcement before him. "I can take Brian."

"I can hold him." Dean buried his lips to Brian's head.

"I'll clean up these papers for you."

"Thanks."

Gathering up the papers, Ellen heard Alexandra chuckle in amusement to her self. "What is it Alex?" Ellen asked as she set the papers on the coffee table and sat down next to Dean.

"Look what I drew Mommy." Alexandra held up her drawing. "I drew you and Daddy, but I made Daddy's feet too big." She snickered and stood up rushing to Dean. "Look Daddy at your feet."

Ellen watched Dean swallow predominantly and lift his head. His eyes didn't move.

"Daddy? Look." Alexandra held it higher.

"I . . . I see sweetie." Dean told her.

Alexandra giggled again. “No, you don’t. You aren’t even looking. Daddy look.”

Ellen saw the pain on Dean’s face as he desperately tried to find direction looking for where Alexandra’s voice came from. She heard him tell his daughter ‘that’s great’ and upon those words something inside of Ellen just snapped. She jumped from the couch. “I’ll be back.” She looked at Henry as she ran her hand across Dean’s back. “I have to go, I’ll be back.” Running out without anymore words, Ellen stopped on the walk, and took a deep breath of the evening air. Robbie’s music was louder out there, and the song he played seemed to be the perfect backdrop to her life that seemed so much like a bad Monday night movie.

She ran quickly the four houses up to her own, wanting so much just to get inside and stop the rush of madness she was feeling. When she got inside, Ellen just plopped on the couch, burying her face in her hands. She knew Dean was losing his sight. For while too. And when she saw him at the crack of dawn she knew his sight was gone. But she never realized the impact of it until that moment. Was the same thing going through Dean’s mind that was going through Ellen’s? Did he regret all those times he sat on the couch working, and he only lifted his head to Alexandra and pretended to see her drawing? How many times had he done that? How many times as a parent had Ellen done that. Now, Ironically Dean did the same thing moments earlier. Only this time his face showed how much he wanted with all of his heart not to be pretending.

A single knock on the door brought into the room the voice of the person she couldn’t face. “El.” Frank called out. “I was going in my Dad’s and I saw you run in here.”

Ellen wiped the tears that seemed to fall from out of her control. She wiped them quickly and folded her arms closer to her body.

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah.”

“I mean you were real quiet when I dropped the kids off. And Dean, Dean was fuckin rude. He wouldn’t even acknowledge my presence or look at me. And I was only trying to ask him how he was.”

Ellen stood immediately up, keeping her back to him, wanting him to go away. Not because she didn’t want him there, but because she needed him there.

“You’re quiet, Did I do something. I know I did. What was it?”

Ellen shook her head. “Nothing Frank. Really.”

Frank heard it in her voice. She spoke different, She spoke sad. “Talk to me.” He laid his hand on her shoulder and immediately he watched her head go to it. As she brushed her cheek against it, Frank felt the dampness. “El?”

Ellen spun around to him, she said nothing and she threw her arms around his neck grasping so tight to Frank.

“El. What is it?”

"I'm just having a really bad day. Could you . . . could you just hold me Frank?"

Frank's response was his answer. His huge arms wrapped around her almost twice as he pulled Ellen up and into him, cradling her with his whole being. He felt as he held her in his arms, he was giving her the strength she needed. But what Frank didn't realize was, he was giving Ellen the strength that only he could give.

(6)

Henry played with Ellen's hair softly as she laid upon his chest in their make-shift bed on Dean's livingroom floor. "I promise you El." He'd lift the hair, and let it fall. "I promise you it will be better tomorrow."

"Dean still won't be able to see tomorrow Henry."

"No he won't. But it will be another day. And with everyday that passes he will get better with it. He'll adjust. He has to."

"Will he?"

"Yes." Henry wanted to give her the answers. "Dean doesn't adjust well to change El, you know that. This is a big change, but you and I both know when he does adjust to something, he does it well. And he will do this well. He'll learn to live with this. He just needs time to know he has no choice but to learn. And when he does, you watch him."

"What about his state of mind Henry?" Ellen held on to him nuzzling more. "I'm worried about that."

"That will take time too."

"I have to help him."

"I know you do. Dean needs you. I saw that tonight. He was lost when you weren't around."

"He has so much to learn now Henry. And with him being so down, I'm afraid he won't learn. And if he doesn't learn, we're in so much trouble if this virus hits." Ellen closed her eyes. "Was that selfish of me to say that?"

"No." Henry's hand ran down her head. "Answer this question. Dean would be traumatically effected by the loss of his sight under normal circumstances, don't you think with this virus heavy on his mind, things are worse?"

"I do." Ellen raised her head to look at Henry. "Thank you for understanding me having to be there for him."

"I always knew you would be El. I'd be upset with you if you weren't. You have to help him through this. I believe you are the only one who can get his mind to heal enough for his body to learn to live with his blindness."

"You do know Henry . . ." Ellen took a second to kiss him gently before saying anymore "You do know I have to be there for him in anyway he needs me. You know this."

“I know this.”

“Things could happen Henry. When people are hurt and down they reach, Dean will reach. Can you handle that? If you can’t, you have to let me know and I will not cross any lines you do not want me to cross.”

“I know what you saying El. I do. Dean loves you. He’s going to seek from you a strength and a comfort only you can give him. There isn’t anyone else that can, and even if there was, he wouldn’t want anyone else.” Henry slipped his arms around Ellen more holding her to him. “I care about him too. You do what you need to do. I understand. I live in this world too. Trust me, I understand.”

“You’re the best person that’s ever came into my life Henry. I need you to know that.” Ellen clenched her arms tighter to him. “You’d better never give me up. I’d be so lost without you.” Ellen’s head lifted suddenly. “Henry?” She smiled in curiosity at him. “Your heart. It’s beating so fast right now. Are you all right?”

Henry only nodded and pressed her head back to his chest. He took a deep breath trying to let it go unnoticed. He closed his eyes and held Ellen until they fell asleep finally ending the day that became the nightmare they had been so long hoping would never occur.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

JULY 26

(1)

The theme song to Mission Impossible played in Henry's head as he slivered his way to Dean's front door. The morning silence filled the street as Henry, back against the archway, leaned his head out first, then slipped his body out of the house. Like the big spy, he checked up and down, darted a house forward, looked around the bend then hurriedly returned into Dean's house. "All clear." He told Ellen and Dean.

"Thanks Henry." Ellen said. "You're sure no one is around."

"Positive,," Henry answered. "Keep in mind that it is Sunday so you shouldn't run into anyone on your way to the clinic. Just avoid being center town between ten-fifteen and ten-thirty. Services let out."

Ellen gave a wink and a thumbs up. "You'll stop by and see us at the clinic?"

"Yep." Henry nodded. "Joe and Andrea are supposed to pick up the kids, so as soon as they do that, I'll be by. Are you sure you can make it there all right?"

"Oh sure." Ellen told him with such confidence. "Dean?" She looked to the couch where he sat. "You ready?"

"I don't know El." Dean shook his head with fright. "People are gonna know. We should go straight to the mobile lab."

"I'd love to." Ellen told him, walking to the couch. "But unfortunately Andrea says there is a lot of clinic work to do. Annual physicals took place this week, remember?"

Dean nodded. "I do. But what happens if someone walks in? What do I do?"

"What we talked about. You pick up that pen and bury your face into the notebook." Ellen reached for his arm and helped him to stand. "Ready?"

"I guess."

Walking with Dean, Ellen waved goodbye to Henry and walked out of the house. So as not to look like she was guiding him, she leaned against him as they walked, like two lovers on a stroll.

Den felt the openness and the warmth of the air. The sounds and smell of outside immediately hit him and he stopped walking.

"Dean? What is it?"

"It's just a little frightening that's all." Dean started walking again, only this time a little slower and depending on Ellen more to lead the way. "I guess you never realize how small you really are until you can only feel how big things are around you."

(2)

"Baby exchange." Frank handed Joe Nick and took Brian, laying him down on the couch, getting ready to change his diaper. "So what are you exactly doing with the entire brood today?"

"Andrea and I are taking the kids out to the field, we're gonna spend the day out there with them. We'll pick up Nick after lunch."

"Man are you a glutton." Frank commented as he changed Brian's diaper.

"I've been a busy man Frank, and I haven't had time to spend with my grandkids."

"But to take all of them in one shot."

"You do it." Joe commented. "And you're putting the diaper too tight on that kid."

"No-no. Don't even tell me how to change diapers. I am the master. I fuckin have two of them in diapers right now." Frank pulled up Brian's pants and held him. "And what is taking Alexandra and Henry so long up there. Henry? What the fuck? Come on!"

"We're right here Frank." Henry came down the steps "I was fixing Alex's hair. It was a mess you know."

Frank rolled his eyes. "What the hell is it with you and your obsession over fixing the kid's hair." He stood up and looked at Alex's perfect braid shaking his head. "You shouldn't be able to fix her hair like that Henry. Something's just not right about that."

"She looks pretty." Henry ran his hand down the back of Alexandra's hair.

"Yeah, well in about an hour she'll look dirty. She's gonna be running around the baseball field."

"At least she started her day off looking good." Henry checked out the time. "Joe should we still be at your house for dinner at the normal time?"

"No." Joe told him. "Make it six tonight. By the time we get back we won't have time to get it ready."

"O.K., I'll see you then. Bye." Henry hurried to the door.

Frank called out stopping him. "Wait a second."

Henry hunched and turned to face him. "Yeah Frank?"

"Where the hell are you going?"

"To the clinic." Henry watched Frank shake his head. "No? Why?"

Setting Brian down on the floor, Frank took Nick from Joe's arms. "Your turn Henry."

"But Frank . . ."

"Henry, take your kid."

"But Frank, I have things I have to do."

"So do I." Frank moved to him, extending the baby. "Take the baby."

"Frank, I promised El I'd stop by before she went to the mobile. I can't watch the baby until Joe picks him up. I have to go to the clinic. It's

really important. How about I get him after I stop at the clinic and then I'll take him to mechanics with me." Henry widened his eyes, smiled and nodded his head. "Good?"

Frank grunted and pulled Nick into him. "One hour. You be back here to get him in one hour or I'll chase your skinny ass down. If I chase your skinny ass down, I'm beating it."

"Deal." Before Frank could change his mind, Henry was out the door.

Joe couldn't believe it. "You really let him get away with pushing off that baby. I thought he'd want to be more a part of that kid's life."

"Oh he does. He wants to be a big part of this kids life." Frank kissed Nick. "Just as long as he doesn't have to feed him, walk him, change him or bath him."

"I'll pick up Nick from him after we're done at the field. Is Ellen coming to dinner tonight, her and Dean. Did you talk to her?"

"I talked to her this morning. She says they have a lot of work to catch up on."

"So Dean is better."

All Frank did was shrug.

"Something is up."

Frank raised his head. "You think so too?"

"My gut tells me Frank, we don't know something. Both of their demeanor was bad yesterday."

"How about this? I'm on my way into your house last night right. I see Ellen book into Henry's. I go in. She's crying. Crying Dad. And I held her for at least twenty-minutes, just held her. She wouldn't let me go. All night long I kept on thinking about that. Why was she crying? . . . And don't light that up in my house." Frank saw him pulled out a cigarette. "Not in front of Nick."

Joe grew perturbed as Frank waved his hand about. "Christ Frank, I haven't even lit it yet." Joe put the cigarette back. "And I'll be nice I won't smoke."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." Joe ran his hand down his own face. "Ellen, our Ellen was crying?"

"Yep."

"Something's wrong with Dean. Something is really wrong with him."

"You mean like sick?"

Joe's eyes rolled slightly. "Yes Frank. What the hell else do you think I mean. Come on, do you honestly think Ellen would be crying over nothing."

"She said she had a bad day."

"Ellen's had a bad life. She still doesn't cry over it."

There was a pause of silence, then Frank's big mouth broke it so loudly that it made Nick jolt in his arms. "Oh! This is good. What if he's dying."

“Frank!”

“Not that it would be a good thing. But say that’s what wrong with Ellen. What if Dean has this horrible disease?”

“You just really want to get rid of the man, don’t you?”

“Not really.” Frank handed Joe Nick to hold. “But I’m gonna find out.”

“How? You’re just gonna walk right up to him and ask him.”

“No.” Frank was offended that Joe would think he would be that callous. “No, I’m not gonna just walk up to him and say, ‘Dean are you fuckin dying’. I’ll find out. From Ellen.”

“Frank, if there’s something wrong with Dean. It’s really none of our business.”

“Bull shit. It’s all of our business. Like him or not, if Dean is dying or if there is something wrong with him, then we’re screwed. And we shall have the right to know. Because that virus is coming Dad. It’s already crossed our soil and we were lucky enough to keep it contained. How lucky are we gonna be the next time. Or worse, how lucky will we be if something hinders Dean from stopping it.”

It was at that moment Joe received a slap of reality. If a hundred SUTS came barreling through Beginnings back gate, Beginnings had a plan, and if that failed, they had a back up. But if a little tiny virus crept into Beginnings air. Beginnings had Dean. And if he went down, so did their first and only line of defense against that virus. And that right there, was the scariest of thoughts. What would they do if something actually happened to Dean?

(3)

“And Joe says he’s gonna have them until tonight.” Henry rolled up surgical instruments in a green cloth as he and Ellen sat at the counter. “What time do you think you’ll be done?”

“Most of the experiments Henry take hours. We’re almost finished here. I ran the test.” Ellen, who rolled up instruments to prepare for sterilization looked back to Dean who sat at the computer. “How’s it going Dean?”

“Good.” Dean typed slow.

Henry leaned forward to Ellen whispering. “Should he be typing in the results?” He raised his eyebrows.

“I heard that.” Dean yelled.

Ellen waved her hand at Henry. “Oh he’ll be fine. He does that home row key thing. Anyhow, I’ll check it when he’s done for errors.”

“Did you check to see if his hands were on the home row.”

“Um . . .” Ellen turned back again to check. “It is, I think. Are they Dean?”

"Yes Ellen, now please I'm listening to your tape, I can't listen to both of you."

Ellen giggled. "Look at Dean doing dictation Henry. And did you see his hair? I parted it on the right side today." She turned when she heard the click of the stopping of the tape player. "What is it Dean?"

"You parted my hair on the right?"

"Um . . ." Ellen hunched. "No Dean. No I didn't so that. Left, I mean left."

Dean's hands raised to his head and he felt around. "Aw Ellen. And stop laughing."

Henry tried not to laugh, "That isn't very nice. Dean likes his hair parted on the left." Henry peered at Dean. "But I do like it better like that. But he needs to shave. Dean? Dean?" Henry stood up and walked over to Dean. "Dean?" He lifted the headset from his ear. "Dean?"

"What Henry?!" Dean's hand slammed on the counter. "What?"

"You need to shave. You never go with out shaving, if you don't want people to know that you can't see, you have to shave."

"I'll keep that in mind." Dean felt the keyboard to reposition his hands.

"Did you need me to come over tonight and help you shave?"

Dean paused before he answered Henry, his head dropped slightly. "No Henry. I'll figure it out."

"Good boy." Henry gave him a pat on the back sending Dean forward some and knocking his positioned hands off the keyboard. "Sorry." Henry grabbed his hands and put them back. "And you're doing really good Dean. You can't even tell you can't see."

"Thanks Henry."

"Your eyes have stopped bouncing around. They did that yesterday, you know. Bouncing and bouncing." Henry walked back to Ellen. "They stopped though." He sat back down next to Ellen. "Kind of reminded me of this woman I knew when I was a kid. She was cock-eyed . I never knew what eye to look at when I talked to her. I always felt I was being rude."

"Henry I know exactly what you're talking about." Ellen said. "You kept thinking, what if you were looking at the wrong eye. Do you suppose people with crossed eyes know that people have a hard time knowing which eye is the correct eye to look in?"

"I suppose they do El." Henry continued helping her get the instruments ready. "I mean they really couldn't go their whole entire life without someone telling them that. Could they?"

"They could. Because wouldn't it be impolite to tell a person with crossed eyes something about their eyes?"

"But people can be rude El."

"So true Henry. I remember when I was in the second grade I used to walk pigeon toed. Like this." Ellen stood up and pointed her toes inward.

"I never knew that." Henry laughed. "Dean did you know that."

"She still walks like that Henry."

"No way?" Henry was shocked. "El, walk across the room and let me look. But don't try to walk normal."

"I can't do that Henry, even if I try to walk normal I'm gonna subconsciously walk straight. Understand?"

"Yeah." Henry said disappointed. "I'll wait until you don't know I'm looking. How about that. I learned something new. See Dean . . . whoops sorry . . . you taught me something new about Ellen."

Dean mumbled as he worked, trying to listen to Ellen's rambling dictation and key in the results. "Why do I torture myself being around you two?"

Henry thought he heard Dean talk. "Did you say something Dean?"

"No Henry." Dean shook his head. "And aren't you supposed to be back to get the baby. You said one hour."

Henry leaned into Ellen. "How does he know how long I've been here?"

Dean grumbled. "My watch beeps every hour. It has beeped twice since you've been here Henry. Go."

"I'd rather wait until Frank seeks me out. You don't mind me staying do you El?"

"No." Ellen told him. "But you may want to leave." She lifted her head to the door.

Dean heard Henry moan. He wanted to turn around, he wanted to ask who was there. But by the moan it could only be one of two people. Frank with the baby, or . . .

"Hi Ellen." Jenny Matoose walked into the clinic. "Henry." She shuffled to the counter. "Hello Dean. I heard you were sick yesterday. Feeling better."

"Yes." Dean answered curt and continued to work. He felt nervous suddenly when Jenny walked in, like he was being watched. And Dean knew he was just being paranoid.

"I won't keep you long." Jenny said. She grunted at Henry's 'good.' "We're all going out to the field with the kids today. Ellen, I need to know where you'll be later. Ben is dropping off the swatches of colors for the bridesmaid dresses and you have to pick. He's going to dye them this week. And . . ." Jenny smiled widely. "He finished with your flats." She spoke with excitement. "I'd like to drop them off as well. But he won't have them until later."

"I'll be at the mobile." Ellen told her.

"Oh." Jenny folded her arms. "John hates when I go up there. How long will you be up there?"

Ellen lifted her shoulders and dropped them "I don't know. Hours, maybe. Why?"

"Well, Patrick has the baby tonight and John and I are going to the social hall. Can I drop them off with Hen . . ." Jenny shook her head.

"Scratch that. Can I drop them off at Fra . . . Nah. Call me when you get home. I'll leave John to drop them off to you."

"When do you need the color answer by?" Ellen asked.

"Tomorrow."

"You know what. Just drop them off at Dean's." Ellen told her. "If I'm not there, I will be there and I'll get them. And make sure you bring my shoes."

"I will. The door will be open then?"

"Yes."

"Good." Jenny smiled and stepped back. "As soon as I get them I'll bring them over. That way I don't have to listen to John bitch about me leaving him on our date." She moved to the door. "And let me know about the color, first thing."

"I will." Ellen raised her hand noticing how red Henry's face was getting.

"Bye Dean. . . Henry." Jenny giggled and left.

It rumbled. It was loud and Henry's color returned when he exhaled loudly. "God! I thought she'd never leave. How long can one person hold their breath for?"

Ellen laughed at him. "You held your breath the whole time she was here."

"Oh sure El. I didn't want her to drop off your stuff with me. I'm looking forward to having the house alone for an hour or so tonight. She would just . . ." Henry hunched when he heard his name being called. "Shit. Frank." He jumped up. "I gotta go. Talk to you later." He hurried and kissed her. "Bye Dean."

Dean listened as Henry ran out. He chuckled when he heard Henry ramble off excuses from the hall to Frank on what took him so long. He only wished he could make out the words better.

"No, El." Dean resisted her forceful pull. "What, are you crazy?"

"Dean, you have to."

"I can not."

"Dean, when have I ever driven to the mobile lab. Hmm?"

"And when have I ever driven blind? How am I supposed to drive El." Dean tossed his hands in the air. "I can't see!"

"Shh." Ellen covered his mouth. "You never know who's around. Just get in. I'll direct you from the passengers seat."

"El, you can't even drive from the driver's seat."

"Get in Dean." Ellen gave him a shove and then she walked to the other side. She stepped in the jeep and watched Dean feel his way around as he climbed in.

"Ready." He told her, gripping the steering wheel.

"O.K. Now the jeep is faced the right way. Just turn it over and go. I'll tell you how to steer by saying numbers on a clock."

Nervously, Dean reached for the key. "This is so dangerous."

"Good. You have to live life dangerously or you really don't live life."

"Aren't you being miss philosophical." He didn't see it, but Ellen smiled with arrogance. "Pretty cocky for someone who is in a moving vehicle with a blind man driving."

"Just drive Dean."

Dean turned over the engine then shifted gears.

"Pull out slowly keeping it steady at twelve. You're good. Just go straight."

"Oh God." Dean's heart pounded as the jeep began to move.

"Good Dean, Good."

"How's my speed?"

"Excellent." Ellen giggled.

"What?"

"Nothing, one o'clock Dean. Good." Her giggle transformed into a laugh.

"What is it?"

"Nothing." She laughed harder. "Oh!" Another laugh. "Two O'clock, three, back to twelve." She held on as the jeep swerved. "Great!"

"Ellen what hell?"

"You're good." A deep sigh came from her. "Oh that was fun."

"What was? Ellen am I going in the right direction."

"You are now." She wiped her hand down her face, looked back at Beginnings, then smiled. "Watch out for that tree . . ." She felt the jerk of the breaks. "Just kidding."

(4)

"What the fuck was that shit all about!?" Frank blasted out his question as he stormed into the mobile lab. "Ellen?"

Ellen immediately ran by Dean. "Bury your head Dean." She whispered.

"What is he doing El?"

"Hello!" Frank called out. "Answer me. Why am I walking through town, at casual pace mind you and then . . . and then Fuckin Dean tries to run me over with the jeep. You think you're being funny Dean?"

Dean kept his back to him. At first he didn't think it was funny, but then the visual of Frank running from a zig zagging Jeep hit Dean and at that moment he started to laugh. "Sorry Frank."

"Yeah real funny. And I have to talk to you."

"Oh shit." Dean said softly. "El get him out."

"Frank." Ellen faced him. "You have to go."

"Nope. I have to talk to Dean. In fact, can you leave us alone for a second?"

"Nope." Ellen returned to her work. "We're busy. Go Frank."

"No El." Frank walked closer to Dean. "I have to talk to him."

"Can I . . . uh . . ." Dean fiddled with his notebook Ellen placed right in front of him. "Can I work while you talk?"

"I don't give a shit. Just make sure you listen."

"El." Dean called her. "It's all right. Just go in the special lab. All right?"

"Are you sure?" She laid her hand on his back. "I can stay."

"Go." Dean lifted his head. He heard her footsteps and then the special lab door opened and closed. "Frank, now what is . . ."

"El!" Frank yelled at her. "What are you doing? Go!"

Dean couldn't believe it. Ellen pretended to leave? And she thought she'd get away with that with Frank. Frank wasn't the one blind. "Go El."

"All right." Ellen whined and opened the door. "I'm gone."

Again Dean heard the door shut. "Is she gone."

"You don't know?" Frank asked.

"I don't feel like looking."

"Man are you lazy. Anyhow." Frank stood right behind him. "She's gone and we need to talk. I do have a purpose for being here."

"Then talk."

"Now something is going on and I need to know. It's a dead giveaway Dean the time you two are spending together."

"Frank." Dean could hear it coming, Frank thinking he was with Ellen. Trouble and interference is what would happen if Frank felt strongly that he was. Dean couldn't have that. "Frank, I know where you're going with it. I do. And I want you to know, there is nothing going on between me and El. Nothing. I have no interest in her."

"Really?" Frank smiled with a closed mouth and nod. "Bonus, I didn't even ask about that."

"Bonus?"

"Yeah. That isn't what I wanted to ask you about. . . . and Dean, Alex writes better than you." Frank pointed to the notebook. "She at least writes in the lines."

Dean tried to ignore Frank's bad wit. "If that wasn't what you wanted to know. What is it then?"

"Oh." Frank cleared his throat. "Are you fuckin dying?"

"No!" Dean snapped. "Why would you ask that?"

"Just thinking about it." Frank shrugged. "Oh well. I'll see you guys later."

That's it? That was the big Frank question. That was the other reason--aside from almost being run over--Frank came to the lab? It was perfect, it was short, sweet and almost painless.

"What did Frank want?" Ellen asked as she returned.

"He wanted to know if I was dying."

"I hope you told him no."

"I did . . . and can we get back to work."

"Oh sure Dean." Ellen said. "But one thing . . . While I was in the special lab. I noticed three rabbits had died. Numbers 16, 19, and 23."

"Shit." Dean brought this hand to his forehead. "They weren't suppose to die yet. They weren't."

"They folded under pressure Dean They couldn't take it any more."

"You know what this means El?"

"No." Ellen shook her head.

"It means we no longer can put in the background the things we have been."

"Such as?" Ellen asked.

"Such as, we have been swarming trying to beat this virus. When El, I'm starting to believe the virus may not kill us after all."

"That's good news." Ellen stated with a smile.

"No El. That's bad news. Because if this virus gets here and it doesn't kill us. The symptoms will. And it's time to get to work on that."

(4)

Robbie would look at her through the corner of his eye, look away, the look back again. What was up with Andrea. Smiling and buzzing around his father's house. His head jolted up to a loud thump above his head. And Robbie walked over to the stairs. "Frank! I hope you don't have those kids in my room." He shook his head at Frank's 'shut up' and walked back into the livingroom. "Henry." He spoke to Henry who sat on the couch a notebook open on his lap. "It's Sunday, what are you doing?"

"Working Robbie."

"On what?" Robbie looked over his shoulder.

"If you really want to know . . ."

"Not really."

Henry grunted.

"Just kidding. What is it?"

"Well I am learning that SUT programming and I am going to reprogram the second chip to be something totally not on the program list."

"No way?" Robbie asked. "You can do that."

"I'm hoping. What you do to the SUT depends on where you implant the chip. See?"

"I get it. So while the SUT has the one chip implanted in him. You're gonna reprogram the other and when that's done, reopen his brain and stick that one in?"

"Uh . . ." Henry gave a cringing face. "I was kind of hoping for another SUT."

Robbie folded his arms and rubbed his chin. "We can do that. The next time we spot one, I'll get him for you."

"Thanks." Henry smiled.

"Get what?" Joe asked when he walked into the livingroom.

"Henry wants another SUT."

Joe gave that disbelief look to Henry. "They're humans Henry. You do know that."

"Yeah Joe sure." Henry read his notes. "But I need another one to implant with the chip I'm working on reprogramming."

"Then we have time." Joe sat on the couch. "Another year maybe for you to do that?"

"Ha, ha, ha. Ye of little faith,"

"No." Joe pointed at him. "Ye of little time."

If Frank could have barreled down the steps any louder at that moment he would have annoyed the people in the next row of houses as well as those in the livingroom. "Hey." He spoke upbeat smacking Robbie on the back of the head as he walked behind him. "What's up with you yelling at me?"

"What's up with you hitting me." Robbie nudged into him.

"Ow!" Frank faked whined and grabbed his shoulder. "Your bones are hard."

Robbie wanted to lash out again in fun fighting mannerism but he stopped when Andrea waltzed into the room. He looked oddly at her and so did Frank.

Andrea smiled shaking her head. "You boys."

Robbie mouthed the word 'boys' in question to Frank.

Andrea set down a coffee for Joe. "Would any of you like some? No?" She shrugged "Henry I brought that planner over for you to look at." She reached for the notebook he held.

Like a greedy child Henry protected it. "No. What planner?"

"The wedding planner. It's on the table by the door. It's all the details us women have come up with."

"Swell." Henry mumbled.

"What was that?" Andrea, with folded arms asked. "Anyhow it's over there. You'll like it." She lifted her arms and raised them with a drop. "Robbie?" She spoke so chipper. "You'll play for us, won't you?"

Robbie gave an odd look. "Play what?"

Andrea giggled. "Guitar silly. And sing. Oh when we were back in the old world we used to sit on the porch and listen to the boy downstairs play and sing. When you guys were practicing the other night I thought of that. I enjoyed it. You'll play right?"

"Andrea I'm like old. I'm not twelve. No one cares."

Andrea tapped him on the cheek. "Sweet. I'm going get some strudel and you can grab your guitar." She moved to the kitchen. "Oh, and I want to hear that 'Silly' song."

Robbie tossed his hands up. "What is up with her? Is she going through a change of life or something. The 'Silly' Song. That's a joke." Robbie looked at his father. "Dad?"

"Grab your guitar Robbie."

"All right." He pouted. "When I was eleven you used to make me play that stupid song, the only song I knew. What was it?"

"Proud Mary." Frank answered sounding so distant.

"Yeah that was it."

"You sucked." Frank commented.

"Thanks. Dad, do I have to . . ."

"Be nice." Joe sipped on his coffee giving a 'blow-off' attitude to Robbie. Speaking to him like he indeed was a child. "We have company and we're doing a family night."

"Aw." Robbie started to whine, then stopped. "Shit, I sounded like Henry." Robbie laughed when he saw Henry's raised hand extend the middle finger, and then Robbie walked over to the closet. As he did he saw Frank staring down at the table. "Frank." Robbie stood right next to him and he saw his big brother staring so sadly down at the planner. "What is it?"

Frank closed his eyes and titled his head. "They're really gonna do this thing aren't they? My best friend is going to marry Ellen." With a subtle slam of the planner, Frank ran his hand across his short black hair and grabbed the back of his neck. His eyes shifted to Henry.

"You knew this."

"Yeah . . ." Frank nodded slowly. "But I didn't believe it." He stepped back. "I'll be back. Tell Dad I had something to take care of."

"He's right there, tell him your . . ." Robbie didn't get to finish, Frank had left. "Self."

Joe immediately spun around at the close of his door. "Did Frank leave? Where did he go?"

"Um." Robbie scratched his head. "He went to the social hall to get the tambourine. He doesn't want to feel left out."

"Good." Joe stood up. "I'll go help Andrea with that strudel."

"Good?" Robbie chuckled. "I bet he didn't even hear what I said." Shaking his head he walked to the couch. "Henry? You have to go after Frank."

"No." Henry closed his notebook. "I'm not playing tambourine Robbie. I'm not Tracy Partridge."

"Sure you are Henry, you have the long hair." Robbie held up his hand when he saw Henry's facial muscle clench. "Seriously, go after Frank. He's upset and I'm afraid he'll drink. I'd go after him myself but I'll flip on him and you're the one who needs to talk to him."

"Me?" Henry asked. "Why me?"

"Seems my brother got a reality check." Robbie pointed back with his thumb. "He was looking at that wedding planer and he got upset."

"Shit." Henry nearly stomped. "Thanks Robbie. I'll find him." He tucked his notebook under his arm.

"Henry what are you going to tell him? What *can* you tell him?"

"I don't know Robbie" Henry opened the door. "But I can't let him feel bad about it. I just can't. I knew this would happen. Shit."

With a raise of his eyebrows, Robbie watched Henry leave. Then it hit him, the kids were upstairs. His Dad and Andrea were doing the strudel thing in the kitchen. Robbie could make his escape. Just as his hand reached for the door he knew that was an impossibility.

"Robert." Joe called out stern walking into the livingroom with Andrea who held her strudel. "Wrong door for that guitar."

"Right." Robbie shook his head and faced the closet, he opened it and pulled out his acoustic. "Got it."

"Good." Joe sat down with Andrea on the couch.

Really wanting to let go and whine and pout like Henry, Robbie thought of one better. He placed on his guitar and walked before Joe and Andrea. He'd let them hear him play. And as best as he could he would play and sing loud the most annoying songs he knew. And he'd start with the Brady Bunch Collection.

(5)

"Point two five percent." Ellen spoke softly, raising her eyes above the clipboard then watching as Dean held a dropper in his hand and held it over a beaker. "Good. Next, acid content. One percent." She watched him pick up the next dropper and add the ingredient. "Hydration. Forty-percent." Ellen, with her eyes peered to Dean, stopped walking. "No." She hurried over to him grabbing his hand. "Wrong one." Trying to remain calm, she lowered her eyes just to read, and she heard the thunderous crashing of breaking glass. She lifted her head to see Dean's arm in a final sweep of the counter. "What are you doing?!"

"Not this!" Dean stood pushing his hands at the counter.

"Sit back down."

"I'm screwing up."

"So what? It's a cough formula, big deal. That's why you're learning."

"I can't do this El."

"It'll take practice."

"No! Now is not the time to be practicing and you know it." Dean argued strongly. "How can I be trusted to mix medication that people will ingest into their bodies?"

"That's why we're . . ."

"El!" His hand shot in the air. And he turned to try to face her. "I can't even see where you are and I'm supposed to see what I am mixing into a medication? And to think I am being counted on to cure a virus. I'm useless."

"You're not useless Dean." Ellen walked over to him trying to be comforting..

"Useless El. I'll never be able to be left alone without a babysitter in my own lab. Do you know how that makes me feel? I can't take it."

"Dean, that's not true. Come here." Ellen reached for his jacket that not only was wet, but had blood that dripped from his hand. "Take this off. And your hand is bleeding. Let me . . ."

"No!" Dean moved back. "Stop treating me like a child. You have me up here treating me and teaching me like a three year old. Talking down to me, scolding me when I make a mistake. I can't help it El. I just lost my sight. You don't seem to comprehend what that is doing to me."

"I do Dean." Ellen's voice stayed soothing.

"No, you don't. All day long I have to listen to you and Henry make bad reference jokes trying to cheer me up. It's wrong. You have me driving. Wrong. You have me mixing chemicals that could inadvertently kill some one. How can I try to save a life if I can't even shave my own face. A face that is so itchy!" Dean ran his hand harshly across his chin. "It's driving me nuts! I shouldn't be here."

"You have every right to be here. This is your research." Ellen laid her hand on his back.

Dean's hands reached out for the counter and he felt his way into it. "I feel horrible."

"I know."

"I just feel so lost. So lost." His head dropped down.

"Dean." Ellen move closer to him. "Let's call it a night. Let's just go home. Let me take you home." Dean didn't answer her. "Dean?" She placed her face closer to his. "I'll even drive." She watched his head sway from her with his eyes closed. "Dean, please." Ellen listened as Dean let out a long breath of sadness and frustration then covered his face with his hands. So un-respondent to her.

Leaving the lab was what they had to do, take a break, and going home was for the best. Dean had worked so hard, but he just didn't know that. The giant steps he was taking on this day would have seemed to him years earlier like baby steps, and that made things worse for Dean . . . Knowing what he had the capabilities to do and feeling so powerless in expending them. But Ellen knew before they slid backwards in any progress, she had to get Dean to care enough to take further steps to go on. And right then, she couldn't even get him to care enough to take that first step from the lab and go home.

(6)

Henry spotted him, just where Robbie said he would be, doing exactly what Robbie said he would do. Frank stood against the bar, leaning into it, a drink in his hand. "Frank?" Henry walked up to behind him. "You didn't stay for strudel."

Frank brought his drink to his mouth dumping some of the liquor in.

"Robbie is singing."

"I don't care."

"You're drinking Frank."

"I don't care."

Henry held back his frustration. "Go back to your dad's with the kids."

"Where are you gonna be?"

"Me? I'm uh . . . I was going home. Unless you want me to go to Joe's with you."

"No." Frank finished off his drink and reached over the bar for the bottle.

"Frank, you said you weren't gonna . . ."

"Henry." Frank slammed the bottle. "Leave. Right now, I don't want to be around you."

"Tough Frank, I'm here." Henry moved closer to beside him. "Robbie told me you got upset when you were looking in the planner."

"Yeah I did."

"Why? Why all of the sudden are you getting upset?"

"Did you see that thing Henry?" Frank asked with an edge. "Where you stand. Where she stands. What you'll eat. What song you'll dance to. And do you know what song that is? Soul and Inspiration. Our song. Me and El's. And you're gonna dance to it with her."

"No Frank, we won't. I'll change it. I didn't know. I didn't even know we were dancing."

"It's a wedding Henry." Frank poured another drink. "A big fuckin wedding for you and El."

"I'm sorry Frank."

"No. Don't be." Frank finished off that second drink and gasped, running his hand over his mouth and goatee. "I keep thinking when this wedding happens. Where do I stand? I'm losing her."

"No you aren't. I won't let that happen."

"How can you be sure?" Frank turned his head to look at Henry. "How?"

"Because I want it to work out. All of us. I have told you over and over again. She won't be with any one else Frank. Just us. I'll make sure of it."

Frank's jaw moved back in forth as he stared at Henry. "You always said you wouldn't interfere in who she's with."

"I know I said that. But I also know what El says to me. It's getting there Frank, it really is. You have to be patient. And you coming in here and drinking . . ." Henry reached for the glass. "It's not helping. It's not gonna help matters if she finds out you're doing it."

Frank's fingers released the glass. "You're right."

"I know I am." Henry moved the glass from his way. "And please don't be upset about this wedding. It's not going to change things between the three of us. We sat down and talked about the way the understanding would go, remember? I still want to stick with that. And if there's anything I can do to make you feel better about it, let me know."

"There is something you can tell me Henry, because you're close to her too. I feel it Henry. El and I are close again. We're what we were years ago. I'm believing I'm gonna have her in my life. And for a long time I stopped believing that. Tell me Henry right now if you don't think that's gonna happen. I am going crazy because everyday that goes by, my heart gets more and more into it. You have to tell me if I'm wasting my time. You have to tell me if it's not going to work out. I can handle the truth. What I won't be able to handle is, waiting and waiting and then finding out I waited for nothing."

"You're not Frank. It's gonna happen. I swear it."

Frank smiled slightly. "I'm sorry I went off on you."

"I understand. Now, will you come back to the house?"

"What? Are you fuckin nuts. Hear Robbie sing. Watch Andrea play June Cleaver. Fuck no. I'll stay here."

"Frank . . ."

"Without drinking Henry." Frank reached over the bar and set the bottle down. "I'll hang out here. Maybe catch a game of darts with someone. You wanna play?"

"Can I take a rain check?" Henry lifted his shoulder in a innocent fashion. "I have to work on these notes."

"Rain check given." Frank said.

"Good. I'll see you later. Stop by when Ellen gets home. O.K.?"

"I'd like that."

"See you Frank." Henry backed up. "And no . . ."

"I know, I know." Frank shook his head and held up his hand. "Bye Henry." He saw as his friend left and Frank looked around the bar, and the four men in there. He knew his hopes for a dart partner would not go unanswered when seventy-two year old Forrest walked into the social hall.

"Ah Frunk." Forrest approached him. "You uh a loon?"

"Most of the time yeah." Frank commented.

"Then you wooed newt mund de comb-pa-nee?"

"Huh?"

"De comb-pa-nee? Ma Uh john you?"

“Um sure. Hey Forrest. You feel like playing darts.” Frank smiled. An easy victory always made him feel better.

“I woo love to plea dots.”

“Great.” Frank clapped his hands together. “Let’s go. I have to warn you Forrest, I’m still a beginner. Don’t kick my ass.” Frank said sarcastically as he stepped toward the dart machine.

“Uh woo try newt to. Ma-bay Uh con hep you. I wuss de Iowa stat mun’s da-vison-nil chum-peon for sex years strut.”

“Fuck.”

Forrest chuckled. “Uh um ruddy Frunk.” Forrest grabbed his darts.

“Great.” Frank huffed some under his breath. If little Forrest beat him that surely would end up topping off his night. Regretting the ploy for a quick feel good fix in beating Forrest, Frank checked out who was in the bar. Figuring if he was going to lose he was going to lose painlessly, Frank seeing that Henry was gone, re-claimed his bottle from the bar, poured a drink and walked back over to join Forrest.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

(1)

The snow fell hard and fast that first winter in Beginnings. So much of it that the originals, the only ones that lived there thought it would never let up. Ellen stood before the door of what would eventually be the social hall. A smaller warehouse now equipped with tables but nothing else. Plans to complete were set for spring. But to Ellen, spring seemed like an eternity away. She felt the kick of the baby, a slow moving foot running from inside of her as she stared out watching the snow fall and fall. Seven months pregnant just about, and still far from showing it fully. She didn't wear a maternity dress, Ellen always thought they reminded her of tents. Tan pants, and a long black shirt, and to add that dress up touch, Ellen wore earrings.

The chattering continued behind her, though she tried to block it out. Turning around a hand on her stomach, she looked at the waiting faces. Joe sat with a drink, picking at the food that set center a large table. Frank was off behind everyone and he stared at her. In fact, Ellen felt they all stared at her when she turned around. They did. Did she look as confused or embarrassed as she felt? Feeling the weight of the baby ache her legs, Ellen wanted to sit down, but she didn't. She turned back to the partly open door and stared back out. Where was Dean? Her mind slipped back to a few days earlier, the whole reason for her waiting. Going over to see Dean in some fake excitement on how the baby moved oddly. Had Ellen had known she was carrying twins, the shifting of her stomach would have made so much sense. How she used that excuse as the leverage she needed to talk to Dean. To try to make him see she really wanted him in her life. To ask Dean to marry her. Of course Ellen didn't expect the reaction of laughter she got from him. But Dean agreed to marry her. Maybe his quick decision was why she stood there waiting on him. Maybe he had no intention of marrying her. Dean's little payback for Ellen's betrayal of him when they first got to Beginnings.

She closed the door, again silence in the room when she faced those waiting for the first marriage of Beginnings. She smiled slightly, looking at Frank who shook his head as if to tell her 'give it up'. George, who was going to perform the ceremony, kept looking at his watch. This bothered Ellen. Everyone looking at their watches bothered Ellen. Did they actually have something better to do? How long have they been waiting? One hour? Another excuse. It was time to give them another excuse for Dean's delay. Getting the clinic together perhaps? Just as Ellen opened her mouth to tell yet another reason, she felt the hand on her shoulder. *Dean?* She turned around. "William." She smiled up to the man who towered over her. Dean's father whom Dean bore no resemblance to.

"Ellen." William took on the worldly advice appearance. "Ellen, maybe we should just send everyone home."

"He's not coming?"

William shook his head. "I'm afraid not."

"Why?"

William knew, his face showed it, but he wasn't telling Ellen. "I don't know. I've tried talking to him. He's not coming."

"Then I'll talk to him." Ellen walked by him. "Excuse me."

"Ellen, maybe it's best not to. Not right now. You two have all the time. Do it another day."

"He said he was going to marry me today William." Ellen pulled from his gentle reaching arm.

"Don't Ellen. Just . . . just stay, finish off the food with us, and let it go."

"Oh now see, now I'm really going over there." Ellen heard William call her name as she ran out of social hall, her feet sinking into the snow, but she didn't stop. It wasn't far to Dean's not at all. Making it there was a chore, the snow came up nearly to her knees. The fact that she didn't wear a coat barely phased her in her determination in hurry to get to Dean's house. A place she had taken her clothes to just the day before.

Was he there? Or was he hiding out? Ellen had to know and she wasn't taking a chance on him not opening his door either. She didn't knock, she just walked in. Her mouthed moved to call out his name. But he saw her. Dean sat at the diningroom table, books spread out before him. "Dean." She walked in, shutting the door then brushing the snow from her hair.

Dean looked at Ellen soaking wet, he stared for a moment, adjusted his glasses and buried his head back in the book.

"Dean."

"Ellen please."

"What are doing?"

"I'm working on different ways to come up with anti . . ."

"No, Dean." Ellen moved more to him. "What are you doing? I was waiting. You didn't show. You had no intention of showing."

Dean fussed nervously in his chair and turned a page.

"Doesn't it bother you?" Ellen reached out slamming his book. "Doesn't it? You knew I was waiting. Doesn't it bother you that you were supposed to be there and you stood me up."

"Of course it bothers me." Dean spoke with an edge. "More than you know."

"You had no intentions of showing up. Did you?" She waited and received no answer. "You could have at least had the guts to tell me that you didn't want to marry me. You could have at least done that." Ellen turned and began to walk away.

"Then I would have been lying."

"What?" She spun to him.

"I want to marry you. But I'm not marrying you. I can't El. I can't. This is stupid."

Ellen shook her head with an emotional laugh.

"No hear me out." Dean stood up and walked to her. "How long were we in Beginnings before you were with Frank? An hour? Two? El, my God, I love you. We're having a child. We decided we were going to be together and you slept with him?"

"I told you I was sorry." Ellen lowered her head.

"Real sorry." Dean stepped closer to her. "So sorry that you did it again."

"You broke up with me."

"And you made no attempt afterward to work it out. None. You sleep with one brother and live with the other. I don't even want to think about what happens at night with you and Robbie Slagel."

"Dean . . ."

"For as much as I love you, and for as much as I'd love for you to be my wife, it's a motion we'll go through and it will mean nothing to you."

"I would have never asked you to marry me if I didn't want that." Ellen told him.

"And why is that El? Why do you want to marry me?"

"I love you."

"You have a funny way of showing it." Dean started to back up.

"Me? And you think standing me up while I'm waiting on marrying you, is showing how much you love me?" Ellen tossed her hands up. "Go back to your book. I have fifteen people waiting in the social hall for me to return and tell them something they already know."

"Ellen stop." He called out as she moved to the door. "You can't be mad at me about this. You can't. Not after what you did to me."

"Then why did you agree to marry me? I came here the other day and laid my heart on the line to you. I don't to that Dean. We are having a baby. I want to start over again. And I don't care what you say about being there for us. I want to do this with you. You have given me back my hope when you gave me this baby." Her hand moved about her stomach. "The other day was Taylor's birthday and I was so down, I was so lost. But you know what? The thought of having this child. The thought of having this child's love pulled me through. And I wouldn't have that if it wasn't for you. This is our baby Dean. And I love you, not just for giving me this baby but for being a part of my life. And I realize I need you in my life. Or at least I did. I'm not perfect. I don't claim to be. I don't want to make mistakes anymore, and God knows I would have given it my best shot. I just wanted to try to live life again and I wanted to do it with you."

"I can still be there with you and the baby El. Look around, no one is around. I'll be there, but I don't have to marry you to do that. I can't marry you."

"I know you'll be here for me and the baby, I know that. You can be. It's just not gonna be what I wanted. I wanted to be with you. I realized that. I guess I realized it too late."

"But if you really want to be with me, can't we at least start over? Can't we do it without getting married?"

"We could have." Ellen nodded. "Could have. But not now."

"I do want to be with you El. I just can't let my heart go all the way like that."

"Neither can I Dean. I let it go with you. I won't anymore. I guess, and I'm sorry for saying this, but I guess in a way Robbie and Frank were right. I didn't know you. I shouldn't have made that commitment to you in the first place. They said I should raise this baby with someone I know I can count on."

"Oh that is such bullshit El."

"Is it?" Ellen asked. "I have to go."

"No, you wait." Dean hurried to the door. "They were telling you that shit because they were convinced because you knew them longer, that they were the only ones you could count on. That is not true."

"Isn't it?" Ellen reached for the door. "I know where I stand with them. You're the one who left me standing at the altar." She raised her eyebrows and walked out. The coldness of the air blasted her and took her breath away. Folding her arms against her already damp clothing, she walked back to the social hall.

Ellen paused before going in. She felt bad, really bad and now she had to face everyone. Not like she expected to get pity from them. She got what she deserved. Her lesson was well learned. She cleared her throat when she walked in to get their attention. Knowing full well they knew she was there and they just didn't want to put her in that position. The position Ellen was in as she stood before them. Even George had left. Maybe that was his way of giving her an excuse too. Either way, Ellen had to tell those who remained in the wait. "I'd like to tell you all." Ellen slowed in her speech. "I'd like to tell you that I had the time or the day mixed up. But I didn't. Um . . . I had my uh . . . my . . . ideals, I had my ideals mixed up. I thought Dean wanted to get married today. He uh . . . he didn't. I mis . . . I misunderstood him and this here, it's all my fault." She closed her eyes shaking her head, trying to act as if what had happened was a mistake. "Boy was he surprised when I went over there and told him that we were supposed to be getting married at that moment." Ellen fake chuckled. "And you guys know Dean, he was hanging out in his sweat pants and he wanted to get dressed and I told him . . ." Ellen swallowed. "I told him 'Nah' we'll do it another day. So, let's eat and uh, we'll do this another day."

"No Ellen." Dean's voice rang through the silent room when he walked into the hall. "We'll do this now."

Ellen turned suddenly to face him. "We can't."

"Why." He stepped in a little more, still keeping his distance.

"We're not doing this Dean."

"We're doing it."

"No. This isn't what you want."

"Bull shit, this isn't what I want. I love you. I thought about it."

"Well, go home and think about it some more. The wedding is off."

Ellen changed her demeanor and tried to act as if nothing was bothering her. "Besides, George is gone. You're off the hook."

"I don't need George. Who is George anyhow? Someone we appointed to say it would be official?" Dean chuckled. "I don't need George. Just like I don't need to go home and think about it some more. We screwed up. I screwed up and you screwed up. And it's going to be a lonely world El, for both of us and we don't at least try to make it right."

"Don't." Ellen held her hand up stopping him. "Just let it go."

"No El."

"Dean!" Ellen shouted. "I'm embarrassed enough. Stop it."

"Nope." Dean shook his head stepping closer. "We have witnesses right here . . ."

"Dean . . ."

"And we don't need George."

"Dean . . ." Ellen backed up. "Knock it off."

"No!" Dean ran his hand through his wet hair. "Because I Dean." He stepped to her. "Want you Ellen . . ." Another step and his voice softened. "To be my wife." His fingers grabbed her face that turned from him and he made Ellen face him. "I will be faithful to you always. I will stand by you and I will try with my whole heart to be there for you whenever you need me. We don't need rings. We don't need a ceremony or someone to tell us we're married. I just made my vow to you. And I need you to tell me 'yes' and from the second you do, I will look at you in no other way than as my wife." Dean's face was serious as he looked into Ellen's eyes. He moved his face even closer to hers. If the room had not been so quiet, his whispering words would not have been heard. "Say yes El. Say you're my wife."

"Dean . . ."

"Say yes."

Ellen closed her eyes. "Yes." She felt his fingers slip behind her head and Dean pulling her to him to kiss her.

Joe officiated, he was the only one who would at that moment. "I guess it's official. Our first marriage. Dean and Ellen Hayes."

Ellen heard them applaud, she even heard Frank's loud, 'Oh just fuckin great' yelling from the back. She didn't care, she held high hopes as she kissed Dean, just like many do when they first get married.

What had happened? That moment in the social hall all those years earlier that brought Dean and Ellen together. That moment so strong on Ellen's mind as she stood before the kitchen sink, watching it fill up a small

basin and shifting her eyes to Dean, who looked so lost waiting on her. She adjusted the bathrobe she wore and turned off the full running faucet. Why did she think about that day? Was it the underlining promise she had made to him? The commitment she had broken. The trust Dean placed in her that she had betrayed. It had to be, because now Dean needed to trust her and Ellen felt a part of him didn't. He had every right. And more than ever, Ellen wanted to help Dean now. More than the day she had married him, she wanted to prove to him she could be there for him. And with Dean as low as he could get, Ellen had her chance to make it all up. Her feelings for him had grown deep enough that she could be what he needed, and not let him down. And she wouldn't. Not this time.

Ellen lifted the basin to the counter, then dipped a small brush in the cup of soap, swishing it around building it to a lather. "Towel or no towel Dean."

"How bad are you going to be?" He kept his eyes closed as he sat in a chair center kitchen.

"I'm a pro." Ellen tossed a towel over her shoulder and brought the brush to his face, soaping him up. "Ready?"

"I guess."

She set down the cup and picked up the razor, lifting Dean's chin to start at his neck. Humming as she shaved him.

"What are singing?"

"You'll laugh."

"Then tell me."

She dipped and rinsed the razor and then continued. "I was singing the 'Silly' song Robbie played all night last night."

"Why?"

"I can't get it out of head. I could have swore I heard him playing it when we were walking home."

"I thought I heard that too."

Ellen released a sigh of relief. "Good. I thought I was hearing things. I wonder why he was playing it?"

"To annoy everyone."

"That's Robbie." Ellen shaved his other cheek. "Almost finished." She wiped the soap that dripped.

"El." He spoke so soft. "I usually shave first then shower."

"So we did it backwards."

"You combed my hair on the right, didn't you?"

"Dean, you seem to be bitching a lot at someone who has a lethal object so close to your throat."

"Sorry."

"Don't apologize." She set down the razor then wiped his face clean. "Yell at me, do something. Show me emotions. And we're finished."

"It's hard to show emotions when you just feel so numb."

"I wish I could help you with that." She turned and reached for his shirt that set nearer to the stove.

"You could have."

"I could have? Did I miss my opportunity?"

"No. I did." Dean reached his arm out to the side, feeling for the counter and then standing.

"How did you do that?"

"Not fifteen minutes ago El I was standing with you naked in a hot shower. And instead of thinking about where the situation could lead, I was thinking if you would tell me if I washed all the soap out of my hair." He sensed Ellen's silence. "It won't always be like this El. I'll do all these things eventually without help. Hopefully soon."

"I know you will." Ellen grabbed his hand. "Let's go in the livingroom. You can wait there until I go put some clothes on." She led him from the kitchen guiding him to sit on the couch. She grabbed his hands and placed his shirt in them. "I'll be right down and then I'll make you dinner."

Dean's mind raced. Ellen was going to cook for him. What else? She had done everything for him so far, it was borderline humiliating to him.

Ellen noticed as she stepped away, Dean's head lower. He brought the shirt he held to his mouth as he crumpled it within his hands. "Dean." She softened her voice moving back close to him. "I know you're down. You have every right to be. But I feel down now too. I feel like I'm not doing anything. Tell what I can do to help you. I want to help you."

"You do. You are. I just wish I could see you. Your face."

"It's not very attractive right now Dean. I just got out of the shower."

"That's not what I mean. No matter how nuts you drive me, no matter what, when I saw your face it made me smile."

"You can still see me Dean, but only in different way. Come here." She reached out to him. "Give me your hand." She took his hand leading him to his feet and then she laid his hand upon her face. "See me."

His fingers parted as his palm laid just upon her lips. He felt every curve of her face, every scar, her damp hair running over the back of his fingers. Slowly his hand moved down, his fingertips brushing lightly against her lips as he made his way to her neck and trailing to center of her chest through the slight openness of her robe. He actually felt his body tremble some in nervousness as he felt the rise and fall of her every deep breath. Dean shifted his hands just a little to the left. Tighter he closed his eyes when he felt the vibration of her heartbeat through her skin. How many times in his life had he touched Ellen in desire? But now he touched her differently. He touched her with discovery, seeing her for the first time in a different way. And he wasn't just seeing her anymore with his eyes, Dean swore at that moment he could actually see into her soul.

The silence, the deafening silence filled only with the ringing of their breathing.

Rigid and tense in their movement, his fingers spread outward slower than he had ever moved his hand before. Dean's little finger extended. It touched lightly, then traced over--barely touching--the contour of her breast.

Ellen shivered and an ache filled the back of her throat at his slightest of touch, his hand opening more over her, feeling her. She lowered her head sliding it against his, her cheek against his cheek, bringing her mouth to his ear. Her parted lips reached to kiss him there and as they touched and moved to his neck, Ellen's hand slid down his bare chest.

Dean's breathing was off. Near hyperventilation he felt, when her hands moved from his back, across the rim of his jeans, then sliding over the front of him with a sensual firmness as she pressed her body against his. Not only on his body, but in him, he felt Ellen kissing him. The warmth inside built, yet Dean froze. He literally could not move when, like a lightening rod, fear hit him. Darkness, he was engulfed in a darkness that would not leave him even when he opened his eyes. He couldn't see Ellen, he could only feel her and that frightened him. Instead of giving in to what was building, Dean found himself fighting against the vulnerability he was feeling toward Ellen. So at *her* mercy, so at *her* control, so out of his hands. And his one moment of intimacy, his long awaited moment with Ellen was turning into what had happened in his life. It was becoming another thing he feared he couldn't do, now that he was trapped in his darkened world. Dean didn't want to fear it. He wanted it. And so badly, he needed it. But he felt it slipping from his fingers like her body he held gently in the palm of his hand just underneath her robe.

Let go Dean. Please let go. She could feel him wanting to respond but something held him back. Was it her? More to him she pressed, letting the warm air of her breath hit against his ear as her mouth lingered there. "Dean . . ."

Her whisper shot into him with the effect of an echo chamber. Ringing through his head to his heart, shivering every nerve of his body.

Ellen touched her lips lightly to his ear calling out his name again. Just as she slipped her hands slightly under the waist of his jeans, she felt her wrist abruptly grabbed and removed. She shook her head, closing her eyes tighter wanting him not to pull back. And Dean didn't.

With his step to her, he pulled Ellen into him, pressing his hand firmly to the side of her face and holding her cheek against his. So close they were that even the slightest movement of their eyes could be felt against the others. It was almost a forceful hold, keeping Ellen to him. His forefinger pressed to her temple, his thumb rested on the corner of her mouth and Dean's voice was soft and raspy, as he spoke with emotion into her ear. "Let me be the one to do this." He swallowed the thickness of what he felt that had formed in his throat. "I *have* to be the one to do this. Let *me* . . . lead *you*."

Dean's hand pressed so firmly that Ellen's back arched. And he swayed her as if music were playing, widening his mouth and running it from the base of her neck, to her chin and meeting her lips that waited for them.

Slow moving and intense he kissed her. The sweep of his mouth so in control of hers, not letting Ellen stop or pull back, not even for a second, not even to breathe. His hands moved to the collar of her robe. His fingernails scratched faintly as he pulled the garment just below her shoulders, bracing Ellen to him, feeling the skin of her bare chest against his. And at that moment, eyes open or closed, he realized, being with Ellen was the one thing he didn't need his sight for. His heart and emotions would be his eyes, and they would guide him further than his vision ever could.

His palms rested against her chin, fingers spread across her face as he pulled from the kiss. And slowly Dean lowered himself, bringing his hands down with him, opening her robe and feeling her as he did. Center of her chest his forehead rested, only briefly, taking in the security of her before his lips followed the lead of his hand which laid upon her breast. Gently his lips caressed, not growing in intensity until Ellen's fingers slipped through his hair, holding him to her and then at that moment, Dean's hands dropped to her waist and his mouth moved to her stomach. In his mind he could see the body he had touched so many times, every inch of it. He envisioned the small birthmark just above Ellen's right hip and he kissed where he knew it was as he brought his lips to her thighs. The robe hit hard against his hands as he pulled at it wanting it to fall to the floor. Being free from any hinder it gave in his feel, touch and taste of her body. Fingers pressing. Hands feeling. Mouth searching.

Ellen's eyes rolled when the strong heat swept up her body at the touch of his lips to her. She reached for him, pulling for him as her legs began to weaken. She could barely stand, she didn't want to stand any longer. The coldness of the air was a shock to her as Dean pulled from her. His lips followed the tickle of his hair as they trailed upward across her stomach and to her neck. She grabbed his hand, stepping back from him, lifting his chin to see his face. His eyes were closed, yet some how Ellen knew he looked at her, Dean saw her. In her turn to lead him from that livingroom, Dean stopped her.

He pulled her into him, sliding his hands under her arms, his hands gripping her shoulders as his chest pressed against her back. In the near bite to the nape of her neck, Ellen's hands reached backwards grabbing for him. And with each stroke down the sides of his hips, she felt the fall of his already loosened jeans.

Against her he moved more, slow and firm. And his hands which still gripped in a brace to her shoulders, led her down, first in a kneel and then to the floor on top of her robe that laid there. Dean didn't want the connection of their bodies to break. He found a sense of security holding

her to him, her back to his chest, his face to her face. And he only pulled briefly from her, bringing back the tight connection of their bodies when he joined fully with her. It was at that second that Dean felt as if he had gone home.

Overpowering his emotions were. Locking his fingers with hers, gripping not only them, but the coarseness of the bathrobe beneath them. He kissed her, squeezing then releasing the interlocked fingers in nearly the same rhythm as he breathed, touched her with his lips, and made love to her.

Nothing else mattered at that moment to Dean but being with Ellen. Holding her so close to him. Feeling like he was no longer the man who was so helpless. Feeling at that moment, he was no longer blind. "El." Tighter he held her, his fingers clinging to even more of the robe. "El . . . I love you."

Ellen cried. His words drew it from her immediately and she brought his hand that held hers under her chest for Dean to hold her tighter, if that were even possible.

Their bound bodies built with intensity and emotions and it brought forth a powerful finish to what they had been building to. The final moments of sound, the last deep breath, the imminent paralyzing hold, and then . . . the silence.

(2)

So perky and bubbly Jenny Matoose was walking down the street on her way to Dean's house. Dressed for her 'date' with her husband, excited about being the distributor to all of the women, giving to each of them, their very own pair of Beginnings first women's flat shoe.

Ellen was the last to get them, she was the only one not around. In one hand she held that pair of shoes, and the other, the color swatch samples of the bridesmaids gowns. She swung the shoes back and forth so happily, feeling so pretty as she walked. A long shirt that Jenny felt hid her extra weight, a short skirt that showed what she felt was her best asset. And Jenny walked predominantly too. Why wouldn't she? She was proud of her new shoes, walking strong and clicking the hard soles against the concrete in an echoing beat on the quiet street. 'Clickety-clack, clickety-clack' she bounced in her loud stride like a showing-off school girl. She hoped that Ellen would pick the second shade of blue, that was the one Jenny liked most. Attached to the swatch was a cute little note. Jenny giggled as she read it one more time, moving closer to Dean's. Clickety-clack, clickety-clack, Jenny walked on.

(3)

Ellen's grunt and struggle made Dean laugh. "I think . . ." She grunted again. "I think I have it."

"Just get up."

"No." Her face cringed. "I think . . . ha!" She smiled and then it immediately dropped. "Ow Dean."

"What?"

"Cramp, cramp, ow, cramp in my toe."

Dean snickered. "Well if you wouldn't try to grab the blanket from the back of the couch with your toes, they wouldn't . . ." He stopped when he heard her whine again. He ran his hand down her leg which was extended straight and rigid, following the leg to her foot. His hand hit against the blanket which was gripped by her curled up toes. He pulled it from her and heard her gasp.

"Thank you." She said in relief.

"You still want the blanket?"

"I'm still cold."

"Gee, Thanks El." Dean said with sarcasm, feeling the floor to find the blanket. He draped it over his shoulders, then reached down to feel for Ellen, using her as a guide back down to his floor position. He laid on the floor next to her, his body half on hers adjusting the blanket over them as best as he could. "How's that?" He asked her.

Ellen looked to see if they were actually fully covered and they were. "Very good." Her head plopped back down to the robe she now used as a pillow. "I could have reached the blanket better had we not moved so far away from the couch. Should we get dressed?"

"No. Not yet. Please?"

"O.K." She ran her hand down his face then kissed him. "Can I ask you a question? You can't get upset with me for asking because I want to know."

"What's that?"

"They say . . . they say when you can't see your other senses take over. Was making love to me different?"

"Actually . . . yeah. Yeah it was." Dean had a peaceful look on his face. "Instead of just feeling it. I felt it. I really felt it."

"Really?"

"Really."

Ellen was quiet for second, then she tsked loudly. "Boy, I feel cheated."

"I can not believe you just said that to me." Dean's mouth opened in a shock. "I can't . . ." He was silenced by Ellen's kiss.

Ellen watched as he propped his head up with his hand. He faced her yet his eyes remained closed. "Dean?"

"Hmm?" Dean responded as he ran his fingers over her face then to her neck, taking it all in. Photographing it with his fingers.

"Do you do that on purpose or can't you help it?"

"Touch you?"

"No. Keep your eyes closed."

"I . . . I guess I keep them closed on purpose. Embarrassed I think."

"Why?" Ellen said. "You have the best eyes in Beginnings. They're so green. Why hide the just because you can't see?"

"Because they bounce."

"What?" Ellen laughed.

"They bounce. Henry said they bounce. I don't want you to be looking at bouncing eyes."

Ellen laughed even harder. "They do not. Henry exaggerates. They moved more yesterday because you were more lost. Understand? They don't move now. Open them Dean, please."

Dean opened his eyes. "Better?"

"Much. Dean . . . I'm smiling at you."

Dean felt her mouth. "Thank you."

"You seem different. You seem better"

"I think making love to you did something to me." He heard her snicker. "That too. But . . ." He paused to smile. "It showed me that I wasn't a helpless person. That I'm still me. And just like I had to make love to you differently, I'm gonna have to do other things differently. And just *because* I'm doing them differently won't mean I'm not doing them right."

Ellen giggled and spoke upbeat. "Oh Dean. Good line. Good answer. I'm impressed."

"Yeah well don't be yet. Making love was a natural instinct. Walking blindly down the street is not. It'll take some work. But maybe . . ." He leaned down and kissed her. "I can build my confidence back up?"

"Right."

"What?" Dean detected the sarcasm in her voice.

"Dean, you're like getting a little old to be able to go round after round."

"I don't get it enough El not to."

"Good point."

Just as Dean began to kiss her again, the opening of the front door and the shriek of surprise stopped him. "Shit. Who's here?" He whispered.

Jenny turned her back suddenly, covered her eyes and rambled in a fast nervousness. "Oh Ellen, Dean, I'm sorry. I thought you weren't home. You said you wouldn't be home. You said to just walk in. I wouldn't have walked right in if I knew you were in here. I'm sorry."

Ellen hid her snicker, especially when Dean slid down further into the covers to hide himself. "It's all right Jenny."

"I'll just uh . . ." Jenny, fidgeting, headed to the door. "I'll stop back later. Sorry." So embarrassed for just walking in, Jenny flung open the door and raced out.

"Jenny . . ." Ellen called lifting up, then plopping down. "Fuck, she took my shoes with her. I wanted them."

"Tell me El." Dean's head emerged more from the covers, flinging his hair forward and on to his face. "What do you think she saw?"

"For starters, your butt. It wasn't covered by the blanket."

"Shit."

"Just kidding."

"Don't do that." Dean ran his fingers through his hair. "She did see us."

"Considering we're in the middle of the livingroom floor. Yeah. We were covered though."

"That's a good thing."

"And there is another good thing Dean."

"What's that?" He asked, almost afraid to.

"It's a good thing you're blind, because Jenny Matoose was wearing a mini skirt."

(4)

Clickety-clack, clickety-clack. Slam! Frank's hand hit hard on the bar when he heard it. "What the fuck is that noise?" He listened again still angry and irritated from losing six straight dart games. It continued, getting louder and louder in the near empty social hall. It also got to the point that Frank had to turn around and investigate this new noise. When he did he saw the reason for it, Jenny walking in a skip across the social hall. "Jenny! What the fuck. Am I gonna have to start calling you Rhoda?"

"I hope you aren't making a shoe reference."

"Well it certainly isn't a Mary-Tyler-Moore reference." He reached for his drink and cringed when she walked to him. "What?"

"You are one nasty man."

"And you are . . ." Frank couldn't stop himself. He noticed what she wore and the man in him took over. His eyes skimmed down looking at the little skirt she wore and her dimpling legs. Frank shuddered. "What the fuck are you wearing?"

"Quit it about the shoes Frank. Are you going to make fun of Ellen when she wears hers as well?" Jenny asked.

"Ellen won't wear them. I won't let her."

Jenny laughed at him. "Oh yeah?" She held up the shoes and slammed them on the bar. "Here are Ellen's."

"No way." Frank slid them down.

"Hers. And are you seeing her tonight?"

"Yeah."

"Can you give her them?"

"No." Frank answered abruptly. "You give her them. Weren't you supposed to drop them off at Dean's?"

"I went to Dean's. But they were kind of busy."

Frank scoffed. "They were too busy to let you drop off hideous shoes? It was an excuse. Ellen just doesn't want them. They were lying to you."

"I hardly think two people laying on the floor naked is a . . ." She saw Frank look up suddenly from his drink. "A uh . . . uh . . . I have to go." She spun way. "John?"

"Jenny." Frank jumped in her path. "What . . . what did you just say?"

"Nothing."

"No. What did you just say?" He didn't get an answer. "Fuck it. I know what you said." He started to leave.

"Frank." Jenny grabbed his arm. "Where are you going?"

"What are they doing Jenny?"

"Why do you care? So what. Let it go, talk to her later."

"Let it . . ." Frank let out a shocking breath. "Let it go? Oh I don't think." He pulled from her reach and charged out of the door.

"Shit." Jenny spun round confused, spotted John and ran to him.

"Hey Jen what . . ." John stopped speaking when Jenny stole his phone from his belt. "What are you doing?"

"Warning someone." Jenny began to dial.

Laughing and wearing Dean's shirt, Ellen bent down to the floor and picked up the swatch of color that Jenny must have dropped in her rush out. "Blue."

"What is?" Dean stood up zippering his pants.

"This, see?"

"El."

"Sorry. It's a swatch of fabric so I can see the color for the bridesmaids dresses. It's blue. Very blue." Her head turned to the phone ringing. "Where is the phone? Did you see it?"

"El."

"Sorry. I mean . . ." She moved toward the diningroom following the sound. "Here it is." She picked it up off the cabinet that set between the livingroom and diningroom. "Hello?"

"Ellen." Jenny said her name, grateful that she answered.

"Jenny, you took my shoes."

"Ellen listen to me. I'm sorry . . ."

"Jenny, let it go."

"No, listen. Frank's on his way over, I didn't mean to. I mentioned you and Dean were together."

"Oh." Ellen spun to face Dean who stood not knowing what expression was on her face.

“Ellen get dressed. Whatever, don’t let him catch you. He’s roused up.”

“Jenny I . . .” *BOOM!* The front door to Dean’s house burst open. “Shit.” Ellen hung up the phone, dropping it.

Frank stood in the wide open door looking round, assessing a situation that screamed answerers to him. “What the fuck El.”

“Frank.” Ellen flew over to him as he charged forth.

Dean felt lost, he didn’t know what way to turn. “Frank?” He took a deep breath.

Ellen pressed her hands to Frank’s chest holding him back. “You have to leave.”

“Fuck that. Fuck that!” His words were strong as he blared them out. “How can you do this El? How? I thought things were happening between us. Things were happening. And you!” He spun and faced Dean. “You can’t even face me can you? I ought to nail your ass right now! You lied to me!” Frank charged toward Dean. “You lied! What was this shit you aren’t with her? What was this shit you gave me that you have no interest in her.”

Dean turned his body as close to the point where he knew Frank’s voice was coming from. “What the hell did you expect me to tell you Frank? Huh? The truth? No. Because you’d screw it up for me. You always screw it up for me.”

“So you lied?”

“And I’d lie again.” Dean huffed his words. “If you didn’t walk in here you would never know. I wouldn’t tell you. I can’t take the chance of you trying to take her from me. I can’t. And you would. Whether you want Ellen or not, you would try your hardest. Because you can’t accept the fact Frank, that you are no longer a part of her life. Face it.”

Ellen saw it. She watched it coming as Dean gave his short speech. The red on Frank’s face. Now was not the time for Dean to take his stand. Seeing Frank charge toward an unsuspecting Dean, Ellen dove forward intercepting Frank’s reach and standing before Dean. “Don’t Frank!”

“Move El!”

“I won’t let you touch him.”

“I see.” Frank lifted his hand up in surrender.

“No you don’t see” Ellen snapped back.

“I see! I see you jumping in the middle, nearly getting nailed all to defend him.”

“No I jumped in the middle because he can’t see you to defend himself?”

“What?” Frank’s head twitched suddenly.

“You heard me.”

Frank looked passed her at Dean who still didn’t look his way. “Oh bullshit!”

“No it’s not bullshit.”

"You're telling me he can't see? Bullshit. Another lie El, another lie to cover up that what you did was wrong."

"It was not wrong." Ellen argued. "And you can't come in here and pass judgement on me. You can't."

"How can you stand here, half dressed and tell me you're not wrong? What about Henry?"

"What about him?"

Frank ran his hand down his face. "You live with him. He's your primary relationship. You're gonna marry the guy El. You sleeping with Dean is not wrong? You cheating on . . ."

"I'm not cheating on Henry. How can I be cheating on Henry when Henry knows."

Crushed! Frank felt that more so then if he had gotten hit. "Henry doesn't know."

"Henry knows." Ellen told him. "Henry's known for a while. I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't have crossed the line with Dean if Henry hadn't told me it was all right. If Henry didn't have an understanding with Dean."

Fire raged through Frank upon hearing her tell him that. He stepped back breathing short breaths through his nostrils. "Sorry I bothered you. Sorry I bothered your little understanding."

Ellen saw it in his face. She sensed it in his words. His anger, the hostility. "What are you doing Frank?"

Frank pointed to Dean. "*He* may not be able to see to defend himself. But Henry sure as hell can." Slamming his fist against the archway of the door Frank stormed out.

Ellen knew she didn't have much time. Four house down the street was all Frank had to go. "Oh my God." She rushed around looking for something to put on.

"El." Dean called out to her "What's happening." He listened to the sound of her footsteps as they ran up the stairs, shuffled on the floor above his head and thumped back down, Dean even thought he heard her stumble. "El? What's going on?"

Ellen pulled up her shorts. "I have to stop him. Oh shit, I have to stop him."

The panic was so predominantly in Ellen's voice that Dean felt it. "What?"

"You heard him Dean." She spoke rapid as she ran to the door. "And that look. That look that look . . . oh God, he's going after Henry."

(5)

Henry had just about reached that point in his work that he was starting to get bored. He set down his book on the coffee table and began

to sit. He expected Ellen home soon, he did not expect the loud, single bang at his front door. Wondering who was joking around--loudly--Henry walked to the front door, opening it. "Frank?"

"Just so you know." Frank spoke graveled. "Just so you were warned. And just so you can see it coming . . . I'm gonna nail you right now." Before Henry could respond, Frank did something he seldom did. He gave Henry everything he had and he sailed it to him in that one hit. A single hit that spun Henry and sent him flying back, knocking into the end table and rolling on the floor.

Henry's eyes rolled from the hit. He found himself face first to his carpet staring at blood that dropped fast onto the carpet from his cheek.

"Get up!"

Henry blinked slow, he watched the floor move in a blur, so foggy he felt.

"I said get up!"

Henry braced his hands upon the carpet lifting his chest from the floor then bringing himself to his knees. "Frank . . ."

"I will not fight with you Henry and I will not argue with you until you get up!"

His balance was lost and Henry was confused, not only from the hit but from what caused it. Stumbling, he reached for the already fallen end table and he stood up. His wobbly legs caused him to tip and Henry stumbled forward, catching himself seconds before he hit the wall. Using it as a means of support, Henry faced Frank and leaned back swaying. "What is going on?" He wiped the blood from his cheek.

"I can not believe you have to ask me that."

"What Frank?"

"You were supposed to be my best friend. You are supposed to be the one person in Beginnings I can count on."

"I am!"

"That's bullshit Henry. You killed me the worst. You know that? I asked you, I asked you to be honest with me. I asked you to tell me if I stood a chance with Ellen. I love her! I live for her and you know that! But you lied to me. The whole time you lied!"

"What are you talking about Frank?"

"Don't!" Frank held his hand out pointing. "Knock it off! Answer me honestly Henry. Do you have an understanding with Dean?"

Henry waited before answering. "It's not an understanding like you think Frank."

"Really?"

"No, it's not. It's not suppose to be a real understanding."

"Then you tell me why I had to walk in his house and see both of them half naked. Why?"

"He . . . he needs her Frank." Again Henry wiped the blood that poured down his face. "It was temporary. That's why I didn't say anything to you."

"Temporary? He needs her?" Frank's words held so much of an angry edge. "So you loan her out because he needs her? She's not a fuckin lawn mower Henry. She's a person. You don't loan her out until the next person needs to borrow her. She's not a fuckin whore and that is exactly what you're making her."

Stupid or not. Weak or not. Frank had crossed Henry's line. Stepping to him with all of his strength, Henry swung out his tightly closed fist, connecting hard with Frank's jaw.

A sideways toss of Frank's head and it snapped right back up. And when it, did Frank grabbed hold of Henry's shirt tossing him back hard into the wall back first.

Henry bounced forward falling to the floor. He saw Frank coming. What did he start? Hurrying to his feet and grabbing the lamp that laid there, Henry stood, and in a turning spin, in his best defense he smashed that lamp into the side of Frank's head, trying to stop the maddening effect of Frank he saw rippling his way.

It was a blow that Frank felt and the pain of it knocked him off his balance and on to the floor. Losing his perception for only a second, Frank shook his head and felt his anger build even more. Facing the front door, Frank with a growl, stood up ready to charge Henry. As he turned to him, he faced Henry racing at him. But what Henry did not expect was for Frank to be so ready for him.

Leaping his thin body at Frank, Henry felt himself being lifted further than his physical capabilities allowed him to jump. Frank had a hold of him, and Henry's charged-run only fed a strengthening fuel to Frank's fire. And feeling himself going Henry wasn't going to go alone. With every bit of strength he had, he held on to Frank and in that instance both men crashed with a vengeance through the screen porch door, bouncing once off the steps and rolling out into the grassy area before them. So enthralled in their emotional battle, they failed to hear Ellen's scream when they nearly knocked her over as she made her approach.

Ellen, shaking, knew she was at a loss. Watching Frank stand up first and literally lifting Henry to his feet by his neck, told her Frank was out of control and Ellen raced off to go get help

"Robbie!" Ellen burst through Joe's front door. "Joe!"

Robbie sprang up from the couch. "El hey did you come to get the kids or did you come to get me?" The smiled dropped from his face. "What's wrong?"

"Frank." She caught her breath. And then saw Joe walk in the room. "Joel!" She ran to him. "Frank . . . Frank and Henry are fighting. They're fighting bad Joe. You have to stop them. Frank will kill him."

Joe barreled by Ellen without saying anything, following behind Robbie who was already out the door.

Robbie ran, bare feet and all toward the vision of Frank and Henry not far down the street. And from what Robbie could see, Henry was losing any fighting chance he ever had.

Slam! Frank pummeled his fist into Henry and Henry stepped back, leg over leg catching himself before he fell. In a weakened run toward Frank, Henry swung out hitting Frank in the corner of his mouth. It was in that after-hit instance, with Frank blurry, and everything spinning around him, that Henry felt the tight grip to his throat. One huge hand of Frank's had reached out snatched him forward. Henry couldn't breath. He felt the choke of Frank's palm pressing with firmness against his neck. And in a gasp for air, eyes somehow losing their steadiness, Henry found himself face to face with Frank, under Frank's control. "Frank." Henry tried to speak, his hands trying to free himself. "Frank, stop this."

"I'll stop it." Frank clenched his free hand into a fist, raising it in a torturous suspense to Henry. "For every lie you ever told me Henry. For all the pain you caused me . . ." Frank gripped tighter to a defenseless Henry. "Right here and now, I'm gonna finish this. It's over!" Just as he was about to deliver what would have been his final devastating blow, Frank's heard his brother's call out.

"Frank no!" Robbie raced forward leaping at them and diving on Frank's back. "Get off of him!"

Frank struggled with his brother who held tight to his fist. His choke hold on Henry slipped and Frank's fingers reached out grabbing Henry's shirt. "No!" He growled, struggling more when Joe pulled at Henry trying to free him from his son's grip. His emotions had built so strongly that all it took was one hard jolt of his body and he knocked Robbie off of him, jerked Henry towards him from Joe and with both hands, he hurled Henry hard to the ground another five feet away. Frank then assailed forth at him, grabbing him, lifting him and readying to hit him again.

Joe saw it, Robbie saw it too. Frank wasn't going to stop. He had reached his out of control point and it was going to take everything they had to bring him down. Both of them, Robbie and Joe could not give up, they dove back into Frank's battle trying to separate Frank and a now powerless Henry.

Robbie pulling at Frank. Joe pulling at Henry. Frank grunting out a call of frustration, trying to swing his arm forward at Henry, trying to stand on his feet against the powers that fought to bring him down. And Robbie and Joe, despite their best efforts were losing. How much more could Henry take?

Suddenly, in the maddening of the fight, a lone, single shot rang out close and loud. One shot. And in that one shot, Frank fell to the ground bringing with him not only Henry, but Robbie and Joe who were holding on so tight they had no choice but to fall right along with him.

Like a commercial break in the height of an action scene, everything stopped and all movement ceased.

Breathing heavily, Frank released Henry and swung his arm out to push off his brother. In doing so, Frank had cleared a visual path for himself. He saw the reason for the gunshot and the person who fired it. Ellen, holding a revolver out, walked toward the four men on the ground who all stared up at her. The gun shook from her trembling hand that embraced it.

"I had to stop you." She spoke cold, pointing the gun at Frank the closer she stepped. "I had to." Her words were emotional and the gun closed in on him. "And if you touch him again Frank. I swear to God I won't shoot you in the leg again. The next time I'll kill you."

Frank took a long breath to slow his hyper breathing. He looked at Robbie, then Joe and then at Henry. And then Frank found himself staring at the barrel of the revolver that was inches from his face. "Sounds good El. But you see, there's only one problem." Frank huffed, shook his head in disbelief then raised his voice to a high level as he screamed in annoyance at her. "You didn't shoot me !?" He reached up snatching the gun from her hand. "Gimme that! You aimed?! You fuckin aimed at us!? What the fuck is wrong with you shooting into a group of men? A shot in the air wouldn't cut it, you had to fuckin aim!? Your aim isn't that good! What the hell El!?"

Ellen's hands covered her ears. "Stop it Frank! Stop it! You could have killed Henry. You could have killed him."

"I could have killed Henry? No El, you stood more of a chance of killing Henry." Frank twitched his head to Henry. "I was fighting with him. Holding on to him. And you shot at *me*? Where the hell are your brains?"

A reality check hit Henry and then fear plastered his bleeding face. Henry shuddered some, shaking his head and he rolled with a painful grunt onto his back. "El, I know what you were trying to do." He coughed and grabbed his side. "But . . . but." Henry's eyes widened and he stared out in shock. "Oh my God." He took a second to wipe the blood from his face.

Frank tossed his hand up in the air then looked at the revolver. "Is this yours Henry?"

"Yeah." Henry took it from Frank. "Thanks."

"No Problem." Frank looked up at Ellen who surprised him when he saw a tear roll down her cheek. "What are you doing El? And shut up Robbie this isn't funny" He elbowed his brother who laughed. "Huh? Why are you crying?"

"Leave me alone Frank. You're an asshole!" Ellen wiped her tear and held her hand to Henry. "Come on e Henry let's get you to the clinic. Look . . . look what he did to you." Hard she swung her leg out to Frank.

"Ow!" Frank grabbed his shin and stood up. "You fucking kicked me."

"You're yelling at me! You beat up Henry!" Another kick at Frank.

"OW!" Frank hopped then grabbed his leg. "You shot at me!"

Ellen sniffled holding tight to Henry and trying to back up crying as she did. "I was only trying to help. Joe . . . Joe and Rob . . . Robbie. They couldn't stop you. I was scared. Henry I'm sorry. I was only scared."

Frank rolled his eyes. "But you shot into a group of men. You don't fuckin shoot into a group of men. And it's a good thing your aim just sucks. It's a good thing you didn't hit anyone."

Joe cleared his throat and grunted as he picked himself up a little from the ground. "I wouldn't exactly say that Frank." He spoke with such an agitated tone. "Because!" Joe yelled as he gave scolding eyes at Ellen. "She shot me in my goddamn ass!"

(5)

"So you understand?" Joe asked Robbie who stood in the examining room with his father. "You know what needs to be done."

"Yes." Robbie nodded once, looking at his father who laid on his stomach on the table.

"And assess the damage over Henry's and give me a report. Those two are going to be the ones to clean up the mess."

"Got it." Robbie looked at Andrea who gathered her supplies on a tray near the table. She whistled while she worked. "Will my dad be O.K.?"

Andrea snickered. "Oh just fine. May have limp for a week or so." She smiled widely and pulled down the sheet some from Joe. "Ready Joe Slagel?"

"Christ." He ran his hand down his face. "Go on. And Robbie." He pointed at his son who was leaving. "Make it dramatic. You know what you have to do."

"Yes. And I know just who to get to do it too."

"Good." Joe's head plopped down when Robbie left and he felt the chill of the air against his burning backside. His head sprang back up when he heard Robbie say 'hey El' and then heard the examining room open. "No." He looked at Ellen who walked in. "Andrea make her leave. Get her out of here."

"Oh hold still Joe." Andrea tapped his rear-end with a snicker and worked some more.

"Joe." Ellen walked closer slowly.

"Out!"

"Joe . . ." Ellen ignored his dismay. "I'm sorry I shot you in the butt Joe. I didn't mean to do it."

"You never mean to do anything that you . . . Ow! Goddamn it Andrea use some thing to numb the area. Ellen, get out."

"No." Ellen shook her head. "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry . . . Andrea?" Ellen smiled. "Is that the 'Silly' song your humming. Nice rendition."

"Thank you." Andrea's hands kept busy. "I like it. I also found if slow it down just a tad it's so emotional."

"You should see if Robbie would let you sing that with his band." Ellen told her. "It would be such a change of pace to hear a woman . . ."

"Hello!" Joe called out. "I'm laying here with my ass exposed and you are the last person I want to see right now Ellen. I'm pissed at you. Really pissed. You shouldn't have grabbed that gun and you shouldn't have fired at us. You understand me?"

"Yes Joe." Ellen said with fright. "But I . . ."

"No 'but I' Getting Henry's gun was one thing. Firing it into the air was another. Shooting at one of us . . . that's, that's a whole other ball game Ellen. And you hit one of us. What in Christ's name would make you shoot Frank?"

"He was killing Henry. He was beating him up."

"Do you really think Frank would have killed Henry?" Joe asked her so upset. "And son of a bitch bastard Andrea, take it easy!"

Ellen fiddled with her hands, "Yes, Joe I think he would have. Frank is strong. I know what Frank can do. Henry, Henry isn't as strong as Frank. No one is and Frank being so upset as he was . . ."

"Stop!" Joe held up his hand. "First of all Ellen. I was there, Robbie was there, we wouldn't have let Frank kill Henry."

"Not meaning any disrespect Joe." Ellen spoke. "But you guys weren't doing a very good job."

"At least we didn't shoot anyone! I'm shot Ellen. You shot your father for crying out loud."

"I'm sorry."

Andrea's excited 'oh' Caught Joe and Ellen's attention, Andrea held up the bullet with the tweezers. "Got it! Buried nicely just in the flesh." The bullet clanked when it dropped in the basin.

After giving a thumbs up to Andrea, Ellen resumed to looking at Joe. "You are the last person I would shoot Joe. I feel really bad. I do."

"Tell me something Ellen, tell me what started this whole thing." Joe said. "Why was my son going after Henry with such a vengeance? And I know, no one is going to tell me any different, it had to do with you. Ninety-nine percent of the fights in this community are over our women. What the hell happened?"

"It did have to do with me Joe." Ellen hung her head down. "But it was Frank's fault. He shouldn't have gotten so out of control. He had no right."

"What did you do?" Joe asked.

"Some things have been going on with Dean in his life. He's . . . he's having problems, bad problems and I've been helping him. Well Frank, he, he walked in on something tonight that he probably didn't want to walk in on. And he got mad. And I told him that I was allowed and that Henry knew about mine and Dean's understanding . . ."

Andrea let out a sweet 'ah'. "That's nice Ellen, you and Dean are back together. That is really . . ."

"Andrea!" Joe scolded in his yell. "Finish Ellen."

Ellen took a breath. "Anyhow. Frank immediately got mad at Henry at that point, and he stormed out of Dean's house and beat up my poor Henry."

"Tell me Ellen, if I'm getting this right, Frank walked in on you and Dean. How in the world did Dean get off so easy?"

"Well Joe that's kind of personal don't you think?"

"That's not what I'm talking about!" Joe yelled. "I would think that Frank's would have given his wrath to Dean as well."

"No Joe." Ellen waved her finger about. "Frank shouldn't have given his wrath to anyone. Dean and I have an understanding. We're allowed to be together. I'm sorry that Frank doesn't like it."

"There's a little more to it than that Ellen. Do you have any idea why Frank got so mad about the understanding part."

"He was jealous."

Joe imitated Ellen. "He was Jealous. . . No! Granted my son would get jealous, but do you honestly believe in his jealousy over you and Dean he would have beaten up his best friend?"

"Come to think of it." Ellen tapped her finger on her lips. "No. So why did Frank beat up poor Henry?"

"You don't know? You really don't know?"

"No, I don't. What did Frank tell you?" Ellen asked.

"Frank didn't tell me anything."

"Then how do you know why he beat up Henry?"

"I'm gonna make a pretty good guess here Ellen. Now I'm not defending my son's actions. I'm defending his reasons for his anger, understand?" He waited for Ellen to nod. "Frank went after 'poor' Henry because your 'poor' Henry has been lying to him for quite some time."

"What?" Ellen was shocked. "Henry doesn't lie."

"Not intentionally. And I truly believe Henry believed every word of it. You said you have an understanding with Dean. Henry knows?"

"Of course he knows Joe."

"Well I didn't know. Frank didn't know. And if Henry knew, why on earth would he set up an understanding arrangement with my son? And he did." Despite Ellen's shocked expression, Joe continued. "I even thought at first that you and Dean were gonna have that understanding. But, I was quickly corrected by your poor Henry about that one. And Ellen, not once in any of the conversations that I had with Henry or Frank was it

mentioned to me about an understanding with Dean. The way I gathered it, they were just waiting on you to be ready. Oh yeah, they had it all figured out. How they would do the understanding, how it would be, the time spent with you and the kids.” Joe nodded at her. “Sure.”

“But Joe I never . . . I never told Henry that.”

“He thinks you did. From what I gathered it happened or you said something during your quarantine time. I don’t know. Whatever the case was, Henry believed that you were going to be with Frank. And your poor Henry rolled with that. Here my son is be-bopping along Beginnings thinking he’s getting the love of his life back, when all along you’re with Dean. And his best friend, the same one who was stringing him along like a puppet, knew about it the whole time. Pissed? I’d sure as hell be pissed at Henry if he led me on like that too. Maybe he just didn’t want to hurt Frank, but he hurt him more by not telling him the truth. And Frank hurt back the best way he knew how. And if I were Frank, right now I’d be mad at Henry, you, and though he’s an innocent in this, Dean . . . just because he has attitude.”

Andrea had to get her two cents in also. “I heard you were getting back with Frank too Ellen. That’s probably why I’m shocked that you were with Dean. I’m glad, but shocked. Especially the way you jump to Frank’s defense all the time. Hang around him all the time.” Andrea shrugged. “You can see where ideas get had. And . . . I’m done.” Upon hearing Joe’s ‘Good’ Andrea covered Joe’s freshly bandaged backside with a sheet, swatted down with a slap to his rear-end and stepped back with the tray to the sink.

Joe grunted. “Andrea.”

Andrea snickered and washed up. “Oh Joe.” She took a breath and dried her hands. “I’ll let you two talk. And don’t sit on that rear tonight. It’ll be a little sore. Stop by my office for some medication. Right now, I have to go help Patrick with Henry.” She rubbed Joe’s head messing up his hair as she passed him and laid an understanding hand on Ellen’s shoulder. “It’ll all work out. It could have ben worse. Joe, Ellen.” With a wiggle of her finger wave, Andrea left.

Ellen stood so shocked, staring blankly as Joe slid from the table, holding the sheet around his waist. “Frank thought we were getting back together?”

“Yes.” Joe grabbed the fresh clothes that had been dropped off for him. “And turn around, I can’t speak seriously to you anymore without my pants.”

Ellen turned her back to face him. “Even though Henry told him this. Why would he believe this? We never discussed this.”

“When, in the whole entire Frank and Ellen history has it ever been vocalized between the two of you, that you would be a couple. Aside from when you got married. It was always just assumed.” Joe finished placing on

his pants, quietly whining and cringing as he did. "And it was assumed now. And what have you done to discourage his thinking?"

"What have I done to encourage his thinking?"

"Think about it sweetheart." Joe laid his hand on her shoulder. "You hang around him and the kids. You and Henry. When Henry was in the hospital, where did you sleep. At Frank's house, in Frank's bed none-the-less. Right there and then, whether it was innocent or not, you crossed the friendship lines. You led him on Ellen, inadvertently, but you led him on."

Ellen turned around facing Joe. "And because of my situation with Dean, Henry got hurt, Frank got hurt and you . . . got shot."

"It's not all your fault Ellen. It really isn't, I'm not blaming you. I'm blaming all of you. It appears that everyone was communicating, just not everyone together." Joe placed his hand on her cheek. "And now that I have you feeling guilty about shooting me. What is going on with Dean? You said he has a problem. You're with him because of it. What's the problem?"

"I can't tell you Joe."

"Can't or won't."

"Can't. I promised Dean."

"It's his health, isn't it?" Joe asked.

"Yes."

"Dean's health effects this community, especially if this virus hits. Ellen, I have a right to know. I run this community. "

"I know. And because you lead us Joe, that's why I can't tell you. If I do you could pull Dean entirely and if that happens then we don't stand a shot in hell of beating this virus."

"Ellen please. Why in the world would I pull Dean because he's sick. There isn't anything that could be so wrong with him that I would pull him before he's ready."

"How about if he can't see."

Joe's words stumbled out as he lost his balance. "What? I know he had some trouble with his vision after that attack on the two of you. Is Dean losing his sight?"

"Lost it Joe. It's gone."

"Dear God." Joe's hand immediately covered his mouth. "When? When did this . . . wait a second." He stepped back "When *did* this happen?"

"Not last night, the night before."

"Almost two days ago? Ellen, I saw him driving today."

"True." Ellen nodded. "He was driving."

"If he can't see, why in the world was he driving?"

"Because we were trying to keep up appearances. He knows and I know Joe. When it was mentioned about his problems with his vision, you and Andrea acted like it was good thing he *wasn't* blind. And Dean and I have been preparing for this. We saw it coming. We learned how to work

together if his sight went. We planned on how we would do this so our fight with the virus could continue even if he lost sight.”

“Ellen, the man can’t see.” Joe spoke with concern. “He can’t possible beat this virus with the efficiency that he could with his sight. We are going to have to put someone else on this immediately, this is way too important.”

“No Joe.” Ellen argued. “See. This is why we didn’t tell you. Dean’s eyes don’t cure this community, his mind does. And we’re using his mind with my eyes. He can still mix meds. He can still figure out what’s wrong with people. He can still figure out what is needed to beat this virus, but he has to be able to do it. He is the greatest mind we in Beginnings, no, wait, this world has ever had. Mind Joe. Not eyes. And your attitude will be everyone’s attitude. Let Dean and I prove he can do it before you pull him. I know he can still work in his field, let him. But I’m asking you to not let anyone know yet. Not yet. It’s bad enough he lost his sight, please don’t let him lose the faith of the people that trust him as well.”

Joe was silent staring at Ellen in thought. He took a long deep breath before answering. “All right. Maybe I’m being closed minded. I’ll try to open it. I won’t say anything to Andrea until you can show her what you can do. You two can do this right?”

“Yes Joe.” Ellen smiled.

“And I talk to Dean myself. You hear. He’ll know that I’m aware.”

“Yes Joe.” Ellen kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you. We won’t let you down. We’re already on the way to beating this.”

“I know you are. And I’ll help you out. I’ll take him off of patient duty and devote him only to research. It’s a valid move, especially with this virus thing.”

“Thanks Joe. And once again, I’m sorry I shot you in the butt.”

Joe grunted. “Yes well, your ass is gonna be searching a mighty soft pillow for me. You hear?” He pointed at her.

“I’ll get right on it. But first, I want to go see Henry. He looked bad and I suppose he’s feeling just as bad too.”

“You go while you still have time.” Joe told her.

“Time? Oh yeah, I have to get back home and relieve Denny with the kids. You’re right.” She reached for the door.

“Ellen before you go.” Joe walked to her. “Let me ask you something.”

“Sure Joe, what?”

“If after all these years, it’s finally gone, why haven’t you told Frank?”

“What are you talking about Joe? Told Frank what?” Ellen asked.

“That you don’t love him.”

“Oh my God Joe, that’s not true. I love Frank. I love him with everything I am.”

“And you still don’t want to be with him.”

Ellen's head lowered. "Joe, sometimes I want to be with Frank so bad my heart hurts. But I can't. I can't be with him. I can't. We pull each other apart when we're together."

"Ellen, if you feel that strongly about him, you should be with him. Or at the very least, have the understanding with him."

"No Joe. If I had the understanding with him, he'd end up taking me from Henry. One way or another he'd take me from Henry. And I would never hurt Henry like that. I love Henry. You have to understand something about me and Henry. He's my friend, my companion, and he's the one and only person I have ever known in my entire life that doesn't judge me. He accepts me for who I am. And I'll stand by Henry because he has always stood by me."

"But sweetheart What about love? Huh?" Joe spoke fatherly to her, dropping his voice to a whisper. "What about love? I know you love Henry, I do. But it's a different kind of love. It's no where near what you have with Frank, or even Dean for that matter."

Ellen closed her eyes with a slight smile upon her face. "Yeah Joe, but it doesn't matter how great of a love I have for Frank or Dean. There's a good reason why neither of them are my primary. Henry gives me something Dean or Frank could never give me. True happiness. Henry would never hurt me or make me sad. I believe with all of my heart, Henry will never hurt me. And because of that, with all of my heart, I will always chose Henry first."

"Your commitment to Henry is commendable Ellen, it really is. But keep in mind you can't guarantee that it will always be like that. No matter how happy Henry makes you now, there are no guarantees that he won't make you sad. And I really hope that day never comes. Because you little lady have so much stock and trust in Henry that he won't hurt you, that God forbid he does, you will be crushed. And right now, you are keeping at arms length, the only person I believe that can pick up those pieces correctly."

"Please Joe don't tell me your saying I should be with Frank as an insurance policy incase Henry hurts me."

"No Ellen, I'm saying you should be with Frank because you love him and he loves you. And this Henry-Frank understanding is the best combination. I believe that. Henry sees that. Why can't you? Besides, I think having my annoying, pain-in-the-ass, son in your life would take some of that pressure you put on Henry. Because you are putting an awful lot of pressure on him to be perfect and not make mistakes in your relationship."

"No way Joe." Ellen smiled and waved him off. "There's no pressure. Henry will never make mistakes in this relationship Ever. He's too good at relationships. That's why I'm happy." She smiled and tried to make an exit before anymore was said.

"Ellen."

Too late. Ellen turned back around. "Yes Joe?"

"What about you making Henry happy? Just like you feel this underlying obligation to Henry, he feels an underlying obligation to Frank. Maybe him making his best friend happy is a way for him to be happy too."

"Joe." Ellen leaned in to him. "Henry's getting fixed, because his best friend just beat him up. If he felt like that, he certainly doesn't anymore."

"Ellen."

"Have to go." She opened up the door, but stopped. "Joe." She softened her voice. "Just between you, me and these four walls . . . if circumstances were different, I would be with Frank too. Not just because I know that's what Henry wants, but for me as well."

"Circumstances, meaning Dean?"

"Bye Joe."

"Ellen . . ."

"Bye Joe." She hurried out the door.

Joe mumbled and flung his hand in frustration, then as he turned to get his button down shirt, he grumbled some more in pain.

What was it about Ellen's timing? Was she meant to walk out of Joe's room and into Frank as he walked from the other examining room? "Frank." His name rolled from her mouth.

Frank stared at her, said nothing then walked away.

"Frank wait. I want to talk to you."

"Leave me alone Ellen." He held up his hand.

"We need to talk."

"I have nothing to say to you." He turned around and walked backwards. "You slept with Dean."

"Frank." She followed him.

"You kicked me in the shin." He still walked backwards. "Not once but twice!"

"Frank."

"You pointed a fuckin gun at my head Ellen."

"Frank . . ."

"You shot my father. Go away." He spun to no longer look at her and as he did he stopped cold when he heard the clicking of chambers and saw a wall of his security guys holding their guns aimed at him. "Fuck. What! I have a fuckin headache, this better be good gentleman."

Robbie emerged from the back of them. "You're being taken to holding Frank. You can go easy or we'll drag you there."

"You gotta be fuckin shitting me. For what?"

"Community disruption." Robbie motioned his head to Dan and Cole. "They're taking you to holding." Robbie pulled out handcuffs.

Frank was shocked. "Handcuffs. We never used handcuffs before."

"New rule Frank, where you been." Robbie walked behind his brother grabbing his arms. He felt Frank pull. "Don't fight me on this Frank. We have orders to shoot you." Robbie handcuffed him. "You are to go to holding until the decision is made on whether you are to be ousted or not."

"What!" Frank shouted. "We've never ousted anyone for fighting."

"There's always a first time." Robbie handed Frank over to Cole and Dan. "Take him away."

Ellen would have panicked at that moment. Frank being ousted? But she saw the look on Robbie's face. He was too calm. And if it wasn't a scare tactic--one she knew wouldn't work on Frank only piss him off--then Joe wouldn't have been so insistent that she get together with Frank. So Ellen, decided to help out and play along. "Thank God someone is doing something about him. Let me know where to cast my vote Robbie." She folded her arms, and watched them lead Frank out. Snickering she turned around to go see Henry and see Henry she did. He was walking down the hall. "Henry!" She ran to him, reaching him and throwing her arms around him. "Oh you're all right." She kissed his cheeks over and over. "Look at your poor face. What did he do to you." She laid her head on his cheek.

"He beat me up El. Real bad." Henry touched his cheek bone. "Now I have a Frank scar."

"Aw Henry." Ellen kissed him again. "I'll get you home and take good care of you."

Robbie stepped in-between them, "Excuse me El," He pulled out another pair of handcuffs.

Ellen grabbed Robbie's arm. "What are you doing?"

"Henry has to go to holding too." He walked behind a shocked Henry bringing Henry's arms back.

Henry shook his head. "No. What's going on? Handcuffs?"

Robbie clicked them closed. "New rule Henry, where you been?"

"But I'm the one who got beat up."

Ellen stepped in closer. "Yeah Robbie, Henry got beat up."

Robbie just shook his head leading Henry to Scott and Mark who awaited. "My brother got smashed in the head with a lamp El. I wouldn't exactly say Henry was the total victim in all this. Excuse us." He handed Henry over.

Ellen chased behind as they took Henry. "Wait." She caught up, laid her hand on Henry's face and kissed him. "It'll be all right Henry. Right Robbie? You're not ousting Henry are you?"

"Nah." Robbie shook his head. "Just cooling him down. Fighting rules. He'll be out by morning."

Henry looked back at Robbie as they led him out. "But I'm not angry anymore. I've cooled down."

"Too bad." Robbie waved to him and watched them take Henry out as well. He turned and faced a stunned Ellen. "You know, if you weren't such the busy little woman tonight I would have suggested that you and I

go off somewhere to relieve all this frustration you're feeling. But . . .” Robbie let out a breath and rubbed his chest. “But I suppose when you eat hamburger all night long, you're too full to even enjoy filet mignon.” He laughed at Ellen's open mouth expression. Under her chin he placed his index finger and closed her mouth. “See ya.”

Ellen tossed her hands in the air and let them drop with a slap as Robbie waltzed away in his usual cockiness. And Ellen decided right there and then to get her tail out of the clinic before she gets anymore shocks or talks thrown at her.

(5)

“Thank you again Denny.” Ellen smiled and closed the front door to Dean's house, leaning briefly against it for a moment. “Oh boy.” She stood straight and walked to Dean who sat on the couch.

“That has got to be the easiest person in the world to hide the fact that I am blind from.”

“It's Denny. He's naive.” She sat down on the couch next to him watching Dean as he leaned forward rubbing his hands together slowly. “What's wrong?”

“How's Henry?”

“Beat up.”

“Bad?”

“He could have been worse.” Ellen told him. “He's walking.”

“I'm sorry.” Dean brought his hands to his face.

“Why are you apologizing?” Ellen removed his hands. “You didn't beat him up.”

“But I feel responsible somehow. I pissed Frank off while he was here, making him worse. As if he wasn't bad enough seeing us.”

“There are other reasons for Frank's anger. Just know that.” Ellen grabbed his hand. “Next you're gonna tell me you feel bad because I shot Joe.”

“What!?” Dean's head sprung up. “You shot Joe?”

“You didn't know? Oh yeah I shot him. I was trying to break up the fight, and when I tried to shoot Frank I missed and hit Joe.”

“You tried to shoot Frank?”

“Yes. He was killing Henry contrary to what Joe said. But Joe's fine. I hit him in the butt.” There was silence then both Ellen and Dean started to snicker. “We shouldn't laugh Dean.”

“No.” Dean ran his hand down his face, again his smile left.

“What else is it?”

“I'm feeling bad El. Guilty. When I was with you tonight, it was so great El. It was so much what I needed.” He gripped her hand tighter as he leaned back on the couch. “But I realized something after you left. I

realized that I was with you and you aren't mine. You're Henry's. And Henry has never done anything to me and I slept with you. I'm feeling bad, like I betrayed him."

"You didn't Dean." Ellen scooted up to him. "I guess that's why they call them understandings. Because the primary relationship understands what is going on. Henry understands."

"I still feel strange about doing it. But . . . I need to tell you thank you for tonight. Thank you for what happened. You gave me back a strength I thought I lost for good."

"Wow. I must be one hell of a lay." Ellen smiled.

"No, you're one hell of a friend."

"Dean? Since you're feeling better and stronger, can I ask a favor?"

"Sure El."

"Can I just fold right now. I'm having a really hard time. Frank and Henry are both in holding. Henry got beat up. I shot Joe. You're blind." She heard him chuckle. "No, it's not funny."

"That's one hell of a weekend you had El."

"I know and I'm tired and I just don't want to be strong the rest of this night."

"Then don't be. What did you have in mind? Did you feel like crying?"

Ellen fluttered her lips. "No. I cried twice tonight. I think I reached my quota for the year. I just . . . I just want to not have to worry about anything, at least for a little while."

"Then don't. However I can help, let me know." At the completion of his words to her. He felt Ellen slide down and drop to his lap. Laying her head on his legs and holding on to them in her cuddle. Dean ran his hand across her face, closing his eyes and feeling her. And he smiled, though it would be brief--Ellen never was less than strong for very long--it was the first time in a long time instead of Dean depending on Ellen, Ellen depended on him.

(6)

A slight gasp and a cringe was what Frank did following his drink of the moonshine. He placed his finger to the corner of his mouth and the small cut there that burned when the whiskey hit it. "Thanks Dan." He handed the moonshine back to him.

"The handy dandy flask." Dan held it up. "Never leave home without it. And why don't you hold it in here. It's gonna be a long night."

Frank took back the flask. "Thanks. I appreciate it and I appreciate you letting me in on my father and Robbie's little 'oust me' plan. I owe you." Frank pointed. "Name what duty you want for a week and it's yours."

"Thanks Frank. But right now . . ." Dan held up his keys.

"I know. Go on." Frank motioned his head.

"See you in a few." Dan backed up hating to do it, but under orders had to. He left the holding room locking the door as he did.

Frank closed his eyes at the throbbing of his head. He walked to the bed, bringing the flask to his lips and taking another drink. Slowly he brought his body down to that bed. Every single move pounded in his head. Just as he was about to lay back, he heard the door unlocking and when it opened, Henry walked in. "What the hell?"

"Hey!" Henry yelled at the door as it closed. "Shit."

"Oh great, just fuckin great." Frank set down the flask and stood up.

"You think I like the idea of being in holding with you Frank?" Henry asked him. "I don't. You beat me up."

"You hit me in the head with a lamp Henry."

"You started it."

"No you started it."

"How can you say that Frank?" Henry tossed his hands up. "You hit me first. And now I'll look like you, thank you very much."

"Oh quit bitching like a woman. You held your own with me."

"Oh sure Frank. You choked me. Look." Henry tilted his head. "A bruise. You could have broken my neck."

"You shouldn't have started this thing."

"I didn't!"

"You did. You had the understanding with Dean. You failed to mention that little detail when it came to setting up the understanding with me."

"I failed to mention it because I didn't think you needed to know. I didn't think it would actually happen."

"Well it did." Frank stated strongly placing his face near Henry's. "They slept together Henry. Did you know that?"

Henry's head dropped down. "I found out."

"And I'm seeing on your face that you don't like it very much, do you? I guess you're not the big understanding guy that you think you are, because you feel bad about it."

"I don't feel bad about it because I can't handle an understanding. I can handle an understanding Frank. They are a fact of life now. I feel bad about it because you got hurt over it. And I should have . . ." Henry stepped back. "I should have told you about it. That was wrong of me. I'm sorry. I knew there was a chance that they were going to sleep together, especially with all that happened with Dean. But I guess a part of me was hoping that she could help him through it without reaching that point and get him through it enough for him to stand on his own so she could be with you."

"So you're not angry that she slept with Dean?"

"No I'm not angry, because he needs her. And if finding comfort with Ellen is the way to his healing then so be it. He has to heal. He has to get

better Frank. That is so important right now. For himself and for this community.”

Such a shock took over Frank’s voice. “He really is blind?”

“Yeah, he really is blind. He’s been dealing with the loss of his sight for months now. They tried to prepare but when it happened, I guess the shock hit him harder than he thought.”

“Shit.” Frank turned around.

“And Ellen is helping him. I can’t get mad at her for doing that. And neither should you. How would you feel Frank if you found yourself suddenly without your sight? I know how I would feel. If I couldn’t see, I swear I’d rather be dead. My eyes are my ability to do what I do.”

“Oh that’s such bullshit.”

“No it isn’t.”

“Yes it is.” Frank faced Henry. “Your eyes are a guide, they have nothing to do with what you can or can not do. I knew a blind man once who would nail your ass harder than I did if he heard you say what you just did. You have to just learn how to do things over again. I remember Sam. That was his name. It was during practice maneuvers when he lost his sight. He was down for awhile, real down, but he learned and learned fast to do things all over again. And when he did, there wasn’t anything he couldn’t do after he lost his sight, that he couldn’t do before.”

“He could still shoot a gun?” Henry asked in non-belief.

“Eh, that’s a hard one to judge. He was always a lousy shot. O.K., there is one thing. He couldn’t drive a car . . . fuck!” Frank’s hand cut through the air. “No wonder Dean almost hit me today. He was trying to drive blind. Someone should have told him he shouldn’t drive. Well . . .” Frank tilted his head to think. “Maybe he can, this *is* Beginnings, how much traffic is there driving around a field.”

“Not much.” Henry shook his head smiling. “Are you still mad at me Frank?”

“Nah. I understand where your thinking was at. You still should have told me. But I have to tell you something.” Frank’s head lowered. “I was uh . . . I was drinking tonight, heavily. It made things worse than they needed to be.”

“I figured as much.”

“It’s no excuse and it makes it more clear why I have to quit. Henry . . .” Frank placed his hands on his hips. “I feel really bad. I’m sorry I went after you. I should have never done that.” He held out his hand to Henry. “You’re my best friend and hitting you was wrong. It was so wrong. I’m really sorry.”

“You hit me hard Frank.” Henry shook his hand.

“I know.”

“Knocked me on the floor.”

“I know.”

“Broke my wall . . .”

"Henry! Fuck." Frank watched Henry smile. "We're O.K.?"

"We're O.K."

Frank's shoulders dropped. "Thank you." With a grin, he stepped forward, placed his hand behind Henry's head and yanked Henry to him, smacking a kiss on his forehead.

"Aw Frank, did you have to kiss me." Henry wiped off his head.

Frank bit his bottom lip. "Don't think I won't spread that around."

"Aw Frank." Henry whined.

"Lighten up." Frank swatted his arm. "I'm messing with you. And now that we're all made up. We have to talk about this Dean thing."

"What about it?"

Frank grabbed the flask. "Drink?" He showed Henry.

"No." Henry snatched it from Frank. "And neither are you."

"O.K." Frank held his hands up. "We have to help Dean. We have to help him learn how to do things right. Because if I know Ellen, aside from her comfort tactics. Her idea of help will be just to do everything for him so she doesn't get frustrated."

"You're right. But I don't understand why you . . . oh, *I* get it. You want to get Dean on his feet because of Ellen."

"No Henry." Frank turned more serious. "And if this ever gets out of this room, I'll kill you. I want to help Dean get on his feet because . . . because its Dean."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

JULY 27

(1)

That cellular phone waiting with anticipation, seemed to smile at George. Finishing off his coffee, George walked to it looking down at his watch, then at the phone which sat upon his office desk. How badly he wanted to pick that phone up and dial, sending the signal to Beginnings, but it had only been a few minutes since he heard that Cole and the crew had settled into Jordan. And if it was only a few minutes, then the monitor hadn't returned yet to the communications room and George calling his awaiting CME's would be a futile attempt. He needed that monitor to be near. He needed that monitor to inform Frank or Joe who would then prepare--George hoped--Robbie to join, protect or escort Cole to Beginnings. It was almost ready and if all went as planned. More Beginnings men would be dead and Robbie Slagel would be on his way to Former Quantico to be a Society Legion Soldier. How exciting that thought was to George. He rubbed his hands together in an antsiness fashion and stared again that cellular phone. A few more minutes. A few more minutes.

(2)

The edge of Frank's desk touched against his body as he leaned far into his it reading from a folder, his hands rested on the sides of it as he peered down. "Reports .. . reports." He pushed out his chair standing up and walking over to the file cabinet. He took a second to pull the nearly finished cigarette from his mouth and blow out the smoke before checking his 'in' bin on top. "Here you are. Let's see." Frank spoke to himself, putting his cigarette back in his mouth and heading back to his desk. "Oh yeah." He flipped a page of the report. "Yesterday alone John you were down in communications one, two, three . . . five times?" Frank shook his head with a smile, sitting down and immediately writing on one of many sheets of paper that occupied that folder. Frank went through each day and its history counting up how many times a John-number was used to open or close the communications room. Reviewing his notes, reviewing the weeks history, Frank felt so close, so confident that he had just about all he needed to present it to council and they could present to the community to get a full vote on ousting John Matoose. Really all Frank needed, and he knew it, was Dean's remembering for certain John was there that night at the mobile, that would cinch it. This was a delicate situation and Frank knew it. It wasn't any normal ousting, it was John Matoose. And a lot of people would get in an uproar about him being tossed out if there wasn't enough proof or John himself didn't confess.

Quickly Frank's mind went immediately back to Dean. No longer was Frank outraged about Ellen and Dean, but Frank felt bad. Bad because he almost hit Dean. Bad because Dean was important to the community's health, and most of all, because he knew Dean so well. Dean was an original. And like Dean or not, enemy or not, finding out what had happened to Dean was like Frank finding out something had happened to his own brother.

Frank stared at the burning cigarette which was squeezed between his middle finger and thumb. He remembered the first time he had smoked in his life. How many years ago was that? Vividly, Frank recalled boot camp. How he smoked heavily up until he made the ranking of drill Sargent, and then Frank swore it off for life. Bound and determined to never smoke again. Judgmental of all those who smoke. Yet, there he was smoking. He justified it. It wasn't like he smoked all the time like Joe, Jason or Robbie. And it wasn't like Frank wanted anyone to know he smoked. He didn't.

He thought about when he started smoking again. A few months earlier, one or two during the day to calm his nerves. And when he realized that they worked, Frank began smoking more as time moved on, especially when he found himself wanting a drink, and he knew he couldn't have one. The more Frank wanted a drink, the more Frank would smoke. A replacing of one evil for another. They helped, not as much as Frank wanted. They got him through the day. And Frank wished as he stared at the trail of smoke, he wished with everything he had, that they worked at night when he was at his worse. But they didn't.

Not wanting to think about it any further, he had more important things on his mind than his own problems. He had Cole and a small group of men outside the walls--that always weighed heavy on Frank. He had SUT troops out there. He had a band of savages east of Beginnings about seventy-five miles. A camp, large in numbers. A camp they would watch. The camp had moved two more miles east since they first appeared, seemingly coming from the north. And them moving east was in Beginnings favor. Away from Beginnings and to the other side of the country that Beginnings rarely bothered with. And then Frank's mind went back . . . to Dean.

Just as Frank replaced his cigarette in his mouth for that final hit, a single knock occurred at his door and Robbie walked in. With Robbie's 'hey Frank' Frank turned his chair to the right, opened his mouth wide and using his tongue, flipped that cigarette inside his mouth to hide it. With closed tight lips he faced his brother and pretended to be engrossed in paper work.

"I wanted to stop by and tell you that I was doing the U.D. perimeter. All is fine." Robbie told him. "There was a problem, slight though with the perimeter in the Industrial division. I thought it was a problem, In fact I knew it was a problem. Are you listening to me?" Robbie waited for a nod from Frank. "Anyhow, it looked like wire was just hanging out of the beam's box, just hanging there. So I called up Henry who I knew was there

in that division at clothing fixing that fuckin cotton machine that . . . Frank? You O.K.”

Frank nodded.

“O.K., so Henry comes up. Why was he working today Frank? I thought he was beat up. Obviously big brother you’re losing your touch. So Henry comes up and starts bitching at me because the wire isn’t hanging there. I told him it was. He yelled at me again. He said if I would do my rounds up there more often or pay more attention to how things work, I would know that the beam box I was looking at has that wire dangling as a trip. A trip. How the fuck did I knew we rigged our boxes incase someone tried to cut the connection. How do you like . . . Frank.”

Frank held up his hand to Robbie and stood from behind his desk.

“Frank?”

One finger, one single finger was all Frank showed Robbie as he walked to his closet, opened it up and disappeared into it.

“Frank, what the . . .” Robbie stopped talking when he heard Frank cough loudly and long. “Frank?” He chuckled. “Are you all right?”

Frank stepped from the closet, shutting the door. “Man, can you ramble like a woman. You fuckin knew those beam boxes were rigged. You helped make them.”

“Was that the beam boxes, shit I thought we were just making explosives. Where the hell was my mind at. So Frank. How come you went into your closet to cough?”

“What?”

“You. You went into your closet to cough.”

“When?” Frank asked.

“Just now.”

“What are you talking about Robbie?”

“Never mind.” Robbie grunted. “I need a jeep req. Dad’s out of them and he said you have some.”

“I do.” Frank walked to his filing cabinet. “Who needs a jeep?”

“Dean and Ellen to get to their mobile lab. They let theirs run right out and it’s gonna take twenty-four hours to recharge it. Go figure. Hey Frank?” Robbie watched Frank dig in the filing cabinet. “Have you seen Dad walk? Better yet, have you seen Dad sit?”

Frank paused in his searching and looked very seriously at his brother. “Robbie, it isn’t . . .” Frank started to laugh. “I’ve been avoiding him so I don’t make fun of him.”

“It’s pretty funny. So was our scare tactic on you last night. Did you think you were getting ousted?”

Frank slammed the drawer shut. “Robbie. Fuck. Can you not run at the mouth so much today. What is up with you?” Frank started to hand the requisition to Robbie and just as it hit his hand, Frank snatched it back up.

“Ow Frank, you paper cut me.” Robbie looked at his hand. “Give me the req.”

"Are you taking this jeep to them."

"Yeah now." Robbie shook his head. "And I'm bleeding. Here." He wiped his hand on his brother's arm. "Give me the req."

"I think I'll take the jeep to them." Frank rolled his eyes at the blood smear on him.

"Why? You gonna beat Dean up today for sleeping with . . ."

"Robbie! Enough! I have to head into town anyhow." Frank rolled up the requisition and placed it in his back pocket.

"All right. But what am I supposed to do?"

"Work maybe." Frank opened his door and stood there. "Go to mechanics early and help out Henry."

Robbie shuddered. "I'm not in mechanics today. Today is Monday. On Mondays I'm at containment. I suppose I could go to containment and relieve Jason. I guess I can do that since Ellen isn't in containment today until two. How about . . ."

"Robbie."

"What?"

"Can I leave?"

"Oh yeah. Go on."

"Thank you."

"And don't forget to get Dean to sign that req. He always blows it off and Dad gets pissed."

Frank grunted and walked out.

Snickering and knowing he irked his brother for the day, Robbie walked to Frank's desk with full intentions of kicking back and falling asleep. But the moment he sat down was the moment he saw all the investigation material on John Matoose just spread across Frank's desk. Not a good thing. Smiling and thinking he had something he could bitch at his brother about. Robbie decided to hide it all and teach Frank a lesson. He began to gather the material when Frank's door opened. Robbie looked up. Frank just walked in with his index finger to his lips in a shush manner to Robbie. He quickly went to his desk, pulled up the material into one pile, took it to the file cabinet dropping it in the last drawer, locked the last drawer and smiled right before he left again.

"There goes that." Robbie tossed his hands in the air, cupped them behind his head, leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes.

(3)

Dean raised his head up from his work when he heard the oddness of the single click in the clinic lab. He heard shuffling and his hand froze above the petri dish. "Ellen? What are you doing."

"Um . . . nothing." Ellen quickly placed her hands in her lab coat, pulling the long garment closed and she walked to Dean. "So did I tell you that Robbie was over this morning helping me with the kids?"

"I was there Ellen remember? I waited upstairs."

"Oh that's right. Wasn't that nice of him though?"

"He's a peach. What did he want?"

"What do you mean" Ellen asked.

"He doesn't just do that to be nice. He had to ask you something he was curious about."

"Oh Dean you are so perceptive since you've become blind. How did you know?"

Dean closed his eyes briefly. "It's Robbie Ellen."

"He was just asking more details about the big fight last night. Speaking of the big fight . . ."

"Ellen, how is that new batch of anti infection agents working?"

"Don't know." She shrugged. "Getting back to my story. Did you . . ."

"You don't know?" Dean asked her. "I mixed up the new batch. Ellen, I'd like to know if they are working so I can start the two strep throat cases on them."

"O.K." Ellen said. "Anyhow, did you . . ."

"Ellen." Dean interrupted her again. "Check them."

"In a second."

"Ellen."

"All right." Ellen saw the disgruntled look on Dean's face and she walked over to the computer. "Oh I can't do this." She talked to herself. "I didn't hook up the microscope. I'll have to view it manually." She tsked and walked to the counter buy Dean. "So as I was saying. Did you see Henry this morning when he left for work."

Dean merely swayed his head her way.

"Sorry. I mean, boy was he limping. I thought for sure he'd call off, you know since Frank almost killed him. Dean are you listening to me?"

"I really don't have a choice now do I Ellen." he placed down a petri dish. "How are those results?"

"Um . . ." Ellen peered into the microscope. "Working fine. Mix up more. Getting back,. Did you hear Henry come in last night after holding. I know you can hear Dean. Did you hear him?"

"No, I was sleeping."

"He was actually in a good mood. We talked and talked. Not like that is much of a surprise." Ellen moved closer to Dean. "Isn't that a little shocking that he was in a good mood last night." She reached her hand out to him.

Sitting there listening to Ellen and concentrating on what his hands were doing. Dean felt the sudden touch to his hair. It startled him so much that he jumped back.

"I'm sorry." Ellen retracted her hand and lowered her voice when she realized she scared him. "I uh . . . I was just touching you."

"Just let me know when you're gonna do that. O.K.?"

"O.K." Ellen sighed. "Dean?"

"Yes."

"I'm gonna touch you." She slid her hand across his face and leaned forward to him.

Dean could feel her presence drawing into him. "What are you doing El?" He grabbed her hand and pulled it down.

"I was going to kiss you."

"Why?"

"I'd like to. Why? What's wrong?"

"I still feel funny. Just tell me, what was Henry's reaction last night to what happened between the two . . ."

"Henry!" Ellen called out his name with excitement. "Dean, Henry's here."

Dean immediately stopped what he was doing when he felt his stomach drop and an overwhelming wave of nervousness hit him. He swallowed harshly.

"Henry." Ellen rushed to him, making a clicking sound as she moved. "I'm glad you stopped by."

"Hey El." Henry laid his hand on her cheek, kissing her. "I was on my way to the bakery I wanted to see you guys. How are you doing?"

"We're fine." Ellen kissed him again. "Look at me Henry. Look at my feet. I have flat shoes on."

"They're . . . they're blue." Henry looked down at her legs which protruded slightly from the long lab coat.

"Everything new is blue for a while. Check this out Henry." Ellen flung open her coat. "What do you think?"

Feminine. That was the first word that came to Henry's mind. It was the first time since the very early days of Beginning that Henry could remember Ellen looking feminine. "Take off the coat all the way." Henry requested and Ellen did. "Turn around." Henry snickered. "That is great. I love it."

"Thanks Henry."

Dean listened to this, wondering what the hell they were doing. He wanted to ask, but avoidance of talking to Henry was foremost on his mind.

Ellen ran her hands from her shirt then across her hips, which the curve of showed predominantly in the tight little skirt she wore. "I had this skirt in my box in Dean's basement. And when Jenny brought over the shoes this morning and I saw that *she* could wear a skirt, I figured I would. Ben from fabrics said he would try to make a few for those of us who want to wear them? You like?"

Dean blinked. *A skirt? Ellen's wearing a skirt? I'm missing this. Is it short. It has to be short, she wouldn't wear anything that was long.* Dean's mind raced and he envisioned what he thought Ellen was wearing.

Henry liked what he saw. He kept his views to just under the hemline of her skirt. Staring at legs he had seen a million times, but for the first time ever, he was looking at feminine legs. A different shape to them. The tiny little heel on those so-called flat shoes, was adding that look to Ellen's legs that the women in Beginnings stopped showing the moment they started wearing only tennis shoes and combat boots. "I like El. In fact remind me to thank clothing for them. Could you . . . could you just turn around and face Dean please." He waited and he stared at her from behind. "Thanks."

Ellen giggled. "You're cute Henry. You should have seen me dancing in here just before you walked in. You know, twirling in my shoes. But Dean yelled at me. Dean, Henry's staring at my butt just incase you're wondering." She moved to the counter by Dean.

Henry grinned "The skirt is really tight Dean, and short."

Dean wanted slam his hand in frustration. *I'm missing this? Why am I missing this?*

Watching Ellen lean in toward the counter, Henry knew his mind had better get elsewhere. He walked up to Dean and Ellen, and stood between them. "Hey Dean, how are you feeling."

Trembling, nervousness. Dean couldn't pick up anything. "Henry."

"I wanted to talk to you last night when I came home but you were sleeping." Henry said. "There's something I need to talk to you about."

Dean swallowed. "Henry. There's something I need to talk to you about too."

"Sure Dean. What is it?" Henry pulled up a stool and sat down. "And just so you know. Your eyes look very in control today."

"Thanks." Dean answered too nervous to care about the Henry-style compliment. "Henry." Dean moved his head to face him. "Henry I'm sorry. I am really sorry. You have never done anything to me ever and I feel like I totally dogged you last night. I swear to you I didn't know where it would lead. I swear it. I shouldn't have let it happen. It was wrong. And I know it's no excuse, but I needed Ellen . . . no I'm not even going to say it."

"Dean." Henry pulled down Dean's hand that waved about as he talked. "It's all right. I know it's probably really hard for you to understand this. But I don't have any resentments toward you. I would not have entered into any agreement with you, nor would I have given my O.K. to Ellen had I thought for one second it would bother me. I love Ellen. I am very fortunate to have her love and companionship in my life. And in today's world, having that type of partnership is a rarity. A rarity. And it is also a necessity more so than we ever thought it was. And should we look for a peaceful existence to occur, we must as people share what we have. In this world today there isn't room for greed when it comes to the things we love. There can't be, not if we want to live amongst each other as brothers."

Ellen smiled. "Ah Henry that is so good. He is so philosophical, isn't he Dean?" She kissed Henry on the cheek. "Want to feel my leg Henry."

"Very much so El, thanks." Henry reached his hand down to her thigh.

"Henry?" Dean called out. "Henry? Is that what you wanted to say to me? Henry?"

Henry cleared his throat. "Huh?" He snapped his hand back, smiled at Ellen then looked to Dean. "Sorry. No. Um . . ." A shift of his eyes again to Ellen. "I wanted to talk to you about something else. Frank and I were discussing you in holding last night."

"Oh no." Dean's head dropped. "Frank?"

"Shh." Henry smiled. "We were seriously discussing you. We talked about what has happened to you. We also talked about how each of us would feel if we found ourselves in your shoes. And Dean, we'd feel just as bad as you do. Everything you're feeling and going through is understandable. But you see, the thing is, for as understandable as it is, you being down and lost can't happen for long. You are too vital to this community. Just because you can't see what's in front of you doesn't mean you can't see what's up here." Henry pointed to his own temple as if Dean could see him. He noticed Ellen shaking her head. "Whoops sorry Dean, I was pointing to myself. Getting back to what I was saying. And like you and Ellen are doing, you have to learn to do things all over again differently. And in order to fully do that, your spirit has to heal."

"Henry." Dean had an edge of disbelief. "All of this you're talking about, you and Frank discussed. My spirit? Healing? Come on, what does that mean. I really can't picture Frank sitting back and talking about healing my spirit."

"Actually." Henry continued. "The spirit part was my line. Frank talked about you learning to do everything again. Learning how not to depend on Ellen for anything but what you absolutely need her for. Example, her eyes to tell you what she sees in that microscope. Other than that, there should be no reason why you can't feel confident enough to take care of your children. No reason why you can't get from here to there, fix things, part your hair on the left side, shave and so forth."

"That's all well and fine Henry, I want to do these things. I will do these things. It's just gonna take time."

"We know." Henry said. "And . . . Frank and I are going to help you."

Dean nearly choked. "Frank? Frank and you? How? By aggravating me into doing things. Henry, Frank drives me nuts."

"True. Then you'll learn much faster so you can get away from him." Henry smiled. "Dean, we're serious. Frank wants to help you."

"Help me? Henry, Frank isn't going to help me now that he knows about me and Ellen. He's going to do nothing but interfere. And that's a hinder."

"No Dean. Look, he was mad last night, he really was. But he knows you have to feel better in order to start doing things on your own. That's why he and I are both stepping back." Henry saw Ellen's expression drop. "Not entirely El." Henry laid his hand on her face. "I'm still going to be around, it's just we, I mean, I'm not putting any restrictions on your time together. Not yet. And there has to be a 'not yet' Dean, because Ellen is still my primary. And as nice as I am, Dean . . ." Henry leaned to him. "I'm not letting you have her for good."

"I understand Henry, I do." Dean smiled. "But why does Frank want to help me? Why is he stepping back too. I would think he wouldn't."

Henry shrugged. "Don't know for sure. Maybe it has to do with this virus. I know for a fact, Frank wants you full force when and if this virus hits. And so do you Dean. A part of me thinks it has to do with Ellen. If he gets you on your feet, you won't need Ellen as much." Henry watched Dean nod so in agreement to that one. "But whatever the reason, be forewarned, no matter what Frank says, he hates the idea of you two together. And he may not interfere now, make lots of comments, but not get in the way. Mark my words Dean. The second, the second he sees you being self sufficient and not so dependant, that will be the second Frank will interfere. And big time. That's just Frank."

"I would expect no less." Dean commented and tossed his hands up. "So. When does this help from you two start."

"I think tonight, I don't know. Frank has a plan."

Hearing Dean's 'oh boy' Ellen giggled and walked to behind Henry, wrapping her arms around him and planting her lips to his cheek. "See Dean. See how Henry is."

A high, squealing, squeak of his boot introduced Frank's entrance into the room, and then, so did his mouth. "Oh . . . my . . . God." Just as he saw Dean, Henry and Ellen get ready to turn around, he held his hand out. "No! El! Don't move. Stay like that." He walked closer. "Oh my God." A wide grin hit his face as he stared at her. "Henry, did you see this skirt."

"It's great isn't it Frank?"

"Oh my God. El . . . you look . . . you look so . . . so . . . female."

Ellen rolled her eyes and released Henry. "Gee Frank thanks." She moved to the counter's side and stood there leaning.

Frank whined about her moving her position, but only for a second, he moved to right behind her. "Henry, this is . . . Dean, do you . . . never mind." He laughed once loud. "Dean you are missing this."

Ellen spun her head to face him. "Frank! Will you quit gawking?"

"I can't help it El. When's the last time you dressed like a woman? Man." He shook his head. "You know I was starting to think I was walking around in a nightmare or something. Everywhere I went where there was a woman, I was hearing that clicking sound. Getting on my fuckin nerves like it was Invasion of the Body Snatchers. Only instead of Aliens the shoes were transforming the women into prisses today." Frank shuddered.. "But .

. . ." His hand motioned out. "There is something to be said about those shoes if they make Ellen get dressed up."

"I'll have you know Frank." Ellen spoke snippy. "I did it for Dean, not you."

Frank laughed. "El, he can't see you to appreciate it. We can tell him about it though. Can't we Henry? Henry. You have to let me touch her leg."

"Sure Frank." Henry ignored Ellen's loud 'no!' . "El, they look good."

"No Henry. He can't . . . Frank!" She smacked his hand. "Frank, knock it off." Ellen yelled about Frank's creeping hand. "Knock it . . ." She swung back her leg kicking him. "Off."

"Fuck." He grabbed his shin. "Scratch what I said about those shoes."

"Asshole." Ellen folded her arms. "Why are you here and don't tell me it's to go up my skirt. I'm going home and changing." She hunched at the three loud 'no's' that came at her. "All right, I won't change. Why are you here Frank?"

"Oh." Frank reached into his back pocket. "I brought your jeep, and . . ." He unrolled the paper and slammed it down in front of Dean. "I need you to sign this Dean."

Dean tossed his hands up in disbelief. "Sign what Frank?"

Frank snickered. "Sorry, you can't see it." He nudged Henry. "El, you sign this req, you're the queen of forgery." His extended paper was snatched from his hand. "Easy El."

Dean covered his face. "And he says he wants to help me."

Frank snapped his finger. "Speaking of which." He spun to Dean with a squeak of his boot. "El is at containment at two today. What are you doing between two and four?"

"Um .. I am at the mobile. Probably trying to figure out how I'm getting back. I'll be keying in dictation."

"O.K., then Henry will pick you up at four and you'll go to the house. He'll stay there with you until I get there. I will be no later than five and we'll start. El should be home by . . . what seven?"

"Uh . . ." Ellen looked up from signing the requisition. "I guess. Unless something happens." She shrugged.

"Good." Frank continued. "We'll start as soon as I get there Dean."

"Start what?" Dean asked. "Frank, I'm not one of your guys you set up for training."

"Now you are and . . . Henry help him pack."

"Got it Frank." Henry said.

"Pack?" Dean questioned. "Pack what?"

"Dean." Frank spoke sharp. "Because you can't see, I'm telling you the look on my face says I'm annoyed with you. We have to get you fully functional. Which means you have to be worked with day and night. Which means Henry and I will be around you at night. El has you during the day. You want to be around the kids. You can't take care of them yet. Three or four days, yeah. until then, I have the bigger house. Guess what Dean?"

"No." Dean shook his head.

"Yeah." Frank laughed. "Think of it as one big fuckin slumber party. So don't forget your pajamas."

Dean closed his eyes. "There is something demented about you."

"Me? Well let me tell you something Dean." Frank leaned in closer to him. "Between this demented person and Henry. One week, one week and I guarantee you'll be glad we got a hold of . . ." Frank's head snapped up. "Hold on." He grabbed a hold of his headset microphone and adjusted. "Yeah go on." He stepped back.

Ellen saw the lost look on Dean's face as if he was trying to decode what Frank was trying to say to him. She whispered in his ear. "Frank is on his radio." She gave him a tap to his back.

Dean wouldn't have to wait long to find out had Ellen not told him. Frank's sudden Exorcist turn in demeanor told him it all.

"Fuck! When? Fuck. Where? Fuck! All right. Get a hold of Robbie have him head to the hanger. Get team three suited up. I'm on my way to armory. I'm heading up, we'll head on out. Fuck." Frank pulled his headset off and looked at the silent faces in the room. "I have to go."

Henry stood up. "Frank what's wrong?"

"We got a signal coming in. Radio transmission slash phone. I don't know. But it's coming from the west, not far from here and close to where Cole is. He only has three men with him one isn't security. I'm heading out." Frank charged from the room.

Ellen's head jolted from Henry to Dean. She too ran from the lab chasing Frank. "Frank!" She followed him through the glass doors.

Frank stopped in his run and turned around with oddity at Ellen's call to him. "EL What is it? I have to go."

"What are you doing Frank?" Ellen asked as she ran up to him.

"You heard me El, I have to go."

"You said you're going out there."

"Yeah, that's my job." He backed up.

"No Frank. It isn't."

"El . . . I have to go."

"Frank no." Ellen chased him and then she saw Joe. "Joe tell him." She spoke as she followed as fast as she could behind them.

"Tell him what?" Joe asked

"Tell Frank it's his job to protect the community. It is Robbie's job to go out there unless Frank has no other choice. Tell him Joe."

Frank had passed perturbed at that point when he rounded the buildings to armory. "El Enough."

"Don't go." Ellen grabbed hold of his arm. "Please don't go out there. Robbie can handle it."

Fumbling with his keys in a complete confusion spin on what was wrong with Ellen, Frank handed the keys to his father and faced her. "El Why are you being like this?"

"Because I don't want you to go out there." There was a deep raspiness to Ellen's voice as if it came from her soul. She looked up to Frank, her hand clinging to his arm.

Frank blew out slowly and yelled into armory to his father who already was in there. "Pull out for a basic drop-in. I'll be right in to help." He took hold of Ellen's arm and led her aside from the door. "El, come on sweetie."

"Frank." Ellen closed her eyes. "I don't care how dangerous you think it is or isn't. Right now to me, any chance you take with your life is a chance too big. You are the strongest thing in my life Frank. Don't go. For once stay here."

"El." He emotionally said her name. "I'll be fine."

"I don't care!" Ellen screamed then brought her voice back down. "Not now. I can't take any chances of anything happening to you. Not now. Please." She closed her eyes tighter, her voice dropping with each word. "Please. Please."

He didn't understand. Running his hand slowly down his face, Frank watched Ellen. How scared she looked. How so much in her life had to be getting to her for her to be so emotional about him going. "O.K." No sooner did he say that, and Ellen's arms were tightly wrapped around his neck.

"Thank you." She buried her face at the base of his neck. "Thank you."

"I still have to move." He set her down. "And I will be on stand by if Robbie radios in that it's not good. O.K.?" He watched her nod and he heard his father call for him. "I have to go." He backed up. "And we will talk later about this." He pointed as he went into armory. "We will."

Ellen knew as he walked away from her and as she headed back to the clinic that Frank hadn't a clue on why she felt the way she did. That was fine with her, all that mattered was he didn't go. And if Frank took a look at all that had been happening with the men around her, first Henry almost dying, then Robbie, then Dean's blindness, he would see why she feared so much for him, why she worried. And maybe if he saw it, he wouldn't have pointed that finger at her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

(1)

His dark Asian eyes peered over the scope of the rifle. His eyes, his black baseball cap which was worn backwards to keep his coal black hair out of his eyes, were the only visible portion of him on that roof top. On one knee he perched his tall body, a body that was thin yet defined. A body, hair that came just past his collar, and a handsome face that hid his age. And to Danny Hoi that had always been just fine. His forefinger rested on the trigger so ready to shoot, watching the street below and the four men who had just arrived. He raised his free hand and lifted his cap, wiped the sweat from his forehead and replaced it. "What are they doing?" He asked the man next to him. "Bentley?"

"Walking." Bentley answered. He too in the same stance as Danny, but not having as easy of a time. His body was much rounder, yet solid, and one thing about Bentley that made him look so much more different than any other survivor who wandered about was his hair. Dark, almost black, and clipped. Cut short in a man's clipper cut. He crinkled his nose causing his glasses to slide slightly across his sweaty nose. "Uh I uh don't know Danny." Bentley shook his head and spoke with a nervous voice. "You're wrong."

"No way. I'm telling you Bent. It's them, It has to be why else would we get the . . ."

"Error maybe. You're wrong." Bentley lowered his weapon.

"What are you doing?" Danny asked shifting his eyes back from Bentley to the men afoot.

"Danny. Look. Look at the way they are dressed."

"So. They're wearing military."

"Not typical. And there's an old guy out there. And . . . and mind you. He just went into a tuxedo shop."

"Huh?" Danny looked down below. "Shit." He pulled back some but did not lower his rifle. "What the hell is going on?"

"Cole. Cole come in." Joe walked into the hanger, radio in hand. "Cole damn it. Come in!" He released the button. "Where the hell is he for crying out loud?" He asked Frank who loaded up the chopper.

"He's not in trouble, he would have radioed at the first sign."

"What if he didn't have time."

"There's always time." Frank looked up to see Robbie, suited up and ready. "Let's go Robbie. Dad, try him again."

Joe placed the radio back to his mouth. "Cole. Cole come in."

Cole heard the static and the call. He was laughing when he heard it, talking to his two men about maybe bringing home blue tuxedos just to get the woman roused up. Then he thought about it, and remembered they were women, and the odds of them making their life a miserable hell until they went back out and got the correct tuxes, were good. "Hold on." He took that after laugh breath, rubbed his eyes, tossed his rifle over his shoulder and walked to the jeep to get the radio. Still laughing, he picked it up. "Yeah Joe."

"Cole are you all right. Any trouble."

"No, Joe. Why what's up?" Cole asked.

"We have news."

"Bentley." Danny nudged him with excitement. "Pick up your weapon. Pick it up."

"Oh shit." Bentley nervously fiddled with his rifle.

Danny positioned himself better on that roof, leaning more into the ledge. "Ha-ha. I got you this time you son of a bitch. Time to tally up the card." With his words and a bright smile, Danny began to fire down to below.

A horror shot through Joe with a feeling of being too late when he heard the gunfire through the airwaves then silence. "Shit. Move it out!" He hurried Robbie into the helicopter and just as Robbie and the last of the team stepped in, Joe got another call on the radio.

"Joe . . ." Static. "Joe." It was Cole.

Relief, a released breath. Joe picked up the radio. "Cole, what's going on?"

"We're O.K." Cole closed his eyes for a second to the quiet around him. He picked himself off of the ground. "We uh . . ." He shifted his eyes around, checking on his men. "We're all fine." Just as Cole bent down to pick up his weapon he saw them laying not fifteen feet away. "Joe, we have three dead SUTs."

"Dead?" Joe asked. "Any more trouble."

"None that I can see. Let me get back to you."

"Do that. I'm still sending Robbie and another man out with you, at least to escort you back if there's anymore trouble. We'll be there in twenty."

"Thanks Joe."

Joe hooked his radio to his belt. "Frank, you heard."

"Yeah, I did. Robbie and Dan."

"Sounds good." Joe motioned his hand to the other two men waiting to go out. He sent them on their way. "Good quick action on Cole and his men. Don't you think?"

"Too quick." Frank shook his head. "Maybe we should send all four out. Yeah, I think we will."

Robbie heard this as he stepped from the chopper. "Frank, you don't need to."

"Why?" Frank asked.

"I've been out there., They travel in groups of eight to ten. If there are any more there's only seven of them. We hit them with the gas first, then take out the remaining who aren't effected by it."

"I don't know Robbie. Just to be safe, let's send a whole team out."

"Frank, come on. I can take them out alone." Robbie said with arrogance. "Ye of little faith bro. Let me have some fun."

Frank breathed heavily out then looked at his father then back to Robbie. "All right, you and Dan. But you canvas the area before you drop out and stay with them. And . . . and you don't help them scrap you stay ready, find a roof top or something. Got that?"

Robbie rolled his eyes. "Yeah Frank, whatever. I'm not a pup in this, you know."

"Sorry. I know. All right." Frank waved his hand. "Move it out."

(2)

Congratulations were in order. Or at least that's what Cole thought. Congratulations to whichever one of his men had the quick insight and quick thinking to take out the SUTs so close to them. He approached his two men who stood stunned, passing Gene who took a seat in the jeep to catch his breath after the excitement. "You all right Gene."

Gene placed his hand on his chest. "Will be. Give me a second." He snatched Cole back as he walked by him. "Cole, is it safe to go back into the tux shop?"

"Um . . . give us a few minutes to check out the area. Hang tight." He moved to his men. "Good job. Who did it?"

"Did what?" Mark asked.

"Shot the . . ." Cheering caught Cole's attention. Cheering and laughing, and he spun his head to see the two men moving quickly down the street. Hurriedly Cole raised his rifle at the tall thin man and the shorter heavier man. "Hold it."

Danny scoffed as he carried his dangling weapon. "Put it down, we aren't the bad guys here. We just saved your life." He ran passed Cole to the SUTs which laid there. Danny, using his boot, lifted the pant leg of his baggy levis--so as not to get blood on them--and he rolled the SUT from his stomach over to its back. "There Bentley. I told you." Taking the barrel of the rifle Danny nudged the SUT. "Check the other two." He ran the

barrel down the arm of the dead SUT and found the patch, pointing it out to Bentley. "There. Look. CS. I was right. Bent?"

"Dead." Bentley sniffled and tossed his rifle over his shoulder.

Danny laughed loudly. "Was I right? Was I? Who's the man. Who is the man?"

Bentley rolled his eyes. "You are Danny."

"What I tell you? I told you it wouldn't fail. I told you. No, you had to insist it was going off for no reason. It's perfected Bentley. Perfected why would it . . ."

"Excuse me?" Cole made an apprehensive approach to the two. "You shot them?"

Danny faced Cole with a grin. "Yeah. We did. We saw them from the roof. Good thing for you we were up there or you wouldn't be standing here. Man they are sneaky." Danny looked back down at the SUT.

"Let me ask you a question?" Cole slowly reached for his weapon. "How do I know you aren't one of them."

A snicker, a snort and both Danny and Bentley laughed. Danny held up his hand as if Cole had just told the funniest of jokes. "Look at us. Look at me." He leaned in some to Cole. "I'm wearing jeans. My pal here is wearing jeans. Those things . . ." Danny's voice dropped to a whisper. "They're wearing uniforms. And the number one reason you should know I'm not one of them is the same reason I know you're not one of them."

"Which is?" Cole asked.

"You talk. I talk. They don't. Well . . . they do, but they don't, do they Bentley?"

"Some do." Bentley answered. "Never in whole sentences and never with reason."

"Not true." Danny held up his finger. "Remember the one?"

"Oh yeah." Bentley nodded. "But, you have to admit he reasoned but not about anything we quizzed him on."

"He knew why we had to shoot him."

"Oh sure definitely."

Cole's head spun. "Who . . . who are you two?"

Danny adjusted his rifle over his arm. "Oh hey sorry." He extended his hand with a firm shake to Cole, and he spoke rapidly. Something he did often. "Danny, Danny Hoi. Excuse the hair. And this is George Bentley. I call him Bentley or Bent for short. You?"

"Cole St. John." Cole retracted his hand in shock after the handshake at the rambling pair.

"No way?" Danny snickered. "Is that really your name?"

"Yeah."

"No way?" He laughed again. "I sounds like something out of a James Bond movie. You gave it to yourself didn't you?"

"No." Cole told him.

"It's O.K., you can tell us. Changed your name because you figured everyone was dead and who would know anyhow."

"No!" Cole got defensive.

"Your mother really named you Cole St. John? I guess it's better than John St. John." Danny shrugged. "So are you guys looking for that place?"

"What place?" Cole asked.

"You know, that place everyone says exists but only those who have gotten thrown out of *know* it exists." Danny looked at him waiting for a reply.

Cole was confused. "What are you talking about?"

Bentley saw the lost look. "Here let me explain, some times my friend gets a little excited. He's eccentric. We're looking for a place we heard is in Montana. We ran into some men a while ago, a long while and they told us about it. One of them said they couldn't get in and the other said he had gotten tossed out years ago. It's supposed to be a city?" Bentley tilted his head. "Have you heard of it?"

"I think I have." Cole said cautiously. "Is that what you guys are doing. You're searching this place out?"

Danny nodded. "What the hell else do we have to do? No, scratch that, we could be sitting in our own city, but they . . ." He pointed to the dead SUTs. "They are making it impossible to settle anywhere now a days. Wait a second." Danny stepped forward to Cole. "I should have known." He touched Cole's arm. "Bentley feel his skin. He's much too clean to be living out here. Feel his skin."

Cole smacked away the reaching hands, "Hey."

Danny ignored him. "Most of the men we have come across smell and don't clean up regularly." Danny sniffed. "You don't smell, well, not of being unkempt. And your skin isn't gritty. He doesn't have that sandy feel. I personally have avoided it. Bentley too. With the world at your hands, it's hard to believe people let them selves get like animals. Don't you agree? So are you from this place? You are aren't you?"

"Oh boy." Cole widened his eyes.

"You are." Danny said with excitement. "Bent he is! Hey can we go there?"

"Oh Boy." Cole stepped back.

"Where you going?" Danny asked.

"I need a drink." Cole walked to the jeep.

Danny snickered and nudged Bentley. "He needs a . . . he needs a drink? Tell me he's not from a civilized world saying something like that?"

Bentley agreed. "He wouldn't say it if he hasn't been saying it."

"True." Danny turned to Cole and yelled to him. "Hey, so can we go?" He watched Cole hold up his hand then bring a flask to his mouth. "Can we?"

Again Cole held up his hand to him and took another drink, a long one.

Danny shrugged. "I guess that's a yes. Feels good don't it. All those nights we were hanging out talking about getting back into civilization and wondering if it was just a pipedream finding this place. Now we know it's not. Look at the guy, drinking booze from a flask. You have to love that concept. Hey Bent. You don't think I came off too strong do you?"

"Nah. You have to be personable Danny. And you're a personable guy."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. And you don't want to be too quiet. People tend to not trust quiet people. And you know a lot of the people in this world are quiet." Bentley raised a thinking finger. "You came off Danny-like. And we did decide if we found this place we were going to be ourselves so they would know we were civilized."

"Shit." Danny spoke in shock.

"What's wrong?"

"Look at us. We weren't suppose to find them looking like this."

"We're prepared."

"We're prepared." Danny said. "Should we get moving on it now?"

"Yeah, we don't want them to leave with out us."

Danny looked back at Cole. "Hey James Bond, we're uh . . . we're gonna go get our stuff and get ready. Don't leave without us."

Cole gave an acknowledging wave--a half ass acknowledging wave--and lifted his flask closer to his mouth again. "You want healthy men Joe. I bring you healthy survivor men. Oh Boy." He watched Danny and Bentley dart off into a building. "Oh boy." What Cole wanted to do was pass the new pair off as crazy. Giving him the perfect excuse to leave them behind. But they did save his life and the lives of his men. And the more Cole thought about it and remembered listening to them ramble, it only made him realize how much they were already like the people of Beginning. With that, Cole took another drink.

(3)

If George was a young man, he would have used the word 'cool' to describe himself. He grinned as he walked around his George world. Leaving his home with the best news ever. The news that he was right. The news that confirmed that not only did George know Beginnings and their way of thinking so well, that he pegged exactly what they would do. Robbie Slagel was en route to meet Cole. In flight. And it was only a matter of time.

(4)

He was eating a sunflower seed as he sat on the steps to the mobile. Ellen paused in the open door watching Frank. His long legs bent as he sat

on that too-small-for-Frank step. His elbows on his thighs, eating each sunflower seed with precision.

A single click of her hard sole on the wooden step and the close of the mobile door, let Frank know Ellen had come back out. He was in his own world and she knew it. Deep in thought she supposed. "Frank?" She sat down next to him. "Sorry."

"No, that's all right." He spit out the seed. "How is he? Does he need you back in there?"

"No. He's fine." She reached into the cloth sack and pulled out a seed. "I'm glad you came up."

"Me too." Frank turned his head to face her and he smiled at her. "Sorry about being the bearer of bad news."

"Some one had to do it." She got rid of the seed in her mouth and grabbed another. "What exactly did Cole say?"

"About finding survivors?"

"Yes. And I hate when Cole brings back survivors. You know they're always trouble and there is always something wrong with them. It's like he's the animal magnet or something."

Frank snickered. "I know. But he was rambling on and on." Frank shrugged as he placed another sunflower seed in his mouth. "He sounded upset, saying something or other about you. And about you and these survivors. And he went off talking about rambling. I don't know. I shut him off and told him to tell Robbie to radio me."

"Cole knows." Ellen said with certainty. "He knows I'm gonna hate these two, doesn't he? Trouble."

"They could be. I'll radio you when they get here."

"Swell. And you know what two new survivors means don't you? It means I'm not getting out of containment at seven tonight. Well Frank, I'm telling your dad, sore butt or no sore butt, he's staying with them."

Frank chuckled. "You tell him El."

"So was the whole purpose for the visit to tell me about Cole?"

"No." Frank shook his head and peered out toward the sun with squinted eyes "I want to talk about today."

"What about it?"

"El. You confuse me. You really confuse me." He looked at her. "What happened? Why were you so emotional about me not going. Let me tell you, you've asked me not to go before. You've gotten upset before. Never have you been like that."

"I know." Seeing Frank eat a seed, she grabbed one. "So much has happened Frank. I think you know that. I'm having a hard time. More than I want is happening in my life or has happened."

"Can I help?"

"You did." Ellen held her hair back as it blew forward. "You didn't go. You stayed behind and let me have a piece of mind. At least about something. There's so much on my mind Frank, that I just didn't want to

worry about you. And I worry about you. Even when you walk your perimeters I worry. Sending you out there even for something routine was just too much for me to handle. I wanted you here and safe. I just needed you here.”

“See, that’s what confuses me. You act one way toward me. But yet you’re with Dean.”

“Frank.” Ellen said his name softly. “Dean is very special to me. When he’s hurt, I’m hurt. And he needs me. And right now, Dean needs all the help he can get. More than you realize, and I think you will once you work with him, that Dean is not having an easy time with his loss of sight. He tries, he tries to do all that we worked on previously, but I see the look on his face. He’s not letting instinct take over and it shows. It’s all because he’s scared. Scared because he has to learn to do things over again. And scared because he afraid he won’t do things right or he’ll fail. He’s also reaching Frank. He’s reaching. He’s reaching for something, anything to help him. And I have to be within his reach when ever he needs me.”

“I understand.” Frank let out a breath. “I understand why you are with him now. Now El, not before.”

“What do you mean?”

“I know this whole Dean togetherness is new. And contrary to what you might think. If you and I had been together when he lost his sight, you could have come to me about it. You could have told me that you had to be there for him. And I really, really believe that I would have let you. I’m not uh real sure about the sleeping with him part, I’m not Henry, but I would have let you be there for him.”

“You know Frank. I believe you would have.”

“Thank you for that.”

“You’re welcome for that.”

Frank returned the gentle smile that Ellen gave him. “But getting back to what I was saying.” He cleared his throat. “I’m going out on a limb here. Before this Dean thing came to a head, I thought . . . I thought you and I were getting somewhere. We were getting so close I could actually feel it in here.” Frank brought his hand to his chest. “You know, when we were together. Like a tension. Now I know you’ll always love me, that’s not a cockiness mind you. We’ve known each other for so long we’ll always love each other. But I thought you loved me again. Really loved me again. And today, even though I know you’re with Dean, when I looked at you.” Frank shook his head slowly. “When you were asking me not to go. I looked at you and I swore I wasn’t looking at just my friend. I swore I was looking at a woman who was in love with me.” Frank watched Ellen slowly close her eyes and bring her folded hands to her face. “What’s wrong?”

Ellen shook her head.

“El?” Frank saw her head drop. “Oh God I’m sorry, I was wrong. I was really wrong wasn’t I? I didn’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable.”

“Frank.”

"I didn't El. I swear. I was just . . . just confused. You confused me."

"Frank." Her voice was low.

"No." He shook his head. "Don't worry about it. I *was* confused. Only I confused myself."

"Frank stop it." She lowered her hands in frustration to his rambling and she snapped. "Stop. You weren't wrong O.K.?"

"What?"

Ellen's eyes widened and her head lifted with such a panic. "I mean . . ."

"El? What are you saying?"

"Nothing. I mean, you uh . . . you were wrong, but . . . you uh."

"El, too late. You said it."

"Said what?"

"That I wasn't wrong."

"That's not what I meant."

"Yes it was." Frank nudged his shoulder into her.

"No."

"Yes it was." Frank drew a smirk upon his face as he stared forward. He was silent for a second and then he turned his head to her with a smile. "El? You still love me don't you?"

"Frank."

"Tell me."

"No."

"Come on tell me."

"No."

"I still love *you*."

"Frank."

"All right." He chuckled and picked up his cloth sack. "Sunflower seed?"

"Yes." She let out a silent breath and grabbed a few. "Frank can I tell you something."

"What's that?"

"I am sorry I aimed at you last night. I was thinking about it and I'm sorry."

"I was thinking about it too." Frank ate a seed. "And don't apologize. You had every right to aim at me. Not to shoot the gun, but aim and tried to scare me. Which . . . which you did."

"You didn't show it."

"You think I would?" Frank took a breath. "I should not have gone after my friend like that. I shouldn't have. I was wrong, really wrong." Frank tossed out the seeds and his head dropped as he folded his hands. "I still fell really bad about it. In fact, more than you realize I feel guilt over it."

Ellen slid her hand, first down his forearm then to his joined hands, slipping her fingers in between them. "You'll get through this." She leaned to him, then rested her head against his arm. "If you need to talk . . ."

"I know." he released her fingers and brought his hand to her face, holding her against him for a second, then Frank tilted his head in to her and kissed Ellen on the forehead. He smiled after. He saw through the corner of his eyes, Ellen looking up at him and he lowered his head, as he did, Ellen raised hers and he just stared at her. Opening his mouth to say something, anything at that moment, Frank's entire view shifted from Ellen when Dean's call for her came from the lab. "You uh . . . you'd better get back to him."

"You wanna come in?"

"No. That shit is boring. I'll see you at receiving when the new survivors get here." Frank chuckled when he heard her whine. He squeezed her hand. "I gotta go." He stood up, holding Ellen's hand. "Thanks for the talk."

Ellen looked up as she still sat on the step. "Thank you too."

"Anytime." Frank gave that cool appearance then stepped back, ready to release her hand. Before he did, he stepped into her, raised her fingers to his mouth and kissed them. "Friend."

Ellen smiled at him. "Friend." She stood up clutching his hand once more and feeling every bit of his skin as he slipped his hand slowly from hers. "Bye Frank."

Frank watched her start to go into the lab. "Hey El?"

"Yeah?" She turned to look back, opening the door.

"If you run into Andrea in town, can you tell her I'm really busy."

"Sure. I know Dean's vision is a secret. I won't tell her you're helping him."

"No that's not it. She wants to measure me."

"Measure you? For the wedding?"

"No. Get this. For a sweater." He heard Ellen laugh. "Yeah. She says I'm in need of a good sweater for the winter. Me a sweater. What is up with her lately. She is all fuckin loopy and shit." Frank dramatically shuddered. "Anyhow, cover for me."

"I will. Only because I can't envision you in a sweater."

Raising his eyebrows high, Frank waved. "See you at receiving."

She watched him briefly while holding the door open, then Ellen went into the mobile lab and chuckled as she did. "A sweater." She pulled the door closed and stopped cold. "What *is* up with Andrea lately?"

(5)

The moment Robbie stepped off the helicopter he could see the distress across Cole's face. Not that Robbie cared whether Cole was upset or not, but he could see it. Unloading the extra ammunition, Robbie instructed Johnny to power down the chopper and hang out for a few minutes while Gene got everything together. There was no reason, if there

was going to be trouble, to pull a seventy-year old man with tuxedos into it. It didn't take long for Gene to be ready. He was more than willing to take the short route home. Loaded down with his tuxes, shoes, and shirts in plastic bags, Gene anxiously awaited Johnny to take him home. And Johnny's reputation for causing airsickness wasn't even on Gene's mind.

Johnny slid the side door closed. "So Uncle Robbie, you want me to hang out a few minutes more."

"Nah, go on. But make a sweep around and keep in radio contact with me. Got it?"

"Yep." Johnny put on his sunglasses. "Be careful."

"Got it." Backing away, Robbie gave a thumbs up as he watched his nephew get into the helicopter, then he himself walked over to Cole as the noisy bird lifted. "Cole."

"Robbie."

"How's the metal run going?"

"Good. Another hour and we'll be ready to head out."

"So I see our dead SUTs, where are our hero survivors?"

"Get this." Cole raise his eyebrows. "Getting ready."

"Getting ready? Getting ready for what?"

"To go to Beginnings. They want to make the good impression. They heard we're picky."

"We are."

"They're weird."

"No kidding?" Robbie grinned. "When aren't survivors weird. Pretty whacked out then?"

"Did you ever sit in a room with Ellen and Henry for about, say . . . two minutes?" Cole asked.

"Unfortunately, yes."

"They are worse. Ten times worse. Only one problem though Robbie. They're civilized. Completely civilized. You can tell by looking at them they had lived in a civilization for a while, among people. They just don't have that look."

"And now they're getting ready."

Cole nodded, looking so annoyed. "I think the one is getting a haircut."

This shocked Robbie. "A haircut?"

"Oh sure. One of them was a barber."

A grin, a wide grin. "You do know Cole, we don't have a barber in Beginnings."

"It never phased me Robbie. I just shave my head when my hair gets to me."

"Yeah, but you're not attractive." Robbie playfully elbowed him.

"Ha, ha, ha. And according to Danny, the new guy, I don't smell very nice either."

Robbie leaned to him and sniffed. "Come to think about it you . . ." Across the street, the figure of the thin man backing up caught Robbie's attention. Robbie squinted, focusing against the bright sun. "That looks an awful lot like . . ." He watched Danny, no shirt, wearing only his jeans, back up and look to the sky watching the helicopter. As his head tilted back, his black hair look even longer. "It looks like Henry."

"That's because he has that long ass hair." Cole snipped. "Wait until he turns around."

When Danny did, Robbie agreed. "I see. Hey!" Robbie called to him then motioned his hand for Danny to come over. "What's he doing?" Robbie asked Cole when he saw Danny go back into the building and come out with Bentley. "Look at these two."

Danny was bright and upbeat when he walked over to Robbie. "Hey." He held out his hand. "Danny Hoi. Nice to meet you."

"Robbie. Robbie Slagel." Robbie shook his hand then shook Bentley's. "You're coming with us?"

Danny nodded with a raise of his hand. "If you'll have us."

"We'll have you. Especially since you helped out our men. I'm in security in Beginnings."

"Security? So this place is pretty safe?" Danny asked.

"More so than anywhere in this country." Robbie spoke with certainty.

"Let me ask you this." Danny said. "Are there, are there women in you town?"

"Oh yeah." Robbie saw Danny grin wide. "But . . . unfortunately they're all taken. Two, some have three men."

"Can we talk to them?" Danny asked. "I mean strike up a conversation, sit with them or do we run the risk of getting killed."

"Not many of our women show violent tendencies." Robbie smiled at the same time Danny did. "Of course you can talk to them. Some you may not want to, you'll weed the weird ones out."

"Excellent. It has been forever since I spoke to a woman." Danny shook his head. "Over a year since I've seen one. And the ones before, that I did see, you couldn't even look at them."

"It's not that way in Beginnings. And . . . you picked a good day to arrive. Our women are on a feminine kick today. Clothing division just made them all these little flat shoes. Only they aren't flat, they have a heal. And all of them are dressed up today. They look good."

"Clothing division? Whoa. I can't wait until I get there." Danny started backing up he grabbed Bentley's arm. "In fact with women there. I'd better cut this hair. I hope you guys can find a use for me in there. I can be useful."

"What exactly did you do in the old word?" Robbie called out asking as Danny walked away. Expecting for certain Danny would say waiter, actor, something like that.

"Oh." Danny stepped closer. "I was an . . ." A beeping sound stopped Danny from speaking and immediately a panicked look took over him. "Shit. Bent, our guns." The beeping grew louder as Danny reached behind him to the back waist of his pants.

"What . . ." Robbie looked around. "What is that beeping?"

Danny pulled out what used to be a hand held video game. "Shit." He looked at the display. "They're close." He looked up at Robbie. "You guys have guns right? Get them ready." Danny looked down again.

"What? What are you rambling about?" Robbie tried to remain calm.

"Those things." Danny pointed to the SUTs. "They're coming. Twenty . . . twenty-two of them."

"Twenty-two?" Robbie was stunned. "How do you know?"

"I know." Danny looked at his contraption. "And close. Shit." He spun around. "Get your guns. North, south . . . west . . . seventy-five feet, seventy feet . . ." The beeping grew faster and Danny hurried back. "Bent, we'll hit the roof."

"Hold it." Robbie positioned his M-16. "Cole, you and your men follow them. Danny." Robbie called to him. "Can you really tell when they're closing in?"

"They are."

"Can you stay here. I guarantee you'll be safe. I need you to let me know when they are right here."

Danny looked at Bentley and then motioned his head to him to show Cole and his guys the roof. "All right."

"Thanks." Robbie loaded up his M-16 203 with a small gas can. "Tell me when they are within fifteen feet and give me an approximate. I need to get close."

"I can point you right at them."

Robbie grinned widely. "If you can do that. And I take them out with little problem. I'll get you hooked up with a woman in Beginnings."

"Just don't get me killed right now. All right."

"All right. Give me a direction."

"Over by the bank." Danny held out his hand. "Over there." He pointed in another direction. "By the park." He turned Robbie again. "And masses over by the old McDonald's."

"How far?"

"Thirty feet."

Robbie rotated. "Too far. Anything closer?" He asked as he readied three more cans of gas.

"No. It's like they're all in synch."

"No problem. Hold these." Robbie handed him the gas cans.

"Twenty-five feet. What are these."

"Called phase out." Robbie lifted his radio. "Johnny, Johnny come in. We have SUTs. Twenty-two. Head back and get ready to fire on them. You copy?"

"Got it uncle Robbie."

Robbie hooked his radio on his belt. "How far now Danny?"

"Fifteen feet." He saw Robbie smile. "You see them?"

"I see them. When I tell you, you hand me the cans. And be fast. Ready . . ." Robbie aimed upward. "Say goodbye." A soft pop and a whistle emanated from the M-16. "Gas." Robbie held out his hand, loaded the gun, shifted in a turn and fired. "Gas!" Click, clank, shift, pop. And another turn. "Gas!" Again Robbie, loaded and again Robbie fired. Whistles filled the air, then the sound of the gas cans letting loose. He grabbed hold of Danny's arm and ran with him to the buildings grabbing his radio as he did. "John. John you read me?"

"Got you Uncle Robbie. I see the gas working. I also see eleven of them not going down. Not effected."

Boom! Robbie kicked forth the door of the building. "Can you get them?"

"Negative, they're covered."

"Can you see them now?" Robbie placed an ammunition clip in his weapon and lowered the radio. "Danny go to the roof."

Johnny came over the airwaves. "They hitting center town. They're coming to that building you ran in. They saw you."

"Danny hit the roof!" Robbie held up his M-16 and peered out the window seeing the SUTs moving toward him. "Fuck it." Taking a deep breath, Robbie flung open the door to the building, held up the weapon in its automatic state and ran out firing his weapon in a spraying motion letting the searing, rapid bullets of the gun take out the SUTs loudly and with a slicing action.

Standing in the street amongst his single man massacre of SUTs, Robbie, slightly out of breath heard laughing. Wiping the back of his hand across his forehead he turned to the laughing to see Danny coming out of the building.

"That was great!" Danny came out. "That was really great. You must really be in practice or up against those things a lot. I'm up against those things a lot and I can't take them out like that. Of course I don't have an M-16 either. Or that shit you fired in the air." Danny ran out toward the bank. He saw a reddish brown bubbling substance by the building. "Is that what's left of them? What was that shit you fired at them? Holy hell."

Robbie chuckled at Danny's enthusiasm. His slight show of dementia told Robbie that Danny would get along just fine with him and Frank in Beginnings. And though Danny stood amazed looking at what Robbie had done. He was clueless to the fact that Robbie stood amazed looking at Danny. Yes Beginnings had the weapons, the gas and the practice that Danny may not have had. But Danny had something Beginnings was nowhere near having. What they had been looking for. A possible first line of defense against the SUTs. And Danny held that literally in the palm of his hand.

(6)

Ellen closed the last rabbit cage. "Ready to break for lunch Dean? If I see any more rabbit puke I'm not going to want to eat and you know how I get cranky when I don't eat."

"Yes I know." Dean felt his way to stand and made his way over to the sink to washup with Ellen.

"All I had was a few sunflower seeds when Frank was up here."

"Yes I know Ellen and I had to hear you bitch about how your lips are numb."

"They aren't numb now Dean. Want to kiss me?" She didn't get an answer. "Maybe not." She flicked her wet hands at him, watched his annoyed look on his face, giggled and walked to the door. "I'll see you there. I brought us . . ."

"El. You wanna wait. I still need you to guide me over there. I fell twice today on those steps between the mobiles. And stop laughing it isn't funny."

"Sorry." She grabbed his arm. "I'll lead the way."

"So what did Andrea want up here? She never comes up here."

"Actually she wanted to measure you." Ellen led him from the mobile "Step. She has learned a new . . . step. . . trade. Knitting."

"Knitting?" Dean said with shock.

"She says she's going to make every man . . . step . . . a new sweater. I told her . . . step . . . that's a lot of sweaters." She opened the trailer door. "I do see you in a sweater though Dean. We're in the hall of the trailer."

"I gathered." He reached his hand out feeling the wall to learn it. "Ellen, I just counted two steps down and two steps up."

"Yes."

"So why this afternoon when I went to use the bathroom did you tell me there was three steps."

Ellen laughed. "Sorry."

"It's not funny."

"I know. Sorry." She brought him into the living area and then into the kitchen. "Chicken sandwich or jam."

"Which one do you want."

"I can't decide. You decide."

"I'll have the chicken." He heard Ellen whine. "Then I'll have the jam. If you wanted the chicken why didn't you say so?"

"I was being nice." Ellen opened the refrigerator. "Frank made the sandwiches."

"Swell."

"You know what he said Dean?" Ellen pulled out the lunches. "He said that if he and I were together when you lost your sight, he would let me help you."

"And you believed him?"

"Oh sure I did. Milk or water?"

"Water. El . . . Don't get me wrong. I'm glad that Frank wants to help me, but he's gonna really get in the way of us when I start to become self sufficient."

"I guess that's something you'll have to deal with."

"Like him going on and on about you wearing a . . ." Dean paused. "Are you really wearing a skirt today?"

"Sure I am Dean." Ellen replaced the milk back in the refrigerator. "You don't believe me?"

"Well . . ."

"Give me your hand." She took it and laid it up her thigh. "Feel. Leg." She moved it up an inch. "Feel it. A skirt."

Dean stepped closer to her. "You are."

"Sure I am. Dean?" Ellen paused. "Dean? Dean?"

"Huh?"

"The skirt stays down."

"Sorry." Dean pulled his hands away and backed up. "I thought you were lying to me."

"Now why would I do that?" Ellen pulled out some plates.

"For starters I've had to deal with a ton of bad blind jokes today."

"I'm just trying to lighten the mood."

"Don't."

Ellen turned around and faced him. "I'm sorry. I won't do it again."

"Just . . . just not yet. O.K.?"

"All right." Ellen's voice dropped and she turned back to preparing the lunch.

Dean sensed the change in her mood. "I made you feel bad, didn't I?"

"No." Ellen answered short.

"I did. I didn't mean to."

"I know." Ellen gripped the counter. "I'm just trying to help your mood Dean. I thought I did last night. But every time I try to be nice or touch you, you pull back. With the exception of the skirt. But that's a problem I won't have again. This is the last day I wear a skirt."

"You did help last night El."

"So if I did, why do I feel so . . ." She grabbed the plates. "Lunch is done." She brushed by Dean and brought the plates to the table.

"So what Ellen? You feel so . . . so what?"

"Never mind." She took hold of his arm. "We'll eat."

"No." He stopped her. "What is it?"

Ellen let out a loud breath. "It's just that. I thought we kind of clicked last night. I wasn't really looking at it like a stepping stone over a hurdle. You understand? I looked at it differently than *just* something you needed."

Dean was silent for a second. "You think I used you."

"No." Ellen's voice took on that high pitch fake sound. "No. I didn't say that."

"Yeah you did El." Dean stepped closer to her. "I didn't use you. I loved last night. I want last night all the time. But I know the moment I get used to it, it will be taken away from me."

"You can't say that for sure."

"No, I can't. But I know our history. And I know our pattern." He laid his hand on her face. "I love you. And right now, just knowing I have you here for me is all I need."

"So you don't want to take a chance?" Ellen asked. "That sucks. You know that? Every single time we get close, one of us always stops it. I thought this time we could take that chance."

"I *can't* take that chance. Right now I am really vulnerable. I know that. And if I sleep with you again it's gonna make it that much worse when it's taken away from me. I work with you El, I'm with you more than anyone. I'd rather want you and know that I can't have you, than have you and wait for it to be taken away."

"I understand." Ellen said softly. "I wouldn't trust me either. I have a pretty . . . uh . . . strong reputation." She watched Dean's awkward smile. "It's O.K. We'll work together. We had a great time last. A great time." She leaned to him. "I'm kissing you right now, so don't back away." She kissed him soft and quick. "There, painless."

Dean's hand immediately went to the lips that just kissed him. He moved in to kiss them again and stopped. "Last night was not only what I needed. Know, it was what I want."

"Then why give it up?" Ellen asked softly.

"I don't want to give it up. I just don't want my heart to get broke again." Dean stepped back. "Just once, just once I'd like to be the one who's in the way rather than the one who gets stepped on with you. Just once, I'd like to be that other man. Because you and I both know, you never give up that other man."

Ellen huffed slightly. "I can't believe you just said that to me."

"O.K. that was wrong."

"It was."

"But there is something appealing about being the one you sneak off with. The one you fool around with."

"Appealing meaning, exciting? Or meaning the sex?"

Dean raised his head. "Both."

"Oh." Ellen gasped with shock. "You of all people Dr. Hayes are not one to say that. You're the sensuous guy. You're the romantic. You're not the guy who sleeps with someone without their heart getting involved."

Besides, you just don't have it in you. And I for one would never do that with you. Ever. Sex? Sex only?" Ellen fluttered her lips at him. "Let's have lunch."

It was a weakened grip, preluded by a long chesty grunt and Ellen's fingertips gripped the kitchen counter top. Her head flung back as she gasped to catch her breath, then she slid her palms flat on the surface trying to leverage herself. A walk was what her flat hands did. Left hand, right hand, inching their way for support as she lifted herself. Then quickly she felt the edge of the counter scrape against her hands as she--against her will--was pulled back down. Whining with a sense of tiredness to her, Ellen called out. "No. Dean."

Dean laughed, gripped her hips and pulled her nude body back down to his. He leaned up some planting his mouth center of her chest then grasping her head to kiss her.

"Let me up." Ellen pulled from the kiss.

"Nope."

"I'm hungry."

"Tough."

"Dean . . ."

"Nope." Dean pulled at her again, bringing her to him and as close as they could get. Reaching his hand out to feel the linoleum, Dean held on to Ellen and rolled her to her back, laying his body on hers.

"Dean." She felt his lips on her neck. "Stop." She grabbed his hair lifting his head. She looked at him, his eyes were closed, his lips reaching in a search. "I have to tell you something and you can't get mad."

"What's that?" His words were heavy as he fought to lower his head to her.

"You . . . you being blind, definitely has its advantages in some areas."

Laughing at her with a genuinely wide smile, Dean grabbed hold of her face, pinned his body more to her and kissed her.

(7)

"Robert!" Joe scolded as he opened the door to his office. "Get the hell out of my chair."

"Sorry Dad."

"What the hell were you doing sitting there anyhow?" Joe hobbled his way to the desk.

"Waiting for you. What took you so long?"

"Eh. Andrea." Joe lowered himself to sit, paused, lifted back up then slowly and gently with a scrunched up face, sat down.

Robbie ran the back of his hand across his mouth to hide his snicker. "So uh . . ." He cleared his throat. "What about Andrea?"

Joe gasped a slight moan and shifted in his seat. "She was measuring me."

Robbie tossed his head back. "You too? Man I saw her coming with that tape and I ran. I ran Dad. She is gone. Really gone anymore. Walking around singing that stupid song. Whistling like the fuckin seven dwarfs."

"Robbie." Joe's hand slammed on the desk. "Enough about Andrea. Where are our two survivors?"

"In the extra room, waiting. Waiting for you because you took too long."

Leaning, Joe opened his drawer and pulled out his ashtray putting it on his desk. "What are they like. Forewarn me."

"Considering that Cole came across . . ."

"Aw!" Joe interrupted his son with a loud vocal complaint. "What the hell is wrong with Cole. Does he not realize he doesn't do well with survivors. He picks up the worst of them out there."

"Well this time they . . ."

"Where are they now? Cleaning up?"

"No. They're already cleaned up."

"That fast? They can't be cleaned up that fast. They have to shower and sanitize you know that. We don't need another outbreak of lice around here."

"Actually Dad, if you would let me finish."

Joe looked up at Robbie curious about his tone. "Go on."

"They were clean when I got there. They had cleaned up. And wait, just wait until you see them. They are different then any other survivor we have picked up. And I have been doing this survivor shit since we started it."

"They aren't sick?"

"No, not at all. In fact I predict Ellen, when she gets here will give the O.K. immediately to go to containment, If not past."

"What?" Joe asked. He started to lean back, stopped, grunted, shifted, then finished leaning in his chair. "These two that saved Cole and his men?"

"No. These two that also saved my ass too."

"You didn't mention this. How did this happen?"

"What saving my life? The one saw it coming. He saw the SUT's sneaking in before I did."

"You think maybe he's a set up?" Joe asked.

"Nope not at all."

"Then how did he see them coming before you? You're trained in that shit."

"Because of this." Robbie laid in front of Joe the video game that Danny had.

"You were playing games when it happened?"

"No." Robbie reached down. "Let me see what Danny said . . . oh yeah." He pressed the circle button and the instrument beeped. "It's on."

"O.K. but right now I don't want to play a game."

"Dad, it's impressive."

"So the man knows how to make batteries, so what?" Joe slid the game back.

"No Dad, you have it all wrong. Danny calls this the TT for Terminator Tracker. But he said he'd easily rename the SUT finder."

"The SUT finder?" Joe laughed. "The SUT finder."

"Yeah. O.K., we'll come up with a better name."

"Robert, why name it that at all?"

"Because this little thing. See this attachment on the end." Robbie pointed to the small red square on the edge. "It like a radar. It picks up our SUTs and it picks them up not only in distance, but in direction, and in numbers. It beeps. For each SUT a red dot appears. Soldiers who aren't SUTs. Their dots are black."

"Black and red dots?" Joe spoke with sarcasm and lack of belief. "And it beeps. Robbie you were duped. There is no way this will . . ." A beep shut Joe up.

Robbie looked down at the tracker. "See, one red dot."

"See, it's wrong. I don't think a SUT is walking in Beginnings."

"Fifty feet. Bet me it's Henry."

"Why do you say that?" Joe asked watching it indicate a closer range.

"I told Henry to come up here and bring the microchips. Here he comes." Robbie faced the door. "And . . . Henry." The door opened. "Frank?"

At the point where the thing beeped loudly and out of control, Joe had enough. "Shut this thing of. It's Frank and he's no SUT."

"But Dad." Robbie grabbed the tracker. "I'm telling you this works."

"I'm telling you it doesn't."

Frank stepped forward. "Can I interrupt?" Before he could take a chance on waiting for them to tell him he will anyhow. Frank reached his hand down and laid down a white cloth. "Here's those microchips. Henry said to be careful with them."

Joe's wide eyes immediately went to the cloth then to the game. "Robbie, get me this survivor."

Robbie smiled and walked over to the far door, opening it. "Danny. I need you first." He stepped back.

The door opened a little wider and his black hair peeked through first, then his head with a wide smile. Danny slid in then closed the door behind him. He ran his fingers through his now short and neat hair, then extended

his hand out, confused on who to greet first. "Danny Hoi." Danny walked to Joe only because he sat behind a desk.

"Joe Slagel."

"Really?" Danny asked. "You're Robbie's father? I see the resemblance." He faced Frank. "Danny."

"Frank . . . Slagel."

Danny laughed once loud. "Another one? Oh man that is wild." Though already neatly dressed in a tee shirt and clean jeans, Danny tucked his shirt in more. "Thanks for letting us come in. We were a little worried that you wouldn't let us in."

"Dan." Joe held up the tracker. "Did you make this?"

"Oh yeah." Danny began to look around Joe's office. "Is this your office Mr. Slagel?"

"Joe. And yes it is."

"Wow." Danny smiled. "Clean."

"Thank you." Joe continued. "Danny how did you make this?"

"Simple." Danny walked up to the filing cabinet next to where Frank stood. He smiled at Frank then ran his hand over it. "Really clean. Amazing."

Joe looked at Robbie then Frank, then Danny. "Danny? Explain simple."

"It's like baking cookies. It's just a matter of this and a matter of that." He opened a file drawer. "Wow, files." He pointed in with such childhood excitement. "Are they real?"

Frank shut the drawer. "No we call them Copperfield files. They're a fuckin illusion."

Danny laughed at Frank. "That's funny." He walked from the filing cabinet pointing to the door behind Joe. "Is that another room?"

"Yes." Joe answered. "Now getting back to . . ." He watched Danny open the examining room door.

"Oh my God." Danny exclaimed. "It's like a doctors office. Oh my God."

"Danny, would you mind sitting down?" Joe requested.

"Would you mind if I didn't. I'm finding this place really interesting and I haven't even seen it all."

"Danny please." Joe held out his hand to the chair. "You can look around when we're done."

"O.K." Danny shrugged and walked to the chair sitting down.

"Danny." Joe held up the tracker. "Do you realize what you brought in here?"

"Yeah." The smile dropped from Danny's face. "Is it not allowed? I can take it apart . . ." As his hand reached for it he pulled it back when Robbie and Joe both shouted 'No!'. "Or I won't."

"Can you tell me about this?" Joe asked.

"Oh sure. It tracks the terminator up to a hundred feet away. It detects in distance, you know, direction." Danny acted nonchalantly.

"How did you come up with this?"

"It was easy. O.K. I'm lying, at first it wasn't. At first it worked, then it didn't. I made the first type, years ago when we . . . the people I lived with . . . when we were dealing with the, I call them warriors because they remind me of something from Mad Max. They run around in loin clothes and such screaming."

Joe knew who he talked of. "We call them Savages."

"Yeah sounds like them." Danny bit his nails, leaned forward and then back. "I made a tracker to detect when there were a large group approaching. And it worked because when we lived in that town, man those things would hit us once a week, I swear. It was a game to them. We actually ended up moving twice."

"Where are you from?" Joe inquired watching Danny fuss about. "And are you always so hyper?"

"Always. Always." Danny shifted. "Nervous energy. I'm from California, Sacramento."

"Is that where this town is that you were at?"

"At first. I lived in the mountains at my house there for a while. I went there at the onset of the plague with my parents and brother and his family. I thought if we were far enough from it, we would be safe. We weren't. I guess I lived alone for . . ." Danny closed one eye and thought. "A year and a half and then I moved on. I traveled a couple months when I reached the town where I met Bentley the guy I'm with. Him and about six men were farming this town. I stayed, the savages hit we moved on. We found another town with about ten more men and two women. But the women you couldn't touch, look at or speak to, or you'd get shot." He turned his head back to Frank who snickered. "Anyhow, that place is where I made the first tracker. And it worked, each one I made worked for years. No matter where we moved. But it failed about a year ago. We were in our town in Nevada and we got hit by these soldiers. Six of us escaped with our lives. They took the two women and killed the other men. Bentley was O.K. with me, the other men blamed me for my tracker failing. I couldn't figure it out. And it seemed everywhere we went we ran into these things and had to run, because we couldn't get ahead of them because we couldn't see them coming."

"But you see them coming now." Joe said. "This does work right? Robbie said it works."

"Oh yeah it works. Now." Danny blew from his mouth. "How stupid I was. I of all people should have figured it out sooner. It dawned on me that what would cause my electronic instrument to fail? Why wouldn't it pick it up. Interference right? What interference could there be unless these soldiers had either something on them or in them. So when we killed one we checked out its clothes, nothing. We did an autopsy at first. Nothing. It

was human, blood guts and such.” Danny tossed his hands up. “Then I realized what it was about them that made me think that perhaps they were robots. Their eyes, they had no soul. And being the big Planet of The Apes fan that I am, I checked the head of the next one we found. A laser scar right at the temple.” Danny pointed to his own temple. “And we busted it’s head open and, you’re not gonna believe this, but a microchip. These soldiers had a microchip in their brain.”

Joe nodded. “We know about the chip.”

“Oh good. I thought you weren’t going to believe me.” Danny grabbed his chest. “So I took some time, a day or so and figured the chip was what had to be causing the interference. So I took the chip and used that in conjunction with my tracker. Sort of implanting it within the electronics and using it as a magnet. Now instead of just picking up humans, I pick up the chip and how many there are of them. Works quite nicely too. And depending on how many there are, we have enough time to run or fight them. But they are so heavily armed at times, we just kept running.”

Frank snapped his finger loudly. “Wait a second!” He stepped away from the filing cabinet. “You mean to tell me this game thing tracks the SUTs before you can see them. Picks them up.”

Joe roiled his eyes slightly at his son’s Einstein quick way of picking things up. “Yeah Frank what the hell have we been talking about for ten minutes.”

“That is so fuckin great!” Frank said with excitement snatching the object from Joe’s hand. “This is great. Danny, can you make more?”

“Oh sure. I need another microchip to make another one though. The game units we can get at any toy store. The circuit board, the rest I can piece together with just about anything you have laying around.”

“Whoa.” Frank looked at it. “Like the thing the Ghostbusters used.”

“Exactly.” Danny nodded.

“You said you have a range of a hundred feet?”

“Yes.”

“What’s the chance of you building one on a larger scale?” Frank asked

“You men like furthering the range?” Danny tried to clarify. “I don’t know. It works like radar and the radar part of us failed. I have it good with one chip. Furthering the range . . .”

“No.” Frank interrupted him. “Radar yes, but large scale radar. Connecting a bunch of these things together to make an entire tracking system.”

Danny went silent and shifted his eyes around. “I guess. Sure, I’d have to design it. And I’d need a lot more chips. Perhaps with an entire system like you’re talking about we can actually pick up signals father out.” Danny shrugged. “I’d have to work on it.”

Frank's face lit up. "I have been trying to establish a first warning system and I was at a loss. This could save lives here and man power if we see them coming. Fuck, we'll air drop on them."

Joe liked Frank's idea and the fact that Danny was near certain he could do it. The certain part was what made Joe curious. "Danny, tell us, how do you know so much about this? How were you able to create this so easily?"

"It's what I do, or did." Danny said. "Actually putting things together is a hobby of mine. You know, take things apart, put them back together. Fixing things, I like to fix things, I think I do good at it. But Electronics, now that was pretty much my specialty. O.K., I'm lying, designing, building and creating electrical systems is what I did. You know, for buildings. I actually went to school to be an architect. I was always buildings things as a kid, but it was boring, so I went back to school to get my degree in Electrical engineering. But I'll tell you Mr. Slagel. Making that . . ." He pointed to his tracker. "I didn't learn in any college. I learned more in trade school when I went for electronics then I did at UCLA."

Joe's mouth dropped. "You went to trade school too."

"Oh sure." Danny lifted his shoulders "You can't design something to make it work, if you yourself can't built it and make it work. And you can't do that unless you understand how it works. Understand?" He saw the slant expression of Joe's face. "Oh no. You don't believe me. I don't blame you. I know people probably come knocking on your door, giving you a bunch of shit so they can get in. But you can test me. I'll take a test." Danny raised his eyebrow. "Give me something to fix. I'll do it. Anything." He leaned into the desk. "Just let us stay. We're tired of running. We're tired of living out there. We want to live with people again."

"Danny . . ." Joe gently held the tacker.

"Mr. Slagel Bentley, he's a barber. Look he cut my hair. Robbie says you don't have barber. We're useful."

"Danny." Joe smiled and shook his head at the rambling young man. Here sitting before Joe was someone that wanted in so badly and little did he know he walked in with his own key and handed it to Joe. "Danny you and your friend are welcome to stay with us. There are channels which I'll explain later, but you can stay."

Danny clenched his fist with a silent 'yes'.

Robbie expected the reaction Danny would give. He saw his brother's expression. If Frank didn't like Danny before, Danny certainly jumped over typical survivor status with his tracker. And Joe, Robbie saw that his father recognized an asset to Beginnings more than anything. "Dad? What do you think?"

"I think." Gently holding the tacker Joe sat back, not without trouble but he sat back. "I think we're gonna have some really amusing times ahead of us."

This made Robbie curious. "Really? Amusing? Why do you say that."

Joe grinned devilishly at the tracker. "Because of Henry." Joe looked at Frank and he knew Frank knew exactly where he was going. "Henry is going to be so jealous. I love it."

(8)

Annoyed would be the understatement to describe Ellen's mood as she toted herself from town to the line of utility buildings to greet and examine the two new survivors. All the way up there, box in her arms, courtesy of Henry and everyone else who stopped her and said, 'hey, are you going to Joe's? Can you take this for me?' And being the kind hearted person that Ellen believed she was, she shrugged and they tossed what ever it was in the box. She would have thought that they would have avoided her. If she could feel the hideous mood showing on her face, she could only imagine what the others saw. Maybe that's why they bothered her, to irritated her. Just like Frank. He thought he was real funny calling her on the radio and telling her that she *had* to come to receiving. She *had* to meet the new survivors. She was going to *love* the one. Ellen knew exactly what Frank was up to. In his own way he was telling her how bad they were and he was just digging that fact into her with every chuckle he let out over that radio. She'd see who was laughing when he would want her to come help out that evening with the kids and she was stuck with the new survivors from hell. Cole-survivors. Ellen shuddered at that thought as she neared Joe's office walking so slow--not like she was in a hurry to get there. And Cole-Survivors were the worst.

It was like a game of chance, different people always brought back different types of survivors. When Miquel used to go out, he would bring in decent survivors. But like Ellen was the survivor queen, Robbie was the survivor king. He always brought back the best. After all, he did bring her back Blake, the Soap Opera God.

She saw the cigarette smoke first as she rounded the bend to the utility building. And when she heard that unmistakable single cough, she knew Joe was outside. She peeked first, then put on a smile--fake. "Hi Joe, why are you hanging outside?"

"I couldn't sit any longer Ellen. I was tired of waiting on you."

"I've been very busy Joe. Look. I'm holding a box for you. Everybody is giving me their work to do." She chuckled at Joe's grunt. "Who's with the new survivors?"

"Frank and Robbie."

"Are they torturing them?"

"No!" Joe snapped. "And what the hell are you wearing?"

"A skirt."

"A second layer of skin. Don't you think that's a little short? Don't you think it's a little tight. And don't you think you're a little old to be dressing like that?"

"And don't you think you're being a little pissy with me."

"Ellen, I'm being pissy with you because you shot me in the ass."

"Oh get over it Joe."

"What!?"

"Just kidding. And, I have to do blood samples."

"No you don't."

"I don't?"

"No Andrea was up here measuring Robbie and she took the samples for you."

Ellen tsked loudly. "What is wrong with her? I saw her when I was walking up here. You would think she would have told me so I didn't have to trot my ass all the way here from the clinic carrying other peoples things too."

"She didn't tell you because she wanted you to meet the survivors. She said you'll love them."

Ellen let out a loud sound of disgust. "God! How bad are they? They're animals aren't they. They have to be, if everyone who met them rubs it in. For sure I'm heading back to the mobile." Ellen turned and started to walk. "Here's your box."

"Take it inside. And then head to containment."

"But Joe. I don't have to be there until two."

"It's twenty minutes till Ellen. By the time you get all the way back out to the mobile it'll be two o'clock, then you'll have to turn your skinny ass around and head back, that means you'll be late."

"Better late than early Joe. And take your box."

"You take my box." Joe reached back and opened his office door. "Inside for me. You owe me." He tossed his cigarette and limped in before Ellen. "She's here." He spoke out.

Ellen closed the door griping as she walked in. "Just announce me like a door prize Joe. Bitching at me from the second you see me. Hey Frank." She smiled at Frank who stood by the file cabinet.

"Hey Babe wanna meet one of the new survivors?"

Ellen stuck her tongue out to Frank and turned into the office. The moment Joe stepped aside and went behind his desk was the moment she saw Danny Hoi stand up. And upon seeing the shocking sight of a well kept survivor, Ellen's hands loosened and from them fell the box. It toppled onto the floor and it's contents spilled out. "Shit." She bent down to it.

"Here." Danny rushed over with a smile bending down to the floor with her. "Let me help." He grinned widely at her. "Oh my God."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." He shook his head and picked up some of the papers. His eyes shifting down to her folded legs. When he heard Frank yell 'eyes' he lifted his views to Ellen's face.

Ellen giggled. "Shut up Frank." She waved her hand and whispered to Danny. "Don't mind him."

Frank rolled his eyes and ran his hand over his head. "Oh great, she flirting already."

"I'm Danny Hoi." He placed a paper in the box and shook Ellen's hand.

"Ellen Slagel."

"No way?" Danny smiled a crooked smile. "Another Slagel?"

"I inherited the name through marriage."

"No way?" Danny turned his head back. "Robbie, is this your wife?"

"Nope. Sex partner, not wife."

Danny snickered at Ellen's tsk. "He's funny." He looked at Joe. "Joe, is she your wife?"

"No!" Joe snapped so offended. "Christ she shot me. If I didn't think of her as a daughter, she would be the last person I'd marry."

Danny closed into Ellen motioning his head up to Frank. "Him? The big guy? That's your husband?"

"Hey!" Frank yelled. "What's wrong with me?"

Ellen snickered. "Used to be. We're split up."

"Oh yeah?" Danny smiled at that.

"He wanted his name back. He was really mean."

"El!" Frank yelled. "I think you're done picking up that shit. You can get up from your private floor party."

Ellen lifted the box and stood at the same time as Danny. "I guess I'll show you around containment. I work there. I run it."

"Great." Danny moved his head into Ellen and sniffed. "You smell like a woman."

"Wait a second." She grabbed his shirt and pulled him back. "You smell good too."

"Cologne. I always wore cologne."

"Oh that is so great." Ellen side handed the box to Frank and he grunted. "No man here wears cologne. And . . . great hair."

"Thanks." Danny stepped back. "Wow, a woman."

"Haven't you seen a woman in a while?"

"No. Over a year."

"I must look pretty good to you." She snickered. "I bet Jenny Matoose would look good to you. So you haven't see a woman in over a year?"

"No. And the last time I was around one I wasn't allowed to speak or look at her. There aren't many women. So it's been years since I even spoke to a woman."

"Oh you can talk to me anytime."

"Really?"

Ellen waved her hand. "Oh sure. I drive everyone nuts though. Be forewarned. And . . ." She looked at those in the room. "Shall I walk him to containment or are one of you three driving us there?"

Frank jingled the keys. "I'll drive you. Then Robbie or my Dad will come by later to do the containment explanation thing to him."

"I can do that." Ellen looked at Joe. "I can do that Joe."

Joe shook his head. "You don't do it right Ellen, you lie to the people. Me or Robbie will be there. And I thought you wanted to be late today."

"Me?" Ellen placed her hand to her own chest. "When did I say that?"

Joe was ready to verbally strike out at her but instead he let her go. She was being an Ellen. He lowered himself to his seat, paused, lifted up with a cringing face and lowered himself completely. He snarled at Ellen, Robbie and Frank who laughed. "Knock it of you three. Robbie go get Bentley and Frank can take them and Ellen down."

"Got it Dad." Robbie walked by Ellen and Danny. "Dan, I'll see you in a little while. Frank, meet you at the jeep."

Frank reached out for the office door opening it. "Let's go El."

"O.K., come on Danny." She walked ahead of him. "Is Bentley like you?"

"I think he is."

"Oh good." She paused in the door. "I have to say, I am impressed. Your clothes, your shirt, hair. You are so clean."

"Thanks. I think clean is important."

"Oh me too. And you're proof. Look at you. You wouldn't believe the condition some people come into Beginnings in."

"Isn't that wrong? Why let yourself go like that? Just because the world ended it doesn't mean personal hygiene should too."

"My thoughts exactly." Ellen nodded.

"El!" Frank scolded. "Today!"

With her finger closing off her ear that rang, Ellen jolted and started walking again. "We'll talk at containment."

Frank grumbled some as they walked out, he looked at his father to say goodbye and saw the oddity of happy on his face. "Why are you smiling?"

"Just thinking." Joe folded his hands on his desk. "I love to get Henry. Henry is going to be so upset for a few days. Not just about Danny's ability. But all the way around."

Frank grinned. "He does get himself worked up." He gave a sneaky laugh.

"Hey Frank. How about you finding Henry and bringing him to containment to meet Danny. You personally find him."

Frank bit his bottom lip with an ornery look. "You know what. I think I will. It *has* been a long time since Henry was all hyper. I miss that." Laughing, Frank walked from the office and pulled the door closed.

Sitting at his desk, Joe knew that some would wonder why he would do that to Henry. But those same people who would wonder that, would have to realize that Joe found that very little amused him in Beginnings. And when he saw an opportunity to be amused, Joe being the man that he was, had to seize it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

(1)

It was like a children's game to Frank. But instead of chasing around some guy in a red and white striped sweater, he was chasing around a tall, lanky, long haired Japanese man wearing tan pants and a white tee shirt. It was the 'Where's Henry' game to Frank and about twenty minutes into his search he started getting annoyed. He went to the field house. No Henry. He went to the generator building. No Henry again. He wasn't supposed to be in town still, but Scott informed him that he had an entire list of things to do. So after listening to Scott ramble on in such a slow fashion, Frank headed into center town. Three stops was what Scott told him and Frank went to all three. Saving History for last because that was where Henry had the longest task to accomplish.

He pulled the jeep up to history, wishing it was his motorcycle. But as Frank found out during his search for Henry, his 'out of commission' bike hadn't even been touched.

He clomped his boots on the two steps, opening the door to history and seeing Trish at her desk in her normal fashion, her nose in a book. Frank could have said 'hello' when she looked up, but he was already getting in a bad mood. "Why are you always reading?"

"Why not?"

"It's stupid."

Trish slammed her book shut. "Do you have an appointment Frank?"

"No I don't have an appointment." He saw Trish ready to talk. "And I'm not here for a history lesson. I'm looking for Henry. He supposed to fix your back printer."

"Oh yes." Trish smiled. "It's broken. It makes this noise when it prints up. Eek, Eek, Eek."

"Trish! Is he fixing it?"

"Yes, right in the middle."

"Good." Frank began to move to the back room.

"Wait!" Trish hobbled up and stopped him. "You can't go back there."

"Why not?"

"You don't have an appointment. Rules, you know."

"I don't care about rules. I need to see Henry."

"Well he's not back there." Trish stated.

"He's not in the back? You said he was in the back."

"No I didn't."

"Yes you did. You said he was fixing the printer."

"He is."

"Then he's back there." Frank reached for the door knob.

"No he isn't, he's gone."

"How can he be gone if he's fixing your printer?"

"He left."

Frank took a second and caught his breath. "You said he was right in the middle of fixing the printer."

"He is."

"Then he's back there!"

"No. He left in the middle of fixing the printer. He said he'd be back. He needed a part to stop it from going Eek, Eek, Eek."

"Then he went to Mechanics."

"No." Trish shook her head.

"You just said he needed a part."

"But that's not why he left. He left because the shredder wasn't working at Paper Division."

Frank grunted loudly. "Why did you tell me this is the first place?"

"You never asked." Trish pointed and moved back to her desk. "And you weren't being very nice."

"Like I care." Frank stormed to the door.

"Oh Frank?" Trish called out to him. "Could you remind Henry that he has to look at my fax machine when he comes back."

"Why does he have to look at your fax machine Trish?"

"It's broke. I'm not getting any faxes you know."

"Oh. O.K. I'll tell him." Figuring he'd be nice and make mention of that to Henry, Frank left before Trish confused him any more. He got back in the jeep and began to drive from town. So irritated at that moment, as soon as he cleared town, Frank reached into his pocket and lit up a cigarette. He stopped the jeep about a mile into the five mile trip to the industrial section and figured he wasn't going to waste his time pulling a surprise visit on Henry. Obviously trying to show up unexpectedly where Henry was at, only made Frank run around in circles. So he did what he avoided doing all along, he radioed out to ensure he was headed in the right direction. And when Paper told him that Henry was there, Frank bluntly told them to keep Henry's skinny ass there because if he walks in and Henry is gone, he *will* start shooting.

Henry was excited that the problem with the paper shredder ended up being a minor problem instead of something major. He debated on whether or not--though he did make the mess--to let Paper pick up the shredded mess all over the floor. After all, he did fix their machine. And seeing how he had his tools to pick up he would leave the mess for the people who ran the division.

Somewhere around Henry's placing the last of his tools in his sack, guilt hit him. He couldn't do it. For as much as he wanted to chuck his mess, the nice person in him couldn't. So Henry, on his hands and knees started to gather the paper up.

He heard him enter. He knew who it was. No one in Beginnings walks that heavy except for Frank. But why was he being so quiet? Henry, realizing he was up to something, and really not in the mood for Frank-games, ignored him and kept cleaning.

A tsk. Heavy sigh. A footstep toward Henry.

Henry paused, shook his head, and swept with his hands.

Another tsk. Another sigh. A step of his boot.

What is he up to? Henry wondered and kept cleaning.

A very heavy tsk, A loud clearing of the throat sigh and a *stomp* of his big foot.

"What Frank, what?! What!" Henry turned around and stood up. "Why are you being like that?"

"Like what?"

"That clicking of your mouth thing you're doing and breathing."

"I have to breath Henry, we're all human. I was just . . ." Frank let out another sigh. "Watching you."

"Why?"

"Feeling sorry for you."

"You should Frank. I'm very busy, Robbie is running around being the protector. I'm sore. Sore Frank because some big ape beat me up last night. And now I'm on my hands and knees cleaning up a floor."

"Why don't you get a broom?"

"Why don't you tell me why you're here."

"To see if you want to come and meet the new survivors. My dad is doing his orientation thing and we thought you'd like to be there."

"I can't Frank. I'm busy."

"Oh." Frank nodded. "O.K., I just thought that maybe you'd really want to be there."

"Why? I'll bite."

"It's just that . . . well . . . Nah." Frank shook his head. "Never mind. My imagination. Go back and pick up your paper." Frank began to back out.

"What?" Henry rushed to him. "Don't do that shit. What?" Henry leaned closer to him and sniffed loudly. "And why do you smell so strong like cigarette smoke?"

"Me? Fuckin Robbie was blowing in my face again. See ya."

"Frank. Finish."

"I did. I told you he was blowing the smoke in . . ."

"Frank. About me visiting the survivors."

"Oh yeah." Frank snapped his finger. "It's just that the one is kind of attached to Ellen already. Like immediately."

"So, they always attach themselves to Ellen."

"Yeah but this one is different. His name is uh . . . Danny Boy. No, wait. Danny Joy? No that's not it. Oh yeah, yeah, Danny Hoi. That's it. He's Chinese like you."

"I'm Japanese Frank."

"Whatever. Anyhow, this guys was different. He was really clean and together when he came in. And he uh, he just has this talent for making things."

"Like what?"

"Like a tracking device that uses the microchip to find the SUTS before they reach you. Something simple like that, no big deal."

Henry's mouth dropped open. "Oh he did not make something like that."

"He did too. It went off before the SUT attack on Robbie and they were able to divert the sneak attack." Frank shrugged. "But you know that's only one thing he makes, probably can't do much of anything else. Even though he says he has a degree in architecture and electrical engineering."

"He does not." Henry got defensive. "He's lying. All survivors lie at first to get in."

"You know what? You're probably right. We probably just believed him because he reminded us so much of you. Tall, skinny, Chinese."

"I'm Japanese."

"Whatever. Hopefully Ellen will be able to see before it gets too late."

"Too late for what?"

"See, she . . . never mind." Frank flung his hand. "You know me. I get jealous so easy. It's probably just my imagination because she smelled the guy."

"What do you mean, 'smelled him'?"

"You know." Frank leaned into Henry and sniffed. "Like that."

"Did he stink?"

"Like cologne or something. At least that's what Ellen said before, or was it after, yeah after, she told him he had great hair. No wait-wait-wait before."

"You're lying Frank." Henry spoke so irritated.

"I'm not, but then again, maybe it was my imagination. But after talking to you I see I was probably wrong. But just incase, I'm heading to containment. To double check myself. That way, incase I'm not wrong, I can be there when they expose this Danny guy for who he really is. But I have to say that contraption he made looked real."

"Anyone can make anything look real Frank."

"You're right." Frank backed up. "But then again, how do *we* know? We can't tell that shit. We only know what he tells us. And Ellen doesn't know what he says he can do yet. She should be able to sift through the bull shit. That is if she can sift through the fact that she was impressed how clean he was. That's what she told him when she went to containment . . . early." Shrugging, Frank opened the door to Paper. "See ya."

With his mouth tightly closed and his jaw going back and forth in a shifting debate, Henry looked at the mess on the floor, looked at his tool

bag then the just closed door. After a few seconds, Henry grabbed his tool bag and ran from Paper. "Frank wait up."

Frank smiled.

(2)

"And this room is our skills room." Ellen walked with Danny into the large room. "Here's where we do most of our testing and evaluating. Our social skills classes and such to prepare people for civilization again."

"I see." Danny walked with his hands behind his back. "Big room."

"It needs to be because sometimes we have to divide up. Diane comes in and does speech therapy because a lot of people forget exactly how to speak. They sort of started their own language. Unfortunately there are only a few of us here that can understand them."

"You're one of them."

"I work with them. I'd be pretty lost if I didn't."

"So you're close to every new person that comes in here?"

"You can say that." Ellen told him. "I'm the primary judge of when they get out of containment and move into general population. We have to be careful because if we let someone out too soon, we have problems. We've had problems."

"Have you ever gotten close to someone that they have thrown out?" Danny asked.

"Twice. But you can't let it get to you. You have to keep thinking, good of the community. I distance myself quite a bit from the survivors. That is, at first."

"Oh." Danny dropped his head some. "So this is just a job. You really don't take special interest?"

"Of course I do. I love working with survivors. Between you and me." Ellen nudged him. "I find it rewarding and fun. But don't spread that round, I have a reputation of being a bitch."

"But wouldn't you have to have that reputation in here?" Danny quizzed. "If you came off soft, it could be dangerous. I know what's out there."

"Very good." Ellen smiled.

"So did you work with people in the world before the plague?"

"I was a nurse."

"How come you don't work at the clinic?"

"I do." Ellen said. "But not much with patients. Just taking their blood. I have a pretty bad bedside manner. I tend to bitch when people whine. For example. We have woman her named Trish. She is expecting. Don't get me wrong, Trish likes me, I think. But she specifically requested that I be no where near her when she is in labor or gives birth."

"So you'll kind of hang in the wings?"

"Oh hell no. I'm going to be in there every step of the way. Annoy that kid right out of her."

Danny laughed. "This is very nice having a conversation with someone other than Bentley."

"Bentley is a very bright man." Ellen stated. "I picked something up about him, much common sense." Ellen turned Danny from the skills room. "Shall we go back to my office and finish?"

"Sure." Danny followed. "So you pick things up about people?"

"Yes. Survivors especially. I worked with them so much, I can tell all about them without them telling me a thing."

"No way."

"Yes way. And I'm good at it too. I ought to be, I've been working with these people for years."

"Tell me about me." Danny stopped walking.

"Give me your hands."

"A palm reader."

"No." Ellen giggled and took his hands in hers. "Now keep in mind, I didn't read Joe's stupid report on you and you haven't told me anything." She ran her fingers over Danny's hand and snickered at his dramatic shiver. She bent his fingers back and forth. "You lived civilized for a very long time post-plague. You work hard, very hard and take pride in everything you do because you take pride in yourself. Um . . . the work you do is difficult, and tedious but it's not your typical laborer work. You work with your hands, quite a bit. Intricate work, because the muscles in your fingers are firm. That tells me you use your fingers more than your hands. Someone that uses their fingers tend to have strong muscles in them. Someone who doesn't, has soft hands, calloused but soft." She gave him back his hands. "How did I do?"

"Amazing."

"Thank you." Ellen smiled.

"You are totally wrong."

"Shit. I'm never wrong."

Danny laughed loudly. "Just kidding. Pretty much right on the nose. I work with electronics and fixing things."

"Really?" Ellen held the door to her office open for him. "Henry will be glad to hear that. He runs Mechanics and he does so much on his own because he's the only one who really knows how to fix the big things that break. And trust me, things break around here. You'll like Henry. Everyone likes Henry." Ellen motioned her hand to a chair for Danny, then she sat down behind her desk. "Any questions so far?"

"Explain social skills classes. What exactly are they?"

"Oh gees. Um . . . like I said we teach survivors how to be civilized again. From eating with a fork and using a toilet again to trusting people and giving them stressful situations to handle. Checking them under pressure. Which trusting one another is a big problem with survivors. I

think we'll use Bentley to help in a class. He's a barber right? I think we'll make Bentley give some haircuts. Even though our survivors do need it done,. It will be good to see their reaction when some stranger is over them with a pair of scissors. Then again we'll have to bring Frank in just incase there is trouble."

"Why Frank?" Danny asked.

"Frank runs security. He *is* security. Everyone's afraid of Frank."

"Frank? The big guy with the black eye? Everyone is afraid of him?"

"Oh sure. He's the meanest, toughest, strongest man in Beginnings."

"This is your ex-husband you're praising here."

"Oh sure, I always praise Frank. I've known him all my life. He's my best friend."

Danny looked curiously at her. "And people fear him? You're kidding? He doesn't look that tough."

"Ask anyone. They'll tell you. Watch out for Frank. Ask anyone." At that second Robbie walked into Ellen's office.

"Hey El." Robbie grinned. "Hey Danny. My Dad will be here soon to talk. In fact he's on his way."

"Thanks." Danny looked up to him. "Hey Robbie, is Frank the meanest, toughest, strongest man in Beginnings?"

"Nah." Robbie waved his hand at him. "Frank's a pansy."

Ellen gasped loud. "I can not believe you are talking about your brother like that. No, I believe it. But who was the one last night that couldn't control Frank when he was beating up my poor Henry? You."

"Yeah well, who was the one dying here not long ago. Me."

"I'll give you that." Ellen lifted her shoulders with a drop.

Danny was confused. "Frank was beating up Henry? I thought you said everyone likes Henry."

"They do. Frank was being a jerk."

"You said 'my poor Henry'." Danny tilted his head. "You're with Henry?"

"Oh yes. Henry and I are getting married."

"Oh." Danny nodded with agreement. "I see, so Frank was beating up your Henry out of jealousy?"

"No. Henry and Frank are best Friends. It's a long story. Like I said Frank was being a jerk. I was pissed at him. I shot at him to break up the fight."

"You shot at Frank?" Danny asked with shock.

"Yeah, but I hit my father instead."

"You shot Joe?"

"Not seriously. I shot him in the . . ." Ellen snickered and so did Robbie. "In the ass."

"I see." Danny said. "And here I thought he had hemorrhoids. So let me get this straight. You shot your father inadvertently in the rear-end

when you were shooting at your ex-husband who was beating up your husband to be.” He saw he was on track. “Why were they fighting?”

“Because of Dean.” Ellen stated.

“Who’s Dean?”

“My other ex-husband. Actually he’s my first ex-husband. Frank is my second. And I was with Dean last night.”

“O.K.” Danny blinked several times. “If you were cheating on Henry with Dean, why weren’t Henry and Dean fighting?”

“I wasn’t cheating. I’m allowed. It’s called an understanding. When one man shares his partner with another it’s called an understanding.”

“So if you’re allowed, why did Frank and Henry fight?”

“Because he wanted to have the understanding with Henry. He thought he was going to be with me. And he was mad that I was with Dean.”

“So why didn’t Frank beat up Dean?” Danny asked.

“He wanted to, but he opted to beat up Henry. Somehow Frank thought it was understood that he and Henry were going to have the understanding. Understand?”

“I think. So is it customary and common courtesy to have an understanding with the ex-husband slash husbands?”

Robbie interjected. “Not really. It’s pretty much anything goes here in Beginning as far as understandings go. Hell, Ellen and I have even slept together.”

Ellen gasped in shocking embarrassment. “Robbie! Shut up about it. God, make me look even more like a slut.”

Danny chuckled. “Oh my God. You slept with your brother’s wife?” Danny chuckled some more. “Before, during or after they were married?”

“Uh . . .” Robbie snickered and shifted his eyes to Ellen. “All right, all right. Before.”

“So even though you’re an ex of sorts, you had nothing to do with this fight?”

“Hard to believe huh.” Robbie shook his head. “Just trying to break it up.”

“I think I got it.” Danny grinned. “Your future husband Ellen has an understanding with your first ex-husband, which your second ex-husband doesn’t like because he thought he would have an understanding with your future husband. So your second ex-husband got mad and went after your first ex-husband but changed his mind and went after your future husband, beating him up instead.”

“Yes.” Ellen nodded.

“I take it now that your second ex-husband and future husband are at each others throats?” Danny questioned.

“Oh no, they’re back to being best friends again.”

"Best friends. Your second ex-husband and future husband are best friends and your future husband doesn't want to have an understanding with his best friend who is also your second ex-husband?"

"Oh he wants to have an understanding with Frank, I'm the one who doesn't want to."

"Because he's your ex-husband, second mind you, and you hate him?" Danny tried to understand.

"Oh God no. I love Frank very much."

"But you don't want to be with him and your marrying someone else." Danny bit his bottom lip and nodded slowly. "Is it you or are all relationships in Beginnings this confusing?"

"Some are." Ellen told him. "You have to understand, there are only twenty women. Two of which have passed the ripe old age of eighty. Now with all these men, there are lots of relationships. It as to be that way in order to keep tension low. So there's lots of different types. Some are confusing, some are organized. It's not just me. Hey, at least *I* don't sleep with the old guys."

Danny tossed his hands in the air. "It doesn't happen much to me, but I'm lost."

Ellen grinned at him and folded her hands on her desk. "Then welcome to Beginnings."

(3)

"Frank! You're an asshole. Will you shut up?" Henry requested loudly as they entered into the entrance office of containment.

"Just curious Henry."

"I'm not listening to you." Henry covered his ears and motioned his head to Dan to buzz them in.

"But what if she does that Henry?" Frank talked to fast walking Henry who still held his hands on the side of his head. "What if this guy fixes thing, invents things and Ellen get confused and thinks he's you. You guys do look alike."

"I can't believe you're saying that." Henry peeked in the sleeping quarters then in the diningroom.

"I thought you weren't listening." Frank agitated.

Henry stopped walking. "And how can we even remotely look alike? We won't. Especially if he's Chinese. I'm Japanese." He moved to Ellen's office and looked in there.

"Henry, I'm Caucasian. And it is a well known fact that us Caucasians are racially ill-informed."

"Frank, you're just intellectually ill-informed."

"Hey . . . George Washington." Frank called out to Henry as he approached the skills room.

With a curled up face Henry spun to him. "What? What did you call me?"

"George Washington."

"Now why on earth would you call me George Washington?"

"Because . . . you're history pal."

"Oh I am not." Henry faced the skills room. "You're such an . . ." He stopped cold in the archway. Immediately he saw Joe and Robbie sitting at a table with the two new guys. But that wasn't what made Henry stop from going in. Ellen was. She sat next to the one. Very next to the one and she smiled brightly.

Frank walked up to behind Henry, leaning in toward his ear. "What were you going to say I was? George." With a nudge to Henry's back, Frank bodily moved Henry inside while motioning his head in toward the group.

"Henry!" Ellen called out his name the moment she saw him. She stood up. "I'm glad you're here." She ran over to him.

"Hi El." Placing his arm around her waist, Henry kissed Ellen.

"Come here Henry, you have to meet the two new men." She grabbed his hand and led him to the table.

Henry walked slow, and he grew even more annoyed at Frank who trailed so closely behind him.

Ellen pointed. "This is Bentley. He's a barber."

As Henry extended his hand he felt the nudge of Frank to his arm. "Ow Frank . . . Nice to meet you."

Frank nudged him again. "He's a barber Henry. Maybe you can get him to cut off some of that long fuckin hair."

Reaching back, Ellen smacked Frank. "Leave his hair alone Frank. Some men look good with hair. And this Henry, this is Danny Hoi."

"Henry." Danny stood up shaking Henry's hand. "I've heard a lot about you. All good."

"Thanks." Henry retracted his hand.

"I hear we have a lot in common. But I have to say I was shocked when you walked in the room and Ellen called your name. Somehow with how she's been talking about you, I thought you'd look more like Tom Bosley."

Henry hurried and looked at Ellen. "What did tell him?"

Ellen giggled. "Danny's teasing. He teases Henry."

Henry grabbed hold of the back of his arm when he felt the nudge to it again. "Ow Frank, knock it off. Don't you think you've bruised my poor body enough."

Seeing the annoyance of Henry's face, Joe knew that Frank had been working on him. But he also knew Frank was far from subtle about it, so Joe took over. "Danny, Henry here is on council as well. Next in line for

the leadership position. Anyhow, Henry, you'll be happy to know that it looks like Mechanics is finally gonna get that steady person you need."

"Really." Henry kept his views on Danny, especially when he watched Ellen sit back down next to him.

"Really." Joe continued. "Seems he has a degree in Architecture and Electrical engineering."

"Really." Henry raised his eyebrows at Danny. "Where did you go to school?"

"UCLA."

"Frank said you made some sort of tracking device."

"Oh yeah." Danny nodded. "Against the um . . . SUTs, that's what you guys call them."

Henry looked down as Joe handed him the tracker. "This is it?" Henry asked looking at the video game. "How is this it?"

"I gutted it and redid the inside." Danny answered. "I just thought using the game gave it a neat appearance."

Henry laid it on the table and turned it over. "May I?"

"Sure." Danny said.

Henry reached into his back pocket and pulled out a screw driver and began to undo the back.

Frank had to get his comments in. "Careful Henry, don't break it. Danny worked real hard on that."

Danny snickered. "Don't worry about it Henry. I'm sure you know how to put it back together."

"No he don't." Frank said and received a sour look from Henry.

Henry removed the back of the unit. "Fuck." He spoke softly, slowly sitting down as he looked. "Where did you get these parts from?"

Danny leaned in closer. "The board here I got from one of those radar trackers people used to use to detect the cops. Here . . ." Danny's finger pointed in the unit. "Here's the microchip I got from one of those SUTs."

"You're using it as a conduit."

"Exactly."

"Impressive." Henry began to replace the cover. "And you actually made this?"

"Yes. It was fairly simple, as you can see. But it took the idea first and that was difficult. And as you know Henry, putting it together, finding the right parts, that takes time."

"Of course." Henry handed the unit back.

Frank gladly took it. "Yeah these little things are gonna be part of a grand scale beef up to our security system."

Henry faced Frank. "How do you mean?"

"Danny here is gonna work on making these things large scale. You know, stick some trackers in the trees. Pick up the SUTs miles away. Man those things won't have a chance."

"The whole entire perimeter?" Henry asked. "Frank, that is gonna take a power supply to run it. We could make the battery units but that could take time. You're talking one hell of a system."

Joe stood up--slowly. "That's where you come in Henry. You'll help out. Won't you?"

"It's a big project Joe." Henry looked at Danny. "Do you realize how big of a project it is?"

"Yeah I do." Danny stated. "But putting the project together won't be as difficult as finding the parts to do it. By the way you're talking that's a lot of microchips and detectors."

"Not too mention." Henry interrupted. "The reception unit. Right? It would have to be built larger scale then the hand held unit."

"Yes. And then like you said, there would be the power supply. We could use the battery units."

"But you run the risk of having them fail or die." Henry stated.

"True. What about channeling the power supply that powers the perimeters now?"

Henry shrugged. "Possible. Again, a lot of work."

"I don't mind." Danny looked at the faces. "Really I don't. I mean I can start designing it now while I'm in here. And correct me if I'm wrong, but by what I saw when I came in here, you guys run off of Hdryo and primarily solar energy. That's the only problem I will have when I design the system. I have some knowledge about those energy sources, but hardly enough to work with it."

Joe gave a pat to Henry's back. "Henry knows all about it. He'll teach you. Won't you Henry? Henry is the king of solar energy."

"You're kidding?" Danny's eyes widened brightly. "Wow. Is that what your degree is in? Where did you go to school for it?"

"I didn't." Henry looked cross at Danny. "I taught myself."

"Man that is impressive." Danny nodded. "Do you have blue prints of the power system here. I'd like to look at them if I could while I'm designing the new system."

"Yes we do." Henry told him. "But I can't give them to you to view." He saw the stares from everyone over that especially from Joe. "No Joe. Sorry. We go to great lengths to protect this community. We go to great length to ensure that those who walk amongst are apart of us. I'm sorry Danny. You just arrived here. In my opinion, though you gave us something that possibly works, you still just got here. We don't know you. I for one will not be responsible for showing where we can be vulnerable to someone who has yet to prove themselves."

Everyone was silent. Danny felt the awkwardness in the room. He lowered himself back down to sit, holding his hands up. "I completely understand. I would be the same way. Really I would. But I'll still work in the design of that system and possible things we can use to create it. I'll do that while I'm here."

Joe was glad to hear that. And glad that Henry's blunt tactfulness didn't frighten him off. "Good Danny. I'll get you some things to start. But Henry has one point. You do have to prove yourself fully. To me proving yourself mentally is where my concerns lie most. Not with trust. I'm pretty good at the trust part. My gut instinct never fails me. Nor does Frank's and Frank's gut is not in doubt of you. So . . ." Joe clapped his hands together once. "I'll let you get settled into containment and I'll see you this evening for our skills class. Which you'll be here, right Ellen?"

Ellen smiled. "Oh without a doubt."

"Good." Joe backed up. "And Danny, we'll work on the tests and get you and Bentley where you're needed. Out there with us. Hopefully no longer than a week. Ellen opinion?"

Ellen shifted her eyes to Danny. "No offense Danny. But I've been burned, so I'll hold off judgement or opinion at least for another day."

"No offense taken." Danny laid his hand on Ellen's with a pat. "And Joe, there's no problem with me staying her in containment. I understand your rules. I'll abide by them because I want to stay. And . . ." He smiled at Ellen. "Ellen's here with me right. So how bad will this place be?"

Frank snickered, stepping into Henry and whispering into his ear as low as he could get. "He touched her Henry. Ellen let a survivor touch her on the first day."

Henry didn't need for Frank to tell him that. He saw it and his eyes never left Danny.

Frank watched Henry and the expression on his face. He thought that maybe it wasn't a good idea at first to egg Henry on. That his instigating only caused Henry to not give Danny the chance he should have been given. But after Frank thought about, he chucked that thought right out of his mind. Because the look on Henry's face made it all worth while, and not too mention, brightened his spirits. And Frank knew he'd needed his spirits to be up, especially if with in an hour, he was going to begin living with Dean.

(4)

"Here we are Dean . . ." Frank opened the front door to his house. "Home sweet home."

Dean stood there in the doorway, hesitating, really hesitating before going in. "I'm not too sure about this Frank."

"Sure you are Dean." Frank gave him a pat to his back, carried Dean's small bag in for him. "Come on in. Don't just stand there, and watch that step."

"O.K." Dean stepped forward ready to take that first step as Frank put it, and his foot hit hard on the carpet, he stumbled a little. "Frank, there isn't any step there."

"And you should know that."

"I'm going home." Dean began to turn around, but stopped. "Where's Henry?"

"I thought you were going home."

"I can't get there alone Frank."

"Sure you can Dean." Frank set the bag down.

"No I can't. I'm blind or did you forget?"

"Now how can I forget that. But there should be no reason you shouldn't be able to make it home. You've lived in this place for almost seven years. Just like there should be no reason that you didn't know there wasn't a step in my house. These houses are all alike. Blind or not blind, eyes open or closed you, Dean should have no problem getting around because you should know this place like the palm of your hand."

"The back of my hand Frank. That's how the saying goes."

"Dean, knowing how long it was that you were without Ellen, I'm willing to bet you know the palm of your hand better than the back."

Dean grunted. "Why did I agree to torture myself like this?"

"I don't know, you tell me." Frank smiled widely when the front door to his house opened. "And look who's here. Sorry. The troops."

So tired Henry looked as he toted not only Nick in his arms but Brian, dangling from his hip. Alexandra and Billy ran in passed Henry and Joey came in through his legs. All of the ones who were self mobile were also loud. "Help Frank."

"Henry." Frank shook his head. "I do this shit everyday."

"It's a well known fact that you're Superman Frank. Help."

Shrugging Frank walked up to him. "Look at this shit. You got my kid dangling from your fuckin leg like a Christmas ornament." Frank placed his arm around Brian's waist and lifted him, he smiled at Brian's 'Da-da' and then he reached for Nick. "And you have this newborn all bent back. Look at his head Henry all the blood is rushing there. He's gonna end up stupid." Frank backed up, kissed Brian and extended him out to Dean. "Dean can you hold him."

Dean felt the touching little hands of Brian and he reached for the baby taking him into his arms. He hugged him tightly.

"Very good Dean." Frank commented as he set Nick in a baby seat. "Henry where are you going?"

Henry was trying to make an escape, but failed. "I have work to do."

"No you don't. You left it for Scott remember? Besides, you agreed to help out this first day. Why don't you want to?"

"It's not helping out Dean. It's not you Dean." Henry told him. "It's the kids. I just carried them all the way back here to your house Frank. It was difficult. I have a headache and I'm still sore from you beating me up."

"Knock it off about that shit." Frank walked to the door and closed it. "Hang tight. If you don't want to be around the kids. Start dinner or something."

Henry pouted then whined. "All right." He stomped his foot and went to the kitchen. For starters that was the lesser of the two evils.

"Henry's gone. And . . . hand over my kid." Frank took Brian from Dean and immediately tickled the baby with his chin causing Brian to squeal. "Hey Bri." Frank kissed him. "How was Henry, was he mean to you. Fuckin Henry." Frank kissed the baby again, over and over. "I missed you. Yeah." Brian grabbed hold of Frank's nose. "Wanna go in your walker and hit everyone in the legs?" He took Brian over to the awaiting baby walker. "O.K. Dean, I'm putting Brian in his mobile thing. Watch out for him when you're wandering around the house for the next hour."

"Explain wandering around the house."

"You Dean, are going to try to walk around the house and learn it. I'll be with you, hell I'll be nice and let you know if you're gonna run over Brian or something like that."

"You want me just to walk around your house."

"Yeah. It's like yours, only I have three bedrooms. No biggie, you should still have no problem. In fact theses house should be your comfortable turf. The place that your secure with. You'll know the set up, where everything is."

"You keep making it out like it's so easy Frank. Well it's not."

"Then I'll find out and you can shut me up. Right?"

"What?" Dean asked.

"Tomorrow after my morning rounds you and I are spending the day together or at least a few hours. I call it the BBB day. Blind Buddy Bonding Day."

"I'm afraid to ask."

"Then don't. And your first task on this first day together is taking your bag upstairs." Frank handed Dean his bag. "I'm even being nice Dean, I'm giving you my room while you're here. Aren't I nice?"

"Swell."

"And, just so you have pleasant thoughts." Frank leaned closer whispering. "Ellen and I had sex in that bed your sleeping in." Frank stepped back. "Oh Dean, I'm smiling. And you can take your stuff up. You know where my room is don't you. Top of the steps to your right. If you follow the wall you'll walk right into it. Of course don't get to used to that wall, you should be able to get there with out it's guidance." Frank turned Dean to face the steps. "You're facing the staircase, about three feet from it and you'll hit the railing."

"Will you come with me?"

"To my room?" Frank asked. "Dean, I didn't know you felt that way."

"You're an ass Frank."

"Yep."

"Help me up there. O.K."

"You really think you need help?"

"Yes Frank I need help. You keep forgetting that." Dean snapped.

"O.K., I'll help. How?"

"What do you mean?"

"You want me to hold your hand Dean. Sure I'll hold your hand." Frank reached for Dean's hand.

Dean felt his touch and pulled away. "That's not what I mean."

"Sorry. How about I place a reassuring grip on your shoulder like this." Frank stood behind him and gripped Dean's shoulder.

"Frank." Dean grew more annoyed.

"Or you can hang on my arm like my prom date."

"Frank!"

"Wait, I got it." Frank snapped his finger. "I can carry you. Yeah, hell you're little."

Just as Dean felt Frank's hands touch for him, he jolted away. "Frank! Knock it off! Fine. You don't want to help. Fine. Asshole!" Lifting his bag harshly, it swung out hitting Frank in the leg and Dean walked forward.

Frank folded his arms and chuckled as he watched Dean so mad, so upset. But no matter how mad Dean was at Frank, hitting him in the leg or not, Dean was walking up the steps and he was doing it alone.

(5)

His father seated on the couch was not what Robbie expected when he walked into his home that early evening. "Hey Dad."

"Robert." Joe leaned forward, reports spread out on the coffee table as he read them. A cigarette burned in the ashtray and Joe looked up at Robbie over the rims of his half square glasses. "Are you done?"

"Yep. Finished early. I came home to eat and . . . don't you have a social skills class tonight?"

"Yep." Joe shifted a paper.

"Well I'm done with my work, want me to take it?"

"Nope."

"O.K." Robbie walked further in. He sniffed loudly. "Dad." He smiled. "What are you cooking? Man that smells good."

"I'm not."

"Who is?"

"Robbie!" Her cheerful voice called to him and Andrea, perky, walked from the kitchen. "Oh sweetie, you are just in time."

Looking at his father, his mouth moving to the word 'sweetie?' Robbie felt the sudden pinching on his cheek.

"You're staying to have dinner with us aren't you?" Andrea asked. "Please tell me you're staying, we have plenty."

"I uh . . ."

"I won't take no for an answer." She shook her finger at him.

"I uh . . . Dad uh . . ."

Joe looked up. "Robert. You'll eat."

Andrea smiled brightly. "Ah Joe isn't this nice. And we didn't even expect Robbie home for dinner. Isn't this nice? Robbie you run along and wash up. Dinner will be ready in about fifteen minutes. So we can feed your hungry father and shuffle him off to his social skills class he has in an hour."

Robbie's mouth opened with a silent laugh. He swung his head to look down at his father. "A late social class. Is it because you previously had dinner plans?"

"Robert." Joe ignored him and kept reading.

"Dad, I will be really glad to take over that class tonight so you can hang out after dinner."

"Robert. No." Joe's eyes raised again. "No."

Andrea giggled. "Isn't your son sweet Joe, offering to help you out knowing how long of a day he had shooting people and everything. Robbie you are so sweet."

"Um . . . thanks. But Andrea don't ask me to play tonight. O.K.?"

Andrea waved her hand, then covering her mouth she laughed. "Sunday I will. Anyhow, did Paul speak to you. He said you two would record that 'Silly' song for me. Isn't that nice of Paul. Oh!" Andrea stepped back. "I have to get back to my dinner. You go get ready." She stepped back, then stepped forward. "And . . . I made brownies."

"Really Andrea?" Robbie spoke so chipper. "Wow. Gosh. Gee thanks."

"Sweet." She winked at him, and with a bright smile Andrea darted off to the kitchen.

"Brownies? Dad?"

"Don't ask."

"Man." Robbie looked down at his watch. "I'll be back." He headed to the door.

"Robbie, dinner in fifteen minutes. Where are you going?"

"I have to share this with Frank while it's still fresh on my mind. I'll be back."

Joe gave a grunting goodbye to Robbie and returned to his work. His head lifted again when he heard Andrea humming that 'Silly' song, slow and blues-like in the kitchen. Joe dropped his pencil, rubbed his eyes and grabbed his cigarette. He wanted to politely tell her to knock it off, but he didn't. That dinner smelled much too good to chance losing all over Andrea's singing. So doing something Joe was quite accustomed to in Beginnings, he blocked her out completely.

Clapping his hands together once loudly, Frank led Dean into a sitting position at the diningroom table. "O.K., Josh has Alex, Billy, and Joey at the playground. We can proceed." Frank moved Dean's chair closer to the table.

Dean grunted when the table slammed into his gut.

"Sorry. Too Close?"

"Yes."

Frank moved him out again. "How's that?"

Dean extended his hands feeling air, he lowered them and felt more air. "Where's the table Frank?"

Snickering, Frank put his closer again. "Sorry."

"All right, I've been walking around your house for over an hour. Tell me why we're doing this? Why are you helping me eat? I can eat Frank."

"Really? Then why wouldn't you eat with your children. You told me and Henry you'd prefer to wait. Right?"

"Right."

"Then that tells me you feel awkward about eating in front of them like this."

"I do, I get lost and drop my food."

"You'll learn not to."

"Yes I will. Eventually. You don't have to show me."

"Ah, but I do." Frank held up his hand. "Henry hurry with heating that food. You Dean, aren't confident enough to eat with your own kids. That is just a minor thing too. The whole premisses to overcoming any obstacle is confidence. Which you lack. And contrary to what your hormones are telling you, sleeping with Ellen isn't the way to build your confidence. Starting from scratch and learning how to do each task over again is the key."

"I get it."

"Get what?"

"Why you're having me move in here? You brought up me sleeping with Ellen. This is a ploy Frank isn't it? To keep me away from Ellen at night."

"I don't need to." Frank looked at his watch. "Seems our new guy has taken that responsibility. But that's a good idea Dean. Thanks." Frank's eyes lifted to Henry who walked in the diningroom holding a plate. "Henry's in the room."

"Thanks." Dean heard his plate being set down. "So Ellen is with the new guy now?"

"Well, Ellen is at containment. So I guess she's with the new guy."

"What's he like?" Dean asked.

"Different. Very nice and friendly guy. Don't you think Henry?"

Henry stood on the other side of Dean. "I don't trust him."

Dean was curious. "Why?"

"I just don't. He's too nice Dean. Too nice. I bet he's some psycho in disguise."

"Frank?" Dean called to him. "What do you think?"

"I told you Dean, he's a nice guy. Wait until you meet him. And smart. Builds things, invents things, fixes things. I think Henry's problem is he is just jealous."

"And rightfully so." Dean said. "I think I would be too."

"Guys!" Henry called out. "I am not jealous. And can we let Dean eat, he's probably hungry."

Frank adjusted the plate in front of Dean. "All right Dean. Now it's one thing to eat your food, it's another to know what you are eating. You want to be prepared to eat a soft food, because if you think your gonna eat something hard and you eat something soft, man that can kill your jaw. Get it." He waited for the nod. "Basic and simple. You set up your plate like it's a face of a clock. Unless you're eating pasta then you say piss on it. Anyhow, We have set your plate like a clock. And you should always set it up the same way. Twelve o'clock is the bread, three is the vegetables, six is the meat, and nine is the potato. Got that?"

"Twelve bread, three veggie, six meat, nine potato. Got it."

"Good. Go on and get the meat."

Dean reached to the side of the plate and grabbed his fork, he lifted it to the plate and dove in at six O'clock, he brought the full fork to his mouth and placed the contents in. "Aw Frank." Dean cringed. "You said six was meat. That was a green bean, not chicken."

"Yeah I know." Frank snickered. "I was kidding." He rotated the plate. "Go on it's fixed." He saw the hesitation in Dean. "No, I'm serious, Its fixed."

"You have a warped sense of humor." Dean started to eat.

Henry watched Dean's slow indulgence and then he looked to Frank. "What's next to work on tonight Frank?"

"Hide and go seek." Frank answered. "I'm gonna test Dean on how well he's learning the house. I'll send him after things. Works on his perception. And El gave something she wants him to work on. She said she might be here when he's ready, but I doubt it. I think she's hanging out for a while with the new guy. Dean." Frank tapped him on the shoulder. "Ellen was doing that tossing of her head and flipping her hair thing."

"Already?" Dean stated as he ate. "And with a survivor?"

Henry folded his arms. "Funny Frank. I'm not letting you get to me. So . . . go on."

"Oh yeah. That's about it, of course we have to work on Dean's shaving." Frank grabbed Dean's chin and swayed Dean's head back and forth. "Yeah, he's in need of a good shave."

Henry was a little shocked by this. "You're gonna give a blind man a sharp object."

"Oh sure. I'll be there Henry to make sure nothing goes wrong. But then again, I want to be there first and see it if it does." Frank winked. "How's it going down there Dean."

Feeling like a child being watched by his parents, Dean ate. He was way too hungry to stop eating just because Frank got on his last nerve. He listened to Frank and Henry ramble on. He chuckled at how dense Henry was being about what Frank was doing to him with Danny. Dean could have opened his mouth to Henry and enlightened him, but instead he opted to open his mouth for food.

Without knocking, and bitching loudly as he did, Robbie walked into Frank's house. "Frank, what ever you do, don't go over to Dad's. It's like the fuckin twilight zone over there. Andrea, she's possessed by something or other. Making dinner, baking brownies. I swear Frank." Robbie walked into the diningroom. "I swear if she's gonna be hanging around all the time, I have to make Dad give me my own place. I should have my own place. I'm thirty-three years old right? Why are you guys watching Dean eat? Hasn't he been a good boy? Dean, are you not eating all your vegetables?" He saw Dean drop his head down to the plate. "Oh I get it. You're finally both mad at Dean for last night, and now you're punishing him by making him eat Ellen's cooking."

"Robbie." Frank interrupted Robbie's rambling. "How come you're here?"

"To bitch. I had to bitch and tell you about Andrea. Why? You want me to leave?"

"Yes." Frank nodded.

"Why?" Robbie asked.

"None of your business."

"Is there something I don't know about you three." He didn't get an answer. "O.K., I see that I'm not welcome. Just know you were warned out of the goodness of my heart about not going over to Dad's. But I'll tell you, Dad's, even with Andrea bopping along, singing, cooking and baking. I'm thinking it's a lot less weird than this house. Three grown men huddled at the diningroom table. One of them eats while the others watch closely. And people talk about things that I do. I'm out of here. At least my entrance was more received at Dad's." Robbie started to walk to the door. "Even if it was by whacked out Andrea." He stopped mid stride. "Oh Dean?"

Worried and not wanting to make Robbie think he was blowing him off, Dean raised his head.

"Dean, I fixed the disposal in the mobile lab."

"Good. Thanks."

"Yeah found your problem." Robbie reached into his back pocket. "Did you lose a pen light? It must have fallen down there. Here, Catch." Robbie tossed Dean the pen and it sailed across the room beaming Dean in the forehead. "Dean you were supposed to catch it or make an attempt at it. Not sit there and be a target." He noticed Dean still stared forward and the

snicker on Robbie's face left him. "What's going on? And I know something is going on. Never do you three hang out together unless you did something and you're trying to figure out a way to cover it up." Robbie had to wonder at that moment if they really thought he was that stupid that he couldn't see through the fact that something was going on. "That's it, isn't it?" He walked back into the dining room. "You guys are way too quiet right now not to know something you want no one else to know. What is it? What did you do?"

Frank looked at Henry's face, so at a loss. Then he looked down at Dean. "Dean?"

Dean lifted his head up. He knew and he felt what Frank wanted. "Go on. Tell him."

Just as Robbie was about to ask 'tell me what?' he saw Frank move from Dean. And at that moment, quietly, and seriously Frank told Robbie everything.

(7)

In just enough time so as not to be too late for Andrea's dinner and hear her complain or possibly make him sit on the couch for holding things up, Robbie returned home. His mood had changed from his upbeat one to a somber one. So in shock he was over what Frank had told him about Dean, and a little upset that he wasn't included in the big 'help Dean and cover up' plan. After all, he was good at keeping secrets. He could keep the truth from the community for their best interest. Opening his door quietly he saw his father still in the same place he was when he left. Probably because Joe couldn't move around too much at that point. "Hey Dad."

"Just in time." Joe looked at Robbie, returned to his work then looked quickly back at him. "What's wrong with you?"

"I can't believe it." Robbie slowly shook his head, walking around the couch to the arm of the sofa.

"Can't believe what?"

"I didn't even see it coming. I didn't know. I don't pay much attention to him. But how did I miss it. I lived with him for a week straight. Was I the one who was blind? And I consider myself a perceptive guy."

"Robert? Where are you going with this?" Joe asked, not wanting to come straight out with it.

"Dean." Robbie tilted his head. "I understand why you are keeping it from the community. But me too? I could help like Frank. But I still can't believe it."

"Robbie. This is not to be mentioned to anyone. Got that?"

"I got it. Frank told me. He wouldn't have, had I not hit Dean in the head with something I tossed at him. Then again Dad, people are gonna

know something is up if Dean and Frank are hanging out together.” With his hands on his hips, Robbie looked so much in disbelief.

Joe looked up at his son, and just under Robbie’s arm he saw the vision of Andrea walk into the room. “Robbie.”

“I can’t believe Dean is . . .”

“Robbie.” Joe tried to halt him.

“Blind.”

Joe’s hands immediately covered his face when Andrea zipped around and into the livingroom.

“Robbie?” She questioned. “What did you just say?”

Joe shook his head. “Robbie.”

Robbie looked at Andrea. “Oh I know Andrea. I found out, don’t worry about it. It’s safe with me.”

“What is?”

“Oh you’re good acting all dumb. I was just over Frank’s. Dean’s blindness.” At that point Robbie didn’t even notice the hunching more of Joe.

“His . . . his what?” Andrea’s mouth dropped open. “Dean’s what?”

Robbie spun to Joe. “She doesn’t know?”

Joe peeked through his spread fingers. “She does now.”

“Dad, she is council, how can she not know?”

“Robert.” Joe scolded. “Enough. Thanks for adding more fuel to her fire.” Joe looked up to Andrea and he waited. Waited for the Andrea blast from him, for holding back the truth. “Andrea.” Joe held up his hand in a calming fashion. “Dean didn’t want you to know. He was afraid you’d pull him from everything when he is perfectly capable of doing things. Just differently. And he is working really hard.” Joe wondered if that did it. Did it do it? He didn’t think it did when Andrea’s mouth dropped open even wider. Joe hunched and cringed in preparation for what he wasn’t in the mood to hear.

Andrea let out a strong gasp. “Sweet Jesus, Sweet Jesus, Sweet Jesus.” Her hand covered her mouth. “Oh . . . my . . . Sweet Jesus.” She heaved out with emotional dramatics. “Oh.” Her other hand fanned herself. “Dean is blind? He has lost his sight?” Faster she fanned herself. “Oh that poor man. That poor, poor man.” With her trembling hands out, Andrea made a painful squeezed up face, shaking her head back and forth. “Oh Dean!” In such fifties movie fashion, Andrea covered her mouth with the back of her hand, let out a single short sob and raced from that livingroom and out the door.

“Damn it.” Joe turned as fast as he could. “Where is she going?”

“One guess.” Robbie walked to the door. “I’ll go chase her. I know you’re crippled.”

“And stop her before she gets us both in deep shit.”

“Got it.” Robbie flew out.

“Dean!” With her loud blast out, the front door to Frank’s house opened and Andrea charged in.

Frank let out a surprising shriek at the sight of Andrea racing forward.

Dean whispered up to Frank and Henry. “What, what is going on . . . Uh!” Suddenly he felt the tight embrace of someone. Felt himself being pulled into a body. He knew it was a woman because he could feel the breasts in which his head was pressed between.

“Oh Dean. Oh Dean! Sweet Jesus.” Andrea grasped him tightly to her. Her hands ran through his hair over and over. “What has happened to you? You poor man. You poor, poor man.”

Dean’s arms flopped about as he was in Andrea’s control as she cradled him. Muffled and from within her grip Dean called out. “Frank . . .” In such struggle he sounded. “I’m . . . suffocating.”

Frank winced and stomped his foot. “Andrea!” He reached out to pull her away. “What the fuck?”

“No.” She smacked at Frank’s reaching hand then held Dean again. “I’m here for you Dean. I am here for you.” She laid her lips to the top of his head, tears flowing down her cheeks. “Don’t you worry your little self one bit about me. Lord knows you have lost enough, I will not take anymore from you. You poor soul.” Andrea’s head jerked up when she heard Henry’s laughing. Quickly she spun to face Henry bringing Dean with her. Bouncing Dean like a little girl holding a rag doll close to her chest. “And you find humor in this?!” She asked with a scold.

Henry’s top lip quivered and he stepped further back. “No Mam.” Using long strides, Henry snuck from that diningroom, grabbing the towel from Frank’s shoulder. He walked into the kitchen, covered his mouth with that towel and released the laughter that he fought hard to contain.

“I’ll pray for you Dean.” Andrea gripped his head into her bosom more. “I will pray for you. What are these men doing to you now? Probably misguiding you. You know Frank does not like you.”

Dean’s hand reached out, like a quicksand victim reaching for shore, his fingers reached for Frank. “Frank!” So grumbled his words were. “Help.”

“Andrea!” Frank yelled. “Let the man go. What are you, fuckin gone? He’s not a child!” Frank reached for Dean. “Let . . . him . . .” He pulled and struggled. “Go!”

“No!” Andrea whipped Dean away from Frank.

Frank brought his hand to his own face in a frustrational smack. Just as he ran it across the bridge of his nose, he saw over his fingers, Robbie walking into the room. “Robbie!”

Out of breath, Robbie stepped forward. “Andrea, do you ever run fast for an old woman. Shit.”

With his jaw twitching, Frank stepped to Robbie. “What did you do?”

"I uh . . ."

"You told her didn't you?"

"Well I thought she knew."

Grunting loudly through clenched jaws, Frank brought his hands to his head. "You're killing me! You are fuckin killing me!"

"Frank." Robbie nervously tried to cover up. "Look, it was innocent."

"Look at Dean!" Frank pointed, his face so red. "He is clenched in the jaws of fuckin hell and I can't pull him out!"

"He's being nurtured Frank. Maybe that's what he needs right now."

"He needs to breath!"

"Don't you think you're over reacting?" Robbie asked. "So she found out."

"She wouldn't have found out nothing had you not been the stupid asshole who opened his mouth!"

"Well you're the stupid asshole who thought you could hide the fact that the man is blind!"

"Oh I ought to nail your ass right now! I should have known better than to trust you with anything!"

"No Frank, Dean should have known better than to trust you!"

"Fuck you!"

"Fuck you!"

"Boys!" Andrea screamed out so close to them. "Stop this bickering. Dean does not need this!"

From staring at each other in a heated brother argument, both Frank and Robbie, at the same time, switched their views to Andrea. Not only had she made her way to them, but she brought along Dean still held tightly in her embrace.

Frank's eyes went down to see Dean who was struggling not only to break free but also to stand up. His knees were against the carpet. "Will you let the man up! God!" Finally, knowing he had to get firm, Frank walked behind Andrea, took hold of her arms and pulled them outward and from Dean.

Dean dropped to the floor, he let out a loud gasp for air.

Robbie reached down for him knowing full well that Dean's perception was off. "Let me help you up." He led to Dean to his feet. "Sorry. I didn't mean to tell her."

Dean shook his head. "Maybe it's better that she knows."

"Thanks." Robbie told him. "Oh and Dean. You're hair is messed up."

Frank saw Andrea stepping to Dean again and he blocked the way with his body. "Don't." He held out a finger at her. "Don't. Back off."

"You back off!" She smacked at Frank's finger. "And just who do you think you are pointing that Slagel finger at me?! Dean needs me! He needs comfort."

"Dean needs to be treated like there is nothing wrong with him! He doesn't need to be treated like an invalid, because he's not! You hear me." Frank blared at her. "Now settle your ass down right now or I will tell my father how you're acting!"

Andrea's bottom lip moved up to meet her top lip. She crossed her arms tightly to her body. "Well I'm . . ." She shivered a sob. "I'm telling your father how you're talking to me."

"Oh tell my father. I don't care." Frank scoffed at her.

"Joe!" Andrea saw Joe standing in the door. She ran over to him wrapping her arms around his neck.

Frank moved to Dean. "You're safe, she found someone else to molest."

"God." Dean caught his breath and ran his fingers through his tossed hair. "I felt like I was on space mountain."

"I bet." Frank shook his head and looked back to his father who comforted Andrea by the door. Joe didn't look like he wanted the task, but he did it anyhow. "What is up with her?" Frank asked then walked to the door and tried to be calm. "Andrea. You think you're calm enough to sit your ass down and talk about this without stuffing Dean's face into your breasts."

Joe winced. "Tact Frank. She's just concerned."

"Concerned? Not often do I feel sorry for Dean, but you should have seen what she did to him."

Andrea pulled from Joe's hold. She wiped her hand down her face. "I am just very upset by all of this. I feel very sorry for him."

"Don't." Frank instructed. "Don't. Dean is fine. Dean will do just fine without anyone feeling sorry for him. Of course now, because of the scene you made, the man's dinner is cold." Frank saw Henry sneaking back into the room. "Not too mention you frightened away Henry."

"I'm sorry." Andrea spoke and walked to Dean. "Dean, I'm sorry I over acted like that."

Just to be on the safe side, Dean stepped back in fear of getting pummeled again. "That's fine Andrea."

"And just to make it up to you." Andrea sniffled. "I am going to send you some of my spaghetti. And we'll talk about everything tomorrow. Deal?"

Dean nodded.

"Good." Andrea walked back over to Joe. "We'll leave. Robbie? Robbie dinner. Come now."

Robbie closed one eyes and silently whined. "All right." He looked at Frank and Henry who raised their eyebrows at him.

Andrea paused in the door before leaving. "Henry, do you mind walking up and getting the food?"

"No, not at all." Henry walked forward only to have his arm snatched back by Frank. "What Frank?"

Frank pulled Henry close cupping his hand over Henry's ear and whispering to him.

Henry gave a thumbs up. "Got it Frank." He grinned and walked to the door and out with Andrea, Joe and Robbie. Henry was ready to seize the opportunity. Take advantage of her guilt like Frank wanted. So he asked what he thought would be the most important question of the evening. "Hey Andrea? Do you think we can have some of those brownies?"

(8)

"All in bed." Frank stepped down the last step of his stairs. "And early too. How about that? Dean, good job on washing Joey's hair. I told you all you had to do was the squeak test and you'd know the soap was out." He walked over to the couch. "How's that sewing going?"

"Good." Dean held on to a stuffed animal. Sutures in his hand as he repaired small gashes. "Only Ellen would think it enjoyable to slash a teddy bear."

Henry who was sitting on the arm of the couch, his feet on the cushions, looked to Frank who stood behind the couch. "Ellen had a good idea. She's always said she likes the way Dean stitches." Henry looked down to what Dean did. "Good Job. I think, El will have to judge."

Frank sighed. "If she ever comes home."

Henry ignored Frank's comment and returned to Dean. "So Dean. Will it be the same way when you stitch someone?"

"They won't be fuzzy." Dean commented. "But I guess. I'll still have to feel the gashes. And follow it with . . ." Dean sniffed. He raised his head and sniffed again. "Do you smell cigarette smoke?"

Henry inhaled. "As a matter of fact. I do." He swung his legs over the couch and stood up sniffing.. He followed the scent to Frank. "Frank?"

"What?"

"You smell like cigarettes."

"Ow!" Dean screamed when he pricked himself with a needle. "Is that Frank who smells like smoke? Frank were you smoking?"

"Fuck no. I hate that shit."

Henry shook his head as he smelled him. "No Frank, you really smell like it."

"Henry." Frank palmed his hand over Henry head and moved him. "Get your nose off of me. And it was Robbie. He was here, upstairs with me smoking that shit when I was putting the kids to bed."

Henry laughed. "Robbie wasn't here."

"Yes he was." Frank got defensive. "How would you know? Where were you fifteen minutes ago?"

"Frank." Henry sounded so annoyed. "I ran to my house for five minutes."

"That's when he was here."

"In the five minutes that I was gone? Right. Dean was Robbie here?"

Dean shook his head. "No."

Frank scoffed. "Dean, how the hell would you know. You're blind."

"I would think Robbie would say something to me Frank."

"Well." Frank fluttered his lips. "He doesn't like you, so there."

Henry chuckled as he sat back down on the couch. "Right Frank. If you're smoking why aren't you admitting it. You smell like it. What's the big deal? Own up to it. Just because it would be admitting a weakness, not too mention really make you look like a hypocrite for getting on the people who do . . ."

"Enough!" Frank shouted. "Drop the shit. Robbie came in, ignored Dean, walked up stairs, annoyed me by smoking and left. All right? Fuck. You people are on my nerves." He took a deep breath. "Now . . . the kids are asleep. It's just us guys. You know what time it is. And we'd better do this before Ellen gets home and intrudes."

Henry nodded. "We'd better. She might walk in any second."

Dean shrugged. "Then again, she might not. But do it Frank. Do it now." He set down the teddy bear. "I'm ready."

"Yeah me too." Frank backed up. "Time to brake out the adult stuff."

Henry started to stand up. "I'll get it Frank."

"No." Frank held his hand up. "I'll get it. Stay put and sit with Betsy Ross." He walked to the kitchen, stopping inside and peeking into the livingroom first. He moved to the sink and opened the last drawer reaching far in the back and pulling out a small bottle. Peeking out into the livingroom again, Frank took a drink, a long one, and then another. He replaced the bottle and ignored Henry who called out to hurry him along. "I'm coming." Frank hollered back. He grabbed three glasses, holding them between his fingers, then he picked up the plate of brownies. Smiling at them, he carried them into the livingroom and set them down on the table.

Henry like a kid, lowered himself to the floor by the coffee table. "Milk Frank."

"I'm getting it, I only have two hands."

"And napkins. Andrea's brownies are gooey." Henry uncovered the plate. "Dean we'll make sure we tell you if you get chocolate on your face."

"Gee thanks Henry."

"No problem."

"Milk, plates and napkins." Frank set them down on the coffee table and sat on the couch. He grabbed a glass, filled it with milk and set it down on the table in front of Dean. "Coffee table, twelve o'clock is your milk Dean."

"Thanks Frank."

Frank watched Henry serve up a brownie. "Give Dean two Henry. He was the one stuck in Andrea's boobs." Frank took the plate and handed it

to Dean. "These look good Dean. Messy. Hey I bet that was a scarey thought being hovered by Andrea like that."

Dean shrugged. "I guess. It was more frightening not being in control."

Henry waved his hand at them. "That was nothing. I had a high price to pay for these brownies too. I had to sit with Andrea and have coffee and . . . and listen to her stories about her teenage years." Henry gave Frank his brownies. "And not too mention, I had to hear about how old she was Frank, when she lost her virginity."

Frank cringed. "Ouch. Sorry Henry. But does anyone know what is up with Andrea lately? Dean, is she going through a change of life or something?"

"Possibly." Dean answered. "But I've never known a woman to get so happy when it's a change of life. Wow, these are good."

"She's gone." Frank commented and ate a brownie. "Whoa, she did a good job on these."

Henry sat up perky. "I know why she's like she is." He saw he had their attention. "Andrea is in . . . these brownies are good."

"Henry!" Frank yelled. "Andrea is in what?"

"Love." Henry answered. "With your father."

"Oh she is not in love with my father." Frank said.

"Is too." Henry insisted. "Head over heals."

"They aren't even together." Frank argued.

"Yes they are." Henry insisted.

"No they aren't. Did she tell you this?" Frank asked.

"No." Henry shook his head. "But I can tell. I guess they're hiding it like you hiding your smoking. But I'll bet they are. Frank, she waits on him hand in foot. And she's all giddy when she's around him. Love. Bows down to him, in so many words. Not literally, I don't think. That's really none of my business."

"Please. No woman waits on a man hand and foot."

Dean laughed loudly once. "Frank, have you see Ellen with Henry? She's bad with him."

"You're kidding?" Frank asked. "No way."

"Yes." Dean nodded as he chewed. "Frank, everyone talks about how much control you and I have over her. Nothing. It's nothing compared to what Henry has over her. She thinks he's a God. Everything Henry says is gospel. Trust me."

"Henry." Frank looked at him. "Knock the shit off."

"I don't control her Frank." Henry stated. "Did it ever dawn on the two of you that I am nicer than the two of you. Or maybe, she just likes me better."

"Oh really Henry?" Frank said with arrogance. "A little cocky are you? Well, maybe you're not the nicest one anymore."

"I am too."

"Nope." Frank shook his head. "I'm telling you that guy Danny is nicer. Dean, this guy is really nice, and he's not all high strung like Henry either."

"You don't say." Dean knew what Frank was up to.

Henry tried to ignore them. "Danny is not nicer than me."

"He is too. I bet El knows." Frank told him. "Henry it's after nine. Where is Ellen?"

"At containment." Henry answered.

"Where's the new guy?" Frank continued.

"At . . . at containment." Henry reached for his milk. "But I'll have you know, Mr. Smartie Pants, she has a social skills class tonight."

Dean cleared his throat. "Frank, correct me if I'm wrong. I might be wrong. But when you and Ellen were together and she was cheating on me. Didn't she use to use that excuse? That she had a social skills class? And that they ran over?"

"I'm pleading the fifth Dean."

"I thought so." Dean said. "And you're saying that she was taken by this new guy? I'm a little worried Frank, if I were Henry I wouldn't be so sure. She's been around us for how long? We know Ellen. Someone new. Someone nice. Someone clean and . . ."

"Dean." Frank interrupted. "You can stop now." He snickered. "Henry's left."

The first thing Henry noticed when he walked into Containment was the lack of a guard sitting in that small office out front. He made a mental note on that, making sure he would bring that to Frank's attention because Frank would get pissed. Anything to pay him back for irritating him as much as Frank did. He buzzed himself through the door and the second he opened it he heard coming from the skills room at the end of the hall a loud burst of laughter. Another step, Henry heard a male voice, then another burst of laughter. What was going on? What could Joe be possibly saying that was so funny? It seemed with every step Henry took, he heard the muffled voice and it was followed by the laughs. Never in his whole time of knowing Joe did he ever know him to be so funny. What was he missing? When he hit the entrance to the skills room he saw that it wasn't Joe who had everyone laughing, it was Danny. Standing before the skills room filled with the containment survivors, Joe, Robbie, Diane, the missing guard and Ellen. A strong twinge of jealousy hit Henry like a knife to his gut when he saw Ellen standing with Danny.

Ellen was laughing and Danny stood behind her.

"Ellen just do it."

"I can't stop laughing."

"You're killing my story." Danny lifted her arms up. "Now getting back. Arms up and out Ellen. This professor in college used to make us

stand before the class it was a confidence exercise, he told us.." Danny told his story to those who listened. He turned Ellen's palms face up. "Just like this, if we would give him any excuse that had to do with not enough time, too much other things. Anything. And he's make us stand before the class. Head back." He placed both hands on Ellen's head and tilted it back.

"I'm not doing this."

"Shh." He brought his lips to her ear. "Trust me. Isn't that what you preach?" He brought Ellen's head back again then stepped away. "And as we were standing like this. He would place things on us. Such as . . ." Danny looked around and snapped his finger. He walked up to Joe. "Can I?" He took a pen from his pocket. "Thanks Joe."

Henry walked over to the empty seat next to Joe and sat down whispering. "A new skills class Joe?" Henry watched as Danny placed the pen on a laughing Ellen's nose, making it balance.

Joe shook his head. "We were done an hour ago. We've just been letting Danny entertain us."

"An hour?" Henry asked. "Ellen's been done an hour?"

"Henry Shh."

Danny folded his arms watching Ellen balance the pen. "See, now the who idea behind this was to prove to us students that in order to succeed in anything, even a simple task as holding a pen without falling, we must achieve perfect balance in our lives." Danny reached out and grabbed the pen then lowered Ellen's hands. "Of course we all bought it right? Until we found out this professor actually had a betting pool with another professor and daily they would bet between them who could get more students to stand up before the class and look dumb."

Ellen shrieked. shoving Danny when she realized what he did to her. "I fell for it."

Danny laughed and so did everyone in the room. "Hey, Henry's here."

Ellen looked to see Henry stand up. She wiggled her fingers in a wave to him and before she could take even three steps to him, Henry was with her, his hand on her back and he was leading her out.

"Henry?" Ellen slowed down. "What are you doing?"

"Taking you home. You're coming home El."

"What?"

"What are you doing?" He stopped and faced her. "Huh? You were done over an hour ago El? Why didn't you come home?"

"I was just . . ."

"And don't give me the line held up at containment. It's been used by you before."

"Henry?" Ellen tilted her head. "Why are you med at me?"

"I'm mad because I have spent the entire day with Frank and Dean. I listened to the insult festival between them. I've been with our son El. I've been with everybody but you today. I wanted you home. Not only do I have to deal with you being with Frank and Dean, but now this new guy

too. And you let him touch you.” Henry pointed and backed up. “You let him touch you. Did you think for one second that I needed to spend time with you? Did you think that maybe it would have been nice for you to come home and be with me instead of giving the extra time to a new guy you don’t even know.”

“I’m sorry Henry. You’re right. I should have come home.”

Henry closed his eyes briefly then ran his fingers through his hair. “I’m sorry I yelled and got upset.”

“No, that’s O.K. I understand.”

Henry stepped to her, kissed her then stepped back. He held out his hand “Can you come home now?”

“Sure.” Ellen smiled slightly at him. “Let me just go back and say goodbye.”

“To who?”

“To everyone. Why are you asking that?”

Henry took a step to her. “I don’t want you treating this new guy any different than you treat the other new survivors.”

“Why Henry? He’s really nice. If you would just give him a chance.”

“I will give him the same chance I give all the other survivors. I’ll give him a chance when he proves himself and not before. And I’m asking you, from now on if it’s between coming home or listening to him show off in front of everyone, out of respect for me, I’m asking you to give him no consideration in that matter.”

“Henry? Why are you being like this?” Ellen asked.

“Why do you have to ask?” Henry move back from her. “Forget El. Go say goodbye. I’ll see you at home.”

Ellen watched Henry turn and walk away. “Henry, wait.” She ran up to him and grabbed his hand. “I’ll just go home with you instead.”

CHAPTER FORTY

JULY 28

(1)

It was as if he could actually see the files he pulled from the filing cabinet. Henry watched Dean, thumbing through, his mouth murmuring as if he were counting or something. Then Dean would pull out a file.

"Dean? How are you doing that?"

"I'm remembering the names of everyone in Beginnings and counting files. Here. Who's this?" Dean held the file out to his side.

"Gerry Sanders."

"That's one of who I need."

"Wow Dean, this is really amazing."

"Who's this?" Dean handed him another file.

"Bill Trobino." Henry looked at the name.

"Good. Need him too." Feeling the file cabinet, Dean closed it. "That's everyone. Walk back to my lab and wait with me Henry?"

"That's why I'm here. To wait for Frank with you."

"What am I in for today Henry?" Dean grabbed his files and moved slowly to the door. He paused and then turned right.

"Um . . . you're in for an interesting day."

"Thanks."

"Are you counting paces Dean?"

"Yes."

"Was Frank right? Or was I? Was it twenty-five Dean paces or Frank paces to the lab?"

"Frank paces. Wanna know how I know? I came here last night with him and followed his stupid chart. I walk twenty five paces. Turn left and bam I hit into a wall. So we recalculated. I stayed up most of the night memorizing the steps from the lab to the file room and so forth."

"Do you think Frank's pace map will actually help you then?" Henry asked.

"Yeah I do. Hey." Dean stopped and turned left. "I'm at the lab right?" He didn't get an answer. "Tell me I'm at the lab Henry so I don't walk into a wall."

"You're at the lab Dean."

Dean smiled and walked inside. "Too bad you didn't come back to the house Henry last night. You could have come with us. Josh watched the kids and Frank and I were here working. Actually . . ." Dean shrugged. "Actually I thought he was being stupid and I yelled at him, but it ended up being fun. We went to the social hall last night and threw darts."

"That couldn't have been much fun Dean." Henry sat down on a stool. "It had to be a pretty lopsided game, especially seeing how Frank can see the dart board and you can't."

"He made it fair Henry. He put on a blindfold. Well we both had blindfolds on to cover up for me throwing badly too. It took an hour to play a countdown game that should have taken five minutes. But, aside from hitting old lady Josephine a few times with the darts. All went smooth."

"Who won?"

"Who do you think?"

"Frank."

"Exactly." Dean walked to the refrigerator, felt the clipboard that hung there, grabbed the third sheet and opened the fridge. He pulled out a rack and walked to the counter, setting down the rack of blood tubes carefully. "Here Henry could you compare the names on this sheet to these tubes. I think I grabbed the right rack."

Henry took the sheet of paper and started to compare.

"So why didn't you and Ellen come back to the house?"

"That's one of the things I came here early to talk to you about. I need to talk to someone and I thought you could help."

"Sure." Dean felt to his side, found a stool and sat. "What's up?"

"Last night . . . oh by the way, you grabbed the right rack." Henry set down the paper. "Last night I went to containment. I snatched Ellen out of there Dean. I kind of fought with her and made her feel guilty and we went home."

"How was Ellen with that?" Dean asked.

"Sad that I made her feel bad."

"Why did you snatch her out of there Henry?"

"See . . . whoops, sorry Dean. When I got to containment they were laughing and joking around, everyone. Listening to that Danny guy rattle on and use Ellen as a visual aid. I don't know why I got like I did."

"Henry, simple. You were jealous."

"No." Henry shook his head. "I'm not a jealous person."

"Henry, you are."

"No I'm not Dean."

"You are a very territorial guy Henry. How much more blunt can I be?"

"Dean, you're wrong." Henry stated. "Very wrong. I share her with you. How can I be a jealous person or territorial if I share her?"

"Can I be perfectly honest with you?" Dean asked.

"Please."

"O.K., Henry you are territorial. Now you may be the great share guy and understanding guy. But you are only well and fine when the situation falls within the realm of your rules. Anything that happens out of bounds from your rules, drives you insane. That's when your territorial tendencies come in. Last night was a prime example. Had she been with me, you wouldn't have thought twice about it. But she stayed late at containment and all over another guy. A guy who isn't in your Henry rules. Therefore

Ellen crossed a line and you got upset. All was fine Henry when I couldn't handle Ellen, and Frank couldn't handle Ellen. You came across as the big understanding man. But that was only because you adjusted to me or Frank. You've accepted us to the point Ellen being with us doesn't bother you. But as Frank and I both know, Ellen is Ellen. That is something Frank and I are quite used to. Maybe Henry, you bit off more than you expected when you took her on as primary. She's a lot to handle."

"But I don't want to be like that Dean. I don't want to give Ellen limitations and boundaries that she inadvertently and subconsciously will push to break."

"Henry." Dean's voice dropped to a soothing one. "You already did. Last night by snatching her out of containment you let her know she broke a rule with you. The only thing is. Did she know this rule? You have to be really specific with Ellen."

"I was a little upset last night, I was. But you know what Dean. I refuse to let myself get like that anymore. I won't."

"Can you though Henry. You seem awfully threatened by the new guy. Ellen works at containment."

"I'm just gonna have to trust the fact that he is just a survivor right now. I have to trust Ellen." He heard Dean snicker. "I trust her Dean and I won't do that again. Mark my words I won't show my jealousy again."

Ellen's bright chipper entrance happened upon that lab as she shuffled in. "Morning! Or almost Afternoon!" She giggled and set her phlebotomy tray on the counter. "Hi Henry." She kissed him. "Are you waiting for Frank with Dean?"

"Yes. I'm helping them out today." He kissed Ellen again before she walked away.

"Boy I'll tell you." Ellen spoke loudly. "What a weight I feel was lifted off my shoulders. Especially with people beginning to know you're blind Dean. They only have nice things to say." She moved to the counter and saw the stack of folders. "Are these for me to work on?"

"Yes." Dean said. "I also have the rack out for you. Remember their virus strained blood is on the second shelf at the mobile fridge."

"Got it." Ellen gave a thumbs up. "Oh! Can I tell you guys a joke? I have a really cool joke. I laughed and laughed." She snickered. "Can I?"

Henry grinned. "A joke? Wow, it has been forever since I heard a funny joke. Dean, how about you?"

Dean lifted his hand and let it fall with a slap. "At least one that hasn't been told a million and one times. Shoot Ellen, tell us your joke."

"Really?" She shifted her smiling eyes. "Good. Thanks. Oh gees, the pressure. I hope I don't screw it up." She rubbed her hands together. "Here it is. These two whales. Mr. and Mrs. Whale were swimming in the ocean. The guy whale says to his wife, 'hey I hear a fishing boat and I know it's the sailors that tried to stab me last year' Well the wife, being a wife mind you, says. 'Oh how do you know.'" Ellen heard Henry snicker. "It's funny huh?

So the husband insists that its the boat and he begs his wife, like a good husband should, to help him out. Against her will she says 'oh all right. So the husband tells her. "When the boat comes near, I'll go under it and rock it like mad. Then you, you snort at them blasting them with your water and when they fall out of the boat, you eat them.'" Ellen paused to laugh. "Here's where it get's funny. So the wife . . .the wife goes, 'fine, but get this straight, I have no problem snorting at them but I refuse, refuse to eat the fishermen.'" At the end of her joke, Ellen burst into laughter, and so did Henry.

Henry smiled brightly. "That was really funny El. Really funny."

Dean was lost. "I'm blind, not dense. What? I don't get it."

Ellen tsked. "I can't believe you don't get it Dean. She'll snort, but won't eat the fishermen. Get it?"

"No." Dean shook his head. "Ellen there is absolutely nothing funny about that joke. Henry are you insane, why are you laughing?"

"It's funny."

"No it's not."

"See Dean that's because you weren't listening." Henry took a breath and stood up. "You have to decipher Ellen's punch line. What she meant to say was that the wife whale would blow but she refused to swallow the seamen."

Ellen quickly looked at Henry. "That's what I meant to say." She laughed. "Wasn't that funny? Dean wasn't it funny?"

"Yeah. Ha, ha, ha." Dean shook his head. "And where in the world are you hearing jokes from anyhow?"

"Oh." Ellen slid in a stool next to Dean. "Danny. He told me. He has a million. He's so funny."

Dean wished with everything he had he could see the expression on Henry's face. But Dean really didn't need to. He heard the breath that Henry tried to hide and just sensed the immediate tension. "Henry." He called out in a warn.

"El." Henry moved to her. "When did Danny tell you this joke?"

"This morning. I stopped over to get some papers and he and I started . . ." Her smile left her. "Uh . . .um . . . uh-oh."

"El." Henry spoke her name so strong. "Did nothing we talked about . . ." Henry's head jolted when he heard the loud slam coming from where Dean stood. He looked to see Dean picking up a clipboard.

"Sorry." Dean set the clipboard down. "Clumsy. So Henry uh . . . gosh, Ellen came in and interrupted us. What were we talking about right before she came in? I can't remember can you. Do you remember and it's only been a few minutes ago."

"I don't know Dean." Henry snapped off so annoyed. "Right now I'm too . . . too . . . cars. We were talking about cars. Wow, great conversation."

"Wasn't it though." Dean said. "About how we, no matter how much we trusted our cars and thought they'd always be there. We would push and push them to the limits until they would . . . break?"

"And . . ." Henry sound a little humbled. "And we never saw it coming."

"We never will."

Ellen watched them go back and forth like a tennis match. "Excuse me Dean." She stepped in between them. "Henry, you were going to yell at me. I would appreciate if you finish so you don't stew about it all day."

"I was going to yell at you? When?" Henry played dumb.

"Just now. About Danny. Yell."

"I wasn't going to yell at you El."

"Oh." Ellen smiled. "Good."

Henry looked down at his watch. "I'll be back. I want to see what's taken Frank so long."

Waiting until he knew Henry was gone, Dean slammed his hand on the counter and held back his lab coat with one hand while leaning forward. "God!" Dean exclaimed loudly. "You really irritate me when you do that El."

"Do what?"

"You just wilt around him. Wilt El. It's pathetic. I have never seen you wilt with anyone."

"That's not true Dean." Ellen walked up to him. "I'm going to touch you." She grabbed him harshly by the collar of his lab coat, leaned her back against the counter and pulled him into her. "I wilt when I'm with you."

With a sarcastic smirk on his face, Dean nodded his head. "Right El. What a . . ." His eyelids flickered when he felt her hand move up his chest and her lips hit his neck. Breathing slowly through his nostrils, he slid his hands up her to cup her face in his hands, then Dean pressed into Ellen, pinning her against the counter, and he began to kiss her. Deep kisses which widened with ever second that passed and every sweep of his hands on her body.

"Enough!" Frank's loud mouth blasted in the room. "Knock the shit off! What did I tell you last night about your hormones Dean?" He laid his hand on Dean's shoulder. "Henry just said to me outside, that he is really close to nailing your blind ass for touching her so much. Now, see I have couth. Henry, he could care less, he'll nail you. And I haven't even taught you yet how to fight without sight." Frank chuckled and snapped his finger. "Hey that was pretty good huh? Fight with out sight."

"Frank!" Dean yelled out as he moved further from Ellen. "Stop the stupid shit. I know Henry isn't planning on hitting me."

"Was too." Frank argued.

"He was not."

"Dean."

"Frank!" Dean reached up running his hand across his forehead. "God, you annoy me."

"And trust me when I tell you you're not my fuckin prince charming either. But let's go lover boy." Frank grabbed hold of his arm. "Say goodbye to El." Being helpful, Frank waved Dean's hand for him and spoke female sounding and high. "Bye El. Bye."

Angry, Dean pulled from Frank's hold. "I can do this Frank."

"Dean . . ."

"No." Dean started walking from the lab.. "You're the one who preaches do it yourself right? Well . . ."

"Dean."

"I don't need your help, or for you to . . ." *WHAP!* Dean was close, but not close enough to miss the archway of the lab door.

Ellen cringed. Henry hunched. And Frank laughed loudly and annoyingly.

Dean rubbed his head, shook it off, and like a cat, acted as if he meant to do that. Feeling around first, he walked out of the lab, Frank and Henry trailing closely behind.

(2)

"How's that head Dean?" Frank asked as he slid in the driver's side of the awaiting jeep.

Dean grunted and slid down in the front passenger's seat. "Just drive to where ever you're taking me Frank."

Henry, sitting in the back reached between the seats and laid his hand on Dean's shoulder. "Don't worry about it Dean, it matches the one on the other side of your head."

"Swell." Dean rubbed his head. "I swear to God not only am I gonna be blind for the rest of my life, but if I keep hitting my head I'm going to be stupid as . . ." Dean jumped a foot in the air when Henry's high pitch scream startled him. "What!"

"No!" Henry yelled. "No Frank."

"Shut the fuck up Henry. I have the jeep pointed in the right direction."

"I'm getting out." Henry stated with a panic.

"What!?" Dean screamed. "What am I missing?"

"Fr . . . Frank." Henry pointed. "He's wearing a blindfold Dean."

Dean laughed. "Yeah, I'm buying that. You two think you're real funny."

"Frank." Henry pleaded. "Don't do this."

"Shut up Henry." Frank gripped the wheel. "I have to follow sounds. And don't tell me where to turn unless I'm gonna hit something. Got that?"

"Oh my God." Henry covered his eyes. "I'm sitting in the back seat of a jeep that has a blind man riding front passenger and a blindfolded man driving. I'm dead, I know I'm dead."

Immediately Dean perked up. "You're not kidding?" He reached for the door when he heard the jeep turnover. "Shit, I'm getting . . ." His body jerked back when he felt the jeep move. "Henry? Henry? Henry! How's he doing Henry? Oh Shit." Dean held on.

"I don't know Dean. I'm not looking."

Dean shrieked. "Look! Look! You're the only one who can see. What are you crazy?"

"No Frank is."

Frank chuckled, bouncing some in the seat as he drove. "This is fun. How am I doing Henry?"

"Oh." Henry moaned, then moaned again. "Well . . . you just missed Josephine." Henry turned around in the seat of the jeep, looking back. "She's fine though Frank. She's getting up. You just frightened her."

"Should I stop?" Frank asked.

"No." Henry told him then turned back around. "She's walking."

"What the fuck was she doing running around a field anyhow? She's like what? Ninety."

"You know she wanders Frank. She's senile." Henry argued. "And Joe said let her go as long as she doesn't . . . watch out for Denny, one o'clock." Henry swerved when the jeep did and at the same time Dean grunted loudly. "As long as she doesn't wander into any perimeters, it's fine. Hey are we going up to the training area?"

"Yeah. Am I headed in the right direction."

"Surprisingly . . . yes. Are you wanting to be on the road Frank. Because we're not on the road."

"Obviously Henry if we're fuckin bouncing all over the place we aren't on the road. How far am I from it?"

"It's about uh . . . ten yards east of . . . bush at eleven o'clock . . ." Another hard swerve to the right. "Oh Frank a little more and you're on the road." Henry smiled. "You're doing good."

Frank felt the bounce of the jeep. "Hey we're on the road." He felt another bounce. "We're off the road. Shit."

"You just missed it Frank." Henry tapped him on the shoulder. "Hold the wheel left. Keep going . . . keep going . . ." The jeep bounced on the road. "Now turn right." As the jeep jolted, so did Henry, he flopped completely over and his legs went up in the air. Afraid to look, he sat back up. "You're good." He leaned forward between the two seats. "Hey Dean? Why are you covering your eyes? You can't see anyhow."

Dean lowered his hand slowly. "I'm going to kill both of you guys. Both of you. What are you doing to me?"

Henry grinned. "It's a male bonding thing Dean. Frank, watch out for your guard."

"Where?"

"Never mind. He ran." Henry shrugged. "This is fun."

"O.K." Frank led the way to the top of the hill at the security training field. "Part one of today."

Dean shook his head as he was led by the hand of Henry. "Why are we up here Frank? I'm not security. There are other things you could work on me with."

"No Dean, there aren't. Right now, what should be happening is your other five senses should take over. You're not letting your other five senses take over and they should be your eyes."

"Four senses Frank." Dean corrected.

"Five."

"Four senses Frank. Everybody has five senses, if I lost one I have four left. Basic math. Oh yeah, I forgot, you don't know that."

"Ha, ha, ha. Asshole." Frank snapped. "For your information little-man, you have five remaining senses. Taste, touch, smell, hearing and instinct, Gut instinct. And that one, you need work. And that's why we're up on the firing range."

"Oh my God." Dean stepped back, but was stopped by Henry. "Just tell me you don't have your blind fold on."

"No." Frank said. "I'll put it back on though. Don't worry." He walked behind Dean. "Excuse me Henry. All right Dean." Frank laid his hands on his shoulder and turned him a few inches to the right. "Now, right now you are facing our Henry range. I call it that because Henry fixed this place for me. Fifty yards straight ahead and spanning fifty to your right and fifty to your left are our row of snipers. You can't see them, not because your blind, but because they're snipers. Get it?" Frank laughed. "O.K. They work on a timer. There are ten of them. I'm going to set it up for only five to jump up randomly at three seconds apart. If you listen, and listen good you'll hear the click and you have about a half a second and then you'll hear them pop up. Listen, I'll show you." Frank jotted over to the jeep and ran back. He held the remote in his hand. With a few beeps, there was a buzzing. "Listen Dean to it. It's warming up." The first click went off. "Hear that? First one." Frank turned Dean to the sound. "Second one." He turned him again. "Third." Another turn. "Fourth." A final spin. "Fifth. Understand."

Dean nodded. "I think I do. You want me to see if I can locate them by sound?"

"Uh yeah. Then shoot them." Frank told him.

Dean had to laugh. "Shot them? Right Frank. Not even you could do that."

"Bet me."

"Bet you that you can't shoot them?"

"Yeah." Frank said.

"You have to shoot them all. All five."

"No problem." Frank stated with certainty.

"Deadly shots."

"The only kind."

"You're on." Dean spoke cocky. "What's the bet?"

Frank pulled out his revolver and clicked the chamber. "Name your win."

"O.K. If I win . . ." Dean smiled as he raced through his mind what he could make Frank do. He smiled wider. "If I win, for one week, you have to come to the clinic and wash out all my specimen cups and clean my equipment. This gets done nightly."

"You're on. But if I win you don't touch Ellen for a week." He handed Henry the remote.

"What do you mean touch her?" Dean asked.

"Nothing past the friendly stage. One week, if you welsh. I kill you. And I'm allowed under cowboy law."

"What the hell is cowboy law?" Dean snipped.

"You don't know cowboy law? Henry tell him what . . . oh you wouldn't know either, you're not from America."

Henry gasped. "I am too Frank, you asshole. I'm American."

"Sorry Henry you just don't strike me as the cowboys and Indian guy." Frank took that explaining breath. "The cowboy law is, you can shoot someone if they break their word. It's an honor thing. That's why two men were allowed to shoot each other back then. Law. We on?"

"Cowboy law." Dean shook his head with a snicker. "Only you would say something stupid like that."

"Dean!"

"Yes. We're on. I won't touch her for one week. But only because I know you can't do this."

"Hold this Henry." Frank held out his revolver then placed on his blindfold. "I'll take it back." Frank gripped the revolver when it was returned to his hand. "Step back."

Henry pulled Dean back with him and readied the remote. "Whenever you're ready Frank."

Frank ran the back of his hand over his forehead and held up the revolver cupped between his two hands. "Now don't talk . . . Ready." Frank listened to the machine reset itself, then warm up to began. It was like a metronome. The click of the contraption, the clank as the sniper popped up, and the bang of Frank's weapon three times. Steady as the speed it was set. Click . . . clank . . . bang-bang-bang, and Frank would turn and repeat it.

A quiet and smell of gunpowder filled the air as the buzzing of the machine stopped. Frank lowered his weapon. "How did I do?" He took off his blindfold.

"Shit." Henry stated. "You hit them." He ran up to the targets. "Oh my God Frank, you hit them all!"

Dean's shoulders dropped and the word 'no' rang through his head. "Deadly shots Henry?"

Henry checked them out. "I'd say!" He yelled back.

Frank called out to him. "Any head shots?"

"No!" Henry answered. "All chest."

"Fuck." Frank reloaded his weapon. "But . . . all deadly Dean. No Ellen for one week. By that time she would have broke the Dean-little-man habit."

"You're real funny. You did this before didn't you? You shot with a blindfold on before."

"Oh yeah." Frank prepared to hand Dean the revolver. "But you didn't ask that. Dean. I was a sharp shooter, champion shooter in the fuckin Army asshole. You think there hasn't been a challenge thrown my way?" Frank fluttered his lips. "I've been doing shooting shit since I was eighteen years old. I was the wrong person to make the bet with." Frank grabbed Dean's hand. "Your turn."

"No." Dean tried to hand back the gun. "Here Frank. Frank?"

"I'm back here." Frank was ten feet behind him. "Go on Dean. You can do this. Move out of the way Henry, a blind man has my gun."

Henry who was making his way to Frank, quickly changed his mind and ran to the jeep--on the other side--to wait out Dean's turn.

Frank watched Dean just stand there, he ran up to him. "Here." He grabbed Dean's hands and put them on the gun, he then raised his arms. "Now you are at the perfect height. I can't do anymore for you. Feel the force. Feel it."

Dean mumbled listening to Frank step back. "He thinks this is Star Wars."

"You ready?" Frank asked.

Mumbling Dean answered. "Oh yeah. I should turn around and start shooting your way."

"What was that?"

"Nothing. Go on." Dean sounded so perturbed. He listened to the foreign sound of the machine warming up. He really listened to the clanking and the clicking and he tried with everything he had to pull a Frank. The weapon seemed like it weighed fifty pounds when Dean finally lowered it with relief that the drill was over. "How did I do?"

Frank clapped as he returned to Dean. "Good job."

"Did I hit them?" A twinge of excitement came over him.

"I don't think, but good job. Henry!" Frank looked out to Henry who checked the target. "Any hits?"

Henry checked out the fake snipers. "Frank! He hit one! In the leg but he hit one!"

"See Dean." Frank gave a firm pat to his back. "You did good. You fired ten shots and got one hit."

"It sucks."

"No it doesn't, you're blind. And . . . you've never done this before. One out of ten is good. Hell, I have men who their first time up here without blindfold didn't do that."

"Really?"

"No." He snickered at Dean's moan. "But . . . you still did good. Ready to try again."

"You know what?" Dean smiled and raised the gun. "Point me in the right direction again Frank. I'm ready."

(3)

If anger was lava spewing forth from a volcano, then Quantico would have been Pompeii with the amount that George was putting out. He stormed not wanting to speak to anyone. Having just received, through Morse Code, the word they had failed in yet another attempt at Robbie the day before. And what had made matters worse for George is that he didn't hear a word of it from John Matoose. It had been days since he had personally spoken to John Matoose. And it fueled any fire already breeding in George. John knew George couldn't contact him, it would give away George's location if he did. Something had to be going on with John, George figured. Something that prohibited him from making his daily call. Perhaps he was found out. But George knew if that was the case, he would somehow know about it. Tightened security around the communications room would stop John. But it wouldn't stop George because he was certain, without a doubt that he could get his message through on the first of the month when the system regenerated itself for thirty minutes and received no signals. That was when George would contact John, three p.m. that day. But unlike his typical transmissions on the first of every month, where George would send information to John, this time, if he hadn't heard from John, he would send him something else.

Irritated and in no mood for any excuses, George went to where he knew he could always hear what he wanted to hear. His labs. And George did hear what he wanted to hear. That in no time, part one of two could be launched with success. It was what George was building for. His final attempt at the elimination of Beginnings. Final because he was certain that this plan would work. Work with maximum loss of lives to Beginnings, and minimum loss of lives to George. Even though Beginnings was a hangnail in size compared to the hand George had on the east, they were untouchable. Protected by the walls of security around them, and the gold

mine they had beneath of them. A gold mine that their ignorance hadn't even tapped the surface of.

But he would break them eventually. Positive of that. And then Beginnings could become one more stop of George's in his 'bring them in, train them, spread them out' large world he was creating. Growing by the day in size, though large in numbers George was still at a loss. Because he knew an army of a thousand strong--without hope and without fight inside of them--could not defeat an army of a hundred with spirit. And perhaps that was another reason, a big reason, George had so much difficulty defeating Beginnings.

(4)

They sat in a field two miles south of the living section and three miles north of the mobile lab. Frank and Dean, amongst the high grass, finishing off the lunch that Frank had brought out there for them to eat before continuing on.

"Will Henry be back?" Dean asked, finishing off his sandwich.

"Nope." Frank took a hit of his cigarette.

"We're all the way out here Frank."

"We'll walk back, it's not that far."

Dean listened to Frank as he blew out his smoke loudly. "You know Frank, I can't believe you of all people are smoking."

"And you won't say shit Dean."

"No, I won't." Dean brought his knees up to his chest, dusted off his hands and wrapped his arms around his legs. "You do know Frank, health-wise . . ."

"Dean."

"But as a doctor . . ."

"Dean."

"It's just that you're so fit and so healthy . . ."

"Dean!" Frank snapped. "Please."

"If I'm gonna keep this secret, can I at least know why you started smoking?"

"It's just that . . . it's . . . things are stressful Dean. You know that. You have this virus to contend with. Me. I have this place to protect. And there are so many outside forces, that I deal with on a day to day basis that a lot of people don't know about. I deal with it, it's my job. But . . . I'm allowed to worry. So smoking kind of calms me. Three things calm me. Sex, which I'm not getting. Smoking, which I'm doing. And drinking, which I'd prefer not to do."

"So you've quit drinking?" Dean waited for an answer, he only received silence. "O.K." He paused again. "Answer me this. Did you start smoking to stop the drinking?"

"No . . . well, sort of. I guess."

"It's not working, is it?"

"Dean. I'd rather not talk about this with you."

"O.K., O.K., It's just . . . it's very typical in the old world standards. People who quit drinking, or who have a drinking problem . . ."

"I don't have a problem."

Dean raised his hand. "I'm not saying you do. I'm saying that it's a typical switch. One for the other. Sometimes it helps but it doesn't work. Get it?"

"Yep." Frank took another hit of his cigarette.

"People say that you have to want to quit drinking in order to quit. Medically, I don't buy it."

"Dean. Where are you going with this?"

"No where." Dean stated. "But know, it's O.K. to smoke Frank if you're giving up drinking for it. It's O.K. to go that route. It's proven medically that smoking will help. But just remember if you can't . . . if you find yourself unable to quit the drinking all together, there are other ways we can go, aside from just your willpower. Because some people, no matter how strong they are, may need a little more."

"That's not me." Frank spoke defensively. "I like having a drink. I can quit all together. I just don't want to."

"Good. But if you would ever find yourself in that position, and I know that's not you, but if you do . . . let me know. Medically speaking, there are ways I can help. And no one has to know."

"If I would find myself in that position, which I won't, I appreciate the thought."

"Yes well, just like I'm not saying anything about the smoking, you can't say anything about that offer I just made. People could talk."

Frank smiled. "People will talk. Shit, we were throwing darts last night."

Dean began laughing. "Last night we hit Josephine with the darts and today we nearly hit her with the car."

"Yeah but she's senile, who's gonna believe her."

"Frank?" Dean softened his words and became serious. "Can I ask you something. And I need you to answer me honestly. Why are you helping me? Why are you putting so much time into helping me? And you're putting a lot of time into it."

"I'm not done."

"Why?" Dean asked with passion. "We are always at each others throats. Even with good times between us, we'll revert back to that. You hate me. You've always hated me."

Frank was quiet as he tossed out his cigarette. "There's a fine line . . .and this goes no further than this field or I'll fuckin kill you. There's a fine line Dean. And just know, I don't hate you. This, you being blind, it killed me. It's wrong and like everything else, I want to make it right. And as far

as always hating you goes. I think it was the fact that you have always threatened me. Not your size mind you, cause you're like two feet tall." Frank reached into his pocket and pulled out another cigarette. "But you. You're were everything I wasn't. You had Ellen right away, and I always wanted her. You're smart, really smart. You save lives. And people, they like you."

"Well know Frank, you've always been a threat to me too. You're everything I wanted to be too. And I *am* talking about your size. You're big, strong, and you just go in and do it. Without thought and with your heart, you do things. And I may save lives, but so do you. And let me tell you, the way you save lives deserves a lot more credit than you get."

There was an awkwardness between the two of them at that moment, one never there before. A sense of respect that Dean had for Frank, and Frank had for Dean was known for the first time ever in all the years they had known each other. And both of them, at that second, didn't want to admit . . . they wanted out of that moment.

Frank stood up, brushing himself off and grabbing the small sack. "Enough mush. Put behind us and never brought up again. Deal?"

"Deal." Dean Felt Frank's hand on his arm and with its guidance he stood up. "Now what? Are we walking home?"

"Yep." Frank tossed the sack over his shoulder. "Now." Frank walked behind Dean and turned him. "You are facing town. Do you hear the noise coming from there?"

"Yes."

"Good. So do I. Don't move." Frank placed on his blindfold.

"What are you doing?"

"Walking blind like you."

"This ought to be interesting. So, do we just follow the sounds?"

"Yep." Frank walked to next to Dean. "Like I said, we're facing town. It's straight ahead two miles. Follow the noise. See you there." Frank started walking.

"See me . . . Frank?" Dean reached his hand out to his side where Frank spoke to him last. "Frank?" He turned around. "Frank!" All he got was a distant 'bye Dean'. "Shit" Dean brought his hand to his head. 'He left me here.'

(5)

"What do I do, what do I do?" Ellen spoke to herself looking at the computer screen waiting for her analysis of her recent batch results that she had mixed together. "Lie? Probably." With her feet on the counter, she brought close to her mouth the pocket tape recorder she used for Dean's dictation. She pressed record and spoke into it. "Results are taking an awfully long time Dean. Of course to you doing this dictation you wouldn't

know. I press the button to pause. Like now.” She stopped recording,. “Oh he is just going to kill me. But what does he need to know. I won’t tell him I screwed it up. I’ll lie. Yeah.” She cleared her throat and pressed record again. “Still waiting on those results Dean. Of course you and I both know what they are gonna be. Same old. Same old. How can it not be when it’s the same old thing right? Hey, have I told you recently that I loved you.” Ellen watched between the screen and her fingernails, glad at that second, even though it wasn’t right, that Dean was blind. He wouldn’t see her screwed up results in the analysis history of Agent Seventeen. “Dean, I was thinking. We ought to give this thing Agent Seventeen a name. What do you think? It works, not without some side effects, but it works. We have to give it a name, because I am tired of calling it Agent Seventeen. And speaking of agents. I almost spilled that rack of shit we got from George. Boy would we have been screwed if I did that. Not only would we have not any more strand one virus to work on, but we wouldn’t have those two extra doses either. Sorry, my hand hit the rack when I was reaching in the fridge. Speaking of two doses. Dean . . .” Ellen lowered her feet to the floor and sat forward. “What *are* we going to do with them?” There was a long moment of silence as Ellen heard the beep of her completed results. Just as she was about to do her big lie, she did something else. She screamed. Ellen screamed so loudly, so shrill it could have broken the microphone of the tape player her mouth was still close to. “DEAN!” Another scream. “DEAN! Oh my God! Hold on.” She turned off the tape player. “Shit. This can’t be right.” She spoke excited then shrieked and smiled as her fingers clicked the keyboard. “It is!” She grabbed the player again, speaking in to it, rapidly. “O.K. here it goes, I was thinking about something else when I was mixing the batch of Agent Seventeen Dean. And I inadvertently put in two percent of hydro chloride instead of two percent of Hydro metholide. Wait, don’t yell, so I caught myself during the mix and I added the hydro metholide also, knowing full well that it wouldn’t work. But I didn’t want to waste the batch. Figuring I’d run the test anyhow, waste the rabbits and lie to you about why the batch didn’t work on them. So I ran the preliminary test and DeanDean . . . guess what? We have tried the hydro chloride before instead of the hydro metholide but we never tried the combination of the two. And . . . instead of our slow conquering of the virus sample with the initial saturation being forty-percent. I had an initial saturation of eighty-three percent. No shit. Eighty-three percent. Ten minutes Dean. Ten minutes the host virus was completely saturated by our agent. WHEW!” She shrieked. “O.K., testing the bunny time. I’ll inject one half a cc into our day three rabbits, seeing how they are the farthest along and I’ll get back to you. If these results are right, we should see a drop in body temperature in a few hours instead of twelve. O.K. bye.” She shut off the player and turned it back on. “I’m so brilliant.” Stashing the tape player in her lab coat pocket, Ellen flew into the special lab. She immediately grabbed the sample batch and in her excitement began to fill three syringes to test on the rabbits.

Singing that 'Silly' song, Ellen injected the last syringe into the bunny IV. As she was doing that she heard a knock on the glass of the special lab window. She looked up from the cage to see Jenny Matoose standing there. Titling her head with an odd look, Ellen held up a 'wait a second' hand to Jenny, finished her task, took off her lab coat and cleaned up.

"Jenny?" Ellen came out of the special lab. "I thought you weren't allowed up here."

"Oh." She flung her hand. "This was important, I had to come up." She looked into the window. "What are you doing to those rabbits?"

"Trying to cure them."

"Of the new virus?"

"Yep."

"Any luck?"

"We are so there. The host virus is hardly a threat any . . ." Ellen caught her self in her excitement. Opening her mouth about something she was given strict instructions not to. "Um Jenny. I didn't say that. O.K."

Jenny pretended to lock her mouth shut and throw away the key. "Not a peep Ellen. Besides, with all the work you and Dean are doing up here, how could you guys not beat this thing? Right? And speaking of Dean."

Ellen let out a breath. Jenny was changing the subject. "What about him?"

"Why is Dean walking circles in the field a couple miles from here? Is it a new experiment?"

"You could say that. Frank is working with him on something. I've been told not to give him a ride, even if he begs."

"So I take it I shouldn't."

"No. Frank will kill you. So, what's up."

Jenny took a seat on a stool. "Guess where I'm going in two hours?"

"Where?"

"Ben has the dresses done. Well, almost."

"No shit?" Ellen smiled and pulled up a stool next to Jenny. "I thought he said another week."

"That's what he said. But he has them done. Which means we can move this wedding up to August 15th. What do you think?"

"Oh Henry will be glad. I know he just can't wait until this whole thing is over with."

"Good." Jenny smiled. "Andrea and I will come over to your house with the dresses. Can you meet us there in two hours?"

"Sure. Why?" Ellen asked.

"A couple reasons. Andrea is going to pin the hem on you for Ben and we're all gonna try the dresses on. It'll be fun. A bridesmaids afternoon." Jenny giggled. "And guess what? William said he found that old calligraphy kit he knew was around. So starting at the woman's meeting Friday, we'll do the invitations. I'm working on few now. I'll bring three to your house and you and Henry can pick which one. Once you do, we can

hand write them out and Paper said they'd give use the nice stuff to do it on."

"Invitations?" Ellen asked with surprise. "I didn't know we were gonna do that."

"Well, it was sort of a surprise I was keeping until I knew I could pull it off. I mean why not? We have food, Paul is going to Miles City tomorrow with Cole to get some music for the reception. We have a hell of a buffet planned. Cindy has designed a cake that kills. Why not have invitations. I figured we'd have to write out about seventy. I'd like to get them out and hand delivered by Friday of next week. Not like no one knows or they have other plans, it'll just be ceremonial and nice."

"Jenny this is starting to really get exciting, isn't it?"

"I'd say." Jenny looked down at her watch. "And I'd better head out before John misses the jeep and Forrest has my kids speaking Forrest-ese. Did I tell you he's the guest at our meeting? Even though he's a guy, he's so worldly and he knows all about the ancient rituals behind our project we're doing."

"Are we finally doing the one I have been waiting for?"

"Yep. So don't forget to bring your supplies." Jenny moved to the door. "See you in a couple hours. I'll wave 'hi' to Dean for you."

"Thanks." Ellen tapped her fingers on the counter a few times after Jenny had left. Dresses. Hems, Invitations. Ellen's head popped up in thought. She immediately sprang to her feet. "Shit, I'd better clean up if I want to be home in couple hours." Foregoing what she was working on, actually forgetting about what she was working on, Ellen prepared for the final clean up phase of the day.

(6)

With a slight limp and his hands behind his back as he walked, Joe moved side by side with Danny down the hall of containment toward the entrance door. "You and Bentley did great on the tests Danny."

"Not to sound arrogant Joe, but I knew we would."

"So did I. We're looking at letting you two out Saturday. We'll have you guys share a house. And that'll be your first day in Mechanics."

"So I definitely am going there?" Danny asked.

"Without a doubt. You have to start working on that tracking system."

"I understand. What about this security force. I'd be interested in helping out there."

"Yeah?" Joe nodded. "I'll talk to Frank. I don't see why he can't fit you in on the reserve squad."

"Good. What about Bentley Joe? Where will he go?"

"I have special plans for Bentley. In fact we have store number four which is vacant being done up like a barber shop. Cole is running into Miles

City tomorrow for the supplies. That's why I stopped in actually. I had to speak to Bentley and he told me. I needed to know how long he needs between each haircut appoint. Seems the word has spread around here and everyone is anxious. So I have one of our girls, Trish setting appointments for everyone."

Danny chuckled. "Bentley will love that idea."

"He already does." Joe stopped at the door. "Danny, I wanted to ask you something. If I can."

"Sure."

"You said you went to school to be an architect. We had a man here, he left, that redesigned our housing units, using the supplies to make some three bedrooms instead of two. Seems, something has happened to these prints. Everything if prefabbed. Do you suppose you can do that?"

"Redesign them? Sure why not." Danny shrugged. "Why not just design newer housing?"

"Like I said, it's prefabbed and we have all the supplies already."

"Joe, you have a world of supplies out there and a world of prefabbed houses."

"Danny?" Joe was a bit confused.

"Simple. You need wood to build new homes. Just like you will go to Miles City to get a barber chair, you go to Miles City to get a house. Or stuff from one to build one. Possibilities are endless Joe."

"Well you think about that. We have growing families and some are just smashed into two bedroom homes. I'd like to give them more room."

"Then we will. When I get out, I'd like to look at the prints for the prefabbed houses and the supplies for them."

"Deal." Joe reached up his hand to the keypad. "Oh Danny." Joe winked and shook Danny's hand. "I have a good feeling about you. It's good to have you aboard."

"Thanks Joe."

With a swat to Danny's shoulder, Joe punched in his code. He walked through the small office, saying his goodbyes to the guard and then out into the hot sunny day that waited for him. As soon as he stepped out though, he saw Frank. Just the man he was looking for. "Frank?"

Frank stopped in a skid in his hurry move to the living section. "Oh hey Dad."

"What's the rush."

"Heading back home. Josh is with the kids and I needed to get to distribution for milk before they closed." He held up the container. "See ya."

"Frank. Wait."

"I need to get back."

"Just one second." Joe hobbled to him. "Care to tell me why I got a call on my radio from Jason that Dean is wandering around in circles out in the field by his lab?"

"Nope. See ya." Fast and laughing, Frank took off.

(7)

The slam of the front door rattled the archway, and Dean, dirty, sweaty and hot stormed into the house. "Frank!" He screamed out into the darkness of the home he guessed was correct. "Frank! Oh I'd better be in Frank's house."

Frank came from the kitchen drying his hands. "Whoa, hey Dean, you're here."

"I hate you!" Dean bellowed at him. "I really hate you Frank."

"Why?"

"Why!? Four hours. Four hours I wandered around in circles mind you trying to get home."

"I made it."

"You're an asshole! I didn't make it. Did you stop to wonder if I was all right? Did you stop to think I might need help? No! All I got was every half hour, Robbie driving by saying, 'You O.K. Dean?' forget that I would tell him 'no' he'd just drive off anyhow!"

"How'd you get back?" Frank asked.

"I walked! Walked! It took for the kids to get out of school for me to hear enough noise to follow!" Knowing Frank's house well from walking it for an hour, Dean moved into the livingroom. "I'm hot Frank. I'm tired and I hate you. And I just don't want to be bothered by you right now."

"What are you doing Dean."

"Sitting on your couch. Am I allowed."

"Oh sure." Frank tossed his hand up. "Go on. But just remember. Never take anything for granted."

"What the hell is that suppose to mean?" Dean lowered himself to sit and instead of his body plopping on the couch he expected to be there, his body plopped down to the floor.

"That." Frank answered.

"Where is the couch Frank?"

"I moved it."

"You moved it?" Dean picked himself up. "I'm blind, I learned this house inside and out last night. Why would you move the couch on me?"

"To show you things are never what you think they are."

Dean grunted loudly. "You keep throwing these Frank-tests at me and I keep failing them! When are you going to learn they don't work?"

"Bullshit." Frank snapped. "They work. Your blind ass made it two miles to my house. Alone. It may have taken you hours, but you made it. You made it. And the next time you're stuck somewhere you'll pull upon what you learned today and you'll make it through that situation too."

Frank backed up and went into the kitchen. “And don’t try to jump on the bed either.” Frank yelled from the other room. “I moved that too.”

Though annoyed and a sore rear-end were added to the list of things Dean was at that moment, he knew one thing. Frank was right.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

(1)

Andrea ran a dab of Hair Hold in between her fingers and touched her fingers to the strands of hair that hung down onto Ellen's neck. Spiral, Andrea had curled them, adding the hair product to the soft curls to hold them in place as they dangled from the perfect test hair-do that Andrea and Jenny did to Ellen before she tried on the dress that nearly fit her perfect. Ellen's dark blond hair was pulled up and back loosely, twisted and tucked with the ends curled about. So fancy, so unlike her. But Ellen didn't mind the half hour it took for Andrea and Jenny to do her hair, she actually like it. Being fussed over. 'Practice preparations' Jenny called them. Standing in front of her bedroom dresser mirror in the off white dress Ben worked so hard to redo. Made so much of lace, so turn of the century. It was hard to believe as Ellen looked at herself that Josephine had actually worn the dress sixty years earlier. And it wasn't just Josephine's dress, it was Josephine's mother's as well.

The woman they labeled senile. The woman who four years earlier they found sitting on her front porch like a Caucasian version of a Stephen King character, brought that dress with her along with so much that those in Beginnings always found interesting. And like those trinkets Josephine shared with the community, she now shared that dress. Telling Ellen and the women that anyone who could wear it, should.

"Girl." Andrea ran her hand down the front of the dress, a closed-mouth proud look on her face. "Look at you in this dress. I feel like your mom."

"It's beautiful." Ellen stared in awe.

"And you don't need but an inch taken up. Ben won't even need to cut this dress." Andrea commented.

"Maybe you can wear it next." Ellen giggled. "We are the same size."

"Sweet Jesus Ellen." Andrea waved her hand with a tsk. "Who in God's world will I marry? No-no. I'm fine wearing this." Andrea touched the straight, long blue dress she wore. A simple large pearl decorated the gathered front.

"Those turned out nice." Ellen turned from the mirror. "Jenny you took yours off?"

Jenny tossed on her tee shirt. "I have to be getting home. This was fun. But I have to leave. John gets nervous if he is stuck making dinner too." Jenny slipped into her shorts. "I'll leave the invitations here for Henry to look at Ellen." She grabbed her dress and stuck it on the hanger. "You look great in that dress. Henry will be so pleased when he sees you walking down the aisle."

"You think?" Ellen asked, almost uncertain.

"Oh sure."

Andrea unzipped her own dress. "I'd better be going too. We've been here for two hours. Goodness. And Henry will be home soon so get out of that dress." She slipped from her own, grabbing her clothes and placing them on.

"Another minute or two." Ellen looked at her reflection. "I've never worn a wedding dress before."

Jenny walked up to behind Ellen straightening the shoulders on the dress. "Maybe the reason for that is you were waiting for the right man to wear one for."

"I think you're right." Ellen smiled. "Jenny." She stopped Jenny as she started to leave the bedroom. "Your hair pins. I can take them out now."

"Just give them to me tomorrow, so I can put them away for the wedding."

"O.K." Ellen fussed with her hair. "I can't leave it this like this. Henry will see. I want him to be surprised."

Andrea, dressed, and her bridesmaid gown draped over her arm walked to Ellen. "He will be. Now make sure you put that in the dark sack. We don't need Henry seeing it before the wedding."

"I'll be sure." Ellen accepted the kiss on the cheek from Andrea. "Thanks."

"See you tomorrow." Andrea took one more look at Ellen, then walked from the bedroom.

Knowing it was time to slip back into a pair of shorts and a tee shirt, Ellen reached her hands to her hair to feel for the pins that Jenny had placed in her hair. As her arms raised, she heard Andrea saying 'Hi Frank'. Ellen's arms dropped. "Frank?" She closed her eyes and jumped back when the single knock at the door startled her.

"El." Frank walked in, and the moment he saw her turn to look at him, Frank's heart dropped. "Oh my God."

"Frank." Ellen spoke nervously. "What are you doing here?"

"I uh . . . I took a walk. Dean is spending time . . . God El. You're beautiful."

Ellen's head dropped in a blush. "Frank."

Frank walked up to her. "Look at you." His hand reached out and touched lightly to her face.

Ellen closed her eyes and tilted her head unconsciously into his touch. She caught herself and her head sprang up. "But this isn't me." She turned from him. "And I have to get out of this Frank. Oh I hate this dress up stuff." Her hands raised to her hair. "So you left Dean alone?"

"Yep. Fifteen minute test. I figured I'd come here and bother you."

"Care to help. I have a million hair pins in this hair."

"Sure." Frank walked up behind her. His huge hands dug in her hair with Ellen's hands, pulling out pins and setting them on the dresser. "This reminds me of the time you had your hair pulled up for that dinner. Remember?" Frank dropped some pins. He separated her hair. "I'll do

this.” He removed her hands. “I swore we dug pins from your hair for fifteen minutes.”

“I remember that. Not to mention all the hair spray.”

“This feels soft though.” Frank tried to run his fingers through her hair and they got stuck. He laughed. “Maybe not. What did you do? Tease you hair?”

“Andrea did.”

“Last pin.” He handed it to her, then reached around for the brush. “You or me?”

“I can do it. Thanks.” Ellen smiled. “Step back.” She bent over flinging her hair forward and she brushed it talking to Frank’s boots. “Thanks for your help.”

“No problem. I needed to waste fifteen minutes. Which with walking time included is almost up. You’ll see him soon though. I’m sending him down here to try walking alone again. He did good today El. Made it home all by himself.”

“I heard it took him forever.”

“But at least he made it.” He watched Ellen straighten up and fling her hair back as she stood. It was full and Frank shrieked in a joke at her.

“Frank.” She hit him lightly with the brush then brushed her hair flat. She turned her back to him. “Could you undo the zipper for me?”

“Sure.” Frank hesitated in his reach then grabbed the zipper, pulling it down slowly, looking at her bare back as he exposed it. He swallowed and separated the open garment. “All . . . I have to go.” He stepped back quickly.

“Frank?”

“Fifteen minutes is up El. Dean will panic.” He opened the door. “I’ll see you.”

“Frank?” Ellen was at a loss when Frank darted out.

Frank paused on the top step before going down. He looked back at the partially opened bedroom door, wanting so badly to go back in there. But he couldn’t. The best thing for him at that moment was to go home. He hurried down the steps. As he reached for the front door, it opened and Henry walked in.

“Frank?” Henry said on his entrance. “How come your here?”

“Eating up time. Dean’s home alone for the first time with the kids. Trial thing. You know.”

“You leaving?”

“Yeah. El’s upstairs. And uh Henry. Don’t go up there.”

“Why?” Henry asked, afraid of the answer.

“She has her wedding dress on. Bad luck.” Frank walked thought the open door. “Henry. Man, she looks . . . she looks beautiful in it. I . . . I always thought one day I would stand at one end of an aisle and I would watch Ellen walk down the other in a wedding dress. I guess it’s better to

be the best man and be a part of it, than to be no where near in her life at all."

"Frank."

"I'll see you Henry." Frank tapped once on the edge of the door, then pulled it closed as he left.

Henry closed his eyes tightly and leaned in toward that closed door. "I'm sorry." He spoke softly laying his hand palm flush against it. He stayed there for a minute like that, thinking about the look on his friend's face. As he turned from the door, he saw Ellen standing on the next to last step. "El."

"Attached to that door Henry?" She asked then walked all the way down. "Look at my fluffy hair." She kissed him. "They had me teased and pulled up. Fussed over. How was your day?"

"Good." Henry pulled her back into him, laying his hand on her face and kissing her.

Ellen was a little surprised by the tender kiss. "What was that for?"

"I love you."

"I know that." She tapped him on the cheek and stepped back. "Oh Henry, the wedding is getting moved up. To the fifteenth, I think. Isn't that great. Now you won't have to wait as long. I know you're getting anxious."

"El, we have to talk."

"I know. And you still have to get fitted for your tux. Ben says he has to hem your pants."

"El . . ."

Ellen darted with excitement into the diningroom and ran back. "Look at this Henry, invitations. Three of them. Well we have to pick one of them then all of us women are going to fill them out. Invitations, how do you like that?" She held them to him. "Look our names. Isn't this great, I know you guys all think this is stupid, but it's been a group project for us women and we have had fun."

"El, listen we have to talk."

"That's what we're doing Henry. We're talking." She laid the invitations down on the table behind the sofa and she rambled. "Anyhow, we need to decide on this now so we can start on writing them out. By hand. Makes you appreciate printing presses huh? But you don't need to worry about that. Guess what else? Jenny and Andrea brought over their dresses and had them on too."

"Ellen." Henry ran his hand down his face.

"Don't let anyone know I told you this. But even for as big as Jenny is. She looked good in that blue dress. And here I thought blue was going to be all wrong for her. Imagine that actually being her color. It was so exciting."

"El . . ."

"And we talked like teenagers this afternoon Henry. And they . . ."

"El, I can't do this wedding."

"Fussed and they fussed and they . . ." Ellen's mouth dropped and she stuttered silently for a second. "What did you just say?"

"I said." Henry took a long breath. "I can't . . . I can't do this wedding."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean . . . I can't do this wedding. I can't." Henry spoke nearly in a whisper.

Ellen stared at him for a second, her eyes shifting about his face, and then she smiled. "Oh it's just nerves Henry. You'll be fine. Don't worry about it." She kissed him on the cheek. "And I have to finish putting my dress away."

"El." His hand reached out as she backed up.

"I'll be right back down. We'll talk about this when I do. You'll be fine." She giggled and hurried up the steps.

Henry closed his eyes. "Oh my God." As his head dropped he heard a knock on the door. "Not now." He turned and walked to it, opening it up. "Dean?"

"Hey Henry, can I come in?"

"Now is not a good time Dean."

"Henry, I just walked all the way from Frank's by myself as my assignment. Now *is* a good time."

"No Dean, It's not."

Dean sensed the depth to Henry's voice. "What's wrong? Are you fighting with Ellen?"

Henry looked back to make sure Ellen was still upstairs. "Dean, I just need to be alone with her right now. I'm trying to . . . I'm trying to tell her I can't marry her."

"You what? Henry you can't do that."

"I have to go Dean. I'm sorry."

"Henry . . ." Dean heard the close of the door. His heart raced some over the news he had just heard. Not that Henry canceling the wedding mattered to him, but what it would do to Ellen did. Turning around, feeling the porch railing, Dean gathered his composure and headed back to Frank's.

(2)

"Man." Frank commented when he watched Dean walk in. "Didn't they want you either? Or didn't you go?"

"I went." Dean shut the door. "Frank . . ."

"What did they do? Kick you out?" Frank laughed.

"You can say that. Frank." Dean walked further into the house. "Henry's calling off the wedding."

"No he's not. I was just there."

"No Frank. He wouldn't even let me in. He was in the middle of it when I got there. Frank, I could care less about the wedding. But what about . . ."

"Ellen." Frank placed his hands on his hips and dropped his head. "She won't let him do it. I know El. Hell, he'll be picking out flowers in ten minutes."

"Just to be sure . . ."

"Stay here." Frank walked to the door. "Maybe I can talk some sense into him before does this. Like you Dean, I can care less about the wedding. But you and I both know what this is gonna do to El." Leaving Dean alone with the kids, Frank headed to Henry's.

(3)

Henry heard Ellen creeping slowly down the stairs, her pace picked up when he looked up at her. "El."

"Feeling better now Henry?" She asked as she walked into the livingroom.

"No."

"It's nerves Henry. Really it is. I'm nervous too."

"It's more than that El."

"Henry." She grabbed his arm and softly spoke to him. "Look, everything will be all right."

"Ellen you don't understand."

"Sure I do. It's a big thing. It's the first wedding. I know you don't like things like this. But can't you do it anyhow. I mean, we planned this."

"No El."

Ellen swallowed harshly. "O.K. I understand. I'll let them know. But Henry, could, could we at least get married in front of Joe?"

"El . . ." Henry's head raised.

"No, I know you're a private person. But Joe is my father. I would really like for him to be there."

"Ellen listen."

"I'm not asking much, just a simple . . ."

"There isn't going to be a wedding El. No wedding."

"I know that Henry, I'm not talking about a wedding, I'm talking about our marriage."

"So am I. I can't marry you El. I can't."

So stunned, Ellen released Henry's arm and stepped back. "Of course you can Henry."

"No El I can't."

"Henry."

"No!" Henry stepped back, it was hard enough to do this, why couldn't she understand. "I can not marry you. I won't! And we won't talk about this again!"

"Oh we won't will we?" Ellen stepped closer to him. "Where is this coming from?"

"I've been thinking." Henry's head hung down.

"Obviously. Well the thinking part is over Henry. Look at me with this. Look at me!" She waited until he did. "How long?"

"El."

"How long!?" She screamed. "How long have you been thinking about this?"

"Since . . . since we found out we weren't really married."

Pummeled. Ellen felt as if she were hit with a steel wall. All of her breath escaped her and she spoke as if she reached for every word. "You . . . you knew this the whole time?" She swayed her head in disbelief. "You knew the whole time I ran around excited about marrying you and you never said a word."

"El."

"No! You could have said something Henry!" She grabbed the invitations that laid on the table. "Look how far you let me take this!"

"I thought things would change. I thought I would feel different. I thought I loved you enough to do this but . . ." He heard her loud gasp. "No El, that's not what I . . ."

"No." She swung out at his reaching arm. "You thought you loved me enough? What was I Henry, something you got tired of and just didn't have enough guts to admit your mistake to? So you string me along?"

"El, you're not letting me explain why I won't do this. I . . ."

"I don't care!" Ellen yelled at him.

"What? I need to tell you."

"You needed to tell me . . ." She ripped up the three invitations. "Before this!" She tossed the pieces harshly at him, they sprayed like rain into his face then onto the floor. "And it doesn't matter what you say Henry. Nothing, nothing is gonna make up for the hurt your cowardliness just caused me." She brushed harshly by him, smacking her shoulder into Henry as she passed him and flung open the door and ran out.

With her arms folded tight, Ellen with a quick pace ran up the street, so blindly she ran, she almost barreled over Frank.

"El?" Frank's hand grazed her as she ran by. His views went from her to Henry's. "Fuck." His hand cut in the air and he ran to Henry's house. "Henry."

"Excuse me Frank." Henry hurried to the door.

"Henry." Frank blocked him

"Let me by Frank. I have to go after her."

"What you need to do." Frank shoved him back into the house. "Is let her calm down. You hear?"

"I have to get her."

"Henry." Frank placed his hands on Henry's shoulder. "What the hell did you do?"

Henry's head swayed and he walked away from Frank and to the couch. "I did what I had to do. I called off the wedding."

"Why?"

"Why?" Henry's hand gave a firm squeeze to the back of the sofa as he turned his head to Frank. "I did it for you!"

"Me? I never told you to call off the wedding Henry!" Frank blasted him.

"You didn't want me married to her."

"I didn't want Ellen hurt!" Frank stormed to him. "This hurt her. More than you realize Henry this is gonna hurt her."

"I know."

"If you knew this, why did you do this?"

"Because of a promise I made to my best friend. A promise I broke and had a chance to make up for. You gave me a chance with her and what was I doing? I was taking her away from you."

"Henry. No. I didn't want you to marry her. But as long as she was still in my life, that was what mattered most."

"Yeah Frank. And now's your chance. So why don't you just run after her."

"I'm gonna run after her." Frank pointed at Henry as he stepped back. "But only to bring her back here. Straighten your ass up Henry. Straighten it up."

Henry still gripped that couch, staring at the just closed door, and with Frank's warning on his mind, all he could think of was . . . could he?

(4)

Henry's fingers trembled as he sat at the diningroom table. So sad his fingers worked on piecing back together the ripped up wedding invitations. So diligently and with such determination he tore small strips of tape and carefully rebuilt the invitations to what they were. Staring in so much hurt at their names and the wording that was to inform everyone of their marriage. Like the invitations he fought so hard to put back together, Henry wondered if he could do the same with Ellen.

The clicking of the front door handle, went though Henry like a shock. The last he spoke to Frank, he hadn't found Ellen. Yet when Henry looked up, Ellen was walking into his home. "El." He stood, dropping the invitation to the table and racing to the door. "Where have you been?"

"Not here." She walked to the steps.

"El, can we talk? Please can we talk?"

"No." She said somberly and began to walk up the steps.

Henry followed her, determined to speak with her. "El, listen I've been . . ."

"Henry." Ellen spun to him when she reached the top step. "I'm not in the mood to talk." She walked to their bedroom.

"You can't go to bed mad at me El."

"Mad? No Henry, I'm not mad." Ellen walked around to the bottom of the bed and reached under it. She pulled out a duffel bag.

"What are you doing?"

"I no longer live here Henry."

"No El." He pulled the bag from her. "You live here."

"I'm leaving."

"You can't do that."

"Did you think I'd stay? Did you?"

"I can't believe you'd walk away from what we have just because we aren't getting married."

"It's more than that Henry." Ellen flung open the closet. "You hid the truth from me."

"I was afraid to talk to you. I was afraid of this."

"Guess what Henry, you're fears have come true."

"No." Henry pulled her from the closet. "I won't let you do this."

"I thought you knew me."

"I do."

"Then you know I move on." Ellen spun back to the closet and she stared in.

"But I also know that this can't be easy for you."

"No it's not." Ellen shut the closet. "Not while your standing here. I'll come back when you're at work." She walked to her dresser and opened the top drawer. She pulled out a tee shirt and undergarments, then opened the second drawer and grabbed shorts. She slammed it with her leg and brushed by Henry.

"No!" Henry ran after her and down the steps, nearly throwing himself at the door as she reached for it. It slammed shut. "Don't walk out El."

"Henry." Ellen tried to open the door.

"El." He turned her from it and moved closer to her. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I love you."

Ellen pushed way his hand that moved to her face. "You don't know the first thing about love."

"You're wrong."

"Am I?" Ellen spoke emotionally bringing her hand to her chest. "Love is telling someone the truth. I was always honest with you. I walked on eggshells with you Henry because I never wanted to screw up what I had with you. I loved what I had with you. I have never been so dedicated to anyone like I was with you. Being with you and making it work was more

important to me than life itself. Want to know why? Because I thought for once, I was finally with someone special. I was wrong. It wasn't love."

"We have a child El. That's love."

"That was a mistake." She tried to back away from him but Henry grabbed hold of her arm. "Let me go."

"No. I can't let you do this." Henry stepped even closer to her, caressing her face with his hand, brushing his lips so close to hers. "Please I am begging you, don't leave me. Please don't leave me. I need you El. I need you so much." Henry's words dropped to a whisper. "I'm begging you. I am begging you. Please. Please."

Ellen pressed her hands to his chest and pushed him back. "It's over Henry. You called the final shot." She slipped away from him and opened the door. "You lived lot of years alone here in Beginnings. Now I hope to God you live the rest of your years alone here as well."

"El." *Slam!* The door's loud closing vibrated through Henry magnifying the hurt he was already feeling. With his tightly closed fist he pounded it against that door, then brought his forehead to the surface and leaned to it. It had been a long time since Henry felt the way he did standing with his body against that door, feeling the last of Ellen's presence. It was a familiar feeling to Henry, one he thought he'd never feel again, one he thought he lost, now one he felt more then ever right there and then. The feeling of being . . . alone.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

JULY 29

(1)

Barely daylight. Barely awake and Robbie found himself having to think and recant what had happened the night before. He sat up, propping his pillow behind his back against the headboard and straightening the sheet across his waist. He folded his hands, tapping fingers together. He was drinking the night before, heavily too by the feel of his headache. He remembered that. His thoughts were interrupted when the snooze alarm went off on his alarm for the fourth time. Quickly he reached his hand over and shut it off. He lifted the covers, looking down under them at himself. He wasn't naked, he was wearing only boxer shorts, so that had to play into his night. He wouldn't have given a second thought to the amount of alcohol he consumed the night before, or the fact that he stayed out consuming it till all hours with Ellen. No thought at all until he hit the snooze for the third time and he heard the slight moan next to him in bed.

Did he drink so much that he totally blacked out somewhere and missed the fact on how Ellen ended up in bed with him. Did something happen between them that he couldn't remember. Robbie debated on whether he should assume it did and risk embarrassment if he found out it didn't. That option was much better than assuming it didn't and risking getting decked by Ellen when he asked her if it did. But Robbie was stumped because he just couldn't remember when and how Ellen ended up in his bed.

He looked at the time knowing he had to get out of bed, and figuring so did Ellen, he decided to wake her. Maybe if he did, she would hold the answers in her actions.

"El." He called out to her looking down as she laid on her stomach. He could see she wore a tee shirt and Robbie wanted so badly to lift the covers to see if that was all she wore. The curious part of him wanted to find out, the ego part of him didn't want to be crushed if he saw she was wearing bottoms. He'd wait. Ellen's actions would be his answers. "El." He called out again.

Ellen grumbled something and lifted her head, her hair flopped all over her face. When she plopped her head down, she landed right next to Robbie.

Robbie smiled. Ellen was touching him, maybe not consciously, but touching. "El, do you need to get up?"

"What time is it?" She groaned.

"Six thirty."

Ellen whined. "My poor head." She lifted herself to her elbows then rolled onto her side, removing her hair from her eyes. "I can't even lift my head. What did you do to me last night?"

Robbie grinned, then he lost the grin. What did he do to her? “We drank a lot.”

“I’ll say.”

“Hey El. What exactly hap . . .” One knock, one firm knock and Robbie looked to his bedroom door.

“Robert.” Joe called and opened the door walking in. “Time to get . . . Oh Jesus Christ.” Quickly Joe retreated and left shutting the door fast.

Ellen sat up all the way. “What was all that about?”

Robbie shrugged. “Don’t know.”

“Why would Joe . . . oh shit!” Ellen flung the covers from herself jumping out of bed. “He saw us in bed here.”

“Yeah, so.”

“Oh shit.”

“Oh shit is right.” Robbie got out of bed too. “You’re wearing shorts.”

“Of course I’m wearing shorts.” Ellen looked for her shoes.

“El, did we have sex last night?”

“No!” Ellen answered sharply. “Where are my shoes? Oh I know Joe is just gonna yell at me. My head.” She grabbed her forehead.

“Are you sure we didn’t have sex. I mean we were both drunk, maybe we just don’t remember. I know I don’t, no offense, don’t remember going to bed with you.”

“Robbie . . . found them.” She sat on the bed. “The reason you don’t remember is because when I got into bed last night, you were crashed. You left the social hall a half hour before me.”

“Oh yeah.” Robbie said. “You were talking with Forrest and Josephine. Boy that old broad is a lush isn’t she? Why are you rushing around?”

“To avoid Joe.”

“Then why rush out of here. My bedroom is the last place he’s coming back to.”

“You’re right.” Ellen finished her shoes and relaxed for a second. “I still have to get to Frank’s and get the kids off to school. Dean can’t get them off alone.”

Robbie opened his drawers and pulled out his work pants. “El, how did you end up in bed with me?”

“I ended up here because I couldn’t get into Dean’s. I knew his house was empty, but his house was also locked. I couldn’t go to Frank’s it’s crowded enough there. Not too mention it was a hoof and I could barely stand. Henry’s was out because as you know we broke up. And quit smiling. So I came here. But when I snuck in, Katie was sleeping on the couch and Denny was on the floor. I guess Andrea had an emergency.” Ellen stood up.

"No, Andrea is sick. She came down with something last night." Robbie shrugged. "I don't know what. But we watched the kids for her. Then I went out. Is that why you were in my bed?"

"Yeah. You have a double bed, there was room and I remember you are not a bed hog. So I slept here."

"Hey El. Can I tell everyone I woke up in bed with you?"

"No." She said annoyed, walking to the door.

"Let me tell Dean, with you two being . . ."

"No."

"Frank. Come on let me tell me brother. It will be so funny seeing him get all pissed off."

"No Robbie. It's bad enough Joe thinks we slept together. How I'm getting out of that one, I don't know." She opened the bedroom door.

"El." Robbie waited for her to stop. "Can I at least tell Henry?"

Ellen was silent. "Yeah, go on you can tell Henry. But that's it." Waving her hand and knowing she had to be going, Ellen left.

"Yes." Robbie finished getting dressed. "And I don't care what she said. I know we had sex . . . I think."

(2)

Over the railing of the lookout tower Frank leaned his body into his elbows that rested on the thick wooden beam. He took the tower watch while Steve took a break. Frank never minded it much doing that. There was something really peaceful about the view that was seen from the tower. Not that Frank would share that feeling with anyone. Watching out into the wilderness where barely an animal moved, Frank smoked his cigarette thinking back to the night before.

Ellen was in the social hall when he found her. Actually one of three people. Forrest sat with Josephine at the bar and Ellen sat at a table using two chairs, one for her body and the other for her extended legs. Her head was back and her hair looked longer than it was as she rested her side against the table and her hand played blindly with her drink.

"Hey." Frank spoke to her, gently tugging her hair and making her head pull back more. "Can I join you?"

"Not right now. O.K. Frank?"

"O.K." Frank stood for about ten seconds then walked to in front of her removing her legs from the chair and he sat down there. "How about now?"

"Frank." Ellen turned her body into the table. "I just want to sit alone. O.K.?"

"I know what happened." Frank watched her take a drink.

"Are you going to gloat?"

"Nope."

"No 'I told you so's'?"

"Nope."

"What's up with that?" Ellen asked him, holding back her bangs as she leaned for support on her elbow.

"Let's just say as your friend for over half your life." Frank rested his hand on her hand that held her drink. "I'm concerned about you."

"I probably look really stupid right now. Don't I?"

"Why would you even think that?"

"Because." Ellen slumped into the drink she sipped from. "I let myself get all caught up in this wedding thing. Running around with all the women, finally feeling like I was a part of them. Not that I ever really wanted to be. But you know Frank . . . it was nice."

"Was? Why does it have to end?"

"Because . . . I think their only interest in me is that I was the one who was getting married. Was getting married. I'm not now Frank. Did you know that?"

"Yep."

Ellen finished her drink. "So, no wedding, no group effort. I'm not the type of person these women really like Frank."

"You think this is something new?" Frank asked her.

"Gee Frank, make me feel so much better."

"No." He chuckled at his own bad play of words. "Ever since I've known you Ellen, women, they just don't take to you. So what." Frank shrugged. "You never cared before. Why care now? Like before, you have guys that fill that friendship part of your life. And . . ." Frank leaned into her. "I'm going to sound like a parent right now but, if these women don't want to be your friends because the wedding isn't going to happen, then they really weren't friends to begin with. And why would you want to hang around them anyhow?"

"Oh my God." Ellen started to laugh. "How many times were you told that growing up?"

"Tons."

"Me too." She reached for the bottle on the table and poured some more in her glass.

"El."

"What." Ellen saw Frank eyeing the bottle. "No-no. Don't preach."

"O.K. I won't."

"You know what hurts the most about all this Frank?"

"No. Tell me."

"It's Henry." Ellen turned her head to look at Frank. "I never expected anything less than the truth from him. I don't care about the wedding, I don't. But he doesn't want to marry me Frank. He can live with me, be with me, tell me what to do and what not to do and but he doesn't want to marry me."

"He does want to marry you El. He won't. And . . . he says he isn't because of me."

"What?" Ellen swung her views back to him.

"He said that he won't marry you because of a promise he made to me. That I gave him the chance with you and he can't take you from me."

"You gotta be shitting me? That is the lamest most pathetic reason I have ever heard in my entire life." Ellen snapped. "You mean to tell me that Henry won't marry me out of some obligation to you? Well fuck him."

"El."

"No. Fuck him." She finished another drink and poured some more. "He chose you over me. You Frank. Doesn't he know that you really could care less in the end if him and me were married as long as you got to be with me?"

"Well . . ." Frank fluttered his lips. "You make me sound so shallow El."

"You are."

"I am not."

"Yes you are Frank. And Henry, Henry is shallow too. What was this bullshit that he loves me? He can't possibly love me if he uses an excuse like that."

"Henry is hurt El."

"Right now, do you think I care. Sorry Frank, I think it's just an excuse for the fact that he really didn't want to marry me." She waved her hand at him. "And he led me on. He let me go on and on with this wedding when the whole time he knew he wasn't going to do it. Why couldn't he be honest with me right away?"

"Look." He stopped her waving hands. "He made a mistake."

"And so did I. By trusting him Frank. I trusted him so much. He doesn't even realize what I put aside, what I gave up for my obligation to him. No matter how much it hurt, I put aside everything I felt for you so . . . so . . . I could . . . finish my drink." She held up her glass, widening her eyes as she drank and looking away from Frank. "I didn't say that."

Frank smiled. He lowered her drink from her mouth. "I didn't hear anything. El, instead of sitting here . . ."

"I'm not going back to Henry's."

"I'm not saying that. I was gonna tell you come back to the house with me. Hang out. I have to be getting back anyhow, walk with me. Come on, Blind Dean is there." He tilted his head with a smile. "We can play blind jokes on him. What do you say?"

"No." She shook her head with a slight laugh. "I wanna stay here. At least for a little while. Rain check though on the blind jokes?"

"Most definitely. Will you be all right?"

Ellen grunted and moaned. "Don't make fun of me but . . . I feel like crying Frank. I feel so bad."

Frank put his arm around the back of her chair and scooted closer. "I'm sorry."

Ellen leaned into his chest. "I really thought it was different. All these men who are in understandings and relationships with the women here, I always wondered. Is what they feel genuine? Would they be with this woman if there were many others to choose from? A lot of them . . . I would say 'no'. But I never would have put Henry in that category of men."

"Henry isn't in that category of men."

"I beg to differ Frank. He is. And I believe he thinks what he feels for me is real. It isn't. Because let's face it. If the world didn't end, Henry Kusakari wouldn't give me a second glance."

"Of course not. If the world didn't end, he would have been a married man."

"You know what I meant." Ellen shook her head and nudged him.

"I know what you meant. And know I mean it when I say Henry isn't in that category of men that I put my son Johnny in."

"Frank, the only man in this entire community that I am certain isn't in that category of men is you."

"Thank you for that EL."

"And thank you for the talk." She picked up her drink again. "Go home."

"Will you be all right."

"I'll be fine."

Frank leaned into her and kissed her on the cheek. "If you need me for anything. You call me or come and get me. I want to help."

"You can."

"Good." Frank began to back away but Ellen pulled him back.

"Frank." She slipped her arms around his neck and brought her lips lightly across his neck and to his ear, whispering. "Take me somewhere. Make love to me. Do what only you can do and make it all go away. Please." She brushed her lips against his ear.

"EL."

"Frank."

"EL." He pulled Ellen away from him then firmly ran his hands up her arms then to her face. He placed his hands to her cheeks and lowered his lips close to her. Then Frank stopped. "I can't." He backed up and removed her arms. "I can't, sorry."

"What?"

"I can't do that to Henry."

"You can't do that to Henry?" Ellen asked with so much shock. "Oh my God."

"EL."

"No." She shook her head. "I don't want to hear it."

"Listen." He turned her to face him. "You are my best friend, But Henry, he is also my best friend. And he's pretty down about this. This is a

man who won't marry the woman he loves because he doesn't want to take advantage of a mistake I made. I couldn't take advantage right now of a mistake he made."

"Oh my God." Ellen stood up and grabbed her bottle and glass. "You two deserve each other."

"Stop it." Frank stood, following her to the bar.

"No Frank. Why don't you wear the tux and Henry can wear my dress and you two get married. There. Problem of the wedding solved."

"El . . ."

"I won't ever, ever, *ever* offer it to you again."

"Yes you will."

Ellen's mouth dropped open in shock. "I will not."

"Yes you will." Frank walked to beside her. "And trust me when you do, you won't be on your fourth drink."

"Go away Frank Slagel." She sipped her drink. "Go home."

"Be good." He kissed her on the cheek and laughed when she wiped it away. Just to annoy her he kissed her cheek again.

Frank thought about how glad he was when he left that social hall to see his brother walking in. Knowing that Forrest and Josephine were the only ones there and they were the barflies of Beginnings, he was glad that Robbie was there and he promised to keep her in line . . .

Frank reminded himself right there and then as he finished his cigarette on the tower, that he would thank his little brother for keeping an eye on Ellen the night before.

Looking at the cigarette that had nearly burned itself out, Frank, using his middle finger and thumb, flicked the butt over the rail. It sailed through the air spinning. For as much as Frank didn't expect to hear it hitting the ground fifty feet below, that was how much he didn't expect to hear the high pitch shriek beneath him. Knowing that the cigarette probably hit someone, Frank snickering, peeked over the railing. It took everything he had not to laugh out loud when he saw Henry rubbing his arm and looking up at the tower to try to see who had just burned him.

(3)

It wasn't turning out to be a very good day for Henry at all. Not like he actually thought it would be, but since the moment he woke up alone, the day had gone downhill. It was bad enough that everybody in town knew by eight a.m. that he had called off the wedding, but what made matters worse was that he couldn't walk past a single woman in Beginnings without them calling him a prick. Every single one he walked by called him that.

Henry kept his head low, it would have hung like that on its own from his sadness but now he dealt with name calling. He tried to get by Jenny, but she called him a prick and told him she wished she could spit on him. Trish, she went into her own version of a riot act, telling Henry he was sending her into premature labor, that they still would have a gala and he would eat his heart out at it. Of course, Trish screamed that single slang term for the male anatomy at him at the end of her speech. Even Josephine jumped on that bandwagon adding the word 'fuckin' to her sentiments to Henry. Bad day. And as Henry walked to the Mechanics Division building, he was in pain and ready to kill Steve the guard for that cigarette burn. Henry guessed that red welt was now the cherry that topped the whipped cream that topped his bad day.

It had to get better. It would get better, when he tried to speak to Ellen . . . again. Hopefully on his next round at it, she wouldn't walk by him. If he could only get her where she couldn't leave, then he'd be sure to get her to listen to him. To Henry, getting her to listen would be half the battle.

Walking into Mechanics, Henry tossed his bag on the bench. "Hey Scott, back already?"

"Yep. And I'm going back out."

"Good."

"Henry, Forrest is in your office waiting for you. He radioed and asked where he could find you and when I told him you were heading back here before your meeting with Joe, he showed up."

"Forrest?" Henry tilted his head in question. "What's he want?"

Scott shrugged. "Don't know." He picked up his things. "See you later."

"Scott. Did Robbie ever show up this morning?" Henry asked.

Scott didn't need to answer, Robbie did. "Yes Henry I did." He came from the stock room holding wires.

Henry turned from Scott who left and faced Robbie. "Why are you here and not out working?"

"Uh . . ." Robbie looked up at the ceiling in a thinking mode, his middle finger pressed to his bottom lip. "Supplies maybe."

"You were late."

"So what. I'll work late."

"You can't be late Robbie."

"I slept in. And I'm hung over so don't start on me."

Henry grunted. "I don't care if you're hung over Robbie. You can't be sleeping late all the time. You have to learn to pull yourself from that bed."

"Normally I would Henry." Robbie gave a shitty grin as he walked to the door. "But why pull myself out of bed this morning when Ellen was still there." He gave swift pat to Henry's back as he walked out. "Bye."

Henry spun fiercely to the just shut door. "No. He didn't . . . shit."

"An-ray." Forrest called out chipper, stepping from Henry's office.

A squeak of Henry soles occurred when he spun back around to see Forrest. "Hey Forrest." Henry took a second to let his heart stop racing at the vision of Robbie with Ellen.

"An-ray, uh woo luck ta speck with you if uh cooed."

"Um sure Forrest. What is it?" Henry placed his hands on his hips and looked down to the much smaller man.

"Uh woos specking ta Trash un shay tod may dat you un El-loon half cod ef de wadding. Oui?"

"Um . . ." Henry quickly deciphered what Forrest had said. He really wanted to rush him along, he had to get his notes and head to Joe's office. "Yeah."

"Uh um saw-ray An-ray. Trash has tod may dat El-loon es don with you. Shay hes mud de sue-gestion dat ma-bay uh cooed stop en un hop El-loon. I luck El-loon and uh ned ta knew ef you wooed mund An-ray ef uh wooed tuck El-loon on a det."

"Uh what was that Forrest?"

"Woo you mund ef uh tuck El-loon on a det?"

"One more time."

"Tuck a on a det. A det. A det." Forrest was a bit frustrated.

"Um . . . uh yeah, sure." Henry nodded.

"Tank you An-ray." Forrest blew out of his mouth and moved to the door. "An-ray ef I mut? Ma-bay, de pro-blem woos dat you dud net lis-soon e-niff." He opened the door giving his final advise before he left. "De woo-mun, day ned ta bay heard."

Henry scratched his head after the smiling Forrest left. He was certain that whatever Forrest was saying was important. And it probably was some worldly advice from a father figure. But Henry just didn't have the time to take to make out his messages. So shrugging, Henry hurried and gathered his stuff he needed for his meeting.

(3)

Joe rubbed that spot above his eyebrows so harshly that if Dean could see, he would know about the huge red spot his actions were causing Joe to masochistically place upon himself. "It's not that funny Dean." Joe told him.

"Sorry." Dean caught his breath. He stood side by side with Joe in the clinic lab. "Those are my choices? What about I finish these tests in this lab then I run to the mobile as planned."

"What about not." Joe stated. "Dean." Wanting to rub the irritation away some more, Joe stopped. "Andrea has a flu bug or something, she can't wander two feet from the commode. Now, you wanted to be treated no different than if you hadn't lost your sight, and I'm not. If you could see you wouldn't be laughing."

"Yeah Joe. But I can't see. So explain to me why you can't just have Jason work the clinic and you run Containment when Ellen's done there."

"I can't run containment Dean, after my meeting I have to run out to Metals they're short handed for the melting. I'll be there until night."

"What about Dan?" Dean asked.

"Dan is working perimeter nine for Huey who broke his ankle."

"Robbie."

Joe grunted. "Robbie is in Mechanics today, all day. He got a late start and he has to fill in for Dan tonight on perimeter seven because Dan is filling in for Huey today."

"Why not just leave Ellen in containment all day then and I'll go up to the mobile lab and work with Johnny up there."

Joe refrained from just reaching out and slapping Dean upside the head. "Dean! Johnny is up there now running experimental batches. Didn't we decided he'd do that in the morning and you and Ellen would do the agent seventeen testing afternoon and evenings so know one else knows? How do you propose we keep up the agent seventeen facade if you go up there and work with Johnny on it. Though I trust my grandson explicitly, he is his father's son and I can't trust what will escape his mouth when a female questions him. And trust me, he tells me that Denice is constantly asking him if they are close to curing it. It's getting on his nerves. Just like you're getting on mine now! Now your ass either works this clinic or you're Ellen's relief at containment. Which will it be?"

"Forrest. Why can't Forrest . . ."

"Dean!"

"All right, all right." Dean held up his hands. "Containment. I'll work containment for the next couple days."

Joe let out a long audible breath. "Good." He turned his views from Dean and to the door. "Thank . . . Hey! Hey you!"

Dean jumped from Joe's yell. "What, what did I do?"

"Hold up Missy! Stop!"

"Joe?" Dean asked with such a hesitation. "Why are you calling me Missy?"

"Not you. Sorry Dean." Joe walked away from the counter and he held out his finger to the door curling it in a call to Ellen. "Now, come here."

Ellen whined. "Aw Joe, I'm busy, I have to get back over to containment."

"Not so fast."

Dean snickered at Ellen's stomp as she entered the lab. "Hi El."

"Hi Dean." She walked in. "Can I kiss you yet?"

"Nope. Cowboy law. I don't want to get killed."

"Aw." She whined again. "It's a Slagel thing this cowboy law. It's not real."

Joe cleared his throat. "I beg to differ. Clint would beg to differ . . . the Duke would beg to differ with . . ."

"Oh Joe The Duke is dead and we should assume so is Clint. I have to get back to containment, the animals are left unattended." She turned to leave. "Bye Dean."

"Not so fast." Joe called out.

Dean was curious. "El? What did you do?"

"Nothing." She answered. "Joe I have to go."

"Ellen." Joe spoke firm. "I know, no wait, the whole goddamn town knows you and Henry broke up last night. But do you think it helped matters by getting drunk . . ." He saw Ellen open her mouth and he held his hand up. "Don't deny it, Josephine told me."

"Oh Josephine could barely stand last night, she was offering herself to Forrest."

"Still." Joe continued. "Do you think . . ."

"Joe my head hurts."

"Ellen. It's bad enough you got drunk beyond walking straight, but do you mind telling me why in God's name I had to walk into my son's bedroom and see you in bed with Robbie?"

A thump, a rattle and a bang.

Ellen hurried to Dean's aid. "See Joe, you knocked a blind man off his balance. Here Dean." She helped him to his feet. "How did you fall?"

"Frank!" Dean yelled.

Ellen looked at Joe then back to Dean. She spoke to him like he was three. "Sweetheart, Frank isn't here. Did you think he pushed you?"

"No." Dean felt out for the stool. "He keeps moving my things on me. I always have that stool at the end of the counter."

Ellen giggled. "Sorry." She bent down and picked up the stool. "Here." She led his hand to it. "And Joe for your information, I didn't have sex with Robbie last night." She looked at Dean. "I didn't have sex with Robbie Dean honest. I wanted to sleep at your house and . . . never mind, long story, I told you most of it. But I just slept in the same bed as Robbie. He was so drunk he didn't even know I was there."

"Sex or no sex." Joe said. "It's the same thing."

Ellen laughed at him. "Oh I beg to differ Joe. Really I do. Has it been that long for you?" She snickered and nudged Dean. "Anyhow, why are you preaching morals to me?"

"This has nothing to do with morals Ellen. This has everything to do with my goofy ass son. He woke up in bed with you this morning. And you know as well as I do, there is nothing he loves more than to get people started. And I have spoken my peace." Joe stepped back. "And since you were in such the hurry to leave, I'll walk your ass to containment so you can prepare a day for Dean in there." He heard Ellen snicker. "Yeah you heard me. Dean in Containment."

"But Joe, he's blind. How will he control them?" Ellen tried not to laugh.

"Get your new buddy to help. Let's go." He reached out and snatched her by her arm. "Say good bye to Dean."

"Bye Dean." Ellen tried to kiss him but Joe pulled her back. "Hey!"

"Cowboy law."

(5)

Joe remembered well in the old world how when ever he used to enter a store a slight buzzing would occur to let the clerk know someone had entered. It was a great idea Joe thought, one that he didn't know they had in Beginnings but found out his office had when he opened the door and heard the moan.

Alarm system or stupidity? Knowing that deep voice well, Joe shut the door and opened it. Again, another moan. "Frank?" Joe walked into his office. "What is wrong with you?"

"You keep hitting me with that door." Frank stood to the side of the open drawer of the file cabinet. "Here I am putting away your stupid reports and you hit me with the door."

"I wouldn't hit you with the door if you would stand in *front* of the file cabinet." Joe walked behind his desk. "Sorry I was late."

"That's O.K." Frank shut the top drawer. "Henry isn't here yet. So, where were you?"

"Fighting with Ellen. Arguing. Seems from what I heard she was quite wasted last night."

"I told Robbie to watch out for her. He let her get drunk?"

"I'd say. And then I tried to tell her she can't live with me. Nothing against Ellen Frank, but I don't want her with me. Christ she has your house, and Dean's. Lord knows I don't want to open Robbie's bedroom door again and see her in his bed."

"What!" If Frank's voice was fire, Joe would have been torched.

"Now don't get yourself all worked up. She was in his bed and . . . and . . . you'd better have a talk with that brother of yours. Taking advantage of her in that state."

"Oh I'll talk to Robbie all right. After I beat his fuckin ass." Frank pounded his fist once into the side of the filing cabinet. Adding yet another Frank dent.

"Yeah it's a real shame. I go walking in there, imagine my shock."

"Fuck. I should have known. I know what she gets like when she gets drunk. I should have just slept with her like she asked me to."

"Frank."

"What?"

Joe motioned his head to his office door that had just opened and brought in Henry.

"Hey." Frank cleared his throat, placed the stack of reports he held on top of the file cabinet and closed the drawer. "Let's uh start this meeting."

Henry watched Frank walk away from that cabinet and to a chair by his father's desk. "She asked you to sleep with her?"

"Did I say that?" Frank looked at his father. "I didn't say that. Did I?"

Henry sat down. "Yeah you did. What made you turn her down Frank?"

"Well you know, she was drunk, she was on the rebound. And . . . don't take this the wrong way, but I couldn't do that to you."

Henry lowered his head some "Thanks Frank. How could I take that the wrong way?"

"Ellen did. She said we ought to be the ones to get married. And she thought I got a little upset. It's nothing compared to how mad I am to find out she was in bed with my brother. Don't worry Henry, I'm gonna kill him."

Henry waved his hand. "Don't worry about it Frank. I know Ellen. She didn't fool around with Robbie. I'm certain of that."

"But my Dad walked in and saw them two in bed."

"That might be so." Henry remained calm. "But they didn't have sex."

Joe leaned forward into his desk, and squinted a little in pain from the still healing injury to his buttocks. "They didn't Henry. They passed out drunk. But tell me how you were so sure of this."

"Easy." Henry still spoke calm. "Ellen got her period yesterday. She's, how does she put it, on vacation."

Frank's hand slammed hard down on to the chair. "You gotta be fuckin kidding me. Fuck! She's on her period?"

Joe snickered. "What's the matter Frank, upset by the empty proposition she gave you last night."

"Hell no. You think I give a shit if she's on her period? I never have, and she knows that excuse doesn't wash with me. No, I'm mad about the bet I mad with Dean. He can't touch her the week, she won't let him touch her. Fuck."

"Waste of a good cowboy law." Joe stated. "Now can we start this meeting Frank. You called us here."

"Oh yeah." Frank shuffled in his chair. "O.K., with . . . Shit Henry. What the hell happened to your arm. You have a huge welt."

Henry rolled his eyes. "Steve your guard. He flicked a cigarette off the tower and burned me."

"He's an asshole." Frank commented. "Anyhow as I was saying before Henry rudely interrupted, with Danny working on this tracking system, he said it will take a week or two to start getting it up and running. Once he gets out of containment and gets his supplies. Now I have a security plan.

In fact, I'd like to put it into motion as soon as possible. It goes along with our New First defense system."

"Which is?" Joe asked.

"More choppers." Frank stated. "Two more birds." He heard Henry moan. "What?"

"We went through this before Frank." Henry said. "We'd have to take a truck to where ever they are, repair them. Charge of the battery, gas them. It's too much of a risk."

"Dad."

"We *did* discuss this before Frank."

"I know." Frank nodded. "But things are different now. We haven't any idea how many of those SUTs, or even people working for George, are out there now. Dad, you know as well as I do. Give a hundred that back gate perimeter, four can be the suicide squad, hold back the beams while the others storm us. It's a fear I have and what will we do. We're done. With Danny's tracking system. We get them by air and we take them out before hand."

"And you don't think two is enough?" Joe asked.

"Two is enough." Frank said. "But we depend on both of them. We should have back up, like everything else here. We should be prepared for something to happen. We have four piolets. I'd like to start training four more. I have the four picked out. Look, I have the route all planned out." Frank lifted up and pulled a wrinkled piece of paper from his back pocket, he laid it on the table. "We pack up a small tanker. Four men. We send them out to Minot Air Force Base, six hour trip tops from here and you know it. Seven if they piss around. We send them out five a.m. they get there by noon. We spot out two birds. Come on, last time we did a spot check of the place, no one had touched it. No one even attempted to take the padlocks off the gates we set up. It's buried under five feet of jungle. Dirt, bugs yeah,. But we've done it before. We've picked up a second chopper. How long did it take you Henry? Four hours. What did we do? We brought the battery from the chopper we had running, and used that to help power the new one home. Then we took it out and gave it its own battery. We can do the same here. Take two batteries with us from our birds and take them back out once we land them." Frank looked at his father. "Dad, we can have our men back home by ten p.m. that night. Hell, let's do one better. Let's take one of the spare tankers, little ones and just leave it there We can pick up another tanker a hell of a lot easier than we can pick up a bird. Our men will fly home. Home by five. Dinner time." Frank was so certain.

"Who's the crew?" Joe questioned.

"Bart will drive. He won't be missed in security. Robbie and Johnny to fly. Robbie especially because he's canvassing for missiles while . . . while Henry fixes the choppers."

"No." Henry stated. "No, Frank. I can't go."

"One day."

"My life is in shambles right now. No I can't."

"Yes you can." Frank argued. "Don't be such a wuss."

Henry gasped. "Why don't you go?"

"Because I can't fix the fuckin choppers that's why. I don't claim to be the head Mechanic around here. I'm not the one who boasts and brags that I put together an entire helicopter engine when it laid in pieces last year. Am I? No." Frank pointed at him. "You will go."

"Joe." Henry looked to Joe.

Joe tossed his hands up. "I wish you would go Henry. But Frank, you know our established rules. We can't make a man go if he has children."

"Yeah." Henry folded his arms.

"Oh that's bullshit. Henry wouldn't have even of thought about that. Look at Greg. He went out for weeks and he had a child."

Joe shook his head with so much sarcasm on his face. "Greg's dead Frank. Good example."

"Yeah." Henry pointed. "His son is an orphan now."

Frank grunted and stood up. "Dad. Can I have this trip if I find someone who can fix the choppers?"

Joe nodded. "Sure Frank. Lay it out. I'll authorize it for as soon as your ready."

"Good." Frank walked to the door. "We'll leave Thursday."

"Where are you going?" Joe called out.

"To get the person that can fix the choppers. And obviously it's not Henry.." Frank flung open the door.

"Who Frank?" Joe yelled.

"Danny." He slammed the door and angry he stood outside trying to calm down before heading into town. He patted his chest pocket and twitched his head in disgust. "Fuck." Spinning around he opened his father's office door, walked in, walked up to Joe, reached in Joe's chest pocket and grabbed a cigarette. "Thanks." He placed it in his mouth and lit it as he walked back out.

With his mouth hanging open, Joe pointed to the door. "Did he just . . ."

"No." Henry shook his head.

"But I just saw him."

"No you didn't."

"No I didn't?"

"Oh no Joe. That wasn't Frank." Henry told him. "It's never Frank who smells like cigarette smoke or is smoking, didn't you know that. It's Robbie. So just keep in mind when you get really frustrated while asking him about it, that he's gonna tell that wasn't him that walked in here, stole a cigarette and lit it. It was Robbie."

(6)

"Come on Dean. Relax." Ellen held on to his arm as they walked slowly down the hall of containment. "You're so tense I can feel it shooting from you."

"I can't do this."

"Sure you can." Ellen brushed into him. "Bentley and Danny and the cable guy are all gonna help you with the rough six."

"Rough six?"

"Yeah, they're a little rough, they fight all the time, just ignore them. Danny said he'll handle them for you."

Dean sniffed predominantly. "Why am I smelling an over abundance of Hair Hold in this place." Dean stopped, grazed his hand up to Ellen's head and felt. "You're hair is soft."

"Thanks." She messed up his. "And so is yours. No. Bentley is practicing women's hairstyles in the skills room. I gave him some old magazine. Oh Dean, he said he'll cut your hair."

"Swell." He started walking again with her. "Are there women here now?"

"Don't be silly. Women aren't safe here. Well, I am."

"Then who is Bentley practicing on?"

"Who else. The men. They look real funny Dean with their hair in rollers. Too bad you can't see them."

"El."

"Sorry." She brought him into the skills room. "You should see Os-Oscar Dean, he is wearing the flip." Ellen giggled. "Of course he isn't Os-Oscar anymore. Jason cured him. The dick." Ellen smiled. "Oh here's Danny. He's approaching you with an extended hand Dean.. He's about six foot." Ellen guided Dean's arm up. "Danny. This is Dean."

"The first ex-husband." Danny shook his hand. "I'm Danny Hoi. Nice to meet you. So you're . . . you're . . . you're blind."

Dean raised his head. "You didn't know?"

"Holy shit no." Danny said. "Ellen failed to mention the man she bragged about being the brilliant scientist was blind. Whoa. She should have bragged more."

Dean was curious. "Danny, if you didn't know I was blind. Why did you think Ellen asked you to help me out in here?"

"To be honest?" Danny chuckled. "I just thought maybe you were . . . you were a pansy?"

Dean's mouth dropped open.

Frank's loud 'he is' bellowed at them.

Ellen hunched. "Oh shit it's Frank. I'm out of here. Danny you know what I told you. Dean, is all the stuff at the clinic?"

"El . . ." Dean tried to talk.

"Good. Danny will help you read the schedule. See ya." Quickly she kissed Dean on the cheek and faced the end of the hall to see Frank walking her way. Debating on whether to run, or face him. Ellen decided to run. She charged forward down the hall to make her escape. Frank blocked her. "I have to go." She moved to her right.

"Nope." Frank moved again to stop her.

"Frank." She moved to her left.

"El."

"Watch out." She shoved by him only to be snatched back and picked up. "Frank!"

Frank laughed as he set her back down a few feet down the hall. "Why are you running away from me?"

"I have a headache and I don't feel like dealing with you."

"El, I'm crushed. Besides you're just pissed . . ." Frank leaned to her ear. "Because I shot you down."

"Don't flatter yourself Frank Slagel."

"Well, just so you know. I turned you down because you're on your period."

Ellen gasped. "How do you know that?"

"Simple." Frank held out his hand. "You bloat."

"I do not."

"You do too. Really bad."

"You're an asshole Frank. I do not." Ellen brushed by him and proceeded to pull out her tucked in tee shirt just on the outside chance Frank was right.

"Where are you going?"

"I have to get to the mobile and relieve your son before he has a fit. He has to work for you now Frank." She walked backwards. "And why are you here?"

"I have to talk to your boy." Frank pointed to Danny. He saw Ellen hesitate before going out and then he saw Ellen step closer the more he backed up to Danny.

Danny saw Frank pointing to him. "Hi Frank, what's up."

"Danny. Do you . . ." Frank looked to his left to Ellen who had snuck back and peeked her head into the circle of Frank, Dean and Danny. "Danny do you . . ." Frank placed his hand on top of Ellen's head and shoved her out. "Do you know anything about fixing helicopter motors."

Danny fluttered his lips. "You're kidding right? You're not kidding?"

"Nope."

"Shit. I've never even seen a chopper motor. Why?"

"I need someone to leave the walls with a small crew to go pick up two helicopters. The batteries will have to put in them and the engines will need fixed up. Hopefully only cleaned and such. Robbie and my son can help, but the mechanical aspect they may need some help. I thought maybe you knew."

Danny lifted his shoulders and dropped them. "I'm sure if I spent a good eight hours with a motor, looking at it and learning it I could be of use. I'm pretty good with motors."

"Good." Frank said. "Then I'll get you out of here to . . ."

Henry's 'no' shut them all up and surprised them. All but Dean who actually heard the Henry-shuffling of steps before he spoke.

"No." Henry walked to the group, pausing to look at Ellen. "He doesn't need to go. I'll go. It's only for a day." He stepped into the circle of men. "I know what I'm doing. I'll go."

Frank nodded pleased. "Even better. You want me to still get Danny out of here to give you a hand with . . ."

"No." Henry said strongly. "I can do it. I've done it. That's O.K. Thanks Danny for offering." Henry stepped from the group and turned around, hoping to see Ellen and hoping to pull her aside, but he didn't see her.

Danny saw that he was looking for her. "She went in her office."

"Thanks." Henry walked a few feet down the hall and looked in Ellen's office, he saw her standing by her desk. He knocked on the archway. "El? Can I talk to you."

Ellen turned around and looked at him. She walked to him. "No." And with her word she slammed the door shut in Henry's face.

Henry's head dropped and his hands immediately gripped the outer doorway. "Shit." He shook his head. And when he swayed it to his right he saw he had an audience. Not wanting to make anymore of a spectacle of himself, he decided to try later when no one would see him. Henry gave a half wave and walked slowly down the hall. He was surprised as he went to buzz himself through that Forrest walked in at the same time. "Hey Forrest, Bye Forrest."

"An-ray." Forrest moved perky down the hall. "Ah Frunk and Don. Have you sun El-loon?"

"Uh Yep." Frank moved to Ellen's office door. "Why you need her?"

"Un woo luck very mooch ta speck with her."

"Sure." Back knuckling the door in a knock, Frank called out. "El."

"What!" She blasted as she opened the door and sent everyone back a step. "What Frank?"

"Forrest wants you."

Ellen let out a breath and decided Forrest did nothing to deserve her bad mood, so she placed on a smile and walked out of her office. "Hi Forrest."

"El-loon Uh um hop-pay dat uh hef fund you. Uh woo luck ta speck with you."

"Sure Forrest. What's up." Ellen crossed her arms.

Forrest looked a bit nervous, but he was also full of confidence in himself. "El-loon, Uh wuss wondering ef you wooed bay in-trees-dead en huffing a det with may."

Ellen heard Dean's snicker, she knew he understood, unfortunately she didn't. "Could you repeat that?"

"Oui." Forrest tried to stand taller, he looked slightly up to Ellen. "Wooed you luck ta huff a det with may?"

Ellen really didn't want to be rude. Obviously Frank was, because he burst into laughter right there and then. "Frank." She scolded. "Stop it."

"Answer the man El. He wants to have a date with you." Frank informed her. "Go on." He raised his eyebrows so sarcastically.

"A date?" Ellen asked Forrest and saw him nod.

"Oui. An-ray tod may et es ah-rut."

"He did, did he?" Ellen folded her arms tighter. "Sure Forrest I'd love too. When?" She hid her snicker at the synchronized gasps of Dean, Danny and Frank.

"Woo you luck ta do et Friday?"

"Sure. Friday after my meeting."

"Ah-rut, et es a det." Forrest reached forward and tapped Ellen on the cheek. "Uh woo speck ta you latter a-butt tit? Oui?"

"Yes." Ellen nodded and watched Forrest, so bubbly walk back down the hall. She spun her body to face Frank and Dean who laughed. "What?"

Frank laughed the hardest. "How can you be so mean, leading the man on like that?"

"I'm not leading him on Frank. I'd like to go out with him. And I have to go. Bye Dean good luck."

"No-No." Frank chased her. "Why would you want to go out with Forrest?"

"Perhaps I want to see what the other women are talking about with the older gentlemen. A kinder, gentler lover."

"We aren't talking George Bush here El. We're talking about a four foot french guy."

"Frank." Ellen shook her head and moved to the door.

"El." He followed her out. "You really aren't doing this, are you."

"Yes Frank I am. And quit following me."

"El." He grabbed her arm and stopped her before she left the building entirely. "What are you going to do when he touches you for real? Huh? Makes a pass at you."

"Frank, stop." Her hands laid on the containment door pushing it open slightly.

"Reaches his old hands for your . . ." Frank stepped to behind her. "Your breast. What if El, what are you gonna do if he . . . gets naked?" Frank shuddered. "Then what. You'll be stuck."

"Then." Ellen turned just a little to face him readying to make an exit. "Then I'll imagine he's you and I'll . . . I'll screw the hell out of him. Bye Frank." She darted out the door.

Frank smiled with a wide mouth grin staring at that closed door. He turned back to go in containment and saw Huey the guard with the broken ankle staring at him. "What?"

"Getting back together with Ellen Frank?" Huey lifted his eyes from the book he read. "You got that little Frank an Ellen flirtatious thing back."

"Yeah." Frank smiled. "Yeah we do. Buzz me in. I'm going back with Dean for a while if anyone is looking for me."

"Helping him out in there?" Huey asked.

"Fuck no." Frank listened for the buzz and opened the door. "Blind jokes."

(7)

Contrary to what Dean said he had done, Ellen knew better. It was a good thing she checked the box at the clinic before she took it with her to the mobile or she would have been missing several files that she needed. Dean chalked it up to the fact that he couldn't see, Ellen, she chalked up anything missing to the fact that Dean got lazy. Because as far as the blindness went, Dean was doing pretty good at handling things.

She pulled up the jeep, parking it at the end of the make shift road right outside of Jason's quantum lab. And Ellen did what she did everyday. Got out of the jeep, debated on going in to say hello to Jason, reminded herself that he stopped Os-Oscar from stuttering and flipped off his quantum lab building. It didn't feel quite as rewarding on this day because it just didn't hold the same effect when she knew Jason wasn't in there.

She carried the box of supplies close to her as she walked to the mobile. Ellen knew she was in trouble when she saw Johnny walking out. "Sorry Johnny."

"No problem El. I finished the new agents."

"How are they working?" She asked.

"Results are still cooking. I felt it was safe to leave."

"I would have been here sooner but your father held me up. He's such a jerk."

"That's my dad." Johnny commented. "Sorry to hear about you and Henry."

"That's O.K. You know me. I move on. Just like I'm going to move on to the mobile."

"El." Johnny tried to talk to her. "Do you think you and Henry will get back?"

"No Johnny. He had his chance. He blew his chance. There will not be a second chance."

"You've given my dad many second chances."

"Johnny." Ellen winked subtly. "That's your Dad."

"Are you getting back with my dad?"

"Probably not."

"Dean?"

"I honestly think I'm giving up on all three. I mean, how pathetic I must be. A world with hardly any women. And here I am, a woman. And I have Henry who won't marry me because of Frank. Frank who won't be with me because of Henry. And Dean who won't commit to me because of me."

"So why commit to any of them? Be Ellen, the free spirit."

"That would have been all well in fine in my hey day John. But I'm getting older now. All right, I know in this day in age you kind of have to spread your companionship. But even with that, even separating myself like that, I still wanted one person to be the one person. My constant. The one person that I knew when I turned eighty, he would be sitting right there with me. Being my companion. I thought that would be Henry. I really thought that."

"I'm sorry El."

"It's fine Johnny. And you'd better be going before you're too late to blame your tardiness on your father."

"Yeah." Johnny began to walk away. "Oh hey El? Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Why aren't we working with our agents on the host virus sample we have? We're trying our agents on everything else. Strands, two and three. Why not one?"

"One word. Dean." Ellen stated. "He doesn't think we should. You know him. Just because he used to be one of the top minds in his field he thinks he knows everything. Go figure. I have argued with him."

"Keep arguing because I think it's a mistake ignoring that host virus." Johnny stepped back. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"See ya Johnny. Thanks for helping today."

Trotting the rest of the way to the mobile, Ellen hoped that Johnny didn't lock the door. The last thing she wanted to do was balance a box and reach for a keypad. Johnny didn't. The door was open.

Taking a second to enjoy the cool air condition air. Ellen felt the heat of the day leave her and she laid the box on the counter to her left. When she did, she saw it. A single wild flower. She lifted it up and brought it to her nose.

"It's from me."

Ellen's head quickly turned to Henry who stood by the trailer door. She turned away.

"I knew you were coming, so I came up."

Ellen set down the flower harshly and proceeded to unpack her box. "I'm very busy Henry. So unless you came up here to fix something. Please leave."

"I did come up here to fix something." He walked to her. "Us."

"We can't be fixed."

"Anything can be fixed."

"Not if enough damage is done, it can't." She continued reaching into the box.

"Ellen." Henry grabbed her hand and pulled it out of the box. "Have we done that much damage. Have I done that much damage that I can't repair it. El . . . I'm the fix it guy remember?" Another inch closer to her he moved. "Let me fix this. Please let me try to fix this."

"There is nothing you can say or do Henry. Nothing." Ellen tried to pull her hand back.

"No El. I don't believe that. I love you." The more Ellen tried to pull from Henry, the more he held on. "I made a mistake. A big mistake. I was wrong for not being honest with you. And I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. We have something El. Not had. And like your hand, I'm not about to let it go."

"You have no choice Henry."

"It's not right El. It's not right that we fight and then it's over with. Where did working it out go? Why can't we sit down and talk. If there's one thing you and I could always do, it was talk. Can we please talk right now?"

Ellen was quiet for a moment and she let her answer be known to Henry when her tensed hand relaxed. "We'll talk."

"Thank you." Henry said breathy and touched her cheek. "Thank you. Can we sit?"

"No we'll stand."

"We'll stand then. O.K., I'll start. First, I need you in my life El."

"You had me in your life Henry."

"But I still do, don't I? It can't be over. It really can't be over."

"It is." Ellen stated.

"But why?"

Ellen gasped in shock that he would even ask her that. "Henry, you don't want to marry me."

"I never said that. I want to marry you El."

"Henry?" Ellen lifted her head and looked at him. "You do?"

"Yes, I do. I've always wanted to marry you."

"Oh Henry." Ellen smiled and jumped to him. She wrapped her arms tightly around his neck. "I thought you didn't want me. I thought you were just using me. Why did you do it then? Why did you call off the wedding?"

"I tried to tell you last night. You wouldn't let me."

"You mean about Frank?" Ellen asked.

"Yes."

"What happened Henry? Did you think about it. Did you realize that it wasn't a good reason to call it off?"

"El?" Henry stepped back an inch. "It is a good reason."

"But you changed your mind."

"Changed my mind?" Henry stuttered his words out.

"About marrying me."

"I always wanted to marry you El. I just couldn't."

"But you can now."

"No." Henry shook his head. "I still can't."

"What?" Ellen moved away from him. "You said . . . you're up here to fix things."

"Yes I am."

"But you didn't change your mind about going through with the wedding?"

"El."

Ellen's mouth opened in shock. "Why are you here Henry?"

"I don't want us to be apart."

"But you don't want us to be married."

"I do."

"Bullshit!" She blasted him. "Bullshit. If you really wanted to marry me bad enough you would."

"And if you really wanted to be with me bad enough, you would."

"I do!" Ellen spoke strong.

"But only if we get married? That's wrong El. That is so wrong."

"And so is sleeping with me, telling me you love me, telling me you will marry me and then not going through with it."

"I was wrong for not telling you how I felt about the marriage. I'll admit that. But can't you admit, you're wrong for giving up on us because I can't marry you."

"No, I am not wrong." Ellen stormed from him to the other side of the counter, as if that was her defensive wall. "You come up here and want to piece things back together and end up telling me I'm wrong?"

"Putting a contingency of marriage on our relationship isn't helping us."

"Neither are you!" Ellen yelled at him. "And leave."

"No."

"Leave Henry."

"Why is it so important El? Why? Why must we be married to be together. We weren't before. Can't you see I have to keep my obligation to my friend?"

"What about your obligation to me?"

"It's there! I don't need a preacher to tell me to be obligated to you. It's there. In this day and age a commitment like marriage isn't necessary."

"I would think Henry, as a man who *had* one of very the few women, you would insist that a commitment like marriage is necessary."

"We are committed El. We have the dedication."

Ellen proceeded to unpack her box, shutting out Henry and speaking as if she were. "Not much longer."

"Are you gonna say that was a mistake, just like you said Nick was?"

Ellen's hand slammed hard in the counter. "I never said Nick was the mistake. Having Nick with you was. And as far as the dedication goes

Henry, you aren't really up on your understanding rules are you? Let me fill you in. That dedication came from Mine and Frank's marriage. Frank and I are no longer married. Getting that dedication annulled will be easy."

"I won't sign the papers." Henry tossed his hands up. "I won't. You think I'm gonna sit back and let you move on so fast? I won't sign them."

"And if you knew me Henry, you would know signing them or not. I'll move on, and fast as you put it. With your help too."

"What's that suppose to mean?"

"One word. Forrest." Ellen took the now empty box and set it on the floor.

"What about him?"

"You gave him your blessing to ask me out. He told me you did."

"Oh I did . . ." Henry's eyes widened. "Shit. No El. No!" He followed her as she moved to the special lab with papers. "No. You know I never understand him. You know I agree to everything he says. Forrest asked you out?"

"Yes he did and . . . I told him yes."

Henry reached out and grabbed her arm before she disappeared into the special lab. "Before you go and get yourself in a situation with him that you can't get out of. Let me just let you know something. Going out with him will not make me jealous El."

"I didn't think it would." Ellen opened up the lab door. "Now, when I go out with Danny. That ought to do it."

Henry's mouth shut and his jaws twitched. "Danny? Since when did you lower your standards El and go after survivors?"

"Since when did you get so prejudice."

"When you turned so shallow."

"Shallow?" Ellen blared. "How is going out with Danny shallow?"

"I will never look at it as anything else but a ploy to get to me."

"You think I need to get to you Henry? You think I would use Danny to get to you? Don't flatter yourself." Ellen flung her head back trying to make her exit but she was still gripped by Henry.

"Then why would you even go after a survivor."

"If he was just a survivor Henry, you wouldn't be so bothered. I'll tell you why this bothers you. You're threatened by Danny."

"I am not."

"The hell you aren't." Ellen said snidely. "And you're threatened big time. He's smart. He's funny. He's good-looking and he's nice Henry. Not too mention he has this uncanny ability to create things that you couldn't even come up with. I'll tell you what Henry, instead of you sitting back worrying about him taking over a person you used to have in Beginnings, you'd better sit back and worry about him taking over a job you could be saying you used to have in Beginnings."

Henry's hand sprang off of her as if her skin burned him to the touch. "I never thought I'd see the day when you would speak to *me* the way you speak to Frank or Dean when you're angry with them."

"Neither did I Henry. I had you on a pedestal above them because you treated me like I was so special. I never thought you'd ever hurt me."

"I'm human El. I make mistakes."

"See, I didn't think that. That was my mistake. And now that I see you *are* human and you're just like the other men in my life. Guess what Henry. I don't want you."

"You don't mean that."

"Yeah I do. Because in my book right now, there is nothing that separates you from Frank or Dean. So why stay with you? We have no long history. There's nothing that makes you special to me anymore Henry. Nothing."

Henry nodded slowly and stepped back away from her. "And I guess hearing you speak like this, I guess there's nothing that makes you special to me anymore either El." Somberly he began to walk away. He paused at the work counter and looked at the wild flower he had stopped and picked for her. His peace offering. So simple, so natural, just like he thought he and Ellen were. Henry grabbed the flower and walked to the mobile lab door. Before he left, he stared down at it, then turned slowly back around to face Ellen who watched him. "No." He took a step to her. "I'm not going to end this bitter. I refuse to end this bitter. Because I am different than Frank and Dean." Another step closer to her. "I have acquired a great friend in Beginnings. A friend that I would like very much to keep. To talk to. To laugh with, to gossip with. You El. But if choose not to remain my friend, I'll understand. I will. But just know, I will not allow myself to be angry about our break up. Know why? Because it would ruin what you've done for me. You made me laugh and smile again, you made me feel human again. You gave me a son. For an entire year, I wasn't lonely anymore. Even if it was for just that short time, I will forever be grateful to you." Henry walked closer to her and extended the flower out. "Will you keep this El?"

Ellen swallowed. "No Henry I won't."

Henry closed his eyes momentarily, took a step back clutching the flower and he moved quickly from the lab. But before he left, he crushed the wildflower and tossed it in the trash, not looking back as he walked out the door.

(8)

If there was one thing George truly missed about Beginnings and vowed to keep the same when he returned, he would say the alcohol. The moonshine recipe brought to Beginnings when they arrived by a farmer named Stan, an original, was kept up even after Stan's death. Unlike any

moonshine George had ever tried in his entire life, Stan's batch was sweet and tasted more like bourbon than anything else. Stan said it was his secret ingredient that he would take to his grave. Fortunately for Beginnings, Stan got entirely too drunk one evening and he boasted that secret ingredient. And not one person thought twice about taking advantage of his drunkenness. They quickly questioned him all about making it and wrote it down.

George sipped his chemist's equivalent to moonshine. George said it had to be sweeter and with a hard kick. But the more George sipped it, the more he felt like one of those women in the old world who wanted to be one of the guys and do a shot, but only did schnapps.

But if he drank enough of it, it usually would have a soothing effect. In fact as George sat upon his front porch of his home sipping his alcoholic beverage, he actually became giddy. Giggling and chuckling to himself and making those who passed him on the street wonder if he was in control of his own faculties. To some people the moonshine he drank had a drunken effect. George could hear the hooting and chanting coming from the bar down the street from his home in that small town located in the center of former Quantico. With all the people moving about Quantico, it sometimes took a second for George to realize the old world wasn't back. At least not yet. And it wouldn't be long either, contrary to what Beginnings thought. And thinking of Beginnings newest move made George laugh even more.

Every time their so-called tracking system popped into George's head, he laughed. Beginnings hadn't a clue that the new radar equivalent system they were going to create would be useless. George thought ahead about that one. When trying to create the perfect army, he knew one way to do it would be to make them radar invincible. Or a Stealth soldier. George did it. The microchip in the CME's made it impossible for them to be detected at all. And the soldiers he had that weren't CME's, could benefit by it too. All they had to do was carry a microchip and they too could not be seen. And that was exactly what George was going to have them do when he sent his wave of invasion Beginnings' way. He had his labs working to create more.

It almost seemed to George like an unfair advantage he had over Beginnings. But it brought George enjoyment, sitting on his front porch, thinking of his preparations, picturing Beginnings thinking that they're so high and mighty with a brand new radar system. A radar system that would fail them before they would realize it never would have worked. Like a child, George kept thinking to himself that he knew something Beginnings didn't know, and he laughed when he thought about that. But what George was unaware of was that Beginnings knew something he didn't know, and for that, they could very easily have the last laugh.

More than her words to him at the lab. More than Ellen's refusal to take his flower. The realization that Ellen was gone, really gone, hit Henry when he returned home that evening. He stopped at Frank's to visit with Nick, a part of him hoping Ellen was there. But she had long left Frank's. Frank tried to tell Henry, he tried to warn him that Ellen--even though Dean was still with him for a couple more days--had moved into Dean's vacant house.

Words, just words is what they were. Perhaps Henry should have let them sink in. Perhaps if he did, the shock of walking into his home that evening wouldn't have pummeled him over so harshly. It was if she had never lived there. Not a stitch of her clothing remained, nothing in her drawers or closet. Not a single nicknack, picture, notebook, photograph was left. Even those drawings done by her children were removed from the refrigerator door. Gone. Any remnant or reminder of Ellen had left with her. Henry's house looked eerily like it did before Ellen had ever moved in. Cold, tidy and lonely.

He couldn't take it. After looking everywhere for something of hers, even in the kitchen for her favorite mug, Henry walked from his home. He stood on the walk in front of his house for the longest time in debate, pacing back and forth like he used to do so many nights ago. And then Henry paced his way, four houses down to Dean's.

He stood outside, but he arrived too late. Any hopes of speaking to Ellen were gone when he watched the lights slowly go out. He stood there staring at the blackened house, trying with everything just to feel her presence. No more late night talks with Ellen, no more laughing at nothing. And Henry learned something as he made his way back home. He learned Ellen didn't just take her belongings when she left his home, she took his heart. And like her things . . . it wasn't coming back.

FORTY-THREE

JULY 31

(1)

So chipper and perky Ellen called out as she walked into the bedroom, holding a mug of coffee. "Let's go Dean!" She walked over to his side of the bed. "Get up." She set the mug on the night stand next to him. "Boy are you lazy today."

Dean grunted. "Go away. What time is it?"

"Seven. Let's go." She spoke annoyingly high pitched and chipper. "Dean, get out of bed."

"El, I will."

"Dean." She flung off his covers.

"El!" He pulled them back up then rolled onto his stomach.

"You're missing the day Dean." She walked to the window.

"It's seven in the morning Ellen. How much of the day can I be missing?"

"A lot. I made breakfast Dean. I'll hold it until you get out of the shower. Kids are dressed. Let's go."

"El . . ." Dean started to lift his head but stopped, he listened. "Do not tell me you're opening the blinds."

"I am."

"Why?"

"For you. It's a beautiful day."

"El, it's dark to me. And why are you so perky?"

"I've been up since five." She walked over to the bed and sat on the edge next to him. "I brought you up coffee."

"Is that mine? I smelt it."

"Yep on your night stand." She stood up. "You need me to pick out your clothes?"

"No. Frank has my drawers all arranged by . . ." Dean sat up. "Could you just look to see if he lied to me?"

"Sure." Ellen walked to the dresser. "How are they suppose to be?"

"Jeans on the bottom, the more faded they are the more on the right they are."

"Check."

"Third drawer should have my sweats on the right and tan pants on left."

"Check."

"Second drawer should have my tee shirts arranged by . . ."

"Dean, I just thought of something." Ellen said as she peered into the drawer,

"What's that?"

"What does it matter. Jeans go with everything and so do tan pants."

"I'd like to know what I'm wearing. El. Can you check my closet for me. He's suppose to have them tagged in a Frank system."

"This is silly. You'll match, that's all that matters." Ellen walked to the closet. "God, he has these things pinned to it. Shapes. Circles, triangles . . ."

"Are the circles on black?"

"Yes."

"Good."

"Dean?" Ellen watched him get out of bed and easily walk to the dresser. "We had a good first night living together again, didn't we?"

"Oh sure El, you kept me up half the night talking."

"Oh please Dean. You were out by one, I fell asleep early, two a.m."

"Two a.m. is not early El. Not by my standards. Ten o'clock is a good bedtime." Dean proceeded to pull out clothing from his dresser.

"I'd die if I missed as much of my life as you Dean, sleeping. However I was very glad you got up to talk to me last night when I came home from Frank's."

"What happened with that? I thought when you left here that you said you were going over to talk to him for a few hours."

"It's sounds almost as if you're disappointed I came home." Ellen sighed. "Anyhow, Frank asked me to leave. He said I was rambling too much. He wanted to go to bed."

"So I got the honors?"

"Dean, I wanted to talk."

"And I told you today is my first day back at the lab after Andrea's little flu." Dean huffed and shook his head. "I wanted to go to bed early. You said fine, and you went to talk to Frank."

"Frank didn't want to talk. He wanted to sleep."

"So did I."

"But I live with you Dean. You have to talk to me at night. I love talking at night."

"I love sleeping at night El." Dean grabbed his clothes. "Henry has ruined you. Staying up to midnight is one thing, hearing you still tell Jenny Matoose stories as it pushes one is another. I don't even want to hear about what you go into around three." He walked backwards to his door.

"Should you be walking blindly like that Dean."

"What other way is there to walk for me El." Dean stopped walking.

"Forwards, perhaps?"

"I know this room El. And if you feel like talking all night, go to the one who started you, the other insomniac. Henry."

"I couldn't talk to Henry for more then two minutes. I tried yesterday, I said 'hello' he said 'hello' and I said 'goodbye.'"

"Sounds like a good start to putting things back on track." Dean said. "And I'm taking a shower. I'll be a few minutes."

"O.K., I'll wait down . . . Dean? Watch out for that . . ." Ellen cringed at the soft 'thump' that sounded off when Dean rammed into the archway. "Wall."

Dean grumbled in disgust, then rubbed his head. "I have to stop doing that."

"You know you can't blame Frank on that one. That wall has always been there. Frank couldn't have come . . ."

"El." Dean held up his hand as he slowly felt his way from the room. "I'm taking a shower now. I can't talk."

"O.K."

Dean mumbled to himself as he walked from his bedroom holding his clothes and heading to the bathroom. "I have to get her talking to Henry again. Or I'll never survive her living here."

(2)

Joe couldn't figure out exactly why everyone was saying it to him. Perhaps it was because he had been shot in the rear-end, or maybe because he tried to run to mechanics, whatever the reason, he didn't think it one bit amusing when everyone would yell, 'Run Forrest Run'.

Joe was trying to help Henry out, since he unloaded the large task of getting the two new helicopters back in order. They were sort-of fine, but they needed a good Beginnings once over and cleaned up. With Henry engrossed in that portion, Joe headed off to Mechanics. He slowed his pace down, because his fast bouncy stride kept hurting the injury site that didn't want to heal.

Separate the requisitions. Write up work orders, then move about to his own work in Beginnings. The last thing Joe wanted to do was run into anyone. He thought he was safe from that, seeing how it was in the middle of the work morning. Just as he lifted the requisitions from the 'in' bin, the door to mechanics opened and in walked Trish.

"Joe." She spoke as if the so was just so perplexed. "I have a problem."

"What is it Trish, I'm a busy man."

"But I have something that needs fixed."

"Fill out a requisition."

"Joe I really need this fixed now."

"Christ Trish, Do I look like Henry? No. What is it?"

"Did someone get up on the wrong side of the bed this morning Joe?" Trish asked with a tilted head.

"Trish. No. Now what is it?"

"My phone Joe. Look." She held up her cellular phone. "It won't work."

"Is it charged?"

"Oh very much so Joe." Trish stated. "Did you honestly think I would let it go?" She tsked about that. "It just won't work."

"Then just leave it here, Scott has been the phone guy, I'll make him look at it."

"Thanks Joe." Trish spoke with such relief. "And the sooner the better too. You never know when you are going to get bombarded with calls. And I hate to miss any of them."

"Trish. Who is going to call you?"

"Just about anyone."

"Just give me the phone." Joe all but snatched the phone from Trish's hand. "Go."

"Thanks." Trish moved back to the door. "And Joe? Just so you know. I wasn't any of those people who were making Forrest Gump references to you, even if you were shot in the buttocks."

"Go."

As Trish left Mechanics, she felt so lost, so lonely without her phone. But she put high hopes in Joe that he would see to it that her phone got fixed. Even if he did remind her of Forrest Gump and she absolutely hated that movie.

(3)

The hard clanking of the tool was a sure signal that Henry was getting frustrated. Frank couldn't help but snicker at him. Dropping the tool like something was extremely wrong with the helicopter and Henry couldn't do anything about it.. "Henry, what the fuck. You keep throwing things. I know the helicopter can not possibly be that bad if they flew all the way here from Minot."

"I'm having a bad day Frank. And I'm backed up in Mechanics. The last thing I wanted to do today is fix these helicopter They almost crashed on us Frank, two times they almost crashed. And then your asshole brother, made matters worse. Screaming and nose diving the thing."

"Henry. If you could sound anymore like a woman I'm gonna suggest you marry yourself."

"At least I'd have someone then." Henry bent down to pick up his wrench. He saw the boots as he lifted his tool. He tried to ignore them hoping that they would go away. But if he knew Henry was in a bad mood then Robbie Slagel definitely would edge him on. So Henry pretended. He placed on a big smile and stood up giving it to Robbie. "How are you Robbie?"

Robbie returned the grin. "Hey Henry. I hear you're in a bad mood."

"You heard wrong." Henry lifted his tool to the helicopter's engine. "I'm in great mood."

"Oh yeah? Even with Ellen living with Dean again."

"What is up with that?" Henry asked slamming the tool down and stared at Frank with such anger. "Huh? What is up with that? Dean, he snaps at her right before he goes blind. He tells her he doesn't want to be with her and what does she do? She moves right back in with him. And you Frank, you are the worst. You scream at her call her bad names. Treat her like she nothing and . . . and she still remains your friend. He does that happen? How can you and Dean stay her friends, when I hardly do anything at all and she hates me."

"Easy Henry." Robbie answered. "You're way too nice. Frank and Dean are dicks to her. Women like that stuff. Me personally." Robbie pulled up his pants. "I uh . . . lets just say they never get mad and forget about me. Prime example, Ellen. Never in our history have we ever fought. Never has she ignored me like she does with you Henry."

"Why is she being that way to me though?" Henry asked. "Come on, she's being, such a . . . such a . . ."

Frank completed Henry's thought. "An Ellen?"

"Yes." Henry nodded.

"And you thought she wouldn't be?" Frank asked. "Man Henry. You know how she gets when she's pissed. And now add hurt on top of that. I'm surprised you haven't withered away and died from what she is capable of saying to you."

"You're not helping matters Frank." Henry stated.

"And it actually crossed your mind that I would?" Frank laughed.

"Can I get in on this? Not helping matters." Robbie asked, then smiled arrogantly. "How about that Bentley guy getting out of containment before Danny. Hey Henry wanna hear a rumor."

"No." Henry snapped.

"Come on."

"No."

"Just a little bit." Robbie begged.

"I said no."

"Come on." Robbie put it all on the line. "Come on. Please."

"All right, what is the rumor." Henry gave in.

Like a little kid Robbie rubbed his hands together. "All right. Rumor has it that Danny doesn't want to leave."

"Why wouldn't Danny want to leave Containment?" Henry hadn't a clue what his one question to Robbie would mean.

"One word." With his hands on his hips, Robbie looked as if he was waiting to release the big news of the century. "Ellen."

"What, because he has a thing for her, he's gonna stay in there?"

Robbie fluttered his lips. "Thing for her? Henry, I busted them having . . . well let's just say they were quite intimate at the moment that I walked into the women's . . . Shower."

Even though he intended on handling it with the highest amount of maturity, Henry still held the slight look of disbelief. "Liar-liar."

"I am not. Frank am I lying?"

"Yes." Frank answered. "Henry's he lying. And anymore Robbie, you suck at it."

"I suck? You suck."

"At what?" Frank quipped back with sarcasm.

"A lot."

"Name something." Frank folded his arms, moving an irritated Henry aside as he met up face to face with his brother in what was building to be an intelligent verbal challenge. "Anything."

"O.K. , I'll name something. You . . You suck in softball."

"Bullshit."

"You do, your old ass can't even hit the ball."

"You wanna put a wager on that pal?" Frank stepped to his little brother. "Prepared to back up that statement. We're playing softball tomorrow."

"No Frank. I'm not going to bet. Gambling is a man's weak addiction to achievement of power."

"You're scared." Frank nearly laughed at him. "Henry is he scared."

"No Frank." Henry snapped. "He's not scared, he's trying to piss you off and Robbie does that well with everyone. Including me, but at this time it isn't entirely Robbie. It's you too. Now could you both get out of this hanger so I can work. I have you Frank looking over my shoulder. Like the big helicopter engine teacher, trying to catch my mistakes. I have you Robbie trying to piss me of by making shit up that isn't true."

Robbie laughed. "It worked, didn't it?"

Snickering at Henry's grunt Frank pulled Robbie out of the way. "There he goes again bitching like a woman. Come on Robbie, let him go and you and I can work on ways together to get him at tomorrow's game."

"You mean like every time I pitch to him, I hit him." Robbie suggested.

"Um . . . yeah, that'll work . . . again. But Robbie." Frank walked with him from the hanger. "Not too hard, we don't need him whining about anything else."

To Henry there was definitely something about those Slagel brothers. They talked loud and rough and for some reason, they failed to comprehend that the loudness and roughness of their voices carried. And the best part of it to Henry as he worked again on that helicopter was, that Frank and Robbie actually believed that as they boasted their plan to get Henry back, they actually believed as they stood four feet away from him, that Henry would not hear them. And what irked Henry even more was that he really wanted to have a conversation with someone, and unfortunately his choices seemed to be minimal and only including the Slagels.

(4)

Ellen laughed at their tales, but she especially enjoyed the laughter rush she got from Os-Oscar as he proceeded to tell his story to everyone how he came to Beginnings. She enjoyed it immensely because it seemed the more upbeat Os-Oscar became, the more his stutter wanted to return. So she egged him on, raising the enthusiasm to her voice to get him going, all while snickering to herself at his perfectly done hair. She knew it would be a sight she wouldn't see for much longer, Os-Oscar had already made himself an appointment with Bentley to get that stylish new do. And as the thought of stylish new-do popped into Ellen's mind, so did Danny. And her smiled left her. Danny hadn't returned to the meeting.

Standing up, she handed her clipboard to Tony, a survivor who was quite versed at the observers report and she headed back to where she knew she'd find Danny. It was one or two places. Either Danny was eating--something Danny liked to do--or he was in the men's quarters. Her instincts told her he was there and she was right. She peeked in the door first. Danny was quietly packing his things into the duffle bag. He looked as if he had just showered because his hair was still wet. "Hey." She called out knocking once on the door. "What are you doing?"

"Getting ready." Danny slipped a shirt in the bag.

"You aren't upset with me that Bentley left first are you?"

"No, not at all."

"It was out of my hands Danny. They had today filled with appointments for his barber shop."

"Ellen." Danny smiled at her. "I understand."

"You don't seem like yourself though. Almost down."

"I guess you can say that."

"Wanna talk?" Ellen sat on the bed next to his bag.

"If you don't mind."

"Really?" Ellen smiled. "You really want to talk?"

"You asked."

"Oh sure but no one ever takes me up on that."

Danny snickered. "Why? Are you boring El?"

"I could very well be." Ellen answered him. "But let me just tell you I know for a fact that I wasn't boring in the old world."

Danny sat next to her on the bed. "I bet you weren't. You aren't boring now El. O.K. maybe during your skills class."

Ellen gasped. "I'm boring during skills class? That's an awful thing to say to me. I work very hard on these skills classes. I try to be creative, funny. Say I'm boring in bed, yeah I might have to agree. But say I'm boring in my skills class and you're gonna get an argument."

"I'm kidding Ellen." Danny tried not to laugh and he laid his hand on hers. "Want me to be honest with you?"

"Always. I ask that of everyone. Not that I always give that to everyone mind you." She saw the oddity of seriousness on Danny's face. "Honesty please"

"I have to say, I'm a little bit frightened of Beginnings. Now I don't have doubts that I'll get along. I will, civilization doesn't scare me. Beginnings does. I remember what civilization was before the world ended and I have this feeling that Beginnings is the next best thing. It's a feeling I have, but I'm not so sure. And the question is ringing through my mind, what is Beginnings Montana. What does it consists of. I know what you tell me when I am in here, but a part of me doesn't believe it's all true. Maybe that's the fear of wanting back that world so bad again that if you aren't all that you tell me you are, then I won't be so disappointed. And I rambled. I tend to ramble."

"No not at all. And I'm not really a good judge of that, am I? I'm the rambling queen and . . . I can answer that question for you if you'd like."

"I'd like."

"Follow me." Ellen stood from the bed and walked to the door. "Now I'm only doing this because you're getting out and I like you Danny Hoi." Ellen walked from the men's quarters Danny following closely behind her. Ellen surprised him when she buzzed them out and stopped at the guard desk. "Dan I'll be back. I'm taking Danny out back with me."

Danny had to snicker as they walked out. "Back? Wow it sounds so seedy."

Ellen shook her head leading Danny to the back of the building and to the ladder that awaited there. She grabbed the rung. "Come on up."

"Where are we going?"

"To get that answer to your question." Ellen began to climb, Danny trudging up with a smile on his face behind her. Slightly out of breath Ellen hit that roof and climbed over the small ledge. "This way." She stood up facing north.

Danny's breath was taken away when he viewed the fields. "Wow. All I hear right now is America the Beautiful."

"Well substitute it for Beginnings the beautiful because this is your new home." She turned his body to the east. "And this is where you'll live." She pointed to the houses then turned him again. "And this is where you'll work." She made him view the center town and the part of Mechanics that was seen. "All of this Danny is Beginnings, and all of this is your new home."

"This is unbelievable." Danny held back his well styled hair and moved even closer next to Ellen. "I'm really glad I told you what was bothering me."

"I am too Danny. It was nice having someone talk to me."

"See, I don't get that." Danny faced her. "I'll talk to you. Why won't anyone talk to you."

"They do. But just not for extended periods of time. Ever since Henry and I split, no one really hangs about with me and rambles. Especially at night."

"Well since you helped me out so much." Danny said. "Any time you want to talk you see me. I'm nocturnal by nature you know."

"I never was until Henry, but now I am. And don't be surprised if I show up at yours and Bentley home."

"Don't be surprised if I expect you." Danny took in a deep breath of Beginnings air. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Why would Henry let you go, why would any man who has a woman let her go?"

Ellen shrugged. "Not valuable enough I suppose."

Danny fluttered his lips. "Not much in this word is valuable. A woman is valuable. Food and gas are valuable. And Ellen, you have something of value not everyone has."

"What's that?" Ellen asked as she tucked her hair behind her ear

"Blake Steward."

Ellen snickered. "Blake?"

"Oh yeah. You are missing the boat El."

"Why, you think I should be with him?"

"No." Danny waved his hand. "O.K., what is as good as money in Beginnings. What do you guys ever bet?"

"Work hours and such. But what does the have to do with me being with Blake. I really don't like him."

"Yeah, but every woman in this town loves him and wants him. He is what their men aren't physically. And you Ellen have him."

"Where are you going with this?" She asked him.

"Sell him off. Off to the highest bidder. Imagine what these women in Beginnings will put out for him."

"They'd never go for it. They have enough men."

"Trust me. I'm never wrong." Danny stated with certainty. "Never. When it comes to making money, but in this case, money equivalent, I won't be wrong. They'll bite."

"No."

"Yes." Danny nodded. "And massively too."

"No way."

"Ellen, you are the envy of all you're near-friends. They want him. They'll buy him, and at a real high price too."

Ellen smiled brightly. "What happens if Joe finds out. He could get mad. We never auctioned off a person before."

"Don't tell Joe. Just keep it between the woman. Like at that meeting tonight."

Ellen tapped her finger on her chin. "Maybe . . . what happens if they start beating me up over an obscure idea?" She watched Danny shake his head. "No?"

"Nope."

Another wider grin hit Ellen. "You know what I think, I might actually mention it. Just mention it tonight."

"And then watch what happens."

"Thanks Danny." Ellen extended her hand to him. "I needed to just chat with someone and you helped me there. And here *I* was the one who was supposed to help you."

"Yeah but as you so often point out." Before Danny released her hand, he kissed it. "We're in Beginnings now. And isn't that what people in Beginnings do, help each other out? Of course now since I've stepped in, we can add help people to appreciate the fact that the business world can still exist in a plague ravaged society."

Ellen laughed at Danny. "You're funny."

"I try."

"No you don't. It's natural to you."

"Yeah it is. But I do fib well."

"I'll give you that."

"Thanks." Danny took one more look out below him. "Ready to go back down?"

"Making you bored already?" Ellen asked.

"No." Danny smiled. "Anxious." Danny gave a slight shiver of a breath. "Very anxious."

(5)

Dean's finger felt for small raised dot on the 'J' key of his keyboard so he could place his hands on the home row. Just as he prepared to lay his foot on the pedal to start his tape to do his dictation of Ellen notes, he paused and lifted his hands. He felt all the keys again, just to be sure and so as not to get ahead of himself. He remembered doing the day before's notes, getting comfortable on the home keys, only to start and realize that he felt more than one raised dot. There was an explanation for it. One word. Frank.

So he felt around, felt only the one dot and replaced his hands on the home row keys. He took a second to shake his head at the thought of all that Frank had done to him lately. A sick series of blind jokes on him that Dean found far from amusing. Moving his computer to a totally different location, making Dean feel around for it. Placing Johnny's lab coat where Dean usually found his, so when he placed it on the sleeves would dangle way passed his hands. Anything Frank could do to make it more annoying

for Dean, he did. He still could hear the hysterical laughter of Frank when he came up and told Dean that he put him on the roster for the next day's softball game. And Dean was scheduled to be the pitcher. How funny Frank thought himself, how childish Dean thought he was. Of course Dean hated to admit, that Frank's little practical jokes kept him on his toes and taught him more than anything else.

After dwelling in the Frank world of dementia, Dean returned to his own world and to the tiny tape of dictation that awaited him. He couldn't figure out how Ellen had done all that she did to warrant two tapes. She didn't say she had done that much work. But she had to have, so Dean had the first tape, one of the two he found in her lab coat pocket. Ellen couldn't leave them on the counter or in the dictation machine, she had to make it complicated for him everyday by making it a hide and go seek game. Everyday of radioing her and asking where the tape was. And hearing everyday, Ellen say the same thing. 'Uh . . . I uh . . . I think it's in the drawer, no wait, the special . . . no . . . check my lab coat.' Shuddering at Ellen conversation flashbacks, Dean's foot depressed down on the Dictaphone.

He listened to the usual clearing of her throat, her good mornings or afternoons. Her stupid thought for the day, and then after two minutes of nonsense rambling, he placed his hands on the keyboard and prepared himself.

"July 28th." Ellen spoke.

"What?" Dean said out loud. "El, this is three days ago. Why am I finding this tape now?" He grunted and waited, listening to her talk about how she was waiting, and still waiting. Dean wanted to fast forward but was afraid he's miss something so he listened some more.

"So what are we going to do about the two doses of antiserum?"

Dean lifted his foot from the pedal and rewound the tape a second, listening to Ellen's comment again. He stopped the tape completely and froze. "Shit Ellen. Good point." He backed it up and listened one more time. Making a mental note to put some thought into that, a bright smile hit Dean's face when he heard her tell him she loved him. After letting the nice moment pass Dean immediately went to thinking about what she could possibly want or was trying to cover up for.

Then it hit him. It made Dean jump up. It made him shudder and pulled the earphone from his head. Ellen's shriek. Dean stomped and placing his finger to his ringing ear. "Aw God Ellen." He pressed harder to his ear. "You're gonna make me deaf as well. What the hell are you screaming about?"

Apprehensively he placed the headset back on and tapped the fast forward pedal, listening as he did to what sounded like the end of the screaming. And then he heard her ramble off her excitement explanation. "You did what?" He asked the tape, rewound it--too far--jumped at the shrieks again and heard her again. "No way." Again he played it. "Oh my God." He breathed heavily. "It has to be an error." He commented on

Ellen's break through on the host virus. "Ellen you couldn't have done this. This is too big, you had to find a mistake in here or why else didn't you mention this to me." Dean moved the tape ahead hoping she explained more, but the tape was blank. "What is going on?" He took off the headphones and reached outward to his right for the phone he had placed there. He pressed the number three button for the speed dial to Containment.

Danny answered. "Containment, this is Danny."

"Danny? Why are you answering the phone?" Dean asked.

"It was ringing."

"Yeah but you're a survivor."

"And a mighty good one too Dean."

"You're not allowed to answer the phone."

"Why?" Danny asked.

"Because it's the rules."

"Kind of a dumb rule don't you think? I mean especially when in less than twenty-four hours I will be an official Beginnings-ite. Right?"

"Yes but we have to follow rules."

"Even about answering the phone?" Danny quizzed.

"Danny . . ."

"Dean, you have to admit, it's really funny that you're asking me about this." Danny laughed. "This rule thing, and you getting upset about me answering the phone. Does it have anything to do with those anal repulsive qualities that Frank has been telling me annoys him, or are you just going off about rules because I answered the phone and I wasn't the person you wanted to talk to."

"Yes."

"Which one?"

"Which one what?"

"Which one are you saying 'yes' to?"

"Danny." Dean spoke his name so annoyed. "Are you related to Henry?"

"No not really. It would have been brought up, don't you think? I mean, he's Japanese and I'm Chinese and unless we are Manchurian then that's out of the question. Actually, remember in the old world there was a clash of interest between the Japanese and Chinese. Do you suppose that has anything to do with Henry not liking me much. Would be kind of dumb if it did. After all the world did . . ."

"Danny."

"Yes?"

"Can I speak to Ellen?"

"No."

"Why?" Dean asked.

"She's not here." Danny stated.

"Then why didn't you tell me that earlier."

"You didn't ask about Ellen earlier Dean. Hey, Jason is here, do you want to talk to him instead?"

"No. I needed to speak to . . ." Dean stopped talking when he heard the door to the lab open and Ellen's cheerful greeting. "Never mind. She's here."

"So does this mean were done with our telephone conversation."

"Yes."

"Why?" Danny asked him.

"Goodbye Danny." Just as Dean pressed the button to end the call he felt the kiss to his cheek. "Just the person I wanted to see."

Ellen smiled. "Ah Dean that is so sweet. With everything there is that you could want to look at if you still had your vision you still wish it were me." She kissed him again.

"No El, that's not what meant."

"That's what you said."

"God." Dean cringed. "I was . . ."

"Don't you want to see me Dean if you could see?"

"Yes, but I wanted to talk to you now."

"I'm here."

"Thank you."

"What's up?"

Dean let out a short breath. "Did you . . . were you . . . damn it."

"What's wrong?"

"Between your's and Danny's rambling. I forgot."

"Well think about it . . . oh shit."

"What?"

"Um . . . nothing." Ellen closed one eye and looked at the computer screen to what Dean started to type. "Dean, this July 28th."

"Uh ha!" Dean called out loudly causing Ellen to scream.

"What!" She grabbed her chest. "You scared me."

"What the hell El!" He yelled at her. "You didn't give me the tape."

"Sorry."

"I'm listening to this and it's driving me nuts. You ramble, you scream . . . and what *did* it end up being that caused you to think you came up with the combination that effectively reigns over our host virus?"

"Huh?"

"It was an error right? I mean you misread the results."

"No I didn't." Ellen said

"You didn't misread them?" Dean questioned.

"Nope."

"You got it up to eighty-three percent?"

Ellen hesitated before answering. "Yes."

Dean was quiet for a second, then his voice raised to the highest of levels. "Ellen!"

"What?" She jumped back.

"Why am I only hearing about this now if you did this three days ago?"

"Well . . . I uh . . . Dean." Ellen cleared her throat. "I had a lot of problems in my personal life. See, Henry he broke up with me, well not actually him breaking up with me, I broke up with him because he broke off the . . ."

"Stop!" Dean stood up. "Before I go on, tell me if I'm facing you."

"Um . . ." Ellen moved a little to her right. "O.K. now you are."

"Thank you. Ellen, you single handedly came up with a more effective anti-dote?"

"I guess. It was a mistake, see I was singing the 'Silly' song while I was mixing up the batch and I screwed up. Which was very easy to do Dean, the names were so similar. So I . . ."

"Why didn't you tell me this? This is great news."

"It is isn't it?" Ellen grinned. "I was going to tell you."

"Did you forget about it? You had to have forgotten about it. How, I don't know, it's a really big thing."

"I kind of did and I kind of didn't. See I had a plan."

"Which was?"

Ellen hem-hawed about. "I was gonna have you mix the batch, you know tell you it was a lesson. Then tell you that you put in the wrong ingredient which was actually the right ingredient and let you be the be to have the credit."

"W-why would you do that?" Dean was stunned.

"I love you Dean. I'd rather everyone think you did it on purpose rather than me doing it by accident. Besides, this batch will deserve a lot of credit and if it gets out that I was the one, it wouldn't get the credit it deserves. Trust me."

"Well you will get the credit. I'm proud of you." Dean reached out his hand and hit air. "I thought you said I was facing you?"

"I lied. I didn't want you mad at me and flicking me or anything."

"Ellen." Dean shook his head and felt around slowly until he touched her. "Excellent job." He stepped to her and kissed her. "Now . . . let's talk about this."

"O.K. let me get my lab coat."

"Why do you need your lab coat. We're only talking."

"To feel like a scientist."

"No." Dean shook his head. "We're just gonna talk. I need updated."

"O.K."

Dean stepped back feeling for his chair and he sat down. "Wanna sit?"

"Yeah, sure." Ellen pulled up a chair.

Dean waited until he heard the silence of her shuffling about. "All right. You tested the new batch on the rabbits?"

"Yes."

"And?" Dean waited for more. "I need an 'and' because there is nothing further about it on the tape. Is it on the next days?"

"No."

"O.K." Dean tried to remain calm. "So I'm taking it that it really didn't work."

"Oh it worked."

"On the rabbits?" Dean spoke as if he were speaking to a child, or explaining something to Frank.

"Yes."

"And?"

"And you know how our Agent seventeen made them worse before it started working. Well, that didn't happen with the new batch. Nothing adverse happened at all within the first two hours."

"What happened after the first two hours?"

Ellen shrugged.

"El?"

"I answered you."

"No you didn't."

"Yes I did. I shrugged."

"I'm blind El. You have to be verbal. So you don't know?"

"No."

"Why don't you know?"

"See I uh . . . I uh . . ."

"We'll try something different El. When did the rabbits show signs of improvement?"

"I don't know." Ellen held up her finger. "But they were better the next day."

"Why don't you know any of this El. You created a new batch, you injected it into the rabbits. Were did you get lost?"

"I didn't. I left."

"You left?" Dean asked.

"Yes."

"Why would you leave in the middle of a new batch?"

"Dean." Ellen tsked. "I had to try my wedding dress on. Of course now that was an obsolete move. Prick Henry."

Dean grunted. "Ellen. Now I am going to assume you mixed up more right."

"Wrong. I really couldn't do that. It would defeat the whole purpose of making it out to look like you did it instead of me if I created an entire batch. Gees Dean, think about that."

"Ellen if you didn't mix up more, then how do you know that you pinpointed where your error was and that you could actually recreate it?"

"I don't."

Dean closed his eyes and brought his hands to his head.

"What's wrong? Do you have a headache. I wonder if its your sinuses because my head has been bothering . . ." She slowed her word when she

watched Dean lower his hands and sway his head her way. "Sorry. I just have all this talking that needs to get out."

"Let's go." Dean's hands fell to the tops of his thighs with a slap.

"Where?"

"We're gonna make another batch. Then you're going to describe to me everything you're doing while you're doing it. We'll run the analysis, you'll describe that, then we'll inject the rabbits and you'll describe that."

"Dean, that's gonna take an awfully long time. We have to pick the kids up at four and I have to get dinner ready, because I have that meeting tonight that I don't want to miss."

"Tough. We'll call Joe to get the kids."

"It'll take eight hours to do all this Dean. If we start right now I won't get home until seven. I have to shower and do my hair, I have a date with Forrest after my meeting."

"Go dirty, I don't care. We have work." Dean moved to the cabinet where they kept the ingredients.

"We can do it tomorrow."

"No."

"We'll have all day."

"No."

"We needed to start sooner."

"So we'll start now." He opened the cabinet.

"Please Dean?"

"No!"

"Dick."

"Ellen." He flung open the right side of the cabinet. "This is important. Now the more you whine, the longer it'll take for us to get started. Let's go."

Ellen rolled her eyes and joined him at the cabinet. "You know Frank was right yesterday when he was talking about you and your work."

"Yeah well Frank is always right. He's a God."

Ellen snickered as she pulled two bottles out of the cabinet. "Glad to hear you finally recognized that Dean." She laughed harder at his grunt. "Just . . . no Dean wrong bottle."

Dean released the bottle he gripped. "Sorry. Where is it."

"Oh you had it. I was kidding you."

"Ellen." He re-grabbed the bottle. "Keep it up and I'm calling Henry to be here while we work."

"Why don't you call Henry anyhow after we mix the batch. He can watch you work with the rabbits. He's qualified enough to tell you if they stopped puking or not. And Dean, you'll get the pleasure of knowing he pukes right along with them." Ellen saw that Dean paid no attention to her rambling or that he wasn't amused at her Henry comment. Ellen realized right there that Dean wasn't in the mood and had his focus on the

new batch. So she folded went to he cabinet for more supplies and decided she'd annoy him later into sending her home early.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

(1)

Ellen really hoped that all the dip wasn't gone by the time she got to the meeting. Trotting off at a quick pace to Jenny's, carrying a little pouch in her hand, she arrived, hungry from the lack of dinner and a half an hour late. She knocked on the door to announce her arrival then she walked in. "Sorry I'm late. Dean had me working."

All the women in the room turned upon her entrance.

Jenny stood from her seat next to Trish on the couch. "We were waiting, no problem." She walked toward Ellen. "Have a seat."

"I brought my supplies." Ellen held up her bag. "I didn't get a chance to make a finger food. Don't be mad."

"Oh." Jenny waved her hand. "We all know what you're working on up there is important." Ellen stepped over the extended legs of Bev and took the spot on the couch between her and Trish. Ellen shuffled in her seat. She looked to see if Bev was taking too much room, maybe not as close to the arm of the sofa as she should be, but Bev was pressed against it. "Am I getting fat? How did Jenny fit here?" Ellen asked trying to fit in the spot. "What's wrong with this . . ." She looked to see if Trish was against the arm, but she couldn't see the arm of the sofa over Trish's pregnant stomach. "God Trish you're getting huge."

Trish opened her mouth in a gasp.

"Aren't you overdue?" Ellen asked her as she reached for some dip. "Drop that kid so we can get the betting . . ."

"Ellen." Trish quickly removed the dip from Ellen's reach when she saw Ellen was eating the dip she had made. "I'm having a large child and it will be born when it's ready. I'm not even due yet."

"Not yet?" Ellen's cheeks puffed out when she filled them with the air she slowly let out. "God you'll explode if you carry it any longer. You should talk to Dean about taking it out. Wait, maybe not Dean right now. Andrea will do it."

Jenny cleared her throat to get everyone's attention. "We should be starting Ellen." She held her index finger to her own lips. "O.K. We'll get the meeting portion over with because our activity will take some time tonight. First." Jenny took on a somber look. "I speak for all of us Ellen when I say how sorry we are that Henry did this to you. And I also speak for all of us when I say it was a dick move." Applause filled the room. "We're all pissed at him Ellen. All of us. And we all put in stupid requisitions this week, lots of them just to annoy him."

This pleased Ellen and the smile on her face showed it. "Thank you for that."

"Oh sure." Jenny waved her hand. "Now I've been talking to a few of you and I'd like a show of hands on this one. I think since we have worked

so hard on the food list, got the O.K. from distribution for supplies, been creating decorations, I think that we should still have our party. But instead of it being a celebration of love, it will be a celebration of life. Reverend Bob said he'll have a special service at the church and then we'll go over to the social hall for refreshments and entertainment. Paul will still D.J. and we'll have a great party. We'll save the gowns for another wedding. I'm sure they can be taken in and such. They'll be used . . . someday whenever an unattached female gets here or Ellen decides to marry someone else. Show of hands." It was an unanimous vote. "Good. A little bit of advice please, those who think they may have problems with their partners for who they'll be with for the party, you might want to consider time slots."

The women in the room nodded at each other at such the brilliancy of Jenny's suggestion.

"Continuing. Is there anyone who has anything they need to bring up tonight?" Jenny announced and saw Ellen raise her hand. "Yes Ellen?"

"O.K." Ellen stood up--something she knew she'd regret doing when it came time to sit back down. "As you know, Robbie Slagel gave me Blake Steward as a gift last year. I've made no bones about the fact that he's mine. Even though Joe insists it's not right to claim people as their own. Blake likes it though. He's not really that smart. Anyhow . . . I feel that it's time to give him up. And seeing how Blake likes the ownership factor . . . " Ellen hesitated and then spoke rapidly. "I'm putting him on the auction block, he goes to the highest bidder." Silence, dead silence. *'Oh God, they're gonna start throwing things at me.'* Ellen thought.

Cindy raised her hand. "What do you mean highest bidder. You'll take bribes?"

Hunching her shoulders and thinking of ways to kill Danny, Ellen hesitated. "Yes."

Another woman lifted her hand to ask a question. "Then he's ours to do with what we want? That gorgeous guy would be ours."

Before Ellen answered, Jenny put in a comment. "Work hours and such count? Babysitting and so forth?"

Ellen nodded.

Jenny clapped her hands. "Oh this could be fun." She ran over and got some paper. "We have to establish rules."

A sigh of relief is what Ellen let out. "Really? You guys want to do this?"

"Oh sure." Jenny said, "I want Blake." She snickered. "I'll keep him on the side for viewing purposes." She shivered. "I love his body. O.K. Ellen, we need time. Ladies why don't we put a bid date on for Wednesday August fifth?" She waited for agreement. "And then Ellen can announce her winner on that Friday. Ellen, is that all right?"

"Um . . . yes . . . that'll work."

Jenny held up her pen. "We have to write the bids down, it'll secure it so we don't fail to pay up. And it will lesson the confusion on what we bid. Ellen, can we change our bids if we want?"

Trish shook her head. "That's not really fair. What if I bid something good, and you find out Jenny. I think it should go the same as construction bids go. Sealed and Ellen can't say who bid what."

Jenny hesitated in disagreement. "But don't you think it'll make it more of a competition game? After all, when there used to be auctions everyone had a chance to out bid the next." She waited for Trish's nod. "All right, is there anyone here who doesn't want to participate." No one raised their hands. "Then let the auction begin."

Ellen sat please--uncomfortable, but pleased--she would have to tell Danny how well things went.

Jenny continued on. "Next up. We have . . ." Jenny stopped talking when there was a knock on the door. "That should be Forrest." She walked over to the door and opened it. "Forrest!" She led him in. "We're just about finished, you can have a seat in the dining room while we finish up."

"Uh woo do that Jen-nay." As he moved through the living room he winked at Ellen.

Ellen's eyes widened and she slid in a hide closer to Trish's pregnant body. "Oh my God."

Jenny looked at her. "What was that?"

"Nothing." Ellen shook her head. "Finish up, I want to start our project."

"I'll do that. O.K., I will announce the winners for next weeks dart board competition game." She saw the enthusiastic anticipation on the faces of the women who awaited her announcement. "Bill from armory wins for telling Bev she looked absolutely stupid in her flat shoes. And . . . Dean for being so mean to Ellen. Ellen, you can change your mind now if you want."

"Nah." Ellen shook her head. "Even though he's blind now, he wasn't when he was mean. Keep him on the board."

"Good." Jenny set down her paper and pencil. "Then we can begin. Did every bring their stuff?" There was a unison of exciting 'yeses' "Then let's begin. I'll let Forrest take it while I go get the softening wax. Forrest?"

Forrest waddled his way into the livingroom. "Uh wuss en-joy-yang de dup. Et wuss good." He smiled, aiming it at Ellen. When Jenny slipped from the room, he continued. "Uh um going ta enjoy shoe-ing ma no-ledge wit all ef you. Uh will start bay hopping you un-da-stund where et all begun." So excited Forrest seemed as he was about to tell his tale. "Et es a rit-u-el ef de tribes ef Africa. De Voodoo doll wuss yessed a-gins de en-a-me to bring hem don. Woot you will use de voodoo for es for fin. Et well newt wok Sue donut dink et well." Forrest chuckled at the disappointment on the women's faces. "Et es de be-lif dat de personnel items on de doll es what mucks et magic. You well ned three items from de object of your

voodoo. You well ned hair, cloth of dem, und a item dat day tooch quit a bit. Do we huff dis items?” He raised his eyebrows to everyone to see them nod. “Ah-rut.” Forrest clapped his hands together once. “Uh see dat Jen-nay hes de wicks on de ta-bell. We well shup et onto de firm of de mall dat you want to voodoo and a-touch de personnel items to et. Shall we?” He pointed his hand toward the diningroom, and the line of enthusiastic women headed there. “Donut war-re, uh well hop you wit de firming of de wicks. Uh em quit goo dat et.” And pulled Ellen back as she passed him. “El-loon, uh em quit goo dat o-there dings es well.” He whispered in her ear.

Ellen swallowed, not only did a twinge of nervousness hit her but so did a twinge of nausea too. She shuffled quickly with a fake chuckle from Forrest. She stared into the wax, holding her little pouch.

“Henry?” Trish whispered at Ellen.

“Huh?” Ellen looked back at her. “What about him?”

“Is that who your voodoo doll is going to be?”

“Oh no, that wouldn’t be fun.” Ellen told her. “Mine is going to be Frank. Hell, I spent yesterday sewing an old tee shirt of his into Frank-clothes. And . . . I was so glad that he trimmed his goatee last night. I have a bunch of little hairs that I’m going to use too.” She opened her pouch and showed Trish. “I really hope he gives us that spell that goes on the dolls. I really want this to work.” Through the corner of her eyes, during her conversation, Ellen saw Forrest heading her way. With quick thinking, and dreading making that date. She stood closer to Trish, trying her hardest to hide behind her protruding pregnant stomach.

(2)

Total body exhaustion is what Henry looked like he was suffering from when he plopped into the chair next to the couch in Frank’s house. He held a bottle of his homemade wine and in which he proceeded to drink from. “What a night.”

Frank, who sat on the couch leaning into the coffee table, merely shifted his eyes at him. “What the hell are you whining about?”

“Nick.” Henry answered. “He’s tough Frank.”

“Aw.” Frank drastically whined. “Let’s have a pity party.”

“A pity party?” Henry snapped. “Oh grow up Frank. No one past the third grade uses that saying.”

Sitting in the other chair, Dean snickered. “Henry, look who said it. And that comment surprises you.”

“Shut the fuck up Dean.” Frank told him. “I let you into my house all evening. What? You don’t have nothing better to do than to hang out here?”

"Actually no." Dean said. "You have the kids. I'm done with what ever I can do. What else am I going to do? I'm blind Frank."

"Yeah, so we've been told a million fuckin times Dean. Take your turn."

"I'm thinking. And . . ." He heard Frank whine. "What?"

"Why are you talking. Move. It's your turn." Frank held out his hand and saw as he did, Henry taking another drink. "Why are you drinking Henry. And give me that." Frank snatched the bottle from Henry's lips. "You're drinking way too much too fast. You're gonna get plastered." Frank brought the bottle to his own lips.

Dean heard the close swishing. "Don't drink Frank."

"Don't bitch Dean." Frank quipped back.

"I'm trying to help. Do your other thing." Dean told him.

"I could do my other thing Dean." Frank set the bottle on the coffee table, it was quickly snatched back up by Henry. "But my nerves are shot. Here it is after nine, the kids are asleep, I'd have my house to myself. But no. I have Ethel and Lucy sitting right along with me."

Henry took another long drink. "Which one am I Frank?"

Frank looked at him. "Which one are you what?"

"Ethel or Lucy." Henry asked. "Which one am I?"

"What does it matter?"

"It matters quite a bit Frank. I don't want to be Ethel. I don't think there's a person on the face of the earth that wants to be Ethel. She was weird."

"Henry." Frank yelled at him. "Quiet. Dean's trying to concentrate. If he doesn't concentrate, he'll never take his fuckin turn! God! There should be a time limit. Dean!"

"It's difficult Frank." Dean held up his hand.

Henry shook his head. "Dean, I thought you were a lot smarter than that. Why are you playing scrabble with Frank."

"Call it me giving Frank a handicap." Dean answered.

"But still Dean. He'll cheat."

"So what. He's helping out, it's a game Henry." Dean became perturbed. "It's something to do other than getting drunk. Want us to start over and you can play."

"No." Henry answer quickly. "I don't want to play Scrabble with you and Frank. No way. I want to be with Ellen. But she's on a date with Forrest right now. Did you see her? Not you Dean, I'm mean Frank. She was really pretty. And she's being with Forrest."

Frank snickered. "So."

"So?" Henry leaned forward drinking some more. "It's a date. You don't care? Both of you don't care?"

"Henry." Frank looked at him. "Why would we care? She doesn't like Forrest that way. He's old. He's little, he's wrinkled. And Ellen is the most superficial person I know. If there's something about your appearance she

doesn't like, she'll gag." Frank stole the bottle from Henry and took a drink, scoffed at Dean's task, and handed the bottle back to Henry. "Now that Danny Hoi. He's the one I'd worry about. He gets out tomorrow. I like the guy and everything, but I will kill him if he moves in on her. He's stands a good chance. He has that hair thing going for him."

Henry breathed heavily outward. "How does he do that. How does he have such good hair. I try, I mean I think I . . ." He stopped talking when he saw Frank's glare and even Dean lifted his head his way. "Never mind."

"Henry." Dean fiddled with his tiles. "If you're so worried about her date, why don't you go to the social hall and intrude."

"You think I could?" Henry asked taking another drink.

Both Dean and Frank shouted 'yes' at him.

Henry jumped back in the chair. "O.K., O.K." He stood up. "Whoa." he grabbed his head. "I'm a little dizzy."

Frank shook his head. "Well float on out of here. Dean! Take your turn!"

"I would Frank, but Henry had me confused, he broke my concentration."

"See Henry." Frank pointed. "Go, and bring her back here so she can walk home with Dean."

"I don't need her to walk home Frank." Dean commented.

"No. But it'll be fun riding her about Forrest."

Henry moved to the front door still holding his bottle. He swayed a little. "I'm leaving. I think, I think I'll leave my wine here."

"You do that." Frank said as he anxiously and impatiently waited for his turn. "Go." He heard the open and shut of the front door, and Henry was gone. "Thank God." Frank pulled a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it. "I'm getting an ashtray, when I get back you'd better have your tiles down Dean or else I'm kicking your ass."

"I got it now. I got it." Dean felt the board carefully, remembering the words that Frank told him were there. He felt for the letters he needed, then placed down his tiles in the order he had them on his rack. "Done."

"Good." Frank laid the ashtray on the table, his cigarette dangled from his mouth. "What the hell is that?"

"Glaze."

"No it is not. You have 'gyrza' that's not a word Dean."

"Frank, you told me what letters I had, I made mistake. Do I not have the letters to make the word glaze using your 'Z'?"

Frank pulled at Dean's rack. "Yeah."

"So I messed up. Give me a break. I'll put the right tiles down."

"No way."

"No way?"

"Nope." Frank grabbed a pencil. "You'll remove the tiles and then you lose a turn. 'gyrza' is not a word, therefore I challenge it, therefore I get fifty extra points." Frank made a buzzing sound then snickered.

"Give me a break Frank I'm . . ."

"Don't." Frank stopped him. "Don't say it. I'm tired of hearing it. My turn." Frank grinned widely at him. "Oh Dean? By the way incase you're wondering, I have this gloating look on my face."

Dean sulked. "The one I hate?"

"That's the one." With another short laugh, Frank placed down his tiles to his words, instigating Dean with every wooden piece he put down.

(3)

'This is so neat!' Ellen thought as she stared at her Frank voodoo doll. The little black hairs she collected from the sink plunged nicely into the wax on top of the dolls head to form black hair, his perfect goatee, green clothes. And her Frank doll was bigger than any other women's, Ellen made it that way. It had to be. All except the crouch area, she made that extremely small on purpose just to irk Frank if he ever found it. *'Neat, really neat.'* She kept thinking as she walked, then she'd respond to Forrest. "A-huh."

"Uh wuss married foe . . . foe-tee years." Forrest walked side by side with her, his hands behind his back. "Uh em sure you hef felt dat way."

"A-huh." Ellen smiled. *'Wow did I do a good Job.'*

"Sometimes loon-lay-ness guts to you und you hef ta rich et ta a nether. Oui?"

"A-huh." Ellen carefully began to wrap her Frank doll in a cloth. *'I have to show this to him, it's too good.'*

"Un you do newt see de person dat you shoe see. Day are rut dear wit you und when you see dem, you know. Do you agree?"

'I really think I did the best job.' Ellen smiled again. "A-huh."

"Uh dink El-loon dat you und Uh coo bay a good cup-pal. Do you newt?"

'No one. No one else's is this good.' Ellen proudly finished covering the doll.

"El-loon? You und uh muck a good cup-pal. Oui?"

"A-huh." With a giggle Ellen tucked the wrapped doll carefully in the pouch. "Great evening Forrest." She rolled her eyes and then fake yawned. "But . . ." She stretched out. "I am really beat. Dean is a slave driver you know."

"Ah oui. Don con bay de wok-a-hell-lick."

Ellen looked to where they were, grateful she saw they were at the edge of the living section. "Well, thanks for walking me home. I can make it the rest of the way."

"Uh woo luck to wok you to you home. Uh woo luck ta comb in. Oui?"

"Uh . . . no." Ellen shook her head. "Not tonight. God." She pressed her finger to her temple. "I have this pain. I wonder if Frank is sticking a pin in a voodoo doll he made of me."

"Bay-foe we de-put. May we muv a sum to woot we booth a-grued to?"

"Um . . ." Ellen fluttered her lips, clueless. "Sure Forrest."

"Ah El-loon." His hand reached to her hair, and as he stepped closer to her, Ellen shrieked loudly jumping back. "Woot es et?"

"A bug." She fake shuddered. "I swore I saw a bug."

"Uh well pro-tucked you." Another inch to her and Forrest puckered his lips her way.

Trapped! Ellen felt the grip of what he thought was a romantic hold. Was it happening in slow motion? What the hell was she saying 'a-huh' to the whole time? What did she agree to? *'Ob God!* She squinted, moving back but Forrest just chased her with those lips. *'Ob God. Trish put him up to this. I know it.'*

"Forrest." Henry's calling of his name, caused Forrest to move away from Ellen. "I've been uh, thinking about what you asked me."

"An-ray." Forrest held up his hand to Ellen as if he were going to take care of it so they could have their moment. "Ef you donut mund. El-loon und uh are fin-ness-ing our det."

"I kind of do mind Forrest." Henry moved closer to them, his eyes could barely focus and he rattled with words to say in his mind. "I really do mind. See, we're still, still dedicated. And . . . I wasn't thinking when I said it was all right for you to take her out. I'd really rather you not touch Ellen."

"El-loon." Forrest took on a chivalrous look. "Oon-loss you want me to stay. Uh moos buck away. An-Ray es my frund. Uh donut want to hut dat."

What Ellen really wanted to do was chew Henry's ass out for interfering in her life. But swallowing her hostility toward Henry, Ellen decided to take his saving grace. "I completely understand Forrest. Completely. I'm with you. Though I hate it." She gave glaring eyes to Henry. "We're still legal. Thanks for the date." She extended her hand to the little old man.

"Et hes ben ma pleasure." Forrest took her hand and brought it to his mouth and kissed it.

Ellen felt the feel of his too soft lips.

"An-Ray." Forrest released Ellen's hand. "El-loon. Goodnight." Like a gentlemen, Forrest stepped back, turned and walked slowly away.

Henry stammered a step to Ellen. "El . . ."

"One second." Ellen held up her hand, hurried away from him and placed her hands on her knees bending over.

"El?" Henry moved to her.

"Wait. I . . ." Ellen twitched her head. "I'm trying . . . trying not to . . . gag."

"Are you O.K.?"

"I'm fine." A long deep breath went into Ellen as she stood upright. "Fine." She turned around and looked at Henry. "You're drunk." She brushed by him.

"No." Henry reached out to her quickly pulling her back. "Ellen."

"Henry, let me go." She placed her hand over his and pulled his fingers from her wrist. "What do you want?"

"I want to talk to you."

"I want to go home." She move by him.

"Dean's not there. He's hanging out with Frank."

Though Ellen thought that odd, she didn't make mention of it. "Then I'll go to Frank's. Excuse me."

"Why don't you want to talk to me?" Henry asked as he followed her.

"What is there to talk about? I don't want to stand here and discuss us with you. We've done that. That is not an option."

"I don't want to do that either."

"Then why are you chasing me Henry?"

"Because I just want to talk to you." His head dropped down. "Just talk. About anything." He spoke with desperation. "I just want to talk to you. You El."

"No."

"Come on." Henry called out in a near sluggish whine. "I helped you with Forrest."

Ellen stopped walking and turned around to face him. "So you want paid back?"

"Don't you think you owe me?"

"I can't believe this is you talking."

"I don't care how I sound." Henry tossed his hands up. "If that's what it takes to get you to come home and just talk to me, then I'll be a dick to do it. Please El. Let's go and talk. I promise I won't bring up us. Fifteen minutes."

"I'll give you ten."

"I'll take it." He held out his hand and Ellen swiped it away walking past him and to his house.

Upon the opening of Henry's front door, Ellen walked right into the livingroom. She glanced down at her watch. "I'm timing you now."

"Want . . . want to sit down." Henry pointed to the couch.

"Yeah sure." Ellen sat. She watched Henry and she could see how glossy his eyes were. "Where were you drinking tonight?"

"Frank's."

"You're supposed to be helping him not drink Henry, not encouraging."

"Shh." Henry plopped down on the couch. "Don't yell, I want to enjoy this time with my friend."

"I'm not your friend anymore."

"You can be."

"No I can't."

"Try."

"I don't want to." Ellen looked at her watch again. "Eight minutes left and then my debt to you about Forrest is over."

"Why do you have to be this way?"

"What other way am I supposed to be."

"I don't know." Henry's head hung low. He rested his arm on the back of the couch and faced Ellen. "Can we just sit and talk?"

"We won't be able to do it."

"Yes we can. If there was one thing we did, it was talk. Were talking now."

"It doesn't exactly count Henry, because I don't want to be here talking to you."

"We'll try. O.K.?" Henry looked at her, wishing she would just get into it. "How was your day?"

"Fine."

"Dean said to congratulate you."

"It was dumb luck." Ellen folded her hands on her lap and looked down at them.

"My day was busy."

"Too bad."

"I had an enormous amount of requisitions . . ." He saw her snicker. "What?"

"Nothing." Ellen peeked down at her watch.

"You're not trying El."

"I don't want to."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want to talk to you."

"I miss you." He moved closer to her. "I really miss you. Our nightly talks. Our tea. Everything. I miss it all."

"Too bad Henry." Ellen stood up. "And I'm going to go. I'll owe you the other five minutes."

"No." Henry hurried to follow her, stammering as he stood from the couch. "Don't."

"Henry." She spun to him. "You've been drinking. I hate drunkenness. You know that."

"I'm sorry. I didn't think I'd see you. I didn't think I'd get this opportunity."

"What opportunity?"

"To just spend time with you. Even if it's only ten minutes." He walked closer to Ellen. "Please don't leave here. I miss you with all of my heart. I love you. You don't know what it's been like these past few days. To come home to an empty house that used to be full with someone else. To go from having a family to being alone again."

"And you don't know what it's like to stare at a wedding dress that someone told you that you could put on and meet him down the aisle. To stare at it, all along knowing you have to give it back." She stormed to the door. "And you promised me we wouldn't talk about us. Yet here we are."

"Yes here we are. So why can't we talk again. Talk about it all."

"I don't want to." Ellen told him.

"Why? Are you afraid we might click again? Are you afraid we might get back together?"

"No Henry." Ellen said coldly reaching for the door. "There is absolutely no fear in my mind that you and I will get back together. I'll never allow that to happen."

"How can you just give up on what we had?" Henry asked. "I know I screwed up. But we had something. Why can't you see that?"

"What did we have Henry?"

"God! How can you even ask that?" Henry grabbed his head. "We were the best of companions Ellen. We'd talk and talk for hours about nothing. Nonstop from one subject to the next. We were friends. And we had this . . ." Henry moved forward pressing his hand flush against the door and closing it as he leaned his body into Ellen. "We had this." His other hand slid up her arm and to her face and Henry moved his lips to Ellen's. Just as he began to touch them to hers, both of her hands slammed into his chest sending him back off of her.

"I can't believe you would try that."

"I need you. I need that with you. You need that with me."

"Bullshit!" Ellen flung open the door in a rage. "And you trying to kiss me just proves to me why you were with me in the first place. And if you need it that bad, you find it with someone else."

"Don't say that El. You don't want me to find it elsewhere. I believe you still love me."

"Wrong Henry. You can't be more wrong. After how you let me down, I don't believe I can get any closer to hating you than I do at this moment."

The slam of his front door was just an added pain that Henry felt with her harshly delivered words. And as Henry spun around, hands pressed to his eyes, his heart pumping strongly the sadness he was feeling, the alcohol began to pump something else with in him . . . anger. Bringing his hand down, he clenched his fist and slammed it into his front door. Before the door even rattled, Henry had flung it open and stormed out.

The social hall was its usual rowdy-loud for a Friday night when Henry stormed in there. The first thing he did was go to the bar, pouring himself something stiffer to drink than just his wine. He downed it, then poured another. He turned from facing 'Sam' the mannequin to the women who had gathered in their typical circle after their Friday meeting. A part of Henry was hoping that Ellen had returned to her 'moon tribe'. In fact in his angry march to the hall, he had convinced himself of it and he became more angry when he saw she wasn't there.

Henry stood there for at least ten minutes, finally bringing himself to a sip when he hit his third drink. Thinking about Ellen as he stared out at those laughing and having fun. Running her final words to him through his mind, growing more frustrated at the ease in which she said them to him.

Never giving one regard to how much her words hurt him as much as his actions hurt her. But then again, Ellen wouldn't think that way. She held the upper hand. She would never in her lifetime experience what Henry or many other men experienced every day. The feeling of having no one. His eyes felt heavy, almost too heavy and his focus was at his worst. Running his hand down his warm face, Henry took a long drink of his moonshine and set down his glass when he spotted her. With his hands in his pockets and his body feeling as if it weighed three hundred pounds. He walked over to Jenny Matoeso who stood laughing with another woman.

"Jenny." Henry cleared his thickened throat.

"Henry." Jenny raised her eyebrow.

Henry swallowed shifting his eyes around, standing in a total hesitation.

"Henry? Did you want something?"

"I know . . ." Henry closed his eyes, his voice was so graveled. "I know you can help me. Not you personally. But I know . . . I know you're close to these women."

"Yeah so."

"I need to be someone."

"Try Ellen." Jenny turned from him.

"I'm serious Jenny."

Jenny faced him again. "And I am too."

"She told me she hates me . . . she . . ."

"She is hurt. And you think asking me this is going to help your case?"

"I'm hurt too." Henry lifted his shoulders so arrogantly.

"And you're also very drunk right now. I can see it in your face. The way your standing, acting. Go home Henry and sleep it off. I won't be a part of another mistake of yours." Making what she felt would be her final turn away from Henry, Jenny felt the burning knot hit her the moment she picked her drink back up. Because that was the moment that she heard the female voice behind her saying 'then I will Henry.' Widening her eyes, Jenny slammed down her drink and spun around seeing Bev move from the social hall with Henry. "No." She charged over to the two. "Henry." She jumped in front of him. "Come back and sit with me and we'll talk."

Henry ignored her and tried to get by her.

"Bev." Jenny blocked Bev's way. "If you do this, if you break our bond of women, I will not be responsible when Ellen beats the fuck out of you. In fact, I'll encourage it. This man is drunk, this man is angry and this man doesn't need to make a mistake right now."

Bev blinked long and hard with thought. She stepped back from Henry, moving Jenny with her. "You may have a point, but this man is also very down right now. Aren't you the one who preaches to us Jenny that it is our responsibility to help them out. I'm not starting a relationship with him. I'm merely helping him through a rough time." Bev began to move from her.

"Bev, I swear to God if you do this, I will never stand by you through anything. There aren't that many of us women for us to be stabbing each other in the back. I learned that the hard way."

"And I learned what someone doesn't know, won't hurt them." With a semi-wave, Bev walked to Henry, placed her arms on his and walked from the social hall with him.

Jenny grunted, her whole entire body literally moved in that grunt. "Ellen." As she went to charge for the door, she felt her arm being pulled back.

"Let it go." John Matoose told her.

"I can't John. I have to . . ."

"Let . . . just let it go Jen." John brought his hand to his forehead.

"How can I do that?" Jenny asked. "Ellen and I are rebuilding that trust. If I don't step in right now, what does that do to that trust?"

"You tried. You gave it your best shot. You didn't fail. Henry failed. Bev failed. And if you run to Ellen with this, with her still hurt over this wedding shit, it's gonna make matters worse. I'm gonna tell you what will happen. One of two things. Either Henry will do it, or Henry will chicken out. Either way he's gonna feel like shit over it. Like a real piece of shit no matter what he ends up doing. And you know as well as I do. He can give a squat about Bev. It'll start between them and be over with just as fast. And if you go running to Ellen now and she heads over to stop it, she could very well walk into the middle of it. Let it go." John raised his eyebrows as a slight stern warning to his wife.

Jenny closed her eyes and let out an emotional breath. Her hands actually shook from frustration and anger and lack of being able to control what was happening. Jenny knew well that the relationships in Beginnings between the very few women and multitudes of men were all intricately woven into their own little groups. That was all well in fine that way, but if someone crosses the boundaries of the threads, Jenny was well aware at how easily the seams would rip.

(3)

Henry's shirt was the second piece of clothing off, Bev's top was the first as he had her on his couch. His hand gripped under her short black hair holding her head to him keeping his mouth wide and hard as he moved it across hers. Her back was pressed against the arm of the sofa, and Henry's other hand grasped her thigh pushing her shorts up and her leg outward making more room for his body as he pressed his waist in a near rough anger against her. He could feel her one hand holding firm against the back pocket of his jeans. He felt the fingers of her other hand digging into the skin of his back, causing almost a pain as she moaned with his

preluding, hard, rigid motions. It added to the surrealism he felt, the dream like state he felt he was in. His feeling of out of control.

(4)

Frank stopped just one more time as he tried to make his escape from Dean's house. His hands fell slapping the sides of his thighs as he turned around and faced Ellen who stood with Dean. "El, then go talk to him if you feel that bad. Just quit talking about it."

"I know." Ellen stared down at her fingers. "I told him I hate him Frank."

"So you said. So you didn't mean it. So then you go and tell him. His lights are still on, go tell him."

"But if I do . . ." She looked at Dean then Frank for guidance. "Will he take it as a sign that I want to get back? I just don't want him thinking I hate him. Hate's a strong word."

Dean, without seeing could tell Frank was getting as frustrated as he was. "Ellen. Go talk to Henry. Just tell him you didn't mean that you hated him. You were wrong, but you still don't like him." The 'so there' look on his face said as much, was there any wonder he was the brilliant one of the community.

"Oh." Ellen smiled. "O.K., that'll work. Thanks. Wait here Frank. I'll let you know how it goes." She hurried to the door. "Thanks guys."

Frank shut the door for her as she left. "Wait here." He grumbled. "I can't take the rambling Dean."

"You aren't kidding." Dean felt for the couch. "We either have to get Ellen and Henry back talking or find her someone else that will listen."

"I'm suffering from severe headaches these past three days." Frank sat down on the couch.

"Yeah, they're called Ellen-grains."

Frank snickered and folded his hands together. Sitting there he couldn't help but wonder why he was still hanging out with Dean.

(5)

Henry sat in his livingroom chair, his elbows on his knees as he rocked slowly back and forth. He still held his shirt, that he gripped between his hands and buried his face down into it. Rocking. Holding that shirt so tight his knuckles were white.

Bev was very silent as she watched Henry. She walked around the couch, switching her eyes from him to the floor looking for her shirt and bra that had been tossed somewhere. As she bent down to pick up the garments from the floor, the electricity feeling of shock hit her along with

Henry in the silent living room when a knock rang through. She looked at Henry who only raised his eyes above the shirt. "Must be Jenny."

Henry re-buried his face in his shirt. "I can't deal with her right now. Please just get dressed. I'm sorry."

"I'll handle her. Don't worry about . . ."

"Henry." The door to Henry's house opened and Ellen walked in. "Are you . . ." Frozen. Ellen was frozen, her hand still holding the doorknob as she took in the vision of the livingroom. Both of them without shirts. Henry looking up at her from that chair. Ellen said no more, she retraced her steps, closing the door, and leaving as quickly as she walked in.

"El." Henry jumped up. "Oh God." He ran his fingers through his hair then charged for the door.

"Henry, calm down." Bev tried to talk to him. "Don't worry about."

"No!" Still clutching his shirt, Henry bolted from the house. He looked up and down the street and didn't see Ellen. Knowing that she couldn't have run that fast, he raced down to Dean's, running in without knocking. "El!" He called out upon his entrance.

Frank stood up. "She went to see you."

"Oh God Frank." Henry closed his eyes tightly.

"What happened?" Frank walked over to him.

"She . . . she . . . walked. She walked into my livingroom." Henry took a shudder breath. "She saw Bev there. She was half dressed. And me . . ."

"What!" Frank's face turned immediately red, that famous vein poked from his temple. "You what? What the fuck were you thinking Henry?!"

"Frank I gotta go find her. I . . ."

"No! I'll go after her!" Frank moved with outrage to the door. "Dean, nail his ass or something. Because if I do, I'll kill him." Frank swung open the door. "And you!" He blasted his loudest at Henry. "I will deal with you later. And we're talking pal. Oh are we gonna talk. Fuck!" On his last verbal obscenity of anger Frank crashed the door closed with a vibration that shook the whole first floor.

Henry, shaking, looked at Dean. "Dean . . ."

"Excuse me Henry." Dean reached for his glass on the table as he stood up and silently walked by Henry and to the kitchen.

(6)

An hour was what Frank searched. Running up and down the street, checking ever house where there was a light. Every structure he knew was open, from the social hall to the garages, to containment. No Ellen. Breathing heavily, his heart racing, Frank began to fill with worry, really wondering where she could have gone. Figuring it was time to place on his radio and start going through the tunnels, Frank headed back to the living section again. It was on his way there that he saw Ellen. He didn't see her

the other ten times he passed. But he did this time. The night guard had made his rounds in the storage building next to containment and he forgot to turn the light off over the front door. That light illuminated the small alley between the two buildings enough for Frank to spot her.

He walked down the alley slowly, watching Ellen sit on the ground, her knees brought close to her chest and her head pressed against them. "El." He called softly holding out his hand to her. "Come on babe."

"Do you know?"

"I know enough." He squatted down and lifted her head up. "Let's go. We'll talk. O.K.?"

Ellen nodded and reached her hand to his for support to stand. She wiped her cheek hard with her hand looking up to Frank in that dark alley way. "I know I have no right to get mad. I know I have no right at all. But it still hurts Frank. It really hurts."

Only for a second did Frank stand alone. Without saying any words to her, there were none to be spoken, he wrapped his arms around her and felt Ellen like a child clinging to him. Bending his knees to be more at her level, he wrapped his arms fully around her, bringing Ellen into him and Frank held her with everything he had. Being there for Ellen as the one thing he had and would always be for Ellen . . . her friend.

(7)

Holding Ellen's hand, and keeping her behind him in a protective stance, Frank walked into Dean's home. He didn't want Henry to still be there, but he was.

"El." Henry stood up, stepping to her.

Frank felt Ellen's forehead press to his back. And with a twitch of his head and a bite of his bottom lip, the look on Frank's face told Henry to 'back off'. "Dean." Frank called to him. "Where you at?"

"Up here Frank." Dean yelled down from the second floor.

"Come down and get Ellen, please." Still staring at Henry, Frank heard the twelve hurried thumps as Dean made his way down. He turned around, laying his hands on Ellen's shoulders and backing her up with the weight of his body, towards Dean. "Go with Dean." He kissed her on the top of her head, reached for Dean and led Dean's hand to Ellen. "Dean, take her upstairs to stay with you. Please."

"El?" Dean grabbed her hand. "Come on."

Without lifting her head and walking as blindly as Dean, Ellen followed *his* lead up the stairs.

Waiting until they were gone, Frank turned his views from the staircase to Henry.

"Frank, how is she?" Henry asked.

Frank said nothing. He walked up to Henry with his hand held outward as if he were waiting to shake Henry's hand.

"What's that for?" Henry asked, looking at Frank's extended hand.

"I'm thanking you. You all but handed her back to me." No sooner did Henry smack away Frank's hand in anger, Frank quickly reached out, snatched Henry in a jerk to him. Clenching the shirt in a fist, Frank pointed a strong finger millimeters from Henry's face. "Don't." He released him harshly with a shove back. "Fuck." Frank closed his eyes tightly then reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigarette, lighting it.

"Frank, you're smoking."

"Yeah, well it's either that or beating the fuck out of you right now for hurting her." He took a second and then he began to go off. "There are nineteen women in this community Henry. Out of the seventeen will even be with any of us men. Excluding Ellen and Andrea, fifteen of them have two or more men." Frank's words were unbearably strong to Henry. Not only was his voice conveying it, but his body movements were emotional as well. Leading in, darting and pointing, red faced with every word. "You don't do this shit in these times. Not with seventy-eight men all wanting a piece of them. Look at the women as like we look at our harvest Henry. There are those of us who are fortunate enough to be rationed a portion of that. But just because you can't fuckin access it at this time, doesn't mean you go elsewhere and feed. You hear me? Like the old saying goes. You never bite the hand that feeds. Well let me tell you something Henry. You fuckin bit it off and spit it out. You hear me?" Frank ran his hand across the top of his own head and took a long puff from his cigarette. "You know what kills me? I have known her my entire life and I have never seen her trust her heart to anyone like she trusted her heart to you. Never! Not even me Henry. Not even me! And I deserve that more than anyone. I would *never* do what you did tonight. And don't think I haven't been given the opportunity more than once, I have. Did I take it? No! Did I even think about it? No!" Frank squinted in anger his words taking on that high pitch with his hard accent. "It didn't even cross my mind to considerate it! Wanna know why? It's not just because you don't screw up what you got. It's because I love Ellen! I have absolutely no desire to be with anyone else. None. Seven years ago I would have told you the same thing, and I can be certain with my life, that I will feel the same way seventy years from now. And it makes me sick to think, that with the way I feel, you're the one who got her complete trust." Frank pointed again. "And that's pitiful. You're pitiful to me right now."

Henry took every word that Frank delivered to him. Head held high, never taking his eyes off of Frank. "You're right. And there is nothing I want more right now then to have you hit me. I . . . I screwed . . ." Henry brought his hands up to his face and turned from Frank. "I screwed up." He stumbled his way to the chair, sitting down. His words were as buried as his face was in his hands. "But I also need to talk to you Frank. Right now I

need to talk to my best friend. Can you . . .” He raised his head looking to Frank with bloodshot eyes. “Can you just be that friend for five minutes. That’s all I’m asking right now. Please?”

Frank ran his hand harshly down his face and across his goatee. He closed his eyes for a second then opened them to stare at his friend who seemed to be drowning in that chair as much as his other friend was drowning in the bedroom above him. Looking for something to flick his ash in, Frank with heavy footsteps took a seat on the couch. “Talk.”

COMPLETION OF CONFLICT
THE INNER STRUGGLES

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

AUGUST 1

(1)

Her anticipation for the return of her telephone was borderline greater than the impending arrival of her first child. Singing the 'Silly' song in her own country music mode, Trish made her way to mechanics. It was Saturday, it was eight a.m. and where was her phone? She informed mechanics seven times the day before, after she had dropped it off, that she needed her phone back. And it wasn't even one of those silly requisitions she put in either, it was a real one.

Figuring one of two things would happen, Trish went to mechanics. Either she would get her phone back or hurry them along by frightening Scott into fixing that problem.

"Hello?" Trish called out, opening the door to mechanics. "Scott? John? Henry? Robbie?" Shrugging she stepped inside. No one was around. Wanting to leave them a note with a piece of her mind, demanding the return of her phone, Trish searched for paper to write it on. As her hand reached across the bench table she spotted three phones in the 'return' box in Scott's work area. Three requisitions lay on top.

Peeking at the requisitions, she saw one of the phones was indeed hers, fixed and ready to go. But which one? They all looked alike. Using what she deducted as reasonable thinking, Trish chanted her way through 'eeny-meany-miney-mo' and grabbed the last one her finger landed on.

Happy with the return of her communication ability, Trish carried the phone with her and headed back down to History before the rush she waited every morning for, hit.

(2)

Golf.

George was more grateful than anything to find out that not only was it a perfect sunny day, but his people had also finished with the first nine holes on the former Quantico golf course. How long he had waited to play a round and he would get his chance. But business was first.

"Five minutes after three." He slammed down a paper in front of his communications leader in command room. "Contact John Matoose starting at five minutes after three and repeat it until he picks up. Understand?"

"Yes sir."

"What do you have for me?"

Turning from his Morse code area, Steward handed a stack of papers to George. "We decoded these this morning sir."

"Give me a briefing on them." George removed his glasses from his pocket, placing them on and skimming the reports from his outside areas.

"Basically sir, weather is getting bad in North Carolina. They're expecting a hurricane to hit there within the next few days. One of our larger outdoor camps are there. What should they do?"

"How many live there? Refresh my memory."

Steward gave a guessing face. "That's not my area sir. Six, six-hundred fifty."

"Hmm." George looked over the report. "Signal back to them to send out a scouting party further east. Find a safer area, bolt down the camp as tight as they can get it, take supplies and move out until the danger passes."

"Will do." Steward wrote down. "Got word from Charlotte. They have repaired the old steam engines. They're ready when we are."

"Signal them back." George grabbed a pen and began to write. "Let them know that the messenger should be arriving with our mail today. And reports on the mining crews in West Virginia. We'll fill them in on that. Until the mining begins we'll go on and run a shipment of what they had in reserve coal down to them."

"Yes sir."

"Anything else pressing?"

"No sir."

"All right." George pulled a piece of paper from his pocket. "Between three and three thirty Montana time, you make these calls. You and your men. I need Farming areas three, seventeen and twenty-two on the line with answers on where their weekly crop reports are. This is our first real harvest and I have a load of men ready to go to that canning facility and I have to let them know what to expect in preparations for fall and winter."

"I'll take care of that." Steward took the paper George handed him.

"What time does your shift end?" George asked.

"Seven p.m. sir."

"So you'll still be round when the answers come in." George looked at his watch. "All right, I'm off to the golf course, stop by my house when you're done with some answers for me. But one thing Stew."

"What's that sir?" Steward started to return to his work.

"Find me the instant you get through to John Matoose, hear?" Getting his agreement from Steward, George, glad that his business for the day was on hold. Headed off to the golf course he had waited so long to play on. It would feel good to get out there and not think about Beginnings or John Matoose or anything that had to deal with the western part of the country. At least not for nine holes worth of time.

It was an unusual sight for John Matoose when he walked into his home for his every Saturday morning break for breakfast with his family. Jenny in the kitchen wearing a robe as she cooked. Jenny had never not been fully dressed when they shared his break. Was she sick? Stopping to kiss his baby daughter who sat patiently in her highchair in the diningroom awaiting her breakfast as she drank from a bottle, John walked up to behind Jenny kissing her on the cheek. "Not feeling well?" He asked as he wrapped his arms around her.

"I'm fine." Jenny tucked her hair behind her ear as she scrambled the eggs. "I'm a little behind today, sorry."

"No problem. Did you sleep in?"

"You could say that. I think I finally fell asleep around five this morning."

"Why were you up so late?"

Jenny shrugged.

"Jen?"

She turned off the burner, removing the pan from the hot element. "John, I just feel so bad about last night. I feel so responsible."

"Don't." John reached for the plates in the cupboard. "You tried Jenny. You gave it your best shot to stop the situation. I can tell you though, I don't know what happened last night, but Henry is messed up today. Really messed up."

"What went wrong. How did it get to that point?"

"I'll tell you how. Henry was drunk and angry. And Bev. You know the way she is. She has always been that way since she got to Beginnings. Sex is her tool. Remember how she was always offering herself in the beginning to get food, to get out of containment. Maybe she just didn't learn."

"She totally took out of context what we as women have been trying to accomplish."

"There's always one." John saw how down his wife looked. "You can not let this get to you."

"I can't help it. I feel as if I were the one Henry betrayed. Maybe because I held out hope that at the last minutes they would still get married."

"Not now they won't. Especially now. Ellen knows."

"Oh no."

"Jenny."

"No John." Jenny began to dish out breakfast. "It wasn't right. And I will apologize to her for being there and not stopping it. She'll hate me again, I know she will."

"Why do you care if she hates you? You two hate each other."

"But we've been trying John." Jenny spoke emotionally. "We have really been trying. Maybe we weren't there yet. Maybe there is still a part of each of us that talks about the other when we're not around. But Ellen and I were making progress. And with her being someone I have known since I

was six years old, I wanted to work it out with her. I really did.” She lifted the plates. “And now, I can forget about that.”

John watched Jenny carry the plates slowly to the diningroom, sitting down at the table and wiping her hands down her face. Jenny looked as if she had just lost her best friend. And as weird as it seemed to John, he had to wonder if perhaps Jenny was worried about losing someone she actually wanted to be that best friend.

(4)

There was a lump in Henry’s throat that hesitated his swallowing as he walked into Warehouse seven. Slowly he walked, with that frightened feeling he hadn’t had since he was a child who got a bad grade and his mother sent him to speak to his father. In an essence it was nearly the same thing at that moment. Walking through the warehouse looking for Joe who had summoned him.

Counting blankets on the bottom shelf was what Joe was doing. A clipboard in his hand, pencil in his mouth as he spoke to Henry without facing him. “Is that you Henry?”

“Uh . . . yeah Joe.” Henry took an apprehensive step to him. “You wanted to see me?”

“Yep.”

So nervous Henry was. He placed his hands in his pockets while his heart beat faster and faster.

“I need you to figure out sometime today when we can have a mechanical meeting. I’m gonna be in here for another hour or so then I have Danny to take around Beginnings.” Joe told him.

“A mechanical meeting. For what?” Henry asked.

“I want to see what we can do and who we can get to ease that load you have backed up in there.” Joe set down the clipboard and stood with a grunt. “I was there this morning and I counted seventy-two reqs sitting in the in box waiting to be looked at.”

“I know Joe we got hit this week really bad.” Henry told him.

“I figured as much. So pull the meeting together, maybe before we all head off to the field for the game. And we’ll sit together, divide them up. Read through them see what is important, trivial and so forth and see what Mechanics can do or put on someone else. Sound good?”

“Sounds good.”

“Thanks.” Joe picked his clipboard back up and returned bending down at the bottom shelf. He still felt Henry’s presence behind him. “Henry? Why are you still here?”

“Is that all Joe?”

“Yep.” Joe cleared his throat and counted.

“There’s nothing else you want to talk to me about?”

"Nope."

"Not even about last night?" Henry was certain Joe knew.

"Nope."

"Can I ask why?"

"Were you expecting me to?" Joe continued in his counting.

"Yeah I was."

"Well you're not getting it from me. You know how wrong you were Henry, ya don't need me to tell you that."

"Do you hate me Joe for hurting your daughter?"

Joe lifted his head from his clipboard. "No I don't hate you Henry. Disappointed in you, yes. Hate, no."

"Thanks Joe." Henry backed up and turned around. "Joe? Can you . . . can you tell me anything I can do?"

"There's not much you can do." Joe stopped counting, stood up and tried to give the advice to Henry that he sought. "I know my daughter. It will surprise me greatly if she ever treats you like she did before, let alone go back with you. If getting back with her is the goal you are trying to achieve, then I suggest you set your goals elsewhere for now. For example, having her accept your apology."

"Do you think she will?"

"No. But you can try now, can't you?"

Henry nodded. "Yes I can. I can try Joe. Thank you."

Joe listened as Henry left, a little faster than he entered. Perhaps Henry was more hopeful he could make contact with Ellen. But one thing Joe knew for certain that he felt Henry did not. Henry still had the 'Hell' price tag to pay with her and he was no where near ready for that.

(5)

"Twelve." Ellen stated, counting the chalk in the supply closet of the skills room.

"Twelve?" Robbie questioned that. "That's it?"

"That's it. God I hate the first of the month."

"El. We had twenty-five pieces of chalk last month."

"And now we have twelve. I'm telling you, Os-Oscar has been eating them."

"Did you tell Dean this?" Robbie questioned.

"Why would I tell Dean that?"

"Because if Os-Oscar is eating the chalk he obviously has a deficiency somewhere in his body."

Ellen swayed her head to Robbie. "His brain Robbie. Can we stop now. I'm tired of counting, we have until Tuesday."

Robbie looked down at his watch. "Yeah. I have to get to Mechanics, we are swamped in there."

"You aren't taking Danny out of here and showing him around?" Ellen asked as she locked up the supply closet and followed Robbie out of the skills room and down the hall.

"That's my Dad's duty today. He'll be here shortly. I'm guessing." He moved to the door and stopped before pressing in the security code. "Hey El?"

"Yes."

His finger pressed down on her mouth. "Stiff upper lip. O.K.?"

"Oh I'm fine Robbie."

"Sure you are." He kissed her on the cheek and buzzed in his code. "Keep in mind. You still have me."

"I might take you up on that."

"Really?"

"No."

Robbie grunted at her then laughed. "See you later." He winked and then left.

Placing her hands behind her back, Ellen started to stroll to her office to finish her stupid reports and biding the rest of her shift time in containment. It was quiet, and she didn't want it to be that way. Quiet times always made her think. So she retracted her steps and went to the men's quarters. "Hey." She knocked on the archway.

Danny stood up from the bed, so neat, so clean. "Is it time?"

"No we have to wait for slow poke Joe. I was just wondering if you wanted to hangout with me in my office. Until I end my shift or Joe gets here. Whichever is first."

"I'd like that." Danny walked to her. "I have my stuff all packed up."

"I see that." Ellen walked down the hall with him. "And great hair."

"Thanks." Danny ran his hand over the back of his hair. "So what's it like outside?"

"You mean Beginnings?" Ellen walked into her office first.

"No I mean the weather."

"Oh it's hot. It's August you know. Have a seat." She pulled the chair closer to her desk and walked behind to take her own seat. Just as she lowered herself completely, she stopped. "Shit."

"What?" Danny looked at the door to where she stared. John Matoose stood there.

"Ellen." John walked in. "Can I talk to you?"

"No. I don't like you John."

"And I don't like you. But this isn't about our difficulties. This is about my wife."

"What about her?" Ellen spoke with attitude. "I didn't say anything about her or to her."

"And make sure it stays that way."

"Oh John go away."

"I'm serious Ellen." He spoke strongly.

"And I am too. Leave."

"Not before you hear me out." He pointed. "I have my wife at home right now crying her eyes out. Sick to her stomach because she thought she failed last night."

"What are you talking about?"

"She feels bad Ellen, really bad about what happened with Henry. She was there and she blames herself for not being able to stop it. I just don't want you making her feel any worse when she approaches you about it."

"I won't say anything to her."

"No I want you to say something. I want you to thank her."

"Thank her?" Ellen tilted her head. "For what Henry did?"

"No. For doing everything in her power to try to stop it. She tried reason. She tried anger. But it was out of her control. Henry . . . Henry, Ellen, was out of control." John stepped back. "That's all."

Danny watched Ellen just staring at the door which John had left through. "You can tell me it's none of my business, but . . . what happened last night?"

"I guess it won't be a secret if John knows." Ellen turned her views finally from that door back to Danny. "Henry and I got into a huge blow out. I went back to his house to talk to him and when I walked in . . ."

"He was with somebody else."

Ellen's eyes widened. "Boy, news travels fast."

"No." Danny shook his head with a laugh. "Good guess on my part. Typical male move. Can I ask a really stupid question?"

"Sure."

"I thought there weren't that many women here. I thought they were all taken. How did Henry get one?"

"That's a really easy question to answer. He was with Bev. Bev uses it as a tool, and Henry, Henry is on council. There is a certain power thing with that. I suppose if he wanted to, he could have been with someone else a while ago. He just didn't want anything to do with survivor women. In fact the only original here that even touches survivors is Jenny."

"Why is that?" Danny asked, a tone of offence took over his voice.

"I guess we just have our certain little click." Ellen shrugged. "We don't let anyone in."

"Oh, I see." Danny nodded.

"But I really want to make an exception to my personal rules with you. I like you. I can see us being friends outside of these containment walls. I want to be friends outside of containment with you."

"I'm glad to hear you say that El. Some of the others in here were talking about how bad I'm gonna feel when I get out because I spend a lot of time in here with you. And they said that they heard you really don't bother much with us once we're out."

"Honestly? No I don't. And they don't bother much with me after the first few weeks of adjustment are over with. But that's O.K. But it won't be

with you Danny Hoi. Because you are going to be my new night time chat buddy.”

“I’m taking it I am replacing Henry in that field?”

“I’d like you to.” Ellen told him.

“I’d like to.” Danny said. “Ellen. Can I say something about this Henry situation. I mean if I’m going to be replacing him in the talking area, I want to say something.”

“Sure.”

“Screw him. The hell with him. If he’s that dumb to do something that stupid, don’t worry about it. You have the upper hand. You hold all the aces here. Besides, I firmly believe you are with the wrong man when it comes to Henry.”

Frank stood outside that office door, listening before he walked in really knowing where Danny was going. His presence was unknown to either of them in the office.

Ellen snickered and folded her hands. “O.K., if Henry is wrong, who is right?”

“You want my honest opinion?”

“Most definitely.”

“Frank.”

“Frank?” Ellen was shocked. “You said Frank.”

“You seem surprised.”

“I am. I thought you were going to say you.”

“I wanted to but then you said to be honest. Frank. My God you have known the man most of your life. You were together for years off and on, and then for years here. Why in the world aren’t you with him? You love him. No wait . . . you Ellen, idolize the man.”

“Danny.” Ellen took a look of embarrassment upon her. “It’s not that simple. I wish it were it isn’t.”

“It’s the share thing that has to happen huh. Well tell me why the three way relationship isn’t with you, Frank and Dean.”

“More than you know it was.” Ellen fluttered her lips. “Beside the fact that Frank and Dean hate each other. I have my reasons that I just can’t be . . .”

“I knew . . .” Frank walked in interrupting, not wanting Ellen to finish what she was saying. “I knew there was a reason I liked this guy. Hey Danny.” Frank hit him in the shoulder then smiled at Ellen. “El, listen to this man. He’s right. But we won’t get into that.”

“Frank!” Ellen stood up. “Were you listening? You were. You are such an ass.”

Frank laughed. “Yep. Hey Danny we’re playing softball at five-thirty today. You wanna play.”

“I don’t have a glove.” Danny answered.

“We’ll get you one. I’ll put you on the roster.” Frank looked back at Ellen. “I came to get you.”

"Get me?" Ellen looked at him. "Why?"

Frank lifted her phone from the desk. "Just as I thought. See." He showed it to her. "Your power is off. As usual. Anyhow I was checking the keypad at the clinic and Stevie Wonder asked, if I ran into you, could I send you over there. He needs help with some tests. Seems he couldn't reach you by phone."

"Now?" Ellen asked.

"Now."

Ellen looked at Danny. "I'm sorry."

"No go on." Danny stood up. "I will anxiously await Joe."

"And I'll hurry him along when I see him." Ellen said. "And I'll see you during the day. Probably the softball game. If not. How about I stop by late tonight. Will you be up?"

"I'll wait up."

"Good." Ellen moved to the door with Frank and stopped. "Oh Danny? It's gonna be good to have you out of here. And don't be surprised if they work you today. I hear Mechanics is swamped with reqs."

"I can't wait."

Ellen seeing Frank bobbing his head to her to hurry her along, walked from the office with him. "Does Dean really need me now?"

"Who said Dean?"

"You said Stevie Wonder."

"Oh El. Oh." Frank was so dramatic. "That is really wrong that you would assume that I would use that as a nick name for our poor disabled Dean."

"Well . . . oh shit." She snapped her finger as she saw Frank reaching for the buzzer. "Wait right here I have to get something from my desk to show you."

"Hurry up." Frank watched Ellen run all the way down the hall. He watched her go into her office, heard her rummaging and saying something to Danny, then he opened the door when he saw her running back down toward him. "What do you have to show me? Is it wrapped in that cloth?"

"Yep." Ellen waved to the guard who sat at the front desk and then she left containment with Frank. "Ready?"

"Yep." Frank placed his hands on his hips.

"O.K., now you can't make fun of it or I'll feel really bad. I made this myself you know. Last night at the meting." She unwrapped it shielding it. "Here it goes." Ellen held up the doll and closed her eyes.

"Oh shit." Frank said with a grin. "Is that me?"

"Yes."

"Whoa." He took the doll. "El, this is cool. Look at the hair."

"It's your hair, I took it from the sink when you trimmed your goatee."

"I wondered what happened to that when I got out of the shower." Frank ran his hand over the dolls black hair. "You got the little beard thing happening. Good job."

"Frank." Ellen blushed. "I'm not a six year old who made an art project in school."

"No this is really neat. One thing . . ." Frank pulled out the pants of the Frank-doll and peeked down under them. "Aw El. That is really wrong."

Ellen snickered. "My personal touch."

"Wow it's the Frank action hero."

"Frank . . ."

Frank held up the doll and deepened his voice speaking for the doll. "Hey I'm Frank. Where's Dean." He made the doll look around. "Hey you."

"Frank." Ellen laughed again.

"El, can you make me a Dean doll. That way I can have my doll beat him up. Thanks El for this. I'll put this on my desk so I can play . . . I mean look at it."

"No." Ellen snatched the doll back.

"Hey!" Frank reached for it. "Oh I get it. You need a little of me around, that's why you made it."

"No Frank you goof. And it's not the Frank action hero doll. It's a voodoo doll."

"A voodoo doll? You made a voodoo doll of me?"

"Yeah."

"Why?" Frank asked insistent.

"So when I get mad at you, I can do this." She flicked the doll in the head.

"Ow!" Frank grabbed the side of his head.

"Oh stop that Frank, you didn't feel that."

"Yeah I did." Frank rubbed his head. "Man El I have a lump."

"You do not." She flicked it again.

"Ow! Knock it off."

Ellen laughed and began flicking the doll watching Frank be a goof and shudder his body as she did so.

"El!" He reached for the doll. "You're killing me."

"Don't touch it." As Ellen pulled the doll from Frank in a grip she watched Frank grab his chest and his face turned red. "Frank?" she stepped before him as he doubled over. "Frank quit playing around."

"I'm . . . not . . ." He grunted loudly. "I think I'm having . . . a heart attack."

"Oh my God." Ellen panicked.

One more loud moan and Frank, grabbing his chest buckled over and fell to the ground.

"You're such an ass Frank." Ellen looked down at him. "Get up." She didn't get any response. "I said get up." Nothing. "Frank?" Her voice lowered and she reached down and touched him. "Oh shit I killed him." Spinning around first in confusion on where she should turn, Ellen held her

hair back and began to scream. "Help. Someone help . . ." Her words were muffled when a hand covered her mouth.

"You really thought that doll worked?" Frank whispered in her ear as he held her from behind.

"Frank." She swung back her leg kicking him in the shin.

Frank laughed hysterically and pulled Ellen back as she tried to walk away. "El." He brought her to him. "It was funny."

"You're a big goof."

"Yeah. But you love me."

"Oh I do not." Ellen fought--but not too much--to get out of his arms. She moved her head that Frank followed with his smiling face. Giving up, Ellen giggled and then Ellen wrapped her arms around his neck.

Frank was taken by surprised. "Whoa, what's the hug for?"

"You make me smile." Ellen pulled back from him slightly, feeling his hand slide up her back and support her head. She kept her face close to his. "After all these years Frank Slagel. You still make me smile."

"I feel like . . ." Frank took a deep breath, whispering and his hands spread across her face. "I feel like we're headed to this really awesome moment right now. Want it to be ruined?"

"No."

"Too bad." Frank set her down and released her from his embrace.

"Frank?"

He stepped back, running his hand over the top of his head then letting it rest on the back of his neck as he looked at her through the tops of his eyes. He cleared his throat then twitched his head to the right.

Ellen turned only her head to see where Frank was motioning to. Walking up to them was Henry. "You set me down for him?"

Frank raised his eyebrows and looked at Henry.

Henry blinked long, then through half closed eyes looked at Frank. "Can I talk . . . can I talk to Ellen now?"

Ellen answered before Frank could say anything. "No Henry." She started to walk away. "I have to get to the clinic."

Frank grabbed hold of Ellen and pulled her back. "Talk to Henry."

"Dean needs me at the clinic."

"No." Frank told her. "No he doesn't. I knew you wouldn't come with me if I told you it was Henry who wanted to . . ." A hard hit landed in Frank's chest as she stormed by him. "El, come on." Frank chased after her.

"Between you and him, I don't know who's worse. I thought you of all people Frank would stand by me." Ellen scolded.

"I do." Frank stepped to her speaking quietly. "I do El. You are the most important thing to me. How you feel is important to me. That's why I want you to talk to Henry. I want you to listen to what he has to say. O.K.?"

"No."

"El. Please." Frank lowered his head closer to her. "Give him five minutes. Let him say what he wants to say to you and then walk away. But you need to hear what he has to say."

Ellen looked at Frank, then Henry. "All right." Folding her arms she walked to Henry. "I'll listen to you."

Henry closed his eyes. "Thank you." He opened them and looked to Frank. "Thank you Frank." He turned back to Ellen. "Can we go somewhere private The social hall is closed right now, we can go there."

Ellen nodded and followed Henry. She kept looking back at Frank as she walked. He stood on the street watching them the whole entire time.

How big the social hall seemed when it was empty like it was that morning. Ellen stepped inside first, Henry waited until she was far enough inside and he closed the door, locking it. Slowly he walked to Ellen whose back faced him. "El."

Ellen spun to him, her arms close to her body and tightly crossed. She wanted to lash out at him, her mouth opened to do so, but as soon as she looked at him, Ellen turned her head.

Henry saw the look of hurt on her face. He felt it hitting so heavily to his heart. "You can't even . . . you can't even look at me, can you?" He walked to in front of her.

Ellen didn't answer.

"I don't blame you. I can't even look at myself."

"You shouldn't feel that way Henry." Ellen spoke sadly. "You and I are no longer together. I told you . . . to be with someone else. I gave that up with you. And I'd like to go now."

"No." Henry pulled her back stopping her. "Please just listen to me. Please. I . . . I am so sorry for this. I messed . . . I messed up." Henry's mouth dropped in complete sadness. "I didn't want to hurt you. I didn't. And I feel . . . I feel like dying right now El, because I hurt the best thing that ever came into my life. I don't know why I acted like I did, but I was stupid. I was so stupid."

"Henry I don't want your apology."

"I need to give it to you. I need you to know how sorry I am for anything that happened last night. For anything that's happened between us. We weren't supposed to get like this El . . . not you and me." He stepped closer to her trying to look at her and only having her eyes turn from him. "And I betrayed you."

"It's only betrayal if we were together. We weren't."

"Bullshit El. In my heart we were." He reached for her hand but she moved. "Do you know what makes my actions so wrong. Not one half hour before you walked in, I was telling you how much I love you. I told you how much I missed you. And I did what I did?"

"I don't want to hear this Henry. Please. Let it go."

"I can't let it go. Do you know how much it hurts me that you can't even look at me. Do you?" Henry's voice cracked with emotions. "I never wanted this. Never. Not when I woke up every single morning wanting and needing to see you. Needing you every . . ."

"Henry!" Ellen moved further from him. "You said your apologies. I want to go. I don't want to be here with you."

"Can I just say one more thing," He watched her hesitate in her walk out. "Just one more thing." He moved to her, standing before her, staring at Ellen who gazed at the floor. "It probably means nothing right now. But a part of me needs to tell you this. I need you to know that I . . . I didn't have sex with her El. I didn't. I emotionally and, and physically could not be with her."

"You were drunk."

"No." Henry's words were strong. "I love you. I couldn't do it. I need you to believe me."

"I do."

Henry's head dropped. "Thank you so much for . . ."

"But." Ellen lifted his head by his chin. "You touched her didn't you?" She watched Henry's eyes close. "Didn't you? You touched her."

"Yes." He swallowed.

"Did your body touch hers?"

"El . . ."

"Did it!"

"Yes."

"And you kissed her Henry." With half closed eyes Ellen walked from him. "And even if I speak to you on good terms again. Even if I get passed this enough to look at you, I will never look at you in the same light again. Never. You're weak Henry."

"Ellen tell me what I can do. Please tell me what I can do to make this up to you."

She stopped in her reach for the social hall lock. Turning around very serious, without the look of 'mean', Ellen faced him. "Let me go. Just let what we had go. Don't try to get back with me. Don't make it any harder than it is. Just let it be and maybe, maybe I won't turn away the next time you say hello. Just don't be a part of my life anymore, that's what you can do."

"What about Nick." Henry walked closer. "He's our son El. We have to be . . ."

"No." Ellen shook her head. "Nick's name is Slagel. Frank takes care of him, Frank lives with him. If you want to be a part of Nick's life you deal with Frank on that issue. Because as far as I am concerned. He is Frank's child. Not yours." She unlocked the door. "Not yours Henry."

Tightly Henry's eyes shut the moment Ellen left. Both of his hands went immediately to his face running straight through his hair, and in a spin he turned from the door. Trying his hardest to control any emotions that

tried to escape him at that second, his hands came down and gripped tightly to the back of the chair before him. So tense he was, standing there holding on to that chair, his head down and his hair flung forward. He fought hard to not let the emptiness he was feeling take over him. And he stayed there in the social hall until he felt he could go back out. Hurting for himself, hurting over what he did, but most of all hurting for Ellen and the loss of what they had.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

(1)

Joe recognized the sound of the thumping, in fact it flashed his mind back and brought a smile to his face. He placed the sound to many years before when Frank was only five. It was the day they moved into the house in Gaithersburg. Frank ran around that houses, checking out every room, every closet and he did it all with enthusiasm. And as Joe listened to the pitter-patter of the feet above his head, he figured Danny, in his excitement was doing the same thing that Frank did all those years ago. "Having fun Danny?" Joe yelled up the steps.

"Oh Joe this is great!" Danny came flying down the steps. "I bet Bentley loves it here. Of course has Bentley seen this place yet? I saw that line of people outside his barber shop. Wow." Danny charged into the kitchen and he squealed loudly. "A fridge. Food! HA!" He flew back out. "Am I going to work now? What do I do after work? Is there anything to do around here or do most people just . . ."

"Hold up." Joe stopped him before Danny caused his head to spin any more. "I might put you to work today, I haven't decided yet. You have that softball game in a couple hours and you make up that man they need. Since I can't umpire, Jason has to and you'll take Jason's place. And as far as having something to do, we have the social hall open seven days a week. It's like a bar. It's open now but no one really goes there on a weekend night until late. In fact, Robbie's band is playing there tonight starting at nine."

"And I can go?" Danny asked. "I'm allowed."

"Sure, But you get put on the clean up schedule like everyone else."

"Can I get drunk?"

"If you want to."

"I don't want to, I was just wondering. O.K." Danny clapped his hands in a ready fashion. "What's next. My stuff is upstairs."

"Maybe Danny, you should consider alcohol, you are way too hyper."

"Oh no Joe. I like being this way. I go constantly." He snapped his finger several times. "Hell, I hate to sleep."

"And you aren't friends with Henry?" Joe shook his head as he led Danny to the door.

"Like to be, but Henry hates me. It's that 'I'm Chinese, he's Japanese' thing. You know, goes back to the old world." Danny took a breath. "Racism, who would think it still be around?"

"Danny. Did it occur to you that it isn't racism, that perhaps Henry is a bit threatened by you."

Danny laughed. "By me? Now why in the world would Henry be threatened by me? If anything I should be threatened by him. He helps run this place. He's the fix-it guy. From what I heard, he's the man. There is only one thing that Henry is, that I'm not that I don't want to be."

“What’s that?” Joe asked after deciphering Danny’s statement. He walked from the house with Danny.

“Stupid when it comes to relationships.”

“I take it my daughter told you about what’s been going on.”

“Oh yeah. Ellen and I are, what’s she call us? Chat buddies. I’m taking Henry’s place there. That’s it.” Danny smiled as he walked looking around and taking everything in.

“Danny, in all seriousness. My daughter is a very busy lady. And confused sometimes. You aren’t . . . you aren’t planning on confusing her anymore are you. I mean, being her chat buddy is the only replacement position you are wanting to fill for Henry isn’t it?”

“Who me? Not me Joe. I’m gay.”

Joe stopped walking. “Really?”

“Nah, just kidding.” Danny laughed when Joe grunted. “But all kidding aside, there’s one very good reason why I won’t try to go after Ellen.”

“And what is that.”

“You know that big mean looking guy you call your son? The one that used to be married to Ellen, not the one who only fooled around with her.”

“You mean Frank?”

“Yep. He’s the reason.” Danny nodded and started walking again. “That man wants her back, bad.”

“And you don’t want to get in the way.”

“Hell no I don’t. He scares me.” Danny shuddered. “He’d kill me. I’m pretty good at some things Joe, fighting and defending myself against a neanderthal is not one of them. Shit, Ellen could stand before me naked and offering herself to me and for fear of my life I wouldn’t touch her. I may look, but I wouldn’t touch.”

Joe laughed at Danny. He sensed there was probably more to what Danny was saying. Then again, maybe he was just frightened of Frank, or he could really be gay. But Joe figured Danny’s reason was probably because Danny was a ‘go with the flow’ kind of guy. And rippling already troubled waters was just not Danny’s forte.

(2)

The ringing of her History telephone sent chills of excitement through Trish, causing her baby to kick harshly. With a giggle, she ran her hand over where the baby’s foot poked and she grabbed the phone, clearing her throat. “Good afternoon History. Trish speaking, how can I help you?” Odd. Extremely odd. The long squealing beep coming over the line. Then Trish’s eyes brightened and she flung herself up from the chair. “A fax. I’m getting a fax.” Jumping about and racing to that fax machine she knew would come in handy. Trish hooked up the cellular phone with the

attachments Cole gave her, made sure there was paper in the machine and watched excitedly as the fax came through.

It could have been faster Trish thought, but seeing it was her first fax ever in Beginnings, she lifted it up with joy when it was finished. The smile dropped from her face and she scratched her head as she read it. "Oh no." Sadness took over her voice. "Who could have sent me this? This is mean. I'm telling Joe."

Upset at what the words said, Trish took her fax, switched the sign on the door to 'be back in ten minutes' and she waddled off out of history looking for Joe.

(3)

Something had to be done about the situation and Robbie knew it. Contrary to what his father wished, Robbie couldn't sit back anymore and let it happen. Denny was a band member, there was a certain bond with that. Denny was fifteen years old. He was a big kid for his age. And there was absolutely no reason what so ever that not only did Andrea have to escort him to the barber shop, but she had to hold his hand as well when they were walking out.

Did she know he was not a child?

"Andrea." Robbie called out approaching the two. He looked at Denny who did not look pleased. His hair was cut and greased down, parted drastically as if he were seven years old. "Andrea, what are you doing to my drummer?"

Andrea held tight to Denny's hand. "Making him look sweet for tonight. I'm coming to see my boy play. Aren't I Denny?"

"Mom." Denny winced as she fixed his hair.

"Andrea." Robbie separated their hands. "You're embarrassing him, Quit holding his hand in public."

Andrea tsked. "I'm embarrassing him? Oh I think not. He has to look good. I hear you are playing the 'Silly' song tonight."

"Yeah, yeah." Robbie moved Andrea's hand again as it reached for Denny. "In fact I'd like to steal Denny right now and go over it with him."

"O.K." Andrea smiled. "Dennis, you be good for Robbie and don't you go and get messed up. There won't be time after dinner for you to take a bath again. And . . ." She tsked again. "You got something on your cheek."

Robbie's mouth dropped open in disgust when Andrea did that mother thing to him by licking her fingers and wiping off the smudge on Denny's face. In fact Robbie nearly gagged watching it. "Oh my God." Just as he was about to say anymore, he heard the call of his name from Trish, and looked to see her holding up a piece of paper as she waddled his way. Being the nice guy that he was, he didn't want her to strain herself making it all

the way to him, so he moved a foot or two from Andrea and waited for Trish there.

“Rob . . . Rob . . . “ She grabbed her chest. “Robbie.” She took a long breath.

Robbie snickered. “Having a little trouble being mobile there Trish?”

Trish smacked him with the paper. “Where is Joe? I’m getting threatening faxes.”

“You’re what?” Robbie laughed harder then stopped laughing when he took the paper. “Trish, Don’t make mention to this to anyone. You hear. National security. Get it?”

“Scouts honor.” She held up her two fingers. “Can you inform Joe that I don’t like it. You know what Henry says don’t you? He says if I’m upset my baby will be born with a frown. Of course who listens to Henry anymore. He hasn’t been very nice.”

“Yeah whatever.” Robbie read the fax. “Thanks Trish. Go back to History. We’ll be right there.” Waiting for Trish to agree, Robbie took off looking for his father.

(4)

The exploding opening of the history door caused Trish to shriek when Frank, Joe, Henry and Robbie marched in. “What did I do?” She held up her hands as if she were under arrest.

Frank looked at his cohorts then back to Trish. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“You stormed in here.”

Frank grumbled, then regained his composure. “Trish did the fax come over your phone line?”

“Yes.” She answered.

“Can I have your phone.”

“No.” She shook her head.

“Trish, give me your phone.” Frank held out his hand.

“You’re just jealous Frank that your phone doesn’t get faxes. Tough. No.”

“Trish!”

“No.” She hid her phone in her arms.

“Dad.”

Joe stepped forward. “Trish, just let me see the phone. Please.”

“All right.” Trish hesitantly handed it to Joe. “But I need that back. I just got it back from mechanics.”

Joe immediately turned over the phone and reviewed the serial number. “Henry.” Joe handed the phone to him.

Henry looked down at it, then up. “Trish this was at Mechanics right? Who gave this to you?”

"No one." She answered. "I took it, I was tired of waiting."

Robbie's voice dropped to a whisper. "It's not her phone is it?"

Henry shook his head.

Frank, needing to talk, pulled everyone closer to history's door and spoke in a near whisper. "Whose phone is it Henry?"

"I think we know that." Henry told him. "She must have grabbed the wrong phone. You know what this means."

Joe interjected in his soft voice. "We know what it means and who it is coming from, but we don't know . . ." He stopped talking when he saw Trish had poked her head into the circle of four men. "Trish, if you don't mind."

"As a matter of fact I do Joe. You really shouldn't be telling secrets in here. It isn't polite."

Not wanting to snap at a woman who was in such a delicate condition that Trish was in, Joe pulled the men outside, despite Trish's whining for her phone back. Before he finished speaking to them, he stuck his head back in History. "Trish, we'll give you your phone right back. Ten minutes tops." Pulling the door to History closed, Joe rubbed his head. "All right. He blackened out where the return fax could come from. Obviously he is well aware that the system regenerates itself on the first of every month or he wouldn't have faxed something. So we're out of luck on George's location."

Frank snapped his finger. "Maybe not. Not yet. This fax is telling John he has to call George, if that's who sent the fax. Now, Robbie you have that bug system all ready to go right? Head down to communications now and put it in. Henry, deliver this phone to John, but deliver it minutes before the system is finished regenerating. Me and my Dad will use Trish's fax machine and fax this back to John. Since the return number is blackened out, he won't know *we* re-sent it. He won't be able to call George now. But if this fax does what it's intended to do, it will force his hand in calling George. Which means, we'll at least get half the conversation depending on what Robbie gets done. Got that?"

Robbie looked at his watch. "Henry give me ten minutes. We have twenty till the system is back on."

Henry nodded. "I'll deliver John his phone as if I'm cleaning up the 'out' box in Mechanics."

Joe looked to Frank. "How soon do you think it'll be before John calls George."

Frank shrugged. "Don't know. I'm betting soon."

"What if he doesn't." Joe headed back toward History with Frank while Robbie and Henry took off in different directions.

"Then we're no further behind then we were before. But we do know one thing." Frank reached for history's door. "Trish may not be real bright. But if she hadn't grabbed the wrong phone, we would have never gotten the proof we needed that George and John have been communicating."

"But is it enough to oust John?"

"Oust him?" Frank shook his head. "Dad. I am more convinced now that we have to keep him in Beginnings. As long as we keep close tabs on him, we're fine. Right now, John is our only definitely link to George and what he is doing."

"That we know of."

Frank hesitated in the scariness of that thought. It was something he didn't want to think of or consider a slight possibility. To Frank there wasn't anyone else who could be a part of it. And though he would keep his mind open to that possibility, Frank wanted to keep his focus on John. And at that moment, that meant, going back into History and re-sending that message to John in hopes that it would push him into contacting George.

(5)

"Excellent." George read over the news as he sat at his diningroom table, a chicken dinner before him. "Excellent Steward." He held his hand over his coffee cup when his houseman tried to pour him more. He shook his head and sent the houseman back to the kitchen. "Steward. We only have ten minutes left. Get back to me if John contacts us." He handed Steward the information.

"What if he doesn't make contact today?"

"I'm not worried about it." George dug into his dinner again. "He will. I'm certain of that. He will."

(6)

In the basement of his home, crying baby and all, John watched as the paper fed through the fax machine. With a look as if he were wishing it would hurry, holding his daughter, John kept on looking up at the ceiling. He cringed when the front door opened. "Shit. Come on." He placed his lips to the baby's face to try to calm her.

"John!?" Jenny called out.

"Down here." John grabbed the paper from the fax machine, didn't read it. Unhooked the phone and unplugged the machine. "I'll be right up."

"Is the baby with you." Jenny yelled down the steps.

"Uh yeah." John fussed to the storage cabinet, pulling out the awaiting box on the bottom shelf and setting the machine awkwardly in there while holding the baby.

"You need me to come down and get her."

"No!" John yelled up. "We're fine." He covered the fax machine with cloths and shoved it in the box on the bottom shelf again and placed it way in the back. "I'm getting my clothes for the game. I'll be right up." Walking

over to the dryer where he laid down his fax, he could hear Jenny walking above him. He picked it up, bouncing the baby on his hips as he read. "Are we getting a little panicked George?" He looked at the words. *'Contact us now! This is not a game. This is your warning!'* John shook his head. "Yeah, well what are you gonna do about it. I think you're at a loss or you would have done something by now." Smirking at the note, he nearly dropped the baby and the paper when Jenny's voice was far too close.

"John?"

John looked up immediately, Jenny was on the bottom basement step. "Jen."

"Are your clothes done."

"As a matter of fact." John turned the dryer on. "They were still damp."

"What are you reading?"

John looked down to the paper. "A Frank roster." He crumbled it up.

"Don't you need that?" Jenny asked.

"No." John threw it in the waste basket by the washer. "Nope, not at all. It's not important." He walked to the steps and handed Jenny the baby. He followed her up the stairs, looking back to the trash. "Not important at all."

(7)

Dean felt the warmth of the late afternoon sun beating down upon the bridge of his nose. The heat that generated from the homemade bleachers he sat upon, made him just a little uncomfortable. So many sounds surrounded him. Children screaming and laughing to his right. Adults chattering to his left. The deadened sound of 'thumps' followed by yells which were distinctive to Dean as the ball players playing on the field. Dean never played, but what he wouldn't give to be out there playing now. And it felt like a great day. He only wished he knew. "El?"

"Yes?" Ellen sat next to him on the fourth bleacher. She held Nick.

"What color is the sky?"

"The same color it's been all my life. Blue."

"No, I mean now. Is it overcast, is it light blue, dark, what?"

"I don't know."

"Can you look?"

Ellen gasped perturbed.

"I can't believe you just gasped at me."

"Light blue Dean."

"Any clouds?"

"Dean!"

"El, be nice."

Ellen looked up. "Very few, and don't ask if they're white and fluffy."

"I won't. You know . . ." Dean leaned forward. "It's days like this, when so much is going on, that I wish I could see."

Ellen got somber and she reached out her hand to his face. "I'm sorry. I wish with all my heart you could see too Dean."

"I know." Dean touched her hand as it slid from his face. "Are they starting yet?"

"Nope. The star is not here."

"Frank?"

"Who else?"

"El? You got awfully quiet. First you were rambling, then you got quiet."

"You hate when I ramble Dean." Ellen stated.

"But I also hate when you're quiet."

"Well make up your mind." Ellen snapped.

"Get out of the mood. I didn't do anything to you."

"You're right. Sorry. I was just staring at Nick. He looks so much like my Hen . . . I mean Henry. So much. Why does he have to look so much like Henry?"

"That's very simple El. The Asian characteristics are very dominant traits. Basic genealogy will dictate that to . . ."

"Dean. I wasn't asking for an explanation."

"Yes you were."

"No I wasn't. I was merely stating a question, not looking for an answer." She adjusted the baby. "Then you go off being all scientific on me."

"Ellen come on. Knock off the attitude with me."

"Sorry. Dean? Do you think it's too hot for the baby out here?"

"No."

"Too cold?"

"No."

"Should I have him in the . . ."

"Ellen." Dean reached out sideways to touch her. "You know how it goes, however you feel then that's pretty much how the baby feels."

"I'm comfortable. A little hot here and there."

"Then so is the baby."

"Then I take it I should remove the blankets."

"Blankets?" Dean asked. "Yeah take off the blankets El unless you want to give the baby heat stroke."

"But he's so tiny."

"Ellen."

"They're coming off right . . . hey, looks like they're gonna start. No, they're switching warm up . . . Oh my God."

"What?"

"Frank. He looks so hot when he dresses like that. He has these long shorts, this cut up tee shirt, he's wearing a backwards ball cap and . . ."

"El, I really could care less how hot Frank looks."

"He does look . . ." Ellen's voice dropped. "Oh."

"What's wrong?"

"Henry's there. Maybe he'll get hit with the ball like he did last time."

"Knock some sense into him huh?"

Ellen smiled. "You're cute Dean."

"But not as cute as Frank."

"Not at this moment. No."

"Thanks."

Ellen waved to Frank who was catching, he tossed the ball back to Robbie then signaled to Ellen to come down. "Dean? Will you be all right for a second?"

"Sure. We're are you going?"

"Frank wants me. I'll be back. I'll grab you a cold drink while I'm there."

"Want me to hold Nick?" Dean asked.

"Do you mind?"

"Nope. Hey I have to practice right. Tonight is the big try it alone night." Dean felt his hands being maneuvered, and then Nick set in them. "Is he sleeping or awake?"

"Sleeping. What does it matter?"

"I'll feel real dumb talking to a sleeping baby El." Dean made the infant more comfortable in his arms. "Go on I'll be fine." Dean told her not even realizing Ellen was already gone.

She walked to the fence that the men had proudly erected not a few months earlier. As she walked to it, so did Frank. She saw Henry look over to her and miss the ball thrown to him because he was so preoccupied with staring at her. Ellen snickered and met Frank at the fence. "Hey Frank, you guys gonna start soon, it's five-thirty."

"In a minute or two." He adjusted his cap and looked to the bleachers at Dean. "You don't have the baby in blankets do you?"

"No. Do you think I'm nuts?" Ellen fluttered her lips. "You look good Frank."

"Thanks." He smiled. "Hey, what are you doing later?"

"Why?"

"Answer the question." He poked his finger through the fence and touched the tip of her nose. "What are you doing later. Wanna go out?"

"As in a date?"

"Yeah."

"Don't ask me on a date Frank. I have to say no."

"All right. You wanna hang out then?"

"I don't know." Ellen looked back at Dean. "He's trying to be alone with the kids later, but I still want to hang out there."

"I can get Josh to go over."

"Frank . . ."

"Will you think about it?" He asked.

"Will you let me touch your chest?"

With an ornery grin, Frank walked to the edge of the fence and lifted his shirt.

Ellen followed him then smiled as she ran the palm of her hand up his hairy flat stomach and to his hair filled chest.

"Not that I'm complaining, but can I ask why you asked for this?"

"Call it a fix. You look really good and I haven't touched a hairy chest in a while." She continued to touch him with a peaceful look on her face.

"Almost done?"

"Not yet."

"Can I make a suggestion. Unless you want to embarrass both you and me, you'd better stop."

Ellen quickly pulled back her hand and laughed. "I'll head back up with Dean."

"Think about tonight. I have some perimeter work to do and we can go, I mean hang out after."

"I'll think about it." Ellen flashed flirtatious smile at him, walked to the lemonade cooler, got Dean a drink and carried it back up to the bleachers, stopping once more to wave to Frank.

Frank walked back to the fence, leaning on it, watching Ellen, his fingers gripping tightly to it. Watching her demeanor and really worrying about it. Though she smiled, she didn't smile one tenth as much as she looked lost.

"She hates me." Henry walked up behind him.

"Nah. She's pissed at you. You did tell her right?"

"She doesn't care Frank." Henry stood side by side with Frank, dressed so similar. Long baggy shorts, a tee shirt and backwards ball cap.

"She will in time. I know her." Frank continued to watch her.

"Well at least you are benefitting from this."

"Not really." Frank dropped his voice to a murmur. "Not yet."

"I heard that. Don't be a dick Frank. Or at least don't rub it into me. I'm depressed."

"Well I can't rub anything in yet. Not with Dean like he is." Frank motioned his head up to the bleachers to Dean and Ellen. "Look at her with him. It's sick. Gets him his drink. Lives with him. God. I have to get him self sufficient or I'm not getting her away from him."

"He's getting there Frank. You did good."

"Not good enough." Frank nudged Henry. "Hey, you're the fix-it guy. Why don't you make him some new eyes so he can see."

"Easier said than done Frank." Henry stated, taking Frank's joking request so serious. "If I could make him new eyes I would. Unfortunately his blindness has nothing to do with his eyes. It's all in his brain signals. Now if I could . . . If I could . . ."

"If you could what?"

“Oh shit!” Henry’s eyes grew wide.

“What?” Frank looked next to him and Henry was backing up. “Henry, where are you going?”

A huge grin hit Henry as he held his hand up. “You have to play without me Frank.” He spoke rapidly and excitedly. “I have to take care of something. Tell no one to bother me.” He got further away. “This is important. Yes!” He took off running.

“Henry, what the . . .” Frank grunted and turned to the field. “Fuck. Now I’m short a player.” He faced the fence again and whistled loudly. He had no choice and he wasn’t taking ‘no’ for an answer. “Hey Dean! Come on, we need you!”

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

(1)

Dean chuckled laying on his couch, his back against the arm of the sofa, headphones on and Nick on his chest. His eyes were closed knees were bent up to allow room for Ellen who sat on the opposite end of the couch, reviewing notes.

Ellen would read, make a notation, look up to the noise above her, then smile and shake her head at Dean who continuously chuckled. It was nearing the end of an uneventful evening at home. Working and relaxing on the couch, her leg catching Dean's for some contact. So comfortable she was, that she hated the thought of getting up when she heard the knock at the door. She debated, then yelled out. "Come in!"

Dean slid his headphones off slightly. "Huh?"

"Not you." Ellen told him and watched him close his eyes again and listen. She looked up to the opening door to see Frank peek his head in.

"Hey El. I brought Brian home." Frank stepped in. "Ready? I got him haircut. Actually, I cut it myself."

Ellen screamed when she saw Frank lift the baby and walk in with him. "Oh my God! What did you do to him. He's bald!"

Dean flung off the headphones. "What are you screaming El?"

"Brain's bald. Frank gave him a crew cut."

Dean's eyes widened. "No, tell me he did not cut off that kids curly hair."

"Uh . . ." Ellen shifted her eyes to Frank who held his finger over his lips and shook his head at her. "No Dean, it was uh . . . blind joke. Go back to listening to your reading."

Dean nodded, rewound his tape and listened again.

Frank walked to the arm of the sofa behind Ellen and kissed her on the cheek. "What are you doing?"

"Going over some notes. Can you put Brian in his walker, it's in the diningroom."

"Sure." Frank carried the now shaven head child to the diningroom and set him down. "Kids upstairs?"

"Playing." Ellen told him.

"I'll let them go. Hey, I'm going to do that perimeter. Smell me El. I smell good." He leaned into her.

"You were hanging around Robbie weren't you. I smell cigarettes."

Frank sniffed and shrugged. "Anyhow. You gonna come out with me tonight?"

"No." She shook her head. "I'll stay here incase Dean needs me."

"Come on El. Josh will come over. He already said so." Frank knelt down behind her. "Please."

"I'm not in a good mood Frank."

"I'll put you in one." He saw Dean laughing. "What the hell is he listening to?"

"Oh. Jason has been recording Dean's favorite books. You remember Dean loves to read. So right now he's reading the Albertine Experiments. Or rather listening to that research. Boring."

"Doesn't sound it." Frank reached over Ellen's shoulder and hit Dean's foot and kept hitting Dean's foot until Dean stopped the tape.

Again, Dean lowered the headphones. "What El?"

"Not me. Frank."

"Frank? What do you want Frank?"

"Enjoying your book Dean?" Frank asked with sarcasm.

"As a matter of fact. Yes." Dean tried to put on his head phones.

"Any good sex scenes."

"It's research Frank." Dean snapped.

"So. Any good sex scenes?" Frank snickered when Dean groaned. "Hey Dean, you still pissy about losing the game for your team?"

"I didn't lose the game for my team Frank. I can't believe you guys had me playing ball."

"You did good." Frank told him. "Even though you lost the game. One run, one run was all you guys needed."

"I hit the ball."

"Very impressive too. But you also got thrown out at first because you ran the wrong way."

Dean gasped in shock. "What do you expect. First you guys yell because I miss the two fly balls that came out to right field. Then your team throws me out off a base I can't see. I should have been cut a break Frank. I can't see."

"Yeah well let me tell you Dean, the blind stint is starting to get old."

"Go away Frank."

"I'm leaving." Frank stood up. "El, I'll be at the hall. Please stop by."

"I don't know." Ellen said. "Dean might need me."

"Dean." Frank called him getting in response a very annoyed look. "You don't need Ellen tonight do you? I'll get Josh to come over and lend a hand. She can come hang with me right? Tell her to."

"No I'm not telling her to." Dean started to put on his head phones but stopped. "But I might send her there if she doesn't let me sleep again. So don't be surprised if she does show up." He laughed when Ellen tsked and put his headphones on.

"See El." Frank kissed her again as he moved from the couch. "Finish your work and meet me there."

"I'll think about it, really I will. But . . . Henry won't be there will he?"

"No." Frank shook his head. "I haven't a clue where Henry is. He went to do something, said not to bother him and he zipped away." Frank lifted his hands. "If he's there I'll send him here. Sound good?"

"We'll see."

"El, you're giving me a complex here." Frank reached for the door.

"It's not you Frank. Really it's not."

"All right. I'll see you." Just as Frank started to leave, he stopped, ran to the back of the couch where Dean's tape player set, he turned up the volume full blast and took off out of the house laughing.

Dean flung off the headphones holding his ear. "El!"

"Not me." She pointed to the door then returned to her notes. "Frank."

"God is he an asshole." Readjusting the volume, Dean listened again, happy that he only had to deal with two blind jokes on Frank's visit. The headphones, and fortunately, Brian's haircut was a blind joke also. But unknown to Dean, it wasn't.

(2)

It was about the fastest Henry's fingers ever moved against the computer keyboard. A cup of tea sat in front of him, a soldering iron, a workbench scattered with papers, and a circuit board. Henry would type, read, write, solder, sip. But there was one thing Henry was doing as he worked at his computer. It was the one thing that Henry barely did all week and if he did it wasn't sincere. Henry worked and Henry smiled.

(3)

"One dart." Frank shouted loudly over the noise at the social hall to Danny. He closed one eye and twitched his head. "Man. Doesn't Robbie's band ever take a break. God." He held up his hand. "One dart. The bulls eye, game over."

"You think." Danny asked nearly instigating.

"I know."

"Awfully sure of yourself, aren't you?"

Frank lowered his throwing arm. "Danny. You haven't been in Beginnings that long. I can do this."

"With one dart? Frank, it took you eight rounds to get the other two bulls eyes."

"Yeah but I wasn't trying. I didn't want to embarrass you by kicking your butt your first night in the hall." Frank reached over to the side of the bar and grabbed his drink. Then his cigarette that was setting in the ashtray.

"Care to bet?"

"Yeah. I'll bet you." Frank took a long hit from his cigarette and put it down again. "If I get this, you have to do my clean up tonight. I'm on clean up."

"O.K. But if you miss, you have to . . ." Danny closed his eyes thinking. When he opened them he had a bright smile upon his face. "You have to . . ." He started to snicker. "You have to shave your chest."

Frank's mouth dropped open. "Now what the fuck would even make you bet something like that. That is really off."

"Ah, but it isn't." Danny held up his finger. "There is no money, so therefore we must bet something of value that we can take from the other. You must feel that it is a waste of time to do clean up, my time, anyone's time is valuable so you bet me clean up. I know how valuable your chest hair is to you or rather to Ellen. I was at the field and seeing that your chest is the only thing she was rubbing, I'm going to say she feels that is your best asset. Of course I saw your voodoo doll too."

"Hey."

"We on?"

"What do you have to gain by me shaving my chest?"

"Nothing really. I just think it would be really funny. Frank? Afraid."

"Fuck no." Frank took another sip of his drink and walked to the line. "Watch." He tilted his head to the left, then the right, rolling it around. He extended his arm, toe near the line. And he concentrated.

"Frank."

Frank's arm dropped. "Danny. Shh."

Danny watched and as soon as he saw Frank ready to throw, he called out again. "Frank."

"Danny!"

Danny laughed. "Go on. I don't need to cheat." He folded his arms, envisioning in his mind Frank with a bald chest and Ellen's shock when she saw it. And then that vision swept from his mind when he heard the bulls eye music play and he looked up to see Frank's dart sticking out from it. "Shit."

"Clean up tonight Pal. And it's Saturday night too." Frank handed his darts to the next guy who was waiting for Frank and Danny's game to be over with. He walked to the bar with Danny. "And the band." Frank used his head to point to Robbie's band who had just stopped to take a break. "You'll have to throw their asses out of here. All but Denny. His mom calls for him." Frank leaned into the bar, smoking and drinking.

"This place is really great." Danny looked around. "It reminds me so much of the old world. A band, the juke box coming on when they take their break, people laughing, drinking and Ellen just walked in."

Frank's head sprang up and he quickly blew out the smoke he held in his mouth. "Shit." He hurriedly put out his cigarette.

"I take it you don't smoke in front of Ellen?" Danny asked then watched Frank finish his drink and put the glass far from him. "Or drink in front of her."

Frank shook his head. "She doesn't . . . hey, where is she going?" He watched Ellen walk from the bar with a glass in her hand, through the

crowded social hall and sit at a small table nearer to the band. Alone she sat there, staring at the stage.

"I thought you asked her to meet you here."

"I did." Frank kept watching her.

"I'd like to say she didn't see you, but how can she miss you?" Danny moved closer to Frank. "She looks really down."

"Yeah she does. Fuckin Henry." Frank twitched his head in disgust.

"The guys my best friend and all but I could kill him for doing this to her."

"You going over there?"

"Yep." Frank looked around the bar, grabbed his glass back, poured a small amount in there and downed it. He slammed down his glass. "Because I don't want to see her like this anymore."

"Think you can help her?"

"I know I can help her." Frank flashed a quick closed mouth smile and walked across the hall to the table Ellen sat at. Still staring forward, a glass of water in her hand, she seemed oblivious to anything but that stage,. "Hey." Frank whispered in her ear. "They just took their break."

"I'll wait." Ellen spoke so down. "Just tell me I didn't miss the 'Silly' song."

"You missed the 'Silly' song."

"Shit."

"Can I sit down?" Frank pulled out a chair.

"What if I said no?"

"I'd still sit." Frank sat next to her. "I'm feeling really bad here El."

"Why is that?" She looked at him.

"I asked you out. You turned me down. Then I ask you to hang out, you turn me down. You show up and ignore me. Do you really want me to leave you alone?"

"If I told you 'yes' would you leave?"

"If you really wanted me to."

Ellen stared at him for a second. "I don't want you to."

"Good." Frank smiled. "Can you tell me something though. Can you tell me why you wouldn't let me ask you out for date purposes."

"I just like to give you a hard time Frank."

"And I would just like to give you a good time El."

"As appealing as that sounds right now, I don't think that's possible. I don't think anyone can make me feel good."

Frank smirked and threw his head back. "You don't think?"

"No I don't." Ellen stayed solemn.

"El. Babe." Frank took on a tone of cockiness. "You just so happen to be sitting, right now, with the only guy who can make you forget about everything and put a smile on that face." He touched her cheek.

"Is this coming from the man who has the most arrogance Beginnings?"

"Nope. It's coming from the man who loves you the most in Beginnings."

Ellen smiled slightly. "That's really nice."

"See." He pointed to her mouth. "A beginning." Frank tapped his fingers on the table, looking around. "You know what I haven't done with you in a while."

Ellen only turned her head with raised eyebrows.

"Besides that." Frank returned the raising eyebrows. "I haven't danced with you."

"The band is not playing Frank. Or haven't you noticed."

"We have the jukebox."

Ellen twitched her head to it. "It stopped too."

"Easily remedied." Frank began to stand up.

"No, Frank, I don't feel like dancing."

"I do." He walked backwards to the jukebox. "I'll play our song."

"No I . . ." Ellen watched him walk to the jukebox, grab the stock dollar and press the selection so fast. Walking back to the table, Ellen saw by the way Frank stopped, and the way his smile dropped from his face, that he screwed up. "Frank. That's not our song."

"Shit. I hit 'E-7' Damn it."

"Oh well."

Frank moved to the table. "We'll make this our song. We'll just say it's our song."

"This is 'Tears On My Pillow' Frank, it's far from our song."

"So dance."

"No. We'll just sit."

"I'll make you." Frank tilted his head.

"How can you make me dance."

"El, if you don't dance." Frank held out his hand. "I will . . . I will sing until you get up with me."

"Frank I'd rather . . . Whoa." Ellen grabbed the sides of the chair as it was slid to the edge of the dance floor. "Frank . . ."

Loudly, and capturing the attention of everyone, causing first moans then silence, Frank began to sing. "*You don't remember me . . . Come on El dance . . . but I remember you.*"

"Oh my God." Ellen stared speechless at Frank standing before her with his arms out.

"*Was not so long ago . . . everyone's watching . . . you broke my heart in two.*"

"Frank . . ."

"*Tears on my pillow.*"

"Frank . . ."

"*Pain in my heart. Caused by you . . .*" He pointed at her. "*You-u-u-u.*"

"Frank please." Ellen tried to get up, but he made her sit down. "Please quit it." She looked around as everyone stepped closer. "Oh God." She covered her face.

"Dance with me El." He pulled her hands from her face and she struggled to put them back up. He kept pulling, but Frank kept singing. "*Love is not a something or other . . . I'm good huh . . . love is not a toy. I have found the one I love, you fill my heart with joy . . . whoa-ob-ob-ob.* Here is the really big part!"

"No!"

Frank dropped to one knee holding his hands out and singing even louder. "*If we could start a new! I wouldn't hesitate . . . El please . . . I'd gladly take you back . . . I mean that . . . and tempt the hand of fate.*" Just as he gave one more pleading look, Ellen's hands plopped down into his and she stood up.

"Stop singing." She fake smiled and joined him on the dance floor.

"*Tears on my pillow . . .*"

"Frank."

"*Pain in my heart.*" He pulled her into his chest, holding her right hand as he swayed upbeat to the faster tempo slow song, smiling the whole time, keeping his grinning face so close to hers. "Told you I'd make you smile."

"Only you Frank."

"I can sing that next." He continued to dance with her.

"No don't." As Ellen hugged Frank at the end of the song, the room filled with the applause of those who clapped for Frank's valiant efforts. "Oh shit." She pulled back to see those who watched them.

"I hope I don't get mobbed for autographs."

"Frank." She laughed and shook her head. "Can we sit down now?"

"I'd rather not. Not right now . . . listen." He pointed with his head to the jukebox and the next song playing.

"You did play our song. Did you play that first one on purpose?"

"You think I was gonna waste our entire song getting you up to dance?" Frank fluttered his lips. "Please."

Ellen stepped closer to him, placing her face near to his and they slowed down in that dance to a point where they barely moved. "Thank you for this Frank."

"The night is not over yet." Frank whispered sensuously. "I'd like to take you from here and do what I had planned to do with you."

"What is that?" Ellen asked feeling his warm breath as he spoke so close to her ear.

"It's the one thing I know we used to do all the time. Since we were kids. The one thing that we had fun doing. And it always took our minds off of everything, because we did it together."

"You were planning this?"

"Oh yeah." Frank pulled her closer. "Do you know where I'm going?"

"I think so."

"How many time did we occupy our boring summer nights with it."

"Winter too."

"Even though it was too cold to do it outside."

"We still did." Ellen finished his sentence. "You want to do this now? Or is it too early make it seem like the old days."

"It's never too early. I'll take you far from here."

"Let's do it Frank." Ellen stepped back and looked up to him.

"El, you realize you are the only person on the face of the earth that knows what I'm thinking without me saying anything."

"I've known you forever Frank . . .and the music stopped."

"Then let's get out of here. Ready to have some fun?"

"More than you know." Ellen let Frank take her hand and he led her off the floor and through the tables.

Frank stopped before he left. "Danny!" He yelled over. "Have fun cleaning up."

Ellen looked oddly at him while following his lead out. "What was that all about. How does Danny have clean up?"

"He bet me I couldn't hit the bulls eye and he lost."

"What did you bet?"

"My chest hair."

Ellen stopped cold, mouth open in the social hall doorway. "I would have killed you if you lost."

Still holding the door open for her, Frank lowered the collar of his tee shirt. "Yeah, but it's still there." He smiled at her softly, then motioned his head and brought her from the social hall.

(4)

It was a good thing that Frank had taken Ellen to the garages because her scream would have ricocheted through the living section. "God Frank!" She bent down to pick up the sopping wet cloth that flew across the garage, smacked her in the face and dropped to the floor. She re-saturated it and tossed it back at him smacking him in the already wet chest. "You cheat." She turned to dump out her bucket of water again.

"Hey El?"

"What . . ." Smack! It hit her again. "Frank!" She held out her arms, so soaking wet she was. "I can't believe I agreed to torture myself like this with you."

"Yeah, but how many jeeps did we wash." He carried his bucket over with her to dump his out.

"Three."

"Productive night."

"It always worked when we were younger. Of course people always thought we were whacked washing cars after midnight." She tilted her bucket. "But it always took my mind off . . ." Another shriek came from her when Frank dumped his bucket out, not on the ground, but over her head. "I hate you." With quick thinking she tossed the entire contents of her

bucket at him. Frank jumped back but not fast enough to avoid the splatter of water that came his way.

"El." With an ornery look, he picked up the hose.

"Frank no." She held her hands up and squinted, trying to back up. As she bumped in the doorway the stream from the hose came at her and her blocking hands only caused it to spray outward and into her face. "Stop!"

"All right." He turned off the hose and dropped it. "Feeling better?"

"Yes, but I'm feeling cold."

"It's hot out, so what." He ran his hand over his wet head. "The jeeps look good."

"We always did a good job. But I don't ever remember getting this wet."

"Oh we got this wet." Frank walked closer to her. "In fact. I can really remember . . ." He bent down.

"No." She saw him pick up the rag, she had no where to go.

"Shh." He stepped closer. "I can remember when you'd wear white shirts like this." Another step closer. "And I remember thinking how hot . . . you . . . you would look." He softened his voice. "When you were wet."

Ellen swallowed watching him bring the cloth right up to her chest level. So slow he moved that rag, squeezing it in a teasing manner letting the water trickle across her chest and down her shirt.

Frank kept his eyes on her chest, watching it rise and fall, the dampness of it exposing the skin that stuck to her shirt. "El." He saw her breathing get heavier.

Ellen's eyes stayed fixed on his fingers that lightly touched the low collar of her shirt. They trailed over her skin and up to her neck. Letting her eyes follow his hand, they led her to his eyes and she couldn't pull them away. She felt his body step closer to her. "You did . . ." She took a heavy breath. "You did what you said you'd do." She heard the wet cloth hit the pavement. "You took my mind off of things. Are you gonna . . . are you gonna stop here."

Frank was so silent, almost a painful look was upon his face as both of his hands went to her face then slid back to her hair. His fingers gripped the wet strands, pulling back her head and tilting her face towards his. He brought his nose to hers, brushing it against hers, breathing with an ache as his body pressed into hers. "Ellen." He whispered her name, touching her lips so softly with his in a tease, then pulling back. "More than anything right now I want to kiss you."

"What's stopping you?" She brought her mouth to his but Frank pulled back.

"The fact that nothing will be able to stop me is what is stopping me." He spoke through heavy, breathy words. "I can't do this. This isn't what tonight is about."

"Frank . . ."

"No. It's not what tonight is about." Touching her face one more time, he kissed her quickly then pulled back. "Tonight was about making you smile. And I did that."

"Yes you did Frank." Ellen watched him proceed to start to clean up like the moment that just was, never happened. She smiled at him really smiled. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. And . . . you know what?" Frank bent down and picked up the buckets. "Everything will work out for you. I'm sure of it. How you're feeling right now, will get better."

"I don't want it to."

"You want to stay sad.?"

"No. You said how I'm feeling right now. Right now Frank, I'm happy that I have you in my life to make it all go away."

Frank had nothing to say to that. He just wanted to enjoy her words and he basked in them while he finished putting things away. "You ready to go home, or you think you might want to go back to my house and talk."

"Talk? It's pretty late Frank, I might start to ramble. You know how I am at night."

"Then we'll stay up and talk as late as you want. All right?"

"I'd like that." She watched Frank pick up his boots that he had off, and set them on the workbench. He then proceeded to undo his pants. "What are you doing?"

"I can't walk home in these pants. I can't move." He dropped them. "Wanna walk back half dressed?" He winked. "Come on it'll be fun, me in my boxers and you in that wet tee shirt."

"If I do this with you, Will you make me a sandwich. I'm kind if hungry."

Frank only wearing his boxers, picked up all his clothes, his boots and his shoulder harness. "I'll make you a sandwich." So simple it seemed with Ellen, just being them. Frank placed his arm around her, holding his clothes and hers and walked slowly with her part-way back home.

(5)

They fought over the front door and who would get in first. Ellen being smaller and a bit more wet, slipped herself between Frank and the door, stumbling into his living room and laughing. "I won."

"I let you."

"Right." Ellen saw him ready to drop the wet clothes. "Leave them outside."

"Shit, you're right." Frank opened the front door, set the clothes on the porch. He carried back inside his shoulder harness, tossing it over the back of the couch. He saw Ellen standing with her arms crossed tightly. "What's wrong?"

"What the hell do you have the air conditioner on? It's freezing in here."

"Sixty-Five."

"Sixty-five? Christ Frank." She began to jump up and down to warm up.

"Want one of my shirts?" Frank pointed to the steps. "I'll go get one."

"Please."

"Be right back down." Hurrying, Frank charged up the steps and into his room. He took a moment to remove his damp boxers and toss on a pair of shorts. He grabbed a tee shirt from his top drawer for Ellen and ran back down the steps, fully intending on turning down the air. "Here's the . . ." He stopped when Ellen turned to face him and she stood without her top. " . . . shirt." He slowly walked to her extending out the shirt, staring.

"You really want me to put this on?" Ellen laid her hand on Frank's.

"Yeah. No. Yeah . . . no." He moved into her. "What are you doing?"

"Wanting to warm up."

"You know, all I wanted to do was spend some time with you. This, this is an added bonus."

"So I take it you aren't turning me down?"

"You are making it very . . ." Frank slipped his hands on her waist then brought Ellen close to him. "Very . . . difficult." Just as he lowered his head to kiss her, he heard three banging thumps coming from below and Frank jolted back. "Did you hear that?"

"Yes. What was that?"

"Stay here." Frank reached for his revolver in the harness over the couch and turned to the kitchen when he heard the basement door open. "Shit." In one motion, he tossed Ellen her shirt, took a step to the kitchen, raised his revolver and clicked back the hammer. "Freeze!"

Henry shrieked and jumped when he saw the gun pointing at him. "Frank!"

"Henry, what the fuck?" Frank placed back the hammer and lowered the revolver. He set the gun on the diningroom table. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I've been here. Working and why is Ellen half dressed? That is wrong Frank." Henry looked passed Frank to Ellen who tossed on her shirt. "I can't believe you're doing this already with her."

"I'm not doing anything with her Henry. We got wet washing jeeps. Now what the hell were you doing in my basement?"

"Ellen's leaving."

"Answer the question."

"Ellen's gone."

"Shit." Spinning around Frank saw the open front door and he took off after Ellen. "El."

"I'm going home Frank."

"No wait." He pulled her back. "We were gonna talk. I was going to make you a sandwich remember. Not to mention you were standing almost naked in my livingroom."

"I'm sorry about that. I feel embarrassed. I shouldn't have hit on you."

"No!" Frank's eyes widened. "Hit on me. Hit on me any time. El I . . ."

"Frank. Go back home. This isn't going to work. It was a great night, but this isn't going to work."

"What isn't going to work? Fine. Leave your clothes on, hitting on me isn't important, just don't go. Please."

"And what go back to your house while Henry is there?"

"I'll make him leave."

"Then what?" Ellen asked.

"Then he'll leave."

"Then what?" Ellen asked again.

"He'll go home?" Frank shrugged and Ellen began to walk away. "Wait. What?"

"Then he'll be back. He'll always be back. Because you'll always hang around him."

"So, Henry's my friend."

"And so am I."

"What? I can't be friends with both of you?" Frank questioned with edge.

"You shouldn't be."

Frank released the grip he had on her. "I can be friends with both of you."

"I don't want you being friends with both of us Frank."

"Oh are you wrong." Frank shook his head. "This isn't first grade El. Don't even tell me you're wanting me to choose."

"I am."

"I won't." Frank raised his voice some.

"Then I'm going home!" Ellen backed up.

"Go home!"

"I will!"

"You're wrong!"

"*You're* wrong!" Ellen shouted loudly.

"Grow up El!" Frank shouted as he walked to his house.

"Go to hell Frank!"

"Shut up both of you!" A voice yelled through the night.

"Fuck you!" Frank responded. "Go back to sleep!" He flung open his house door and stormed inside. "Henry, you being in my basement better be fuckin good . . . and what are all these papers." Frank looked down to his coffee table. "And why are you smiling? You've been miserable all day."

"Two reasons. One, I appreciate you not taking advantage of what is going on between me and Ellen right now."

"Well . . ." Frank tilted his head.

"Frank! Come on. You can't do that. Not yet."

"What do you want me to do Henry? Not touch her?"

"Yes."

"Fuck that." Frank shook his head. "Now what's the other reason."

"I got it Frank."

"Got what?"

"I think I can do it."

"Do what?"

Henry picked up all of his notes. "I think I can make Dean see again."

"Re . . . repeat that?"

"All of this." Henry showed Frank the papers. "My notes. My notes from the SUT program. I have created a program for the microchip for optical enhancement."

"Explain that."

"Dean's eyes are fine. It's his brain that is failing to send signals to his optic nerves. If we implant Dean with a microchip. That microchip will replace the signal the brain is failing to send, therefore Dean will be able to see again."

"Holy shit." Frank plopped in shock to the couch. "Will this work."

"I think so. In fact I will make it work. I have to. Day and night if need be. There's only one problem."

"What's that?"

"We can't take a chance on lobotomizing Dean. And the lobotomy is normally done to make room for the chip."

"So we can't implant it then."

"Oh we could. If the chip was smaller."

"Make a smaller one."

Henry slowly sat down next to Frank. "I've been trying. I can't. I don't even know where to begin to make one that small that will take the program without overloading it."

"It has to be able to be done." Frank stated.

"Oh sure. But right now, I can't do it. I'll figure it out though."

"Henry, you know who can probably do this?"

"No Frank." Henry shook his head. "No, I won't ask him."

"Why?"

"I want to do this alone."

"Why?"

"I don't want him to help. No. This has to be mine." Henry said defensively. "This has to be all my doing."

"That is stupid. You came up with the idea right?"

"Yes."

"Then it is all yours. Only he'll help you achieve it faster. If he can. Ask him."

"Aw Frank." Henry whined.

"Ask him. If you can get Dean back his sight, then you do it. That is what is most important."

"I guess you're right." Henry stood up. "I'll talk to him in the morning. He's probably sleeping now, it's almost two."

"No he's not."

"How do you know?" Henry asked.

"He lost a bet. He's at the social hall now. Go."

"Against my better judgement." Henry pouted and walked to the door. "But . . . if it works it'll really be great huh?"

"Yeah it will be." Frank stood from the couch.

"Don't say anything to Dean until we know it works."

"No problem."

Henry opened the door. "Do you think Frank, that Ellen will think it's great that I can make Dean see again?"

"I think she'll be very happy Henry."

"Good." Henry grinned. "I'll be back. I think. Night Frank." He shut the door.

"Happy but still pissed." Frank said to the closed door. He turned around to see Ellen's wet shirt on his floor. "At you . . . and now me. Shit." He picked it up and clenched it.

(6)

Not much ever surprised Danny Hoi. Not the amount of glasses he had to wash, not the number of tables still left to wipe off. Not even the fact that Robbie Slagel, while taking down some of his equipment, kept getting thirsty and grabbing a clean glass. None of that surprised him. Henry walking into the social hall, still dressed like he was at the softball game, did. Danny looked up from behind the bar, then returned to doing his glasses. He figured Henry had to speak to Robbie, why else would he be there. He realized what Henry wanted when a stack of papers hit the bar.

"Danny." Henry sat on a stool. "I need to speak to you."

"Are you going to be all mean to me. Because I'm in a good mood Henry. I'm not in the mood to have you being mean."

"No. I have to . . . I have to ask for your help. I need to know if you can help me."

"I don't know, with what?"

"Recognize this?" Henry stood slightly and pulled something from his picket, he laid it on the bar.

"A microchip. But it's blue."

"Yes."

"It's not from a SUT." Danny examined it.

"No. I made that."

"Does it work?" Danny asked.

"I guess. It's accepts the data."

"The data?" Danny asked. "You know how to program these things."

"I used to use the prefabbed programs on the disk that Robbie found. But I learned how to create new programs."

"Excellent."

"In fact Danny, I know quite a bit about the chips."

"So what do you need me for?"

"See the chip? To implant that in the brain, a portion of the brain has to be removed to make room."

"That explains the zombie look."

"Exactly." Henry stated. "I want to be able to implant a chip without having to perform a lobotomy on the patient."

"Make a smaller chip." Danny handed it back. "That should work, one about a quarter of the size of this one. The base has to be plastic."

"I know. And the electronic portion mainly has to be encased in plastic."

"Yep."

"So here's the problem. Can it hold the data if it's that small?" Henry leaned closer.

"Yeah. I saw one time at a convention, a microchip so small it was nearly the size of pencil point. And they said it could hold enough data to store all social security numbers in the state of California."

"I need a small chip Danny, and I need one soon. I can make one this size." Henry held his chip. "But I'm lost making one smaller. Can you . . . do you think you could do it?"

"I can't have it done tonight."

"Can you have it done this year?"

"Hell, I can have it done this week. What's the rush. You guys creating a new SUT?"

"No." Henry shook his head. "I created a program for optical enhancement. I did this today. I think I have it."

"Optical enhancement?" Danny stood up straight. "Enhancement enough to correct imperfect vision?"

"Or to make . . . to make a blind man see."

"Whoa." Danny grabbed back the chip. "Dean."

"Exactly. When can you start working on it?"

"Leave me your notes and your chip and I'll start working on it as soon as I finish with these glasses."

"Thank you." Henry closed his eyes in gratitude. "Get back to me as soon as you make any progress."

"I will." Danny set the things aside. "Henry? Thanks for coming to me with this."

"You're really my only choice Danny."

"I see." Danny gave a slight smile. "I hope I can help you out."

“For Dean’s sake, and the sake of the community. Let’s hope you can make this work.”

“No Henry. Let’s hope *we* can make this work.”

Henry gave a slight smile as he moved slowly to the door. “Danny, keep this under wraps O.K., at least until we get this going.”

Danny held up his right hand, it still held the chip. “Your secret is safe with me.”

Just as Henry began to nod he heard another voice call out ‘me too’. Surprised that someone else was there, Henry looked. “Robbie.”

Robbie walked out from behind the amps a shitty grin on his face. He was glad to know something that he wasn’t supposed to know, but most of all he was glad to know what it was.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

AUGUST 2

(1)

Ellen fussed with Brian. How hard he was to control. He wouldn't just sit there, he'd kick his legs outward wanting so badly to get off of Ellen's lap. "Dean." She whispered to him. "I can't believe you're making me do this."

"Shh." He tilted his head into her. "Want me to take the baby?"

"I want you to tell me I can go home."

"Ellen please. Quiet."

"No Dean, drag my ass out of bed, make me . . ."

"El."

"Not just me mind you, all the children. Except for little Henry or Nick. And you know this is something I just don't do."

"Ellen." Dean gritted his teeth and spoke through them. "Quiet."

"And every keeps fuckin . . ."

"El." His voice raised to a louder whisper. "Will you knock it off. We're in church."

"I don't care."

"Well I'm not making you leave." Cringing one more time at the thumping of Brian's struggles, Dean gave up. "Give me Brian."

"No."

"Give him to me El. You can't control him."

"I'll just take him out."

"No. I bring these kids to church all the time. Give him up." Dean reached out and lifted Brian. He made a slight grunt as he transferred the rowdy one year old from Ellen's lap to his. "Shh Brian. Be good." Dean spoke soothingly. "That's it." He felt Brian start to settle and he brought his lips to the baby's head to kiss him. Sharp! Dean's head sprung up immediately at the pain he felt to his lips. It was a sharp, prickling pain. He brought his hands up and felt the baby's head. Upon doing so, Dean let out a shrill sounding gasp of shock.

Everyone looked back at him.

"Dean!" Ellen scolded quiet. She slid down in the pew knowing what had happened. Knowing he found out what she had been trying to avoid him finding out. The reason, pure and simple that she withheld Brian from him all the night before and morning.

"El." Dean spoke in a grunt. "What the hell happened to his hair!"

(2)

In the corner of Frank's basement Henry had his things set up. Since his portion of the cryo-lab accidentally caught fire, it was secretive and safe at Frank's. Originally only a corner, a small partition wall he had made blocked his computer equipment from anyone's view. Set on a long work bench, a simple stool always sat in front of it. Henry's log books set neatly in a stack and never was there much of a mess left around while or after Henry worked.

That was less than twenty-four hours. Now the partition had been moved, outward from the wall to make more working room and to add the second work bench. And Henry's little work-corner of the world in Frank's basement, now extended pretty close to mid basement.

The neat work bench was scattered with papers, wires, tools, cups, plates and remnants of food. The computer was running and a cassette player played songs to fill the air along with the conversation. Henry and Danny stayed at the longer workbench. Though the basement was well lit, Henry utilized the bendable table spot lights. A single one was arched in, causing a small golden circle over the area he and Danny huddled. Jason sat in a chair, against the partition wall, an old metal folding table next to him held his ashtray and coffee. With his legs crossed, he read from notes printed from the computer, ones brought from Dean's work at the clinic, and notes he added himself. He'd read, drop them, read some more.

As his hands worked with Danny's, Henry lifted his eyes slightly when he heard Jason yawn. "I'm still waiting for an answer Jason."

"I'm still working on one for you Henry." Jason said back.

Henry shook his head slightly, eyes peering through the magnifying glass he shared with Danny. "This looks good Danny."

Danny adjusted his glasses and maneuvered a wire. "I think we should have a successful test after this adjustment."

"Let's hope. We've been at it how long now?"

"Too long now." Danny said. "Do you think I can sleep soon Henry. I have this bed Beginnings gave me in this nice little house and I haven't been in it yet."

"I thought you wanted to work on this with me."

"I do. . . Hold that still . . . but I thought when I brought the chip design over to you, you'd at least wait."

"Wait until when . . . no you're missing the connection, right . . . there, you got it." Henry watched Danny work.

"My eyes are losing their focus Henry."

"Try harder. And if you didn't want to work on it right away, you shouldn't have brought over the design two hours after I talked to you."

"You seemed restless, I thought you wanted to have it."

"I was restless, and I did. Thank you."

"Yeah, who would have thought the making of the tiny chip would have been the easiest of details." Danny stated. "Of course I don't think that William guy from plastics was pleased with us when we woke him up at

four-thirty in the . . . Shit.” Danny pulled his hand out from the magnifying glass bent his fingers a few times, and returned them to the wires they worked on. “My hands are cramping.”

“Almost there. Damn it, it’s not staying connected.” Henry grunted.

“We’ll get it. As soon as we do and we encase this bad boy in it’s plastic shield it, should never lose connection again.”

“Good. William did good on that didn’t he?” Henry asked Danny.

“Superb job, but you Henry, you shaped it.” Danny looked up at him. “Just about . . . hand me the chip portion. And any chance I can get some more coffee?”

“Sure.” Using tweezer, Henry removed the chip from a case it sat in. “Don’t touch it with your fingers, remember.” Henry turned his head back to Jason. “Jason, can you get Danny some coffee?”

“When?” Jason asked.

“Now.”

“No.” Jason flipped page. “Ten more minutes.”

Shrugging and unable to move his hands, Henry returned to looking under the magnifying glass. “Once we get this thing together, what are the odds that the sterilization process will affect it.”

“The chip? Not much. I read some of that program. All of these chips are sterilized before implantation. My biggest concern lies in the receptor you made me put in it.”

“All of them have a receptor Danny, they have to, how else are we gonna program it once it’s implanted.”

Danny’s hands stopped working. “You’re serious about that. I thought you were kidding.”

“No, not at all. I guess I wouldn’t have believed it myself had I not read it. For the longest time. I was hooking up the microchips to the circuit board to reprogram them, and well, it can be done that way. But I have this problem, though I do real good at reading manuals and such, I hate to.”

“Who doesn’t?”

“No one I guess. But all the ‘read me’ files on the program, I merely skimmed through.”

“I’m the same way.” Danny took a second to rub his eyes. “So what happened? You saw it by accident?”

“Yep. Boy was I surprised. So as soon as we replant Harold, the SUT we grabbed last year, I’ll bring him down here and reprogram him.”

“Or bring the program to him.”

“How’s that?” Henry asked.

“Lap top.”

“We don’t have any.”

“You have a city a half hour from here. I’m positive if we made a run out there we could find one. Between you and I we’ll get it fixed up. So are you going to run it through the internal speaker system?”

"Yes." Henry answered. "Nearest I can figure is that the speaker, or we'll use a single ear phone, will run the data sequence through the ear and it works the same way as when you hook it up to the circuit board, only it's done audibly instead of directly. You know, unscrambling the current program then running the new one."

"Without harming the base program needed to make the chip function?" Danny questioned.

"From my tests, no."

"Interesting and . . . cover please."

Henry moved his hands about, bringing the cover to the chip, allowing Danny to secure it. "Looks good. Again."

"It will work this time. I'm almost positive. If not, we'll start over. Again. But we rest first. Deal?"

"Deal."

"Henry answer me this. Can the base program that makes the chip function, can that be transmitted audibly too?"

"We're not doing it that way Danny. We're having the base program already installed, then we implant the chip in Dean, then we install the optical enhancement."

"That's not what I'm asking. I'm asking you, can the base program be audibly installed?"

"Yes . . . it's not secure on the left."

"I'm getting there." Danny made an adjustment.

"So why are you asking?"

"I have an idea. Let me run it passed you."

"Shoot."

"O.K., what makes a SUT a SUT?"

"The microchip."

"Not exactly, it goes a little further than that. Think about it."

Henry took a moment to contemplate. "The lobotomy?"

"That and what else, the most important thing that makes it function the way it does. Merely kill because . . ."

"Because it's programmed to kill." Henry nodded. "So. Where are you going with it?"

"How are you planning to make this Harold SUT normal?"

"Implant him with the chip and run a new program. Which, I have about three new ones I created. How they'll work I don't know."

"So in order to make a SUT less deadly, you change the program right?"

"Right." Henry kept thinking how basic this was, he wondered why Danny was recanting it.

"Now you mentioned a few hours ago, that Frank would love to get these things in here and reprogram them for us."

"Yes. Which is easy to do once we get them. Boy I'll tell you Danny, we were going by the misleading information that we had. We thought we

would have to remove the chip and reprogram it. I am so grateful Robbie found the program or I'd still be looking at number sequences."

"So then how do we get the SUTs to reprogram?"

"That's the tricky part. They're tough to get. Knock them out, wound them I suppose."

"Or disable them?" Danny asked, lifting his head.

"That's usually what happens when you wound them Danny." Henry stated thinking that perhaps he should let Danny get some sleep.

"I'm not talking physically Henry. I'm talking . . . mentally." Danny raised his eyebrows. "If you can create an optical enhancement program, you can create a de-scrambling program. A program that when played audibly can take out not only the program they use to function but the base program as well."

Henry knew exactly what Danny meant. "Causing them to drop or stop, then all we'd have to do is redo the program."

"Exactly. Think about how many we can eliminate that way?"

"Any in their army that has a microchip but . . . problem." Henry stood upright when he saw Danny had finished. "Anything that will cause the de-scrambling will have to be played audibly and loud. And if it's that loud, we take a chance of it screwing up any data we have elsewhere here in Beginnings. That is if the SUTs are close."

"What about in the field?" Carefully Danny lifted the microchip and carried it to the board.

"Would work, but what kind of equipment would our men have to carry in order to transmit the signal loud enough?" Henry raised his eyebrows.

"You're killing me Henry."

"I'm being realistic. It's a good idea, a real good idea. It would really help if we disabled them then captured them. It definitely would be easier on our men we send out."

"What if we armed our men with something on an individual basis." Danny began hooking up the chip for the test.

"Like a pocket tape player?"

"Possibly. Is there anything else? I mean, what else could de-scramble that program if not all the data in the chip."

Henry shrugged in thought. "De-magnification."

"A blast."

"A vibration."

"A shock . . ."

At that same instance, both of them looked at each other with the same thought. And they spoke it at the same time. "A stun gun."

Good idea, but Henry quickly shook his head. "Outer body contact will not do it."

"But inner ear will."

A bright smile hit Henry. "It would have to be strong and direct."

"Easy enough." Danny spoke like it was a piece of cake. "A matter of taking one thing from another to create it."

"It could cause the inner ear to rupture."

"So their deaf in one ear, so what."

Henry chuckled. "I like this idea. We can arm or men with a new line of defense out there. They'd have to use the sneak attack approach."

"Only for a second, then the SUT is down."

Henry nodded. "Robbie Slagel would die for that opportunity."

"We should give it to him."

"You mean make a prototype?" Henry asked.

"Oh sure. We can do that. In fact if this test is successful, I don't see why we can't start on that later."

"But you have this tracking system to work on."

Danny fluttered his lips. "This thing will be easy. We need a shell and insides. Hell. I'll bet you guys have all we need right here in Beginnings."

"I know we do."

"And it won't take long, between you and me, we'll have it done and in Robbie's hands. And I can work on more than one thing at a time. Except walking and chewing gun, I never grasped that."

"Then we should run the program test on this." Henry took a step back then brought the magnifying glass closer to the chip that laid on the circuit board. "Good job Danny."

"Yeah, we did do good."

Jason's single word along with the cup of coffee he set down in front of Danny, brought their attention from that chip. "Amazing."

Henry looked at him. "What is?"

"You two." Jason shook his head. "It's also a scary thought. But if you two actually set your minds to working together, think about what your two minds could build for this community. The Wright brothers could very easily look like Abbott and Costello. And . . . I'm leaving now." He moved to the steps, papers in hand. "I wish I had sunglasses, because I know my eyes will hurt when I leave this basement."

"Wait." Henry called out to him. "My answer."

"Oh." Jason looked back. "Yes, I can do it. I've been reviewing Dean's notes. Seems the laser program does all the work for you. I as a doctor only need to guide it. If we play our cards right, the risk should be minimal to Dean and his healing should barely be noticed. I just have to work on the program for the surgery. You know, pinpointing exactly where to go in and doing it with very little exposure of the brain."

With a clench of his fist, Henry smiled excitedly. "Thank you Jason. Will I see you tonight?"

Jason grumbled a 'yes' and walked up the stairs.

"And work on that . . ." Henry shut up when he heard the door above him shut. "Program." Henry shrugged. "Ready to run our test Danny?"

"I'm ready to sleep Henry. Can we just sleep?"

"Can you sleep after the test. I promise you can sleep then. But not for too long."

"All right." Danny walked to the computer. "I swear you are one driven man."

"I don't want to stop until we know it will be able to be done."

"Dean's sight is important yes, but there's something else to it, isn't there?" Danny watched Henry shrug instead of responding. "There is. What is it? You don't seem like the glory guy, wanting recognition from everyone." Danny opened his mouth then smiled. "But you'd die for recognition from one person wouldn't you?"

Henry raised his head. "I need her recognition."

"You're driving yourself like this for Ellen?" Danny was shocked.

"Danny, Dean's sight is so important, yes. The whole community needs him to have it. Dean needs have it himself. But if I could use this as an opportunity to make a change in my life I will. If I can help Ellen's friend see again, the maybe, just maybe she won't hate me anymore."

"Holy shit." Danny exclaimed as he began to run the test program. "You must really love this woman."

"I do. I love her very much."

"Oh yeah?" Danny clicked on the last key. "Then why did you turn to someone else?"

Henry wanted to say something in his defense, anything as Danny looked at him for an answer. But Henry couldn't give a defense, he had none. He just gave Danny that 'I don't know' look, then tried to move on to more hopeful thoughts as the test program began to run.

(3)

It could have been one of the best Sunday family dinners at Joe's house. It had the makings, at least in Ellen's mind. Dean wasn't sulking. He got over the fact that Brian had no hair. Alexandra wasn't screaming every ten minutes. Billy wasn't complaining about being bored. Nick slept and Henry wasn't there. Not to mention the finger food Andrea had set out as appetizers--something Joe never did. Yes to Ellen it could have been a great Sunday. Could have been. If it wasn't for Frank.

"El."

"Frank, leave me alone." She tried to block him out as he followed her from the diningroom table to the living room and all around. "The noise level in here is annoying enough without you adding to it."

"I don't want you mad at me."

"I am." Ellen grabbed for a piece of bread and then dipped it and brought it to her mouth.

"Get over it." Frank took the bread from her hand and ate it.

"Frank!"

"El. We had a great evening last night."

"And you killed it by yelling at me on the street. Dean . . . Dean." Ellen looked at Dean who was occupied playing some sort of string game with Katie. "Tell Frank to leave me alone."

"Leave her alone Frank."

Frank fake shuddered. "Now I'm scared. El . . ." He followed her back to the table.

"Frank. Leave me alone."

"Why don't we just put aside what happened at the end of last night and go to what happened during." He stepped closer to her. "No one is home at my house."

Ellen gasped at him. "I can't believe you are making that insinuation."

"Oh please." Frank said loudly. "You act all offended. Yet who was the one throwing themselves at me last night?"

"I did not."

"You did to! You stood in my livingroom half naked."

Silence, complete silence took over that house.

Ellen cringed and twitched her head to Dean. "Frank."

"You think Dean doesn't know how you lose control around me?"

Frank yelled over to him. "Dean, you know how she is around me."

Dean lifted his head, hands still tied up. "Unfortunately."

"See El." Frank told her. "Threw yourself at me."

"Asshole." She stormed from him.

"Half naked in my living room. Feeling me up at the field."

"Frank!"

"Not to mention that little doll you made of me. Lord knows what you do with that."

"Oh my God." Ellen dropped the dipped bread and moved from him.

"Where are you going?" Frank followed her to the door.

"Away from you." She opened it. "I'll be back."

"El, come on, I'm only teasing you. I'm trying to get you to be nice to me."

"Guess what Frank. You blew it."

"What do you mean?"

"Well I felt really bad for arguing with you last night."

"Right."

"I did." Ellen lifted her head high. "And . . . and . . . I was going to . . ." She grabbed his tee shirt and yanked him down to her level whispering in his ear. When she was done saying what she wanted to say she let him go. "So there!" She stormed out.

"Hey!" Frank laughed when the door slammed. He waved his hand at the door and spun around to see Katie and Dean on the couch. With his finger in a 'hush-hush' manner to Katie, Frank snuck up to the couch. Grabbed a hold of the string Katie twirled gently around Dean's hands in a

game, and pulled it hard and fast, causing the immediate and harsh joining of Dean's hands. Silently he laughed and moved away.

Dean let out only a squeak of a scream so as not to scare Katie. "Easy Katie O.K., it's only a game." He spoke to the bewildered child while hiding his wince in pain. "Boy you're strong for a little girl."

(5)

The 'Silly' song being played slow and picked on the guitar was what Ellen heard when she stopped into Joe's backyard. "Hey." She called out to Robbie who sat on a chair just off the back steps. "What are you doing?"

"Hiding."

"From who?" Ellen sat down across from him.

"Andrea the June Cleaver wanna be."

Ellen laughed at him. "She isn't that bad."

"Oh yeah she is. Especially with me. She acts like I'm Denny. You know she told me to comb my hair." He shook his head at Ellen's laughing. "No, El. It's not funny. I always wear my hair tossed like this and sticking up. It makes me look . . ."

"Sexy."

Robbie grinned. "Thanks."

"Never hid that fact from you. So." Ellen brought her hands to her legs. "Can I hide with you?"

"Depends. Who are you hiding from?"

"Your goof ball brother. We're fighting."

"Well don't fight too much with him please. He tends to drink heavily when you do that, and in war times like this, you never know when there will be a sneak attack. I'm not Frank. No one is. And the last thing we need is him drunk if that happens."

Ellen waved him off. "Frank doesn't get drunk."

"Yeah he does El." Robbie looked up from his guitar. "You know that."

"Drunk?" Ellen shook her head. "Not Frank. He was drinking for awhile but he never got drunk."

"Where were you?" Robbie asked with sarcasm. "Maybe not in the falling down, slobbering sense, but he consumed enough to knock his senses off. I know."

"So do I. He had a hard time. And why are we arguing? You're annoyed at me."

"I'm annoyed at Andrea. Sorry." Robbie stopped playing. "El, can I ask you something?" His chin rested on the curve of the guitar.

"Sure."

"Is Frank having a drink right now?"

"He nursing one. He had cut back for a while and now he's back to drinking one a day. If that Robbie." Ellen reached out to him. "I know we talked about this before. But he's good now."

"El, my brother has gone from drinking to help him get through the rough times, to drinking because he has to."

Ellen turned silent. "Robbie a month ago I would have agreed with you. But we all brought it to his attention. Frank made the turn around."

"El, Frank isn't better at drinking, he's just better at hiding it."

"Did he even try?" Ellen asked with a hint of anger.

"Oh he tried. In fact, he's still trying. He has that one in public that he makes out to seem like his social drink. And he fights not to have the others. I watch him. When he's at home, he doesn't have the big facade of the social hall to hide behind. That's when he has his problems."

"You haven't said anything."

"Nope. Because I know he's trying to quit. A lot more than we see. He'll ask for help one day. Unfortunately and that's what I'm worried about, unfortunately it may just take something big to force him into it."

"That scares you."

"Yeah. That's why I keep watching him. I don't like leaving him alone. I don't like you two fighting. It throws him over the edge. He needs you."

"I know he does."

"I think El, you're the key to helping him. One because he loves you. Two because you are the closest one to him."

"How can I help? Tell me."

"Frank has to tell you that. And you can't go after him for it, he has to come to you." Robbie started playing again.

"Is that why he started smoking? To help with his urges?"

Robbie's hand dropped with a hard strum of the guitar. "You know?"

Ellen blew harshly from her lips. "How can I not. The house smells of it. He smells of it. I think it's funny how when I bust him he always says it's you." Ellen laughed. "I just think that . . ." She saw Robbie's expression change. "What's wrong?"

Robbie lifted his head. "Hi Frank."

Hoping Frank didn't hear what they talked about, Ellen turned slowly to him. "Frank?"

"What are you guys talking about?" Frank pulled up a chair.

"Uh . . ." Robbie shifted his eyes to Ellen. "We were talking about psycho Andrea."

Frank pointed. "That is why I came out." He hid a snicker. "Andrea wants you to wash up for dinner Robbie."

Robbie winced. "Aw Frank. What is wrong with her?"

Frank lifted his shoulders. "She wants to baby you. I think she finally broke."

Ellen shook her head. "You're wrong. Andrea is just in love."

Both Frank and Robbie looked at her and asked at the same time. "With who?"

"Who do you think?" Ellen asked them. "Joe."

A unison 'no' came from both brothers.

"Yes." Ellen nodded, lifting herself from the chair to peek toward the kitchen window. Andrea's head bobbing along in the kitchen could be seen. "She's in love with Joe."

Frank laughed. "I'd better forewarn my dad."

"We both ought to." Robbie added.

Ellen just rolled her eyes at them. "Are you two that dense? Joe doesn't need forewarned. He knows. Why else are they sleeping together?"

"Uh!" Frank shrieked and nearly fell from the chair when he sprang up. "My dad is not sleeping with that woman."

"Yes he is. All the time too." Ellen stated.

Robbie stood and peeked toward the house. "Frank, tell her to quit lying."

"I'm not lying." Ellen said. "You two would swim in jealousy if you knew how much sex your father . . ."

"No." Frank held up his hands, holding back his head and closing his eyes. "Stop. Just . . . just stop."

Ellen didn't. "Andrea tells me about all sorts of things."

Robbie began to play his guitar louder. "I'm not listening."

Ellen spoke louder. "She is buzzing with feelings. And she goes on and on about what they do."

Frank's eyes widened. "My father can't."

"Your father does." Ellen pointed with a smile. "According to Andrea, not only in the bed . . ."

Robbie stopped playing and ran passed Ellen. "I'm out of here."

"Me too."

Ellen blocked Frank, instigating him. "But in the tub . . ."

"Stop."

"On the couch."

"I'm not sitting there again."

"On the diningroom table."

"Forget dinner." Frank held up his hands.

"Frank." Ellen pulled his arms down. "I'm kidding you."

"Oh thank God." Frank ran his hand down his face. "I was starting to think that she was acting all weird because she was trying to be a mother to all of us. So she really is whacked?"

"No." Ellen shook her head. "She really is sleeping with your father."

"But you just said you were kidding."

"About the diningroom table Frank." Ellen snickered and opened the back door. "See you inside."

"Fuck." Frank shook his head when Ellen left. "Andrea and my dad. Man." He reached to his chest pocket for a cigarette and stopped when Ellen poked her head back out the screen door.

"Oh Frank? Before you light that up? Robbie's in the house." She winked and went back in.

Slowly Frank's hand moved from that pocket as he just stared at the back door. "Shit." He took a moment to think, then reached to his pocket again for that cigarette. He figured since he couldn't get away with blaming Robbie on this night, he'd smoke anyhow and use the time while he did that to figure out who else he could put the blame on when Ellen asked him about it.

(6)

There was something so great about the way Dean looked sitting on his bed. Ellen just had to take a moment to stare at him. Maybe it was his jeans that he wore. Those faded ones, real faded and they fit him too. Loose enough to hang just right. Bare foot, bare chested he sat on his bed, one leg brought up, his arm dangled over it. So deep in thought.

"Ellen." Dean called out not raising his head at all. "What are you doing?"

"What do you mean."

"You started coming in the room and then you stopped."

"Wow are you getting good at this blind thing." Ellen walked into the bedroom and around to her side of the bed. "I was staring at you."

"Why?"

"You really look cute Dean." She climbed on the bed. "Wanna fool around?"

"Yes."

With a giggle, Ellen moved closer to Dean running her hand down his stomach and to the button of his jeans.

Dean grabbed her hand, stopping her. "But we can't."

"Why?"

"We have one more day Ellen of cowboy law. I value my life."

"He won't know." Ellen moved to kiss his neck.

"I'll know."

"Like you care."

"I kind of do." Dean backed up some. "As much as I want to be with you." He ran his hand down her face, then spread his fingers to see her. "Can we just wait?"

"O.K." Ellen moved away from him, fixed her pillow and plopped back in a sitting position. "Quiet huh?"

"Usually is when there aren't any kids."

"What were you thinking about. I know you were thinking. You get that Dean look on your face."

"A Dean look?" He shook his head with snicker. "I was thinking about our work."

"Really? So was I." Ellen rolled on her side. "All of our work. I was thinking just a little bit ago how much I miss working on all that stuff we put aside. Marcus, the cryo-babies, not to mention all the neat diseases we used to give the rabbits. All that work in the cryo-lab. I miss working down there too Dean."

"I do too. And when this virus scare is over we will get right back to all of our research. Unfortunately you still have a long wait."

"Why do you say that?"

"We have to dedicate all of our time on this virus for when and if they hit us with it. But by the date on that future note, we still have to January." Dean sensed Ellen's silence at that second. "What's wrong?"

"Well it's just that . . . it's just that you know about the ripple thing. You read the note so you know how us bringing you back rippled everything."

"Yeah."

"Well your death wasn't the only one short lived."

"I know this. George's was too. So you said."

"Yes." Ellen nodded. "So the note that came from the future came from a future without you and without George right?"

"Right."

"So the scientists, not George released the virus on us."

"Correct."

"But George is around now, so how much of an impact or rush will that put on it all. It could very easily happen sooner. You know how impatient George is."

"I didn't even think of that." Dean's head fell some. "But on those lines, the lines of the virus, that is where my thinking was tonight."

"What about it?" Ellen asked.

"What if it hits. What if it hits our children. What can we do about it? And my mind went racing to something you said on the dictation tape. You asked about what we were going to do with the antiserum. Right now we have two doses." Dean paused for a long time. "Two adult doses. I can make four children's doses out of them."

"And give them to four children."

"Not just four children El." Dean lifted his head. "Our four children."

"Dean . . ."

"No hear me out. I know it's wrong, I know it unethical and I know that anti-serum belongs to the community. But I swear to you El, more important to me than anything are the kids. I love them. Our children. And we know I'm immune and you are and so is Frank. Our four kids, not including Nick because he is immune too, but our four kids can be made

immune. We can give them what we have extra and we wouldn't have to worry about them getting sick."

"But is it right?"

"In which way?" Dean faced her to ask her. "Is it the right thing to do, by using the anti-serum for selfish reasons? No it isn't. But it is the right thing to do by us. Because let's face it. I'm not you. If something happens to one of my children, I won't be able to handle it."

"Yes you could Dean. And God forbid something happens, God forbid it. You will find the strength." Ellen closed her eyes tightly. "I have been there. I watched my children die and it is a pain that I would never want to go through again. That is why I am working so hard on this virus with you. So we don't have to face that. And we won't Dean. I believe in you and I believe in us as a team." She clenched her fist. "For as much as I am a selfish person, I can't do this with you. I can't. It is not right that we cheat someone else merely because we hold the upper hand."

"Is this Ellen speaking?"

"Unbelievably, yes. I love our children. God do I love them. But like the last time, I will hold onto to faith that it will work., But I have more confidence this time, I have more faith, because this time I have you."

"Ellen." Dean reached out emotionally and pulled Ellen tightly to him, burying his face close to hers. He gripped her head to hold her to him, his fingers intertwined within her hair. "I get so scared." His voice dropped to a rapid whisper. "So scared. So scared. We work with this thing so much that it has lost it's impact on us. And when I let myself think of the consequences I freak. We've taken this as far as we can take it. We need to take it further. What if we can't."

"We can."

"We're so limited."

So desperate was Dean's hold to her, so clenching that he wouldn't let go. "Do you think giving our children the antiserum will make it all better for you? For me? It will take one thing off our minds but it won't make what may happen go away."

"But it will make it tolerable if something does happen."

"Oh Dean." Ellen pulled back from him laying her hands on his face. "I wish I had the answers for you. I really do. Maybe I'm not seeing what you're seeing, maybe you and I shouldn't be discussing this."

"Who else will we discuss it with." Dean asked. "This effects both you and me. Who else."

Ellen kissed him softly. "Get a shirt on."

"Why?"

"We're walking to talk to the third person this decision will effect."

"Frank?"

"Yes, Frank. I feel how much you want to do this. I feel it when you hold me that you're scared. But maybe if we talk to Frank, maybe he can help us. They are his kids too."

A certain amount of relief came to Dean with Ellen's suggestion. Frank was hard headed and sometime the biggest asshole in Beginnings, but to Dean he was one other thing. A man who loved his children more than life. And if Dean needed someone to side with him, whether Ellen knew it or not, she just picked the right person.

(6)

Cradled so comfortably in his father's arms, Brian slept. And as Frank swayed him as he held him, Frank also watched Brian. His head secured under Frank's huge hand, Brian's face pressed to Frank's chest. Pressed so tight, his mouth puckered. Both of Brian's arms hung down and his legs no longer clenched tightly to Frank like they had ten minutes earlier.

There was something so peaceful Frank loved about holding his sleeping child. How perfect Brian always looked to him. And as Frank rocked him in the livingroom, looking at how big Brian was getting, he made that wish that every parent makes. He wished that he could give Brian that magic drug that could just keep him small forever. Small enough to always look up to Frank, to be held and to need Frank's protection. Frank also wished at that moment for a less popular house. One knock and Danny walked in. Something Henry told him he could do.

Danny brought his finger to his lips, whispering. "Sorry."

Frank shook his head. "You could scream right now and this kid won't hear you. What's up?"

"Just heading back down stairs. Anyone there?"

"Jason."

"Good." Danny stopped in his walk across the livingroom. "Henry is not here?"

"He was. He went to get some music or something for you guys to listen to. You aren't going to be down there all night again are you."

"If it's up to Henry we will be." Danny told him. "He's wanting this

"I guess he wants Dean to see really bad."

"No he wants Ellen to see."

Frank laughed. "Danny." He leaned a foot into him. "Ellen is not the one who's blind." Frank winked, just letting making Danny aware of that little fact.

"I know that Frank." Danny laughed. "But he wants Ellen to see what he's doing. And he wants it so badly that he won't even tell her what he's doing for fear she'll care less."

"El will care." Frank told him. "I think, I think Henry should give her a little more credit than that."

"Maybe you should tell him that."

"Maybe I will." Frank kissed Brian.

"Thanks." Danny started to head to the kitchen.

"Oh Danny. Make sure you guys sleep, all of you look bad."

"This I know." Danny smiled, and with the small box he held in his hand he went to the basement.

"Just me and you Bri and . . ." Frank looked up tot the door opening. "Henry."

Out of breath, Henry hurried and closed the door. "Hey Frank, Everyone here?"

"Yep and why are you out of breath."

"I ran all the way here from the social hall."

"Why?"

"I went there to get the music. Bev was there she tried to talk to me."

"And you ran?" Frank asked.

"I didn't even speak to her Frank. I ran, I ran out of there so fast." Henry took a deep breath to get his breathing back in synch. "I don't need anyone to tell Ellen I was speaking to her."

"Good boy Henry."

"Thanks Frank." Running his hand over Brain's head, Henry hurried by Frank. "I have lots of work to do. I won't bother you."

"Henry, you bother me even when you're cross the street."

Henry, looking so upbeat, grinned at Frank. "That's funny."

"It's good to see you smile Henry."

"Thanks Frank."

"Oh and Henry. It'll be good to see you at all too. Make sure you guys get the hell out of my basement sometime tomorrow at least for fresh air. You're looking all pale, all three of you and I don't want to start calling you the People Under the Stairs."

"Funny Frank." Henry waved and quickly ran into the kitchen.

"I guess I'll put you in bed Bri." Deciding to take Brian upstairs, then fill his even with pestering the working crew on the floor under him, Frank carried Brian to bed.

Gently he laid the baby in his crib, and covered him with the sheet. He ran his hand down Brain's face and leaned down to kiss him. "Love you." Another kiss and Frank moved to the next crib kissing Nick. He made his way to Alexandra next, taking a second to laugh at how she slept. Legs spread out, head back, mouth open. Chuckling and kissing her, Frank covered her and made his way to the next bedroom to check on Joey and Billy.

His nightly routine, one he did not only once but twice, kissing the kids. As Frank pulled the covers over Joey before he left the bedroom, he clenched his fist when he felt it hit his hand. It bothered Frank, and he knew the reason for it.

Staring at his own fingers, Frank watched them do what they did every night at the same time. Shake. Never in his entire life did his hands shake. He could easily stop the from shaking, but the way to make them stop, was actually why they shook. "Just a little longer." Frank spoke to himself going down stairs. He could feel it hit him in his gut, the trembling there. He had fought it for two hours while he got the kids settled for the night. He held Brian extra long too, a sense of support. But it was quiet, and there wasn't anything more he could do about it.

Walking to the kitchen, Frank grabbed a mug to pour himself some of the coffee he had just brewed. Grabbing the sugar, he saw his bottle of whiskey. Frank's hand reached up to it then stopped. Just as he went to close the cupboard, he reopened it and grabbed that bottle pouring a shots worth into his coffee. Guilt hit Frank as he brought the mug to his lips to sip, closing his eyes as he brought the hot whiskey laced beverage to his mouth.

"Frank?" Ellen's call echoed to him.

"In here." Frank leaned against the counter, reaching his foot out to shut the basement door. The last thing he wanted was for Ellen to leave because she knew Henry was there. "Hey." He smiled when he saw her, then lost the smile when Dean walked in behind her. "Aw Man, can't you leave me alone Dean. I know I'm your big hero and such."

"It's not you Frank." Dean snapped back. "It's El. I can't leave her alone. You know that week is coming to an end here. I'll be able to touch her tomorrow."

"Oh Dean?" Frank held up his hand. "I'm flipping you off."

"El, why does he announce things to me that he is doing?"

Ellen giggled. "Don't be silly Dean, because you can't see." She tsked and noticed the coffee. "Is that fresh Frank?"

"Yeah coffee's fresh, want some?"

"Yes. We need to talk to you. It's important."

"O.K., go in the livingroom I'll be right there. I'll get it for you."

"Thanks." Ellen smiled. "Come on Dean." Ellen grabbed his arm.

"In a minute."

Waiting for Ellen to leave, Frank opened a cupboard for a mug. "Want some Dean?"

"Yeah, but I wish you wouldn't give her any, she's hyper enough at night."

Frank snickered. "Deal with it." He set both mugs on the counter and poured coffee them. "And why are you waiting in here with me." Frank turned to look at him

"I smelt something."

"Probably Henry, Danny and Jason in the basement." He took a drink of his own coffee.

"No." Dean shook his head and stepped closer to Frank's voice.

"Why are you walking toward me? You aren't gonna try and kiss me are you?"

"No!" Dean reached his hand out.

"You are!"

"Frank! Knock it off." Feeling around, his hand connected with the back of Frank's.

"Dean, I swear of you . . ."

"Frank." Dean took the mug from his hand, stepped back, reached for the counter and then made his way to the sink.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting you some coffee." Dean sniffed the cup then poured out its contents.

"Dean, I had some coffee but you're fuckin pouring it out."

"Have some fresh stuff Frank." Using the counter against his gut as a guide, Dean felt his way to the coffee pot. He let his finger rest just inside the rim as he poured the coffee into the mug. When the heat drew near to his finger he stopped. "Here." He picked the mug up and held it out. "Am I facing you?"

"Yeah." Frank's voice dropped. "Dean I . . ."

"Take it. This cup will be better." Dean felt Frank reach for the mug.

"I wish it would be."

"It will be." Dean could feel as Frank took the mug from him, the trembling that conveyed from Frank's fingers. Reassuringly Dean laid his hands over Frank's to clench the mug tighter. "It will be."

The kitchen was silent, but only for a second, Ellen's snickering startled them both. "Frank? Dean? Why are you guys holding hands?"

"Fuckin Dean." Frank stepped back. "He was hitting on me. I'll tell you El, I don't know what I'm gonna do with you two . . . here's your coffee." He handed her the mug and started to leave the kitchen. "First you last night, now Dean. You guys are weird. I'm actually starting to get a little frightened that next you'll approach me with kinky offer about all three of us together . . ." He stopped in the archway, turned back when he heard the gasp of Ellen, then heard Dean snicker. Knowing how offended Ellen

looked, and knowing Dean didn't need to see to know it. Frank snickered also "Dean?"

"Frank."

"What do you think?"

"I don't know."

Ellen's mouth dropped open. "Oh my God. Sick. Both of you are sick. Can we get to our serious discussion now." She brushed by Dean then Frank. "Thank you."

Laughing, Frank began to follow Ellen out. "You coming Dean?"

"Yes." Dean took a sip from his coffee and slowly began to turn to walk out. Heading to the livingroom on his own, it was back to the reason he and Ellen came there. And as much as he hated the thought of doing it, Dean was about to change Frank's whole laughing demeanor at that moment, with the seriousness of what he had to talk to him about.

(7)

Jenny jiggled in a sway, making her entrance into the social hall for her typical Sunday evening date with her husband John. The only night of the week that they could go out because it was the only night of the week that Patrick took their baby Caroline. Dressed in a tight little skirt that form fit her large hips, She smiled at the whistles she got, let it boost her ego, and made her way to John who stood up when she approached the table.

She tucked her hair behind her ear as John pulled out a chair for her. "Sorry I'm late John."

"No, I just got here from my rounds. I'll tell you Jenny." John stepped closer to her. "You look great."

Jenny tossed her head back in a flattered motion. As she brought it forward, she saw Bev at the bar. It had been the first time she had seen her since the night Bev left with Henry. The smile was erased from Jenny's face. Jenny stared at Bev, whose one leg extended off the stool, wearing black shorts too short and too tight for her, even though she was thin. Her short black hair was wild and curled.

"Jen?" John waited for her to sit. "What do you want to drink?"

"You know what John? I'll get it." She turned her head with a fake smile.

John saw Jenny eyes immediately go back to Bev. "Blow her off Jen. She's just under your skin."

"Under my nails to be more precise."

"I will tell you what I heard today. I ran into Kenny, Seems uh . . . Bev has had a major change of heart when it comes to him and Kyle."

"What do you mean?"

"Bev has ended the relationships. Did so yesterday."

Jenny's mouth opened wide. "You don't think Henry and her . . ."

"No." John shook his head. "Grapevine has it--no."

Jenny cringed. "Oh I hate Sunday's I never hear any gossip." She stomped her feet. "I'll get the drinks."

"Jen . . ."

"Oh John sit." She pointed her finger. "I'll be right back." Jenny walked or strutted rather to the bar. Fully intending on just getting her drinks, give a glare or so to Bev and head back to her husband. That was unless, Bev said something to her, then it would only be right if Jenny responded. Perhaps Jenny lingered at the bar longer than she had to in beverage debate, perhaps she gave a few more glances then she needed to. But as she poured the second drink, Bev spoke to her.

"Problem Jenny?" Bev asked her with a smile, letting Paul who sat next to her light her cigarette.

"Nope, not at all." Jenny flipped her hair and moved around the other side of the bar stopping at Bev. "I heard you and Kenny split up."

"Yes it was time to move on. To start anew with someone else."

"Unmarked territory I hope." Jenny said.

"Now he is." Bev waited until Jenny started to walk again. "Oh Jenny, your promise to let Ellen beat the fuck out of me fizzled. She didn't say a word."

Jenny spun around. "Then Ellen missed her opportunity."

"You were wrong for getting on me about going off with Henry."

"You were wrong for going off with Henry." Jenny walked back to her placing the drinks back on the bar. "You know the way it is. We can not have one woman breaking the bond that us other women have built. You could have very easily done that."

"Henry is a free man."

"Not for long."

"Exactly." Bev picked her drink up. "If I have my way, Henry will be mine." She nodded.

"Leave Henry alone."

"No." Bev shook her head. "I gave up Kenny and Kyle for him. I'm a newer woman here, I haven't earned the respect I need."

"You think going after Henry is the way to do it?"

"Most definitely. Henry is second in lead of this community, there is a certain prestige that goes along with that. He will be leader someday."

"Oh give it up Bev. This isn't Payton Place. This is Beginnings and forget about line of leaders, this isn't a democracy here. This is a monarchy and next in line for the throne is Frank." Jenny saw the lighting up fact on Bev's face and all Jenny could do was laugh. "That would be funny if you tried that. Now I know for a fact Ellen wouldn't beat you up, she'd kill you. Not too mention the fact of how much of a fool you'd feel when you went

after Frank.” Jenny laughed harder. “I’ve been there. I’ve tried that. Frank has one single focus . . . Ellen. For many, many years.”

Bev fluttered her lips. “Stop. If Frank rejected you, look at why. Look at you Jenny.” Bev raised her eyebrows.

“I’ll ignore that comment.”

“Henry was with me.”

“He didn’t sleep with you.”

“In time he will. I fully intend on that. So you better make Ellen aware of that.”

“He won’t even touch you.” Jenny stated. “Henry won’t be that stupid again.”

“Ha.” Bev shook her head. “In time. After all, why not? Ellen doesn’t want him and . . . and I am prettier than Ellen, built better, nicer, and younger. And Henry will see there really isn’t anything that Ellen is that I’m not.”

“Oh I beg to differ Bev. I can think of one very important thing.”

“And what is that Jenny?”

“Ellen is an original.”

“That’s not a very good attitude Jenny.” Bev stood up from her stool. “Wait until I tell the other women, the one’s who aren’t Originals about your attitude.”

“And wait until I tell the other women about yours. I can do a lot more damage to you around her Bev then you can to me. Watch your step.”

Bev merely laughed at Jenny. “Are you threatening me. What are you gonna do Jenny, throw me out of your little women’s group?”

“As a matter of fact, you’re already voted out.”

This made Bev laugh harder. “Then you can tell the women who voted me out to just watch their backs, and their men. Payback is a real bitch Jenny.”

“Guess what Bev.” Jenny folded her arms. “So am I.”

(8)

“No more Frank.” Dean instructed. “You hear me?”

“I hear.” Frank returned the bottle to the cabinet above the stove.

“I can’t believe I let you take a drink.”

“I did real good all night.” Frank finished off what was in his glass. “And it’s just a shot. That’s all I need.”

“Well if didn’t know the adverse effects of a deprived alcohol dependant bloodstream . . .”

“Dean. Knock it off.” Frank’s looked up to the kitchen ceiling. “Ellen’s coming down.”

“Thanks for helping us out tonight.”

"Thanks for coming to me about it. I appreciate . . ." Frank's head jolted back to the cellar door and the shriek that came from below. "What the hell are they doing know?" He walked to the basement door and opened it. "Are you guys all right down there?"

Henry yelled up. "Fine Frank. I burned Danny by accident. We'll be quiet."

With rolled eyes, Frank shook his head. "Let's go in the livingroom Dean. They keep on making noise like that Ellen's going to find out they're down there." As he made his way to the livingroom he was stopped by Ellen who held his radio. Frank could hear all kinds of noise coming from the speaker. "What's going on."

Ellen handed it to him. "You left this upstairs, Dan is calling you."

Frank depressed the button. "Dan . . . Dan come in. What's going on?"

"Frank, we need you at the social hall. Big . . ." Dan shrieked. "Big fight. We can't control it. Lots of damage. Hurry . . . shit duck!" A loud crash replaced Dan's voice.

An utter look of being perturbed took over Frank. "What the hell? Can't hey control anything." Grabbing his shoulder harness off the back of the chair and his head set off the table in the entranceway, in his stride through the livingroom, Frank placed them on. "I'll be back."

Ellen chased him to the door. "Oh can I come with you Frank and see the fight. Dean can wait here, he won't be able to appreciate it."

"No El. Stay." Frank told her.

"Please. I love when you rush in and do that macho thing."

Frank looked at her, his mind racing with thoughts of how Ellen could possibly get. "Come on. Dean, you mind staying here."

"Nope, not at all." Dean walked to the couch and plopped down. "Don't take advantage of her Frank."

"Yeah right." Frank grabbed Ellen's arm and brought her out. "Keep up with me."

"I am." Ellen nearly ran to keep up with Frank's fast pace.

Hustling through the living section, Frank radioed Robbie for back up for the out of control situation. Monitoring the crashes and screams of the social hall all the way there.

It was perfect timing, just as Frank hit the last row of house not far from the social hall, Robbie, harnessing his revolver ran around the bend. "Frank, what's the situation?"

"Sounds like all hell is breaking lose at the hall." Frank neared the hall.

"What's Ellen doing here?"

Frank shrugged. "She wants to see." As he approached the social hall door he could hear even more noise. "El stay back it could get dangerous. And Robbie, if they are that out of control, knock em out, deck them. O.K.?"

"Got it." Robbie grinned.

Frank opened the door to the social hall prepared and stopped in his storm in when he saw the ruckus and the cheering crowd. "Fuck."

Robbie walked up next to his brother. "You still want me to deck them."

Ellen shrieked with excitement when she watched Jenny, hand on the back of Bev's hair, ram her face first onto the rail of the bar as if Bev was a wrestler going face first into the turnbuckle.

Bev bounced backwards and fell to the floor. Just as she tried to get up, Jenny pounced on her, straddled legs, skirt now raised above her green underpants and her knees were on both side of Bev. As Jenny grabbed hold of Bev's throat, banging Bev's head repeatedly off of the floor, Bev's hands reached up to Jenny in a defensive clawing motion.

Ellen clapped and moved into the cheering circle of men. "Get her Jenny, get her. Jenny you're underwear are showing."

Jenny grunted and banged Bev's head.

Frank had seen enough. "Knock the shit off!" He screamed loud. "Robbie, let's go."

"I'm not decking them Frank." Robbie stated.

"We aren't decking them. El?" Frank looked at her. "Wanna help?"

"No." She said. "Don't break them up Frank, let them . . . Frank!" Ellen yelled as Frank charged in. "Frank no!" Ellen raced toward the two barreling women.

Reaching his hands in, Frank repeatedly got hit and scratched. "Knock it the fuck off!" He placed one hand on Jenny, the other toward Bev, knowing he couldn't pull a usual Frank break up of a fight. "Ladies!"

Ellen, watching Bev's hands grab hold of the skin of Jenny's face, figured it was time to help Frank out. She ran up behind Jenny bracing her under her arms. "Jen . . . nee." Ellen grunted. "Stop it You'll . . . kill." She gave a hard tug. "Her!" As Ellen gave another hard tug, Jenny released Bev and with the force of Ellen's pull coupled with Jenny's strength, both women flew backwards and Jenny ended back first on top of Ellen.

Ellen's arms flung about helplessly under the heavy weight of Jenny. Trapped! "Frank." Her voice was muffle. "Help."

Bev got up from the ground and saw that Jenny was down. She dove for her, but as she did, Frank reached out his arm bringing it around the front of Bev and snatched back the fighting, kicking woman. "Settle your ass down!" Less then gently Frank set her back. "Now!" Almost with a smack of disgust, Frank ran his hand down his face. "Robbie take this woman to holding. Jenny . . ." Frank saw Jenny. How odd she looked with that extra set of arms and legs beneath her. Then he realized that was Ellen trapped beneath the flesh of a woman twice her size. "El, quit fooling around. Get up."

John Matoose reached out for Jenny, lifting his wife to her feet then straightening her skirt.

Watching Robbie remove the wiry Bev, Frank turned to John. "What the hell John. Why didn't you break it up. This was your wife."

"She wasn't losing Frank." John said. "I would have, if she was."

"Get her to the clinic to clean up those scratches. God!"

"Come on Jenny." John put his arm around Jenny who at that instant started to cry. "What's wrong."

"I-I-I am-am just-just worked up." Jenny sobbed.

One more time Frank called out. "She has to go to holding John, three hours. You know the rules." Seeing John's 'yeah-yeah' wave back, Frank covered his eyes with his hands. As he slid his fingers down across his nose, he saw Ellen was still on the ground. "El?" He rushed over to her, he dropped down to one knee. "El."

"I think I'm part of the floor now Frank."

Frank chuckled then slid his arms under Ellen, lifting her up as he stood to his feet. He smiled at her as he placed her back down to her feet, sliding her against him when he did. "Thanks for the help."

"Anytime."

Giving a 'hmm' while biting his bottom lip, Frank took a step to her, cupped his hands in his face and kissed her quickly. "Let's go home."

"That's it?"

"That's it what?" Frank grabbed her hand and started walking out with her.

"That's my kiss?"

"That's it."

"My God Frank, I pull Jenny off that person, I get pinned under her and it wasn't fun Frank." Ellen bitched as they walked. "It really wasn't fun Frank. I could barely breath and I get a simple peck of a kiss like your my dad."

Frank still walked, smiling the whole time.

Ellen was ready to bitch more, but she stopped when Frank slowed his pace down and the hand that held hers went from leading to joining, when his fingers slipped between hers. Ellen smiled looking down at their locked hands. Walking back home with Frank, she took in the peacefulness of the evening. "Was pretty great though, Jenny beating Bev up. Huh?"

"Funny stuff. Aggravating. I think that was the first fight we had between two women. I mean all and out fight."

"I think so. It was worth being suffocated. How bout those underwear Jenny had on."

"I didn't notice."

"Green Frank. Now where do you suppose she got green underwear from."

"Don't know."

"You did good. You didn't punch either of them."

Frank only turned his head to look at her.

“And you did good helping Dean and I out too. Thank you very much.”

“Like I told Dean, I’m glad you came to me.”

“I owe you.” Ellen held tighter to his hand as they approached his house.

“You really mean that?” Frank asked as he reached for the door.

“I mean that.”

“Then there is something you can do for me.”

“Anything.”

Frank cleared his throat, let go of her hand and stepped to face her. “You have to do this for me.”

“I promise.” Ellen held up her hand only to have it grabbed and kissed by Frank.

Frank returned her hand. “Tomorrow when you see Henry, I want you to say ‘hi’ to him. Just ‘hi’.” Frank flashed a smile. “Would mean a lot. Thanks.” He kissed her on the cheek and opened his front door. “You coming El?”

“Yeah.” Ellen stood there in oddity for a second pondering Frank’s request. Of all the things he could have gotten, he asked for a simple greeting to his friend. To Ellen that said a lot, and she promised herself right there if the opportunity arose the next day, she would oblige Frank’s request. What would it hurt?

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

AUGUST 3

(1)

The chopper engine noise. The static. The calm of Robbie Slagel's voice filled the radio. "Home base this is Eagle one, do you copy?" Robbie leaned toward the side window of his helicopter as he flew. Peering out below through his dark sunglasses. "Home base this is Eagle one do you copy? Over."

"Yeah Robbie." Frank responded.

"Frank." Robbie spoke in a whine. "Come on you promised."

"All right." Frank paused. "Eagle one, this is home base we copy. What's your position."

"Heading in south east home base. Got a small ground troop thirty miles northwest of home base."

"Fuck, you're shitting me. How many."

"Uh . . ." Robbie counted. "Twelve no wait one just came out from taking a leak, thirteen. Odd."

"Can you identify them."

"Most likely. Hold on." Robbie lifted his binoculars. "Got the big 'C' Frankie boy. We got ourselves some SUTS."

"What's it look like Robbie, they mobile?"

"Could be. Two trucks. Pretty settled right now. They spot me. I'm flying outward and away. They may move. They don't look like they are. Tents and such."

"Can you take them out now."

"Negative on that Frank. If start firing on them, I'm alone up here they'll scatter into the trees."

"Ground maneuvers."

"Could do that." Robbie tilted the helicopter as he flew taking his last look back. "We'll let that be your call big brother. Ground or air. Either way, I'm heading home to head out. Get the big cheese on it will ya."

Frank snickered over the airwaves. "Yeah, I'll get Dad to armory to suit up a team for ya. See ya in a few Robbie."

"Call me . . . Eagle one."

"Yeah, yeah, Eagle one this home base, over."

"Love ya too Frank." Robbie grinned thinking of the excitement ahead and flew onward back to Beginnings.

(2)

"Henry hurry up!" Danny yelled up Henry's steps. He fumbled with a box, tossing things in it.

"I knew it." Henry flew down the stairs putting on a shirt and running his fingers through his wet hair. "I knew I shouldn't have taken time to get a shower."

"You have to get clean Henry. Besides . . ." Danny looked down at his watch. "We have time. How long once he gets back."

"Ten minutes maybe."

"Got the paper?"

Henry gathered the stack. "Got them."

"Will he do it?"

"Oh yeah, but it's not Robbie who gives the go ahead, it's Frank and Joe."

"It's for the good of the community. Could mean . . . how many did he say there were?"

"Thirteen?"

"Yep. Thirteen more soldiers for Beginnings." Danny rushed to the door. "Let's go."

Hurrying and dropping things, running back and picking them up, Henry raced with Danny toward town then to the hanger.

(3)

Ellen would have made it a mad rush to the clinic, but what was the point. The injections would still need to be given, the blood would still need to be taken no matter how carefree she walked from the containment there. Taking her time knowing full well she promised Andrea she would be there fifteen minutes earlier.

Walking slowly thinking about how she was the displaced worker, always going from one place to the next, Ellen, in her own world was nearly barreled over by Danny who ran by her.

"Hi Ellen, bye Ellen. Henry hurry up!" Danny yelled back to Henry who had stopped twenty feet back to pick up the papers that blew from his hand.

"Hi Danny." Ellen smiled at Danny's rushing, then walked again.

"Excuse me." Henry walked by her.

"Hi Henry." Ellen said as he passed her.

Henry's heart dropped at the same second his feet stopped. He spun so fast to look back at her. "Hi El." Henry wanted to smile but feared it.

Danny tugged at Henry's shirt. "Henry, come on."

Spinning fast back to Danny, Henry stuck all his papers into Danny's chest. "Go on up without me. I'll be right there."

"Henry the helicopter is . . ."

"Please." Henry whispered. "I'll be right there."

"Hurry up." Clutching the papers and his box, Danny took off running.

Henry took a second to run his fingers through the grain of his wind blown hair as he walked to Ellen. "How are you today." Henry asked, begging in his mind that Ellen would answer him.

"Good. How are you?"

Henry hid that shocking gasp well. "I'm . . . I'm good."

"Where are you running to?"

"We have this invention we need Robbie to try, it's, it's pretty neat."

"That's nice." Ellen began to walk away.

"You?"

"Me what?" Ellen stopped walking.

"Where are you headed?"

Ellen's eyes shifted to the clinic. "Here. I have blood to take and it's beginning of the month so we have the Birth Control Hormones to inject. Boring stuff. I . . . I really have to go." She pointed with her thumb.

"O.K., so do I."

"Bye Henry."

"El?" He called out to her. "Thank you. Thank you for saying 'hi'."

"Thank Frank Henry."

"Frank?"

"Yeah. It was his doing." She gave a half smile and walked to the clinic not looking back.

"Frank." Henry spoke with a grin. "I have to really thank . . . shit. Robbie." With that thought, Henry picked up speed hearing the helicopter and raced to catch up to Danny.

Henry saw the helicopter landing as he made it to the hanger building. With enthusiasm and a bit of nervousness he ran inside. Danny was already there waiting. And Frank and Joe stood with weapons and a team of four men awaiting on Robbie to come in. "Frank." Henry smiled as soon as he saw him. "Frank."

"Yeah." Frank looked up only in enough time to see the vision of Henry racing at him. Before Frank could say anything, he was greeted with a hug and a kiss to his cheek. "Uh! Henry what the fuck?" He wiped off his cheek. "Why are you kissing me." He heard the snickers of his men. "I don't know what is up with the men in this community. First Dean holds my hand last night, you kiss me this morning.. You guys want all that from me but neither of you will let me near Ellen."

"Frank, thank you."

"For what?" Frank asked.

"Ellen said 'hi' to me."

"No big deal Henry." Frank tried to walk by him.

"No Frank it is a big deal. It is. Thank you."

"So did you come up here to kiss me or is there another reason for yours and Danny's visit."

"Oh yeah." Henry grew even more excited. "We have this invention. In fact it will help you build the Beginnings army."

"Great." Frank nodded. "Share it with me later. I have an attack about to happen Henry."

"No!" Henry stopped him. "I have to share it with you now. Now Frank. Joe!"

Joe who had been eavesdropping and avoiding getting involved, was forced to when he was called. "What Henry and don't kiss me."

Henry snickered then started to explain, but before he could, Danny's summon to him that Robbie was there, made him stop and run over to Robbie.

Robbie expected to be pummeled when he walked in. He expected to hear Frank rambling on about the plan of action. He didn't expect to be approached by two fast rambling, talking at the same time, mechanically inclined men, who really didn't look alike when they stood side by side.

"Hold it!" Joe shouted out, unable to take the un-interpretable chatting. "What the hell are you two up too?"

Henry, out of breath, turned to him. "We have this thing Joe., An invention of Danny's and mine. We were working on the Dean thing. You know and we came up with this. It's amazing. It's taken us longer than the Dean thing but it works huh Danny?"

"We think so." Danny added. "We need Robbie to try. What it is Joe . . ." Danny pulled it out.

Joe looked at it. "An Aural thermometer."

"No. It's called the Auralnator." Danny laughed. "Great name. Anyhow, we just used the shell. It's a stunning de-scrambling device for the SUTS. You place it in the ear, press this button and it de-programs the SUT immediately, makes them drop like that." Danny snapped.

"You're shitting me?" Joe looked closer at it. "We'll have to try it someday, but now is not the time to be . . ."

"No." Henry stopped him. "Now is the time. Frank needs more men, we can get them."

"Henry." Joe didn't want to argue. "We'd have to use the sneak attack approach to make this work. They're too close."

Robbie disagreed. "No way, it's perfect. They're relaxing. Come on Dad. Let me try the thing."

"And what happens if it doesn't work?" Joe asked. "What happens if you sneak up behind one and zap them and it doesn't work?"

"I'll break their neck, so what. Let me at least get one. One." Robbie asked. "Then we'll pull back and take the rest out. Please." He took the thermometer. "It would be so cool."

Joe took a second. "Fine, one. We have everything ready for a ground move. And . . ." Joe looked curiously at Henry. "If you're running about inventing things, who the hell is running about working Mechanics?"

"Uh . . ." Henry pointed to Robbie. "Him, well he was."

"Robbie?" Joe asked with a raise to his voice. "Robbie is busy now, last I heard Mechanics was swamped."

Robbie shook his head. "Not anymore, I caught us up."

Though there wasn't really time, everyone was shocked by this and looked with silent faces at Robbie.

Joe spoke up. "You took care of it. Yesterday there were sixty-eight reqs left. You did sixty-eight repairs."

"Fuck no." Robbie said. "I want to the source, they were all bogus and the women put them in to get Henry." Robbie lifted his shoulder. "Anyhow this thing." He looked at the Auralnator. "In the ear and press the button?"

Henry nodded. "That's it. It should drop them right there so we can reprogram them to what we need."

"Excellent." Robbie gripped it tighter. "Wish me luck. See you in a few." He stepped back. "Frank, escort us to the back big bro since you have to miss this one."

"Yeah." Frank started walking out. "Henry, Danny good job."

Joe annoyed with the pleased faces of Danny and Henry, called out to Frank as him Robbie and the four men headed out. "Frank, make sure you tell them again, One SUT, then take them out with heavy artillery and Dean's gas."

Danny nudged Henry with a snicker. "They're using Dean's gas as a weapon?"

Henry started to laugh too. "That's funny."

Both of them lost their smiles when Joe turned with such annoyance at them.

Joe shook his head so disgusted as he walked from the hanger. "Christ, what are we now? Twelve? Dean's gas." Another grunt and Joe left.

Henry was quiet and then he started to laugh again at the same time as Danny. "I think it went good."

"Me too. They're gonna use it." Danny said proudly.

"Shit, what if it doesn't work?"

"It will."

"It has to."

"Most definitely." Henry bounced from heel to toe. "Wanna head to the basement and get the program ready."

"Might as well."

"Let's go." Making a sweep by the hanger table to gather the stack of notes that weren't even viewed, Henry led Danny out and back on track to the basement.

Between check-ups, hormonal injections, replacement of cervical covers, Andrea was a busy woman. But Birth Control Days were always that way. Whether it was one woman coming for her every third month shot, or the annual August passing out of the Beginnings diaphragm, it was hectic. And what really bothered Andrea the most was that Josephine insisted on showing up on birth control days. She always added that pandemonium to the schedule. Fighting with Andrea when Andrea refused. Josephine insisting that if she was having sex, she could get pregnant. Arguing that point with Josephine wasn't what bothered Andrea the most, it was the fact that she wanted to kill whatever male or males it was that were taking advantage of a eighty-some year old senile woman's sexual promiscuity. To top off the hecticness of the day, the fuel pump line rupture on the corn shucking machine didn't help. Jason was busy handling those six men who needed their eyes flushed and Andrea handled the clinic aspect alone. And where was Ellen?

Andrea couldn't wait, Ellen was already nearly a half hour late. There were four women left to inject and one diaphragm fitting. Andrea supposed she could pull Dean in for the injections filling the syringes for him, but he was busy creating the eye drops for the injured men, not too mention awaiting the results of the two throat cultures on the allergies turned strep cases. They had to be run and if positive, the Strep cases, as usually, had to be handled immediately.

So Ellen was it. Andrea had to help Jason and Ellen would just have to finish up. The check ups were completed and all Ellen would have to do is give the injections according to the doses Andrea had indicated on their charts. And though Ellen hated to do it, she was quite capable of doing that internal examination on Catharine to measure her for The Cervix shield. Settled.

Figuring Ellen just got held up at Containment, Andrea grabbed the five charts and brought them with her to Dean's lab. "Dean I need you to . . ." She stopped in the empty lab. Where was he? "Dean?" Her head turned to the hallway when she thought she heard a giggle. "Dean?" She called out thinking he was doing his typical under the counter adjustments of something. "Dean-Dean." As she went to leave she heard a shuffling sound from the back of the lab. Taking a step toward it, the shuffling became a banging, then a thump, finally becoming the flinging open of the back closet door. "Dean?"

Looking so surprised and so hurried, Dean stepped out pulling the door half closed. He stood there, fussing with his shoe, banging it and pressing it in small circles to the ground as if he were adjusting his foot better in the high top. His one hand tucked in his tee shirt, while the other ran frantically through his hair. "Andrea?"

"Right here."

Dean moved his head to where the sound of her voice came from. "Hi."

"What in the world are you doing in there. Are you all right?"

"Who me? Fine." He cleared his throat and shifted his weight from one leg to the other. "I was uh . . . uh . . . looking for . . . shit." Dean banged his other foot lifted his head with a smile. "Looking for something in there and damned if I couldn't see it."

"Dean, you're blind."

"Yeah and it made it pretty tricky."

"Need some help?"

"No, no." Dean shook his head. "I felt my way through it . . . I'm uh good."

"Good." Andrea smiled. "I've got to go help Jason Dean. I have five more women left. Four injections and one internal. Ellen is just gonna have to finish it up."

Surprising Andrea, Dean let out a loud, long grunting moan.

"Something wrong?"

"Cramp . . . in my uh foot."

"Oh those get nasty. Anyhow. I'm leaving the folders for her on the counter by your computer." Andrea's voice faded as she started to walk out. "I know she got held up at containment, can you try to call her there to get her here pronto."

"Will do." Dean leaned on the archway.

"Thanks Dean."

Listening to the clicking of her hard flat soles fade from the room, Dean let out a breath of relief when he heard the lab door close. "She's gone. I think."

Ellen peeked her head out under Dean's arm. After seeing that Andrea was gone, she laughed. "Close huh?"

"Nah." Feeling Ellen start to leave, Dean put his arm out on the doorway stopping her, finding her, feeling her, Dean leaned into Ellen and kissed her.

Pulling from the soft, long kiss, Ellen touched Dean's face. "We'd better work. And you'd better fix that hair."

"It's not that bad, is it?"

"Yeah."

"How bad?"

"Bad." Ellen tried to straighten it with her fingers, kissed him quickly then walked by him. "I have a brush in the one drawer here." She walked across the lab slowing down when she saw the file folders Andrea left there. "I guess I should go see these patients." She opened up the drawer by them pulling out the brush. "I can't believe she's making me do an internal on someone."

"Yeah and I thought for sure Andrea was going to hear you moan about that."

"Thanks for making that noise to cover up." Ellen finished brushing her hair, she set it down. "I'm leaving the brush for you by the computer."

"Thanks." Dean made his way there. "Did you want help."

"No, finish up what you're doing so we can have that meeting with Joe." Ellen looked through the folders. "Besides, there's only . . ." Her voice dropped. "Four."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Well . . . all right. Bev." Ellen tossed the folder harshly. "She's waiting in the one examining room. Pisses me off. I heard she was flirting with Mark to get out of holding early."

"She's the injection right?"

"Yeah."

"I'll do it."

"No!" Ellen snapped.

Dean laughed. "What? Why?"

"I don't want you near her O.K.? Please. Jenny told me this morning to watch my back. She thinks Bev has this vendetta against me. I just don't want her throwing herself at you."

"Ellen come on it's me." Dean stepped to her. "Don't worry about me with her." Dean brushed his nose against her cheek then kissed her softly.

"I don't. I just don't like the thought of her coming on to you."

"And I don't like the thought of you dealing with her right now. It'll bother you plus, I don't trust her either. She isn't that nice of a person."

"But you know what Dean?" Ellen gathered up the folders. "I'll be fine with it. Besides I am the one with the needle right." She kissed him on the cheek and backed up. "See ya."

"Ellen, what are you . . ."

"See ya in a little bit." Taking a deep breath and deciding to get the worst over with first, Ellen headed down to the examining room that Bev waited in.

A single knock and holding Bev's folder, Ellen walked in. Not saying anything, Ellen set the folder on the tray.

"I thought someone would never come." Bev sat on the table, her legs swinging back and forth.

"We're busy." Ellen said as she reviewed the amount of hormone she was to give Bev. Looking at her stats, Ellen couldn't help but think, twenty-two years old, so young, so much she could have going for her but Bev was so stupid.

"These shots are so convenient. I was too young to know about them in the old world. Whose idea was it to bring them back?"

"Dean's." Ellen grabbed the hormone vial.

"Did he recreate it?"

"Yes."

"Dean is so smart. There's just something about him I find . . ."

"Fatherly?" Ellen asked as she filled the syringe.

"Excuse me?" Bev asked.

"Do you find something fatherly about Dean? He is just about old enough to be your father."

Bev giggled. "I don't pay attention to that. Kyle is the same age. Besides, Dean looks so young, don't you think? I find something very attractive about older men. Don't you. Of course the men Dean and Frank's . . ." She jolted at a slam of the tray. ". . . age aren't that old to you."

Ellen flicked her finger to get the bubbles out of the needle, wishing in her mind that there were enough in that syringe to kill Bev, and she walked over to the table Bev sat at.

"I don't know why I'm getting these. I don't need them. I did break up with Kenny and Kyle . . ."

Ellen rubbed her arm with alcohol.

". . . for Henry." Bev turned her eyes to Ellen who raised hers. Their eyes met. "There's just something about him. Ow your pinching my arm. You know he's the only man in Beginnings I was with that I didn't sleep with that actually made me . . ." She whispered in Ellen's ear. "Cum."

A twinge immediately hit Ellen's stomach and she instinctively closed her eyes releasing Bev's arm and stepping back.

"Twice."

Ellen recapped the prepared syringe.

"The first time . . ." Bev slid off the table walking to Ellen. "When . . ."

"Maybe you should just return . . ."

"When he was against me." Bev was so near to Ellen standing behind her, her voice low in a taunting whisper. "He was so hard Ellen and his fingers dug so deep in me. Maybe I'm telling you something you don't know. Maybe there are just some things a man can get from or rather give to a younger woman. A firm place to put his hands, his mouth . . . his tongue."

Ellen spun in anger at Bev facing her.

"That was the second time." Bev followed Ellen who began to walk away. "I can still feel him down there Ellen. God." Bev moaned. "Did he ever do that to you? So animal like, so hungry for me. I'm getting worked up thinking about it again."

Why Ellen stayed there listening was beyond her. Maybe she needed to know what happened that night, if that was the case, she was getting it in tenfold. "If it was that intense Bev, why didn't you sleep with him?"

"Oh we would have had you not walked in. Henry needed to . . . rebuild?" With a raise of her eyebrows Bev placed her finger in her own mouth and pulled it out slowly. "And Henry moaned *my* name Ellen, not . . ."

"What in God's name!" Andrea's loud motherly voice burst in interrupting. "Girl?" She walked up to Bev. "What in God's name are you saying to her? And Ellen, why are you listening to this?"

"I can tell you that." Bev said. "She loves hearing it. Don't you Ellen."

Andrea stepped in-between the women, she looked at Ellen, her face so distraught. "What is wrong with you." Andrea grabbed hold of Ellen slightly shaking her. "This isn't you."

"Henry isn't with me anymore," Ellen only raised her eyes into Andrea's. "What am I going to do?"

"Slap her maybe?" Andrea suggested.

"What?" Ellen whispered. "And lower myself to her level? Screw that."

Bev knew what she had accomplished and walked to the already open door. "I think I'll pass on that injection. Maybe I just might decide to get pregnant to . . . Henry."

Ellen saw Andrea ready to charge after the leaving Bev, she grabbed her. "No Andrea, let it go."

"No I will not let it go." Andrea pulled away. "If you won't say anything, I will." Leaving the examining room Andrea stormed down the hall. "Beverly." Being ignored, Andrea kept up the pace following Bev right out into the street. "Beverly you best stop right now!"

Bev turned around. "What?"

"I want to have a few word with you little girl."

"I don't want to listen."

"Oh well you will. And you will hear what I am saying. There is no room in the community for trouble, you hear me? I won't tolerate it. I won't tolerate the behavior."

"Or what?" Bev came back so snide. "You'll move to have me ousted? For what? Hitting on someone else's man? Andrea you think because you're on council you can move to have me ousted? I don't fear that. And I don't even sweat the fact that you're sleeping with the leader of this community." Bev stepped closer Andrea. "Don't think I can't remedy that."

Andrea laughed loudly and folded her arms. "Look at you."

"What?"

"You just think you're all that now don't you?" Andrea's hands waved about and her head bobbed back and forth. "Strutting you little skinny pretty ass around her. Well let me tell you something. You aren't all that baby doll. You aren't all that. I'll let you in on a little wisdom my years of living have taught me. When it comes to any of the original men in this community. I will bet my sweet life that they will regard you no higher than people used to regard the public toilets in the old world. They'll keep their distance sweetheart because they just don't know who's been using you." Andrea moved closer to her. "And let me give you a little advice. This attitude, this behavior and that mouth . . . There are certain people in this community I view as my family. So heed this warning. Don't fuck with my family or you'll have to fuck with me and I'm the wrong bitch to be taking on." Andrea stared hard and cold at Bev, watching the young woman clench her jaws, spin the other way and leave.

Closing her eyes, catching her breath, Andrea turned back to the clinic only to see Frank standing there. "Frank."

Frank looked stunned. "Oh my God. That was great! What caused that?"

"Oh." Andrea shuddered. "I was helping Jason and I remembered one of the patients I left for Ellen was . . . was that." Andrea pointed back. "But I was too late. When I walked in the room she was saying some pretty nasty stuff to Ellen. Nasty, dirty." Andrea tsked.

"Did El deck her."

"No."

"Why?"

Andrea shrugged. "I think she was just too hurt."

"Should I talk to her."

"No I want to. Unless you were going to see her."

"Actually I was finding Henry. Let me know if she's O.K."

"I will." Andrea stepped away. "Oh Frank . . ."

"Yeah." Frank turned before he left.

"You got a little smudge of something on your cheek, right . . ." Andrea licked her fingers and wiped it off. "Got it." She smiled, tapped his cheek and headed off to the clinic.

Frank's wide eyes couldn't bulge out anymore. "No, she didn't just do that to me." He rubbed his cheek. "No." He stormed off grabbing his headset. "Well I'm telling." He spoke into the microphone. "Dad."

(5)

"Henry this is really great." Frank viewed the work bench in Danny's basement. "So you guys are working on the tracking here, and together?"

"We figured it would be easiest and faster if we joined forces."

"Excellent." Frank looked over the plans.

"We hope to have the first proto-type available by the end of the week and be running tests on it over the weekend."

"No shit?" Frank nodded with approval. "Test meaning?"

"Well maybe have someone place some of the microchips in an area to see if we pick them up, plus it would really be helpful if Robbie brings back a SUT."

"If that creation of yours works, he will."

Henry showed Frank crossed fingers.

"I'll radio and let you know as soon as I hear anything from him."

"Yeah, I'd better be getting back to Mechanics." Henry began to gather his things. "Oh and Frank, thanks a lot for today again. It meant so much to be talking to her, even briefly." Henry noticed the smile on Frank's face, subtle but there. "What?"

"I was thinking after you told me she spoke to you. I was thinking to the other night when her and I were hanging out. Ellen was talking and she was doing that rambling thing. Anyway, did you know Ellen always

rambled. From the first time I met her, she rambled. Fast, mindless whether she was excited or bitching.” Frank snickered. “And it dawned on me thinking back. That after the plague, Ellen stopped rambling.” Frank raised his eyebrows. “No matter how much she moved on, she just didn’t go back to being Ellen until . . . until you and her clicked.”

Henry gave a smile of gratitude to Frank for that compliment. “Thanks.”

“I mean it Henry. I am very grateful for that. But she drives me nuts with the shit, always has. I have never been able to deal with it. You have. Dean and I were just talking about how we need to get you and her talking again just so we don’t have to listen to it all the time. Not that I don’t love her. But it gets pretty bad when you go to sleep at night after an Ellen rambling session and you can’t distinguish whether the thoughts you’re having are yours or hers at that moment.” Frank laughed. “Anyhow, like your fingers are crossed over that chip. Mine are crossed that you and her start talking again. I don’t want that part of Ellen to slip away.”

“You got her to say ‘hi’ to me. Any chance you can get her to have a conversation with me?” Henry finished getting his things.

“I could.”

“I doubt it.”

“No seriously, you don’t think I could?”

“Frank, she hates me.”

“Yeah but she listens to me.” Frank was shocked at Henry’s grunt. “Have you no faith Henry?”

“If you could, why haven’t you done so earlier?”

“I didn’t think about it earlier. I am now.”

“You really think you could help me?” Henry asked.

“Hell yeah. Between me talking to her and you taking my advice on little things you can do. Trust me, in no time you two will be girlfriends again.”

“Frank, if you can help me, I’ll owe you.”

“And you’ll pay.”

“Uh-oh.” Henry looked so worried. “What does that mean.”

“How bad Henry do you want back with Ellen? Pretty damn bad from what I can see. Now I could do this out of the goodness of my heart.”

“But you won’t.”

“Fuck no.” Frank said. “I want her back too. And Henry. We’re this close.” Frank held his fingers an inch apart. “So close now. If I pushed it, I’d be there. Trust me. But I want her to come to me and not on a rebound from you. Get my drift.”

“Sort of.”

“O.K., I get you guys back into some sort of thing, then I can let me and El happen again.”

“Why do I get the feeling this is where the big pay-off comes in. It’ll be then you want me to leave her huh?”

Frank shook his head. "No, you can still be a part of her life. It's just that from the moment I am back with her, I want to be primary."

"Don't you think that should be Ellen's choice?"

"It can be. Hell you and I may both be surprised and she may just say 'screw us' and stay with Dean."

"She may."

"Then again, she may not." Frank looked at Henry. "Primary Henry?"

Henry hesitated, took a breath then answered. "Primary Frank."

"Good boy." Frank gave a swift pat to Henry's shoulder with a smile. "Now you ready for my first Ellen tidbit to you?"

"I'm afraid to ask."

"Don't be." Frank stepped to him. "It's time to tell her what you created. Not the Auralnator but the optical enhancer."

"Frank, if she shoots it down, or could care less, I would . . ."

"Have faith in her Henry, I know El. Tell her, and tell her today." Frank looked at his watch. "In fact, she'll be ready for lunch soon. Take her some tea, some food. The hello was the first step, this will be the second. Trust me I'll build you an entire staircase here real soon."

"That frightens me." Henry placed his hands in his pocket. "Should I really tell her." He saw Frank nod so assuredly. "If she burns me Frank . . ."

"She won't. I'll test the water for you first before sending you to the shark."

"Ha, ha, ha." Henry shook his head. Apprehensively he then agreed. Though making a deal with Frank was bad, and following Frank-advice could be worse, Henry knew he was at a low, and not much at that point was going to make things worse. Of that Henry was sure.

(6)

Peering over the hill, laying stomach down, Curt held the binoculars. "What the hell is he doing?" He asked Neal the other guard.

Neal shook his head. "Crawling to the SUT on post."

"Should he be doing that?" Curt asked. "Why isn't Robbie following Joe's advice? We're suppose to aim down, miss one, and grab one. No, instead we have Robbie two feet from an armed thing, Steve in the bush waiting for God knows what and us up here watching."

"Yep." Neal said. "He's giving a thumbs up."

"He's just not right." Curt shook his head, positioned his rifle better and waited.

Forearm over forearm on his stomach, rifle over his back, Robbie crawled with a grunt on his face. So quiet he was gripping the Auralnator in his hand, keeping his faith on Henry and Danny. One foot from the SUT

and Robbie was still unnoticed. The SUT stared out watching and waiting. Grateful for their stupidity, Robbie counted to three in his head, jumped up at the SUT from behind, secured his arm around his neck and placed the Auralnator in his ear depressing the button. Robbie felt the slight vibration of the silent weapon, then he felt the SUT drop lifeless into him. Closing his eyes tightly with a wide open mouth and a quiet 'oh yes!' Robbie pulled the SUT backwards into the trees.

Though tough, he dropped him fifteen feet away at the feet of Steve. "Fuckin brilliant." He told Steve in a whisper.

"It worked?"

"Hell yeah." Robbie clenched the Auralnator.

"Can we take the rest out now?"

"Um . . . no." Robbie walked away.

"Robbie, where are you going?"

"Just one more." Robbie said. "I saw one taking a nap. Just one more. This is way too cool." As soon as he drew closer to the camp, Robbie encircled to where a few SUTs slept and he dropped to his stomach, crawling in his entrance and sneaking up on the next one.

So easy it was, all except for dragging their motionless, limp bodies to Steve.

"Good Job." Steve said. "Not let's get . . . Robbie?"

Robbie held his finger to his own lips in a 'shush' manner. He mouthed the words 'one more' and headed into the trees. A third one Robbie spotted, sitting and cleaning his rifle off by himself. How brainless Robbie thought them to just be so lax to the fact that they could be attacked.

The sneak approach to the SUT who sat on the rock. A grab to his neck, a buzz to his ear . . . and Robbie felt the struggle. "Shit." Getting a fight from the man he braced from behind, Robbie noticed the left temple. No marks. Not a SUT. So with that, Robbie broke his neck easily, pulled him into the woods and figured since he told Steve he was getting one more, Robbie hit the camp again.

(7)

Did she smell tea? Ellen knew she did when she raised her head to the opening of her Containment office door and saw the cup first, then its presenter, Henry. "What . . ."

"I thought you would like to have lunch with me." Henry walked in and set the cup down. "I brought you a sandwich."

Ellen turned her head from him and collated the papers on her desk. "Thanks, but I'm not eating, I have the meeting with Joe."

"El that's not for twenty more minutes. I can walk you there."

Ellen just shook her head, looking down.

Henry sat down in the chair across from her. He nervously folded his hands watching Ellen stay busy and not look at him. "I came here to talk to you. Can I talk to you? It is really important and I promise you, it won't be about us. It has nothing to do with . . . with . . ." As painful as it was to admit, Henry was being ignored. "I'm sorry. You spoke to me today, I thought I could come to you with this. Did something happen?"

"Let's just say I uh . . ." Ellen slammed the papers down. "I had a little talk with your new girlfriend."

"What? Who are you talking about?"

"Bev, you know the one that left Kenny and Kyle for you."

"Ellen I . . ."

"The one, who says, will have your baby."

"Oh my God. No El." He saw her look away again. "I told you I didn't sleep with her, I wouldn't . . ."

"Stop it Henry." Ellen snapped. "Just stop O.K.? You know what gets me? I thought when we were together you loved the tenderness, the intimacy. If you needed it to be more sexual you could have said something to me. Anything Henry. I would have done anything to keep you happy."

"What are you talking about?" Henry was lost.

"When you admitted to touching her, kissing her, you were telling the truth. Except you failed to tell me *where* you touched and kissed her."

Henry's eyes grew heavy with sadness. He swallowed the lump in his throat. "She told you this?"

Ellen looked up at him.

Henry stood. "I didn't come here to discuss this El, really. I didn't come here to upset you. I will straighten this out, maybe then we can talk."

"Henry." Ellen called out softly to him as he walked to the door. "Did you do these things with her?"

"No El. I swear on my life I didn't touch her in any place that was sexual." He walked back to the desk. "If you need to know exactly what happened that night, I will tell you. I would like for you to know the truth so there is never a doubt in your mind again."

"I don't know if I can handle hearing it."

"I need to tell you."

Her head dropped first. "Then tell me. If I stop you . . ."

"I'll understand." Henry pulled up the chair closer to Ellen, and sat down. "First it was no excuse, but I was drunk El. I was so drunk." He spoke in a near whisper. "And, and I was angry. I can't ever recall being so angry or hurt. And I did a foolish thing. I went to the hall looking for trouble and I found it. Boy did I find it. Jenny, she tried to straighten me out, but I was so mad. I wasn't thinking. No, a part of me was. I couldn't believe you told me you hated me. I couldn't believe you said to find someone else. So in my screwed up mind, I did." Henry inched his way to her, laying his hand on Ellen's. "I never meant to hurt you. Never. When we got to my house, I sat there on the couch. I didn't say anything. She kept

trying to kiss me and I kept pulling away. She . . . she took her shirt off and . . . kept saying to me over and over how you gave me up. How stupid you were El for doing that. How I was this and I was that. I swear to you I sat there at first, thinking of us, thinking of you. And she started touching me El and she took off my shirt and said the right things and I . . .” Henry felt Ellen pull her hand away. “No.” He grabbed it back. “I kissed her. And I have never kissed anyone like that. Especially you. It was as if I put all of my anger into it. All of my hurt. And when I realized what I was doing, that I was moving on her, I got sick. I really got sick. I pulled away El. I felt so ashamed and so disgusted with myself that I literally got sick. I threw up.”

“You threw up?” Ellen turned her head to him.

“Yes. You know how I am. God, I couldn’t believe I’d do that to you. I couldn’t believe I’d sink that low. I gacked El.” Henry saw the snicker on her face. “Yeah, and if I threw up from kissing her and touching her leg, I’d be in a coma if I did the other things she said I did.”

The snicker quickly slid from Ellen’s face. “Henry, would you answer me this? She said, she said that she . . .” Ellen had a hard time saying it. “She said that she went . . .” Ellen motioned her head to Henry’s lap.

“What do you mean?”

Ellen closed her eyes. “She satisfied you Henry. Verbally.”

“Verb . . .” When the reality of what Ellen *meant* to say hit him, Henry’s eyes widened. “No. I swear to you El. No.” Henry stood up. “And I have to deal with this, right now.”

“No.” Ellen stopped him. “Let it go.”

“No El. She said all these things to you. This isn’t true. I don’t want her doing it again.”

“It doesn’t matter if she does.”

“Why do you say that?” Henry was upset.

“Because.” Solemnly Ellen reached for the cup of tea. “Because I won’t believe her next time.”

Stopping in his stride to the door, Henry swayed his way back. “You mean that?”

“I mean that.” She sipped her tea. “But just know, you explaining the night does not make it less wrong. It just makes it clearer to me.”

“I understand.”

“And thank you for the tea.”

“Will you eat the sandwich I brought you?”

“On my way to Joe’s.”

Henry smiled gently. “Thank you El.” He saw her stand up. “Are you going there now?”

“Yes.” Ellen grabbed the cup and wrapped sandwich.

“Can I walk you?” Henry asked as she moved by him.

“Henry, no.”

“But there’s something I need to tell you. Something very important.”

"It'll have to wait." She moved to open the door. "It can't be that important."

Henry shuddered in a breath getting up his nerve and he chanced it by blurting it out. "I'm going to make Dean see again."

"What?" Ellen stopped and spun to him. "Henry you can't do . . ."

"Yes, Yes I can. I have . . ." Breathing heavy he stepped to her. "Danny and I have reinvented the microchip and I created a program that will enhance his vision and the chip will send the signals to Dean's eyes that his brain is unable to do now. We have worked day and night. We have it now. And as soon as Jason completes his tests we'll do it. Dean will see again. I'm sure of it."

The tea cup dropped from Ellen's hand shattering on the floor by her feet. Not knowing what to say or do, Ellen with shaking hands bent down to the floor to pick up the pieces. As she did, Henry joined in helping her. "He'll see?"

"He'll see. But we don't want to tell him until we know all tests have been completed successfully. And they will be, I'm certain."

"You did this? You came up with the program?"

"And the chip idea, I just couldn't make it. But it's made."

"Oh Henry." Ellen was so shocked. "I don't know what to say."

"Say you're happy El. Say I did something that didn't hurt you this time, but made you happy."

Holding the broken glass in her hand, Ellen stuttered. "You made me happy with this one Henry. Thank you." She moved to him dropping the glass to the floor again and laying her hand on his face. "Is this what you came to tell me?"

"Yes. I was scared to. I didn't think you'd care."

"I care." She took her hand back and looked one more time at Henry's smiling face. "Wow." She shuddered then smiled too. "This is great." She finished picking up the pieces of the cup. "And . . . and I'd better hurry to Joe's. I'll get one of my guys to clean this up."

"Can I walk with you *now* El?" Henry stood to his feet the same time as Ellen.

"Walk with me now?" Ellen opened the door. "Henry I'm sorry. This was a great, great thing you shared with me. So great. I'm proud of what you did. But it doesn't make me see you any different right now. It doesn't erase what happened. O.K.? I . . . I still want to walk alone." Giving Henry a peaceful look, Ellen walked over the spilled tea and slowly from her office.

Failed. Henry's heart fell so hard at that moment and the glorification of what he accomplished in helping Dean, faded to the background. It mean nothing to him, because Henry felt like he failed. How could he bask in what he created if he couldn't fully bask in it with the person he cared most about. And until he could achieve that, what he did for Dean would never mean to Henry what it should.

(8)

"A lottery." Joe sat at his desk with folded hands watching Frank, Ellen, and Dean so seriously look back at him. "You think this is best."

Dean nodded. "It's the best choice we have."

Running his hand down his face, Joe reached for a cigarette. "I have to be honest with you. I knew of the anti-serum, but I thought it was gone. Not used in some experiment, but used by you two." He pointed to Ellen and Dean. "Injected into the kids."

Dean quickly looked at Ellen. "We thought . . . we thought for as much as we'd like to do that, it wasn't fair."

"No it's not." Joe stated. "And calling an emergency meeting and not letting anyone know ahead of time is best. I'll start tomorrow writing down the names. We'll pull the four names before the entire community. This is a hard thing to do. To pick only four children to be definite survivors if the new plague hits. It's even harder knowing that they could very easily, without saying anything, be all of my grandchildren." Slowly Joe lifted his eyes. "I need to know who's idea this was. Ellen, you said you and Dean went to talk to Frank about it. Which one of you came up with this?"

Frank answered for the three of them. "Let's just say it was a joint effort."

"Good enough." Joe said. "We'll just . . ."

The door to Joe's office burst open and in walked Robbie. Smiling, standing tall, arms extended outward and . . . singing. It was a song from the sixties by the Rascals, People Got To Be Free, with Robbie's own words. "Shout it from the mountain tops all over town. Beginnings should be grateful that Robbie's around. Ba-ba-ba-ba."

"Robbie!" Joe shouted. "What the hell is this?"

"I'm back." He walked in and kissed Ellen on the cheek. "In one piece, victory mode, wanna fool around El? I'm in a good . . ." Frank's loud 'Hey' stopped Robbie's line of questioning to her. "Kidding. Anyhow, like I radioed, we were successful and I need Frank to come to the garage. I have a surprise."

Frank stood up. "You got our SUT?"

"You could say that, yeah." Robbie grinned. "And I have to head back there. Grab Henry."

"Got it." Frank turned to Joe. "You coming?"

"Yes." Joe stood up. "You get Henry, I'll meet you there."

"Sounds good." Excited, Frank raced to the door, stopped, ran back to Ellen, rubbed her head, and kissed her cheek. Chuckled and ran out of the office with Joe right behind him.

Ellen looked to Dean in Joe's empty office. "I guess our meeting is over with."

"I guess so."

"Wanna go sneak and see what they're up to."

"Sure why not. Lead the way." Dean stood, holding out his arm, letting Ellen take it and foolishly lead him out.

(9)

The banging, the slamming, the grumbling, it all came from behind the Mechanics door when Frank approached. "What the hell?" He opened it up to see Henry. Henry banged the file cabinet drawer. Mumbled something, stomped about and made just about as much noise as one person could make on their own. "Henry? What the fuck?"

"Hey Frank." Henry sounded so down.

"What's wrong?"

"Everything."

"Did something happen?"

"You could say that. I told Ellen about my Dean invention."

"And?" Frank asked.

"And she killed me Frank. Shot me down. Burned me. Crucified me. Hung me out to dry."

"Whoa." Frank looked and sounded shocked. "I'm sorry Henry. I thought she would have been receptive."

"She hates me."

"Tell me what she said." Frank walked closer to him. "Did she say, 'Henry you suck, that's a stupid idea' or what?"

"No."

"No? Did she say she could care less?"

"No."

"Well what the hell did she say Henry? Let's take what she said apart. Maybe each statement individually may not look that bad."

"I doubt it." Henry said.

"Let's try. What all did she say? Start by first reaction."

"She dropped the cup she was holding."

"Good. Stunned. Not bad. What next?"

"She said . . . she said it was a good thing. I didn't make her feel bad for once."

"Another good occurrence Henry." Frank nodded with approval. "And then she blasted you right?"

"No. She did say that it was a great thing and she was proud of me."

"My God Henry could she have gotten any meaner with you." Frank was sarcastic. "Now where exactly in the conversation did she kill you with words."

"When . . . when . . . she wouldn't walk with me Frank."

Another dramatic gasp came from Frank. "She tells you that it was great and that she's proud of you and your pouting because she wouldn't walk with you. Henry! That's stupid."

Henry raised his head and his hand dropped from the filing cabinet. "I guess you're right."

"A step Henry. We're taking this one step at a time. This method is not a express elevator to the Peaches and Herb floor of being Reunited. Got that?"

With a snicker Henry nodded. "You're right. And that Peaches and Herb comment was funny."

"I'm a funny guy. And . . ." Frank walked to the door. "The good news guy. Robbie got you your SUT, it's at the garage."

Henry shrieked. "The Auralnator worked!"

"I guess."

"Yes!" Henry paced to the door, then backed to his desk, he grabbed his radio. "Danny, Danny come in. Meet me at the garage hurry. It worked, Robbie got a . . ." Not wanting to say it over the airwaves, Henry coded it. "A recipient of the Auralnator. Hurry." Hooking his radio on his belt, Henry hurried from Mechanics so fast Frank couldn't catch him right away.

(10)

So proud Robbie stood before the closed garage door, occasionally banging his fist against it with a smile yelling at Neal, Curt and Steve inside who wanted out. "Wait until everyone's here."

Joe was his usual perturbed self standing in front of the closed garage doors. What was the big deal? Why did he have to wait? His annoyance was coupled by Ellen who whispered her commentating to Dean, truly believing she was not being heard.

Robbie could see Frank and Henry coming up over the hill, they stopped to wait for Danny then all three walked to the garage.

"First off." Robbie held out his hands. "Henry, Danny, I have to tell you that thing was so cool. Man did the SUTs drop like flies. Buzz and down." Robbie grinned. "So, knowing this and feeling like I was in a Lays potato chip mood . . ." Robbie lifted the garage door. "I came home the victor."

Neal ran out first, stopping at Joe. "There is something not right about your son."

"Yeah, I know." Joe commented.

Henry with Danny stepped in first, the shrieks of laughter prompted Joe to race in.

Joe stood shocked. "Twelve? What in God's name Robbie? I told you one."

"I know, I know. But Dad. It was so easy and now we have our fist squad." Robbie pointed to them. "What do you think Frank?"

"You did this with that thing they made?" Frank whistled. "Henry, I want every single one of my men to have one, can you make them?"

Henry who was bending down in a squat to a SUT, looked back at Frank. "We need the supplies and we'll do it." His hand reached to the SUT who just stared outward. "Danny?" Henry whispered. "Do you think we messed him up."

"No way. I think the thing was lobotomized and the chip told him how to function. You know program CME-IS-2. Replacement of normal function. Infantry Soldier directed. And . . ." Danny sniffed. "That would explain the really bad smell."

Henry inhaled and made a gaging face. "What is that?" He covered his nose.

"He doesn't know how to control his bodily functions." Danny's back of his hand covered his nose. "Man, rank." He blew out. "We'll have to clean these guys up before we take them to the basement to reprogram."

"You mean they all will just go . . ."

"Where ever they feel like it." Danny said as he watched Henry stand up. "And bad too. Watch that puddle Henry you gonna . . ."

Henry let out a loud 'uh'

" . . . step in it."

With his eyes watering from the smell and the thought, Henry took off running with his hand over his mouth. He raced from the garage, his stomach pulling and turning. The second he stepped outside was the second he released his hand, turning to the side of the building and vomiting.

Ellen saw this as she led Dean to the garage. "Must be good in there Dean, Henry just puked." As she walked by Henry, she tapped him on the back. "You O.K.?"

How badly Henry wanted to answer, Ellen was speaking to him and nice too, but he couldn't. All he could do was let her go see the SUTs for herself while Henry finished releasing the remnants of the contents of his stomach.

(11)

A cool breeze blew in through the bedroom window, lifting the curtains. It was a great breeze and odd for an August night, Ellen thought. She stood by the window, a brush in her hand staring out to the empty street below. Her hair was still slightly damp from the shower, and she looked down to her watch. How peaceful the house was, how quiet and Dean wasn't even around to enjoy it. What he could possibly be working on at the clinic was beyond her. Maybe it had something to do with the twelve new members of the community. Ellen certainly hoped that they weren't

going to come into containment. Especially when none of them were toilet trained.

Though there were times when a person truly enjoyed being alone, this was not one of them for Ellen. She could wait for Dean, but seeing that it was nearly eleven at night, he probably would just go to sleep when he returned. She could do what she used to do in the old world. Many of summer nights were spent just sitting on her front porch. More times than not, someone would also have the same urge and they would walk out to sit outside also, and so would start that endless summer night conversation. A part of her missed that feeling. Sipping a drink, talking away, looking at her watch and seeing it had crept closer to morning than she thought.

But there was one thing certain about Beginnings, it wasn't filled with the night owls. Frank was pulling extra rounds. Robbie was beat, and Henry . . . she didn't even want to consider him. Then she remembered, she had another friend, a new one and that was who Ellen decided she would go see. Danny invited her by many times. Hoping that maybe she could entice Danny into a summer walk and one of those long conversations about nothing, Ellen set down her brush, slipped on her shoes and headed over to Danny Hoi's.

(1 2)

"Danny, we're getting ahead of ourselves." Henry spoke as he reviewed the papers scattered about Danny's coffee table. He sat in the chair, elbows on his knees as he leaned forward. "One thing at a time."

"Sorry." Danny plopped down the couch. "But I think we should do the first reprogram tomorrow."

"I'm not going near them when they smell."

"Robbie said he'd hose them down. He'll be fine and Henry get over it, it's body functions."

"Danny." Henry raised his head very seriously. "I have stomach problems."

Danny laughed. "You do not. O.K. back to the tracking." Danny's hand slammed down. "Preliminary tests I did this evening show that the chip you made works as well as the one taken from Harold the SUT . . ." Danny started to snicker again.

"What's so funny about that?"

"Harold the SUT. It makes me feel like singing. Remember that movie Howard the Duck? Get it? Harold the SUT, Howard the . . ." He saw Henry was not amused. "Maybe not." Danny shrugged. "What program are we gonna put into the first test one? I think we should do one of the ones you made. If it's screwed up, we can just erase it. What do you think?"

"Sounds good. However I am curious about the one already made program. We'll talk about it tomorrow." Henry's hand smoothed across the

paper. "I'm looking at this Danny. Can what you have planned to use, actually sustain what you have planned in size?"

"Let's hope. We're doing what? Five of these instead of one big one. Connecting them should be . . ." Danny's head lifted. "Was that a knock?"

"It was light. Could be Dean."

At the second knock, this time a little harder, both Henry and Danny looked at each other with a unison. 'Nah.'

Danny stood up. "I'll be right back." He walked to the door. So surprised he was when Ellen stood there. "Ellen."

"Hi." She smiled. "What are you doing?"

"Working on the tracking system."

"Oh." She folded her hands. "Are you real busy?"

"Not for you. What's up?" He opened the door wider for her to step in.

"It's a great night Danny. And I was hoping you and I could take a walk and . . ." Ellen stopped cold when she saw Henry sitting in the chair. "Never mind."

Henry who was taking a drink, lowered his glass as he stood up. "Hi El."

"Henry." A flash of a brief smile and Ellen turned back to Danny. "I'll just leave."

"No wait." Danny stopped her. "What's going on? You said something about a walk and . . ."

"No. Forget it now. Work on the tracking. I didn't know Henry was helping you."

"We're working together on a lot of things."

"I see." Ellen nodded her head. "Goodnight." She started to leave. Again Danny stopped her.

"El, I'll uh . . ." Danny looked back at Henry. "I'll walk. Henry can review these alone."

"No. Night." She waved to Henry. "Night Henry." She walked from Danny's house.

Danny shook his head so confused to Henry, then held up his hand to him and followed Ellen out. "Ellen, wait."

"Yeah?"

"What was up with that?" Danny made it to her. "I thought you and I were gonna be nighttime chat buddies. I told you anytime you wanted to, I would make time to talk."

"And I changed my mind about that. You're great guy Danny. And what really made it great for me was that you had no connection to Henry what-so-ever. It was sort of like you were *my* friend. And the only in Beginnings that was just friends with me, not Henry. Maybe it's a little juvenile, I don't know. But last I heard, you weren't getting along with Henry and now you're working with him." She started walking again.

"Ellen come on." Danny stood looking like he was pleading.

"Night Danny." She smiled at him and continued walking.

Danny tossed his hands up in the air and let them fall with a slap. He looked at Ellen walking down the street, then to Henry who stood in his door. And he felt for the first time like a real Beginnings resident. Pulled like everyone else who knew Ellen and Henry. And in Beginnings, that was everyone. With a community as small as Beginnings, to Danny it was a shame that a gap had widened so far between two of it's people.

(13)

A glass of iced tea, a refreshing breeze, and a seat on the last step of Dean's porch was Ellen's scenario. Waiting for someone to walk by, watching--like the end to a Walton's episode--the lights on the houses go out one at a time. Her position on the last step caused the raise of her knees. It was enough of a raise that Ellen could rest her elbows on her thighs, hold her glass of tea and bring her mouth to it, slurping it in laziness.

Mid-third slurp and Ellen ejected the ice cube from her mouth when she heard the footsteps. Too heavy to be Dean, Ellen lifted her head to wait on the poor unsuspecting soul she would pounce on for conversation. Hopefully, it wouldn't be Henry.

The footsteps stopped. Did she imagine them? She heard the subtle clearing of a throat in the darkness, followed by a poetic whisper out at her.

"Stranded on her front porch. Looking really down . . ."

Ellen shook her head with a crooked smile. It was Frank. Was he doing that song from Grease making up his own words? No.

" . . . what Ellen really needs. Is Frank Slagel a-round."

"Frank."

"*Ellen . . . Baby . . .*" He sang.

"Frank."

"*I'm in misery . . .*"

"Knock off the Danny Zucco bit Frank."

Frank laughed and peeked his head around the bend of the house. "Hey." He walked up to her. "Porch watching?"

"Yeah, but porch watching nothing."

"Beginnings sucks like that. No old man Cramer . . ."

"No late night barbecuing."

"Hamburgers on the grill." Frank smiled.

"No Mrs. Jargon with her spiked Lemonade."

"Lemon icers." Frank corrected with a point. "Did you ever have one of those things."

"Many of times. Especially when she fought with her husband."

"Strong."

"Very."

"Can I join you?" Frank asked.

"Who's with the kids?"

"Robbie is staying there. Can I?"

"Please. But you are forewarned, I will talk."

"Then I will listen." Instead of beside her, Frank sat behind her, a leg on each side of Ellen. "What are you drinking?"

"Tea."

"Can I?" Frank reached down for it and took it. "Wait." He leaned down to her. "You weren't doing that Ellen thing of playing with the ice cubes and spitting them back in were you?"

"Yes."

"Just curious." Frank took a long drink and handed it back to her. He heard Ellen snicker. "What?"

"That never bothered you."

"You mean putting something in my mouth that was in yours?" He whispered in her ear. "Sweetie, we have been far more intimate than that." He kissed her on the cheek.

"I love you Frank."

Frank's heart stopped. "What was that for?" He rested his hands on Ellen's shoulders, gently rubbing them not wanting her to see the huge grin on his face.

"I haven't told you in forever."

"See, you don't need to. I know this." He kissed the top of her head. "But . . . I love you too." He felt Ellen lean back into him and he basked in that, wrapping his arms around her front and holding her.

"Did you ever wonder if we've known each other way too long?"

"Never. We haven't known each other long enough."

"Frank?" Ellen set down her glass. "You've known me since I was a teenager. Do you . . . do you ever look at me now as old?"

"What?" Frank laughed. "Never. Do you look at me as old?"

"You? You're a Slagel, like Joe, you'll never get old."

"Where is this coming from?"

Ellen shrugged and leaned on his leg. "Do I look old to you?"

"Ellen."

"Do I?"

"No." Frank answered sharp. "You look great."

"What about my body, is it . . ."

"El." Frank rested his chin on her head. "This body is better now than it ever was." Frank ran his hand down her arm. "And if you offered me that body of twenty years ago for the woman I hold right now, I'd laugh. Because everyday you get better and better in my eyes. And you know what? You always will."

"Even when I'm seventy?"

"Even when you're seventy." Frank's hand slid to hold hers. "You'll still be my girl."

Ellen's eyes rolled slightly with a calm peacefulness at what Frank said. It was what she needed to hear. Maybe that was why she brought it up to Frank, because Frank always told her what she needed to hear. Seeing that it was turning out to be an old fashion summer evening, Ellen leaned more into Frank, and enjoyed the feeling of that.

(14)

Dean was blind, not deaf and he certainly wasn't stupid either. So why at that moment did Dean feel as if he had been treated as such. A china doll that would break? A guinea pig? An uneducated mind that wouldn't possibly comprehend what was happening, let alone be consulted on?

Dean felt outraged as he stood in the storage room leaning against the wall. He went in there for more petri dishes, what he didn't expect was to discover how much his other senses had started to kick in to compensate for his loss of vision.

It was as he felt around for the dishes he knew were there, that he heard the mention of his name. The voice of Jason carried from Andrea's office through the heating vent. His voice not only conveyed Dean's name, but the fact that he was dictating information that Dean should have been told. Information that Dean should have known first. Dictating his latest test findings. Dictating the success of them. And finally dictating that his results would soon confirm the go-ahead for the hush-hush procedure that would give Dean back his sight.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

AUGUST 4

(1)

It made Ellen's mind flash back to the old days of highschool. Early morning, dewy, still damp from the night before rain, a cloud of cigarette smoke from those who huddled outside. Of course in Beginnings a cloud of cigarette smoke could easily be referred to as the Slagel smoke signal.

Jason joined Joe and Robbie outside Joe's office smoking. Ellen thought it odd how they were all hanging outside instead of in. And in usual Ellen fashion, nothing went unsaid. "Morning." She walked up to the three men. "Morning Joe." She kissed him on the cheek. "Why are you three hanging out here?"

Joe tossed his cigarette butt. "Enjoying the first cool morning in a while I suppose." Joe looked at Jason. "Remind me to ask Henry about this weather when he gets here."

Ellen quickly shuffled her head around the men. "Henry's coming too?"

"From what he told me." Joe looked at his watch. "Should be here any minute with Danny."

"Danny?" Ellen questioned. "Well what is the big meeting all a . . ." Ellen felt the kiss to her cheek, she smiled and turned to familiar feel of his lips. "Morning Frank."

"El." Frank said with a smile, biting his bottom lip.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I was thinking about last night."

Ellen grinned and spoke softly. "I was thinking about that too on the way up here."

"I loved it."

"Really?"

"Oh yeah." Frank said. "It was so much like old times."

"It was, wasn't it?"

"Every single second of . . . of . . . of." Frank clenched his mouth and tilted his head. "Robbie, what the fuck?" He palmed his hand over Robbie's face that had intruded into their conversation, he pushed him out. "Go."

"What happened last night?" Robbie asked. "Come on tell me. Please. Did you two?"

"No!" Frank snapped at him. "We talked and go away, it's none of your business." Frank shoved him.

Robbie snickered. "Right, I'm not buying it. This 'I loved last night' shit. You two were screwing around, weren't you? You're glowing."

"Robbie." Frank grew stern. "For your . . ." His words halted when he grunted loudly, feeling the hard nudge to this gut. He looked up as Henry walked between him and Ellen.

Henry paused by Frank. "Thanks Frank! Asshole! You're glowing!"

"What?" Frank questioned.

"Deal's off." Henry pointed his finger.

Ellen stepped closer as Henry moved by. "Deal? What deal? Frank, do you have a deal with Henry over something?"

"No." Frank answered.

"Yes." Henry corrected. "Over you."

"Over me?" Ellen asked shocked.

"Yes." Henry said.

"Tattle tale." Frank shoved him lightly.

"Welcher." Henry shoved back.

"Hold it." Ellen stopped them and spoke slow. "What deal? Is there a deal Frank?"

Frank's mouth moved a little without saying any words. Then he took a second, twitched his head and glared his angry eyes at Henry before looking back at Ellen trying to explain his way out of it. "Yes. El, look I . . ."

"Stop." Ellen held up her hand and faced Henry. "You." She pointed at him "Have no right what-so-ever to be making deals over me. You hear me?" Angrily she stormed off and into Joe's office.

Frank snickered at the gasping look on Henry's face. "Back fired on ya, didn't it little boy?" Frank flicked Henry lightly on the nose and walked toward the office. "Deal will be back on see, cause I will straighten this out." He smiled and walked into the office.

"Such an asshole." Henry commented and walked towards Joe's office, he paused before going in allowing Frank time to handle that situation.

Andrea's cheerful voice caused Robbie to cringe and Joe wishing he had a place to hide. "Look who I found coming up here." Andrea walked holding onto Danny's arm. "Seems Mr. Hoi has been invited also. "

Seeing the good mood and pleasantries on Andrea's face, Robbie, escaped into Joe's office before Andrea could say or do anything odd to him. He was still wincing after she asked him just that morning if he'd been brushing three times a day.

With Robbie watching the slight Ellen and Frank bickering, Henry sulking, Andrea humming, Danny gloating and Jason snickering, as Joe walked behind his desk. "If there's a chair, have a seat. We might as well start this thing." He watched as Ellen and Andrea took a chair, then Frank and Henry tugging on the third, finally losing to Robbie who just sat in it. "All right, if we're ready. Frank, start."

"What?" Frank asked as he took his normal stance by the filing cabinet.

"Start, you called this thing."

"No I didn't." Frank said. "I merely told you like I was supposed to. Henry called this."

"No I didn't. I told you Frank." Henry pointed at Andrea. "Andrea called it."

"Not me, Jason."

Jason snickered with a shake of his head. "Robbie's the one."

Robbie threw his hands up. "All of you are confused, Ellen called the meeting."

"Me?" Ellen smirked. "Now why in the world would I call a meeting? I hate them."

Joe had enough. "Christ. Each one of us passed the message along. Who in God's name called this thing?"

"I did." Dean stepped into the room. "I called the meeting. I told Ellen and she started the 'pass it on'. Thank you El."

"Sure Dean." Ellen, chipper crossed her legs swinging them.

Walking by Ellen to Joe's desk, Dean paused, listened and stopped Ellen's swinging leg. He stood before everyone. "May I Joe?"

"You called this thing." Joe rolled his chair out some from his desk to watch Dean.

Hoping that he actually was facing everyone, Dean began to talk. "I called all of you hear for this early morning meeting because last night, each one of your names were mentioned. I overheard them being mentioned by Jason. And . . . and that is not all I overheard. Right now I'm pissed and I suppose that's why I called you all here. Seems you people think so little of me that I'm not even privileged enough to know that Henry has come up with a way that I can see." He heard the merging of voices as they tried to explain. "Stop it!" Dean's voice raised. "These are my eyes, not yours. I lost my sight. None of you know what that is like. Frank and Robbie, you knew of this because you set up the capturing of SUTs to use as practice on an invention that was spawned when Henry and Danny worked on the chip for me. Henry, you made something that could make me see? You are supposed to be my friend and you didn't tell me. Joe, you run this community and you let these people run around with this conspiracy of sheltering me from this as if I were a child? Andrea you gave Jason my notes. He went through my notes, read my stuff, used my equipment and practiced with it trying to perfect a way to lobotomize me? You people sit back and make plans on cutting into my brain and I'm not allowed to know about it? That program Jason, that laser program. I know it. I've run it. Don't you think it would have been a little easier for you to come to me for help. And El. Did you know?"

"Dean I . . ."

"You did." He spun to where her voice came from. "That pisses me off the most." His voice raised. "You! You of all people knew and you kept this from me! I tell you how much I wish I could see! I slept in bed with you last night, I said goodnight to you and you laid your head down knowing that you were keeping from me something I should know."

"Dean . . ." Ellen tried to defend herself.

"No!" He shouted at her. "I don't want to . . ."

Frank stepped in. "Dean, enough." He spoke strongly. "Don't yell at her again. She was the last one to find out. Now settle your little ass down. Calm it. We're all trying to help."

"You're right." Dean held his hand up. "But the charade is over. El, I'm sorry I yelled at you." Dean took a calming breath. "Now I want all of you to fill me in on every aspect of this. And I will be the one to help plan the medical procedures. I will help decide how and when and where this chip gets planted. Understand? You guys may have come up with this, but it's my life you've been planning on risking. And I'll be especially damned if I won't be involved in a medical procedure that I know more than all of you about."

There was silence in that room at first but as Dean leaned back against Joe's desk the explanations and planning began.

(2)

Ellen ran as fast as her feet would carry her from containment over to the clinic. She nearly tripped several times, especially when slow-moving Josephine got in her way on the steps of the clinic. Grateful that Josephine wasn't hurt when Ellen bumped into her, she continued on in her race.

Down the main corridor to the left then to the right into birthing room number two. "Sorry I'm late Dean I got here as fast as I could." She saw Dean washing up at the sink. "Dean?"

"False."

"Aw!" Ellen stomped and whined walking over to Dean and lowering her voice to a whisper. "Where's Andrea?"

"Delivering a baby."

Ellen giggled. "You didn't have to feel around too much for the examination now did . . ."

"Ellen."

"Sorry." Ellen covered her mouth.

"Melissa was in here anyhow."

"Oh. And you know, you always did exams with your eyes closed anyhow." Putting on the fake perky, Ellen in a skip, moved the examining table to where Trish was sitting up. "No baby huh?"

"It was false labor." Trish covered her body.

"Well what were you doing, maybe you can keep doing it and it will make the labor real."

"Running." Trish told her.

"Running?" Ellen turned to Dean. "Dean did you tell her she shouldn't be running?"

Dean tossed the towel he dried his hands on, in the bin. "I think Trish should tell you why she was running."

"Why were you running Trish?" Ellen asked.

"I was chasing that Bev." Trish said with such anger.

"Though I like that thought, you shouldn't have done that, but uh . . ."

Ellen leaned to her. "Why were you chasing her?"

"She's doing this testing thing Ellen. She is testing all of us women. She was flirting with Jeff. He said she wasn't. I said she was."

"Even if she was Trish, Jeff is good. He's not Henry." Ellen patted Trish's knee and started to walk out. "Oh by the way. What were you going to do if you caught her?"

"Simple." Trish explained. "Josephine told me if I caught Bev, she would beat her up for me."

"Oh." Keeping serious. Ellen nodded, opened the birthing room door and walked into the hall releasing her laughter.

(3)

"Perimeter reqs." Frank's strong voice preluded the strong hand that slammed down the requisitions in the bin at Mechanics. "For you Henry."

Henry shook his head. "See how it is Danny around here, they keep coming in." He saw Robbie peeking in the bin. "Robbie are you staying to help?"

"I have a few more things to take care of and I'll be back."

Henry picked up the requisitions Frank had laid down. "Security and clinic are always first repairs." He explained to Danny.

"Yeah." Frank added just to irritate Henry. "And don't forget that." He started to leave. "Oh Henry, I fixed that little problem this afternoon. Deal is on. And . . . a little womanly advice to you right now from me. Right now with Ellen, you're luck is bad, you're drowning in it pal. So before you drown, think . . . think real hard before you say anything." Frank pointed his finger to his own temple and backed up through Mechanics door. "Coming Robbie?"

"In a sec." Robbie answered.

Leaving, Frank could hear Henry bitch about him to Robbie, but he didn't mind. He actually enjoyed it, Henry so upset.

Frank moved toward his office, the place he went to everyday at that time. Fully planning on catching up on his stupid reports, rehashing the reconnaissance flights with Robbie, then hitting the perimeters again. If Robbie would only catch up. Frank looked back and saw him nearing.

With his eyes glued to his clipboard, he opened his office door, lifted his head, saw a smiling, naked Bev on his desk, turned immediately around and walked back out shutting the door behind him. "Robbie." He called to his brother.

"Yeah Frank?" Robbie trotted up to him.

Frank motioned his head backwards. "Use my jeep and take care of that problem in there."

"Problem?"

"Yes."

"Uh . . ." Robbie, clueless, shrugged. "Sure." He walked into Frank's office.

Frank moved over a foot to the little bench that leaned against his outer office wall, he sat down breathing out as he did. He listened to Robbie take care of the problem and Frank only lifted his head when he heard the jeep turn over then drive away. Calmly with just a hint of snicker, Frank looked at his watch and then pulled a cigarette from his pocket.

He'd smoked some, look at his watch again. Like he was waiting on a bus Frank sat there. And with his final puff of that cigarette, he glanced one more time at his watch, drew a smirk upon his face and lowered the microphone of his headset closer to his mouth. "El."

(4)

It was evident at that very moment in time why Ellen earned the title 'The Little Mouse That roared'. Still wearing her clinic lab coat, she stormed with a vengeance, hair flying back, coat flying back, across the street of Beginnings. A woman on a mission, and it was seen in her face. Those who saw her, those who stood in her way, parted from her path as if she were Moses and they were the Red Sea.

Her eyes held determination along with anger. Her face was stone cold as she moved quickly down to the second line of buildings. She didn't stop, not once, she couldn't. Flinging the door to the bakery open with a 'bang' Ellen flew by Cindy who stood up from her counting of supplies., passed Josephine who quickly jumped from her way, and into the back of the bakery where the kitchen was located.

Ellen saw her as soon as she stepped in the kitchen. Bev. With her eyes glued upon Bev's, Ellen with straight-ahead bulldozer determination, moved across that kitchen toward her. In her furious stride, never slowing down, never pausing, Ellen reached out her small hand, and snatched Bev up by her throat. Using her anger as her strength, she pulled Bev with her across that room as if she weighed nothing, and she slammed her back-first against the huge vat of grease.

Bev let out a blood curdling scream as her hands fought to free Ellen's from her throat. Her legs slid upon the floor in a struggle.

Ellen gripped so tight to Bev's throat, her fingers could have punctured through the skin. She leaned close to Bev, feeling the heat of the hot oil that boiled less than a foot from Bev's head which dangled in toward it over the side of the vat. Over her, in a choke grip, pressing the back of Bev's neck hard to the vat, Ellen placed her face. She ignored Bev's cries. "I will take a

lot.” Ellen’s deep graveled voice spat at her. “I will put up with a lot. I will *not* put up with you when it comes to Frank.” She rammed her hand again. “Go near him again. Speak to him. Look at him. And I swear to God, the next time, I will drown you in this oil.” Pulling her from the vat, Ellen tossed Bev harshly to the floor, stepped over her crying, shaking body and she stormed back out of the bakery nearly as fast as she stormed in.

(5)

Joe’s half square glasses rested on the hand that rubbed his eyes harshly, not wanting to hear what was being told. “Go on.” He told Andrea as he stood outside a clinic room door.

“Some of them are third degree burns Joe. Those are the ones she’s not feeling right now.”

“Christ.” Joe moved his hand looking back at the closed door. “I don’t want to deal with the shit Andrea.”

“I know. Is there any way we can let it go? Ignore it.”

“I would.” Joe cleared his throat. “But that asshole Kenny is in there with her now, screaming for justice. What am I supposed to do?”

“I know it’s hard to not be a father right now. How about being both, the leader and her father.” Andrea laid her hand on Joe’s folded arms. “I’ll go with you. As your partner and as council.”

“Thank you Andrea.” Joe lifted his head to her, took a breath, knocked on the door and walked in. He looked at Bev in the bed, awake. Her face was tear streaked and swollen from crying. “How she doin?” He asked Kenny.

Kenny released Bev’s hand and stood up harshly. “Look at her. She’s in pain. Unbearable pain.” He shouted. “And your daughter is . . .”

“Easy!” Joe shouted. “Pipe down will ya, I’m not the one who shoved her in the grease pit. Am I? No. Now sit.”

“We want something down about this Joe. Something needs to be done.” Kenny looked at Andrea.

Joe stepped closer. “You do understand this is a delicate situation.”

“Why?” Kenny asked with anger. “Because it’s Ellen. I don’t care who she is. She did this, she should be treated like everyone else. I want her out.”

Joe had to try his hardest not to laugh. “Oust her? What are you out of your goddamn mind? One! We don’t oust women unless it’s drastic. Two! Those two are at odds. Three, she’s my daughter for crying out loud! And if I throw her out, do you even comprehend how many people will follow? Now that is not an option.”

“I want council to do something about this.” Kenny insisted.

“And council will.”

Kenny scoffed at that. "Like you said Joe, you're her father and she's . . ." He pointed at Andrea. "She might as well be her mother. I want it to be Henry's decision. Henry cares about my Bev."

Immediately Joe turned from Kenny, he couldn't face him with the fear he would laugh at him.

"Does he even know about this yet?" Kenny asked. "I bet he doesn't. He'll be upset. I want him to make the decision Joe. Him. Even knowing how he feels about Bev, you know he'll be fair, Henry is always fair."

"Henry can't . . ." Joe shut up and faced Andrea. "Henry doesn't know about this does he?"

"Sweet Jesus Joe." Andrea shook her head. "No. He can't make this decision."

"What did the man say?" Joe pointed back at Kenny. "He said Henry is fair. Well Andrea, Henry *is* fair. We know that."

"Not when it comes to . . ." Andrea whispered. "Ellen." She cringed when Bev moaned.

"He doesn't need to know it's Ellen. How much more fair can I make it." Joe faced Kenny. "Will you accept Henry's decision if he bases it on fact learned only through the anonymity of Ellen . . ." Joe hunched at Bev's scream. ". . .and Bev."

"You're not going to tell him who is involved?" Kenny saw Joe nod. "I'll accept that. I'll accept that decision. And I'm trusting you Joe." He pointed. "I'm trusting you to feed him the facts. No bias sides to the story."

"Yeah, yeah." Joe shook his head and walked to the door. "I'll go get him now, you'll have his decision shortly." Joe walked out and waited in the hall for Andrea.

"Joseph. I can not believe you are going to put Ellen's fate in that boy's hands without him knowing he is controlling it."

"Fate my ass Andrea, this is Henry we're talking about. Ousting is out anyhow, how bad will he be? This is Henry." Joe started to walk. "Besides, it'll be very interesting when he does find out it was Ellen." He stopped and faced Andrea. "Kind of like the Let's Make a Deal version of punishment. Huh?"

"Joe." Andrea tsked.

"I'll radio you as soon as he makes his mind up . . ." Joe kissed her cheek then tapped it. "Sweetheart."

"No instigating it Joe."

"It's Henry." Joe held his hands up as he walked backwards.

"No allowing him to put himself in a position that will reek him hell from Ellen."

"Andrea it couldn't be more brilliant. Like I said. How bad will the punishment be?" Joe smiled. "It's Henry."

(6)

No amount of good news from his southern divisions was going to put a smile on George's face during his daily briefing.. Three whole days had passed and still not a word came from John Matoose. And to top it all off, it had surpassed his check-in time from his observation CME's positioned within fifty miles of Beginnings. Things weren't going as planned and George hated when that happened. It was time to take full control of the helm and steer it his own way.

After telling his right hand man Lawrence Gillian, also one of George's Caceres Peace Ambassadors, 'if John Matoose calls, put him through, smile over the phone, but tell him nothing. Fuck him' George left the meeting determined. He headed off to his laboratories, knowing full well that they were near ready. He stopped on his way there at his military command, instructing his Sergeant Major to 'intensify and prepare.'

George wanted in his hand, written reports by his biological specialists and Military specialist. Reports of a plan of action and their expected outcome of it. And George wanted and needed these reports in his hand by the day's end. With their reports and George's own intensified plan, he would put in motion his actions to proceed in what he believed to be the final strikes against Beginnings. George was going to hit them fast, furious and hit them in full force. But most of all George was going to hit them sooner than Beginnings had ever anticipated.

THE INVASION

CHAPTER FIFTY

(1)

A final grunt and a turn of his wrist, Henry emerged from under the counter in the monitoring security room. "Done." He stood up brushing himself off. "Now Explain to me Jeff, how a bolted down terminal got loose."

"One word . . . Frank."

"Frank?" Henry questioned. "Did he move it?"

"No, he slammed his hand on the counter. Pissed off at that survivor the other day who kept throwing things at perimeter nine because we wouldn't let him in."

"Was that the one he shot at?"

"That's the one." Jeff pointed and slumped further into his chair.

"Not in a good mood Jeff?" Henry closed the flap to his tool bag.

"Pissy mood to be precise. Trish thought she was in labor, it turned out to be false."

"That could do it. Of course Nick was born early so I really didn't have to wait on him at all."

"The false labor isn't what got me. It's the reason for it. She was running after Bev so Josephine could beat her up."

"Why was she doing that?" Henry asked.

"Trish can't fight Henry, she's nine months pregnant."

"No, I mean wanting her beat up. What did Bev do now?"

"Trish said she was flirting with me. Hell, I didn't even pay attention to her. Now I'm going to have to hear about it even though I'm an innocent in all of this."

"And stay that way too." Henry gave his advice. "Take it from me, you see that girl coming, you run. Run from her, she's trouble Jeff and has been the past couple of days here in town. She really burns me." Henry began to get upset. "A trouble maker and I . . ."

"Henry." Joe walked into the monitoring room, interrupting. "Glad I found you. I need you."

"Oh sure Joe." Henry grabbed his tool bag. "Remember what I said Jeff." Tossing it around his shoulder he joined Joe. "What's up?"

"To my office." Joe waved his hand and led the way to the line of utility buildings not far from the monitoring station.

"Did I do something Joe?" Henry asked as they walked into Joe's office.

"No, but you will. Have a seat." Joe walked behind his desk and sat.

"What's going on?" As Henry sat, he placed his tool bag on the floor.

"You're on council, in fact you're second in command here in Beginnings. A situation has arisen in the community and you have to make the decision."

"Me? Just me?"

"Yes Henry."

"Why?" Henry asked.

"One, the decision has to be based on anonymity. And Andrea and I know the parties involved. So this one is on you."

Henry blew slowly from his mouth. "I hate being put in that position."

"I know. But you have to make a decision and it has to be done now. It's on the lines of punishment."

"Oh no Joe, you know I hate making punishment decisions, people end up thinking I'm not very nice."

"You have to do this one."

Henry slid down in his chair. "All right. What's the situation?"

"Fact. It involves two women . . ."

"Stop. Women?"

"Yes Henry let me finish. We'll call these women, Woman 'A' and Woman 'B'. Fact. Woman 'A' on the word of a third party went after Woman 'B', physically attacking her."

"Did woman 'B' attack back?"

"No."

"Did woman 'B' provoke it physically?"

"No." Joe shook his head.

"Woman 'A' based her attack on the word of a third party? She didn't see anything for herself?"

"No."

"Was it a simple attack? Slap and scratch sort of thing?"

"That's good." Joe pointed with a chuckle. "But . . . no. That's why you have to make the decision. See, Woman 'B' is in the clinic now. A sprained neck and severe burns on the back of the neck, some of them third degree."

Henry's eyes widened. "You're kidding me? What in the world is up with the women in this community this week? My God, is it premenstrual week or something?"

"You know how it gets the first few days after hormone injections." Joe shrugged. "I always give leeway."

"Well I won't. I'm really sick of the way these women get away with things Joe."

"Henry." Joe held up his hand.

"No." Henry shook his head. "You have a woman, who didn't strike back, who didn't physically provoke, who wasn't even proven guilty and she's laying in the clinic with third degree burns." Henry sat up. "Oust woman 'A'."

"No!" Joe scolded.

"Why?"

"We don't oust women you asshole. Unless it's deadly."

"You gave me the decision."

"Well ousting can't be one of them."

"That sucks Joe."

"Tough."

Henry tapped his hand on the arm of the chair. "Well we have to send a clear cut message to the community. Woman 'A' has to be made an example of."

"Henry you think that maybe you should . . ."

"Joe." Henry held up his hand. "My decision. Let me think. Severity. We can't stick her in the fields, she wouldn't work out. Hmm." Henry thought and grew annoyed at Joe's finger tapping on his desk top. "Joe please."

"No. Henry please. This isn't a difficult thing to do. Come up with a punishment. How about an hour in holding."

"No way! She burned and scarred a woman." Henry snapped his finger. "I got it. This is good." He leaned toward Joe. "Woman 'A' will be placed immediately in holding until tomorrow morning, after and only after, she delivers a personal apology to woman 'B'."

"Henry, most of this day and all night in holding? And an apology? Don't you think that's a little severe?"

"No Joe. That's my decision."

"I don't think . . ."

"Joe." Henry raised his voice. "It's my decision. You gave it to me. That's fair and severe."

"You're absolutely sure?" Joe asked.

"Yes." Henry answered.

"Positive."

"Yes." Henry grew perturbed.

"I can't change your mind."

"No Joe. That's it. I'm really tired of these women in this community. Did you see the long scratch on Frank's arm from the Jenny fight?"

"O.K., if that's your final word." Joe picked up his phone. "Excuse me." He dialed. "Robert. Henry made his decision. Woman 'A' is to be placed in holding until tomorrow morning. Yes he decided that." Joe looked at Henry. "No don't take her there yet. Go get her and . . . and bring her to the clinic. Part of her punishment is to apologize to woman 'B'." Joe spun his chair and lowered his voice. "Knock off the laughing. Get her and bring her to the clinic. We'll be right there. No, I'll tell her the punishment. And uh . . . call Andrea with this one for me. Thanks." Joe hung up the phone and spun the chair to re-face Henry. "Ready?"

"For what?"

"To got to the clinic." Joe stood up. "You decided the punishment. You hand it out."

"With pleasure Joe."

Wanting to tell Henry 'you think?' Joe decided it was best not to let any of the anonymity out of the bag. *That* little surprise would be best uncovered first hand.

(2)

Henry walked side by side with Joe, very side by side. Head held high, ready for any argument Woman 'A' would give to him. Battling his defenses in his head as they made their way to patient rooms.

"This way." Joe told him as they started to turn the bend, but were stopped by Andrea.

"Joe." She grabbed hold of him. "Stop this right now."

"Andrea." Joe held his hand high. "Like Henry insisted, it is his final decision. Excuse us."

Covering her face, then folding her arms, Andrea walked away. She didn't want to witness the painful scene that would unravel.

As soon as Henry turned the bend, he slowed down his pace when he saw Ellen stand from a chair outside of a room. Robbie was with her. "El?" Henry walked up to her. "What are you doing here?"

Giving scolding eyes to Robbie who snickered, Joe explained. "Ellen, you know why you are here don't you?"

"Yes." Ellen said calmly. "My punishment."

Henry's mouth dropped open. "You? You burned her?"

"Yes Henry I did. So what?" Ellen said sharp. "Just tell me what my punishment is. This is fuckin stupid."

"Henry?" Joe motioned his hand. "Since the decision was announced to the other parties. Please tell Ellen you're final decision."

"But Joe . . ."

"Henry." Joe deepened his voice. "You were the adamant one. Tell her."

Nervously Henry cleared his throat. "The one is severe El. You have to go to holding and stay there till morning."

Ellen nodded slowly. "Holding, like a criminal." She closed her eyes briefly. "Thanks Henry. So what's the other one? You made it sound as if I have two punishments."

"Yes." Henry breathed out. "You have to go in and apologize to her for burning her."

"No!" Ellen shouted.

"Yes." Henry said. "El, listen I . . ."

"No!" Ellen waved her hands about. "No, no, no!" She stepped back ranting. "I won't! Fuck her! Fuck you Henry! No! Joe. I'll spend a week in holding. Anything. No."

Joe looked at Henry. "Care to change your mind now Mr. Final decision?"

Henry was a little upset by this. Didn't Ellen understand the severity of the injuries she caused and yet she was still so calloused about it. Taking a

firm breath, Henry faced her. "More than anything, this is what you have to do. I made the decision. I stick by it. Apologize El. You hurt her bad. Really bad. *I want you to apologize now. She deserves that.*"

Ellen bit her bottom lip, stared cold eyes at Henry, pleading eyes at Joe, then shot her middle finger to Robbie who laughed. "Fine." She tossed her hands up. "I'll apologize." She tossed her head back. "You coming?" Taking a calm pause before going in, Ellen opened Bev's door and walked inside.

The moment Henry saw who was in the bed was the moment he wanted to drop over and die. Before he could call out to stop Ellen, before he could do anything, Ellen had opened her mouth.

"Bev." Ellen faced the bed. "I'm told by Henry to apologize. Fine." She cleared her throat. "I'm sorry." She faced Henry. "And Henry?" Without warning, without saying anymore, Ellen revved back her tightly closed fist and squared it away, tossing it harshly and landing it to the side of Henry's face. Shaking her hand, she stormed passed Henry and Joe, and walked up to Robbie. "Take me to Holding." She walked with him. "And don't try anything kinky with those handcuffs." Without looking back, she moved with anger from the clinic.

Joe cringed and squinted when he looked at Henry who held the back of his hand to the corner of his eye. "Gees Henry. Uh . . . I . . ."

"You set me up."

"No." Joe hid his laugh. "I gave you every opportunity to change your mind."

"Thanks Joe. Thanks a lot." Henry closed his eyes tightly.

"I swear I didn't expect that."

"Neither did I." Henry twitched his head. "Can you at least tell me now why she burned Bev. Now that I know who the parties involved are."

"Simple." Joe started to lead Henry down the hall. "Frank radioed her and told her Bev was in his office naked."

"What?" Henry stomped. "That's sucks Joe. She burns Bev because she flashes Frank, but she doesn't go after her at all over me. That just sucks. And now I have a black eye."

"Not to mention Ellen probably is really pissed at you."

"Thanks Joe." Henry stormed ahead.

"Maybe even hates you more."

Henry spun around still holding his eye. "I don't need to hear this!" He stormed off.

"Gonna try to fix this Henry?" Joe picked up his pace to keep up to a near running Henry.

"Yes!" Henry shouted as he flew out the double glass doors of the clinic.

Jolting at the bang of the doors, Joe shook his head and sang his words. "I don't think you can." Shrugging he turned back down the hall and went to find Andrea.

(3)

The day wasn't as bad as it could have been in holding for Ellen. It was spent with lots of paper work that Dean insisted he had to go over in person with her. Ellen figured that was his attempt to keep her in contact with someone. And Dean stayed long each time he came up, laying on the bed with Ellen, talking to her as if they weren't in that cold holding room.

They talked a lot about the virus, but most of all they talked about the microchip that was going to be implanted in his brain . . . first thing the next morning. The whole entire aspect of it frightened Ellen, but she couldn't let on to Dean that it did. So confident Dean came off to her, so comfortable with the fact that he added that needed final touch to secure the possibility of success in the procedure. In fact Dean was more worried about the fact that Johnny was being his eyes up at the mobile instead of Ellen, and how he was going to be able to work efficiently without Ellen by his side.

Ellen's day in holding was filled more with people stopping by then being alone. But that was the day. When evening came, the buzz of stopping by slowed down then finally ceased. The two and a half hours that Ellen had sat alone since the last time she talked to anyone seemed like an eternity.

Maybe that was why when she heard the unlocking of her holding door she became so excited she was like a kid chasing an ice cream truck. She jumped from the bed when the door opened. "Frank!" She screamed out.

Frank barely set down the things he brought with him on the table to the right of the door, before he was pummeled by Ellen who jumped at him and threw her arms and legs around him tightly. "El." So tight he felt Ellen cling to him like she was a monkey.

"Frank." Ellen held on to him. "Take me out of here. Please."

"I can't El."

"Frank, I'm scared in here. It's spooky. Frank."

"El. I can't." He snickered.

"Please, please, please, please, please." She whispered in his ear. "Sneak me out and put me back in the morning. No one will know."

"I can't do that." He peeled her legs from him. "I brought you some things though."

"I don't want things. I want out."

"You're stuck."

"Can you at least beat Henry up for me for doing this?"

"No, I am not beating up Henry."

With a whine, Ellen released her grip. "I can't believe you're taking his side."

"I'm not taking his side. I'm following rules."

"The rules suck." She backed up and sat on the bed.

"Yeah, I agree. But it won't be that bad. Just go to sleep. Look." He walked over to the table. "I brought you clothes and your toothbrush. An old magazine." He lifted it. "And . . ." He grinned. "The blue underwear I like seeing you in." He held them up.

Ellen looked up from the slump stature she held on the bed. Her face brightened up. "You like seeing me in them?"

"Yeah. They're my favorite."

"Frank?" Ellen smiled. "You know you could stay in here with me."

"No I can't."

"Yes you can. I'll . . . I'll model the underwear for you."

"El, for as great an offer as that is. I can't honey."

"Please."

"El."

"Just stay all night with me. No one will know. I'm scared Frank."

"El."

"Frank?" She unbuttoned her shorts. "Look."

"No."

"Frank?" She unzipped them and let the shorts fall, then Ellen stepped out of them. "Look."

"El." Frank covered his eyes and peeked through his fingers.

"All night Frank." Ellen lifted off her shirt.

"El . . ."

"All night." She undid her bra and tossed it. "Alone up here."

Frank grew antsy as he stood there, staring back at the partially opened holding door.

"Frank?" Ellen softened her voice, then in a seductive move she rolled her underwear off of her slowly. "I will make love to you all night long. Turn around Frank and look at me."

Slowly Frank turned around.

"Stay with me and I will make love to you all . . . night . . . long." She backed up to the bed.

"Starting when?"

"Starting right . . ." Ellen sat on the bed then laid on her side on it. "Right now."

"Oh my God." Quickly Frank dropped his shoulder harness, kicked his foot back to close the door, and in his stride to the bed, took off his shirt throwing it.

As Ellen moved to her back and Frank knelt to the bed, Joe yelled through the closed door. "Let's go Frank. Times up."

"Shit." Frank closed his eyes. So close his body was to touching down to Ellen's. "Uh Dad, not now." He felt Ellen's hand slide to his neck and he began to lower his body down.

"Now Frank!" Joe knocked.

With his hands on both sides of Ellen suspending his body up, Frank looked to the door. "I'm staying here Dad."

"No Frank. Move it. Let's go. I know what you're up to."

"You haven't a clue what I'm . . ." Frank looked down at Ellen's naked body just inches from his. "Oh God." He swallowed. " . . . up to."

"Frank!"

"All right!" Frank looked down at Ellen. "I'm sorry." He slid from the bed. "I'm sorry."

"No." She jumped up and was greeted by her clothes that Frank tossed at her. "Don't leave me here."

"El. I can't stay."

"Frank, I swear to God if you walk out that door, you won't ever get this opportunity again."

"Yes I will."

"No you won't."

"Yes I will." Frank faced her and smiled. "And I guarantee it won't be on a rebound from Henry or just because you are scared to be alone."

"Then what will it be because?" Ellen asked tauntingly.

"It'll be because it's finally our time." Frank opened the door slightly. "And you know what El? I think . . . I think for that moment. I wanna wait." He winked with a smile and walked out the door.

"Frank." Ellen called out in a slow whine. "I can't believe you left me here." Stepping into her underwear, then placing on her shirt Ellen heard the grunting and the moaning from the SUT who roomed next to her. "With zombies." With visions in her mind of Harold the SUT crashing through the walls, arms extended ready to chomp flesh. She heard the turning of the lock on her door. "Thank God ." She breathed in relief. "You changed your . . . Henry."

"Hey El." Apprehensively Henry stepped in.

"Get out."

"El, I need to . . ."

"Get out!"

"El."

"No! You did this to me! You made me say I was sorry to that bitch."

"I know." Henry swayed his head. "I'm sorry about that. But look at my eye El. It's black."

"So what? And why are you here? To gloat about you sticking me in here?"

"No!" Henry said defensively. "I was wrong for making you come here. I can't let you out, but I don't want you to be alone."

"I want to be alone."

"You aren't scared?"

"No Henry I'm not. What do you think I am? A big baby? And you are the last person I want here tonight. In fact, I'm looking at this as a break. Even Frank offered to stay, seducing me and all. But I turned him down. And I'd like you to get out."

"I'm not leaving Holding."

"Well you're not staying in here. What are you gonna do? Sleep on the floor outside this room?"

"Yes."

"I don't want you there Henry." Ellen stepped to him. "I don't want you anywhere around. Don't you comprehend this? Your life would be so much easier if you did. You worry about how you hurt me. You worry about making me angry. Well you wouldn't make me these things if you would just stay out of my life. Stay out! And get out of my room. You put me here, leave me here."

"But El . . ."

"Leave." She pointed to the door. "You made your decision. Stick with it. Deal with it. Leave."

Nodding silently and less any words he could say, Henry backed up feeling really bad and he left the Holding room Ellen stayed in.

(4)

Letting out a loud dramatic sound of exhaustion, Frank came down his stairs. "Were they out of control tonight or what?"

"Not really." Dean shrugged sitting on Frank's couch.

"You think Nick will be all right? He felt a little warm."

"He wasn't warm Frank."

"He was fussy."

"He wasn't fussy either." Dean corrected.

"O.K. whiney like Henry."

"I'll give you that."

"How did reading the book go when I was bathing the babies?"

"Horrible." Dean leaned forward toward his knees. He tried to follow the sound of Frank's voice, but only found it made him dizzy because , oddly, Frank was pacing. "Billy corrected me six times."

"He'll do that. You just have to tell him you're doing your own version. Like I do. Man they love when I tell The Three Pigs story and the wolf has ham at the end when he devours them all."

"That's sick."

"That's me."

"Why am I here Frank?" Dean asked.

"Helping me with the kids tonight. I told you Robbie is pulling that extra shift and Henry's sulking at Holding. Did you want something to drink?" Frank indicated to the kitchen. "Oh Dean? I'm pointing."

"No Frank, thanks. No wait. Any coffee left?"

"Yeah."

"I'll have some."

"I'll get it." Frank headed into the kitchen, grabbing a mug for Dean and refreshing his spiked tea for himself.

"No more alcohol Frank." Dean leaned in the archway.

"It's my first drink."

"It's your third." Dean corrected.

"How do you know?" Frank brought his drink to his mouth and handed Dean out his coffee. "Here. Directly in front of you."

"Thanks." Dean reached out and took it. "How did I know you just poured your third drink?" Dean stated. "I'll tell you. Everything Frank. From taste to sound is magnified. Even sex."

"I don't wanna hear that."

"I mean, it's odd. Like sound. It's as if everything is amplified. Not too mention I could smell it. There's nothing else that sounds like a drink being poured from a bottle. And since we use bottles for limited things in Beginnings, my guess was that it was moonshine."

"Good guess."

"Can you not have that drink Frank?"

"Dean . . ."

"Try."

A slight hesitation and Frank put down the glass. "O.K." Frank walked by him.

"Thank you. And one other thing."

"What now?" Frank stopped in his stride toward the livingroom.

"Don't act all annoyed with me Frank, you asked me to come over. And that is the other thing. Why? You didn't need my help. You super Dad. I'm a blind man Frank. Why did you ask me here?"

"To help me with the kids."

"I told you I don't buy that." Dean walked carefully following the sound of Frank's voice.

"All right. Truth?"

"Truth."

Frank sat down on the couch. "Have a seat Dean."

Feeling first incase Frank tried anything funny, Dean found the chair and sat. "Go on."

A deep breath echoed through Frank's fingers as he slid them down across his face. "Where's El?"

"Holding."

"O.K." Frank paused. "O.K."

"Frank?"

"Give me a minute Dean, I'm not good at words." From the coffee table, Frank grabbed a cigarette. He lit it and rubbed his hands together. "How many friends do you have aside from El?"

"Not many."

"Me either."

"Frank, where are you going with this conversation?"

"Dean, give me a fuckin minute or I won't say anything at all." Frank took a hit of his cigarette and coughed. "I was thinking. Tomorrow. First thing tomorrow someone is going to be going into your brain. And like . . . if it was me . . . I uh . . . right now? I wouldn't care how much I knew. The thought of that shit." Frank blew out harshly. "Let's just say, I'd be pretty fuckin worried about it. And uh, wouldn't wanna be alone. Cause my mind would race. I was thinking, you know, with El a prisoner in holding, and me having all the kids, I was thinking that maybe you wouldn't want to be alone. You know, with this brain thing happening tomorrow."

"Frank?" Dean was shocked at what he had just heard. "That is really nice."

"No it isn't."

"Yeah, it is. And you're right. I didn't want to be alone tonight. When you called, I couldn't tell you how many times I started listening to those book tapes that Jason made. But I swear I didn't hear a word he said because I kept thinking about this procedure tomorrow."

"Dean." Frank lowered his voice. "Do you have to do this?"

"You have to be kidding."

"No, hear me out. You're learning how to function, and you are doing it really good and fast. And you just said sex is magnified when you're blind. That alone should be reason enough . . ."

"Frank."

"They're cutting into your brain Dean."

"It's going to be a small site Frank."

"But they're still going into your brain. I saw Planet of the Apes more than once. I read all the notes on what they're gonna do. And even though I see the good side, I keep going back to the bad side. Is it worth it? Is it really? One small slip up and you're done. Is it really worth it?"

"I need my eyes Frank."

"And this community needs you." Frank hit his cigarette hard. "You are not my favorite person in this world Dean. But I'll tell you what, you have been the best nemesis I have ever had. And if you're laying in a bed, some vegetable who can't walk, talk or think. What fun are you gonna be to me? Sure I can shave your head and mess with you for a while. But that will wear off if you aren't fighting back with me."

"Frank." Dean said his name in a chuckle, so astonished at what was being said to him. "More than you know, I appreciate what you are saying to me. And don't think for a second you're thoughts aren't mine. I'm scared Frank. I'm scared that tomorrow when I kiss the kids goodbye that it may

be the last time I kiss them. And I know this community needs me. But I need to see Frank. If I can't do that, I will not be at the full capacity I need to be at. This virus that might hit us, it's only one thing of many that we have to face in the years ahead. I don't want to be frustrated five years from now knowing I could be doing more if I hadn't been afraid to take the risk. And I have to try this, if I fail then I failed trying. And like I said, yeah I'm scared of what could happen to me. But more than that, I am scared that I will never see the faces of my children, their children, Ellen." Dean chuckled. "Even you. What I wouldn't give at this moment Frank to see that clueless expression you get on your face when I get you and you don't know it. That look is priceless to me. But I don't see that anymore."

"You don't get me anymore."

"I haven't tried. You've been too nice."

"Me?" Frank laughed. "Dean I play a blind joke on you at least once a day. At least."

"Yeah, but you know what Frank? Those blind jokes keep me on my toes. Those jokes, whether you want to believe it or not, were your way of teaching me. And you Frank, have been the only one through this whole thing that has made me feel like a normal person. You treated me no less than as if I could see. And I needed that. I learned more from that than I could have ever learned through pity and compassion. You're a good teacher and you're a good father. That's one thing that makes it easier for me when the thought of my kids not having me anymore hits. They'll have you and I know you'll take care of them and raise them to be good people. They may not read all that well . . ." He started to laugh.

"What about the community. I can't cure them."

"Ah." Dean nodded. "But Ellen can. Don't let her know I said this Frank, but she . . . she knows a lot more than she realizes. She knows viruses and cures and procedures. And when push comes to shove, Ellen will draw upon that knowledge."

Frank slowly raised his eyes to Dean as he put out his cigarette. He spoke with confidence. "But she won't have to do that. Will she?"

"No she won't." Dean's words and demeanor fed off that one line of Frank's. "Because tomorrow when I wake up and they put Henry's program into that chip. I will see. I'll look at everyone in that room, and I know everyone will be there because everyone is nosey. I'll look at Ellen. I'll look at you shooting me the finger . . ."

"Hey, how did you know I was planning that?"

"I know you Frank."

"Then I'd better change my course of action."

"No don't." Dean shook his head. "Shoot me the finger. piss me off. Because nothing will change that moment when I see again. And that moment will be worth more than anything. Even magnified sex."

"Well you do know, that will stop."

"What?" Dean asked. "The magnified sex?"

"No. The sex period. Who's gonna sleep with you?"

"Ellen."

"Right." Frank scoffed. "Pity lays."

"Right." Dean chuckled in his own scoff, then went silent. "Frank? If you don't mind. I'd like to hang out for little awhile."

"I don't mind at all." Frank said very seriously, then quickly changed. "But . . . this serious talking shit is gonna stop."

"I'll agree to that."

"How about a little friendly competition."

"Sounds good." Dean agreed.

"Scrabble?"

"Nah, you cheat too bad at that."

"Battleship?"

"You're on."

"I'll get the boards." Frank stood up and started to head toward the kitchen.

"And Frank?" Dean called out to him. "Thanks."

Frank give Dean a nod and a smile, then began to leave again. "Oh and Dean? I'm . . ."

"I know this one Frank. You're smiling."

"Fuck no. I'm flipping you off." Giving yet another unannounced smile, Frank left the room to get the game.

(5)

Loud cries of anguish filled moans came from the room on Ellen's right. They were coupled with the banging, steady and heavy against the wall. One SUT, Harold, did that. So restless he was. Didn't he ever sleep. And if Harold frightened Ellen, that was nothing compared to the SUTs that were de-programmed in the room on her left. How many did Joe have in there? And why were they banging also? The last Ellen recalled, they were silent and immobile. But now they were moving about and into the wall, loudly too. Crashing, steady, thumping, banging. Souls of the damned is what they sounded like.

Ellen, shaking, sat on top of her bed in the dark, unable to go back to the sleep that the SUT noise awakened her from. Her knees were brought close to her chest, her arms held them tight as she rocked back in forth. Feeling that the SUTs knew she was there, sensed her, visions of the movie *Night of the Living Dead* played in her head. That near final scene when suddenly all the walking dead crashed through the walls of the house as if it were paper, played over and over in Ellen's mind. And she feared that scene would happen soon if the SUTs hit those thin walls any harder. She saw them in her mind, going after her, hungry, stopping at nothing.

Reaching her final straw of the scared point, Ellen, wondering why she sat in the dark, reached out for the lamp on the table. With a turn of the switch came a popping sound and the lightbulb flashed out. Darkness again. "Fuckin great."

So afraid, Ellen jumped from that bed and raced to the door. She hesitated before bringing her fist up. "Please. Please." She whispered to herself then knocked. "Henry? Henry are you still out there." There was no answer. "Shit."

"Uh . . . No El. I'm in here."

Startled, Ellen spun to the close voice in the room. "Henry?"

"Hey El." Henry turned on a flashlight. "Don't be mad."

"When did you come in here?"

"While you were sleeping. And please." He stood up. "Please don't ask me to leave."

"Henry . . ."

"No El." He stepped to her. "It's scary. These things are scary. I don't want to be out in that hall by myself."

"They . . . they are pretty frightening." Ellen took a step to him.

"Oh my God and loud too."

"They sound like zombies."

"I hope they're not cannibals."

"Henry." Ellen's eyes widened. "You don't think they'll get in here, do you?"

"I hope not."

"Henry, you should just go home. It's safer there."

"What, and leave you here alone. No way."

"You put me here."

"I didn't mean to. I swear to you El, if they would have told me it was you I wouldn't have done anything. I swear."

Ellen stared at him for a second then grabbed the flash light still in his hand and pointed it to his face. "How's the eye?"

"Sore."

"I'm sorry about punching you. That was wrong."

"No, I deserved it El."

"Henry!"

"What!"

"Hurry shine the flashlight on that wall." Ellen pointed.

Henry spun around. "There?"

"Yeah." Ellen stood behind him. "Shit. Is that wall breaking?"

"Oh my God!"

Ellen shrieked. Henry shrieked and they both charged for the holding door.

"Henry hurry." Ellen saw his fumble with the keys. "Get us out of here."

"I'm hurrying El, it's this . . ." Henry lowered the keys. "Wait a second. The walls are aluminum. We're O.K. in here. It'll just be loud, that's all."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive." Henry walked to the wall and banged his fist. He hit it hard once. The pounding stopped and a single bang came back. Henry hit the wall twice. The same sound, same speed knock, repeated back to them. "We're fine."

"Oh thank God." Ellen grabbed her chest. "I thought they would eat us."

Henry walked back to the door, reaching up the keys.

"What are you doing?"

"Letting you out. This is stupid. You can't stay here."

"No Henry." Ellen pulled his hand away from the lock. "You made the decision. And you have to keep it. As a person who runs this community, for respect, you can't change it. People will never take you serious if you back down." Ellen walked from the door. "It's getting quiet now. I'll stay."

"Then let me stay here with you."

"Henry . . ."

"No El. Listen to me." He walked closer. "I'll sleep on the floor. We don't have to talk. We don't. Just let me stay with you. See, I feel bad. None of what happened today would have ever happened if it wasn't for me. I started the ball rolling."

"You can say that again."

"I started the ball rolling."

Ellen looked up at him and cracked a smile.

"Let me stay El. Your punishment should be my punishment too."

Taking a slow breath, Ellen looked to the floor and to Henry's sleeping bag there. She listened to the slowing thumps around her. "Goodnight Henry." She turned from him and walked over to the bed getting in.

Dropping his shoulders in relief, Henry stood there watching Ellen until she pulled the covers up over her shoulder and closed her eyes. "Goodnight El." He whispered, smiled and returned to his sleeping bag. Feeling better since the SUTs quieted some, but most of all, feeling better because he was in the room with Ellen.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

AUGUST 5

(1)

Ellen didn't even wait for Henry to leave Holding with her. Cleaned up and waiting for that five a.m. 'O.K.', she raced from the room and out of holding as fast as she could to get to the clinic. Knowing Dean was getting his surgery first thing before the hecticness of the clinic day began, Ellen had to get there to see him. She had too.

So dead the clinic was, not a sound was heard. Only the tapping of the soles of Ellen's feet as she ran down the hall toward the operating rooms. She could hear the whispers of Jason, Johnny and Andrea in the OR as they prepared. How much Ellen wanted to be a part of that surgery. To be in there when it all happened. But she couldn't. Not because she wasn't permitted but because in her mind, God forbid something went wrong, she would lose it.

Dean looked as if he were waiting, laying on the cart waiting to be wheeled into the OR. Wearing that fashionable printed hospital gown. So prepared he was, an IV had already been placed in his arm and a small one-inch-square section of his hair had been shaven at the temple.

"Dean." Ellen called his name as she ran in out of breath.

Dean gave a nervous smile. "You made it."

"Of course I did. Had to wait to get freed." She walked over to the cart he lay on.

"I didn't think I'd get to talk to you before I went in there."

"You wouldn't wait?"

"I couldn't El. It's scheduled."

"Dean. It's not like there's this big surgery agenda. This is Beginnings."

"I know." Dean felt Ellen grab his hand. "I'm so glad you're here."

"I had to be here. And I will wait here until I know you're gonna be fine. Then of course I'm heading home to get cleaned up and do my hair. I want to look good for you when you open your eyes and see me."

"El, you can look like you did when you had that flu two years ago and I wouldn't care."

"Gee thanks Dean." She kissed him on the cheek.

"Can you uh wear that little mini skirt I missed?"

"I will wear it Dean." She gripped his hand tighter. "Good luck. I'll pray for you."

"Don't."

"Why?"

"El, we really don't know how good of terms you are on with the big guy."

"Oh you're right.."

"Ellen." Dean softened his voice and brought his other hand down to cover their joined hands. "Can I talk to you for a minute."

"We are."

"No seriously."

"Dean, I don't want to talk seriously."

"I do." He brought her hand to his mouth and kissed it. "El, if something should happen to . . ."

"It's not."

"Listen. If something should happen to me in there. If when I come out, something is wrong with me, brain damage and such. I want you to do something for me."

"What's that Dean?"

Dean reached up and pulled Ellen closer whispering. "I want you to give me two CC's of Tripolithimene."

"Dean . . ."

"Ellen, exactly two CC's. Any less will make things worse. Anymore, if I can feel anything, I'll suffer. Two CC's and I'll go into a deep sleep, then finally respiratory arrest. I have a DNR, they won't revive me."

"Why are you asking this of me?"

"Because you El . . ." Dean clung to her hands speaking so emotionally. "You are the strongest person I know. You are the only one I can trust to help me and stick to their word. Promise me you will. Promise me you not let me live the rest of my life a shell of a man."

Ellen brought her lips to their joined hands. "I promise you." She rubbed her cheek against his knuckles. "But I don't have to worry about keeping that promise because you will be fine. Just fine I know it."

"I feel it."

"So do I."

Andrea walked silently into the room, clearing her throat lightly to get their attention. "Dean. It's time."

Ellen shivered and clenched his hands tighter. "Oh God."

"I'll be fine."

"I know you will." She moved in closer to him when she saw Andrea near. Placing her hands on Dean's face, Ellen brushed her lips lightly to his as she spoke to him. "I love you Dean. I love you very much. Know that. Please, please know that."

"I do. I love you too." Sliding his hand up to the back of her hair, Dean gripped Ellen and pulled him to her kissing her. For the longest time after that kiss, their closed mouths stayed together. Tenseness and fright filled that moment and then Andrea began to wheel Dean away.

Not wanting to let go, Ellen held on until Dean slid from her. "I'll see you in a little bit."

"No El. *I'll* see you."

(2)

How much longer could it possibly take was not the question on Ellen's mind. How much longer would it seem was the one that got her. Watching the dark sky turn bright, feeling tired but not giving in, Ellen paced that waiting room. Joe stayed with her the entire time. Worried also, he tried not to convey it. Like Joe, he was trying to be strength, but Ellen knew him too well.

There wasn't a person who didn't stop in for a progress report, staying longer than they should have. All hoping that they would hear something on their visit in.

Sudden fear struck Ellen when Frank came back to the waiting room telling Ellen that he had gotten a call from Johnny and to summon everyone involved in the project. Within minutes of Frank's arrival, Robbie, Danny, and Henry showed up as well.

Henry cautiously approached Ellen who held onto Frank. "You doing O.K. El?" He asked as he laid his hand on shoulder.

Ellen nodded, tapped his hand and leaned more into Frank who kept his arms around her.

Watching them two, Henry backed up standing by Danny.

"Look." Danny held out his hand to Henry. "Can I possibly bite my nails any lower?"

"Yeah." Henry told him. "They could be as low as mine."

"EW." Danny shuddered. "I'm glad I'm not . . ." He reached up and lightly smacked Henry on the side of the head.

"Ow! What was that for?"

"Quit it." Danny told him

"Quit what?"

"Staring and . . . get that longing look off your face. Ellen doesn't strike me as the type of woman to feel sorry for someone, just annoyed with them."

"You're right. Should I look mean at her."

"Might work. Try it."

"O.K."

Ellen lifted her eyes to Frank. "Frank? Why is Henry giving me dirty looks?"

"I don't know."

"Such an asshole. He's not helping his cause in us talking is he."

"El. I told him to watch what he does. Obviously he doesn't listen."

"Something's happened in there hasn't it Frank." Ellen spoke so scared.

"No."

"Then why did Johnny call you guys?"

"We'll find out." Frank turned her to the door where Andrea, Jason and Johnny walked in. Their solemn faces conveyed more than anything at that moment.

Andrea looked at Johnny then Jason and stepped closer to the awaiting group. "We called all of you here because we thought you may want to know together. We believe . . . we believe that the operation and the implantation was a success." She smiled at the loud sigh of reliefs. "We think the chip was implanted correctly. There were no problems during surgery, Dean handled it well and we're going to keep him sedated for a little bit. We'll start to bring him out of it in eight hours. So there really isn't any reason to stay."

Henry raised his hands. "Should we program the chip while he is sleeping?"

"No." Andrea shook his head. "Let him rest in every aspect. Now if you'll excuse us we have some clean-up." She gave another smile to everyone and left the room

Squeezing Frank, Ellen was so relieved. "Frank, I was so worried."

"I think we all were El."

"Will he wake up all right Frank?"

"I believe he will." Frank hugged her more.

Wanting to interrupt, Henry approached them. "Frank? Can you meet me and Danny at your house in two hours. We're gonna try the first reprogramming."

"Um . . ." Frank looked at his watch, it rested on the arm he had around Ellen. "Sure. I'll bring Robbie."

"Thanks Frank. And I need to talk to you about that . . . staircase."

"What staircase?" Frank asked.

"The one you're helping me build."

"I'm helping you build a staircase?"

"Yes Frank." Henry clenched his jaws and motioned his head to Ellen. "Or did you forget because *you* have *Ellen* in your arms."

"Oh *that* staircase. No, I have the next step planned anyhow."

"Thanks Frank." Henry smiled, looked at Ellen then went back to Danny.

"Frank?" Ellen called his attention as he released the embrace. "Why are you helping Henry build a flight of steps?"

"Fuckin Henry. El, he's brilliant about some things and stupid about the next. Yeah I'm helping him build steps."

"To what?"

"To what?" Frank thought.

"Yeah, there's no new houses being built. Where are you putting stairs?"

"Uh . . . um, well, one of the house is being converted into two apartments and uh . . . El." He breathed out. "It was supposed to be a

surprise, you were getting one of those apartments. See, I blew it. God do you make me fold under pressure.”

“Yeah right Frank. I’ll ask Joe.”

“O.K.” Frank kissed her on the cheek. “And I better go. I’ll check back with you later, or do you need me to walk you.”

“No, go on. I’m going to stay here for just a little bit more.” Waiting for everyone to leave the waiting room and continue on in their day, Ellen sat on the vinyl couch. She planned on staying a little while longer so she could sneak in and see Dean. But while she waited Ellen did something other than wait. Though she promised Dean she wouldn’t. Ellen prayed. She prayed that even if the program failed, she needed Dean to awake as Dean. And praying at that moment--whether she was on good terms with The Big Guy or not--was the best option for comfort Ellen had.

(2)

Crunch. Crunch. Hearing this, Henry annoyed turned his head from the computer screen. *Crunch. Crunch.* Again, Henry turned his head. He ignored it. “O.K. Danny, do you have the Aural piece copulated with the system yet?” His eyes shifted harshly to Robbie’s snickering. “What is so funny about that?”

Robbie snickered again. “What does oral copulation have to do with what you’re doing to this SUT or are you just weird Henry?”

“I said ‘aural’ not ‘oral’ ass.” Breathing out so as not to shout, he looked back at Danny. “Do you?”

“Ready and waiting for insertion.” With Robbie’s laugh, Danny laughed also.

Henry tossed his hands up. “I give up on you . . .” *Crunch. Crunch.* “Robbie! Will you knock off the eating in my ear? Go stand over there if you’re gonna eat those things.”

“Potato chips. Josephine did them. They’re actually . . .”

“I don’t care.” Henry shouted. “This is a very important experiment and you’re munching in my ear.”

Robbie grinned. Robbie opened his mouth wide. Then Robbie, placing that mouth close to Henry’s ear, stuck a chip in his mouth and bit down as loud as he could.

Henry rolled his eyes. “So immature. And where is your brother he’s supposed to be here. I told him two hours.”

Robbie tossed his hands up. “Busy maybe, and I wished he would get here. He’s the only that can calm you down.”

“I don’t need Frank to calm me . . .” Henry sniffed, then sniffed again. “Aw! Did that thing go again.”

Robbie leaned to the SUT and smelled. “Yep.” He ate another chip.

Henry gasped in disgust, holding his nose and speaking nasal. "I wish Frank would hurry."

Danny just shook his head. "Henry, what is wrong with you? And how do you change your kids diaper?"

"He doesn't." Robbie answered.

"You don't?" Danny questioned.

Henry's fingers moved across the computer program. "Not on purpose I don't. And this is finally ready." Standing there waiting he heard it. A 'Psst' came across the room. Henry turned his head to look behind him

Frank stood there. "Psst. Henry." He whispered. "Come here."

Henry looked at Robbie, then Danny. Did Frank not see them there? If he thought his presence in that basement was one big secret, Henry thought of informing Frank on how wrong his thinking was. "Frank."

"Henry." Frank still whispered, waving his hand to him. "Come here."

Tossing his hands up, Henry walked across the room. He noticed Frank stood funny. To the side, not completely facing anyone. "What?"

"I got something for you." Frank pulled him further away.

"This better be important Frank. I want to run this program. And the SUT had another accident. He smells Frank, really bad."

"Get over it. This is important." First looking over his shoulder to his brother, Frank acting so secretive handed something to Henry. "The next step in the Ellen staircase."

Henry looked down to what was placed in his hands. "A video tape?"

"Shh!" Frank told him.

"Frank, how is a video tape of the movie Jerry McGuire the next step?"

"El, loved that movie. Loved it."

"So. I can't ask her over to watch it Frank. That's not a very good step."

"I'm not telling you to ask her over for fuckin diner and a movie Henry. I am giving you this tape to learn."

"To learn?"

"Yep. I cued it up for you. Just so you know I had to go through her stuff for this. You know how insane she gets about that shit. It's ready. Learn that part and that is your next step."

"There's something in this movie that I can do?"

"Yep." Frank nodded with assurance. "And let me tell you. She'll die. Because she loved that movie. She . . ."

"I know, I know. Loved it." Henry smiled. "Thanks Frank. I'll work on it."

"Work on it." Frank pointed. "And now let's work on that SUT."

"O.K. Frank." A little more upbeat but still bothered by the smell, Henry moved with Frank to the table containing the computer. "Hook him up Danny."

"Got it." Pulling the long wires that were attached to it, Danny placed the ear piece in the ear of the SUT. "Ready." Danny saw the SUT struggling at the earpiece. "Robbie. Can you?"

"Yeah." Standing behind the SUT, Robbie held down the reaching arms.

"Uh Henry?" Frank called his attention. "Can I ask you a question. I'm looking at you running that program off a laptop. Laptops are mobile, why is this thing in my basement?"

"Easy. We weren't sure we could load the program properly. We were testing it here incase there was a problem then we could program the SUT from the main computer. But we'll find out. We'll take the laptop to the clinic when we program Dean's chip." Henry hesitated before he pressed the enter button. "We decided on Domestication Program, file 123." Henry shrugged. "Who know what that is as long as he uses a toilet. Fingers crossed and . . ." He pressed the button.

Frank watched the SUT. "I'm not hearing anything." All eyes looked at him. "What?" He crossed his arms and watched the SUT twitch his head.

"Thirty seconds." Henry commented. "Twenty."

Frank slowly pulled out his revolver just incase the SUT went mad. Then he'd shoot it.

"Ten." Henry announced.

Danny tapped from heel to toe nervously watching Robbie hold the twitching SUT.

A slight beeped occurred and Henry turned to the faces in the basement. "Done." He then looked at the SUT.

The SUT opened his eyes looking around, his head lifted and tilted back to Robbie. He cleared his throat and surprisingly in an intelligent style, laced with a British accent, he spoke. "My good man. Is there reason for which you are holding me down?"

Robbie's hands sprang back.

Slowly and with shock, Frank spoke. "What the fuck?"

The SUT brushed off his arms. "Thank you very much." He looked down to his wrist then to Frank. "Sir, I seemed to have misplaced my watch. Could you inform me of the time?"

Frank checked out his watch. "Uh yeah. Almost noon."

"Then there will be only the slightest delay in the afternoon meal. A delay in which I hope you understand." He spoke to Frank.

"Sure I understand." Frank shrugged cluelessly to the disbelieving faces in the room.

"Will your preference be a hot meal sir or a chilled one?"

Frank bobbed his head in thought. "It's summer, chill it. But can you hold that thought." He motioned his head to Robbie and walked to Danny and Henry. "What is going on?" He whispered.

Danny shook his head. "As near as we can figure Domestication means just that he's domesticated. Probably programmed to be a servant of some

sorts. He probably saw you first Frank when he opened his eyes, that's why he asked you for the lunch order."

Henry tossed his hands up. "I'm sorry Frank. We'll wipe out that chip and program him as a soldier since that . . ."

"No." Frank stopped him. "No."

Robbie, Henry and Danny were shocked by this. "No?" They all said.

"No." Frank shook his head. "Let's have some fun with him first. Hell, he said he was going to make us lunch."

Henry's mouth opened in shock. "He smells Frank. I don't want him to make me my lunch."

"Oh." Frank looked at the SUT. "Let's just have some fun with this for an hour or so. My beds all need made anyhow."

Henry looked at Frank in debate. "Two hours Frank, then I reprogram him correctly. But you have to do something about his smell."

"O.K." Excited and clapping his hands once, Frank turned to the SUT. "You, I need to . . ."

"Sir." The SUT interrupted. "I firmly apologize for my rude interruption. But before I facilitate my duties to you, could you possibly point me in the direction of the washing area. Seems I had a bit of a mishap and would like to rectify it and cleanse?"

"Uh . . . sure." Frank nodded. "Robbie can you show him."

"Yeah Frank." Robbie placed his hand under the SUT's arm. "This way."

"Thank you." The SUT stood and walked with Robbie. The second he took the first step up stairs was the second Robbie stopped him.

"I'll lead the way." His voice dropped to a murmur. "I'm not walking behind you."

Frank gave a firm pat to Henry's back. "Good Job. And . . . we get lunch."

"He's disgusting Frank." Henry complained. "I still won't eat his lunch."

"Suit yourself." Frank looked at Danny. "You game?"

"I'll eat his lunch." Danny stated.

"See Henry." Frank pointed. "Robbie!" He called up the steps. "Make sure he washes his hands."

"Got it Frank." Robbie called back down.

"You're not having lunch with us Henry?" Frank asked.

"No. I'll stay here."

"O.K." Frank began to walk away. "Let's go Danny." They moved to the steps. Frank stopped on the third one. "Oh and Henry. Since you're staying down here? You might wanna do something about that chair the SUT was in."

"Frank I . . ." Henry went to argue but Frank just laughed and ran up the steps with Danny. Afraid to, but compelled to, Henry slowly turned his

head to the chair. When he did, immediate salivation and thickening filled his mouth, his stomach tossed and Henry ran to the sink and threw up.

(3)

Danny's hand reached out and grabbed hold of Ellen's as she passed him the folded sheet of paper. "You're trembling."

"I know." She spoke in a whisper as she sat close to him on the waiting room couch. "It's been nine hours. Nothing."

"Patience." Danny raised his eyebrows. "Patience. And we're taking your mind off of things remember?"

"Yes."

"All right." Danny unfolded the piece of paper.

"What does it say?"

"Twenty hours of child care time, five meals." Danny read.

Ellen nodded. "What do you think?"

"Personally? I think the laundry for a month is better."

"But I don't do laundry. The man I live with does."

"Oh." Danny grabbed the next one. "This one sucks. Ten work hours."

"Where are we at right now with the Blake bids?" Ellen asked.

"Still between Jenny and Josephine. And you'd better make up your mind. You promised a winner on Friday."

"I know, I know." Ellen dropped her head. "That cake a week for a year is gonna be hard to pass up."

"True." Danny added. "But will she be around for a year?"

As Ellen's head lifted to comment, Frank walked up. "Frank."

"Nothing yet huh?" Frank reached down and snatched one of the folded papers.

"Hey." Ellen tried to get it back.

"Aw El." Frank shook his head. "I can't believe you are actually taking bids on the guy."

"No Frank." Danny corrected. "You should be saying you can't actually believe women are making bids on Blake."

"Making bids on Blake." His voice interrupting, tossed them all through a loop. Joe stepped into their conversation. "Do not tell me the rumors I have been hearing are true. Ellen, for Christ sake, are you're raffling off a human being?"

"No Joe." Ellen said and pointed to Danny. "He is."

"Yeah right." Joe's voice took scold. "You can not be raffling off a person like they are a new car."

"But Joe, the women love him."

"Let them love him."

"But I own him." Ellen said.

"Ellen! You can not own a human being."

"Ya huh Joe." Ellen folded her arms defensively. "Ask Robbie, he got him for me. My gift."

As Joe rolled the palm of his hand down his face and turned from Ellen he saw Andrea walk in the room.

Andrea waited for the scuffling of feet pummeling to her to cease. "O.K." She held up her hand. "He's up. He's . . ." She grinned brightly. "He's alert. Has a headache but otherwise Dean is fine." Andrea accepted the immediate embrace from Ellen and the applause that filled the room. "However." Silence drew around her. "He is anxiously awaiting his programming. Henry?"

Henry nervously held the lap top. "I'm ready Andrea."

"Good Let's . . ." Before she could finish her sentence, Ellen had bolted passed her. ". . . go."

(5)

Ellen held tightly to Dean's hand as she sat on the edge of the bed. "I'm so glad you're all right."

"Me too." He let out his breath, squeezing her hand tighter. "I am really nervous about this."

"Don't be. How are you feeling?"

"I have a headache. Other wise I'm fine."

"And a little less your hair." She pointed to the bald spot. "You can cover that up." She fiddled with his bangs.

From their quiet moment, Dean raised his head to the abundance of footsteps he heard coming into the room. "Who's all here?"

Ellen looked around. "Everyone. I'll let you see for yourself. How's that?"

"Sounds great."

Henry sat down his lap top on the night stand next to the bed. He let it boot up. "Ready Dean?"

"Yes Henry. Amaze me with your program."

"I believe it will work. Especially the ear piece we'll run it through. We had success this afternoon reprogramming the one SUT. Frank got all his beds made."

Dean drew up an odd look on his face. "What's he mean by that?"

Ellen tapped his hand. "Frank had a butler for an hour when Henry ran the wrong program through. They did get a lunch out of it. Dean? Are you sure you're all right?"

"Fine. I feel tired." He turned his head to Henry's tsk. "What?"

"You shouldn't be tired Dean." Henry pulled the earpiece wire. "You slept a really long time." He placed the earpiece in Dean's ear. "In fact you probably won't sleep tonight."

"It won't be because I'm not tired." Dean adjusted the piece better in his ear. "It'll be because I want to see everything all over again . . . I just heard a beep Henry."

"That was the program loading. In a second I will download it." He placed his hands over Dean's. "Good luck."

"Thanks. El?" Dean called her. "Tell me if I'm facing you. I want to see you first."

Ellen turned his head slightly. "You're facing me."

Henry's finger reached for the button. "Ready to . . ."

"Wait." Frank called out. "If he's gonna see." Frank stepped to the bed. "He needs his glasses." He placed them in Dean's hand. "There."

Dean heard the grumbling, he figured that Frank's interruption of the suspense bothered everyone. "Thanks Frank. Go on Henry."

For as confident as Henry was in his program, he was still filled with nerves. His stomach jumped and fluttered as he watch the screen read 'downloading'. And the fact that he lost all contents of his stomach earlier didn't help.

Dean smiled as he listened. "It sounds really weird, a series of beeping." His face cringed. "My headache is getting worse. Oh God." He grabbed his head and grunted.

"Stop the program." Ellen told Henry. "Stop it now, please Henry stop it now."

"No!" Dean called out. "Let it . . . light." He gasped. "I'm seeing grey instead of black." He smiled widely and grabbed Ellen's hand. "Oh shit, shadows. I see shadows." His words were rapid.

"Fifteen seconds Dean." Henry told him.

"Longest of my life." Dean spoke emotionally and breathy. The anticipation built. His heart pounded. "The shadows are becoming more defined. I have to be ready." He lifted his glass and placed them on. "No." His head dropped. "It's black again. No!" His head dropped as far as it could get when Henry yelled 'finished.'

Ellen reached to his lowered head. "I'm sorry Dean. But . . . try this." She removed his glasses.

When she did, Dean saw the hand that took them off. His heart jumped and a tremble took over his whole body. Shivering in his breathing, he raised his head and he saw Ellen. Focused. Clear and complete focus. "I . . . I see you." He gasped out.

Ellen moved in to embrace him, but Dean stopped her. "Dean."

"No wait, wait." He laid his hand on her face. "I see you. Let me look at you." He moved closer to her, then not being able to help himself shifted his eyes down to the bed and grinned. "You wore the skirt."

"I told you I would." She laid her hand on his.

"Oh El." Dean plopped backwards onto the pillow. "This unbelievable. Henry." He looked at Henry. "Thank you. Thank you for this."

"Thank Danny too." Henry pointed across the room.

Dean looked over. "Oh my God. You look like Henry."

Though the moment was a joyous one, Henry could help but let out an audible sound of annoyance. "See Dean. I should have found a way to enhance the program to eliminate any racial ignorance you have. I'm Japanese, he's Chinese."

Frank rolled his eyes. "Henry . . ."

"Don't." Henry held up his hand. "Don't say 'whatever'. Please."

Dean bit his bottom lip and looked back at Ellen. "I don't understand. Don't my glasses work with this chip? Everything was . . ." He looked down to his glasses. Perfectly cut out pieces of black cloth were secured to the lenses. "Frank." Accepting the shooting of Frank's middle finger with pleasure, Dean returned to Ellen. "I can't help looking at you. I swear, right now . . ." Suddenly something changed in Dean's vision. "Right now I can . . ." A shriek as loud as Frank's body was big, came from Dean and he jolted back.

"What!" Ellen widened her eyes. "I don't look that bad."

"You're . . . you're." Dean screamed again. "Something went wrong! Something went wrong! All I see is . . . a pupil. A big giant pupil. It's all I see." Dean shouted with panic.

Frank stepped closer to the bed figuring he'd add that touch of calmness and explanation needed. "Of course that's what you'll see Dean. She kind of is your student. But Dean . . ." Frank whispered. "She really isn't that big."

Wide eyed, Dean turned his head and screamed again. All he saw was a black fur streak taking up his entire sight. "This isn't right. This isn't right at all. What happened?" Asking in a panic, somehow Dean knew Henry was well aware of the answer for that. The whistling, a subtle whistling came from Henry.

Joe watched Henry back up, hands in his pockets and staring at the ceiling. "Henry!"

"What?" Henry looked around.

Danny knew and Danny walked up to Henry. "You didn't?" He whispered.

"I did."

"No." Danny shook his head. "I told you."

"I know." Henry spoke his answer through his clenched jaws.

"Henry."

"I had too."

"No you didn't. I told you it wouldn't work."

"It did work. Sort of."

Dean heard enough of the murmuring, with the nauseousness feeling in his stomach from his screwed up vision, he demanded his explanation. "What did you do Henry?"

"Well see . . . O.K." Henry cleared his throat. "When I created the program I based the program on information taken from Infantry Soldier

CM 101. Now I copied the optical portion of that program over to mine. Now there are certain numbering sequences. One for clarity. Focus and peripheral. Well . . . last night it dawned on me that you wore glasses and I thought, wow how constricting. So see I . . . enhanced your focus and speed of focus so you wouldn't have to wear glasses anymore. Danny told me to change it back because we couldn't figure out what the numbers meant. I just figured the higher the number the better the vision. And since you're a scientist, I thought you had bad vision, so I upped the numbers really high." Hunching at the 'what's' that were thrown at him, Henry moved back further. "Sorry."

Dean shook his head and rolled his eyes slightly. "Henry, I appreciate the thought. But you're gonna have to wipe out this chip and reprogram it. When I look people in the eye, I want to see more than the eyeball. I can't walk around looking at huge body parts that are otherwise small. Unless of course Frank needs me to boost his ego."

"That isn't very nice Dean." Henry told him. "And you don't have to walk around looking at small things big. According to the infantry soldier program it's in the concentration. You were just concentrating too hard on seeing."

"I'm not now."

"Yeah but you're tense. Relax." Henry told him. "Boy am I glad now I didn't add the target to his sight. Not only would he see big things but a little cross as well."

"Henry you still have to change it." As Dean talked he noticed the largeness of everything started decreasing, with that came the nauseousness. "I have vertigo, I can't walk around having things get large all of the sudden on me, I'll throw up."

"You'll get used to it." Henry said.

"It's easy for you to say. You aren't having that happen to you."

"Oh sure it does Dean, I throw up all the time. You'll get used to it. And the throwing up will cease once you learn how to control the focus. It's all a matter of telling your eyes to focus or not. When you don't concentrate on anything. You won't focus in and therefore, you won't zoom in on anything suddenly. Which I think I put the speed pretty high too. Sorry."

"Great." Dean watched his sight return to normal. "I don't know Henry. How close can I focus in on something?"

"I don't know."

"How far can I see?"

"I don't know that either. I do know I made the numbers really high."

"Dean." Ellen grabbed his hand again. "This could be so useful. Imagine if Henry increased it so much that you obtained the ability to focus close enough to never . . . need . . . a microscope . . . again." She raised her eyebrows. "No smears, no waiting on it to pop up on the screen. Just look at it and bam, you'll know. You could be super scientist."

"And . . ." Danny added. "If you don't like it. We can always erase the program and give you the plain one."

"Not too mention." Henry interjected. "Increase this one when you get use to it."

"Is it right?" Dean asked. "Is it right to mess with nature like that?"

"Dean." Frank's strong voice carried. "You got a fuckin microchip in your brain. How much more of messing with nature do you want. Try it."

Dean nodded slowly. "O.K. It stays. But no one is allowed to make fun if I puke all the time like Henry."

Ellen embraced Dean. "I'm glad. And I'm glad you can see. I'll bring the kids by. O.K."

"Please." Dean smiled.

Andrea hated to do it, but she had to be the doctor. "He needs his rest everyone. We can stop by later and visit. But I need him to relax or else I won't let him out when he thinks he's ready."

Joe agreed. "Let's let the super vison guy alone." He walked up to Andrea and kissed her on the cheek. "Proud of ya. Good job. Dean." Joe reached down and laid his hand on his leg. "Glad everything worked out."

Henry closed up his laptop. "I'll let you be too Dean." He looked at Ellen who didn't look back. "I'll see you later."

"Thanks Henry." Dean smiled at him watching him follow behind Jason, Andrea, Joe and Danny.

With his hand out, Frank laid it on Ellen's shoulder. "You ready?"

"Yes." She tapped his hand. "Get some rest Dean."

"El." Dean stopped her. "Could you just stay for a few extra minutes. I need to be alone with you." He looked at Frank then back to Ellen. "I want to be alone for this moment with you."

"All right." She smiled. "Frank. I'll see you later."

Frank nodded as he stepped toward the door. "Oh Dean? Remember, pity lays."

"Frank." Dean snickered. "Magnified sex."

"Gone."

"But not forgotten."

"Never coming back." Frank shook his head.

"Bet me."

"Blow me." Frank moved toward the door. "El, talk to you later."

Ellen pointed back with her thumb after Frank left. "What was that about?"

"Inside Joke." Dean's hand moved to her leg. "Thanks for staying." His hand crept up and he moved the edge of her skirt looking down. "Ow wow."

"Dean." Ellen pulled her skirt back down.

Dean grinned. "This may definitely have it's advantages."

Shaking her head with a slight smile, Ellen stood up. "Can I came right back. There's something I need to do right now and I should do it now."

"Sure. Go on."

"Thanks." She kissed him on the cheek and walked to the door.
"Dean?"

"Yeah."

"From this moment on. With you're eyes like they are. You can no longer say these . . ." She pulled her shirt out some flashing one breast at him. "Aren't huge." Receiving Dean's laugh at her Ellen walked from the room.

Stepping out of Dean's room into the hall, Ellen thought she'd see him. It hadn't been that long since he walked out. In search of him, Ellen moved down the corridor. As she rounded the bend that would lead to the hall with the main doors. She saw him walking out of that waiting room. "Henry!" She called to him. "Wait."

Still facing the glass doors. Clutching the lap top, Henry closed his eyes briefly, then turned around. "Hi El."

"Henry." Ellen walked up to him, smiled and took a deep breath. "I needed to tell you. Great job."

It was huge, the grin on Henry's face. "Thanks El."

"And . . ." She stepped closer to him. "I'm proud of you." Tip toeing up she softly kissed him on the cheek.

Henry instinctively reached to hold her, one hug, he thought that's what Ellen was going to do. He really thought that. So close to him. As his hand moved to her shoulder and he stepped in, Ellen stepped back.

"Bye Henry." She lifted her hand in a wave, turned and walked down toward where Dean's room was.

Henry watched her, a part of him feeling empty, missing something and a part of him grateful for the moment that just passed. But he wanted more, and he grew a little excited with the thought that he could very easily have that soon. With Ellen's pride over his work, her lack of hatred shown toward him and more than anything, Frank's newest plan, how could Henry go wrong?

(6)

"Dean." Ellen called to him over the radio that night. "How are you?"

"Hanging in there. It's quiet."

Ellen looked around the crowded social hall, people sat, and the chairs were set up in meeting mode. "That's because everyone is here."

"You'll keep the button pressed in won't you?"

"It's already been taped. Nervous?"

"Praying."

"I have faith. The odds are in our favor Dean."

"I know."

"Dean? I'm gonna put the radio down now O.K., Joe just walked in with Andrea."

"Good luck."

"You too." Ellen took the radio and secured the tape over the button. After setting it down on the table, she walked to the wall and stood next to Frank.

As soon as Frank felt Ellen next to him, he pulled her to in front of him and wrapped his arms around her from behind. "It will be fine."

A long breath, a deep breath and Ellen settled into Frank's hold.

In his walk to council table, Henry stopped at Ellen and Frank. "I want to let you two know that with all of my heart, I am with you on this. I feel it too." He nodded and began to walk away.

"Henry." Ellen called him back. "We want you to know, that if none of our children are chosen. You as council are not to blame."

"I needed to hear that." He gave a sad smile to Frank, then another to Ellen. "Good luck." He reached down to Ellen's hand, and gave her a reassuring squeeze. Without saying anymore, Henry walked to the front of the room where Andrea and Joe waited. "Ready."

Joe stood up. "Do you want to do this?"

"No Joe I'd rather not."

"Didn't think so." Looking that the large jug full of folded names, Joe walked outward toward the crowd. How he hated to do it, bring up such a 'down' subject to the happy content faces he gathered in the room. "When my son Robbie was out there last on a sweep." Joe paused. "He got very sick. And for some reason. We don't know why. The Society sent soldiers after him. On the soldiers was, and a lot of you do not know this, was the antiserum to what we believe is the virus the society is going to hit us with." Joe heard the joyful chatter, almost as if they misunderstood him. And they did. "However . . ." Silence drew upon the room. "Despite our best efforts, and we're still trying, we haven't been able to copy it. There were only four doses of the antiserum in the case. One dose was given to Robbie. One dose is still being used for experiments and replication. That leaves two doses. Now our science team." Joe placed his hands in his pockets, his voice dropped slightly. "They're uh . . . they're a pretty good bunch." He winked at Ellen. "And they don't want the antiserum to go to waste. And that is why all of you are here. I didn't tell you ahead of time. No need to build the anxiety. Two people could be made immune to the virus. Two adults. But see, let's look at that." Joe held up a finger. "I'd like to know for sure that I am going to survive this, but . . . hell, I'm fifty-nine years old. How many years do I really have left? Kind of a waste." So sad Joe spoke. "But our young people. They are our future. And since we already know that a few of our people are immune to this thing, then we know, should our children survive and none of us do, then they will be in the best of hands. Therefore it is best that we give the antiserum to the children instead of us adults." It was so quiet in that room a pin could be dropped. "Two

doses for an adult, can be made into four children's doses. And that is what we intend on doing." He walked back over to the table. "In this bowl, I have placed every child from our extreme youngest, which is the child Trish carries that will be born any day, to our oldest child of twelve, Lance. Because of their body size and weight, I could not include our teenagers in this. Now favorable to us, I've been told, is the weight factor. The doses are enough for a combined weight of four hundred pounds. So basic math will tell you. If Debbie's baby born yesterday at nine pounds gets picked, and one of our other babies at twenty pounds is picked, we're pretty much gonna be able to pick another name. Our biggest child weighs in at ninety-three pounds, that is Walt and he's only ten." Joe chuckled. "Big Boy. Andrea will keep track of the weight, and if after four names, we still have ninety-three pounds left. Then we will pick another name. We will pick until we've reached the four hundred pound goal. And for the lives of our youngest, I would like the oldest member of this community to pick. Josephine will you do us the honors?"

Slowly Josephine stood from her chair and walked to the front, her turtle pace heightened the suspense. She stood next to Joe and he brought the large bowl toward her. Her fragile hand, trembling reached inside, digging deep and pulling out the first name. She gave it to Joe.

Henry held tight to his pencil, his head faced the list of children and their weight, but his mind was on Ellen.

So locked Ellen's fingers were in Frank's as they watched Joe unfold the first name.

"We just uh . . . talked about this one. Walt Jefferson." He placed the paper down. "What's our next heaviest Henry?"

Henry cased the list with his finger. "That would be Lance at seventy-six pounds."

"That's our next weight limit. Josephine."

She pulled out another name giving it to Joe.

Joe opened it. "Sabrina McBride." He looked back at Henry. "Henry. Weight?"

"Fifty-three pounds Joe."

Another name, slowly was handed to Joe. Joe opened it, his heart racing as the chances decreased. "Lance Carr."

If Ellen could back her body into Frank anymore she would have. "I can't take this, only one more."

"No." He whispered in her ear. "They'll pick another. We have a chance."

Joe took the fourth sheet of paper, his fingers shook as he opened it wanting so bad to see the last name Slagel or Hayes on there. A breath escaped him. A breath of disappointment. "Jimmy Reese."

Henry looked up from his list. "Fifty-five pounds Joe."

Joe quickly turned to Andrea. "I know we can do one more. Right? That doesn't come nearly to four hundred pounds."

Andrea nodded then folded her hands. "Do another Joe."

Joe handed the bowl to Josephine.

Josephine pulled out a slip looking at the concern on Joe's face. "I'm trying for ya Joey." She winked at Joe.

Joe opened the name. He quickly spun to Andrea who had her eyes closed. He said the name slowly. "Katie . . . Winters."

Andrea's eyes closed tighter, silently at that instant she thanked God.

Henry reached over his hand to Andrea, squeezing it. "Forty-eight pounds Joe."

Through the deafening silence, Joe looked at Andrea with pleading eyes. "Tell me."

"One more." Andrea grabbed her pencil again.

With everything he had, Joe prayed as he handed out the bowl to Josephine.

Josephine reached in.

On his hospital bed, knees brought up to him, Dean pressed his forehead to that radio. He listened to the quiet of the hall as he slightly rocked back and forth. "Please dear God. Please let it be one of mine."

Ellen turned around and buried her face into Frank's chest. "Please." She whispered. "Please." She could feel the tense hold Frank had on her. He held her for strength as much as she held him.

"Last one." Joe took a second, closing his eyes as he unfolded the paper. He opened them to read the name and quickly shut them laying the sheet of paper on the table. "Virginia Ryan." With a dropped head. He raised his eyes to Andrea.

Andrea's head swayed slowly as she mouthed the words 'I'm so sorry' to Joe.

Facing Josephine, Joe placed his lips to her forehead. "Thank you." He refaced the room. "We'll need these six children at the clinic tomorrow morning. They'll have to stay a couple days so our medical team can monitor the side effects."

Dean tossed the radio harshly on the bed next to him, so angry he was. "Why did I mention it. I why didn't I just give it to them. Damn it." Against his bent knees, he laid his head.

Ellen held back her tears, her shaking body gave hint that she wanted to break down. "I thought for sure Frank. I really thought for sure."

"I did too. Let's just . . . Let's just go home."

"Wait!" Henry stood up shouting out as the people started to get up. "Joe, Virginia is a baby. That only totals three-hundred and twenty-two pounds. Our next largest kid is Marcus at sixty-five. That gives an eight pound leeway for dosages. Pull another name Joe. Pull another name."

Grabbing the bowl in gratefulness, Joe carried it to Josephine who was getting ready to sit. "One more Josephine."

Ellen didn't want to stay, she just wanted to leave with Frank, stop by the clinic to see Dean and go home. But she did stay, turning around, facing the front and settling into Frank's arms.

Joe took that final name into his hand and set down the name bowl. This would be it, this had to be the last name. There wasn't a child that weighed eight pounds or under. When he opened the sheet, a thickening filled Joe's throat, his heart pounded and his breath escaped him. Immediately he looked to Ellen and said the name in such relief. "Billy Hayes."

Ellen's head dropped and her eyes filled with tears, her shoulders bounced as she brought Frank's hands from her waist to her mouth. So much emotion and fright filled that little time where she wanted with everything to hear one of her children's names. And when she did, her body gave way and she could barely stand.

Frank held her up, he planted his lips to the back of her head and closed his eyes tightly.

Henry's hands dropped the pen he held and he lowered his face into his hands. As his joined hands ran down the bridge of his nose, he lifted his eyes to look out to Ellen who was crying.

Dean laid back on the bed, his arm covered his forehead. Though he was filled with happiness that Billy's name was chosen, Dean was also filled with sadness at the thought of the struggle his other three children may have to face.

As in any game of chance, there were more losers then there were winners in that room. And what made it more painful was the fact that those who lost were the innocents of the world, the children. And worse that any other raffle or lottery where the loser fails to get the prize that fate hands them, in this pull-of-a-name, the loser failed to get the chance of life that fate should so much be wanting to hand them.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

AUGUST 7

(1)

Joe followed the beeping sound. It had to be close. First checking out the connecting waiting room next to his office, the sound was louder there, but not from there. "Where in the world?" Joe walked through his office and into the little receiving examining room, it didn't come from there either. Needing to find out, for curiosity purposes and for annoyance purposes, Joe left his office and sought it out. It was a high squealing beep, changing constantly in frequency and in speed. It grew louder the closer he came to the empty office next to his. The door was a jar when he walked in. Henry and Danny stood there, the internal portion of a speaker laid on the empty desk.

"Try it again." Henry told Danny. The beeping changed. "Good. Let's go with that one."

"I like it better too." Danny looked at the control in his hand. "Let's go." As he spun from the desk he saw Joe standing in the door. "Joe."

"What is that noise?" Joe asked.

Henry stepped forward. "Oh we're just using this office as a test base. We have to still clear out that storage room near security monitoring."

"Test base for what?" Joe questioned.

"The tracking." Henry answered. "We're putting the first test transmitter up behind the back gate. We placed the small satellite on the roof here." Henry pointed up. "And we're going to see if we pick up the signal. We have the receiver hooked up to the speaker. Which is basically how it will work in the tracking room when it's done. The only difference being, Danny still has to make the monitor so we can get a visual on how many if any are coming, not just an audio. But today we're just testing the system using the audio. Have I lost you?"

"Just tell me this." Joe said. "That damn speaker isn't going to be in this office all the time right?"

"No." Danny shook his head. "Just for today. If we get a successful test, I'll finish with the monitor, then finish all the transmitters for the other areas."

"Good." Joe nodded. "Just wanna be sure. I don't want to be sitting in my office working and having that thing go off every time a deer goes by it." Joe headed towards the door again. "O.K., good luck out there."

After Joe had left, Danny looked at Henry. "A deer?"

"I didn't think of that."

"Neither did I."

"That is really going to be annoying to the monitor."

"Tell me about it." Danny shrugged. "Oh well, it's not us." He grabbed the control. "Shall we."

"Let's go." Leaving the speaker hooked up, Henry grabbed his bag and followed Danny out.

(2)

"Here." Frank handed Dean the bucket that he gladly took.

Holding and stepping away from Frank on the roof of the Utility building, Dean up heaved once into the bucket. "God." He caught his breath. "I am so sick."

"It'll pass."

"It's awful."

"I told you not to eat when I worked with you on this, didn't I?"

"Yeah, it's like I'm on an amusement park ride that I can't get off." Dean began to stand up straight from his hung over his knees position. "All right. I'm ready."

Frank brought is binoculars up. "Danny and Henry are out there placing the new tracking system up. Spot them."

Dean looked out. "Where?"

"Straight on past the back gate."

Taking a deep breath, Dean focused, watching the tress that were so far away get closer and closer. As he scanned the wooded area for the mechanical two, watching things get bigger and bigger, all he could hear was the theme to the Six Million Dollar man. *Steve Austin, a man barely alive. We can rebuild him, make him stronger. Do-do-do . . .* "Frank! Will you knock it off!"

Laughing, Frank moved back from Dean's ear where he whispered. "Sorry. It was funny. Do you see them?"

"Yeah, I spot them."

"What are they doing?"

"Danny is climbing up the tree. Henry is . . ." Dean looked for a closer shot of Henry. "Scratching his head. But he's . . . hold on." Dean moved from the edge, reached for his bucket, but stopped himself before he threw up again. He raised his head back up. "All right it looks like . . . oh my God."

"What?" Frank lifted the binoculars.

"Savages."

"Where?" Frank searched.

"Beyond them, sneaking in. Shit Frank."

"How many?"

"Eight, ten. Shit."

"Stay here. Keep watch!" Frank threw his headset on, and in a run, picked up the rope they used to climb up, leaped off the roof of the utility building, repelling once off the side with a huge 'bang' and dropping to the ground below. He landed on his feet, hands meeting the ground shortly after, picking himself up still running, Frank jumped on his motorcycle.

"Security. Down the back gate . . . Robbie." He called as he rode. "Robbie come in. We got savages headed in the back gate region, S-14 by Danny and Henry."

"Copy Frank. Tower hasn't said anything. They didn't spot them."

"Yeah but Dean did. Suit up, meet me there. I'm heading out. Bring my rifle." Revving the engine and lifting to one wheel as he did, he sped to the back gate. When he got there he jumped off, hoped the perimeter was down and unlocked the gate.

Henry shielded his eyes from the peeking sun as he looked up to Danny who was in the tree. "How's it going?"

"Good."

"Is it securing?"

"Just fine." Danny, rope around his waist, also braced himself against the 'V' in the branch.

"How's it going to hold up if it rains or snows."

"Henry if you would have paid attention to me last night, I explained that." Danny grunted making a turn of his tool. "But your mind was elsewhere." Danny let out another loud grunt.

"Are you having trouble with that?" He shrugged. "Anyway, I wanted to watch the movie. I told you that." Henry's head turned to the sound of static on the radio, he lifted it up. "Yeah Frank?"

"Henry pull back. Get out of there."

"What was that Frank? Your motorcycle is too loud."

"Henry!" Frank yelled as he drove out to them. "Savages are coming your way. Pull back!"

He heard Frank's warning, and with that he knew he had to deliver his own. "Danny! We have to . . ." As he raised his head to call his co-worker he watched, still attached to the rope, Danny's body sailed downwards in a drop, backwards from the tree. Arms extended out, head first straight to Henry. With a spring action, the rope reached it's end and Danny stopped in a snap, swinging outward to Henry and heading back in to the tree.

Henry tried to reach out quickly, stopping Danny from hitting into the tree again. As he grabbed hold of him, moving with the force of Danny's swinging body, he saw the arrow protruding from his gut. "Oh my God." Henry backed up, watching the blood that flowed from Danny's stomach wound run quickly over his face. "Frank . . ." Henry spoke into the radio. "I need help." He turned to make a run for it and . . . *Slam!* . . . something, Henry didn't know what, bolted him in the side of the face so hard he spun around face forward and rammed into the tree. Seeing the blurriness of the bark that his hands could feel the coarseness of, Henry tried to straighten his weakened legs, ignoring any pain, and that was when the hooting and the screaming of the savages began. He didn't even have time to run for it

when he felt himself being grabbed harshly by more than one and thrown with a vengeance, face first, to the ground.

Quickly trying to lift himself from his stomach, Henry saw the multitudes of feet that surrounded him. He barely made it to his knees when another hit struck him in the back of the neck, sending him crashing back down. It was at that moment, the loud hollering around him, when the most frightening turn to Henry occurred. A foot slammed down to the back of his neck, holding his face pressed to the ground. Another foot stood on his arms, and another planted firmly between his shoulder blades, all while he felt the horrifying feeling of them pulling at him, tugging at him, and ripping at his clothes. "No!" Henry grunted out trying to scream with everything he had, trying to fight despite the hits, kicks and pulling at his jeans.

He felt the air hit the bareness of his lower body, and hands that gripped to his hips. Just as he felt himself being pulled back, he heard the sound of gunfire. Not rapid and fast, but steady and selective. And with that gunfire Henry felt the heaviness of a body fall hard upon his back, and the warmth of the blood that flowed from the head of that body, across Henry's face. Screaming as he did, Henry flipped himself over flinging the man from him. Pulling up his clothes Henry saw a spear plunging for him, he rolled again, out of the spear's way and swung out his legs taking the savage to the ground. Henry picked himself up then dove on him, beating the savage without control as if Henry was a savage himself. And then finally, in a kneel above the savage, Henry grabbed the spear that protruded from the ground, lifted it high, and rammed it with speed center the savage's throat. Out of breath, Henry heard no more gunfire. He stood up, looking around. Four savages lay dead on the ground. Where were the rest of them? Where was Frank?

His answer came with a mighty angry roar, followed first by the vision of a dead savage being thrown through the trees and landing with a roll stopping at Henry's feet. His neck, broken so severely, it was nearly severed from his body. And then Frank emerged. One savage on his back, two others fighting to take him down. Seeing this, Henry ran to the body of the savage he had just killed, pulled the spear from his throat and raced Frank's way.

Frank let out a painful enraged scream as he felt the teeth of the savage on his back, sear into his skin between his shoulder and his neck. Engulfed with outrage, Frank reached back, grabbing the hair of the savage, gripping his head, and snatching him so harshly from the bite, that the crack of the savage's neck rang out as Frank flipped him over his shoulder and used him like a baseball bat, swinging his lifeless body out and knocking over a savage that dove at him.

Upon Henry's run to Frank, he saw Frank's revolver laying on the ground. "Frank!" He called out, picking it up as he raced with the spear to

the savage Frank had just knocked to the ground. Spearing the downed savage through the throat, Henry tossed Frank his revolver.

Frank caught it, clicked back the hammer, spun around and fired one single deadly shot into the head of the last remaining savage who was inches from him holding a spear. Frank lowered his weapon slowly, breathing heavy and staring at the last savage he had killed. "Where the fuck is Robbie?" Shaking his head, Frank walked to the tree where Danny hung from. He saw as the blood still flowed freely from the stomach wound. Frank lifted Danny's upper body bracing it against his shoulder and feeling for a pulse. "O.K." Frank whispered. "You're alive." He reached down and pulled out his knife that was strapped to his thigh. With one single hard swing, he cut the rope from which Danny was attached, caught Danny's falling body and lowered him to the ground. As he laid him down, he heard the sound of a jeep's engine. "It's about time." Frank stood up and saw Robbie running through the trees. "It's about time you asshole! Where the fuck have you been!"

"Fuck you Frank." Robbie dropped down to Danny. "I had to get a jeep. Dean said Danny was hit." Robbie pulled out a cloth and laid it on Danny's stomach.

"So I take it they're ready at the clinic."

"Getting there." Robbie looked up. "So how many did you take out?"

"There were ten, I got eight."

Robbie fluttered his lips. "So why'd you need me? Frank are you losing your touch?"

Waving his hand off at his brother, Frank spun around to see Henry sitting on the ground. His knees brought close to his chest and his arms wrapped tightly round them as his head was down. "I'll be right back."

Robbie looked up as he prepared to lift Danny. "Hurry up Frank. We have to get Danny in."

"I will." Frank walked slowly over to Henry. "Hey. You O.K.?"

Henry lifted his head, the gash in his face bled and smeared across his cheek. "You saved my life again Frank."

"Yeah well." Frank sniffed and wiped the blood from his nose with the back of his hand, trying to joke it off. "It's my job you know."

Henry closed his eyes. "Do you know how close . . . how close I came to being . . ."

"Henry." Frank stepped to him, squatting down and extending out his hand. "Let's go buddy. It's all right."

Henry looked at Frank's bloodied and dirty hand, and he reached his own hand out, gripping to Frank's in support and gratefulness.

Frank stood up first then in a pull brought Henry to his feet. Seeing how down Henry was, Frank placed his hands on Henry's shoulder. "Let's get that face taken care of."

"Thanks Frank. I can't thank you enough."

"You being alive is thanks enough." He walked with Henry to the jeep.

Henry felt and heard Frank stop abruptly. "What's wrong?"

Frank looked up at the tree before him. "Hey. Did you guys finish getting that tracking thing up there?"

(3)

"Get me three pints of 'A' positive blood in OR-3 and bring me two CC's of the antitoxin STAT!" Dean screamed out to Patrick as he wheeled the empty cart down the corridor, with Ellen's help, to the front doors of the clinic. "Ellen where's Andrea."

"She still in that knee surgery. Jason is in the OR now prepping it. Tell me Dean, tell me all three of them are O.K."

Dean stopped wheeling the cart at the door. "I can't tell you that."

"Dean." Patrick ran down the hall. "The antitoxin." He tossed it on the cart. "Jason's having trouble with the vital monitors in that room."

Dean shook his head peering out the door. "Shit, that has the tricky switch . . . El, could you?"

"Be right back." She took off running with Patrick down the hall.

The second she left was the second the jeep pulled up. Grabbing the syringe, he held the door open for Frank and Robbie who carried Danny in. "Lay him on the cart." He looked at Henry who followed behind. "You O.K.?" Dean gave a pat to Henry's cheek then ran to Danny. "Frank. Good job." Dean lifted his stethoscope to his ears and placed the diaphragm to Danny's chest. "Heartbeats good." He dropped the stethoscope, flicked the bubbles from the syringe and immediately injected it into Danny's thigh. As he raised his eyebrows, he saw the blood on Frank's white tee shirt. "Yours?"

"Yeah, fuckin savage bit me."

"Damn it Frank." Dean spoke in a snap.

"What, I can't help it."

"No. You should have radioed me about that. You have to be given an antitoxin too."

"Fuck that. I'm fine."

"No." Dean, with Robbie's help began to move Danny toward the OR. "Both of you." He yelled to Henry and Frank. "Frank, room three, Henry, exam room two. I'll send Ellen and Patrick to take care of you."

"Dean." Henry ran up after him. "I know you saw what happened from that roof. Does Ellen know?"

"Henry I have to . . ."

"Dean don't tell her if she doesn't O.K.? Please don't tell her what almost happened."

Dean paused in his wheeling of the cart to look at Henry. "I won't. Just get to the examining room now."

"Thanks Dean."

"Oh my God!" Ellen cried out as she came from the OR to see Dean and Robbie approaching with Danny. "Is he gonna be all right?"

"I think." Dean said pushing Danny inside then rushing to the sink area in the adjoining room. He pressed the intercom to the OR. "Jason, hook him up and start his IV. Get the sutures ready we have to do this fast." He raced over to the sink, Ellen behind him and Patrick washing up. "Both of you." He spoke to them, "I need you at the examining rooms. Jason and I can handle this. I got a bite in room three and a Frank-scar gash in room two."

Ellen backed to the door. "I'll take the gash. No way am I touching the bite." She shuddered. "Savage spit. Good luck Dean." She took off.

Patrick headed out also. "Guess I have the bite."

"Two cc's of antitoxin Patrick, followed by the Kenyan. Got it?"

"Got it." Pushing the doors open with his back, Patrick left the washing area.

Flinging the excess water from his hands, Dean dried them, ran to the OR, grabbed a mask, tied it on, then grabbed his gloves. "Ready?" He asked Jason.

"Ready. We filling him back up with blood. Vitals are good. Everything is ready."

"Get the suction prepared." Dean stood above the only exposed part of Danny's body, the arrow. "God I hate arrows."

"Kind of barbaric."

"So is most of the world." Dean grasped the arrow. "Ready . . ." He took a breath. "Now." As soon as he pulled out the arrow, blood shot up as if it were a fountain. "We have bleeder."

"Looks like it may have punctured the Pump Artery in the spleen."

"Missing any vital internal organs thank God. More suction." Dean peered into the wound vicing it open, then reaching into Danny's stomach with an arterial clamp. "Little more Jason."

"Almost there."

"Getting a clear view and . . . Got it." Dean clamped the artery and the shooting bleeding stopped. "We're gonna need more than three pints."

"Nah." Jason shook his head. "Notice the slight clotting around the artery. The arrow helped there."

"I see that." Dean grabbed the sutures. "Oh Damn it."

"What?"

"We have a splinter, posterior stomach region."

"Where?" Jason looked in.

Dean, using his hand maneuvered the stomach. "There. See it."

"No."

"Right . . . never mind, as soon as I suture this, hand me the tweezers."

"Dean?"

"Yeah."

"Good thing you have them new and improved eyes huh? We're talking major infection if you didn't see that."

Dean smiled as he worked. "Hey, I guess you're right."

(5)

"So I'm taking it . . ." Ellen injected the needle which contained a numbing agent, into Henry's cheek. "I'm taking it that Frank was bit."

Henry nodded.

"What doesn't happen to that man, I'm telling you." She wiped the blood from Henry's cheek. "This isn't that bad Henry, really, a few stitches and I promise to do better than I did on Frank's."

"Thanks El." Henry said so down.

"I'm getting quite good at this." She started to stitch. "Dean taught me well." Her fingers probed his face. "This cheek doesn't feel broken." She continued stitching. "Anyhow, when I'm done it will look a lot worse then it is. I filled it with the numbing agent." She pulled the thread. "Got that high cheekbone look the models in the old world loved. Too bad it's only one." Ellen chuckled. "I'm not hurting you am I?"

"No."

"Maybe I should have asked that before I started stitching huh." She pulled and stitched, tucked and cut. "Almost done Henry." She made her last stitch. "Bandage or no bandage."

"None."

"Wanna display that macho, rugged hero look huh?"

"Yeah." As soon as Henry knew she had finished he lowered his head.

Ellen set her supplies aside and grabbed the cloth from the basin filled with warm water. Using her index finger she lifted Henry's chin. "Let me just wipe you off." She noticed as she wiped his face clean, she wasn't wiping any of the sadness there. "Henry?" She softened her voice. "Are you all right?"

So close she was to him. So much he needed her at that second. Seeing her hand on his face, Henry reached up and grabbed it, squeezing it tight. "El."

"What is it Henry?" She cased her eyes across his face then to his eyes. "What's wrong?"

Henry swallowed, still looking at her. "Nothing." He released her hand and shook his head. "It . . . it was just a bad time out there."

"You're very lucky Henry. Look at Danny. Things could have been worse."

"Yeah, I guess you're right." Henry slid off the table. "I'm done right?"

"You're finished."

"Thanks." Henry started walking out, stopped and turned to face her. "El? Can I just ask one favor of you?"

"What is it?"

"Just . . . just for a second. Could you . . . could you just . . ." Before Henry could get out the words, the door to the examining room opened and in came Frank. The finish to his question, 'hold me' was buried with Frank's loud 'hey' when he walked into the room.

Ellen grinned wide. "There he is." She held out her hand. "The man who deserves the Mighty Mouse theme song." She ran to him and threw her arms around him. "*And* who deserves to be hugged."

"Whoa." Frank hugged her back lifting her from her feet and swinging her around. "This is the best part. Now can you make me my own Frank doll?"

"You bet." She kissed him on the cheek. "I'm proud of you."

"Will it get me laid."

"No."

"Right." Frank set her down. "Anyhow I came to see how Henry is doing."

Ellen looked around Frank. "He's . . . he's gone." She walked to the door. "What happened out there Frank?"

"Henry was . . ." Quickly Frank's mind went to Henry and Dean in the hall. "Henry was jumped by a bunch of them. He had a hard time, but . . . he did good."

"Of course." Ellen winked at him. "Look who taught him." She put her arms around him again.

Frank looked back at the door, he would enjoy the moment of Ellen's gratitude, but not for long. He'd have to find Henry and do what he came to the examining room to do, check on his friend and see if he was all right.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

(1)

"And . . ." Jenny spoke so chipper before her group of women in her home. A group of women less Bev. "Agriculture has promised us ten chickens for our gala." She nodded so happy at the applause. "Not that we can feed a hundred people with ten chickens, but if we cook them up and cut them up we can certainly incorporate it into that pasta dish Andrea will make." She checked over her notes. "I spoke to everyone that I wanted to speak to and everyone looks like they're coming. Not like they have anything else to do. And Trish?"

Trish lifted her head and wiped the ketchup dip from her mouth. "Yes?"

"If you don't have that baby in the next few days, you won't be able to attend, so concentrate. Concentrate hard."

"O.K." Trish said chipper. "I will."

"And last before we head off to the social hall for our monthly game of, 'Dart the big fart' Ellen has her announcement to make."

Ellen stood up and the room went silent. "Thank you Jenny." She cleared her throat. "First of all, I want to say all of you your bids were especially great. Danny and I had a hard time with them. Which by the way, Danny is doing splendid. Splendid enough to have helped me with my final decision, which I bring to you. I spoke to Blake prior to coming here. He is excited about the change of ownership. I have the papers completely drawn up, Andrea is council so she can officiate them. And now . . ." So dramatic Ellen spoke. "With the bid . . . drum roll please." She rolled her tongue in a drum roll then laughed. "With a bid of eight consecutive Friday's laced with her famous Beginnings pizza, coupled with the clincher of one month of filing, filling out and routing of my stupid reports, Blake is now the property of . . . Jenny Matoose."

Jenny screamed with excitement. Her fist clenched and she jumped up and down. "I got him I got him. Yes. Yes. Yes. I got him." She ran around in circles. "Oh my God. Get those papers Andrea before Ellen changes her mind." She began to sing. "I got him. I got him. Oh-oh I got him." Suddenly her excitement stopped and she stood still. "Uh-oh, how am I gonna tell John?"

(2)

"O.K. Frank." Henry barreled down the steps. "Nick is tucked away, asleep in his crib."

"Thanks Henry." Frank brought his glass to his lips. "Everyone else?"

"Out."

"Excellent . . . E-5."

"Miss." Dean looked up from his Battleship game on the floor.

"It is not." Frank yelled.

"It is too."

"No it isn't, quit cheating."

"I don't cheat Frank." Dean argued.

"Yes you do, and that was a hit."

"How do you know?"

"When you went to the bathroom I peeked. So move it back."

"Start all over?"

"Sounds good." As Frank moved his pieces he saw Henry standing at the coffee table's edge. "You doin it now?" he asked Henry.

"Yep. And why are you hanging out with Frank Dean. EL will get pissed."

"I'm bored, What else am I gonna do. I have another hour before I have to go check on Danny again."

"Man." Henry, hair perfect and wearing a long white button down shirt and black pants pulled out a tie from his back pocket. "Are you getting dependant on Frank."

"I am not."

"Yes you are."

"I am . . ." Dean saw Henry tying his tie. "What are you doing Henry. And why do you look so dressed up." Dean stood up sniffing. "And are you wearing cologne?"

"Yes." Henry moved from Dean. "Yes and I have to hurry."

"For what?" Dean asked.

"Tonight, I'm getting Ellen back. Frank gave me a plan."

Dean started to laugh. "A Frank plan. Oh shit." He moved to the chair.

"No don't laugh Dean. It's good. And I'd better go get her."

"She's at her meeting Henry."

"That's where it has to be done." Henry walked to the door. "Wish me luck Frank."

"Good luck Henry. Are you sure you know what to do."

"I watched it twenty times. I'm confident." Smiling, Henry walked out pulling the door closed.

"Frank?" Dean called Frank's attention. "What do you have him doing?"

"This is good." Frank smiled. "I gave him one of Ellen's favorite movies and he's going to recreate a scene in it."

"Uh-ha." Dean nodded. "Which one, and which scene."

"Jerry McGuire. And the scene where that little guy walks into his wife's meeting and he gives her a heart wrenching speech. Good huh. Sappy." Frank grabbed his glass.

"Good suggestion Frank. But there's only on thing wrong with it."

"What's that?"

"Ellen hated that movie."

"No she did not." Frank argued.

"Yes she did."

"Dean! I know!"

"No you don't. *I* know. She hated it, called it stupid and made fun of it."

"Dean." Frank shook his head. "Are you forgetting that one night." Frank explained as if he were explaining to a child. "We called it movie night. The whole entire community watched it and she wanted it to be shown over and over again. She caused a big stink and pressed play, making everyone watch it instead of the second one. Remember? Huh?"

"Yeah I remember that night Frank, but that wasn't the movie. It was 'What about Bob' not Jerry McGuire."

"Oh yeah." Frank sat back. "She did hate that come to think of it. You're right." Frank shrugged. "Oh well."

"Frank!" Dean yelled. "Do you realize you just sent Henry to Ellen to recreate a scene from a movie she hated. Stop him."

"Nah." Frank waved his hand. "If El hated that movie, she won't remember the scene. It's good idea, maybe it will still work."

"I doubt it."

"Dean. Are you gonna bitch or are you gonna set your ships up?" Frank leaned into the game.

"Play." Dean grabbed his board. "And no more cheating Frank. I can see now."

"Thank God for that. I was just on the brink of insanity with that 'I'm blind you know' shit you handed out."

Dean shook his head. "You have no compassion do you?"

"Not toward you."

"Start the game." Dean angled his board just right, and in doing so, he finally felt like he was getting even when he watched every place Frank put his ships.

(3)

It was probably one of the most stupidest jokes ever created but the women laughed at it hysterically as they cleaned up the livingroom of Jenny's house so as to go the hall.

Ellen laughed loudly, trying not to let on that while she laughed her mind raced to figure out what the punch line meant. She carried the potato chip with ketchup dip plate into the kitchen

Jenny stood up, ready to tell another. "O.K. here's another. What do you get when you cross a gorilla with a . . ." The lost smiles on their faces flagged Jenny. "What's wrong? Did all of you hear this one before? Ladies

it's really not . . ." She looked to the pointing fingers, turning around and seeing Henry standing in her livingroom. "Henry!" She shouted at him.

Soon Henry was engulfed with screams of his name, shouting and muttered together rambling he couldn't understand. Still he stayed calm.

"Henry!" Jenny scolded. "Get out! This is a woman's meeting. You are not a woman and we really don't like you anymore."

"And I don't like any of you very much at this moment either. But I don't care, yell at me, whatever, but I came to see . . . Ellen." He saw her walk in from the kitchen. How perfect. So like the movie. "El."

"Henry, what are you doing here?"

"I came to tell you something." Henry stepped closer, the women went silent. "I need to tell you something."

"Henry . . ."

"El, listen to me." Henry held his hand out. "I . . . I messed up. I messed up bad. And it hit me the other day how far apart we got. I can't have that El, I don't want that." He spoke soft and with emotions. "The other day, I helped give a blind man back his sight. And it meant nothing El, nothing without . . ."

"Stop."

Henry's heart fluttered. This was it. This was the part where Ellen would say, 'you had me at hello'. "Yeah El?"

"Where do you get off?"

"What?"

"Where do you get off, coming in here, plagiarizing a scene from a movie. Let alone I movie I despised Henry."

"You hated Jerry McGuire? But Frank said . . ."

"Frank?" Ellen laughed. "Quit listening to Frank Henry. Quit it. Just quit it. This whole act, this whole thing will not work. I'm not a sap and I certainly am not that broad from that movie. I don't give a shit what you have to say to me. It's over. Now if you'll excuse me."

"No." Henry charged to her stopping her, laying his hands on her arms. "O.K., maybe it was a really stupid idea to do this. But a part of it isn't. I need you El." Henry's head dropped. "I need you so much. Today, after what happened. I needed you and it hurt so bad that I couldn't reach to you, that I couldn't have you. I want you. I want you back in my life again. Now I know I screwed it all up. But I want to make it up to you. Let me." Henry dropped down to one knee, placing his hands on her hips. "I swear to you I will make it up to you. I'll do whatever it takes to get you back. I want to marry you. I love you. Everything I am, I feel, I am laying before you. I'm putting my heart on the line"

"Henry." Ellen lowered her head to his ear. "Get up." She whispered. "Get up now."

Slowly and nervously Henry stood up.

Ellen looked around him to the women in the room. "Could you excuse us?" Taking hold of Henry's arm, she led him to the kitchen.

"This is bad isn't it?"

"Don't ever put me in a spot like that again. You Henry, have no right to ask me anything, Not to love you, to be with you or to marry you."

"But El . . ."

"Hear me out." She held her voice firm. "In these times a woman doesn't have to be heartbroken or alone. And a woman doesn't have to give second chances. You of all people Henry should have realized that you don't screw up what you have. You hurt me. But more so than that, you let me down. And whether or not I want to be with you, whether or not I still love you . . ."

"Ellen, I just . . ."

"Henry." She held her hand up to him. "Whether or not you still can light up my life, the fact will remain, that I moved on. I won't go back with you. There are no second chances. I'll get over you."

"So you aren't yet?" Henry asked her as she tried to walk by him. "You can't stand here and tell me you don't miss what we had. Because moving on or not, there isn't a man in Beginnings that can be to you what I was."

Ellen spun to him. "Miss you? Yes Henry I miss you. I miss you very much. But like I said before, it just doesn't matter."

"How can you say that El. How?" Henry grabbed on to her. "If you miss me, be with me. We can just be friends. We can be companions, we don't have to be lovers, just let us be anything."

Ellen pulled from him. "We can't." She walked to the kitchen's archway. "Go home Henry."

Henry's head dropped when she walked away, especially when he heard Ellen laugh and then eventually the fading of the voices as the women left. He stood there, gathering his thoughts and gathering his next move. And there would be a next move, because there was still hope. Ellen missed him.

(4)

Dean saw it, it was so evident as he walked back to his house from a final round at the clinic. Henry sitting on his front porch. Sitting on that step, still wearing those dress up clothes, his face buried within his hands. All did not fair well with Ellen. Not like Dean expected it to.

His mind flashed back to the old world and he remembered a similar scene when he walked home through the base housing on his way back from the lab. Some corporal sitting the same way as Henry, every light off in his house. Dean remembered looking at that corporal and truly seeing that something was bothering him. Dean also remembered walking right by him and going home. This was not the old world, and Henry was his friend.

Dean also knew what all was bothering Henry, every aspect of it, and that was probably more than anyone else did.

"Hey." Dean called out, trying to sound as if he wasn't there to 'lend an ear' which he was. "Just got done at the clinic."

"How's Danny?" Henry raised his head some, not much.

"Get this . . . may I sit down."

"Sure."

"Thanks." Dean scooted next to him. "Talking."

"What?"

"Danny. He's talking and talking and talking. Going off about how he got hit with the arrow and how he had an ancestor who died back in the cowboy and Indian days by being hit with an abundance of arrows. And how it was only fitting that he followed the footsteps of this ancestor."

Henry looked at Dean with an odd smile. "Were there Chinese immigrants over here back then."

"I don't believe so Henry. I do however think we learned something about Danny Hoi. Not only does the man recover nicely, but he's a hell of a story teller."

"He's a lucky man." Henry said.

"I'll agree with that. So . . ." Dean subtly cleared his throat. "Tell me. I'm curious. The big Jerry McGuire thing, how did it . . ." The side glance that Henry gave him told Dean the answer he already knew. "That bad."

"Did you ever see the movie Dean?"

"Yes."

"You know how the guy is giving his speech and the woman stops him in the middle of it. Well Ellen stopped just like in the movie."

"To yell at you."

"Exactly." Henry brought his hands back to his face. "Stupid. I could kill Frank."

"Why don't you? Really Henry I'm sure if you explained to Joe what he does to you then, he just might allow it."

"No. Because all and all, it could have been worse. See, El said some things in her anger."

"We all say things in our anger that we don't mean."

"Well I hope she meant these. She says she misses me. Of course after that she said it didn't matter. But, she misses me. And that is something I can work with. Am I being a big sap Dean? Am I holding on for nothing. Tell me."

"No Henry, you're not. Wanna talk about saps, let's talk about me. In the time frame that happened now and the time you and I remember, Ellen cheated on me, I ignored it. Hell I chased her and held out hope for how long? I have her right where I want her. Most of my days are spent with her. My evenings too. I know now what I mean to her and I also am pretty realistic about Ellen. But I think this time, this time I'm smarter. No matter what she does, I know a part of her will always be mine. And that can carry

a long way. The advice I'm trying to give you Henry is, even if you can't get back what you had, when you get back something, realize it. You know the thing is, I had her right where I needed her for the longest time and I just couldn't see it. I see it now. Of course thanks to you . . ." Dean smiled and nudged him with a shoulder. "I see everything."

Very solemnly Henry swayed his head to Dean. "You also see things now that maybe . . . that maybe others didn't want you to see."

"What are you talking about Henry."

"Today." Henry swallowed. "Everything about today."

Dean folded his hands and looked up. "Henry, do you want to talk about today?"

Henry laughed and shook his head, so much sadness filled that. "Talk about it. Dean, I don't even want to think about. But that's all I do. Every second since it happened." He closed his eyes tightly in pain. "Tell me something Dean, he hasn't said anything, and I don't want to bring it up, but how much does Frank know?"

"I think Frank knows enough to know what was going on. But he was really too busy at that moment to see."

"Thank God." Henry's head dropped.

"Henry, come on this is your best friend. Maybe he wants you to talk to him, maybe you need to talk to him."

"I'm talking to you Dean, does this make you uncomfortable?"

"No!" Dean quipped. "No Henry, it doesn't. I want to help you, and part of helping someone is directing them to who or where they can get the most help."

"Ellen is where I could get the most help."

"Then go to her." Dean told him strongly.

"Are you crazy? I went to her today."

"Did you tell her what happened?"

"Did you think I would? I just need her. I just need her comfort., But I want to get them without telling her what happened. I don't want anyone to know what happened. No one Dean." Henry spoke as if he were on the edge.

"I'm not understanding why. Please explain to me why."

"I can not believe you of all people have to ask me that. You saw Dean. If you could see me scratching my head, then you saw everything. Did you not?"

Dean ran his hand down across his mouth then peered out into the street. "Yes."

"Then you know how close it was." Henry's voice dropped. "I felt him Dean. I felt him. And if Frank was a split second longer I would have felt him more than I could have lived with."

"Henry, what happened to you is nothing to be ashamed of."

"Yes it is."

"No, it is not."

"Yes Dean, it is." Henry's words were strong. "I am not a small man. I'm six feet tall, I weigh nearly two-hundred pounds. I can hold my own. I'm a good fighter. How did I get to that point? How did I allow myself to be placed in that position. That . . . degrading, degrading . . . position."

A lump formed in Dean's throat, he was so lost at what to say. He could only try. "You say I saw it and I did. I also saw that there was nothing more you could have done. There were ten men Henry. Ten of them. You fought. I watched you. You fought as good as any man could have."

"Even Frank? Would Frank have let it get to that point?"

"Now see that is not fair. You can't ask that. Frank is a much bigger man. And . . ." Dean grew frustrated. "And yes. Ten men. Yes, I believe so. And you ask Frank, ask him. Because contrary to what his ego would tell him, the man in him and the friend in him would admit to you that he would have been no better off than you at that point."

"Even so. It doesn't make it any easier knowing I got to that point. *I* got to that point and I will never forget what it felt like. So humiliating." Slowly Henry stood up from the steps. "If you'll excuse me Dean, I think I would like to go to bed now."

"Henry." Dean stood also. "Go to Ellen. If not to tell her what happened, but just to try to get her comfort. Don't tell her the whole truth, tell her that you're just upset over the attack. Tell her something, anything. You need her."

"I need . . . I need to forget about this. But I'm afraid the man in me, will never let me forget it."

Dean's hand gripped the porch hand railing as he watched Henry go inside. He tried, but he felt so helpless. And there was nothing more he could do. He couldn't go to Ellen, he could break that trust of Henry's. All Dean could do is go home, Henry heavy on his mind, and hope that the next day would breed something, anything, that could help get him through the rough times that had him so down.

(5)

The slight breeze through Andrea's open livingroom window, brought more to Joe than just a refreshing break from the August heat, as he lay there, smoking that last cigarette of the day. It brought to him emotional whispers carried in the late night wind. It brought to him the painful revelation that one of his own, his family--Henry--was in need. And as painful as the truth Joe should not have learned was, was the fact that there was nothing, right there, Joe could do about it.

Swinging his legs over the cushion of the couch, he put out his cigarette and leaned forward in silent, deep thought.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

AUGUST 8

(1)

"You wanted to see me Joe?" Henry peeked his head into Joe's office before stepping inside.

"Yes Henry, come on in." Joe set his things on his desk aside.

"What's up?" Slumping a little in his walk--something Henry did not usually do--he made his way to the chair and sat.

"Sorry to pull you away from your work. I needed to talk about a few things with you."

"Sure Joe."

"First." Joe held up his finger. "Robbie went ahead yesterday, I don't know if you know this, but they pulled a test of that tracking system."

"I heard they were doing that. Robbie came to me and asked if when they were finished if he should take it back down. I told him 'no' not if it works, it'll stay. Just that eventually it will be connected to the video monitor."

"Well the test went great. Picked up animals and such. Can't wait to get that video monitor so we can actually see how it works. Excellent Job."

"Thanks Joe." Henry nervously fussed in his chair. "I stopped by to see Danny this morning. He said he wants to start on that monitor right away. Tonight, maybe I'll bring some parts to the clinic."

"Shame what happened out there." Joe shook his head. "In fact that is another reason I asked you hear. I need to talk to you about what happened. For paperwork and documentation sake."

"Joe I'd really rather not discuss it."

"Henry, now it's only paper work, I know how you hate to do that. But attacks like these need to be . . ."

"I really don't want to talk about it!" Henry snapped and stood up. "I . . . got jumped, that's all. Frank saved the day as usual. That's all. And I have work to do."

"Henry!" Joe called out to him as Henry moved to the door. "Since when have you yelled at me for no reason like that?" Joe watched Henry bounce nervously in debate before going out the door. "Son." Joe dropped his voice. "I know this has to be bothering you." He laid his hand on Henry's shoulder standing behind him.

"You don't know Joe. You really don't know."

"I do. I remember I was overseas. A deployment with the service. Police patrol type of thing. There were eight of us and we were all canvassing this town. I had this one block. And I heard this woman scream, I swore I heard this woman scream." Joe's voice was so calm and soothing as he talked. "And it wouldn't have been me to ignore it. So I went into this building. My first mistake, hey I was twenty-two years old, and . . . I was a

Slagel.” He heard Henry snicker a bit and he continued on. “So I go into this building alone. And I see this girl. She’s crying and crying and holding her clothes. I tossed my rifle over my shoulder so I wouldn’t frighten her. And I stepped to her, you know, holding out my hand telling her it was all right. I should have known by the way she kept shifting her eyes. But all I kept thinking was what happened to this young woman? I had to help her. No sooner was I five feet from her when I was jumped. Jumped and beaten Henry by six men, I think. I don’t recall after they encircled me and started hitting me with sticks, my rifle, and whatever they could get their hands on. I was beaten so badly I was in the hospital for two weeks. I think . . . I think a week of that was because of my mental state. Here I was this big tough guy, and I couldn’t get out of this jump. I couldn’t. And that was six guys, you faced ten.”

“But Joe.” Henry’s voice was nearly a whisper and he turned around to face him. “Besides it being ten men, it’s different somehow.”

“Yeah I know it’s different, because you faced savages. And I know how savages are. I *know*. I know what they do and I know what they are like. And what I am trying to tell you is, there are some things that no matter how many times we play it back in our minds figuring out how we could have made it different, there are some things we just can not do anything about. They are out of our control. They do not make us weak. And they do not for one second diminish any of our honor. And though these things may bother us for a long time, we still should hold our head high.” Joe spoke deeper to Henry as he laid his fatherly hand on Henry’s cheek, holding firm in a grip that spread to behind his head. “And hold your head high Henry. Because you fought. And you tell yourself you are the greatest of warriors because you have seen many battles. And through them all, even this one, broken or not, you emerged victorious. Because you . . . You emerged alive.” He gave a slight emotional reassuring shake to Henry as his hand still laid on his cheek. “Hold your head high.”

“Thank you Joe.” Henry’s eyes lowered. “Thank you very much.”

“You’re welcome very much. And . . .” Joe stepped back and changed his demeanor. “And there is one more thing I have to talk to you about.”

“Can it wait Joe? I really have work to do before . . .”

“I think you may want to hear this.” Joe walked back to his desk.

“What’s that.”

Joe sat down. “I had breakfast with my daughter this morning. Nice little breakfast. And she told me about that little Jerry McGuire incident last night.”

“Oh God.” Henry covered his face. “She hates me. I looked pathetic.”

“Actually . . .” Joe grabbed a cigarette. “We spent a good ten minutes laughing about it. She said . . . how did she put it? She said. ‘Henry was cute Joe’” Joe waited for it, and he saw it, Henry’s head lifted up. “And, she told me that after their dart game at the social hall, she headed off to your house

to talk to you. But . . .” Joe tossed his hands up. “In an unusual occurrence you were in bed.”

“Really Joe? She came to my house?” Henry smiled as he watched Joe nod. “Why?”

“I told you she was thinking about what you did. She wanted to tell you that she didn’t mean to make you feel bad.”

“You’re lying, she didn’t say that.”

“O.K. that part I am. But she did go to your house Henry. Seems the women were a but miffed that she didn’t let you finish the speech. Ellen was the only woman there who hated Jerry McGuire.”

“And she wanted to know what I was going to say?”

“Pretty much, the women wanted you to come over next week to do it again, and Ellen was going to ask you, and promise she wouldn’t interrupt this time. For visual purposes or something or other. Go figure.” Joe shrugged. “Women are weird.”

“Swell.” Henry sulked. “They want me to pretend I’m Tom Cruise.”

Joe laughed. “Anyhow, just wanted to warn you if Ellen asks. But think about this Henry. For as much as you may look at this as a bad thing, just a re-enactment, it’s still a step to the old Ellen and Henry. And the old Ellen and Henry would have played this to the hilt.”

Again, Henry raised his head with brighter eyes. “You have a point.”

“Of course I do. I’m me and . . .” Joe’s head sprang up to the loud steady beeping. “Is that?”

“The tracking system.” Henry sprang up.

“Son of a bitch!” Joe slammed his hand down, grabbed his cigarette and stood up. “It started.”

(2)

Racing, M-16 in hand from his back perimeter gate, Frank hurried toward town. “Tower come in. How many do you see?”

“Got about fifty coming in east Frank, another fifty fast approaching the front gate. Not too mention what we have coming south. Too many to count.”

“Hit the horn!” At that second, loud and blearing the sirens went off in Beginnings, ringing through. “Robbie come in.”

“I’m on my way to the hanger Frank.”

“You’re in charge. Get our bird team in the air and commence to hit them from the air.” Frank jumped in his jeep and switched channels on his radio as he drove. “Cole.”

“Yeah Frank.” Cole came back.

"Get me my back gate and northwest squads armored up and in position. They know they should go to you for dispensary they're on their way."

"Got it Frank."

Frank screeched around toward armory. "Dad. Are you . . ."

"Been in touch with the squad leaders 2 through 6. I have them heading toward the other dispensary's and I just radioed our links for every available man center town for evacuation."

"I should be there in . . ."

"I spot you Frank."

Frank screeched to a halt near the armory. About thirty men were coming out, men that not only were active security but from other divisions as well. Frank jumped from the jeep heading to them barking out orders over the loud blasting horn. "Dan! Take you squad and hold tight in the under developed. Squad 7, 8, and 9 I need you as back-up at the front gate. Squads 10 and 11 back gate. The rest of you spread out! We have to clean this place up then hit out post. Now!" Frank looked down at his watch. "Come on Robbie, lift them goddamn birds." Frank looked up at the sky first then charged forth into Beginnings's heart of town.

Charging down the empty hall of the clinic, Dean flew into the lab. "El, come on."

"No that's O.K., I'll stay here." She sat on a stool, her legs crossed.

"Do you hear the sirens. Come on! The clinic's been evacuated."

"No Dean. This is stupid. I'm staying here."

"Fine!" He smacked his hand off the archway. "I'm being with our kids."

Ellen rolled her eyes, waited until she heard the pitter-patter of his little feet fade and she slid slowly from the stool and walked out of the lab. Down the corridor, the closer to the glass doors she got, she could see the running up and down the street. The noise level at that moment to her was unbelievable. Annoying. With in a minute, as she stood at the glass doors looking out, the sirens stopped and the helicopter noise faded. She peered through the glass, up and down the street then shuddered., "Spooky." Shrugging her shoulder she returned to the lab, re-took her stool and picked up her nail file.

Her peace and eerie quiet did not last long. The heavy stomping of boots happened only a split second before Frank's loud. "El!"

Ellen lifted her head and went back to doing her nails.

"El! Frank blasted into the lab. "Let's go!"

"No Frank go away."

"Ellen, what the fuck do you think you're doing., Move your ass."

"Don't talk to me like that Frank. Go away. I'm enjoying the silence."

"Ellen." He marched up to her. "You knew this was coming."

"Yeah so. It's stupid."

"Stupid? Stupid is radioing my man in the tunnels to find out you aren't there. Stupid is radioing my man in the living section to find you, you aren't there either. Stupid is finding you sitting in this lab with a fuckin nail file in your hands. Now get your ass off that stool and head to the tunnels or I'll carry you down there."

"You will not Frank. I'll lock myself in the back closet. It's hot out. It's sticky and with all those people it will smell down there."

"If this was a real attack . . ."

"If this was a real attack I would be there!" Ellen yelled then calmed down. "But it's not and I'm not."

"Fine!" Frank backed up speaking into the microphone. "Dad, I'm at the clinic, how much time do I have?"

"Forty seconds Frank." Joe told him.

"Thanks." Frank headed to the door and looked back. "El, just so you know. The clinic has been targeted hit in this drill., Thirty seconds, your ass isn't out of here. Your dead."

"Oh so what." She sat there. "Go do your drill." Laughing when Frank grumbled at her, Ellen swung her leg back and forth filing her nails. A few seconds more of that silence and of her thoughts, Ellen sprang from the stool, raced from the clinic and down to the front door. The second she got there was the second Dan, stood blocking the doors. "Dan." She tapped on the glass. "Let me out."

"Can't do that Ellen. You're dead. The clinic is gone."

"Let me out." She rattled the door and only grew irritated when Dan smirked at her. She tossed her hands up. "I'm a casualty. And wait until I lay in Frank for letting me die in here."

(3)

He munched on what looked like beef jerky. But in actuality it was a protein snack, created by the Caceres Society laboratories, made from soy and other vegetables. But to Private Tom Collins instead of enjoying it, he thought of that plane load of soccer players that crashed into the Andes Mountains. He stared at it, tried to bite it, then pulled it away from his mouth. "Berry, do you suppose this is really vegetables or do you think this is human flesh."

"What are you talking about." The other soldier sat next to him.

"This." Tom showed the protein snack.

"There's something wrong with you." Berry snatched it up, stuck it in his mouth and continued to clean his rifle. "You are going to be hungry now."

"I've been hungry before. Never been soldier before. This is a first."

"You should be honored."

"Why?" Tom asked. "I didn't ask to serve in some army. I wasn't told that I would have too. When that peace ambassador found our camp, he told me that society has started rebuilding and in exchange for food and medical, our help was needed help build the United States of America back."

"And you're helping. You're protecting. Some farm, some build, some protect."

"Protecting what?" Tom tossed his hands up. "This morning we're told that we're getting shipped out. To where? To try exercise 'Eileen' out for real. What is that shit?"

"You heard the Captain, he said we're hitting some militant post on the west. Suppose to be important." Berry shrugged. "I don't question it. If it's for the good of the country, then it's for the good of me."

"Should we be fighting though. I don't mind participating in the 'operation clean sweep' you know, finding others and putting them in the Caceres cities, but this fighting." Tom shook his head. "I wasn't told I'd fight. And not too mention, fight along side, crazy men." Tom pointed to a large squad. Orderly and in synch, the cleaned and prepared their weapons.

"They're just the quiet bunch." Berry looked at the CMEs.

"They're aliens."

"They are not." Berry shook his head. "Get your weapon ready. We have maneuvers."

"You know what?" Tom stood up grabbing his rifle. "I'd rather nap."

Berry watched Tom walk away, but he didn't go to his sack to lay down. He stopped at another group of men, ones that Berry heard complaining similar to Tom. And making a mental note of that, Berry returned to cleaning his rifle fully intending on bringing Tom's attitude to the attention of the Society heads.

(4)

"You have just got to love drill day." Frank gloated as he walked into his fathers office , setting down his clipboard.

"It was exhilarating." Joe said, sitting back. "The people seemed to have fun."

"Yeah that did." Frank plopped down in the chair across from his father, reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigarette. "But I'll tell . . ."

"Frank. Why are you smoking?"

"Who me?" Frank put the cigarette away. "I wasn't."

"You just pulled out a cigarette."

"No I didn't."

"Frank!" Joe slammed his hand down. "I watched you."

"You're thinking of Robbie." Frank grabbed his clipboard. "And you ready to go over these results?"

"Yeah, go on."

"All right. The whole entire drill, from start to finish took twenty-two minutes. We have to shave some time off. From the initial spotting of the troops, and we were giving them heavy artillery, tanks to storm and missel launchers, we proceeded to armor up and evacuate to the tunnels. With in four minutes we had a front line at the back gate. Pretty good. Five minutes to six minutes we had every available men at either south or north dispensaries and armory, prepping them to go. Dispersing them immediately, we had our center town team of twenty moving out and about by nine minutes. That's where I need to shave time. Clinic reported having the patients out and into the metal structure in eleven minutes. Now I added two more minutes to that because we were moving dummies, had they been real it would have taken more time."

"That's good, where are our incoming now?"

"Eleven minutes post start? At a good ground speed, two hundred yards to Beginnings."

"Helicopters?"

"In the air."

"Towns people."

"Pretty much all in the tunnels."

"Picking up the troops at what? Three miles away, where did we stand at the end of complete evacuation?"

"Like I said choppers were up, by the time we had the town pretty much squared away, Robbie and the other choppers were in firing position, able to take them out."

"You?"

"Fighting with Ellen."

"Christ." Joe leaned back. "She wouldn't leave again?"

"Nope. So I marked her as a casualty. Saying that they fired off ten missiles at us, any more than that and strategically they're destroying what they want. She was a goner."

"How many casualties with the missel attacks?"

"With the trenches at the gates now and buildings hit. I'm gonna say we were good with about twelve. We had eight people in the living section, they hit the basements. But you and I both know, the safest place for everyone are the tunnels, especially if they hit us with gas."

"And what did your tunnel man report?" Joe asked.

"He said everyone was organized, they all grabbed emergency supplies and were ready to hit the route out."

"Then I say Frank, we had a very good evacuation drill. And as long as everyone doesn't mind the disruption, we should keep it up. How much less time was this one than the last?"

"Four minutes."

"Excellent. We'll protect this place yet, won't we. Remind me to get Dean tomorrow to generate some of his gas, we want to be fully stocked if we . . . what?" He saw Frank snicker.

"Dean's gas." Frank shook his head.

"What the hell is the matter with the grown men in this community." Joe shook his head and picked up his phone when it started to ring. "Excuse me." He pressed the button. "Yes? Oh really?" He looked at Frank. "One of us will be right there."

"What's up?" Frank asked as he watched his father hang up.

"That was the dead woman. She said if we want to find out the winner in Beginnings biggest betting pool, we'd better head down there right now."

"No shit?" Frank stood up. "I have twenty hours at stake. Need a lift down?"

"Uh you know, I think I will. Some one has to be there to help keep the crowds in order." Joe in a good mood and excited about finding out the 'big' results, headed out with Frank, certain he was going to be a winner.

(5)

Very sneaky-like, Ellen stood to the side of the double doors, peeking in her head and jumping back. She smiled when she saw the door open and Dean poke his head through. "You got it Dean?" She whispered.

Dean looked up and down the hall then stepped out. "Got it. Here." He handed her what he held. "Now hurry."

Ellen held it tight running down the hall to the examining room nearly sliding as she made it to the table. "Shut the door."

Dean stood by the door's window keeping watch. "Just hurry up before they miss him."

"I am. I am." Ellen uncovered the blanket exposing a tiny newborn boy. "Aw who cut the damn cord this bad. Now this kid will have an outie."

"Ellen screw the chord." Dean peeked through the shades. "Just do it."

"O.K." She grabbed the baby's foot. "I hate doing newborns they squirm."

"Ellen."

"O.K.!" She pricked the needle into the heel of the baby's foot. "Look Dean he didn't cry." She then placed the tiny tube under the bead of blood catching it. "Come on bleed. He's not bleeding enough.."

"Squeeze the foot more." Dean told her.

"O.K." Ellen squeezed the heel tight. "It's working. Got it." Securing the newborn with her elbow, she capped the tiny tube of blood and tossed it in her pocket. "All done." She wrapped the baby back up and lifted him. "Here Dean."

Dean took the baby, and brought his lab coat around to hide him. "Check for an all clear."

Ellen snuck by him, checked the hall up and down. "Go." Moving out of his way, Dean darted by her.

"El, start those."

"I will."

Keeping his pace fast, but not too fast, Dean ran back down to the birthing room, opening the door slightly, then walking back in with his back to everyone.

"Dr. Hayes!" Andrea approached him.

"Um yeah Andrea."

"Give him here." She snapped her finger. "Now."

Dean turned around, opened his coat and handed Andrea the baby.

"What made you think you could get away with this unnoticed."

"You guys were busy."

"What did Trish tell you. No blood tests. I can not believe you did this."

Dean lifted his shoulders. "Sorry."

Holding the baby, Andrea walked to Trish, stopped and went back to Dean whispering. "Let me know the results." She winked and headed back to Trish. "Here you go sweetheart. Your baby boy."

Trish sniffled as she took the baby for the first time in her arms. "I can't believe he took my baby Andrea."

"I know sweetheart." Andrea tapped her leg. "He's a bad man."

"I hear there's a lot" Dean whispered to Ellen as they left the lab.

"How many can there be?"

"Ellen, there are three-hundred and fifty-six work hours bet here. That's a lot of People."

"Yeah Dean but Robbie bet forty-himself."

"I can't believe you and Henry agreed to match every hour." Dean moved to the waiting room and stopped. "Holy shit."

"IS this the whole town?" Ellen asked.

"Just about." Dean smiled and walked in. "We've got the results." Dean held them up into the crowded waiting room. "Now breaking clinic rules, mothers wishes and . . ."

"Dean!" Frank yelled out. "Just tell us the fuckin results. Who's the father?"

"Easy, easy." Dean held up his hand. "Now since I didn't bet. I get to announce. Not even Ellen knows. So, all those for it being Jeff's baby stand to my right. All those for it being Hap's baby to my left." Dean watched everybody move around, amusing himself by the way that every listened as

if it were one giant game of Simon Says. To the right of him, thirty people stood, to the left, Ellen and Henry. "Now the way I am to . . ."

"Dean!" Frank yelled out. "Today."

"All right." Dean opened the folder. "The way I understood this is, you people who think the baby is Jeff's bet work hours. Ellen and Henry matched them. Meaning, if it's Jeff's they have to work those hours, if it's Haps you work that amount for them." Dean heard the grumbling. "O.K., O.K." He snickered. "After carefully running the results, not once but twice. You people." He pointed to the Jeff side. "You people get . . ." Dean laughed. "To make Ellen and Henry's life a little easier. The baby is Haps. You owe them three hundred and fifty-six work hours. Thank you." Before the rush of anger and the painful stampeding of Henry and Ellen began, Dean took off.

Ellen moved closer to Henry when she saw the angry stares. "Something tells me this isn't good."

"I have to agree El, people can be such sore losers."

"Wanna make a run for it?"

"O.K."

Grabbing Henry's hand, Ellen ran with him from the waiting room, down the hall and to the lab. She shut the door locking it behind her. "Where's Dean?" She looked around.

Henry peeked out the blind. "At least they didn't mob us."

"Good thing." Ellen let out a breath. "Wow, three hundred and fifty-six hours. That's a lot of work people have to do for us."

"It is El. And we were so right about that weren't we."

"We knew. And you should see the baby Henry. He's all wrinkled just like Hap."

Henry crinkled his face. "EW."

"Yeah." Ellen nodded. "I knew as soon as I looked at him he was not fathered by no twenty-eight year old man. No way."

"What color is his hair?"

"White like Haps."

"What a life they condemned this kid to." Henry shook his head. "It's sad."

"It is." Ellen lowered her head then raised it with a smile. "But we have three hundred and fifty-six hours coming our way."

"We'll be lazy El." There was a sudden, long moment of silence. Awkward and needing to be filled.

Ellen moved to the door. "It's probably safe to leave. And I have work."

"So do I." Henry paused before going out. "Thanks El."

"Henry?" Ellen stopped him. "You seem a little down today. Is everything all right?"

So much Henry wanted to open his mouth and tell her, 'No El, I need you' but he didn't, he smiled sadly and held on to the door before he left.

“Yes. Thank you though for asking.” He had it. He had the opportunity right there as he stared at her and Henry let it go. Because flashing through his mind he saw himself letting go, and in their closeness, telling Ellen all that happened. For who he was, and what he needed her to see him as, Henry would not and could not let her find out. So he quietly walked away hoping that Ellen would show him the niceties and concern again, only she would do it when he wasn’t so vulnerable.

(6)

“I’ve gathered you all together here.” George walked around the conference table in the huge office he had. “To tell you that I heard from Santa Monica and they have commenced per the go ahead of our biological team. Attack number one, now has begun. However . . .” George held up his finger with a sneaky smile. “It ends up being attack number two. Tricky, but smart.”

Steward raised his hands. “Why aren’t we going about this straight forward? We have the man power.”

“Stew. We need our man power for bigger things and you know it. Though we can afford the lose of lives, in the long run, in the big picture we can not. Beginnings is a step to the big picture. We need that land, but we have to do it right. If we obtain that land through massive losses, then we’ve defeated the entire purpose of needing that place.”

“So why not build what they have. Another communications division. We have the technology.”

“We could.” George nodded. “But what they have someone else could very easily get their hands on. And that we can not chance. It’s in the interest of our country to seize our assets. And we will. But Beginnings is smart. They also have a budding air division which we do not have. We have to hit them differently and differently we will. Everyone knows how to count to three. You know two comes after one, and three comes after two. But what happens if you’re expecting, one, two, three and you get, three, one two? Confusion. And when Beginnings gets confused we get a victory.” George smiled and he knew he had lost his specialty team that sat at that conference table. They hadn’t a clue, no matter how well informed they were, to what he meant about number sequences. But George did. And soon so would Beginnings, and that was all that mattered.

(7)

“Rolling Stones.” Frank stated with assurance as he sat next to Henry on Henry’s porch.

“Very good Frank.” He showed Frank a bag of sunflower seeds. “Want one.”

"Nah. I'm telling you Henry, I'm the seventies guy. Not much I don't know about the seventies."

"Frank?" Henry looked up to the darkened sky. "I heard you're pulling an extra training session tomorrow."

"Yeah. A couple of the guys want it. Why?"

"Could I . . . Could I come?"

It was an odd request, and the oddity of it showed on Frank's face. "Yeah, sure."

"In fact. I'd like, I'd like to ask you to teach me more. More hand to hand. More . . ."

"Henry, does this have anything to do with what happened yesterday?"

"Of course it does." Henry folded his hands.

"You're a good fighter Henry."

"Not good enough."

Frank took a second, trying to come up with words to say. He saw it on his friend's face, the hurt and the pain. "You think if you were any better, you could have done things differently."

"Yes."

"No." Frank told him. "No. Ten men."

"You took them on."

"Henry. I dropped my bike and snuck up on them when they were . . . when they . . . I snuck up on them."

"But what if you were in my position. Answer me honestly. Would you have . . ." Henry paused to catch his emotional breath. "Would you have been brought down, Would they have gotten to the point with you, that they got with me?"

"You mean at the point when I arrived?"

"What did you see at that point Frank?"

"I saw my friend in trouble."

"Oh God." Henry covered his face.

"Henry." Frank grabbed his hands and lowered them. "Come on."

"You didn't answer my question. Would you have been in my position or would you have gotten out of it."

Despite what Frank believed, despite what he himself was confident of, he was being asked--in a round about way--to make his friend feel better. "Honestly?"

"Please."

"I would have been in the same position as you. Ten men taking me by surprise. I'm good Henry, I'm not that good."

"Really Frank?"

"Fuck yeah. There's only one thing that may have stopped them from taking it too far."

"What's that. Your anger?"

"No way." Frank shook his head. "One look at my big hairy ass and I would have been dropped." Frank started laughing when he heard Henry laugh.

"You're a good friend Frank."

"Yeah I know." He snickered, then drew Henry's attention to his left. "Look."

Henry shifted his eyes, saw Ellen then looked straight ahead again.

"Hi Henry." Ellen approached them. "Frank, what the hell are you doing?"

"What?"

"You left the house over an hour ago to check on something. I got the kids in bed, I can't believe you left me there doing the mother thing. Go Home."

"Who's with them now?" Frank asked.

"Josh. But he's going out with Denny."

"To do what?"

"Hang out." Ellen snapped. "Go home." She waved her hand, Frank didn't budge, then Ellen shifted her eyes toward Henry. "Frank, do I need to be direct about this?"

"Yeah."

"Asshole." She shook her head. "Could you let me speak to Henry?"

"Sure."

"Alone."

"Oh." Frank stood up immediately. "Sure. I'll call you in a little bit. Wanna come back over."

Ellen shrugged. "I don't know. We'll see."

"Don't play hard to get El, I may have to take you seriously and never hit on you again."

"Oh that's a threat." She rolled her eyes and twitched her head.

"I'm going." Frank gave a pat to Henry as he walked by.

Ellen watched Frank disappear down the street, waited that extra second to make sure he wasn't hiding around the building eavesdropping, then she looked down to a very silent Henry. "Hey, I was thinking. I know Joe mentioned to you about doing that Jerry McGuire bit, and I was wondering if you wanted to, you know do it. Not do it, but go over that. The women are driving me nuts."

Henry smiled, but not too wide. "Not tonight El."

"Oh. O.K." She laid her hand on the railing. "Dean's not home he's working late on the virus. Gee's Henry he's so engrossed in this seeing thing since you gave him back his sight." She took a breath. "Anyhow, wanna go to the house and we can divide up our work hour winnings?"

"No, you can have them."

"Can I be honest here?"

"Please."

"I'm trying. I am. I was thinking about what you were saying in your speech, about how you needed me after what happened yesterday. And Henry, I wrong for blowing that off. O.K.? If you need me I want to help."

"El, I kind of changed my mind on that one."

"What?"

"I shouldn't have said that to you."

"Henry." Ellen dropped her voice.

"No El." Henry shook his head. "And I was thinking here. Especially after what you said last night, I was thinking maybe you and I should . . . should keep our distance." He stood up. "Goodnight."

"Henry." Ellen reached out and grabbed his arm. "Last night, you said . . ."

"Last night, was my final attempt. I'm sorry. Right now I can't . . . I just can't."

"I can't believe I did this." Ellen gasped out throwing her hands in the air. "Final attempt. You want me to chase you now Henry?"

"No El, really I don't."

"Then I won't. Do you want me not to be around you?" Ellen asked.

"Right now." Henry spoke sadly. "Right now . . ." He closed his eyes painfully. " . . .no."

"O.K." Ellen backed up. "I went out on a limb here Henry. I went against everything I told my self I wouldn't do. I just . . . I just embarrassed myself. And I won't do that again. Don't worry. I will never approach you again." Looking once more at Henry who wouldn't look at her, Ellen after waiting for a response, gave up and walked home.

Henry watched her go into her house and he heard the slamming of her door. He had severed at that moment any chance he had and he knew that. And he knew there was no way he could truly face Ellen until he faced his problems fully himself. And when he did that, he promised himself he would try again to get in her good graces. Until then, Henry would be as he was for a very long time . . . alone.

(8)

No sooner had Frank walked into his house when his cellular phone began to ring. First listening for it, then searching out the ring, he found the phone on the diningroom table. "Yeah." He answered it in his suave Frank-way.

"What are you doing?"

"El?" Frank walked into the livingroom, holding the phone wedged between his shoulder and his ear. "I thought you'd be talking to Henry."

"Fuck him."

"O.K." Frank undid his shoulder harness and draped it over the chair. "You told me this afternoon you were gonna try to talk to him."

"He told me he doesn't want me around him."

"I'm lost." Frank plopped down on the chair. "My dad talked to you this morning right? He said Henry needed some help from you. Doesn't he want it?"

"Apparently not. Frank. What are you doing right now?"

"Talking to you."

"I was wondering. If . . ."

"Yes."

Ellen's giggled carried over the phone. "I didn't say it."

"You want to come over. Please." Frank leaned forward. "Come over. Josh ran out as soon as I walked in." He smiled. "I'd like very much if you hung out."

"I'll be over as soon as I take my shower."

"Thanks El." Hearing her hang up, Frank biting his bottom lip, tapped the antenna to his chin. Realizing he didn't shut the phone off, he reached down for the button. It was then that Frank's finger shook so badly he could barely press it.

He stared in debate at his hands, at that phone, then he looked at his watch. Wringing his hands together as he sat in that chair, Frank decided one drink would not hurt. Setting down the phone on the coffee table he stood up and went into the kitchen.

He opened the cabinet above the stove, staring at his bottle, reaching for it, pulling back and then finally bringing it down. Grabbing a glass he poured a small amount into the glass and opened the fridge for some ice. He swished the ice around cooling the moonshine.

As he brought the glass to his lips, ready to take that first drink, he paused when he heard the tiny voice in the livingroom.

"Da-da. Da-da."

Frank smiled in amazement at how Brian was climbing from his crib already. "O.K. Bri." Pulling the glass from his mouth to set it down, his hand gripped it so hard it shattered in his reach when he heard Brian again.

"Da-da. Gun."

Bang! . . . Silence.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

(1)

With her head bent down toward her knees as she brushed out her towel dried hair, Ellen screamed when suddenly a set of feet appeared right in her vision. She jumped back, flinging her hair back and grabbed her chest. "Henry."

"El . . ."

"What are you doing here?"

"I came to get you." He stepped to her. "We couldn't reach you by . . ."

"I want you to leave,"

"No." He grabbed hold of her arm. "Listen to me. We couldn't reach you on the phone. Come with me. We have to get to the clinic El."

"What happened." Ellen's pull from him stopped.

"Brian crawled from bed. He . . . he got a hold of Frank's gun. It went off." Henry swallowed. "Brian's been shot."

Ellen's hand sprang to her mouth in an out of breath gasp, and raced toward the door slipping on her shoes as she did. "How is he?"

"I don't know anything yet." Henry followed her.

"Did someone call Dean?"

"He's on his way."

With her entire insides shaking and pulling, Ellen, feeling like she had just slipped into a nightmare, ran as fast as she could to the clinic.

She barreled through the front doors of the clinic with full speed, Henry right behind her. As soon as Ellen made it into the hall, she saw Joe. "Joe!" She raced up to him. "How is he?"

"He's in the operating room now."

"Oh my God."

"Ellen." Joe pulled her into him. "He's alive. That's what counts right now. He's alive."

"Dean!" Ellen stepped back when Dean came charging into the clinic. "Dean." She ran up to him.

"Where is he?" Dean asked laying his hands on Ellen's shoulders.

"He's in the back. I'm scared Dean. You have to find out what's going on. Please." She said through her anguish.

"I will. I will." He started to move. "Stay here, I'll be right back." Placing both hands on her face, Dean kissed her. "He'll be all right." Before running down the hall he gave her a quick embrace Then took off.

Ellen folded her arms tightly to her body, holding back the tears that were coming anyhow, and she turned back to Joe. When she did, she saw in the waiting room, Frank. He sat on the sofa, leaning forward, face buried in his hands, Robbie on one side, Johnny standing on the other. Slowly she walked into the waiting room and up to him. "Frank." She called his name out softly.

Through his rocking back and forth he lifted his head. "I'm so sorry El."

"What happened?"

"He got a hold of my gun."

"How? Ellen sat on the coffee table across from him.

"It was over the chair. I thought he was in bed."

"Why Frank, why wasn't the safety on?"

"I don't know." Frank shook his head with emotion filled words. "I just don't know. It's all my fault."

"Well you're not getting an argument from me there."

Robbie's strong, warning 'El' didn't even phase her.

"Answer me this Frank. Were you drinking?"

Frank slid his hands down some from his face.

"Answer me."

His eyes only met hers

"Answer me!" Ellen screamed her loudest.

"I . . . I was getting a drink when . . ."

"No!" Ellen sprang up from her seat on that table so hard it flung the table on its side. "You son of a bitch!" She blasted her angry words at him and Frank, sat quietly listening, taking it all in, without any argument. "Our son is shot all because you found it more important to drink than to worry about your gun laying around?! And look at you." Her hand flung out. "Look at you! You sit here, worried, you're sick about this. You're apologizing. When you have no right. No right! To feel sorry! None! You're pathetic Frank. You have been asked to quit drinking. You have been told to quit. You have lied about it. And now you have proved to me where your priorities lie. Our son has been shot." Ellen placed her face close to him as she nailed him with her sharp words. "Shot! And you have just lost every right you ever had to call yourself a father. You are not fit to call yourself a father. From this moment on, the kids are with me. I don't want you around them. I don't want you near them." She stood up and stepped back. "And when you go home tonight, you will go home to an empty house. Then you can leave your gun where ever you like. You can drink your alcohol whenever you like and you don't have to worry about putting anyone in danger but yourself. And you know what Frank. Right now, I can give a fuck if you even do that."

Frank's head began to drop into his hands, he stopped when he heard Dean.

"El." Dean stood in the waiting room, his eyes kept shifting back to Frank.

"Dean." Ellen stood before him. "Tell me."

"It's not as bad as our minds were thinking." Dean saw her shoulders drop. "He'll be fine. He has some burns on his fingers, they'll be fine. The only thing is. He's lost the top portion of his little finger." Dean gripped on to Ellen. "Which isn't bad El, really, he's so small right now, it won't make a difference to him."

"Thank you." She wrapped her arms tightly around Dean. "Can I see him?"

"They'll be bringing him into recovery in a few minutes." Dean released the embrace. "Andrea agreed that we can take him home tonight. Between you and me, we can keep a pretty good eye on him."

"I'm heading down there." As she moved away from Dean, she saw Frank standing up. "No!" She yelled to him. "I don't want you anywhere near him. You did this to him. *You* did this." With her last words, Ellen spun around and raced from the waiting room.

It was too quiet in the waiting room for Frank. He looked around at the faces in the room as if waiting for all of them to take their turn at him. With a heavy feeling in his chest he stepped to Dean. "Give Brian a kiss for me."

"Frank." Dean called to him as he started to leave. "He's your son too. If you want to wait and see him, you wait and see him."

"No." Frank shook his head with closed eyes. "I'm gonna go home and uh . . . I'm gonna get Robbie and Henry to help me bring the kids to your house tonight."

"Frank."

"No Dean. She's right. I don't deserve to be around them. I don't. What happened tonight, it was all my fault. I might as well have put the gun in my hand and shot him myself."

"Just tell me this Frank." Dean didn't speak with accusation. He spoke calm. "*Were* you drinking when it happened?"

"I hadn't had a drink all night." Frank shook his head. "I had just . . . just poured one. But still. I guess that's where my mind was." He took another step toward Henry and Robbie. "Just know something Dean. All the kids. I would never, never do anything deliberately to put them in danger. Never. They're my life. And I'm sorry that this happened." Before giving Dean chance to say anymore, Frank walked solemnly from that waiting room. Leaving behind him the strong air of his guilt.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

AUGUST 9

(1)

Frank stood outside of Beginnings. Thirty or so feet from where the mouth of the tunnels opened up to. Before a wooden hatch he stood, one of four. 'Pits' dug by Robbie and him to store supplies in the event of evacuation from Beginnings. Three of them still closed and hidden under the brush that was their camouflage,. The fourth, the one Beginnings didn't fill, Frank stared into. And with a silent stone face, he slammed the hatch closed, covered it back up and headed to the tunnel. "This if Frank, I'm coming back in."

(2)

"You are doing nicely Danny Hoi." Ellen lowered his shirt over his arrow wound. "I heard they're letting you out in a few days."

"Yes and I can't wait." Danny grunted as he lifted himself more to sit. "I can only do so much in here. I started putting the insides together for the video monitor but Andrea said I am not allowed to plug it in."

"Andrea is nuts." Ellen sat on the edge of the bed.

"How's Brian?"

"Acting as if nothing happened. I wish I could say the same thing. I think I'll have a hard time getting over this one."

"Accidents . . . accident happen El. You do know that. You can't blame yourself."

"Oh I don't." She shook her head. "I blame Frank."

Henry's soft, "you shouldn't" was his announcement into the room.

Ellen stood straight up from the bed. "I'll see you Danny. I have to go relieve Dean so he can get to the lab. I'll check back." She started to leave.

"El." Henry stopped her. "Frank is blaming himself enough. Please just take a second to think about what you are . . ."

"Don't." Ellen pulled from him. "Don't talk to me. I'm pissed at you Henry. And even more so now for jumping to his defense. That was my son who was shot last night."

"And it was my son who you took off a man who is a very good father to him. You had time to calm down, return Nick to Frank."

"I will do no such thing." Ellen snapped back.

"You will. I'll fight you on this one El. He's my best friend and he's down, and he's hurting and I won't make that worse. He needs Nick with him."

"And you need to stay out of this." She stormed into the hall.

"Me?" Henry followed her. "Nick is my son." He chased her down, stopping her.

"You have no rights to Nick, you don't raise him."

"And neither do you."

"There's a fine line Henry . . ." Ellen moved from him. "And you just crossed it. Fight me on it. Go ahead. You'll lose."

Henry stood near Danny's doorway watching Ellen leave. He stayed there until Danny called for him. Waiting a moment to calm down he went inside. "Yes Danny?"

"You brought up some very good points."

"Thank you."

"Wanna know where you went wrong?"

Henry swayed his head to Danny. "You're gonna tell me aren't you."

"Oh sure. One word. It's a simple little word Henry . . . tact."

(3)

"And watch Brian around the other kids." Dean instructed Ellen as he gathered up his folders. "He keeps hitting them with his cast."

Holding Brian, Ellen looked around the messy house. "Had a hard day Dean?"

"You could say that El. We now have seven people living in a house for four."

"I spoke to Joe about that."

"About finally moving me into a bigger house?"

"Yep. I mean you're next on the list."

"But the houses won't be ready for a while, especially at the rate they're building them."

"Oh I know." Ellen followed him around. "I talked to him about kicking Frank out of the three bedroom and giving it to . . ."

"That's wrong."

"That's what Joe said. I thought he was just being biased towards his son. What do you think?"

"It was a wrong thing to ask. And . . ." Dean kissed her on the cheek. "I have to go."

"Dinner?"

"What about it?"

"Will you be home?"

"I don't think."

"Dean." Ellen bitched. "Come on. What the hell? You may be able to see now, but I don't see you. Take an hour and come home for diner. No wait, do what you can only do at the lab and stay home tonight."

Dean's mouth dropped open. "Why are you bitching at me?"

"You haven't been home."

"I have a virus to beat El."

"You have a family to be with Dean."

"Oh my God." Dean checked out his folders. "And where is the DNA exchange charts."

"Where you left them."

"And where's that?" Dean asked.

"On the counter in the kitchen. You were looking at them this morning when you were making your toast. Of course if you cleaned up the kitchen you would have seen them."

"Ellen." Dean held up his hand. "Stop." he moved to the kitchen when he heard the knock at the door. "And get that."

"Order me around, why don't you." Adjusting Brian in her arms, she walked to the door and opened it. "Frank."

"Don't." Frank saw the door ready to shut. He kept looking at Brian. "I didn't come here to see the kids. I just wanted to check on Brian. How is he."

"Da-da!" Brian squealed with excitement reaching out his arms to Frank.

Ellen said nothing. She lowered Brian's arms. Stepped away from the door and shut it.

(5)

Robbie's voice was not the one Henry wanted to hear coming from the security training area, he wanted to hear Frank's. And when he found out that Frank wasn't pulling the extra training, Henry left the area and went on his search for Frank.

He followed people's 'I saw him over there' as if he were searching for Elvis. His search led him no where except from one spot to another then finally back to Frank's home. All Henry kept hearing in his head was the last thing Frank said to him. 'I screwed up everything Henry. Everything' and that was right before Henry got the brilliant idea to get Nick back off of Ellen. Not only did he not help Frank at all, but he made matters worse for himself. Henry's luck had been so bad, that if seclusion from everyone was possible, Henry would consider it. And when Henry got to Frank's house, he found out Frank must have been considering the same thing. Frank wasn't there, but a small duffle bag and a knapsack, both packed tightly were. Laying on the floor by this bed as if waiting for the moment to be taken.

(6)

"You're mistaken." Dean spoke to Henry as he powered down the computer program.

"No Dean I'm not. I saw the bags myself."

"Henry, this is ridiculous. Frank would not leave Beginnings."

"How can you say that. You have his kids. You have the woman he loves."

"They're still his family and I hardly think he would up and leave them."

"Do you really want to take that chance?" Henry asked.

Dean took a slow deep breath. "When would he leave Henry? How can he get out with out anyone knowing?"

"Twelve-fifteen a.m., one at a time all perimeters are shut down and started up. He stays by the motions in the tunnels,. Waits for that time, and goes. Mark in monitoring told me that he was out at the hatches three times today. Three. That's where the supplies are at. He's going Dean, I feel it. And if he goes, we're screwed. Just like this community can not beat the plague without you. This community can not beat the society without Frank. I don't feel safe if he's not here. Do you?"

Dean took a second to think. "What can we do, short of following him around."

"Give him a reason to stay."

"He won't stay for me Henry."

"But he'll stay for his kids and he'll stay for . . .Ellen."

Dean spun to Henry. "What are you saying?"

"I can't talk to her Dean, she won't listen. But she'll listen to you."

"What are you wanting me to tell her Henry. You want me to tell her to forgive Frank. I tried that."

"I want you to tell her to go to Frank."

"No." Dean said strongly. "No."

"She went to you when you needed her."

"And she stays with me Henry. No." Dean shook his head. "Willingly I will not give her up to Frank. If I do that, she's gone."

"Listen to you." Henry moved closer to him. "You have her. Why? And who stepped back when you were at your lowest point? Frank. He said nothing to you about being with her because he knew you needed Ellen. He saw she was the key to a part of your recovery. And Ellen is a key to Frank's recovery. He's not going to beat this drinking if she abandons him. He'll beat it with her by his side. We've said this all along. And we also said it would take a dramatic turn to make him face it. Frank had his dramatic turn. He's facing it, but he can't do it alone. He needs Ellen. And you have to get her to help him Dean."

"I can't."

"Yes you can."

Slowly Dean closed his eyes and sat down. "You want me to convince her to be his support? I can try to do that. To get her to get to the point

where she will give him reason to stay . . . I don't know if I *can* do that. I don't know if Ellen will do that."

"You can talk to her. You can try." Henry leaned toward Dean. "Frank is at a low point. He has to have reason to stay. He has his reason to not drink. I believe he doesn't want to drink anymore. We can be all the support he can get, but we aren't the support he needs. Ellen is that support. Talk to her. Just talk to her."

The single beep of computer reminding him to shut down completely was the only sound in the silent lab. Dean sat in deep thought, Henry by his side. Not in thought of what to do. But in thought of how to do it.

(7)

Not a hello. Not a simple kiss to Dean's cheek. Not even a wave greeted him when he walked into his home. Ellen did greet him but not like he expected.

"Oh look who decided to come home." Ellen walked with haste from the kitchen. "Gees Dean, a half hour, that's all it would have taken and you would have made dinner. Did you see your twins outside? Did you wave to them? Did they recognize you?"

Dean didn't argue. Calmly he glanced down at his left hand and to the ring finger. He then grabbed Ellen's left hand and looked at that.

"What are you doing?" She asked.

"Just checking to see if I missed something." He walked by her. "Did you save me dinner?"

"Unfortunately."

"Good. I'll eat after we talk."

"Why?" Ellen asked with curiosity, her demeanor changing slightly. "Did something happen at the lab today?"

"You could say that." Dean led her to the couch. "Henry stopped by."

"We're not talking about him, are we?"

"No."

"Good. He was mean to me today."

"I doubt that."

Ellen tossed her hands up. "What is it with the men in this community. Is there a secret society bond thing happening?"

"I'm beginning to wonder that myself." Dean grabbed on to her hand. "I need to talk to you about Frank."

"Nope."

"Ellen."

"No Dean."

"Yes Ellen. And I need you to listen to what I am going to say to you."

Ellen plopped back on the couch. "Go on."

"Go on?" Dean's head spun. "You're kidding? No more argument?"

"I can argue. You want me to argue."

"No." Dean held up his hand. "Hold back the bitching for a second please." He turned his body to face her. "Brian is doing great, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"And, this morning at services, I thanked God, really thanked God that nothing worse happened."

"It could have."

"Yes, it could have. Because . . .because El, accidents happen."

"Great. Just great."

"What?"

"You're defending Frank."

"In a part, yes you can say that."

Ellen started to stand up. "I am not going to listen to you defend Frank." She felt Dean's hand pull at hers. "Stop it." She snatched her hand away. "He left his gun laying around. He left the safety off. He was drinking. He has a drinking problem."

"And you knew about it and you pretended it didn't exist." Dean stood up following her.

"Are you blaming this on me?"

"No! No one is to blame. It was an accident. And Frank wasn't drunk last night. He hadn't even had a drink."

"He was getting one."

"So are you saying that was why it happened. Because he was getting a drink?"

"Yes." Ellen folded her arms to her.

"What if it was water?"

"It wouldn't be water, because Frank has a drinking problem."

"And you think taking the kids from him. Screaming at him at the clinic. Making him feel like the worst parent in the world is gonna get him to stop?"

"Yes."

"Well it won't!" Dean yelled at her. "Frank has to stop and he is going to need help. You're help!"

"I refuse to help him. He started drinking on his own and he can quit drinking on his own, especially if he wants anything to do with these kids."

"Listen to you." Dean walked to her. "Two nights ago, he was drinking just the same and where were the kids? With him. You're taking a holier than thou position here El. It's wrong. Frank made a mistake. An accident occurred to one of the children while they were in his care. You can not condemn the man for that. If you want to bring his drinking problem to light then you do it. But don't you put this accident on his drinking when he wasn't even drinking. Bad instances happen to good parents."

"Bullshit." Ellen snapped defensively.

"Bullshit?" Dean questioned with edge. "You think?"

"Yes."

"Josh."

"What?" Ellen dropped her arms. "Josh went out with his friends."

"Not Josh Slagel. Josh Calaway."

"Oh my God." Ellen moved away from him. "Oh my God. Why are you bringing up my son?"

"Because I remember you telling me about when he was two years old. When you fell asleep on the couch and Josh drank floor cleaner, remember? His stomach had to be pumped, you felt guilty."

"You are throwing that in my face. Fuck you."

"No El. I'm just reminding you that accidents happen. Josh could have died, like Brian could have died. Why didn't Frank put on the safety? Why didn't you cap that bottle tighter? Why didn't Frank put away his gun? Why didn't you put away the cleaner? Why was Frank getting a drink? Why were you sleeping? Were you any less of a parent? Was Frank?"

"Stop." Ellen held up her hand. "I get your point. Slapped me in my face with it, but it was delivered."

"Good." Dean let out his breath and calmed down. "Now here's the part where you have to be the strong one. You have to show Frank that all those years of friendship mean something."

"You want me to give him the kids back."

"Yes, but that's not it."

"What is it?" Ellen asked. "Tell him I'm sorry?"

"No, you can even withhold that if you want. You just have to go to him and let him know that you understand now it was an accident. And . . . it's time you offered your help, any that he needs, in his quitting drinking. It's important El, it's more important than you know. He'll quit, I'm sure of it. And he'll do it if you help him. The first step is to get him out of this slump you and this accident threw him in."

"I should go talk to him then." Ellen walked to the couch and sat down. "I'll . . . I'll talk to him."

"Good." Dean said that one word with an outward breath. "But El, be prepared, he's so down on himself, he may not listen."

"Then what should I do? What should I say?"

"I don't know." Dean shrugged as he sat next to her. "But to be honest, you'd better take a moment and give it some thought. Think of what you're gonna say. And El, it better be good." He saw Ellen look at him through the corners of her eyes. "Because if it's not. Frank could very well end up leaving Beginnings . . . tonight."

(8)

What to say and how to help Frank was foremost on Ellen's mind. Having found very little help--word wise--from Dean, Ellen was at a loss at

how to handle the situation. So before going off to Frank's she stopped at the social hall and found a small group of women sitting there. With them she sat down. And for the first time, she sought out their advice, and listened to what they had to say. And Ellen needed their advice. If her life wasn't complicated enough, how was she about to now include helping Frank in it with out making things worse. So with what they told her racing thorough her mind, nervously she went to Frank's.

"El." So shocked he spoke as he opened up his front door.

"Frank."

"El, look." His words were low. "If you came here to blast me I . . ."

"No."

"No?"

"Can I come in?"

"Sure." He stepped back opening the door for her.

"Thank you." She walked in but not too far in. "Brian is doing very good."

Frank closed his eyes. "Thank you for telling me that."

"You're welcome. Frank?" She waited for him to look at her. "I was wrong for making it worse than it needed to be."

"No El. I was wrong. It was all my fault and I deserved everything you said. I deserved it."

"Frank, look I . . ."

"No. El, you're right. I was pathetic. I am pathetic. And I don't deserve you coming over here. I appreciate you telling me about Brian and I'll never forgive myself for what happened."

"Frank." Ellen grabbed his hand. "Come with me."

"What?" Oddly, Frank felt pulled to the steps. "What's going on?"

Ellen said nothing, she just led him up stairs and to the bedroom.

"El?"

"Close the door Frank." Ellen stepped backwards towards the bed.

Frank shut the door, as he turned around he saw Ellen lifting off her shirt. "El, what's going on?"

"You're down Frank." Ellen unclasped her bra. "You need something. I want to make you feel better."

Frank watched her stand there, undressing. Ellen looked blank, almost emotionless. And instead of being filled with any stir of desire Frank got angry. "Help me feel better?"

"Yes."

"What by fucking me?"

"Isn't that what you want?"

"No!" Frank yelled strongly. "It isn't what I want. Not like this! Who the hell are you trying to be El? Jenny? The other woman? Thinking that you can give up your body to us men, and in one lay it takes it all away? Like some sort of emotional fuckin call girl."

"I can't believe you're saying that to me."

"I can't believe you're standing here being like this with me. Me!" Frank pointed to his chest. "Me El."

"Isn't this what you need."

"No. You are what I need. Not this. Not you like this." His hand motioned at her. "And after twenty years this is what I get? You standing here before me like I mean nothing!" He bent down to her clothes, picked them up and handed them to her not even looking at her partially nude body. "I appreciate the offer. I appreciate what you told me downstairs. But I would also appreciate if you took your clothes and left." Turning from her Frank walked to the door and opened it.

"I was trying Frank. I was just trying." She held her clothes tight to her chest. "I didn't mean to come off so cheap." She rushed to the door but stopped when Frank closed it slightly. "God I feel so stupid."

"Just tell me one thing El." Frank whispered in her ear as she stared at the door's edge. "Just tell me how did we get to this point. Did you lose that much respect for me, that much love, that you have to withdraw in order to be with me?"

"No Frank." Ellen's voice cracked. "I have to be like that."

"Why?"

Ellen's breath was shivering, her eyes held tight to his fingers that gripped the edge of the door. "I just do. Please let me go."

"No." Frank moved his head closer. "You tell me why. You tell me why you have to stand before me and act as if it is nothing. Why?"

"Because I'm afraid."

"Afraid of what El? Huh? Afraid of what? Of me?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"I'm afraid of me." She sounded so much on the verge of tears. "Because I'm afraid if I'm not like that . . ." She lifted her eyes to his, staring deep at him. "I'm afraid I may never wanna let you go."

So barreled over by Ellen's words at that moment, Frank felt his entire being drop to the pits of his stomach. Hard and fluttering, forming an emotional lump in his throat. With what he just heard Ellen say, and no longer holding back what he kept deep inside, Frank's hands released the door and went immediately to Ellen's face. He pulled her up and into him and placed his mouth wide and hard to hers, kissing Ellen like he hadn't done in so long. And his body shook as he did so, weakening with the whimper she let out as he pulled her closer to him and into the bedroom door. Closing it with the weight of their two bodies, so symbolic-like. Almost as if they were closing a long chapter in their lives. And they were. From that second on, Frank and Ellen both knew, there was no turning back.

So barely heard his voice was, graveled and whispered, deep from within his soul. Never pulling his mouth far from Ellen's as he spoke, Frank brushed his lips against hers with nearly every word. "This is what I need . .

. this.” A sadness, an aching, carried in his voice. “*You* are my heart. I love you.” He kissed her again, spreading his fingers across her face, caressing the lips that he so lightly touch. “When will you understand. When will you learn? Everything I am . . . I am for you. I live for you.”

This time Ellen grabbed on to Frank, grasping at him, kissing him as she leaned back into the door not wanting to let him go, pulling him back each time he pulled away.

“Tell me El.” He kissed her as they began to slide down. “Tell me.” He felt Ellen’s head shake, her lips reaching for his. “Tell me.” Another kiss. “Please.”

“I love you Frank.”

Frank lost his breath, his eyes rolled slightly and he gripped Ellen with everything he was.

“I have never stopped loving you Frank.”

Parting her lips with his, Frank slipped his hand under Ellen’s hair, then lifted her into his arms and carried her to the bed.

Locked.

Side by side their bodies were joined. Frank cradled Ellen in his arms, wanting to hold her as much as make love to her. Kisses that Frank did not want to stop. His mouth held tight to Ellen’s, moving almost in perfect synch with his body. Each passing sweep and press of his lips reflected the motions his body made. Slow. So slow. Deep and intense.

Frank’s heart beat so strong he could barely breath. And through it all, only once did he pull his lips from Ellen’s. In their final moment, only briefly, Frank separated from that kiss.

A hesitation in their near lips. A cessation of movement. Tightly closed eyes. One slow, shuddering breath . . . Quiet.

And Frank kissed Ellen again.

Holding on to Ellen’s hips as she sat on the edge of the bed, placing on her shirt, Frank ran his lips sensuously up from the small of her back and under shirt, feeling her. “You cold?”

“No.” She shook her head then flipped her hair from her collar. “Not at all.” She reached down and grabbed her underwear, placing them on.

“What are you doing?”

“Frank.” She smiled at him and bent down to kiss him. “I’m going home.”

“You’re what?”

“I’m going home.”

“You’re kidding me? Now?”

"Yes, now Frank." Ellen finish getting dressed then leaned down to him. "I'll see you . . ."

"No." Frank grabbed her arm. "Stay here."

"I can't stay here Frank. I have to go home." She pulled her arm away. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"El, come on." Frank slid from the bed holding the sheet to him. "Did I miss something. What was all this about. I thought, no I believed this was more than just making love."

"Frank."

"And you're leaving me?"

"I'm not leaving you." She tapped him on the cheek. "I'm just going home."

"Don't." Frank said with passion. "Don't go. Please? Don't do this to me. Not right now. I need you." He grabbed hold of her. "The way we kissed. The way we made love. You told me you loved me. El, I swear, I swear I thought this was it." He kissed her. "Stay with me. Come back to bed."

"Frank, What is wrong with you? You are way too upset over this." She kissed him back. "Too much so that you're missing what's going on."

"That's because I'm scared to death that you'll go home to Dean and this will never happen again.." He saw Ellen laugh. "And what is so funny?"

"You. Frank I would have never told you I love you. Never been with you like I was if I had no intentions of following up on it. We have worked so hard to get to this moment. It's a process Frank. One we're taking. One that's led us here. And unless you're a big jerk, will lead us here again."

"So we're back?"

"Sort of."

"Sort of." Frank tossed his hand in the air and sat on the bed. "I put my heart on the line to you. I have waited so long for this. I was patient for this. I thought we made it. Finally. What will it take for me to get you to stop saying 'sort of'."

"Wanna know?"

"Yes."

Ellen knelt before him and held his hand. "I'll make you a deal. You have to quit drinking Frank. Completely. You have to get dry. Do this for me. Show me that you have every intention of giving up the bottle. Show me and I will help you do it, every step of the way. But I have to see that you're sincere. And if I see that, then I promise you here and now, that for the rest of our lives, you and I will always, always be more than a 'sort of'."

(9)

Dean swayed his head slowly, in shock and in disbelief. "I said make it good. I didn't think you would make it that good."

"I had to tell you." Ellen sat next to him on the porch.

"I'm glad you did."

"You know what so funny Dean. He wasn't leaving Beginnings. I asked him. He was only packing his bags because Joe made the suggestion to let you have his house."

"He needs it now doesn't he? We're gonna go back to sharing the kids. Aren't we?"

"Yes." Ellen nodded. "But not yet. He can have his responsibilities back only after he quits drinking. Which, we'll see if he does."

"So why did you come back?"

"I live here."

"I have to tell you Ellen. I thought you and I were back together."

"We are."

Dean laughed in sarcasm. "Not for long, if anymore."

"Dean." Ellen nudged her shoulder into him. "Who is the one who has said, more than once, that they don't want to get completely involved? You. You've hurt my feelings you know." She snickered at his tsk. "Who said that they would be perfectly content being the understanding. Or better yet, the 'other man' How was it that you put it, it was kind of insulting, yet true? You said it was because I never give up the other man?"

"But to be honest El. I got used to you living here. I like it."

"Who are you kidding? You hate it. I bitch, I get in the way . . ."

"But you're here."

"And I always will be." Ellen said. "Always for you."

"Tell me where this leaves me."

"Wherever you want it to."

"What do you mean?" Dean asked.

"Just like I said Dean, wherever you want it to leave you. Think about it. You've made the suggestion many times." Ellen smiled. "Put it this way. You know how much time we spend together. How many hours a day that is. And basically, back together with Frank or not, I'm pretty much leaving it up to you on how you want to spend some of those hours." She stood up then bent down to kiss him on the cheek. "I'm going to bed. You coming up?"

"In a, in a minute." Hunching in annoyance as Ellen did what she always did when ever they sat on the porch--messed up his hair--Dean stared out into the street and he thought about what Ellen had just said. And he grinned. And Dean realized, for the first time ever, he just got his guarantee from Ellen that he would not end up the loser again. It was a guarantee he could have had before. But this time . . . this time, Dean was going to take it.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

AUGUST 10

(1)

Frank's trembling fingers ran through the little ponytail of Alexandra. He stared at her with a slight smile on his face. Of her, Billy and Joey, she was the last one Frank wanted to say 'hello' to at the school. "Pretty." Her twirled her hair around his finger.

"Henry did it." she smiled. "He always does my hair."

"When?" Frank asked her.

"Here in school."

"How often does Henry come here and do your hair?"

"Everyday. Today I wanted a big ponytail. Some days I like them little cause I like when he brushes my hair. He does that here since he pissed Mommy off and we can't see him."

Frank laughed at her. "I'm glad you're not pissed off at Henry."

"No way. I like Henry. He's funny." Her skinny legs swung back and forth as she sat on the small wall outside with school with Frank. "I wish Mommy would like him again."

"Soon Alex, I think soon."

"Daddy does too. The other day, Mommy was trying to tell him a story and daddy kept telling her. 'Go talk with Henry. Go. Go'" Alexandra giggled. "How come he didn't tell her to go tell her story to you?"

"Because Daddy knew I'd tell Mommy the same thing."

"Why?" Alexandra asked. "She doesn't live with you. Daddy says you don't have to listen to Mommy stories if you live with her."

"Daddy's wrong. And that's a big mistake me and him both made. And I'm hoping." He held up crossed fingers. "I'm hoping that pretty soon. She'll be living at my house and telling me her stories again."

"I hope so too." Alexandra kept swinging her legs. "I like when you fight with her. It's funny." She reached up and grabbed his fingers. "Your shaking." She smiled.

"I know." Frank lifted his eyes from her. "And . . . Miss Jenny is waiting to take you back inside."

Jenny who had stepped from the school, held her hand out to Alexandra. "Come on Alex, we have to go back in. Say goodbye to Frank."

Alexandra slid from the wall reaching her small hands up to Frank's face. "I love you."

Frank smiled at the feel of the tiny hands touching his cheeks. "I love you too." He kissed her. "Be good." He tapped her backside as she ran to Jenny.

Jenny paused before going back inside with Alexandra. "Frank? Are you all right? You look like you don't feel well."

"I'm fine." He stood up. "Thanks. And uh thanks for letting me see the kids. I missed them yesterday."

"Sure Frank." Holding Alexandra's hand, Jenny took her into the school.

Smiling a simple smile, Frank waited outside the school watching it. He ran his hand over his head then sniffed through his clogged nose. Folding his arms close to his body with a shiver, he began to walk away when he felt an oddness on the ground as he walked. Wondering what he stepped on, Frank looked down and lifted his boot. There beneath his huge foot, laying semi-crushed was a mouse. "Weird." Frank bent down and picked up the lifeless creature by the tail, looked at it, shrugged, tossed it in the bush and continued on toward the nursery.

(2)

Henry fluttered his lips to repel the oil that dripped across his mouth as he lay under the truck near the field house. "She's leaking oil really . . ." Another flutter of his lips. ". . . bad. Did you know that Cole?"

"Yep."

"Well I'm not the truck guy. Frank and Robbie are. I can probably fix it but you should ask one of them."

"I would." Cole said. "But Frank is doing rounds or something and Robbie is testing that tacking system."

"Use the other truck." Henry cased his eyes back, looking around. He felt it on his lips again, and he blew out.

"This truck is bigger. I have a ton of shit to take to distribution."

"Well I have . . ." Henry wondered why the oil felt so heavy on his lips *and* it moved. Slowly he lowered his eyes, nearly cross over the bridge of his nose only to be greeted by two beady tiny eyes connected to a grey furry body. Henry shrieked.

"Henry what . . ." Cole heard the scream coupled with the bang. "Are you all right?" As he bent down to check out Henry he jumped from the way of the scurrying mouse. "Shit." Reaching under the truck, Cole pulled out the cart Henry laid on. "Henry?" He shook him. Henry was out cold.

(3)

Frank plastered him with kisses. Holding little Brian so tight, he just didn't want to let him go. But Brian seemed concerned with getting out of Frank's arms and running off elsewhere in the nursery. Frank lifted Brian's little cast arm and pointed at it to where he had written 'Dad'. "Look Bri, Daddy. Where's Daddy's name. Show me."

Brian pointed where Frank did.

"Good boy. Dad" Frank rubbed the boy's shaved head, it already was starting to grow back. "I love you." In baby talk Brian responded and Frank grinned setting him down. In the awkward, baby-tilt walk, Brian darted off. Having visited his last child, Frank moved on.

He found Dean in Andrea's office. So unsuspecting Dean was to the fact that Frank lingered in the doorway watching him rummage through Andrea's desk. And Frank kept thinking how much easier it would be for Dean to find what he was looking for if instead of leaning over the desk looking, he just walked around and opened the drawer. "Dean."

Dean's hand moved about the drawer, slowing down at Frank's call to him. It wasn't the usual loud and annoying one. "Here to gloat about being with Ellen?"

"No."

"Then why . . ." Dean sat up from his lean over the desk and looked at Frank. "My God Frank, you look like shit."

Frank stepped into the office, his head was low and he looked at Dean's through the tops of his eyes. "I need . . . I need your help Dean. Can you help me?"

Dean said nothing, he slid from the desk, walked past Frank and shut the office door.

(4)

It seemed to Frank like a well deserved prison sentence as he stepped into a holding room and set down his small bag. He let out a breath looking around the room.

Dean walked in behind him, placing a box on the dresser. "This will hold you until tomorrow. I'll check tomorrow to see what you need."

Frank looked in the box. "Supplies." He pulled out another box. "What's this?" He opened it. "Fuck Dean is there enough cigarettes in here."

"Honestly? Probably not, no. You'll smoke a lot in here." He walked to Frank. "I need your gun."

"What?"

"Give me your gun Frank. I need it." Dean held out his hand.

Frank removed it from the harness and laid it into Dean's palm, he watched Dean begin to look around the room. "What are you doing?"

"Checking to see if there's any other way you could hurt yourself."

"Hurt myself?"

"You're not heading on a picnic here Frank. Things are gonna get bad. Look at you now. You're pale, you're sweating, because you haven't had a

drink in nearly two days. You're headed right now into the roughest time." Dean motioned his hand to the bed. "Have a seat."

Slowly Frank waked over to the bed. "Dean, I know I'm gonna be up here for a few days. I don't want anyone to know why."

"They won't. As far as everyone will be concerned, you are quarantined for suspicion of tuberculosis. We'll tell them it was just a flu, and that will explain why you'll look pale and have a little weight loss." Dean found the chair and scooted it to the bed, sitting on it. "O.K. Frank." He leaned forward. "You are here to dry up. This is your detox. This will be the worst few days of your life. I can guarantee it. I want you to drink as much water as possible while you're here. I'll continue to check on you as if you were any of my other patients. I'll bring you up food, but to be honest, you probably won't eat. You may . . . what's today? Monday." Dean took a second to think. "You may eat something on Wednesday. I don't know. By what I figure, tonight things are gonna hit their worst. You will . . ." Dean began to spew forth his words as if he were reading from a list. "You will get the shakes, worse then you have right now. Much worse. You will sweat. You will vomit. The pain you will feel in your stomach will be unbearable, but that should subside by tomorrow, tomorrow night. The vomiting and the shakes will continue for about two days. You may hear voices. You may hallucinate. Your skin will feel like it's crawling, sometimes on fire. You'll feel like you're reaching your breaking point. But this normal and this is all part of cleaning out your system. It's an addiction that your body has learned to live with and you just have to show it during this next few days, how to live without the alcohol again. When you get out of here. You can not, *can* not, drink again. You'll have the urge, that will never leave you. But all it will take is one drink, and you're right back to square one. Got that?"

"Yes." Frank nodded his head, listening to Dean.

"I can help a little with the urges. If you need it, I can give you something that we can wean you off in a week or so. I can also give you an antibuse, which will cause extreme nauseousness of you do drink alcohol. Those are last resorts and preferably, you should do this without any help from drugs. My advice. For the next rough spots. Keep busy, smoking will help. Talking to someone will help. Come to me if you like. I'll talk to you. I'll help you."

"When do you think I'll get out of here?"

"Considering you haven't had a drink since Brian's accident. I'm going with Wednesday night or Thursday. Depends on your progress. I want you to not be physically ill anymore when I let you out."

"Well then I guess . . ." Frank reached to his belt and pulled off his keys. "I guess I'd better start this thing then." He handed the keys to Dean. "Lock me in."

Dean held the humongous set in his hand as he stood up. "There's plenty of blankets. But you're gonna go from hot to cold very easily."

"O.K." Frank followed him to the door. There was a lot of nervousness in his voice.

"Frank?" Dean turned around before he left. "What you're gonna go through, it's not going to be easy. It'll be very, very hard. But when you walk out this door, you'll be dry. You'll be clean and sober and I have every faith in you that you will stay that way."

"Thank you for that." He extended his hand to Dean. "Thank you for everything."

"You're welcome." Dean shook his hand and stepped back. "Good luck to you."

A sigh of a breath is what Frank let out when Dean left the room. He stayed by the door, listening to it lock. He turned around and faced the room before him and with that, he prepared to face the inner struggle he was about to embark upon.

(5)

"Good you're here." Joe spoke to Henry as he shut his door and walked to behind his desk. "You know why I asked you here. Where the hell did they come from? Why now? You're the goddamn theory man can you . . ." Joe halted in his lowering to the chair. "Henry, your head is bleeding."

"Yes, I know this Joe." He brought a cloth to his forehead.

"Don't you think you ought to do something about that?" Joe sat down.

"No I don't."

"How did it happen?"

"I got hit with another extreme case of bad luck. Knocked me out too Joe. I was out for a whole five minutes."

"Maybe you ought to . . ."

"No." Henry held up his cloth. "No. Let's talk about the mice situation."

"O.K., I got reports that we have them in town. Not many. And we've spotted them in the fields. Me alone, I killed four of them. Anyway, can we get mechanics to start building some traps until I speak to Dean about creating something?"

"No Joe. Mechanics is swamped. Especially with the tracking system going up. We do have twelve extra hands being trained in the security area. Maybe we can have Robbie and Frank tell them it's a drill and have them make them."

"Good idea. And if they can't. Perhaps you can reprogram them."

"I could do that."

"Easy enough. And wipe the blood. It's dripping."

"Sorry Joe." Henry brought the cloth to his head.

"Give me your theory on this Henry. Why all of the sudden are they here?"

"Me Joe. It's all my fault. I have this bad luck thing happening. And the fates know I hate mice. I hate them Joe and . . ."

"Henry. Seriously. No whining and wipe the blood."

"Sorry Joe." Henry wiped. "I spoke to Jason about this. He says that the mice are probably following the scent of us and our fields. The population of them has finally grown enough to move in small herds or whatever you call mice packs. And he says they diminished their food supply out there and are just coming in here."

"Well I don't want them and wipe that damn blood Henry."

"Sorry Joe."

"It makes no sense. Why now?" He tossed his hands up. "I mean I haven't seen a mouse since we got here. No wait, since that one single lone mouse you found and chased last year. You know the one you and Frank played with. I kind of forgot about that with all the time travel and . . ."

"Aw!" Henry whined loudly and stood up with a stomp. "Aw gees. Aw gees . . . Ow!" Henry cringed loudly when he smacked himself in the forehead. "I can't believe how dumb I am. Aw!"

"Care to share Henry?" Joe asked watching Henry pace. "And Henry . . . the blood."

"Sorry." Henry paced some more. "The time stuff. That's it. I should have know that's where the one mouse came from."

"What are you talking about Henry? Where did it come form?"

"Here. And now."

"What?"

"We have the mouse problem Joe." Henry walked back to his chair. "That's where it came from."

"Henry, you're sounding like my son. Maybe that bump on the head made you stupid."

"Would be par for course. But that's not it. In the time frame, I remember, I found that mouse the day after Jason got the note from himself from the future. With the seven second delay, that mouse probably came through with the rabbit."

"That's all well and fine Henry, but in *this* time frame, Jason never sent himself a note from the future."

"But it's the same premise Joe. How often was Jason fiddling with that damn time machine? That mouse could have come through in a possible experiment his future self was running. I'm surprised we haven't seen more. Especially if in the future, which is now, we have the mouse problem."

"Well then we have another aspect of the future I plan on changing. We're getting rid of the goddamn mice. And do something about that head of yours. Christ! It's bleeding Henry. Go to the clinic."

"No Joe. It'll stop."

"Henry you need a stitch."

"It'll stop." Henry covered the wound with his cloth.

"Why in God's name won't you go get that stitched."

"Because Joe, my luck is bad. And it would be my luck to go there, have them do an x-ray and find a brain tumor in my head. And then I'd die Joe because I knew about it, when otherwise had I not gone to the clinic to get stitched, I wouldn't have found out about it and I wouldn't have died."

"Christ." Just as Joe was about to plop his own head down on the desk he heard the light tap at the door. "Come in Dean."

Dean smiled when he entered. "How did you know it was me."

Wanting to tell Dean his tell-tale knock gave him away, Joe decided not to. "I asked you here. And while I got you, will you look at Henry's head."

Dean moved to Henry. "What about . . ."

"No." Henry jumped up. "Stay away." He backed away from Dean. "I don't want to die." He hurried to the door. "I'll be fine. Bye Joe. Bye Dean." Making a cross with his fingers, he held them up to Dean and ran from Joe's office.

Dean pointed back to where Henry was with his thumb, actually considered questioning it, then shrugged and remembered it was Henry. "What's going on Joe? Why'd you need to see me?" Dean sat down.

"Have you heard about the mice?"

"What mice?" Dean asked.

"Seems we have a bit of a sudden mouse problem."

"A lot?"

"We're not blanketed or over run by no means, but their little asses are scurrying about. We're seeing them here and there today, and in the fields. Mostly there."

Dean nodded. "They must have run out their food supply beyond our walls and now they're coming in."

"That's what I've been told. Which brings me to why you're here. Remember that poison you created when we first got here? We had a few rats and you wiped them out?"

"Oh sure I remember. We actually thought it got rid of the species."

"That's the batch. Can you recreate it?"

"No." Dean shook his head.

"No?"

"Not that I can't. I won't. When we used that stuff we had only seventeen people in this community. We didn't have the amount of children, nor did we have the fields. There is just way too much of a chance, *that* poison can get into the wrong hands. Their little feet will carry it everywhere. Not to mention it will be laced in their saliva , vomit, blood and feces."

Joe cringed. "Thanks for sharing Dean. So we're at a loss."

"No. I can create something that will make their stomachs explode."

"Excellent." Joe smiled. "Can you get on that."

"I can, but not for about a week. I'm gonna be swamped here the next few days or so."

"A week?" Joe questioned loudly. "Well I guess they won't reproduce that quickly now will they?"

"Nope."

"Is there any chance we can dump more work on Ellen if I remove her from containment and put her more with you?"

"No." Dean shook his head. "And that's something I need to talk to you about. That and the delay on working on your mouse killer."

Joe saw the sudden look of serious on Dean's face and he sat back and waded through Dean's silence. Then finally he listened to Dean explain.

(6)

Danny grabbed onto his stomach as he slid in a chair at his diningroom table. A television style monitor sat there, a huge receiver a quarter size his diningroom table sat next to it. Danny's house was now test headquarters for the tracking system. "Ready Robbie." Danny spoke into the radio, then flicked the switch. His lights flickered in his house and Danny quickly made a notation that the entire tracking system would need a huge power source. Within seconds the system started to beep loudly. His eyes moved to the monitor. "I have . . . twelve no, fifteen. Nine SUTs and six other, I'm guessing people cause the signal is strong. What's the verdict."

"Danny, my man." Robbie came back. "You are absolutely right." He imitated applause. "Good job. All right, shut down, we'll do this again."

Danny smiled at the success of his test, he reached for the switch to power down. "A couple more times Robbie and we should be good for today."

"Sounds good, because I can not wait to get back to the training of my twelve new men."

"Easy to do?"

"No easier than my men. I just have the torture factor with them. I can do what ever I want to them and they just don't know."

Danny laughed at Robbie, shaking his head, then grabbing his stomach. He powered down the system, watched the lights flicker and waited for Robbie's go ahead again.

(7)

Henry finally had to do it. He finally had to break down and go to the clinic to get stitches. He tried to work the day out, but he increasingly became annoyed when the blood just wouldn't stop trickling in his eyes. It

probably wouldn't have bothered Henry as much as everyone yelling at him did. So he went, figuring since it bled so bad he probably need a hundred stitches. But he didn't. He only needed three. Quick, easy and painless. Henry wished seeing the look on Dean's face as he walked back into the examining room was just as painless, but it wasn't. Dean looked straight down. "Dean? What is it?"

"I have . . ." Dean shook his head slow. "I have your x-ray Henry."

"What's wrong."

"It seems . . .": Dean hung the x-ray on the light and turned it on. "It seems you have a brain tumor Henry and it's worse now that you hit your head."

"Oh my God. Oh my God. I knew it. I knew it . I . . ." He saw Dean laugh. "What's so funny."

"I'm kidding you. Joe asked me to do that."

"Aw Dean. That wasn't . . ."

"I know, I know . . .Very nice." Dean smiled and walked to him. "You're fine Henry. Nothing is there."

"Oh good. Can I go?" Henry started to get up.

"Not so fast." Dean stopped him.

"But I really don't want to run into Ellen."

"You won't." Dean told him. "And that's what I want to talk to you about. Ellen. And with that, I have a favor."

Figuring anything at that moment was better than hearing he was going to die, Henry stayed and listen to Dean's request.

(8)

It startled Frank especially since at that moment he was jumpy enough. The unlocking of the holding door, made him jolt and spin to it.

"Thanks Dan." Ellen said as she walked into holding, listened to the door close and set down her small bag. "Hi."

"El?" Frank blinked several times. "What are you doing here?"

"Check this out. I too have been quarantined for suspicion of tuberculosis." She walked further into the room. "Hey, it's quiet. I heard they moved Harold."

"El." Frank closed his eyes. "Why are you here."

"Why are *you* here Frank?"

"You know why."

"Then I am making good on my promise to you. I told you I would help you every step of the way and I will. I'm here for the duration with you Frank. Not just because of my promise, but because I want to." She stepped closer to him. "How are you doing?" She reached up and touched his pale face, staring at the dark circles that formed under his eyes. "I am very proud of you Frank for doing this. Very proud."

"El." He removed her hand. "I don't want you to be here."

"Too bad. I'm staying."

"No El." Frank stepped back. Seeing him was one thing, if she touched him anymore she would feel him shake. "I don't want you here."

"And I just told you too bad. You need me here. For medical reasons and emotional reasons. Why are you arguing with me on this?"

"I don't want you to see me like this. And I don't want you to see me get like Dean says I will. A lot of stuff . . ." Frank shivered and brought his arms closer to his body. "A lot of stuff is gonna happen to me."

"I know." Ellen moved to him. "And I'll be a sense of support for you. I'll say nothing if you want me to be quiet. I'll be what ever you need to make it through this."

"Don't you understand sweetie. I just don't want you to see me get like that."

"And I would think it wouldn't matter to you in front of me. You don't think I've seen you at your worst?" She let out a chuckle. "I remember when you ate that rotten Twinkie Frank. You were bad. And what about when you broke out in those hives when you were eighteen years old?" Ellen pulled his arms from his chest and stepped to him. "I've seen you pretty bad Frank."

"Those times were different El." He wrapped his arms around her, holding her close and grasping her warmth.

"I know they were. And just like I was there for you then. Let me be here for you now."

"More than you know, I want you here." Frank pulled her closer, holding her, hiding his shaking. He laid his lips to her forehead. "I know you've seen me at my worst. But you El, you have never seen me weak. I just don't want you to see me weak."

"Weak? You think through out this I'm going to see you as weak? Oh Frank, I beg to differ." She pulled back some to look at him. "You are not weak. A weak person stays with his addiction. It takes a very strong person to take on the fight to give it up."

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

(1)

There was a certain hidden snicker to Dean's voice as he broke the truth to Henry. A snicker he hid well, letting it come across as sadness instead of humor. He watched Henry just sway his head back and forth as he sat on Dean's sofa. "So Henry, that is why Ellen had to be quarantined for TB."

"When . . . when did all this happen?" Henry asked.

"They were together last night." Dean explained. "They slept together."

"They made up fast."

"I guess. I sent Ellen to him like you said and . . ."

"Dean." Henry snapped. "You were supposed to tell her just to talk to him and help him. You weren't suppose to tell her to take her clothes off and sleep with him."

"Am I sensing a bit of jealousy Henry. I thought her being with Frank, didn't bother you."

"It didn't. When I was with her."

"Ah." Dean nodded. "So I take it you're not happy about this?"

"No. I might as well forget any chance I have with her now."

"She hates you now Henry."

"Still. If she didn't hate me. I might as well forget it. You might as well forget it. Frank's in control, we're out." Henry sighed heavily. "At least he didn't leave Beginnings."

"That's where it gets better. He never was leaving Beginnings Henry. He was only packing up to clear out his house so I could have more room."

"Oh swell, just swell. You made her sleep with him for nothing. And now she has tuberculosis"

Dean laughed. "I didn't make her sleep with him. And she doesn't have TB. She's fine."

"Oh you can laugh now, but wait until Frank gets well. Then he'll kill you anytime you touch her."

"If he doesn't know, he won't."

Henry's mouth dropped open in a gasp as he stood up. "Oh that is so wrong. That is wrong Dean. I'm telling."

"You would."

"I will." Henry moved to the door. "And since the kids are in bed, I'm going to fix something or other. I don't know." He opened up the door and in his charge through he nearly barreled over Ben. Suddenly the expression on Henry's face dropped. "Ben."

"Hi Henry." He peeked his head in. "Dean." He held up a pair of pants. "May I come in? I need to speak to you Henry."

Henry stepped back. "Sure."

"I have these trousers I need you to try on. I just finished the alterations." Ben pulled out a tape measure. "And I'd like to do the final fitting. We have less than a week."

"Final fitting for what?" Henry asked.

"The tux."

"Ben, there's no wedding. Or haven't you heard. It's been off for weeks."

"You just never know." Ben walked into the livingroom. "I love what you've done with the decor Dean."

"Excuse me." Dean, snickering went into the kitchen.

"Henry?" Ben held up the pants. "Ready?"

"I'd rather not. There's no reason to try them on."

"But what if there's a change of mind?"

"There won't be."

"I worked hard Henry. It'll only take a second."

"No." Henry shook his head.

"Oh don't be so grumpy. Be nice. Take these." He handed the pants to Henry. "Go on upstairs and take *these* baggy things . . ." Ben's hand reached to Henry's belt in a friendly tug. ". . .off."

Immediately Henry jumped back with a smack against Ben's reaching arm and a hard shove to him. "Don't!" Henry pointed at him. "Don't ever touch me again." He slammed the pants harshly into Ben and stormed off out of Dean's house.

(2)

Joe tried to understand it. But he had a hard time with it. So many questions laced his mind. He even sought out the answers to his questions. Like, why did Frank and Ellen have to be in quarantine for so long? Why couldn't they confirm it as being tuberculosis sooner? Any of the other tests took a mere hour to run. But Dean just told him it was a complicated case. And Andrea, she merely spewed forth the explanation she got when she posed the same questions to Dean. Frank and Ellen had to be quarantine for three or four days because there was a chance that Frank was exposed to--according to Dean--Tuberculosis type-A-7. Which Andrea quickly told Joe she had never heard of. And not only was it a bacterial neurosis, condyloma strain, but also a rare form of tuberculosis believed only to be transmitted through contact with the open warts of the rare Northern United States Yellow Toad, which Frank claimed to have been playing with. Those results, according to Andrea who spoke according to Dean, can only be given after three days.

Disturbed at the news that his family may have contracted a rare, deadly form of tuberculosis, Joe went to holding to check on them.

With keys in hand, he knocked once on their door. Upon receiving Ellen's 'yes?' Joe called out. "Hope your decent." And unlocked the door, walking in.

Ellen looked surprised when she saw him. "Joe."

"How are you Kiddo?" Joe asked looking at her sitting on top of the bed. The one side of the bed was unmade. "Are you feeling all right?"

"I'm uh . . . fine." Her eyes kept shifting around.

"Where's Frank?"

"He's in the . . ."

"El." So loud Frank called out and seemingly with such pain. "El. Please."

Ellen held her hand up to Joe. "Excuse me." She jumped from the bed and ran into the bathroom, shutting the door. Frank was on the floor huddled by the commode. "Frank."

"I can't do this El." He shook his head. His words filled with breath. "I can't do this."

"Come on Frank." She walked behind him wrapping one arm around his chest and the other to his head. "You can."

"I'm so sick."

"I know." She wiped his head and kissed him.

"How did I let myself get like this? How? I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"I know you are. Shh." She kissed him again.

"El I . . ." Frank let out an audible sound of his gut turning inside out and with that he lifted himself suddenly throwing his head over the toilet.

Joe heard the voices and the sound of sickness coming from the bathroom. With concern, he knocked on the bathroom door and opened it. "Is everything all right." He was stunned to see Ellen struggling to hold up his son. "Dear God."

"Please get out Joe." Ellen looked at him, holding Frank's head.

"But he looks awful. Maybe we should get Dean."

"No!" Ellen snapped. "He'll be fine." She kissed Frank feeling the vibration of his body struggling to bring up contents of an empty stomach. "He'll be fine."

Frank spoke through his dry heaving. "Please . . ." Another heave "Please tell him to leave El. Please."

Running her hand over Frank's head, she whispered to him. "I'll be back." Stepping from Frank, she grabbed Joe's arm pulling him from the bathroom and from his stares at Frank. "Joe."

"What's wrong with him?"

"He's just sick Joe. He's really sick." She leaned against the closed bathroom door.

"Then if he's that sick he should be in the clinic. He shouldn't be up here away from everything and everybody. What if he gets worse. You got

him locked . . .” Joe’s eyes went to the bathroom again. “Locked in here.” He walked to the door of the holding room. “I’ll let you alone.”

“Joe.” Ellen rushed to him.

“Take care of my son.” Joe opened up the holding door. “And El. I know you can’t tell him this. Because I guess I’m not suppose to know. But I’ll be thinking of him. I’ll really be thinking of him.”

“I know you will.”

“Good luck.” Joe walked from the holding room, closing his eyes as she shut the door. Shielded from the truth he was, but Joe supposed if he were in Frank’s position he too would want no one to know. But Joe did know, and though he left holding, he left behind a piece of him. The part that felt for his son, feared for his son and the struggle that his son had just taken on.

(3)

Being the head of security, even the temporary one, had it’s disadvantages as well as advantages. Robbie knew that when he took on the responsibility of filling in for Frank while he was out with Tuberculosis.. But Robbie never imagined that the head of Security position carried over even when he was off duty. Especially in the hall. Everyone looked to Robbie to take care of the most recent situation. And by the half way point through his first drink, Robbie himself needed to take care of it. There was nothing more irritating to Robbie then an obnoxious drunk. One that was loud, boisterous and one who just didn’t know when to stop or keep their mouth shut. So Robbie did what he had to do and what everyone requested of him. He ejected Josephine from the hall, taking her home and informing her if she didn’t stay put she would be thrown in holding.

Doing his job and ignoring her crying, shutting out her bitching and spurning her drunken old lady sexual advances, Robbie headed back to the hall. He was surprised that another had come in and sat at the bar. Henry. A glass of water rested in his hand as he slumped at the bar looking like a nightmare patron from the sitcom Cheers.

“Henry.” Robbie gave him a swift pat to the back and sat next to him. “This is odd. We don’t usually see you in here unless your fixing things or trying to get laid.”

Henry shifted his eyes sideways.

“Sorry, bad joke. But why are you here.”

“Taking a break.”

“From what?”

“Running.” Henry answered him.

“Running?” Robbie was shocked. “Why were you running.”

“To get away from the women.”

“Are they *all* wanting you now Henry?”

Again, Henry shifted his eyes.

"Sorry." Robbie hid his laugh. "So why were you running from the women."

"I got a little testy with Ben, and the next thing I know these woman are calling my name and following me. I think I lost them around the field house."

"Why were they . . ." Robbie didn't get to finish his sentence. The screaming 'there he is' made him hunch and he looked at the frightened expression on Henry's face. "Want me to get rid of them? He whispered to Henry.

"Please."

Just as Robbie stood up, Andrea, Jenny and five other women approached.

"Ladies." Robbie held up his hands. "Henry wishes to be alone."

Jenny stepped forward. "I don't care. We need to speak to Henry. Henry look at me."

"No." Henry answered.

"Henry I will spin that stool and make you vomit. I know how easily you do that." Jenny insisted. "Turn around. We have a proposition for you."

"I hope it isn't anything kinky." Henry spun his stool when he heard them all tsk. "And don't ask me to be Tom Cruise. I can't. Do I look like Tom Cruise. No. He's short."

"Henry." Jenny still continued. "We need a favor from you. You know how we're having this big gala on Saturday, you know the one that was supposed to be your wedding. Well we were wondering, and we'll pay up what ever it takes, we were wondering since you are the big reprogramming guy, and since you have that butler program Ellen told us about. We were wondering if perhaps, as council and inventive guy, you could reprogram the twelve new SUTs to be our servants at the party."

"Oh my God." Henry stood up. "You chased me around for that? For that. That is so stupid. I can't believe you'd chase me for that. I'm leaving. Bye Robbie."

"Henry." Jenny called out to him. "Will you think about it? We'll help you with Ellen."

Henry paused before going out. "Oh." He groaned. "I'll think about and talk to Joe." Reaching for the door and pummeled with thoughts of how grateful he was that what the women wanted had nothing to do with his bad luck, Henry was pummeled by something else . . . the door to the social hall. Screaming, "You suck!" at Hap, the clueless culprit who hit him, Henry, rubbing his arm, charged out the door.

After Henry left, Robbie heard the pleased, excited chatter coming from the small group. When he turned to look at them, he saw they all stared at him, like a group of hungry vultures. And knowing how he had to be the secret desire of at least one of those women and how he feared being

accosted by them, Robbie hurried from the bar and hid by the dart machine.

(4)

Ellen didn't know what to do, or what to say. She felt at a total loss, pacing around that small holding room, watching Frank struggle. Every time she would watch him come from the bathroom, holding tightly to himself, wanting to scream out, Ellen, wanted to cry.

He had yelled at her, telling her to leave. Frank had slammed his fist into the wall so many times Ellen feared his hand was broken. His skin on his arms was scratched and red from his pulling at it. Ellen kept her distance. She had learned over the past hours stepping too close to him was not good. He'd swing out in his move from her, yelling, saying things that Ellen would never put a thought into.

Turning out to be the longest night of their lives, Ellen hoped that the rising sun that would be rising soon beyond their closed in walls, would help bring some relief to Frank. But a part of her knew it wouldn't. Frank had gotten worse since they had dinner. He looked worse, he sounded worse.

Five a.m. neared, Ellen knew this because she had checked her watch when Frank sprang from the sleep he finally fell into less than thirty minutes earlier, and fled to the bathroom. His pain filled cry out went right through Ellen. She jolted at his every bang he made in that bathroom. His every yell. She even jumped back when he flung open the bathroom door.

"I can't do this." Frank swayed, speaking weakly, crossing his arms over his stomach and falling backwards into the wall. "I can't take it anymore El." His head flung back and a long, loud grunt came from his gut as his body shook and he banged his head several times. "El." Frank stumbled to his left, rolling slowly about the wall as if for some sort of support. First his shoulder, to his face, then laying his arms and cheek against it finding a soothing effect from the coldness of it. Rolling one more time he found his back into a corner. "El." His bare feet moved out and Frank slid slowly down the wall, bringing his knees up to him, hovering his long arms across them and burying his head. "Help me Ellen."

So scared to reach out for him, so scared of what his mental state could do, Ellen apprehensively walked toward Frank. Her heart pounded as he huddled there. "Frank." She whispered and took another step to him.. "I'm right here." She held out her trembling hand close to his lowered head.

Slowly Frank raised up his head only enough to expose his eyes. Seeing her hand, he tossed out his arm, grasping tightly to her wrist and pulling at her as he pulled himself to his knees and with such desperation, tugged at her until she dropped with him to the floor.

The moment Ellen reached the floor was the moment Frank fell over into her. His head dug deep into her chest, his arms held tight around her as his legs cradled in a fold against hers.

Ellen swallowed her emotions and wrapped her arms full around him bracing his head close to her, planting her lips to him, rubbing her cheek against his hair and becoming drenched with the sweat of his body.

"Take it away El." Frank spoke so raspy. "Please."

"I wish I could. I really wish I could."

"Talk to me El. Talk to me. Tell . . . tell me." He sniffed loudly, his voice shaking as much as his body. "Tell me a story. Anything. Keep talking to me."

Words of encouragement was not what Frank needed at that moment and Ellen was aware of that. His mind needed to be sent elsewhere, away from his body and what he was experiencing. He called out to be taken, maybe somewhere within the deep hypnotic effect of Ellen's voice. Somewhere. Anywhere.

"I remember Frank." Ellen spoke so soft to him. "I remember the first time I danced with you. We were just kids. And we were in our apartment, it was snowing out. We couldn't go anywhere. We were stuck. And you Frank, you and your one track mind back then only wanted to fool around. And I kept telling you . . ."

" . . . after we finish our anatomy."

"That's right." Ellen kissed him. "And then you said that fooling around was part of anatomy. I didn't fall for it. And my song came on the radio. I asked you to dance. You made fun of me for liking such an old song. But you danced with me. You were so tall compared to me, not as tall as you are now. But it was a reach for me to dance with you. I guess now, I'm used to dancing with you. And we laughed during that dance. You called me old because of the song. But that became our song. And do you know when that dance became one of my favorite moments with you?"

Frank shook his head 'no'

"It was when you bought the tape of that song and you used to play it. You didn't think I knew. I did."

"That's because . . ." Frank spoke breathy. "It made me feel you."

Ellen felt his hands grip tighter to her back. "I loved you back then. No where near as much as I love you now. I should never have given up on you. I should never have given you up. Never. If we had stayed together, imagine where we'd be."

"Beginnings."

Ellen snickered. "True." She kissed him again. "Frank, I want you to know. There wasn't a day in my life that went by where I didn't regret not having you. Every single day I thought of you. Every single day I wished I hadn't ended us. I started to fear growing old, because I didn't want to grow old with Pete. All those times you and I, as kids, talked about how we would be the only ones who would put up with each other. All those times

we said that when we were eighty we'd be stuck together and sitting on the front porch of some house, drinking coffee when it was a hundred degrees. Being the old people that the kids on the block would annoy by playing loudly in front of the house. Stepping on our perfect lawn. But you know what Frank? We're gonna have that. We're gonna be eighty years old together. We may only have steps to sit on and we probably will never have a yard, but will sit together Frank. We'll sit together."

"Just don't become Josephine."

Ellen laughed and ran her hand down to his arm, pulling it some from her and grabbing his hand, she leaned more into the wall, Frank's body weight still against her. "We did it Frank. We stood the test of time. And we still love each other. We've become what use to amaze us when we were younger. Remember going to the park or to the mall and walking around? We used to get so amazed at the older couples, the old people there. We also used to gross our selves out . . ." She chuckled. "When we would talk them having sex." She felt Frank snicker. "But even through our warped stories of, what we thought he would do her, and was she still orally copulating him . . ." She laughed again. "Through all those stories, they still amazed us. How they still loved each other through all those years. I never thought that was possible. I thought they just got used to each other. But they held hands, and that gave it away. They still held hands. And though I firmly believed and was quite adamant about how you really didn't love me, how if you were with me, it was out of habit, you knew. You knew Frank, didn't you? You knew . . ."

" . . . I would never stop holding your hand." Frank lifted their joined hands and smiled slightly at them, bringing her fingers to his lips and kissing them. "Never."

Frank didn't shake as bad, he had calmed some giving his little injections here and there into Ellen's stories. Long stories, some she had recanted more than a dozen time. But that was to be expected. He knew Ellen too many years not have a repeat of tales. But he didn't mind, he wanted her to talk. It helped. And he listened.

Ellen continued talking throughout the rest of the night to Frank, and probably well into the next morning. It was difficult. It was the first time Ellen had seen someone go through this. It was hard enough for her to watch, let alone watch someone she loved battle an illness they brought upon themselves. And Frank battled it like he did with all his fights. He battled with everything he had, but only this time, he battled with Ellen by his side.

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

AUGUST 14

(1)

He was moving into his day with only two hours sleep, but Frank didn't mind. He was moving into his first full day back into Beginnings. He tucked in his white tee shirt and strapped on his shoulder harness. So early he was going to start this day, he had to. Frank had so much to catch up on, and he knew well without checking, that Robbie didn't do one of those stupid reports. But even the stupid reports were a welcome.

Standing before his dresser mirror getting ready to go, Frank felt different. For the first time in a long time he stood in his bedroom and he didn't dread the evening that would come. He knew it would be difficult, part of him told him it always will. But he was stronger. And there was one big difference in his life. He had Ellen back--sort of.

His eyes drifted to the photograph of Ellen he had on the corner of his mirror. A Polaroid taken in the cryo-lab when they just uncovered it. How annoyed she looked in the picture. How Ellen hated the picture. But Frank, he loved it. Though Ellen would argue, it was a perfect picture of how she always looked. He picked it up running his fingers over it missing her already even though she had just left a few hours earlier. And Ellen's leaving was something Frank was going to work on. If Frank had his way, she would have stayed. But he had her all week and most of that day and night. Sharing the evening with the kids since Dean wouldn't let him work. Catching up on Alexandra gossip. Both of them walking the kids back to Dean's, putting them in bed, annoying Dean. Then going back to Frank's, both of them saying it was to talk. But both of them knowing it was to ease Frank's slight nervousness over being home his first night dry.

Alone was not what they got, which was good to Frank. Robbie stopped by along with Joe and the four of them, like they use to, lost track of time deep their conversation. Staying up most of the night reminiscing. An unwritten Slagel tradition that spanned decades, only this time the Slagel tradition happened less the alcohol.

Setting down the picture, Frank knew it was time for him to head to work, early but head off there. Making his way from his home to town, walking and enjoying the cool morning, Frank realized how early he was when he ran into Henry.

Henry was startled when he saw the dark shadow jump out at him. He grabbed his chest. "You scared me Frank."

"Why?"

"I thought you were the grim reaper or something finally coming after me." Henry kept his pace up to Frank's. "Heading in already?"

"Yep." Frank looked ahead. "Where were you last night?"

"What do you mean?"

"I thought for sure you would have come over and visited. I haven't seen you in a while."

"Well Frank, by the time you got out, I had already started getting engrossed in the tracking system. We're putting it up today. And . . ."

"Excuses."

"No-no." Henry shook his head. "I was busy."

"I had all the kids, I thought for sure you would have stopped to see them or at least . . . Ellen."

Henry stopped walking. "No. I don't want to see Ellen. Not yet."

"Henry." Frank faced him. "Stop this. You guys were such good friends. Why are you doing this?"

"I just can't face her Frank. Not until I face what happened."

"But what about facing it with her?" Frank gripped Henry's arm. "Of all people. Out of anyone. Ellen is the one who knows what you're going through. She is the one that can help you the most."

"I thought of that. And I justified that in my mind." Henry raised his shoulder and rubbed his ear with it. "But . . . what if I bring it up. She finally told me about that after all this time. What if she thinks I'm comparing the two occurrences. Frank, by doing that I may insult her. What happened to her is far worse than what happened to me."

"Henry, just because the final outcome isn't the same doesn't make what happen to you any less severe. Talk to her."

"No." Henry shook his head. "What if I tell her? She'll see me like that forever. She'll picture that in her mind and I don't want her to look at me like that. Weak."

Frank had to chuckle a bit at that. "El won't see you as weak. I didn't think it was possible, but I learned a little more about her this week."

"You guys are back huh?" Henry's head dropped.

"You could say that." Frank smiled wide. "Yeah, we're back. And that's why I'm getting on you here Henry. You're messing up the trio. You're letting Dean in. Come on."

Henry look as if a small amount of happiness hit his face. "You still want to let me in your lives?"

"Of course I do. You're my best friend. But you have to get off your ass here. I'll work on it on my end."

"Thanks Frank." Henry lost his smile. "But not yet."

"We'll work on this Henry." Frank started walking again. "But you know, I still think that was a lame excuse for not stopping by last night."

"Can I be honest with you Frank?"

"Yes."

"With the way my luck has been, I was kind of afraid."

Frank was puzzled. "Afraid of what?"

"Afraid of catching tuberculosis. I mean, you do have that rare strain . . ."

"Henry."

"And you really shouldn't touch the kids yet with having it."

"Henry." Frank tried to interrupt.

"Of course if you weren't playing with frogs you wouldn't have . . ."

"Henry." Frank grabbed him and stopped him. "I don't have tuberculosis."

"Sure you do. Dean said you do."

"No." Frank corrected. "Dean said I may have it."

"Still Frank, You can't be too sure and uh . . . I really wish you wouldn't touch me I know I'll catch it. And with my luck, I'll die right away."

"Henry." Frank started to laugh. "Dean only said that to cover up the truth. I didn't want anyone to know. I was embarrassed, but most of all because I was scared I couldn't do it. He had me in holding because I had to dry out. I quit drinking Henry. I did it."

Henry's mouth dropped open and he grinned wide. "You really quit?"

"Yep. Haven't had a drink in a week."

"Oh my God Frank." Henry jumped up hugging him. "I'm proud of you!"

"Thanks Henry." Stepping back from the hug, Frank ruffled Henry's combed hair.

"Aw Frank." Henry tried to straighten it. "It took me fifteen minutes to get my hair right."

"Why do you care?" Frank said as they started walking again. "Just shave it off."

"No!" Henry snapped. "And besides, my hair has to look good. I work a lot with Danny. Have you seen his hair? Always perfect. It's embarrassing. I look sloppy." Henry walked a little more then stopped. "Shit. Frank? Ellen was with you up there."

"Yeah she was." Frank said somberly.

"Oh my God Frank, did she have to dry out too?"

"Fuck Henry what do you . . ." Frank looked solemn again. "Yes, yes she did. And it's all because of you. You drove her to the bottle."

"Oh my God." Henry looked panicked as he walked. "I knew it. My luck again, see." Shaking his head, he didn't see Frank laughing in their walk to their divisions. If he had he wouldn't have stayed so worried.

(2)

Dean could have set the mug of coffee down a little easier when he set it on the night stand by Ellen's head, but he needed to jolt her. Not just by the aroma of his nice morning offering, but by the sound as well. "Let's go El." He pulled at the covers. "I'm not calling you again."

"I'm not your child." she brought the covers back up.

"Get up." He pulled them back down and opened the blind.

"Dean!" She yelled out. "Cut it out and shut the damn blind."

"Get up."

"Go to hell."

"Ellen." He tsked at her. "Such attitude. I brought you coffee." He sat on the edge of the bed next to her. "See how nice I am."

"You're the prince." She could smell the clean of him. How long had he been up? "Dean please, I just went to bed."

"So. Choose."

"Choose what?"

"Get the kids up and dressed or make breakfast. Which one?"

"Sleep."

"Not a choice Ellen. Come on."

"God can you be annoying." She sat up in bed, running her fingers through her hair and grabbed her coffee. "The kids aren't up yet?"

"Nope. You guys didn't bring them back until late." Dean looked at his watch. "It's time though." He stood up. "And don't forget you're picking them up today. Bring them here, Frank will get them later."

"Just tell me why I can't go back to sleep."

"Because you have to help me with these kids and we have a ton of work today. We touched no where near what we needed to touch yesterday."

"You kept Frank in holding extra long."

"I kept Frank in holding until he went twenty-four hours without being sick." Dean walked to his dresser and grabbed his shirt. "And don't complain about being tired. You went to bed late."

"That's because I got home late and had to clean your house. Which by the way you are getting lazy at."

"Well you wouldn't have gotten home so late had you not been fooling around with Frank all night."

Ellen laughed. "You think that's what I was doing. Ha!" She set her coffee down. "If I was fooling around with Frank then we were doing it in front of Robbie and Joe. Not much fun in that."

"You continue to shock me Ellen."

"What?" She got out of bed. "That I didn't fool around with Frank?"

"And the fact that you came home."

"I live here!" She tossed her hands up. "You keep missing that fact Dean." She headed to her dresser, pulled out clothes and walked to the door. "And if you don't start being as domesticated as you used to be, I won't live here anymore." She moved to the bedroom door. "And another thing." She pointed. "You should change that shirt. It's wrinkled."

"So."

"So? If you hung those up they wouldn't get wrinkled."

"Ellen."

"And one more thing."

Dean rolled his eyes. "What now?"

"I'm not making the bed. I barely slept in it."

"Take your shower." Dean waved his hand at her.

"You rinsed out the sink from shaving, didn't you?"

"Yes, why would . . ."

"I gag when I have to brush my teeth and I see those little hairs spewed forth all . . ."

"Ellen!" Dean walked to her shoving her lightly through the door. "Go."

"Oh my God, I can't believe you're pushing me like that. And you need a haircut."

"Go."

"You're putting me in a bad mood, you know that don't you." Ellen bitched. "I didn't get much sleep and here you are shoving me around . . ."

"El." Dean covered her mouth with his hand.

Ellen removed his hand. "You can silence me now but you have to work with me all day." She stepped back and walked to the bathroom. "Don't think I won't let you hear it all day either." Her voice faded. "And I hope to God you rinsed off the bar of soap." The bathroom door shut. "I hate used bubbles on it."

Dean tossed his hands in the air, his head spun. "Why did I even wake her up?"

(3)

"How much are we draining?" Danny asked Henry, walking with him to the new Tracking Station.

"Not much. I just think with everything else in your house it just overloaded it."

Danny shook his head. "Good thing I got that fire out huh?"

"Good thing." Henry pulled out his clipboard. "We should have the lines for areas two and four run out there by four o'clock. We can hook those up then. Possibly running another series of tests on those regions."

"How often will security run tests on the system once it's fully operational?"

"Will they have to at all?"

"What do you mean?" Danny asked.

Henry opened the door to the new monitoring station. "This." Henry pointed to Mark who sat before the high squealing, beeping monitor, holding his ears. "See what I mean?"

Danny laughed. "What's wrong Mark?" He asked loudly.

"I can't take this!" Mark shouted back. "We're picking up every squirrel and rabbit in the three mile radius."

Danny looked at the video signal, weak, the slow blinking of the light told him that the motion signal picked up was not that big. "Maybe I should adjust the values. What do you think Henry?"

"We can do that. Lower them a little."

"Until then." Danny shouted to Mark over the loud noise. "Can I give you a little advice?"

"Yes!" Mark was willing to listen, then watching a reach of Danny's hand, the noise stopped.

Danny grinned. "It's called volume control." He patted Mark on the back.

Mark so frazzled, ran his hand about his own hair. "I need to get back in the field. Between the security room, the tracking room and communications room, I'll be flipping out when my alarm clock goes off."

Danny shook his head then checked out the time. "Frank and Robbie will be here soon to see how this place will run. We're gonna do a full scale test on what we have, before we shut it back down to hook up the other . . ." The odd feeling of being examined overwhelmed Danny, he shifted his eyes to Henry staring with a bewildered look. "Something wrong?"

"Your hair."

Danny sprang up. "What's wrong? Does it look bad?" He spoke rapid and with concern.

"It's fine. How do you do that with it? How do you get that . . . that look? We were just tromping through the woods."

"It takes a few extra minutes in the morning."

"I put a few extra minutes in the morning into my hair. I can't get that look." Henry shook his head and folded his arms. "Do you use our Hair Hold."

"Just a little. In the right spots."

"It doesn't work for me."

"Have you considered . . . maybe cutting your hair just a little and maybe adding a few more layers."

"Will it work for me?" Henry asked, deep in his conversation with Danny, not paying attention to Mark who's head went back in forth listening to them. "I have some layers. Andrea is timid about cutting it."

"Go to Bentley."

"He won't cut it too short?"

"No way." Danny waved his hand.

At that moment, Mark had all he could take. He stood up. "Can I take a break?"

Frank's 'no' as he walked in the room, sat Mark back down. "Hey." Frank looked around. "Check this place out. You guys worked hard." He looked at the system. "Is this it?" He pointed. "This is great. Good job. And Mark, what is wrong with you?"

"Them." Mark held his finger to them.

Frank looked to Danny then to Henry, and knowing the two of them, didn't question Mark anymore. "Go take five Mark. And search out Robbie."

"Thanks Frank." Excited, Mark jumped from his chair and flew out.

"Man, what did you guys do to him?"

Danny shrugged. "Don't know."

Henry interjected. "We were talking about hair Frank."

"Hair?" Frank questioned.

"And speaking of hair." Danny said. "Frank, have you ever considered letting your hair grow in some."

Frank's mouth opened, but Henry spoke. "He tried that Danny. A couple years ago, It's too curly."

"Maybe he didn't have the right cut."

"You might be right. We didn't have a stylist."

"And people with thick curly hair can't just let their hair grown in with out good cut. They'll have no control."

Henry snapped his finger. "And speaking of control. We didn't have Hair Hold back then either."

"Whoa." Danny laughed. "I bet your hair was flipping all over the place huh Frank? You have that texture."

Frank's eyes shifted. "I'll uh . . . I'll be right back." Spinning quickly, and rolling his eyes, Frank too, like Mark, made his haste escape from that station.

(4)

How much longer could he go on was the not the question on Private Tom Collin's mind. How much further did he have to go to be free from them was the one. Running. Running without stopping, huffing fiercely out of breath and in horrendous pain. Private Collins only looked back when he thought he heard something behind him, otherwise he kept on going, despite the hurt and despite the fact that he had been shot in the back.

The Caceres Society army arrived twenty-two miles north of Beginnings. Arriving like Minute Man missiles. Taking the long route, coming in from Canada and settling. But the Society army had one big advantage. The knew the flight schedule of the reconnaissance flights of Beginnings. So the army knew when they could arrive in the small town. Knew when they had to stay within the structures and they knew when they could move about.

Why they were there and what they would do was the reason Tom Collins started to leave. He found out things he didn't want to know. A plan he disagreed with. Little did he expect when he disobeyed his order to return, that he would be shot in the back. And it was only after he had taken a bullet that he started to run.

He wondered if they chased him long, if they chased him at all. He started to feel safe. And with the relief of that, Tom Collins started to get dizzy and weak. He fought to keep moving knowing full well that once he stopped, they would find and finish him off. Even the thought of that didn't bother Tom that much. He'd rather die while on the run, then die amongst men fighting a battle they didn't even think about.

Tom couldn't run anymore. His steps began to stammer and the bright day around him began to spin. With the struggling last step, Tom fell harshly to the ground. With the feel of the grass clenched between his fingers he heard the sound of it. He raised his head so weakened. As he heard the 'nay' of the horse again, he saw the hoof and the legs, then Tom's head plopped down and he passed out.

(5)

Joe couldn't recall when the last time he was at the cryo-lab was. Yet there he was making his way down there. It seemed weird, almost uncomfortable to him, but wanted to find Ellen. They were taking a break from the virus, Dean told him, and working on a community project. What that could be, Joe wondered. His curiosity peeked even more when he heard the laughter and giggles coming from the closed door of the lab.

Buzzing himself in, Joe heard the voice, but saw no one. He heard a shriek, Ellen shriek and it came from the back. That was when he noticed it. The windows on the lab area where Henry used to work could no longer been seen through, there were smeared with something, a substance, red and brown. "What in God's name?" Joe moved closer and jumped back when he heard another shriek, followed by a laugh. "Hey." He peeked in. "Oh shit." Joe stepped back.

Ellen turned from Joe, laughed, then face him. "Hi Joe."

Dean peeked around the bend. "Hi Joe. What are you doing here."

Joe stood with his back facing them. It was strange enough that Ellen and Dean had settled into the old Henry-lab, it was even stranger the way they were dressed. Raincoats, both of them, hoods pulled up and tied tightly around their faces and goggles. But the strangest thing was the lab itself. Splattered with red, the blood of some animal, the fur of the animals stuck to the wall as well. "What are you two up to?"

"Check this out Joe." Dean said. "I almost have your mouse killer."

Joe thought about it for a second. "Wait a second, I thought you were making something that would explode their stomachs . . . only"

"Uh . . . I am." Dean told him. "The only thing is I am having a bit of a problem getting it right, I keep exploding the entire creature. Give me some time, I'll have it for you."

"Where did you get all the mice to explode Dean?" Joe asked.

"Mice." Dean looked at Ellen.

Ellen looked out the door. "They aren't mice Joe. They're rabbits., or were. Silly. You actually thought mice would make this much of a mess." She turned back to Dean. "How much longer till the next uh . . . test."

"Should be happening in five minutes."

"We really need to quicken the effect." Ellen said. "Joe? How come you're here. Come to check on your mice eliminator?"

"No. I came to talk to you, seriously."

"I didn't do it Joe." Ellen held up her hand.

"No, I know. But I need to speak to you about Henry."

"Talk. I'm listening."

Slowly Joe turned around to face her. "Dear God do you look ridiculous. Can you at least take off those stupid goggles so I can talk to you?"

"Sure." Ellen removed her goggles. "Hey Dean give me a count down on those rabbits, I have my goggles off." She looked to Joe again. "Go on."

Feeling like he was talking to Daffy Duck, Joe spoke to her. "I need you to put your foot down and get to the root of Henry's problem."

"Nope."

"Nope? Ellen, the man needs someone to help him though this. You and I discussed this."

"I know. He doesn't want my help."

"So what. Help him. Put your foot down. His moods are so up and down, I can't keep up with him. He had an incident with Ben while you were in Holding."

"Oh shit, did Henry turned gay?"

"No!" Joe yelled at her. "He got rough, shoved him, snapped at him. Ellen. Swallow your goddamn pride and be a grown up about this."

"A grown up? I'll have you know Joe . . . I'll have you know . . . you . . ." Ellen smiled. "I see through the corner of my eyes, the large descending belly of that one rabbit. When I yell 'duck' you better duck." Ellen put on her goggles. "Ready Dean?"

Joe caught her attention. "Ellen. Will you?"

"I'll think about it."

Joe could see Ellen was preoccupied, but she was thinking about it. That was good. And another good thing was, they finished their conversation at that point, because Henry walked into the lab. "Henry."

"Hi Joe. They said you were here. Why are you here? And why can't I see through the windows of Henry-World."

"They uh . . ." Joe pointed. "They were fixing it up. Come take a look."

Seeing no harm in that, Henry moved to the back lab. He was like the new kid. The one who joined the game so late into it, he was clueless about the rules. He should have paid attention to the rules, deep within him he knew them. But had he paid attention,. And had he seen something in the fact that Ellen, Dean and Joe all hit the floor when Ellen yelled 'duck!'

Henry would have too. And if he'd done so he would have spared himself the nausea, over turned stomach, and vomiting that hit him at the same time every internal portion of that one rabbit exploded outward and landed all over him.

(6)

Slow, very slow, George typed. And he only used two fingers to do so. He never was much of the typist, nor did he want to be. Looking over his work for errors--ones that he would fix by hand--George found his latest letter to one of his divisions heads acceptable. Capitalizing a letter that he missed, George reread it one more time.

August 14

Dear Captain Richards,

All seems to be going as planned in the Garfield Take-over. Coordination of our attacks are in motion. Please be advised that it appears back-up from your division's army will not be necessary at this time. You may continue with Operation Clean Sweep in your region and any other training maneuvers of your men you deem necessary for future needs.

Sincerely,

President George P. Hadly

George folded the letter neat, creasing the seems tightly. On the smooth side of the letter he addressed it to 'Captain James Richards, League of Caceres Society States, Lexington Region'. After flipping over the letter, he reached for the very tiny ladle he had setting in the heating wax. Adding a small dot, he grabbed his presidential seal and stamped the letter closed. He stood up with his letter and left his office. His 'Pony Express' equivalent would be leaving at first light, and George wanted to be sure he had that letter in his hand.

(7)

If their voices weren't loud enough, Frank and Robbie sounded even louder, echoing as they walked through the front tunnel to the gate area. Danny tried to block them out as he walked behind them wishing they would have brought the jeep, so much shorter the argument would have lasted.

"Frank, I am not a babysitter." Robbie complained.

"You are today. And so am I."

"Anyone else can sit out here with Danny when he attaches that thing. I was out here an hour ago when they ran the lines."

"And you'll be out here now."

"This sucks. Why can't I be at the other sites when they're running the lines."

"Cause I want you here with me." Frank was adamant.

Robbie grunted loudly. "I have other things I can be doing Frank. I still have to be at containment in an hour."

"Robbie, quit being a baby."

"A baby? Fuck you."

"Fuck you."

"Oh my God." Danny laughed. "This is too funny. Have you guys always fought like this? I bet Joe really considered an orphanage as a second home for you two when you were growing up." Danny hid the smile when both brothers stopped cold and spun to look at him. "Maybe not."

"He couldn't have Danny." Robbie said. "I didn't grow up with Frank too much. He was older than me. *Much* older than me."

"I am not."

"You are to." Robbie snapped. "You're fuckin old Frank."

"I can kick your ass Robbie."

"Only because I let you."

"Yeah right."

"I'm telling you bro." Robbie spoke arrogant as they neared the front gate. "Look in the mirror. Old. Grey hair, probably hiding the fact that you can no longer get it up."

"Oh fuck you Robbie."

"Getting a little on edge about it Frank. I hear that old guys sometimes get defensive when faced with . . ." Robbie stopped walking. "Shit."

Frank lowered his microphone to his headset. "Down the front gate. Now." He spun to Danny. "Run back and get the jeep." He tossed him the keys. "Hurry."

Danny set down his tracking system equipment. "Right away Frank." He stepped back, turned and took off running.

Waiting to hear the buzz that the gate was down, Frank rushed through with Robbie at his side.

Robbie immediately bent down to the body of a man. He laid there, back bandaged and wearing only blood stained underwear. "He's alive Frank."

"That bandage looks fresh. Lift it."

Robbie untied the thick string that wrapped around the man's torso to hold the cloth bandage. As he peeked under the bandage, his eyes raised to Frank. "Bullet wound."

"Shot Gun?"

"Nah, rifle. Looks like he was shot from a distance. No burns." Robbie turned the man toward his back. "And it didn't go through. Unless whoever bandaged him got it out. It's still in there."

Frank took a deep breath, slowly through his nostrils, he heard the sound of the coming jeep. "All right. Let's get him inside." Bending down to help Robbie lift the thin man, Frank paused to grab Robbie's cell phone which was hooked next to Robbie's radio.

"What are you doing Frank, we have to get him into the clinic."

Frank ignored him and kept dialing, he held his finger up to Robbie as he listened to the phone get answered. "Hey Dean. It's me. You alone?"

"Uh . . . no."

"Then don't let on that it's me. Listen, how fast can you run one of those tests to see if someone has the virus."

"It's only a matter of minutes."

"Good. Meet me at receiving ASAP and bring what you need."

"I'm on my way."

Frank hung up the phone and handed it back to Robbie. "He waited how long till we found him, he's gonna have to wait a few more minutes for help."

"Good thinking Frank." Robbie secured under the man's head then lifted the man with Frank and carrying him to the jeep. Then just to be on the safe side, made sure Danny went no where near him.

(8)

Joe sat alone in Andrea's office, waiting for answers to come from all angles and they weren't coming fast enough. How long had he waited, an hour, two? Though he kept doing his business about Beginnings along with everyone else, he kept checking back. And now he sat, a result of his last check in with the clinic when he was told it would only be a matter of minutes. So comfortably, wanting that cigarette he couldn't have in there, Joe waited.

It wasn't the person he expected to give him answers, but she would do. "Andrea."

"Hello Joe." Andrea walked in and sat down across from Joe as he sat in her chair.

"Where's Dean?"

"He had to get home." She slumped some.

"You look beat."

"I am. I'm hoping to catch me a nap before my meeting tonight."

"You do that. So what can you tell me about our newest arrival."

Andrea slightly rolled her eyes at Joe's lack of concern and opened up the chart. "John is . . ."

"Hold it." Joe stopped her. "John?"

"John Doe. John is approximately twenty-eight years old, Caucasian as you know. In good health. No signs of infection, illness. Nor, according to Dean, of our future virus either. Dean's pretty confident that he isn't

carrying it either. He isn't in your typical survivor shape. Body's toned, clean, nails are even trimmed. His underwear are newer, home made." Andrea raised her eyebrow. "He has a single gunshot wound to the upper thoracic region. We have him stabilized and the bullet is still in him. It is embedded in near the third thoracic vertebra. Fluid is engulfing it and right now, his state is too fragile to operate and remove the bullet. We're hoping in another day or two we can go in."

"Does this mean when he wakes up and if he's well he'll be crippled?"

"Not necessarily. We don't know. He's still unconscious, he lost a lot of blood. The wound was cleaned and dressed when he got to Beginnings. So that's good sign, less chance of infection in or around the spinal region."

Slipping back in thought into Andrea's chair, Joe sprang back up when Frank walked in. "Frank, got something for me."

"Not much."

"So I take it because the tracking wasn't up in the front gate, we never got a signal that he was there?" Joe questioned.

"We would have. The way Danny designed the system is that, they kind of all over lap. There's a very little window that someone could slip through if one of the trackers were down. But . . . They weren't up. None of them. We had them powered down while we ran the other lines." Frank stepped further into the office. "Robbie and I canvassed the entire front gate perimeter out for about three miles and circling in and around. Nothing. No blood, no foot prints. It's obvious that this guy was in no shape to get here on his own. No one carried him here. We did find some prints in the mud we think are a clue."

"Can it be ours?" Joe asked.

"Nope. We have about eight horses here Dad and to the best of my memory, they never leave our walls."

"Horses?" Joe folded his hands on the desk. "Savages?"

"Highly. Highly doubtful" Frank said. "Savages come in packs. This was one horse, or at least we believe it to be. The man's wound was dressed and cleaned. Savages let their people die."

"Well where did he come from then." Joe wonder in question to Frank.

"I think a better question would be, who brought him here." Frank began to explain his reasoning. "My first instinct was the society, which that was quickly ruled out when Dean said he didn't have the virus. I thought for sure this was one of the ways they were gonna hit us with it. So that was out. He's not a savage. He's too clean, his hair is short and he was wearing underwear. They were clean and in good shape. We know the savages didn't drop him off, like I said before, one of their own, they let die . . . too much of a burden. They'd kill and rape the man before they would even consider bringing him here. Rule out a survivor out there that brought him in."

"Why's that?" Joe asked.

"If a survivor brought him here, then the survivor would have stayed."

“Then who the hell brought him here.”

“Don’t know.” Frank raised his hands. “That to me is as big of a mystery as who this guy is. Because his arrival tells me, whoever dropped him off didn’t know him and they knew we could help him more than they could. And it appears to me Dad, we have one more group of people out there. And I don’t like it one bit. Because the bad part is, they obviously know about us, but we haven’t a clue about them.”

CHAPTER SIXTY

(1)

Plastered with a hug and a jump into his arms, Dean was grateful for Alexandra's greeting when he came home. "Hey honey." He kissed his daughter holding her, then bending down to Brian in a reaching grunt to kiss him. "Where's Billy and Joey?"

"Mommy's says they're being Frank and Dean."

"Really." Dean chuckled. "Playing a game are they?"

"No. Fighting over my Barbie."

"Where's Mommy Alex?" Dean looked into the diningroom. "Is she in the kitchen? I see she's putting dinner on the table."

"Daddy." Alexandra placed both her hands firm to Dean's cheeks. "Don't go near Mommy."

"Why?" Dean smiled.

"She's gonna yell at you."

"No she's not. How do you know?"

"She's been practicing yelling at you for a while. Saying your name, saying loud things."

"Maybe she got it all out of her system by . . ." Dean cringed when he heard Ellen loud sharp calling of his name. He kissed his daughter setting her down. "Go upstairs Alex." Putting on a smile, Dean looked up to see Ellen standing in the diningroom. "Hey El."

"You're so late."

"I know." He walked to the table. "Dinner smells good."

"You know I have this meeting tonight. I want to do my hair."

"El, I had that John Doe to deal with. Remember?"

"Oh yeah. And I'm still pissed at you about that."

"Why?"

"You didn't let me know. Acting all secretive, leaving me with the bunny guts to clean up,"

"Sorry." Dean reached to the large bowl of salad on the table. "Did you stop at distribution. This lettuce looks fresh."

"Dean. Quit picking. You wouldn't be so hungry if you were on time."

"Ellen."

"And another thing. Do you know you left a load of laundry in the washer. It started to stink Dean."

"I'll wash it again."

"That's not the point."

"What is the point Ellen." Dean started walking to the livingroom.

"The point is you can't leave a load of laundry in the washer. You have to finish the . . . where are you going?"

"We're trying this again." Dean walked out the front door, paused and walked back in. "Hey El, I'm home."

"You have to finish a load of laundry that you start Dean. I'd finish it if you would . . ." She saw him hold his hand up to her again. "What now?"

"We'll try this again." Again Dean walked out the door, waited and walked back in. "Hey El, I'm home."

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I'm trying to have a nice greeting when I come home. The last thing I want to hear is bitching when I walk into my own house."

"Your own house? I live here too Dean."

Dean stopped in his walk by her. "Yes Ellen. This I know."

"Oh my God. Look at you being all mean to me."

"I am not being mean to you."

"Yes you are. You made that face."

"What face?" Dean headed to the kitchen.

"This face Dean . . . look at me . . . Dean this face . . . Dean . . ."

"Ellen." He spun to her. "All right, make the face." He watched her give a mean stare. "Oh I did not make that face."

"You did Dean. And you're acting all resentful that I live here."

"Where in the world are you getting that?"

"Because you aren't in this house ten seconds and you're yelling at me an making faces at me."

Dean, frustrated, ran his hand harshly down his face. "Ellen." He stepped to her, laid his hands on her cheeks and kissed her. "Please. Just . . . please no bitching." He kissed her again. "Go get ready for your meeting, I'll finish getting dinner on the table and I'll feed the kids."

"O.K." Ellen moved back from him. "But it's late, I don't have time to do the dishes."

"You don't have to do the dishes El."

"Well they have to be done." She walked to the steps. "I don't want to come home and find them in the sink again Dean. Do you know how . . ."

"El."

"What?" She paused in her walk upstairs.

"Can you send the boys down?"

"Do I have to do everything Dean., damn it." Ellen stomped the rest of the way up.

Dean closed one eye and winced, giving a silent apology to Joey and Billy for their receipt of Ellen's extremely loud 'Boys! Dinner!'. Heading to the kitchen, Dean could hear Ellen above him complaining while she got ready. It reminded him so much of years earlier when they used to live together before. And at that instance, with those vivid memories, Dean wondered briefly why he really wanted it all back.

Like a ten year old child who did not know what to do with himself, that was how Henry looked to Frank. Slumping in the chair, Nick resting conformably in the creases of Henry's joined legs. And Frank watched Henry while he picked up the house, baffled at how much of a mess could be created in the short time since he picked up the kids. "Henry."

Henry lifted Nick's arm, letting it drop, lifted it again. "He really doesn't do anything does he Frank."

"He's a baby Henry."

"Yeah but after ten minutes there isn't much you can do with him. He only makes that one face." At that point Henry proceeded to imitate it and looked oddly at Frank when he laughed loudly. "What?"

"God that baby and you look so much alike. Even the hair."

"If he were a girl Frank I could do his hair. Put a little ponytail in it like I do for Alex. I should have had daughter."

"Either way Henry." Frank walked over and sat on the couch. "At this point in the kids life, they'd still be a baby and they still wouldn't do anything."

"They're so boring."

"They're babies."

"There's nothing more I can do with him but stare. How long do you suppose one can stare at a baby without getting completely bored."

"Henry, give me him." Frank reached out and took Nick, cradling the baby against his own chest. "What are you doing here?"

"Visiting Nick."

"Aren't you supposed to be playing Tom Cruise at that meeting."

"Oh no Frank. Besides the fact that's really dumb. I never rehearsed it with Ellen."

"So." Frank shrugged. "Go over there anyhow. Jerry McGuire and his wife didn't rehearse. Go over Henry."

"I saw the flowers in the kitchen."

"Why are you changing the subject?" Frank asked.

"Are they for Ellen."

Frank hesitated. "Yes. Robbie picked them for me to give her when she comes over tonight. Bitched about it, but picked them."

"That's really nice." Henry sadly let his fingers fiddle with the fabric on the arm of the chair.

"Henry . . ."

"Do you realize that it will be a year tomorrow that you started packing up to go get Ellen from Colorado?" Henry spoke slow, like in a daze. "A year Frank, only a year. So much has happened in that year hasn't it? Doesn't it seem longer. I mean, how has George built everything up so fast? I've been thinking about that you know. I was thinking that when we released that first group and took them to Colorado, they must have released their people in New Mexico and they had to have spread out fast."

"That was the plan Henry. Had we known we could have stopped them before they ever left."

"Do you suppose John Matoose knows about everything?"

"I haven't clue what John knows. We do know he hasn't been in the communications room in two weeks."

Henry's head swayed back and forth. "What is he up to now?"

"I thought for sure the fax would have led him straight to George. But, as far as we can tell. He hasn't even tried."

"Do you think its because something is gonna happen."

"Yep." Frank closed his eyes for a second and then kissed Nick. "And how did we get so far off the subject? I was about to call you 'Tom'."

"I can't do that Frank. Though there's nothing I would like more than to talk to Ellen. Not so much about what happened, but about nothing. Just get into one of those conversations that we used to have., Going back and forth without any silence. Besides the fact that I don't know if I can do it, I think I have burned my final bridge with her."

"You have to try. I'll tell you what. I'll make you a deal. You go over and try, just try to be that friend again and I'll . . . I'll . . . I'll change everyone of Nicks diapers for you for one month."

Henry's head sprang up. "A whole month? How about bathing him too."

"Not like I don't do most of his baths, but yes, I'll bathe him too."

"Can I have the flowers?"

"Henry." Frank gave him a smirk. "No, what are you nuts. Those flowers are my key to getting laid to . . . getting . . . take the damn flowers."

"Thanks Frank." Henry sprang up running to the kitchen to get the flowers. "This is great." He came back out holding them. "No diapers for a month, no baths and I get to give her flowers." He stopped cold. "What am I doing?" His arm dropped.

"You're going to be Tom." Frank stood from the couch and nearly shoved him out the door."Go. And remember this time, they want you there." Frank opened the door for him.

"I can do this right?" Henry asked.

"You can do this." Frank hurried Henry out and closed the door. "Probably."

(3)

Divided into teams of four, the women were in Jenny's living room. Two teams remained, battling out who would be the champions of Beginnings Jeopardy. Jenny was the hostess of the event, standing before them, the rest of the women cheering on. A huge game board she had made herself perched on the chair behind her. Jenny looked over to Josephine who sat in a chair keeping score, she doubled check her just incase

Josephine was cheating again, or made a mistake. She often did that when she had too much to drink.

"O.K." Jenny said chipper. "Cindy it's your team's turn. Pick a category."

"We'll take Beginnings' Entertainment for twenty Jenny."

Jenny snickered at the 'ooh' that filled the room when she pulled out the question. "I'm the most recent form of entertainment. Enjoyed only by the men. I can take hours to accomplish. Minutes to set up. Some say I'm even more fun when played drunk. What game am I?"

They huddled, Cindy's group did and with a nod, Cindy stood up. "Are you . . . Find the misplaced brain-dead field workers?"

"Ding, ding, ding." Jenny said. "Twenty points Josephine, write that down. Two . . . zero, that's right.. Ellen, your team."

Ellen looked pleased. "We're going for it Jenny, give us Dirt of the Earth for twenty-five."

So cocky Jenny looked, taking that question from the slot. "Here it goes . . . I was originally labeled Beginnings' biggest pervert. Staring at butts, men or women from the second I came in. Now I am labeled Beginnings' highest trusted pervert. Who am I?"

Ellen's eyes widened and she spoke very seriously. "Henry."

Jenny made a buzzing sound. "No Ellen, weren't you listening. I said 'when he came in'. Henry was always here."

"And he is now." Ellen said with a slight point.

Jenny turned around and said so excitedly. "Oh my gosh, Henry's here. Everyone take a seat." She shuffled her body to the couch. "Wait Henry, don't start." She squeezed in. "Hand me the popcorn. Quiet everyone." She grabbed a handful of popcorn. "Go on Henry. We're ready." Jenny nudged Cindy's arm and whispered. "Look he got her flowers. Nice added touch. Give me a tissue."

Henry nervously stepped in. "I feel really dumb about this. I'll just . . . " He set the flowers on the table by the door. "Set these down so I don't look too much like a sap. But they're for you."

Ellen didn't say anything.

Henry ran his hands through his hair, then dropped them. It was so apparent how nervous he was. "El, I had this whole speech planned for last week. It seems really stupid now to say it."

A loud eruption of moans began in which Jenny's voice emerged. "No say it Henry, say it. You left off last week saying something about a blind man. I guess you meant Dean. Say it."

So on the spot Henry felt. "Can I try something else please? It might hold the same effect. I hope." He waited for the mumbles to stop. "El, I don't know how much more I can say. I've said I am sorry so many times. But if you want me to, I will say I am sorry everyday for the rest of my life. I'll say anything to you, just to be able to talk to you. I miss my friend. I really miss my friend. I miss our tea. Our gossip. I miss having lunch with

you. I can't do anything right anymore. And I know that has a lot to do with the fact that something is missing from my life. That something is . . ."

"Stop." Ellen stepped to him.

"You aren't going to yell at me again are you?" Henry asked frightened.

"No." Ellen shook her head. "You had me when you walked in the door. And this isn't an act Henry. You had me."

Jenny's loud mouth shouted out into the awkward silence between the two. "Hug her. Go Henry you're ruining it." She whispered again to Cindy. "I better get my servants tomorrow."

Henry stepped to Ellen, his hand reached out to her first laying it on her face, feeling it in a grip. He closed his eyes, moving closer to her to embrace her when he heard the loud outbreak of cheers and hooting that filled the room from the women. At that instant he mind flashed to the last time he heard hooting, and it was a painful reminder to him why he had avoided Ellen. Releasing his hand from her face, Henry sadly stepped back. "Sorry." Shaking his head he hurried form Jenny's home.

"Henry." Ellen called out in the room that went dead with quiet.

"Henry." She chased him out. "Wait."

"I have to go." Henry turned to walk.

"It was an act wasn't it? You only did that as an act?"

Henry didn't turn around. "Yeah El, I did."

"Look at me and tell me that."

Henry shook his head.

"Henry." She grabbed his arm trying to turn him around. "Look at me."

"I can't." Henry pulled from her and walked away quickly.

Standing there filled with confusion and embarrassment, Ellen swallowed her pride and went back into Jenny's house. She knew when she walked in there that the feel of the room would not be pleasant. And Ellen tried to cover it up, smiling at the women, speaking upbeat. "That was good wasn't it? We did good. Are you happy? I didn't think he'd go through with it. But didn't he remind you a little of Tom Cruise?" Ellen's eyes moved to the flowers by the door. "And . . ." She picked them up. "I got flowers."

Before anymore could be said, there was a single knock at the door and Ben and Todd walked in. "Ladies." Ben called out. "The dresses are nearly complete. Final alteration time!" He noticed the quiet of the room. "We're not going to wear them. Are we?"

Andrea stood up slowly from her seat gazing at a loss at the dress Todd held. "No." She moved to the blue garment running her hand down it, lifting the tag that said her name. "We're not going to wear them. We decided, no wedding, no dresses. We thought we would, but we can't. It would be a little sad, don't you think? Sorry Ben."

“Wait!” Ellen held up her hands. “All of us have planed this big party. This was supposed to be a wedding. Ben and Todd worked their asses off on the dresses and the tuxes. So why can’t we have a wedding huh? So what, Henry won’t marry me.” So strongly Ellen spoke. “So what. But you know what? Cheer up ladies, cause tomorrow afternoon Beginnings is going to have the first and biggest wedding ever here. Complete with food, entertainment, servants and . . .” She touched the wedding gown. “Dresses.” She moved to the door. “Start planning. Ben and Todd get your sewing kits ready for the final alterations. I’m going to go talk to him now.” She started walking out the door. “Guaranteed. There *will* be a wedding in Beginnings tomorrow.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

AUGUST 15

(1)

A look of 'proud' barreled over Frank's face as he stood at the alter by Reverend Bob watching Ellen begin her procession down the aisle. Paul's perfect organ playing of *Trumpet Voluntary* added to the feel that surrounded him in Beginnings' small, but packed chapel. So beautiful Ellen looked to him. Perfect. More beautiful than he had ever seen her in their entire lives. She literally took his breath away. As he watched her walk nearer to him, Frank felt his heart pounding from his chest. So enamored with her at that moment he stopped noticing the choking he had felt from the bow tie he wore. All he could feel were his feelings for Ellen. And though he never thought it were possible, Frank swore right there and then, he fell in love with her all over again.

Ellen had barely reached the end of the aisle when Frank couldn't wait anymore. He approached her holding out his hand.

Reverend Bob tapped him on the shoulder. "Frank."

Frank ignored him and laid his hands on Ellen's face.

"Frank." Reverend Bob tapped him again. "You're not supposed to be doin this."

"Shut up will you?" Frank snapped in a whisper at Reverend Bob then faced Ellen. "You look beautiful." He leaned to kiss her.

"Frank!" Reverend Bob had enough. "Get back. The bride would like to make her approach."

"All right." Frank pointed, kissed Ellen with a smile and stepped back. As best man, he took place behind the groom. He nudged him when the Bridal March began, looking up the aisle. "I can't believe she's gonna be my mom."

Through his gritted teeth, Joe spoke to Frank. "Quiet." He put on his best smile, faced the aisle and watched Andrea, wearing that off-white wedding dress, walk down the aisle toward him.

At the end of the march, Joe and Andrea joined arms and stepped before Reverend Bob. He opened his bible. "We are gathered here today." Reverend Bob spoke with passion. "In God's house, to join in holy matrimony, this man, Joseph Anthony Slagel and this woman Andrea Gertrude . . ." He shifted his eyes to Frank and Robbie's snickering. ". . . Gertrude Winters." He continued on, ignoring the childish behavior of Joe's children. "God gave us the gift of marriage. And for that, we should cherish it. Joe, Andrea, today for the two of you this isn't just a joining of marriage, but a joining of families." He gave a stern scolding face to Frank who loudly moan 'oh my God'. "Before we begin, Jenny has a poem so fitting for this occasion, she would like to share it with you. Jenny."

So serious Jenny stood before the congregation as she read her poem. "Today . . . Joe and Andrea get married. We hope . . . that their lives don't get hairy. Troubles so often may cause them to fight. But they will try hard, really hard not to with all their might. And all of us know their love will prevail. And they'll live happily ever after until they get even older. Thank you." Giving a loving smile to Andrea and Joe, Jenny retook her place as a bridesmaid next to Ellen.

Frank looked with a snicker to Robbie. "Hey, that didn't rhyme at the end."

"I know. Now see that will drive me nuts all day." Robbie commented.

"Me too."

"Kind of like sex without the orgasm."

"You aren't kidding." Frank nudged his brother thinking he was being quiet. "Hey Robbie? Jenny's your partner. You have to dance with her."

"I wouldn't have to if Ben wouldn't have refused to do the final fitting on Henry."

"I heard he punched him."

Robbie shook his head. "I heard slapped."

"Boys!" Joe shouted. "Can I get married? Christ . . . sorry Reverend continue."

"As I was saying though the chitter chatter of annoying men." He looked at Frank and Robbie. "Joseph Anthony Slagel, do you take this woman, Andrea Gert . . . Boys . . . Gertrude Winters to be your lawfully wedded wife? To have and to hold . . ."

"Yeah." Joe interrupted.

"I didn't finish."

"Yeah but I know all of that stuff. Yeah, I'll do it."

Trying to remain calm, Reverend Bob faced Andrea. "Do you Andrea take Joe to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold, from this day forward, in sickness and in health, for richer for poorer till death do you part?"

So dramatic Andrea spoke with tears rolling like a waterfall down her cheeks. "I do."

Frank covered his eyes. "Oh God. I can't watch."

Robbie leaned into him. "Do you suppose Dad will slip her the . . ."

"Robbie." Frank spun to him.

"Boys!" Joe yelled. "Let the man finish. Christ . . . sorry Reverend."

Reverend Bob wiped his forehead, looking more forward to the moonshine punch than any food they would serve, "Then by the power invested in me, by the Land Of Beginnings Montana and by God. I now pronounce you Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Slagel. What God has joined together, let no man or children put asunder. You may kiss your bride Joe."

Frank whined so loudly turning from the view of his father embracing then finally kissing Andrea. "Tell me when it's over Robbie."

"Not yet."

"Now?"

"Not yet."

"What the fuck is he doing. Foreplay?"

"Now."

As Frank turned back around, he grunted at the backhand to his gut his father gave him. "Sorry."

Reverend Bob had one more announcement. "As a special request from the bride, she has asked that a special song be played for the recessional." He nodded to Paul who then began to play. It was slow, deep, gospel-like.

Joe and Andrea began their decent arm and arm.

Frank walked out with his arm out to Ellen. "Ready."

"Yep." She took it.

"Nice ceremony."

"Who are you kidding, you didn't pay attention."

"You're right."

Ellen stopped cold center aisle when Paul began to sing. "He isn't."

"He is." Frank began walking with her again. And he and Ellen laughed the rest of the way from the chapel. Laughing at Robbie's 'quit touching me' remarks to Jenny. But most of all laughing as Paul wailed out with such emotions, his very own, soul-filled, gospel version of . . . The 'Silly' song.

(2)

So typically wedding the music Paul, the disk jockey played. Elevator renditions of pop music for the pre-dinner feel, it was almost as if he were being obviously sarcastic.

"You O.K.?" Ellen asked Frank, looking up to him.

"I'm fine." Frank answered, so preoccupied. "I'm gonna go talk to Henry."

"Why?"

"Look at him El." Frank motioned his head to the table where Henry just sat, slumped in the chair his fingers playing with his drink. "Look at him."

"Nope."

"How can you be like this? The man and you have been friends, close friends since the beginning and now you can't even be civil to him. Look at him."

"You weren't there last night."

"No I wasn't. But the guy lost it. Come on he's been through a hard time. Try again." Frank pleaded.

"No way Frank. I'm done with him. There's no room for Henry in my life."

"There was before. El . . . you're making me feel guilty for being with you."

"Don't you do this." She pointed at him. "Don't even pull a Henry. If you feel too guilty to be with me, walk away now Frank. Right now. I won't put up with this from you."

"You know what I'm saying to you. It has nothing to do with being with you. It has everything to do with Henry as my friend."

"You know if he wanted me back Frank, that would be one thing. He has walked away from every attempt I had made and . . ." Ellen fiddled with a curl of her hair. "You're making my hair fall by aggravating me. I'll be back."

Shaking his head, Frank turned to view the table Henry sat at and made his way over. Before he reached the table, a SUT approached him.

"Care for a beverage sir?" He held a tray to Frank.

"Um no. Thanks." Frank couldn't help but laugh at how odd it was having waiters. He approached the table Henry sat down at and Frank pulled up a chair. "Henry."

"Hi Frank." Henry spoke monotone.

Frank noticed as Henry tried inconspicuously to watch Ellen. "Go talk to her."

"I can't. Every time I try I get scared. And she won't talk to me."

"Go talk to her now Henry." Frank motioned his head. "She's alone."

"She looks beautiful Frank."

"Yeah she does. And anytime you want, you can throw a compliment in about me." Frank ran his hand down his tux. "I dress up well."

"Yes you do." Henry smiled slightly.

"If you don't talk to her, at least go tell her how good she looks. Women will listen to that shit."

"O.K., I'll try it." Slowly Henry stood up, took a sip of his drink and walked across the room to Ellen. Her back was to him and he tapped her lightly on the shoulder. "El."

Ellen turned around and faced him.

"I just wanted to tell you." Henry placed his hands in his pockets. "You look very nice today."

A look, a single look and Ellen walked away from him.

Frank immediately covered his eyes shielding himself from the look of hatred Henry gave him. "I'm sorry." He told Henry when he returned.

"You set me up all the time Frank. I'm going to stop listening to you." Henry plopped back down in the chair.

"I'm sincere."

"Sometimes I wonder." Henry lifted his drink. "No. You know what? I can't blame you." He swayed his head slowly. "I made this mistake. I screwed this up on my own. I swear Frank, I swear I've reached the lowest point in my life." Henry sighed heavily. "And I thought today wouldn't bother me so much. It does. And before you say it, not Andrea and Joe getting married. Though Jenny's stupid poem has me left on edge. But this whole wedding. This . . . this was supposed to be mine and Ellen's wedding. She was supposed to be wearing that gown, not Andrea. I was suppose to be wearing that one tux, not Robbie. And you know what makes matters worse. I feel, I feel that had I not screwed up again last night, today would have still been our wedding day. And I lost the chance. I'll never get it back. She'll marry someone else. She'll marry . . . you."

Frank swallowed and leaned in toward the table. "Henry." He spoke soft. "I have to ask you something." There was a slight nervous quiver to Frank's voice. "How would . . . how would you feel about that? If El . . . if El married me again."

"How would I feel? Hurt. Upset. Angry. And not because she would be marrying you Frank, but because I would not be a part of it. I always believed that between you and I, when it came to being with Ellen, it wouldn't matter who was married to her. We work off each other. You and I are better friends that any two men in this community who have an understanding. We've gone passed any jealousy we could have over one another. But none of that matters now. She won't even be my friend."

"Henry. Do you think I want any of that to change. Any of our plans. You think I want to have an understanding with Dean?"

Henry's head quickly turned to him. "You wouldn't."

"Am I gonna have a choice?" Frank spoke with edge. "If I'm gonna have to share her Henry, I want to share her with someone, I know, in a heart beat would share her with me. Someone who is as much my friend as Ellen is to me. That's you. And someone who would walk away for my happiness." Frank sounded so serious. "You did that. You gave her up for me. You didn't mean to lose it all, I know this. That's why I want to help. But you still Henry, you still gave up something you wanted for me."

With lowered eyes Henry faced Frank. "Would you do the same? Would you give her up for me? Would you . . . would you walk away from a moment you wanted, from a moment you have waited for, so she could go to me?"

Frank was silent staring back at Henry, then he answered. "So how 'bout them SUTs being the waiters. You guys did a good job."

Henry had to laugh, he had to as he sat up more in his chair shaking his head. "I knew it."

"Henry look, I . . ."

"No Frank, forget it. You gave your answer."

"No I didn't."

"Yes you did." Henry still chuckled in disbelief. "You could have at least lied to me."

"Henry, you asked an unfair question. Come on, we have over twenty years behind us."

"You're right." Henry held his hand up. "That was unfair. I shouldn't have asked that. I knew the answer. I guess I just wanted to hear something to make me feel good. But who am I? I rank under you, under Robbie, under Dean . . ."

"What about me?" Dean sat down at the table.

Frank lifted his head looking so annoyed. "Did we ask you to sit here with us?"

"No. But I am." Dean scooted his chair closer. "How's it going Henry. You O.K.?"

Frank's hand raised and fell hard on the table. "Look at him just coming in and taking over the conversation. Dean. Go away."

"Frank. Shut the hell up."

"EW." Frank shivered and proceeded to rock on the hind legs of the chair.

Dean rolled his eyes. "Anyhow. This wedding certainly turned out to be the surprise union of the century, didn't Frank. Your Dad and Andrea."

"It sucks." Frank grumbled. "Especially since Andrea's in her fuckin flighty mode. She asked me dance with her, she said she wanted to dance with her oldest son. I'm not dancing with her, she'll probably see a smudge of dirt on my face and do that licking her fingers thing."

Henry cringed. "That is so gross. I'd gag if she did that to me."

With smiling eyes, Dean looked at Frank. Then wiped the thought of calling over Andrea to clean Henry's face, from his mind. "So." Dean cleared his throat.

"Dean." Frank snapped. "You think we care what you're gonna say."

"Frank." Dean came back sarcastic. "Do you think I care what you think. And I'm going to talk, so just rock back in forth in your feeble mind manner and let me go. I was going to say, last night when Ellen came home all excited, telling me she would be really late because the wedding was going on. I thought for sure she was marrying you Frank."

"No way?" Frank snickered. "When she stopped by to tell me she wasn't coming over for that reason, I thought for sure she was marrying you."

Henry sulked. "When I heard there was a wedding, I thought it was Robbie and Ellen."

"Robbie!" Frank questioned loudly. "I'd kill him. Why would she marry my brother?"

Dean answered that one. "To annoy everyone. You know Ellen would do something like that just to throw a monkey wrench into everyone's lives."

"Dean." Frank snapped his chair forward. "Seriously. If she came home and asked you to be the one to marry her. Would you?"

Dean laughed, then Dean laughed harder. "For as much as I love her, for as much as I would love to have that to hold over your head Frank. Probably not. Not now. She's too . . . I don't know. Out there?" Dean shrugged.

Frank nodded in agreement. "Most of the time. Yeah. Hey, at least she looks good in the dress Andrea was supposed to wear."

"It's hard to appreciate it Frank." Dean said. "You weren't there. It was a grueling, grueling process her getting to the point of what she looks like now." He flicked his hand as he leaned to the table. "It started this morning. No wait, it started in the middle of the night. She bitched at me for hogging the bed. Then she gets up this morning bitching because she's gonna look horrible because she didn't get a good night sleep. Then I took too long in the shower. I used up all the hot water. I wouldn't wear a tie. I aggravated extra wrinkles on her face. Her hair was too tight, her hair was too loose. How her hair not being right is my fault I'll never know."

"Dean." Frank smirked. "Haven't you learned yet what to do when Ellen bitches. She has bitched about anything and everything since the day I met her. You gotta just say, 'all right El, whatever' and move on."

"No." Dean argued. "No way. That's giving in. I won't give in to her bitching."

"Yeah but learning how to pacify her is the path of least resistance, it doesn't aggravate you as much. Trust me." Frank explained. "Ask Henry. Henry, what did you do when Ellen bitched at you?"

Henry looked up from his sulking stature. "She never bitched at me Frank. Not like she does to you and Dean."

At that instant, Dean cleared his throat loudly to gather their attention to the fact that Ellen was approaching the table.

"Frank." Ellen spoke his name with a sharp whine. "You have to tell your brother, he's threatening to disappear before the bridal dance. Talk to him."

"I'll do that." Frank said.

"And . . ." Ellen continued. "You have to do the speech now. The SUTs are getting ready to call everyone to the buffet. Come on." She held out her hand to him. "And Dean, Aw Dean come on." She tsked. "What did you spill on your tie. We just got here."

Dean looked down and lifted up his tie. "Where?"

"There." She pointed.

"Ellen, there isn't anything there." Dean stated.

"Of course you wouldn't see it Dean, you didn't see the fact that your tie was wrinkled. One event. I let you wear jeans you should have at least kept your tie clean."

"Ellen." Dean snapped. "There's nothing on my tie."

Ellen huffed and grabbed Frank's hand. "And Frank." She sounded as if she was slipping into bitch mode with him. "You can't unbutton your vest. Not yet. It's not right."

"O.K." Frank shrugged and buttoned his vest. "Dean said it was all right. Sorry El."

"Dean!" Ellen shook her head and rolled her eyes then leaned closer to him. "Why would you tell him that?"

Dean stared at her for a second, then shifted his eyes to her, and Frank, who looked back at Dean while wiggling his fingers in an arrogant wave. Dean huffed outward. "See what I mean Henry. See how lucky you are she doesn't bitch at you?"

"Yeah but Dean? I'd rather have her bitch at me than treat me like she just did."

"And how is that?"

"Like I wasn't even in the room." Grabbing his glass, Henry slid down in the chair, at least one thing would make him smile. Frank's best man speech. And Henry knew, let Frank start talking and who knows what would come from his mouth.

Frank held the glass of water in one hand, and the microphone in the other. He debated on whether to sing just to annoy everyone, but he decided instead, to give the speech he hadn't a clue on what to say. "All right . . . so my father says to me." Frank spoke loud. "He says last night, 'Christ Frank. I gotta get married.' Not that he didn't want to marry Andrea, I don't know if he did, I guess he did, he was sleeping with her. Anyhow, he tells me I have to be the best man. Which I figured I would be because why would he want Robbie. But then I found out I had to give a speech.. O.K. I could do that. So here it goes. Dad, I hope you make this one work. And I think you will as long as you don't make the same mistakes you made in your other three marriages." Frank held his glass to Andrea. "And you, Andrea, I've known you for a lot of years. And I know you're this superstitious lady, so don't think it's a bad sign that it's raining out. It might be, but probably not. So good luck to both of you and uh . . . happy marriage or something like that." He raised his glass. and there was silence. "Come on!" He yelled at the people. "That was the toast." Listening to the muttering of voices as they raised their glasses in good luck, Frank checked out the evil stares he got from his father. "What? The speech was nice." Waving his father off, Frank took his seat next to Ellen. "El? How was my speech?"

"I thought it was great Frank." She kissed him on the cheek. "I thought it was very Frank-like."

"Thanks El." Frank smiled, not once picking up any of the sarcasm in her facial expressions or tone.

(3)

It was a party destined to move on through the night. Not because it was the best party ever, Beginnings had seen better, but because it was a party and in Beginnings, it also was something to do. The faces changed during the night, security kept making post changes so everyone could be there. Everyone seemed happy. Jenny Matoose proudly dance with Blake while John was on his watch. The children that weren't sleeping, ran amongst the adult legs, some sliding on the floor. Joey being the biggest culprit. And the older people, they found entertainment watching the children play. Especially Brian and Jenny's baby, Caroline. The two, one year old children, both kept in their walkers, continued in a fevered game of bumper walkers.

With his hand held tight to Ellen's, Dean danced with her. "You know I have to go."

"I know. But I just really like dancing with you. My neck never hurts."

"Gee thanks Ellen." Dean smiled. "And I'd love to dance with you more. But I promised Patrick I would relieve him at the clinic so he can enjoy some time here. Besides I wanna run a few more tests on our John Doe."

"Let me know what you find?" Ellen asked.

"Of course." Dean turned his wrist to see the time. "And I'm already late."

"Do you need help with the kids?"

"No, Denny coming to help. Henry's bringing Nick to the house. It'll be crowded, but fine. I won't be at the clinic too long. Melissa has next shift."

"Are you coming back here?"

"Doubtful. I'm not the party person, besides it's already pushing my bedtime." He released her from the dance. "And . . ." He kissed her quickly. "I have to go. Have fun." He laid his hand on her cheek. "You looked great tonight."

"Thank you." Ellen smiled at him, watched Dean dart off to gather the kids and she went off to find Robbie. A fast song was playing and he was the only man who danced well enough--other than Henry--That didn't embarrass her on the dance floor.

Frank danced with who he called 'his favorite girl'. He held her tight in his arm, swinging her around, making her laugh. Really enjoying the dance and getting more out of her smile than any words that could be spoken. This to Frank was what it was all about. Life going on. It was a rare

moment in Beginnings, an old fashion wedding, equipped with the songs from the past. And it would be a moment on the dance floor he would treasure forever.

Dean hated to interrupt, but he had to go. He had the kids rustled by the door, Denny and Henry standing there waiting. "Frank. She has to come with me."

"We're finishing our dance Dean."

"But I really have to go Frank."

"I'll walk her home as soon as we're done."

"All right." Dean stepped back. "But don't play outside in the rain with her."

"I won't." Frank winked at Alex and adjusted her in his arms. "Bye Dean."

Dean kissed his daughter, then joined Henry, Denny and the kids who waited by the door.

"Do you spin Mommy around like this when you dance with her?" Alexandra asked.

"Nah. Let me let you in on a little secret. Mommy is in that awkward phase. She too big for me to hold up and dance with her like this. Not that I wouldn't. But she's too little for me to dance with for a long time."

"Why is that?" Alexandra asked with child curiosity.

"She makes my neck hurt."

Ellen leaned against the head table watching Frank and Alexandra, she had a very small amount of Henry's wine in the glass she sipped from. Little sips, almost feeling guilty on Frank's behalf for every sip she took.

"Hey Kiddo." Joe frightened her from her thoughts when he approached her. "Watching them?"

"Yeah." Ellen smiled. "For the big tough guy, Frank is so, I don't know, sappy when it comes to the kids."

"He'll always have a soft spot for his daughter."

"I remember being a little girl and dancing with my father like that at my aunt Vivian's wedding." Ellen smiled at the memory. "I felt so important. My father wanted to dance with me. And by the look on my daughter's face. She feels the same way right now that I did."

"Well I wasn't fortunate enough to have a little girl to dance with in my arms. However . . ." Joe stepped back and showed Ellen his hand. "I would like to be so fortunate as to have my grown up girl in my arms."

"Oh Joe." Ellen basked in that, letting Joe cup her hand, press his strong hand to her back, his cheek to her cheek, and having him dance with her in that old fashion way. Leading Ellen in steps she tried to follow in that slow dance. And Ellen giggled, like Alexandra did, in every spin Joe made with her. "Joe?" She whispered to him.

"Yes?" Joe pulled his head back to look at her.

"You know how I was saying about how I felt as a little girl, and how Alexandra is probably feeling the same way?"

"What about it?" Joe asked.

"I just wanted you to know. That no matter how old you get, having that dance with your father . . . it still makes you feel important."

Giving Ellen that smile of 'pride' that only a father could give, Joe kissed Ellen on the cheek and pulled her back to finish their dance

Robbie looked up from his seat at the table in just enough time to see Joe twirl Ellen around, his mind slipped back to a wedding he remembered. Robbie was five years old. Of course Robbie chuckled right there because most of the visuals of that wedding were of people's legs. But he remembered that wedding, whose it was, Robbie couldn't recall. But seeing Joe and Ellen dance on that floor made Robbie think of the bride dancing with her father that night. 'Daddy's little girl' played loudly, women had tears in their eyes. The father and the bride both cried. The whole hall stopped for that one dance. And Robbie remembered--though he was only five or six--he remembered making a promise to himself that night. He promised himself that if he ever had a daughter, and she got married, that he would never look so foolish as to cry in front of all his co workers like that father did that night. And part of Robbie still felt the same way. In his adult mind he justified his thinking. The father going back to work that Monday morning. Having left Friday being the tough boss, he returned Monday being the big baby who cried his heart out all because his daughter was marrying some jerk whom she would leave in a year or so anyhow. Then that father would end up bitching because not only did he have his daughter back at his house but her baby as well, sucking him dry of all his money, sponging off of him all because the guy he cried about his daughter marrying, was refusing to pay his child support. Perhaps those tears shed during that dance weren't tears of joy, or tears of losing a daughter, but tears of all the problems that the results of a wedding he couldn't afford in the first place, brought.

Mid thought, Robbie was certain that somewhere in his deep world of wedding bell blues, his mind has snapped, because suddenly the song started sounding weird to him. The words became muttered, making no sense. The male voice sounded female and this snapped Robbie out of his thought and prompted him to look to his right. Andrea sat next to him humming. "What?" he asked her.

"I have a favor."

"Oh no. What is it?" Robbie asked frightened.

"Would you be so kind as to dance with an old woman."

"Andrea, I really don't feel like dancing with you right now. Maybe later."

Smack! Andrea's hand hit hard against his.

"What?" Robbie asked.

"I'm not speaking of me. I would like you to dance with . . ." Andrea twitched her head.

Leaning forward Robbie saw who she indicated to. Had she not been so little, she wouldn't have been hidden behind Andrea. "Josephine? No way."

"Robert." Andrea scolded. "Dance with her. I promised her."

"Why would you promise her I would dance with her?"

"Because you're my son now. Dance with Josephine. No one wants to."

"Tell her to dance with Cole, he's sleeping with her."

Andrea gasped. "Robert." She stood up. "If you don't dance with Josephine right now, I will tell your father on you. And you won't be the little happy camper when he takes a firm stand with you tomorrow morning."

"Like I care."

"Be nice."

"I'm a Slagel."

"And so am I now." Andrea's head bobbed back and forth. "And let me tell you something. You will dance with her right now mister., If you don't I will make certain that your pretty little face blesses the monthly 'dart the fart' board. Get it."

"Oh my God. All right." Robbie stood up whining. "Only because I don't want to see a sketch of myself with holes all in it. Let me take a drink and I'll be right there."

"I'll go tell her."

"And also tell her not to grab my butt again." Robbie pointed, cringed at what he agreed to do and downed his entire drink in one gulp.

(5)

It turned out to be one of the most enjoyable wedding traditions that the women copied. The tossing of the bouquet. Of course there were only two women in all of Beginnings who weren't married. Josephine and Ellen. And the evening was highlighted when Ellen caught the bouquet and Josephine in her outrage and determination to retrieve it, pummeled sideways into Ellen knocking her on the floor and then lunging at Ellen to engage in a fierce tug of war over the floppy group of flowers. I took two men to pull Josephine from her. But it wasn't the fight that got Ellen, nor the fact that Josephine, during her pull at the flowers kept calling Ellen a 'bitch'. It was the fact that Ellen had to go to the ladies room and fix her hair back again.

Frank wanted to catch the garter. And the fact that there were more single men in Beginnings than women didn't worry him at all. He knew his

chances were good for getting it. Despite that there were thirty men who graced the floor all waiting to catch it in that old world barbaric ritual, Frank knew he'd be the one putting it on Ellen's leg. He didn't need to stand center of the mob, he stood in the back. He knew he wouldn't even need to dive or fight for it. He merely ensured his getting it when, just as Joe released the garter, Frank yelled out. "Catch it and touch her, you die." Not an arm reached out. Not a leap was made and only silence filled the room. "Thank you." Frank marched through the group of men, picking the garter up off the floor.

Frank winced as he knelt before Ellen sitting in the chair. The screaming men that encircled them. The 'show us some leg' and 'get it up there so we can see the thigh' comments wore his nerves thin.

"Now remember . . ." Paul spoke over the microphone. "For every inch you get it up her leg Frank, that's a year of happiness you dad and Andrea will have."

Frank closed one eye, any more bad comments yelled at him from the men and he was gonna lose it. He really wasn't going to give them what they wanted. How to get the thing on Ellen's leg without exposing her became a problem. The last thing Frank was gonna do was show a bunch of womenless men Ellen's legs. He took off her shoe, stretched out the garter and slipped it on her foot. A loud whistle entailed. "Fuck it." Frank spun to Andrea. "This shit really works now Andrea, how long do you wanna be married to my Dad."

"Forever Frank." Andrea glowed.

"Forever." Frank looked up at Ellen who shook her head. He slipped the garter to her ankle, lifted the bottom of her dress, buried himself underneath of it and proceeded to raise that garter.

Joe ran his hand down across his own face. He looked at the horrified look on Ellen face and Frank's feet, which were the only exposed part of Frank as he was buried under that dress. "Christ this is obscene. Frank." Joe called him. "Frank." He waited, Frank didn't emerge. "Frank!" Joe reached down smacking the outline that he knew was Frank's head.

Frank emerged, a huge grin on his face. "What?" He looked at his father.

"What the hell were you doing?" Joe asked him annoyed.

"Securing it up there. You wanna stay happy don't you?" Frank leaned closer to his father. "But I'll tell you what. That wives tale holds true? You'll still be married after you die."

"Christ." Joe grabbed Andrea's hand and walked away with her.

Frank felt the smack to the back of his head. "Ow." He turned around Ellen stood there.

"Thanks a lot Frank. Talk about embarrassing me."

"I didn't want those guys to see your legs."

"So you stick your head between them?"

Frank laughed. "You love me." He pulled her into him. "And I would like to dance with you."

"I've been dancing all night."

"Tough, you'll dance now." Frank, cupped her hand. "This turned out really nice. You ladies did a great job."

"Thanks." Ellen went silent for a second. "Frank, I have to tell you something."

"What's that."

"I feel bad. I . . . I had a couple sips of wine."

"So."

"No." Ellen shook her head. "Not 'so'. I'm supposed to help you. That wasn't helping you."

"El, I don't expect you to change your lifestyle, just because I changed mine."

"No you shouldn't." Ellen moved into him. "But I want to. I have to. Especially if I'm going to be with you."

"Are you?" Frank asked very seriously.

"What did I tell you?"

"Ellen." Frank stopped moving in their dance. "What you did for me this past week, I'll never forget it. Never. I don't think I've ever felt closer to you."

"How about now?" Ellen tugged him into her.

"See, just about now." Frank lowered his head to her ear. "Just about right now . . ." He whispered. "Is about the time I want to sneak you out of here and take you home."

"And do what?" Ellen asked, getting lost in his soft voice.

"Make . . . love . . ." Frank pressed his lips teasingly to her ear. "To you."

Ellen's eyes rolled back. "Kiss me."

Frank slid his lips across her cheek and to her mouth, then stopped. "Not here." He grabbed her hand and began to lead her off the floor.

"We can't Frank. Where are we going."

"Just outside for a few minutes." Frank opened the door and pulled her out with him.

"Frank it's . . ." A loud crash of thunder vibrated through her and immediately the rain poured down upon her. " . . . raining. Aw my hair."

"So what." Frank pulled her to him, running his hands up her back to her hair, and pulling out the pins letting her hair fall. It didn't take long for them to both become drenched. Frank's hands went over the top of her head, pushing back the water, slicking down her hair with the soft feel of the rain. He kept staring at her, smiling, not noticing anything around him.

"We can't stay out here for ever."

Frank looked around, grinned, then tugging Ellen's hand, their feet splashing in the forming puddles, he took her in between the Social hall and the building next to it.

“Frank.”

He silenced her with his lips and he led her body to the wall of the social hall, pinning her there with his weight. His hands slid up and down the sides of her wet dress. Lifting it and letting it fall as he kissed her. Feeling the shape of her legs.

His body still held firm against hers as Frank pulled from the kiss and breathed heavily. Ellen looked at his face that dripped the water that fell upon him. She ran her hand across her eyes to remove the water to see him better, then she slowly moved her hand to his cheek. Her fingers traced around the contour of his face, moving the beads of water. Making circles around his mouth, then finally touching her fingers to his lips. Frank kissed them lightly and Ellen felt the chill of the air and the kiss move through her. She shivered. But she knew she would only shiver for a moment when Frank moved his lips to her neck. Then lowering himself down, Frank’s hands moved from her hips upward. Across her stomach and to her breasts, cupping them within his hands. His long fingers reaching in a pull at the low cut garment, as his mouth, in a hunger kiss, searched about her chest.

Ellen’s head flung back, when she felt him go lower and his hands moved up to her shoulders then down her arms. His huge hands grasped hers. The top of his head pressed hard into her stomach as if Frank were looking down at the hands he held, the fingers he caressed gently with his lips.

The whole feel of the moment changed, when Ellen felt the oddness of it. She pulled her hand from Frank, and brought it up to her view. She looked at her hand, then down to Frank who had raised his head to look at her. “Frank.” She spoke out of breath, looking again her finger. The finger that moments earlier, wasn’t wearing the gold band it wore now. The wedding band she had given back to Frank nearly a year before.

“El.” Frank held her hand looking up to her not paying any attention to the rain that fell hard on his face. “All those years behind us, all those years El, they can be nothing compared to the years we could have ahead of us. We’ve messed up. We’ve broke. But no one has ever stood by my side like you. I want you there for the rest of my life. I need you there. And if I’m gonna be holding hands with you at eighty years old, then I want the hand I hold to be my wife’s.” He brought her hand to his mouth and kissed it. “Be my wife again El. Say you’ll be my wife again.” Frank stood up slowly, bringing his hands to her face and kissed her. “Say we’ll be old together El.” He kissed her again separating her mouth wide with his, catching her bottom lip between his as he slowly pulled away. “Say we’ve learned from our mistakes.” His hand spread across her face, fingers gripping, his body pressed into her. “Say you’ll marry me again.” Frank’s nose brushed against hers, his mouth was open in a hover over hers. “Say yes.”

The beating rain fell harder, the sound of it hitting against the metal structures became almost deafening. But it wasn't loud enough to drown out Ellen's answer to him. "Yes."

His mouth opened in a gasp at her words and his hand slid behind her head gripping her and kissing her with intensity and heart, giving a light breathy moan as he did. His body moved firmer into Ellen, pinning her more into the wall as his hand dropped to her leg.

Frank grabbed at her dress, pulling it up as he lifted her leg, and bent his knees to lower himself so his waist could meet hers. Pulling her leg more to him, Frank moved his kisses to her neck. As he lifted his eyes to look at her, his eyes caught glimpse of something else. Henry. Henry walked in the rain, slow and toward the social hall. Frank knew they couldn't be seen between those two buildings, But as he tried to kiss Ellen again, his eyes went back to Henry. Frank swallowed bringing his lips to her mouth and closing his eyes. His body's movement lost it's intensity when all he could hear in his mind was Henry's voice. *"Would you do the same? Would you give her up for me? Would you . . . would you walk away from a moment you wanted, from a moment you have waited for, so she could go to me?"*

At that second, Frank lowered Ellen's leg and pulled back from her. "El." He took a breath. "If you ever swallowed your pride before in your life. I need you to do it now."

"What are you talking about Frank?" Ellen was confused. "Aren't we a little busy right now?"

"For as much as I want to say 'yes' I can't." Frank stepped back. "Make a change El. You can make it all O.K., by just being you. I need you to do me a favor. Don't take 'no' for an answer and help Henry. Cause right now in his life, he really . . . really needs you." Frank saw Henry go into the social hall. "Please."

The wedding was parallel to Henry's Junior High days. So much like those dances he masochistically attended. Sitting there like the preteen he used to be. Watching the others have fun, sitting alone. Only this time he sniffled from the dampness and chill that had him. Running his hand through his wet hair, Henry was bout to stand up and leave when he felt the hand touch upon his shoulder. He felt the warm breath brush against his ear. And Ellen's voice went into him when she spoke.

"You're wet. I'm wet. And just about right now, you're the only one I can dance with. Dance with me Henry." She walked around standing in front of him holding out her hand. "I swear to you if you turn me down . . ."

"You'll never ask me again." Henry raised his sad eyes to her.

"No." Ellen shook her head. "I'll keep pestering you until you do. We keep taking wrong turns here Henry. Let's not do that anymore. Please not anymore. Right now. You have two choices."

"And they are?"

"Dance with me . . . or just hold me."

Henry stood up, almost in a spring from that chair and he grabbed onto Ellen wrapping his arms tight around her and burying his head to her neck. "I'm sorry." His words muffled and emotional. "I'm so sorry."

"I am too Henry." Ellen held him, feeling the grip he had on her.

"Just tell me we'll be able to talk again. That's what matters most. I need to talk with you."

"Then we'll talk. I miss it." Ellen pulled back from him. "I really miss talking to you."

"I know tonight is not a good night but when you get a chance . . ."

"Funny thing Henry." Ellen pointed across the room to Frank standing with Robbie. "I've been told I'm pretty much without a date for the rest of the evening. Seems Frank has a security thing he needs to discuss with Robbie. And for as much as I would like to stay at this wedding. I'm drenched, and I'd really like to get out of these clothes, curl up on a couch with a cup of tea and talk. Up for it?"

"More than you realize El." Henry excitedly gripped her hand. "My house?"

"I'd like that Henry." Ellen followed him. "Will you make me my tea?"

"I'll even make it Caucasian." Henry opened the door for her. "Did I miss anything while I was gone?"

"I caught the bouquet. Josephine tackled me."

"Oh my God. She is so vicious some times El."

"She is really gonna hurt someone."

"Oh isn't that the right. But because she's old, she's gets away with it." Henry peered out into the pouring rain. "Wanna make a run for it."

"Nah." Ellen shook her head. "We're already wet, And besides, instead of a run, I'd rather have a walk . . ." She leaned her head on his arm as they held hands. ". . .with my friend."

(6)

She sat with Henry on his couch, but Ellen sat intimately. Across his lap facing him, her hands buried within the sleeves of the large Frank-sweatshirt she wore. She watched the sadness of Henry's face s he talked to her. "I'm sorry you went through that. I really am."

"So many times El." Henry stroked her hair. "So many times I wanted to talk to you."

"Why didn't you. I know more than anyone what you went through."

"It's not the same thing."

“Yes it is.” Ellen brought her lips tenderly to his. “Just know, whenever you need to talk about it, you talk to me.”

“I’m guess I’m just afraid, or was, that you’ll look at me different. That because of what almost happened, you’ll feel I’m not a man.”

“Henry.” Ellen wiggled slightly on his lap. “Right now . . .” She raised her eyebrows. “You’ve got a pretty good argument going on your behalf.”

Henry turned a shade of red. “I’m sorry.” He hid his smile.

“Don’t be.” Ellen locked her arms around his neck and fell backwards bringing Henry with her.

Henry snickered as he kissed her, getting more comfortable with her, enjoying the affection he missed so much. But Henry should have known with the way his luck has gone that something would happen, and it did. Separating his lips from Ellen’s with a surprised look on his face, Henry lifted his eyes over the arm of the couch to the loud ‘bang’ of his front door and he knew his time alone with Ellen would have to wait. Frank walked in.

Yet Henry smiled as Frank plopped down, rambling on and on, acting as if when he walked in he didn’t see Ellen kissing Henry. And Henry didn’t mind Frank’s intrusion, not at all. Because right there was a big part of what Henry missed so much. The three of them. Just like old times.

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

AUGUST 16

(1)

Had Frank not been so close he wouldn't have heard it and felt it so strongly. It screamed out to him and he barreled to the noise, blasting open the door to the tracking Station. Frank's eyes widened, the synchronized beeping, the flashing lights from the monitor screens, the panicked look on Mark's face, it all made his heart pound. "What's going on?"

"The system is working Frank."

"They're coming?" Frank prepared his radio.

"Moving in steady from the northwest at approximately eight miles per hour."

"What's the distance?"

Mark looked at the screen his voice shook. "Two point nine miles."

"How many?"

"Frank . . ."

"How many Mark?" Frank asked stronger.

"God Frank . . ."

"Mark! How many!" Frank blasted them.

"Computer is tallying . . . Four hundred and twenty-one."

"Fuck!" Frank's hand slammed down. "Tower this is Frank. I need a three-one signal on the horn, hit it now, this is not a drill. Keep it peered Northwest we got em coming in large masses." Frank switched to the 'all call' channel, waited for the horns to start then gave everyone that extra second to switch. "Mark, I need you here. Monitor this for me I'll check back for distance. Where are we now?"

"Two point six miles."

Frank backed out the station door. And headed toward his jeep by his office, calling out as he ran. "Robbie. I need our birds in the air now. All three get them up fast. Robbie you have fire, Johnny has gas and John will use Dan as a gunner and lay rapid fire on them. I'll square away perimeters and town and meet you in the air. Do not hesitate. Do not wait for me. Take them out and take them out hard. Some one give me a copy." Frank jumped in his jeep.

"Copy Frank." Robbie came back. "My ETA to the hanger is about three minutes."

"Make it in two Robbie." Frank turned over the jeep and screeched it. "Squads one through six suit up near the field house hatch, squad leaders get your teams in position, stay low and ready. I'll send back up as soon as we clear town. Cole copy me."

"Copy Frank."

"Dad I need you at armory. I need every single available male. Every one whether they are reserve or not. I need them suited up Dad."

Joe spoke over the radio. "I'm right at armory now."

"Get the town clear, make them clear the town,. Get our tunnel leaders down there with them. Stress to the women that this is not a drill." Frank turned sharp toward armory. "Mark what's our distance."

"Two point two Frank."

"We're running low on time." Frank saw armory before him. The loud horns blasted and Frank looked at his watch counting the seconds until he had his choppers in the air. He screeched the jeep to a sideways stop and jumped from it running into help out Joe.

Three long sirens followed by one short one. Ellen and Dean, in the eastern wing of the clinic, the wing never used, worked in a make-shift operating room on the John Doe. Keeping him distant and contained from everyone.

Ellen raised her head to the sirens. "Dean."

Dean's eyes peered over his face mask as his hands worked in the back of John Doe. "It's a three-one Ellen. Get the hell out of here and head to the tunnels. It's real."

"Oh my God." Ellen breathed heavily.

"Go."

"No."

"Ellen go." Dean ordered strongly.

"I'm not leaving you. We can finish this up faster together than alone. I'm staying."

Dean didn't have time to argue. He tried to block out the horns that blasted at them and he continued to operate. "Just a little bit longer."

It was a like an assembly line, the passing down of weapons and artillery down the line of waiting men.. All the way to the last one, he would take his weapon and hit his post. Frank barked out orders as they moved rapidly. "Squads seven through nine, scrap town, hit the front gate. Squads ten and eleven you are our center town patrol, the rest of you men, when town is clean, move up the back gate and support the lines." Frank watched the line of men dwindle. "Dad, I'm headed into move people."

"I'll finish here Frank."

"Then you head to the tunnels." Frank pointed. "Don't waste time!" Frank charged from armory. "Mark, distance."

"One point eight miles."

"Robbie, where we at."

"Loading up, Give us another minute."

Frank rounded the bend, he could hear through the loud horns, the confusion on the street. He saw Henry already armed, moving people about. "Henry."

"Yeah Frank?"

"Get your ass in the tunnel. You're number one tunnel leader."

"Make someone else Frank. I'm fighting."

"No!" Frank said strongly, trying to hurry people along. "I need you there. For the sake of the community and for my family. Do this Henry. Don't fight me on this."

Henry swayed his head. "All right. But let me help a few more people."

"Two minutes." Frank told him then looked to the clinic and saw the wheeling out of patients. "Cole how are our front lines?"

"Secure."

"Jeff, front gate lines?"

"Secure." Jeff came back.

"Robbie?"

"I'm climbing in now Frank."

Frank watched the clinic doors closed then turned to see the last person go down the tunnel. "Tower." Frank gave a thumbs up to Henry as he lowered himself down. "Silence the horn. I wanna hear our birds." The winding down of the horns brought quiet to the streets. "Gentlemen, all is clear in town, let's move it out. . . . Robbie, I'll join you shortly." He listened as he ran back to the jeep. Just as Frank heard the chopper noise he heard something else. Whistles. High pitch, Six of them, loud and fast. "We have incoming! Hit the deck!" Frank yelled, listening to them near, waiting for the explosion. And an explosion, never happened.

With the fading sounds of the helicopter came the frightening sound of something else. It caused his heart to literally stop beating and all movement on that street ceased as everyone looked up.

Pop . . . Pop . . . Pop!

With the slight wisping sounds erupting, so did a thin steam among the town of Beginnings. It hovered over them like the cloud of death they knew it was.

"Gas masks!" Frank ordered out and then called on his radio. "Henry, have them put the masks on down there." Frank threw on his gas mask. "They hit us . . ." Frank spoke gut wrenching and with pain. "They hit us with it." Frank charged for his jeep in anger, his fist clenched in frustration. "No. No. No!" He cried out, then calling his men to move out again incase the SUTs stormed the front gate. "Robbie, blast the fuck out of them. Show no mercy. Give them all we got." Frank flung off his gas mask in his battle adrenaline march to his jeep. His mind raced. All of his work, all of his front line of defense preparations went out the window when the fog cloud was dropped on Beginnings. No amount of defense would have stopped the hit. "Henry. Tell me she's there."

"Frank." Henry called back. "She's not."

"Henry check again."

"Frank, the kids are all here. Ellen is not."

Frank closed his eyes, he spun to send someone back to find her and when he did, he heard another incoming whistle. With his heart pounding he realized it couldn't be more gas they were sending in. It had to be something else. A single mortar. But to take out what? With the revelation of the mortar came the revelation that if they hit them with the virus, what would be one way to secure that Beginnings would not beat it. They could simply do that, by taking out . . . the clinic. With a spinning zoom into the clinic, Frank heard the close range of the descending shell and he watched in horror as it landed with a bellowing ground rumbling explosion and he saw the massive mushroom cloud of fire erupt behind the clinic. "Ellen." His heart dropped.

Ellen's body with Dean hovered in a protection and in a loss of stance when they felt the violent jolting of the ground. Plaster fell amongst their backs as they shielded the John Doe.

"Ellen get out." Dean's fingers touched in the region of the delicate spinal chord.

"We're almost done."

"Please get out."

"You can't move him Dean, I won't leave." Her eyes widened. The smell of it caught her attention first, then the bright sight of it. Fire. The entire wall of the makeshift operating room became engulfed in flames. "Dean hurry."

"I'm getting there."

"Dean."

"Get ready." Dean kept working.

Ellen placed the IV bag on the cart getting ready to help Dean wheel him out. She could feel the heat of the powerful flames burning so close to her. The fire crept up the wall and to the ceiling, crawling at them, like a snake in the grass.

"Ready and . . . Now!" Dean dropped his instruments and gripped the cart, pushing it with Ellen to wheel the patient through the door.

Had Ellen not stopped at the startling sound of the loud crack, she wouldn't have had to jump back in order to avoid being hit when a beam from the ceiling came crashing down separating her from Dean. The flames shot from the portion of the ceiling that fell to the floor and Ellen stood looking so helpless at Dean on the other side trying desperately to figure out a way to get her.

She turned around to look behind her and to the small, too small window there. Ellen could see the rushing water against the window pane. It told her that help was out there, but as Ellen stood trapped, she had to wonder if they could put the fire out that surrounded her, before it got too late.

“We need more water power!” Frank barked out looking toward the eastern wing of the clinic that began to engulf with flames. “Robbie I’ve been delayed. The clinic was hit.”

Robbie’s voice was nearly buried in the sounds of gunfire and explosions. “We’re good up here Frank.”

“Mark how are we looking.”

“Numbers dwindling Frank, looks as though we got a pack still moving.”

“Where are they.”

“Point nine miles.”

Frank bit his lip and twitched his head in disgust. “Cole, get ready. They’re heading your way.”

“Copy Frank. We’re on it.” Cole yelled back.

“You, you and you.” Frank pointed to men as he reached for a hose to help out with the fire. “Back gate move it! Cole, you got squads headed up and I’m sending more your way.” As Frank lifted the hose he saw Henry running to him. “Henry!” Frank shouted at him. “You are not to be up here. Get down there incase we have to evacuate!”

“I can’t Frank.” Henry sounded distraught. “Andrea just told me. Ellen and Dean are in the clinic. They’re operating on John Doe and for fear of the virus they’re in . . .” Henry looked at the smoke coming from the clinic. “Oh God, the east wing.”

Frank dropped the hose and ran to the back of the building where his men not only tried to put the fire out, but hold it back from spreading any further. In his horror, through the shimmering of smoke and rippling water effects, he saw Ellen pounding on that window even too tiny for her to squeeze out. Her mouth was open as she screamed something Frank could not hear. Then her hands went flush to the glass and Frank knew she saw him. “Oh my God.” Without thought and hesitation he took off to the front of the clinic. “Henry, get a team and get them inside. Hurry.”

Blasting through the front glass doors, Frank raced down the smoke filled hallways of the empty clinic. As he turned the first bend, he could hear Dean shouting back and Ellen’s un-interpretable response. Rounding the bend to the long hall of the east wing, the smoke got thicker. “Dean!”

“Frank.” Dean spoke his name in a relief. “I can’t get to her.”

“Frank!” Ellen cried out. “Frank help me!”

"Move that patient out of the way." Frank ordered Dean and backed up quick and as far as he could go down the hall away from the doorway of the room which Ellen was trapped.

Dean nearly shoved the cart from the way. "What are you . . . are you crazy!" He yelled at Frank when he saw Frank take a runners stance.

"Yes." He wiped the sweat from his eyes with the back of his hand, and took a deep breath. Then like a bull freed from his reluctant captivity, Frank charged full speed down that corridor with his heart, raising his arms as a shield and leaping with everything he had through the flames that blocked Ellen's way out.

Ellen shrieked when she saw Frank emerge from the fire. His legs high in the air and he dropped hard in his land to the floor at her feet, the momentum of his run rolled him with a crash into the wall. "Frank!" Ellen coughed.

Frank shook his head with a twitch and picked himself up. He placed his hands on her shoulders stopping Ellen's charge for him. He quickly looked around the room assessing it.

"Frank, I can't believe you did that. Why?"

"Ellen . . ." He saw the bed that had been shoved in the other corner out of the way.

"You should have never done that Frank. You could have been killed."

"I had to get you." He moved to the bed.

"You should have left me."

"What! And leave you here to die? Fuck that." Frank grabbed for the mattress. "Besides . . ." He grunted as he lifted it. "Dying is not an option right now." He carried it toward the fire.

"What are you doing?"

"Watch out." Frank looked past the flames blocking the door. He could see Dean and a few other men that made it to the hall. "Dean back up." He secured the mattress tightly. "Get ready El."

"Frank . . ."

With a throaty call out, Frank raised the mattress and threw it outward toward the fire. The second it landed, tossing out ash, cinder, flames and smoke to the sides of it, Frank lifted Ellen up into his arms and raced forth towards the flames, using the unbalanced mattress as a seesaw bridge over the smoldering fire that now ceased to keep him back.

Landing in safety's range, Frank kissed Ellen quickly and set her down to her feet right with Dean. "Watch her." He pointed at Dean and took off running from the clinic.

Ellen didn't even have time to thank him. Frank was gone. She turned back to face Dean. And at that moment, Dean closed his eyes in gratefulness that she was all right and grabbed Ellen into his arms, Embracing her.

Frank ran up to Henry who was battling the fire. "Henry, how's it look?"

"We've got it under control. How's Ellen?"

"She's fine. They're getting the fire from inside. I'm heading out." Frank looked beyond the horizon of town. In the distance large clouds of smoke sprang up, the perfect back drop for the gunfire and explosions that rang out all around. "Dad come in."

"Yeah Frank." Though Joe spoke close to his radio, he didn't cover the cries or sniffles that filled the tunnel.

"Town's secure. Clinic fire is under control. I'm headed where I'm needed. Robbie? Robbie how's it look." Frank asked as he ran to his jeep.

"We're doing all we can Frank. They're scattering like ants."

"Need me up there?"

"No. I think we have them. I think you're needed there. A small group broke free headed your way."

"Not a problem. O.K. good job." Frank jumped in his jeep starting it. "Lay enough damage to give us a safe lack of movement up there, then bring it in and we'll send ground troops to finish them off."

"Got it Frank."

"Mark. How we looking?"

"In the distance we're good, but . . . some are here Frank."

"How many?" Frank picked up his speed.

"Sixty . . . Sixty-eight."

"Cole." Frank called out. "What's the situation?"

Cole's voice screamed over the loud sounds of shots behind him. "We're exchanging gunfire with them Frank. They're at the back gate. I have two down!"

"Keep behind the grade and in the trench, send four men to the roof of the utility building as snipers. I'll be there in thirty seconds."

Frank had sent his finest to the back gate to be front line. Though forty-four men laced the hillside not far from the back gate. Twenty-four of them Frank had trained by hand. As he jumped from the jeep he passed his four snipers in a run to the utility building. The battle rang out in an orchestrated manner. Rapid gunfire, single shots, a grunt here and there, the explosions of grenades, and an occasional scream.

In his low run to the hill and trenches, Frank could see the dirt sprawled everywhere from the badly thrown grenades. He rolled to Cole who had his back to the small grade. "How bad are our men hit?"

"Don't know Frank." Cole reloaded. "They aren't dead."

Frank called over the radio. "Mark, what's our back gate count?"

"Fifty-nine Frank."

Frank looked at Cole "There's not that many out there." Frank smiled gave a quick Joe-style whistle and yelled out. "Cease fire."

"What?" Cole jolted his view to him.

"Cease fire." Frank waited for the gunshots to slow down. "I need squads one through four right here. The rest of you hit safety in the trenches. Now!" Watching the men scurry to the trenches, and hearing the enemy's gunfire, Frank looked to his fifteen men as he loaded his M-16. "Gentlemen, let's stop pissing around and finish this thing. We'll show these pussies what Beginnings elite is made of. Let's give them the wave. Take formation." All sixteen of them lined up in one long row. "On my call . . ." A synchronization of clicking chambers rang out. "Ready and . . . now!" The first line of eight men stood up firing outward. "Now!" At the exact same time the first line lowered, the second line stood up firing. "Now." A switch of positions, down went the second line, up went the first. "Again!" Frank stood again with his second line, staying up only in enough time to shoot in a dart and move fashion. "Down." All men lowered "Reload and check, Mark, give me a count."

"Twenty-six."

"Beautiful." Frank gripped his M-16. "Ladies, last call. Let's do it."

The up and down exchange took place until somewhere in the pauses, there were no more sounds of gunfire coming from the other side. A loud eruption of cheers echoed from the hillside and the trenches. Frank held his hand up,. "Quiet. Mark?"

"One more Frank. He's not moving."

"Dead?"

"Negative Frank." Mark answered. "I'm still getting other signals from out there only they're weak. This one is strong."

Frank closed his eyes thinking. "Tower, Do you spot anyone in the back gate region?"

"Can't see anything Frank." Steve the tower guard came back.

Frank looked up to the sky at the sound of the helicopters. "Robbie, Robbie come in."

"We cleaned house Frank. Get the men ready to go out."

"We'll do. But make a pass over the back gate region. See if you spot one out there, could be a sniper."

"I'm on it." Robbie revved up the chopper engines tilting the bird to the right, separating from John and Johnny. "Got him Frank. I see him."

"Where at Robbie."

"In the brush of S-12. I think one of my traps got him. I can't be sure."

"Only one way to find out. Head on in. . . Security, down the back gate." Frank stood up.

Cole tried to stop him. "Frank, you'll be a walking target."

"Then cover me." Frank said arrogantly, walking over the small grade toward the back gate. He raised his weapon up, scope to his eye as he flung open the downed perimeter. Frank's views shifted to the bodies, bloodied and tattered that lay all around. "What a fuckin mess." He stepped over them. Looking as some hung from the tress, some on the dirt road, most

dead in the positions they hid in. He marched ready to S-12, using his scope as a telescope and spotting him in the brush the closer he got.

The society soldier held on to his leg, two short dagger-type spears had seared into his calf so severely that the bone was exposed. The soldier struggled to free himself, he shook violently and breathed heavily in a panic.

A foot from him, holding his weapon in a steady aim at the soldier, Frank pumped back the chamber. The target in the scope marked his head and as Frank readied to depress his finger, the soldier raised his head to look. So scared he was, eyes filled with tears. And it was when Frank looked into those eyes that he saw they weren't the eyes of a man. Glossed over they were, blinking rapidly. The soldier's mouth quivered, and Frank knew by looking at him he couldn't have been any older than seventeen. Steadying his weapon and pointing pressure on the trigger, the barrel inches from his head, Frank told himself this was the enemy. This was one of the ones who attacked his home. Shot his men. And then Frank told himself this was a kid. He lowered his weapon, tossing it over his shoulder and he bent down to the boy to free his leg. Frank had no reason not to shoot him right there, no reason for helping the boy. So he justified his actions in his mind. Beginnings needed this kid. He would be the first prisoner of war spawned from a battle that Beginnings ended quickly. A battle whose damage had yet to be determined.

(2)

There was silence in the Morse code room of George's command. Waiting, watching, hoping for something. However George did not give that antsy appearance and Jeremy Lyons noticed this.

Jeremy lifted away from his lean over the decoder. "Nothing sir." He told George. "No word at all. Not even a basic transmission."

"Give it time."

"Time?" Jeremy's voice raised. "They were scheduled to hit over an hour ago. They were told to contact with the simple numerical codes to let us know their progress. We should have heard."

"We may never." George stated calmly.

"How can you be like this. Do you realize that is nearly five hundred lives?"

"I know this. But you knew as well as all of my division heads that those lives were expendable. We sent them out there never expecting their return."

"So all this work and planning you did. A loss doesn't matter."

"A loss?" George laughed heartedly at that. "I beg to differ, this was no loss. Not at all. And like Beginnings, you don't even realize it yet, do you? Four hundred and seventy, dead or not, this was still . . . our victory." And with that, George smiled.

THE BREAK OF THE HEARTS

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

(1)

Robbie never realized how big of an area it was outside of the back gate region until he had to find hundreds of bodies, or at least pieces of them. Trying to determine whether an arm or a leg actually belonged to the same person was a tedious task. He had to give his best body count and he had to get near to what the computer said was out there.

Tromping through the woods with twelve other men, crunching the leaves, checking the bodies that could be alive, rolling over the ones that were, checking their wounds. If the wounds were fatal, Robbie and his men shot them in the head. If the wounds were not. He did what Frank asked him to do. He rounded them up, tagged them and readied to take them back to Beginnings. If they were adult, if they were not fatally injured, then at next morning light they would face a Beginnings' firing squad.

(2)

Ellen glanced up in her walk down the clinic corridor to the over head lights that flickered again then finally came on. So happy she was to see that, so scary it was for her to get cleaned up in the dark. At least the lights were a sign that the clinic wasn't gone. The hammering and pounding of nails that echoed in the halls also told her that what damage done, had to be minimal. She shivered in gratefulness as she headed to the examining rooms, then smiled when she saw Henry walking up toward her.

"Hey El." He approached her kissing her softly on the cheek. "How are you?"

"I'm doing fine Henry. How are you?"

"I got you up and running."

Ellen smiled and looked up. "I see that."

"Danny is still splicing the wires from the area burned out."

"How is he doing? Is he O.K. his stomach and all?"

"He's fine." Henry told her.

"What about the kids Henry? How are they?"

"They're all with Jenny and the other women. Alexandra's a little frightened. If you get a chance in all this, could you go and see her. She needs to see her mom."

"I'll do that." Ellen gave a peaceful smile. "Dean is in surgery with one of our men, and Andrea is in surgery with Jason on the other. I got stuck with a leg injury and as soon as I take care of that, I'll go."

"Good." Henry laid his hand on her cheek. "I'm glad you're O.K."

"I am too. If you see Frank, can you tell him I said 'Thanks' he ran off and . . ."

"I'll tell him. And . . . I better be going. I wanna check on the crew I have sealing off the damaged section of the clinic."

"I'll talk to you later Henry." Ellen watched him start to walk away. "Henry?" She waited for him to look back. "Tell me, tell me in a way we were lucky. That all those stupid Frank drills paid off when they hit us with the gas. Tell me."

Henry's mouth opened some, then he closed it. "El, I want to tell you that. But you and I both know, right now, we're gonna have to wait and see." Sadly, Henry turned and walked down the hall.

Ellen closed her eyes tightly and swallowed the painful lump in her throat, she spoke softly as her hands reached on the door to examining room two. "Please don't let it have worked. Please." She took a deep breath and opened the door. She didn't recognize him when she walked inside and the soldier looked up at her. But she did recognize the 'CS' on the sleeve of his uniform. Seeing that, Ellen turned and began to walk from the room.

"Wait." He called out, his voice not even deep. "Please. It hurts." He whimpered. "Please don't walk away. Help me."

Ellen hesitated in her reach for the door.

"Please."

(3)

"They got it under control now." Frank harnessed his revolver as he walked through the back gate of Beginnings to head into town.

"What's up with him?" Joe motioned his head out to John Matoose who was dragging a body.

"I don't know. I had no choice but to send him up there. So tell me why, if those were his people, he didn't tip the bird sending Dan out. He could have done that easily saying a mortar came by him." Frank shook his head. "It doesn't make sense." So angry he sounded.

"What's the situation out there."

"Well, we have Johnny doing another reconnaissance, a little further out to see if there are any more troops. Robbie and his men are reporting success out there. I just sent a clean up crew out to help gather the bodies and burn them. Also to collect the belongings and the weapons which we can use."

"It'll take a day or so to go through all that stuff."

"We have time for that." Frank said. "That's low priority. We just need to gather up the stuff first. Looks like every available man in Beginnings is working right now, huh?"

"Looks that way." Joe commented. "Clean up crews in and out. We have a town full of scared people Frank. I'm gonna have an afternoon meeting here in about two hours. That should give enough time to finish up. Don't you think?"

"I think so." Frank agreed as they got in the jeep. "What was the final outcome on the evacuation. How did that fair out, I haven't checked."

"It was Sunday." Joe sad sadly as Frank began to drive. "We were very fortunate that a lot of the women ran to containment to use that hatch with the kids. Henry and I had twenty-two out of twenty-eight children with us and fourteen women. When you called out about the gas, we pulled them in the cryo. It was tight, but Henry throw on the exhaust and with the masks . . ." Joe kept his fingers crossed. "Our man in the living section said the ones that didn't make it into center town were the ones who were in the last rows. They did make it to their basements and they did, like you've told everyone, had their masks on as a precaution."

"That's good to hear." Frank drove into town.

"Son, I have to tell you. You did excellent. We had minimal physical damage. We have only two injured. We couldn't have beat this, not at all, had you not been so prepared and so organized."

"No amount of organization stopped that gas, did it?" Frank graveled his words.

"The masks may have. What did Dean say?"

"He said he'd be guessing. I told him to guess and he said what I knew. Time is gonna tell. By his injecting the rabbits directly, he guesses hours before they start getting symptoms, a few more hours until they are down."

Joe looked at his watch. "Christ." He shook his head. "We're looking at the time . . . how many men were in town?"

"About thirty. We had twenty-four at the back gate and eight at the front. But both of those areas reported being hit too. We got the bulk here in town."

"What did . . ." Joe stopped speaking when Frank held his hand up.

"Yeah Johnny?" Frank called into his radio headset.

"Dad, about ten miles west I got a group of them. I'm guessing . . . thirty maybe. I can't count."

"Take them out." Frank ordered.

"Do you want me to do that?" Johnny asked.

"Why wouldn't I?"

"They're holding up white flags Dad."

Frank looked at his father. "Johnny says he sees a bunch and it looks like a surrender."

Joe lifted his shoulders. "Make it your call."

"Johnny? Any view of weapons?"

"Yeah Dad off to the side in a pile."

"All right, hover nearby, I'm sending Robbie and some men out with a truck to get them, if anything maybe we can get some information off of them." Frank switched channels. "Robbie you there."

"Yeah Frank."

"Head west, get a hold of Johnny in the bird for direction. He says he has about thirty surrendering. Take some men with you, It might trap, if it's not, bring them in. We can always keep them in the security training building and post some guards on them."

"We'll do Frank."

Frank turned down the volume of his radio, through the ear piece he could pick up Robbie's conversation. He half listened to that while nearing the clinic. How eerie it was for Frank as he looked around town, everything looking so normal, so peaceful, yet his gut cried out to him that this was just the calm before the mighty storm.

(4)

Ellen finished washing her hands. She pulled her pocket of her lab coat to check for the tube of blood. It was there, and then she informed the young soldier, who now only wore a hospital gown that she would be back in. She knew Frank was waiting outside that door with Joe. Waiting impatiently for her to finish up. Ellen waited impatiently too . . . to see Frank.

She opened the door and pulled it closed as she walked out. "Frank." She tossed her arms around him.

"Hey El. What's going on?"

"Stop." She hugged him tighter. "Take a second Frank to hold me. Please."

With closed eyes Frank embraced, until Ellen was ready to pull back. He set her down. "How's he doing?"

"No fracture. Massive lacerations. I sewed them up. I think he'll be fine."

"So why couldn't we go in there?"

"You'd frighten him." Ellen told him bluntly.

"So the fuck what." Frank snapped.

"No Frank." Ellen shook her head. "You can't say that." Her eyes shifted to Joe as she explained. "I did an examination on him. Our typical entrance examination. Plus some because he was injured. We talked. He's sixteen years old Frank. If that. He doesn't know. He so young he barely had pubic hair." Ellen shook her head. "What makes matters worse is he has the mentality of a ten or eleven year old. Not Denny enthusiasm type, but he really is a child. From what we talked about and from what I know about survivors, that mentality comes from his living by himself for a very long time. He doesn't know how long, he hasn't a clue. But I can tell you he spent a good many years living alone, fighting for his life in our world. Never around adults, never learning how to be one. He said it was cold out, snowing when a man came to the group he lived with. He told me they fed him, clothed him took him to a military type base and taught him how to

shoot. He was scared to ask questions and scared to say no. We're the bad guys he was told. Take out the bad guys. He's scared, really scared." Ellen breathed outward with her words. "And he kept crying in there, saying he was sorry. And he kept trying to reach to me as if I were some sort of mother to him."

Joe was taken aback by Ellen's speech. "You sound unlike yourself Ellen. You sound concerned."

"I am." She said. "I don't know, maybe he pulled the right strings."

"He's still on the other side." Frank stated strongly. "And is he well enough to take to the building up at the security area? That's gonna be our new prisoner camp."

"No." Ellen stopped him as he reached for the door. "This kid is a kid. He was doing what he was told to do. I don't even think he comprehends the damage his people could have done with the gas. I know he doesn't."

Joe rubbed his own forehead, a little perturbed. "What the hell do you want us to do with him Ellen, dress him up and stick him in school with the rest of the kids?"

"Yes."

"What!" Frank and Joe both yelled.

"I mean, not yet. He's a containment case. No more. He's a kid. Don't treat him like a prisoner. Not him." Ellen walked to the door. "Talk to him. Talk to him then make your decision." She opened the door. "Bobby?" She spoke softly. "These men want to speak to you." She lifted her eyes to Frank and Joe who followed in.

Frank saw it on Joe's face the second they looked at him. Frank knew the same expression was on his own face. A look of what to do. And what made matters worse for Frank was he was prepared to go in there and blast the kid, frighten him a little. But looking at his fright, and seeing him out of that uniform made Frank see something else. . . how young he actually was.

(5)

Frank's eyes kept going to Ellen and Henry as those two sat with all the children in the crowded social hall. Frank bounced back and forth in a nervous manner as he stood with Robbie, waiting for the late afternoon meeting to begin.

"Their chattering Frank." Robbie explained. "All twenty-seven of them. Going at the mouth. Saying how they left their camp last night and kept moving. How when they found out the plan, they just wanted out."

"Defectors."

"That's what they told me. I got information for them that is useless, but they're telling me anything they can. But unfortunately, their grunts."

"They don't know too much. I think they were sent here by the society as an expendable army. To deliver their package and if they made it through, good, If not. Oh well."

"I agree. And . . ." Frank motioned his head. "There's Dean."

Dean walked so frazzled, his determination was to only get to his kids, but back tracked when he saw Frank. "Just wanted to let you guys know." He said. "All twenty-seven. No virus. I didn't think they would have it. And . . . they are immune. My guess inoculated. And Bobby our kid, he's immune too. So I ran a test out of curiosity on our John Doe. Guess what gentlemen."

Frank rolled his eyes. "Immune?"

"Yep." Dean nodded. "Society soldier. We'll find out more whenever he wakes up."

"You seem, too upbeat Dean." Frank commented.

"In a way I am." Dean explained. "Though this hall is divided like a grade school dance." Dean pointed to how, by his request the men went nowhere near the women or children. Except Henry, because he was immune. Men on one side, women on the other. "I've checked with your guys through the course of the day. We should have had symptoms, at the very least complaints. Nothing yet Frank. And with a direct exposure, that is a good sign."

Frank didn't want to buy into it, not yet. "What happens though if they do. How is this going to effect the community health wise?"

"We've kept them separated. And this is not an airborne virus so, no contact, no exposure. We're good, and we'll keep them separated for five more days to be on the safe side. The men will have to sleep in one of the empty storage buildings. But they can go about their jobs."

Just as Frank nodded in acceptance of this, Joe walked in.

Silence entailed as Joe made his way up the segregated group and stood before his people. With serious and somberness he spoke. "We faced one hell of a battle today ladies and gentleman. And our men, our men pulled us through it." He nodded proudly at the group of men who were to be separated, They excluded very few men in Beginnings. "But as you know, our men may have been exposed to this virus that we have feared." He heard some whimpering, few sobs. "Dean tells me, the longer they go without symptoms, the better their chances that the gas masks worked. We have them away to keep them from any physical contact. We're doing this with the men who were at the front gate, the back gate and standing center town. The rest of the men, the ones in the tunnels, John Matoose in the air and the one in the living section, Dean believes were at a low, very low risk of exposure."

Hearing that, Jenny clenched to John's arm, burying her head against it.

Joe continued. "We'll keep you apart for five or six more days. Now, moving on to other aspects that we have in this bat . . ." It was like it

happened in slow motion to Joe. His head swayed to his right at the sound of it. It bounced through his soul, causing his heart to pound, then drop. The deadened 'thump'. It was coupled by the immediate panic filled noise of people scurrying to their feet and chairs springing back as everyone in the hall watched the fifty-six men who were separated from everyone else. Their eyes rolled, their heads swayed, and their knees buckled. Then one at a time, like dominos, they dropped hard and motionless to the floor.

Dean sprang up, calling out his loudest, holding some of the women back who rushed to their men. "I need everyone but the people who know they're immune to move out of here. Frank! Get them out!"

Frank and Robbie rushed through the driving crowd of women, pulling them back gently, handing them their children to move along. They were helped by John Matoose and some of the older men who tried to clear the confusion filled hall.

Dean stopped Joe who arrived to aid the fallen men the same time as Henry. He let Henry through. "No Joe. Leave."

"Dean I can't." Joe explained. "They are my people."

"No Joe." Dean shook his head. "Right now these are *my* people and I am telling you to stay away. Go!" Dean pointed. "Go! Ellen! I need you over here!"

Ellen handed Nick to Jenny who held her own baby. "You'll watch them for me?"

"I will." With the exchange of the child Jenny laid her hand over Ellen's. "Take care of our men." She spoke tear filled.

Ellen crossed her hand on Jenny's. "With everything I am." Giving a firm squeeze, Ellen kissed Nick then rushed back to help Dean.

Dean looked up to see Joe had ignored him and bent down to one of the men. "Stop." Dean sprang out to him grabbing Joe's hand. "I told you."

"I have to help." Joe scolded back.

"You wanna help. Go and get some people together, head to the clinic. Get me the east wing set up for all these men. I need beds and cots. Blankets and fluids. Andrea can help with that, so can Melissa. Get it ready stat Joe, then move the hell out of there, we're bringing these men in."

Joe stood up. "I'll get on that Dean"

"I need them as centralized together as you can get them. Six in a room if needed."

"I'm on it." Joe rushed out, laying his hand on Frank's shoulder in his pass of him.

The first order in the hall was to pull the ill men who moaned and shook, from the piles in which they laid upon each other. Getting them comfortable enough to wait until they could carry them out. There were six to handle all of the men. Dean, Ellen, Frank, Robbie, Henry and Johnny. And they all worked fast and together toward some sort of organization. Though everyone of the six worked diligently, everyone of the six worked with their hearts racing in fear.

Dean helped Ellen as she tried to turn over Bentley, a man too heavy for her to handle. "You doing all right?" He asked her.

"I'm fine." She grunted, as she knelt, sliding back as Dean helped her get Bentley to his back.

"As soon as we're done turning them, I need you to head to the clinic. Make sure everything is ready, you know what we need. I'm gonna send Henry to the cryo where we've stored a bunch of agent seventeen. We'll administer some doses, keep our fingers crossed that they have the host strain, if not, try to buy us more time. Slow down the virus reaction."

"We did make enough Agent seventeen, right?"

"To help the community ten times over."

Ellen looked to Bentley. Not ten minutes earlier he looked normal, now his face glistened with sweat, paled in color and his eyes rolled. "Tell me this isn't happening Dean. Please tell me this isn't happening."

Dean looked up at Ellen while loosening Bentley's shirt. "I'm sorry Ellen. It is."

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

AUGUST 17

(1)

It wasn't daylight yet. The sky cast that darkened blue, just before the sun would suddenly appear. Ellen sat on the steps of the clinic, her body drained, feeling exhaustion creeping up on it. The sound of the creaking clinic door opening, made her spin around. "Dean."

"I thought you were going home to get a few hours rest." He sat next to her.

"I will."

"Go home Ellen. You made me take a three our rest."

"Yeah, but I can go without sleep. Living with Henry has taught me that." She propped her elbow on her knee and rested her cheek in her hand. "What happened Dean? How did they get so sick all of the sudden. We've worked with it. We've given the virus to the rabbits."

"Yeah but we haven't given the virus to humans." Dean pulled at her hand holding it. "Direct exposure to humans is something we could have only predicted, not known with certainty."

"And they don't even have the host strain. They have a third mutation. Why? Why Dean?" She looked at him so lost.

"Throw us off. Come on, George had to know we got hold of those SUTs that were after Robbie. Maybe he knew we got the antiserum. Maybe he figured if we had that, we had the host. I don't know." He shrugged then felt her fall into his arm. "I just feel at such a loss."

"I know how you feel."

Dean felt her head suddenly spring up. "What's wrong El?"

Ellen looked out to the street. She heard the loud, rumbling coughing coming closer. "Frank's coming. Why is he coughing like that Dean? He's been coughing like that since this evening."

"He doesn't have the virus El, I checked."

"So why does he sound so sick. Look sick?"

"Exposure to the gas?" Dean lifted his shoulders. "Perhaps the smoke inhalation. But he's not dying, get that out of your mind. I know what you're thinking. You're remembering what we saw when we went to the future."

"Dean." Ellen breathed slowly out. "I'm not only remembering what I saw with Frank. I'm remembering *everything* I saw."

"Unfortunately." Dean pulled her closer to him. "So am I."

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

(1)

Joe's head was killing him. It felt as if it were going to split down the middle, but he pushed on. He had to. In a empty town where no one worked, Joe had to follow up on supplies and distribution. There wasn't a single division that was in full operation. Security was on a skeleton staff. Frank and Robbie helped run it in between working at the clinic. Mechanics was shut down, Henry worked the clinic. The school was closed. The nursery too. It was the biggest crisis Beginnings was ever faced with and Joe feared it was only going to get worse.

(2)

The sound of it burned through Ellen, gnawing at her, not in annoyance but in fear. She finished administering medication to Cole and she stormed from the small room that was packed with six men. "Frank." She called to him as he headed into another room. "Wait."

Frank turned around, covered his mouth and coughed. His whole body shook as he did. "What's up El." His strong voice was hoarse and weak.

"You have to stop."

"I have to help."

"Frank listen to me. You have to rest. Please rest."

"Ellen, you, Henry, Dean and Johnny can not handle all the lab work and these patients. Yo can't. I have to be here."

"You have pneumonia Frank. Dean told you an hour ago you had to stop. Your left lower lobe was filling up." She reached her hand to his face. "You're so warm. Please Frank. Please." She closed her eyes in a begging manner.

"Ellen." He slid her hand from his face. "I'll rest as soon as I catch you up." He kissed her hand. "I love you." As he leaned down to kiss her he lifted his head quickly to the sound of Henry racing down the hall.

"Frank." Henry called out. "El, where's Dean?" Henry ran by them looking in rooms. "Dean!"

Dean came flying out of one. "What's wrong Henry?"

Henry caught his breath. His eyes filled with terror. "We have problems. We have really big problems." He shook his head slowly. "Come with me." Waving his hand to them to follow, Henry sped back down the corridor.

Dean caught up to Henry and as soon as he turned the corner to the main hall, his pace slowed down to a crawl. Nine people sat on the floor

against the walls. Johnny knelt before them trying to administer care. "Henry, tell me they aren't sick."

"I can't Dean. They are."

Dean closed his eyes. "Nine more?"

"I wish."

Dean's eyes widened. "What?" He felt Henry pull his arm toward the waiting room. The moment Dean walked to the doorway was the moment he stepped away, backed up into the wall and banged his head back in frustration. His hand harshly covered his own face and his whole body trembled. "No, no. This can't be happening." Lowering his hand and peering through his spread fingers he looked at seven year old Kimmy, she curled up in a ball laying on Cindy's lap. Looking just as ill as Cindy did. And he knew the horrifying reason why those nine people waited in the hall, when he walked back into the waiting room. Those nine had to be in the hall, because there were so many people in the waiting room, there just wasn't any room for them.

(3)

Jenny spoke in the soothing mother's voice as she held and rocked Caroline. "No, you're not sick little one. You are not sick." How painful it was to Jenny as her baby whimpered so close to her ear. Jenny tried to tell herself it was only the baby's teeth. That she didn't have what everyone else had. She couldn't, she was never around any of the men.

Trying to go through her day so as not to think about anything, Jenny teetered holding her daughter and pulling laundry from the washer. In her awkward balance she bumped into the trash, knocking it over and spilling its contents across the floor. Whining, Jenny reached down to pick it up. Her hand secured the baby's head, and as she lifted the can back up, the odd look of the paper caught her eyes. It was crinkled up, and it had a slight shine to it. Grabbing that ball of paper, Jenny unwrinkled it and smoothed it out on the washer. "What? What is this? It looks like . . . a fax."

(4)

All Ellen kept asking kept asking herself was how did the numbers go up? How did the amount of patients nearly double in less than twenty four hours. She walked by Henry who worked so hard, she paused to grip his hand and kiss him gently, then Ellen, emotionally and physically drained moved to the clinic lab. "Dean."

Dean spun on his stool to face her. "Hey El."

"They're all situated." She laid a tray of blood before him. "Forty-four." She spoke sadly, her lip quivering. "Eleven are children."

Dean walked to retrieve the tray from her and he grabbed hold of her hand. "We'll get through this. We will." He spoke with confidence.

Ellen looked to Johnny who worked on the lab's computer. "Johnny, did you need to check your daughter?"

"I just did a little bit ago. How's she doing now El?" Johnny asked.

Ellen shook her head.

"Maybe I better go be with her and Denice." He walked toward the door. "I'll be back." He stopped before leaving. "El, Jenny called here about an hour ago, really upset. She was rambling, something about a fax. I think she's lost it." He shrugged with a sad look and left the lab.

"A fax?" Ellen asked looking to Dean. "What do you suppose she meant by that?"

"I don't know." Dean answered.

"Should I go see her?"

"No, she'll be fine. You're needed here."

Ellen looked so in debate, standing there at the oddity of Jenny's call. But like Dean had told her, she was needed at the clinic. And putting the thought of going to see Jenny out of her mind, Ellen moved on back to the patients.

(5)

Jenny rubbed her pain filled eyes, holding her daughter who barely moved, trying to focus better on that fax she had read a hundred times as she sat at her diningroom table. Her hand gripped to the edge of it, and in a startle, she crinkled it when she heard the front door open.

"Jenny." John walked in.

Jenny swallowed and folded the fax.

"What do you have?"

Jenny shook her head. "It's nothing honey. Don't worry about it, it's just another Ellen trick on you." Folding the paper, Jenny placed it in the front pocket of her jeans, it protruded slightly. "Why are you home?"

John ran his hand down Caroline's head. "God, Jenny she's burning up."

Jenny held her baby tighter and began to cry. "I know."

"We'll get her to the clinic, then I need to speak to you. I really need to talk to you." John grabbed hold of Jenny's arm and helped her to stand. "Just know, that no matter what I tell you, I love you."

Jenny faced John, pulling from his hold. "Then maybe you should tell me now." She stood before him and waited.

(6)

Ellen straightened the long intravenous tubing that led into her arm. She grabbed the cloth from the basin and wipe it slowly over Andrea's forehead. Slowly and comforting, looking down to her. She pulled the covers up further on her hoping it would stop her shaking. "You'll be all right." Ellen spoke softly.

"I remember." Andrea said through her shaking. "You once told me you'd let me suffer." Her hand reached up to Ellen's. "I'm sorry we fought so bad back then. I'm sorry for that."

"Don't you apologize." Ellen grabbed tightly to Andrea's cheeks and lowered her face within an inch of Andrea's. "Don't you dare say your sorry to me. We got passed that you and me. We did. And I'm sure Andrea Slagel you and I will get passed many, many more fights. You hear me."

"I'm so sick Ellen. I've never been this sick."

"Then fight." Ellen spoke strongly, tears in her eyes. "You fight damn it. We can't beat this alone. We need you to help us too." She lowered her lips and kissed Andrea on the forehead. "Fight."

As much as she wanted to stay with Andrea, Ellen knew she had to move on. With her head down some, she walked toward the lab to get more supplies. When she saw the silhouette by the sun filled front door, Ellen raced forward.

Dean looked up as he placed a needle in Jenny's arm. "She just got here. Her and the bay."

"Oh my God." Ellen grabbed Jenny's arm.

"Ellen, four more came in too. I need you to take their blood."

Ellen's head swayed back and forth, she saw Jenny open her eyes. "Jenny."

"Ellen." Jenny spoke weak.

As Ellen lowered her head to look closer at Jenny, her eyes caught the slight shimmer of it as it hung from her pocket. The white paper and immediately Ellen's mind flashed to what Johnny told her. *Fax*. She snatched the paper from the pocket and unfolded it.

Dean looked up as the tube filled with blood. "Ellen, what the hell are you doing?"

Ellen's eyes skimmed the words with horror. "I'll be back!" She stormed to the door.

"Ellen!" Dean called out, pulling the filled tube from the hub and sticking it in his pocket. He pulled the needle from Jenny's arm, calling out as he chased Ellen. "Someone finish Jenny, I need another tube." He ran as fast as he could to catch her. "Ellen!"

"Dean let me go."

"Get back in there."

"This is important. This is our lives." She held up the fax. "Jenny found this. Read this." She slammed it into Dean's chest. "I have to get Joe."

We have to find John. He did it to her. She found him out and he did it to her.”

(7)

John Matoose sobbed. He literally cried his eyes out, his face buried in his hands. “I’m sorry.” He cried to Joe. “I am. I don’t care what you do to me. You can shoot me, you can oust me, do what you want. But I am begging you Joe. I am begging you please do not do it until I help you bring him down. Use me to get to George. Use me. He doesn’t know I told you. He promised this wouldn’t happen.” John’s head moved back and forth. “Let me help get him,. Let me help you find him.”

Joe was so ill, he could barely stand. He had to lean on his desk in order to stand up. “This has to be Frank’s decision too, Do you realize what you have done to this community? Do you?” His ill tainted voice rose in anger. “Our community is dying.”

“I tried to stop it. That’s why I did what I did. Don’t you understand. He lied!”

Before Joe could say anymore, his office door burst open. “Ellen.”

“Joe.” She raced in.

“What are you doing here.”

“Looking for him.” She pointed over to John, stormed to him. Grabbed his shoulder and pushed him back. “She found you out!” Ellen screamed at him. “She found you out and you gave Jenny the virus. Didn’t you?”

“No.” John shook his head as he lifted it. He looked as sick as everyone else in Beginnings. “No.”

“You have to give it to me John. If you even have a drop of it left. Give it to me.” Ellen pleaded in anger. “We can beat this if we have the host virus. I know you have it.”

“I don’t.” John sprang up from his chair and swayed. “If I did, don’t you think I would hand it right over. I don’t have it.” He breathed heavily. “I wish I did. But I wouldn’t give it to my wife!” He looked at Joe then Ellen. “I love my Wife and I love my daughter and they have this thing too. Everything I did, I did so they would never have to face this.” He cried again, weakly stumbling to his seat. “If I did so much wrong, if I betrayed my community for them. Why . . . why would I give them the virus.”

Ellen stood baffled listening to his heart wrenching reason. “He had . . .” Her hand crumbled the fax as she stood so puzzled. “He had to have, right. Right Joe?” She looked to her father for answers. “Joe. Joe!” She tried to reach out for his stumbling body, but it was too late, Joe’s head went back and he fell face forward to the floor.

(8)

It was a phone call Frank did not want to receive, but one he felt would come. So sick Josh sounded on the phone when he called Frank for help, telling him that he and Denny couldn't watch the kids anymore.

Frank expected the two teenagers to be down when he walked in, he didn't expect to see what he did when he walked in to his house. Little Katie stood with a cloth running it over Denny's head. "Katie." Frank called to her then coughed.

"My brother's sick."

Frank ran over to Josh who sat in the chair, his head forward. "Josh. Hey Guy."

"Dad." Josh couldn't keep his eyes in focus. "I'm sorry Dad."

Frank closed his eyes and turned to the steps at the sound of Nick's loud crying. He raced up the stairs and Billy stood at the top. "Billy."

"Frank, we're trying. Me and Katie tried. But they're all sick." Billy told him. "I'm scared."

"I know. Go down stairs." Frank turned to the bedroom where Nick was at, and his legs weakened when he saw Joey laying on top of the covers. Joey lifted his head slightly and plopped back down. Frank grabbed his radio. "Robbie. Robbie I need your help at my house."

"I'm at the clinic with Dad Frank. He's down."

"Robbie please come to my house. Please. And don't say anything to Ellen." Getting an agreement from Robbie, Frank moved to Nick's crib. "Give me a second. Please." Frank pleaded with the newborn placing the pacifier in his mouth. "Just . . ." Frank's head turned to the sound of Brian crying. "Oh God." He hurried to crib, he wasn't in there. "Bri!" Frank called out, following the crying. He ran into the next bedroom and he saw Brian laying on Alexandra's bed. He curled in a ball holding on to his blanket for security. "Bri."

"Da-da." Brian lifted himself holding out his arms to Frank.

Frank's eyes closed tightly when he took Brian into his arms and felt the hot dry feel of his skin. "Oh God" Frank started to breath even heavier. "Alex." Where was she? "Alex." He called louder as he ran out into the hall still holding Brian. "Billy, where's your . . ." Frank saw her, she lay on his bed. Hurrying into his room, he ran to Alexandra who curled up with Ellen's pillow. Her already thin, tiny body quivered. "Alex." Frank sat down on the bed next to her, running his hand down her fevered forehead. "Sweetie."

"Daddy." She started to cry. "Daddy, I'm so sick Daddy."

Frank scooped her up into his arms as well, holding her tight. Her legs wrapped around him and she cried uncontrollably, coughing a deep echoing cough that sounded as if it should come from a man. "You'll be O.K."

"I'm sick."

"I know." Frank closed his eyes tightly, and rocked her. "I'm here." Hearing the sound of Nick crying, Joey crying, Frank wished at that moment his arms were big enough for all of his children, because at that moment, all of his children needed him. And Frank was at a loss.

(9)

It was the only thing that made her smile on this day, Danny Hoi telling Ellen that his luck hadn't been so good since he arrived in Beginnings. She chuckled at how he kept his spirits up despite the fact that he was so sick. But even with the multitudes patients that now filled the clinic. Patients now spread past that east wing into the main hall, Ellen found time to go back to Joe.

She stood above Joe who was unconscious, wiping him down, reflecting on that special dance they had not two days earlier. In her sadness, she felt the comforting arms wrap around her from behind. She felt the softness of his hair brush against her cheek, and Ellen fell back into his hold. "I can't watch him like this."

"We know he makes it Ellen." Henry spoke softly in her ear. "We know Joe makes it."

"Everything is different now Henry." She turned around and buried her head into his chest. "I never wanted to go through this again in my life. But here we are."

"I wish there was more that I could do." Henry held her and needed Ellen, just as much as she needed him.

Ellen pulled back to look at him, when she did, she saw Dean walk solemnly into the room. "Dean? Dean what is it?"

Dean stood leaning on the door way. His hand lifted the papers he held, then dropped it. "She doesn't have it." He spoke with so much pain. "Jenny doesn't have the host virus." With another slam of his hand to his thigh, Dean left the room.

Henry looked at Ellen who just stood speechless. He kissed her forehead. "I'll be back." He walked with a quick pace from the room, and to the lab. Dean leaned on the counter his hand across his face, his hair sprawled through his finger tips. "Dean."

"I'm sorry." Dean stood up.

"How can this be?" Henry asked. "In the future she had it."

"She doesn't now."

"But . . ."

"She doesn't now!" Dean called out with fierce emotions, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a tube of blood. He chuckled when he looked at it in a mad way. "When I took this tube, I had such high hopes." He clenched it wanting to throw it. "She doesn't have the host Henry." Dean looked at Henry so lost. "And if someone doesn't come up with it."

He opened the fridge and placed the tube of Jenny's blood in the rack. He paused in his talking to look at the eerie sight. The rack of blood labeled was like everything else that surrounded him, so much like a vision he had seen before. The future they had visited no long ago. "We're all . . ." Dean slammed the refrigerator when he heard the anguish scream of Ellen echo toward them. With Henry he raced into the hall.

"No!" Ellen screamed grabbing Alexandra from Frank's arms. "No." Her head flung back then forward burying it to her daughter and spinning to Dean. "Our babies are sick." She started to cry, then weakly fell into Dean's arms when he joined her. "Our babies are sick."

(9)

Frank had finally stopped doing anything. And it wasn't his sickness that made him stop, it was the fact that his children were sick and he wanted to be with them. He wasn't going to leave their sides, of that Frank was certain. In that room was where he belonged, it was where he was needed most, and in the room with his children was where Frank would stay.

It was well after midnight when Ellen returned to the larger room where all of her children, even the healthy ones were and slept. Dean was there, he held Brian. Frank sat in a chair cradling a sleeping Alex, and Robbie paced with a restless Joey. They all had to be there, because there had to be enough arms to hold the children who so desperately needed comfort.

She kissed all of her children, then dropped so tired at Frank's feet, leaning on his legs and grabbing Alexandra's tiny hand in hers. "Henry says it's quiet for a while." She nuzzled to Frank's knee.

Dean rested his head against Brian's "For a while."

Frank ran his hand down Alexandra's face, speaking to Dean and not taking his eyes off of her. "You're gonna keep trying Dean, right? You're gonna keep trying to help our kids."

"With my heart . . ." Dean hesitated and took a deep breath when his emotions started to take over him, he held Brian tighter. "With my heart and soul Frank. I'll give it everything I have and more."

Ellen looked up at Dean. "How are we going to do this? All of these people are sick. We have to work on a cure. We have to help these people. Medicate them. How are we going to do this?"

Robbie stopped in his pace, his head raised in a thinking look, then saw Dean sway his head so at a loss. "We'll figure something out." Robbie said. "But can one of you tell me, how many, how many in Beginnings are sick? How many are we looking at caring for?"

Ellen lifted her head. "Maybe it would be easier to ask, how many in Beginnings aren't sick?"

Dean saw them look to him for an answer and he knew it. “Not including those of us immune?” He swallowed harshly. “None.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE

AUGUST 18

(1)

Henry heard the commotion at the end of the main hallway even through the early morning moans that came from those suffering from the new plague. Dropping the needle he was getting ready to inject in Danny Hoi, he headed with haste to the arguing that entailed. "What's going on?"

Dean stood facing off with Robbie. "Tell him Henry, get them out of my clinic."

Henry looked to the large group of men who stood behind Robbie. "Robbie?"

"Tell him to pipe his ass down. We had a rough night. He needs to work on the virus. We need all the help we can get. Here are twenty-seven healthy and immune hands, ready and willing to help out." Robbie pointed to the society defectors he brought in two days earlier. "They volunteered. Let them help."

Henry looked to Dean. "We need help. They can wipe down. They can change bed clothes. They can do the work and care so you can beat this thing. Dean."

Dean tossed his hands up. "All right!" He said strongly then pointed to Robbie. "If anything goes wrong. Of they do anything wrong. It's on your head."

After Dean disappeared into the lab, Robbie flipped him off. He faced the twenty-seven men. "O.K., you know what to do. You know what I told you. Any questions, find the little blonde with the big mouth and she'll tell you what needs done. Move it out." Robbie waited until they all rushed down the hall by him and he smiled at Henry. "Thanks."

Henry couldn't think about what was going on, his mind was elsewhere. But now he had more help. That's what mattered, that and the people of Beginnings. So Henry returned to doing what he had to do. And that was helping the people he lived among.

(2)

"Come on." Dean beckoned with emotions as he tried with everything he had to revive little Kimmy. "Breath."

"Dean." Ellen pulled him back. "She's gone."

"No." He shrugged her away.

"She's been gone for nine minutes Dean." Ellen spoke strongly in his ear. "She is gone. Let . . ." Ellen's voice dropped with emotions. "Let her go."

Letting out a long grunt, Dean's hands slammed down hard to the edge of the bed rattling it. He pulled harshly in a spin from Ellen, Held up his arm and stormed out of the room.

"Dean." She followed him as he made an enraged dash to his lab. "Dean." Just before she stepped inside, she heard the loud crashing and banging. She walked into see Dean clearing things from the counter. "Stop it." She rushed to him. "Stop."

"We're losing." He looked at her, his face red.

"We're still fighting." Ellen spoke almost afraid of the expression on his face.

"But we're losing the battle! The symptoms are taking over El." Dean screamed out stepping away. "Our children. Our children Ellen are dying. And there is nothing we can do about it. Nothing. We had this thing." His hand slammed on the counter. "We had this thing and we failed to do with it what we should." With a hard swing Dean sent a stack of folders flying outward spraying their papers about the lab.

"And do you think, throwing things is gonna save them? Do you think screaming about it is gonna help."

"No . . . yes."

"Yes?" Ellen said stunned.

"Yes." He stormed to her. "Maybe if I shouted loud enough, maybe the powers that be will hear me!" He looked to the ceiling. "Maybe he'll get off his ass and help us this time. God damn you." He pointed up throwing his body with it. "God damn you for letting this happen again. This is your world! How can you let it die all over again."

"Dean." Ellen reached for him as he gripped the counter and dropped his head. "Come on."

"No." He pulled away. "No!" He ran his hand harshly through his hair. "Kimmy was the first to die. In this time *and* in the future we went to. You wanna know who's gonna die next. I can tell you. Cole." Dean picked up a folder. "And not because I'm a psychic but because it was all given to us. Every single thing that would happen was documented Ellen." He slammed the folder down. "Look around. Look at the cots. The number of people. We ignored it. We hoped it wouldn't get to this. But all the hoping it the world couldn't stop it. Did we cause it to happen faster? Look at the fridge." Dean walked to it and opened it. "This scares me. This is the same sight I saw when we opened that fridge in the future. He slammed it closed. "When we came to the future we saw Robbie walking around. Maybe had we pulled the notes from further back we would have seen the reason for his beating the virus. Robbie probably had it before anyone else in that future too. Look at who is not sick. You, me, Henry and Johnny. Billy?" Dean laughed in disbelief. "Not only are the survivors the same but we played right into the futures hand. We secured it. We gave ourselves the vaccination to ensure we'd beat it. And when I heard Billy's name pulled . . ." He swayed his head. "I should have known. Billy beat it in the future. We

never were stopping this El, we were just living what was meant to happen that's all. The only difference is we had a big preview."

"No!" Ellen shouted at him. "You are wrong. There are things that are not the same."

"That is true." Dean spoke with edge and anger. "How about the fact that instead of the virus hitting in strains two, then one, then three. The virus hit us in the strains, three then two and no one. How is that. How can we have strain twos without ever having a strain one invasion. I can see if they dropped it on us like they did with the third strain. But they didn't. These people that have strain two, they were exposed a week ago. A week. What happened El? Did we miss it?" Dean threw his hand up walking to her. "We did, didn't we. We had to have missed the invasion, the exposure."

"Dean . . ."

"No El think about it. Think." He pointed to his temple while bracing her shoulders. "We're missing it, we're missing it and that is our key. How did they get exposed. Who was the host? Someone brought it in. Something brought it in here a week ago. What happened a week ago that was different then any documentation we had from the future. What is different. What is it that we're not . . ." Dean went silent, his eyes widened. ". . . seeing."

"Dean?"

"No." He closed his eyes. "It can't be that simple. Yes it is." He opened his eyes and turned from her. "The food supply. Lace the food supply. So unsuspecting."

"Dean?" Ellen watched him walk to the counter. "What are you . . ." A loud slam of Dean's hand caused Ellen to shriek. "Dean!"

"Can you be it?" Dean's eyes raised at the same time he brought into his view, wiggling in his hand, a furry grey mouse. "There's one to find out." In one sweeping motion, Dean slammed the mouse back down to the counter, reached into his pocket, pulled out a pen, raised it high, then stabbed it with force into the body of the mouse. The mouse squealed loudly as the pen went through him, pinning him to the counter. "El, get me a slide." Dean held his hand out keeping his eyes peered to the mouse. The second he felt the slide touch upon his hand was the second his eyes focused in on the trickle of blood that flowed from the mouse. And unwillingly doing so, Dean's gift from Henry kicked in with his focus. The small trickle grew closer to him. Engulfing his vision first in all red, then deeper red, then white, then circles of molecules, cells moving about, and then . . . the virus. Dean concentrated harder. In his vision it was like he himself was standing inside the blood of that mouse, it swam in his peripheral vision. And the closer Dean focused in on it, the more Dean could see it. And with a huge grin and excited slam of his hand with a 'yes' Dean spun around to Ellen. "We got it!" He grabbed her and kissed her hard. "We got it!" He ran out of the lab racing down the halls. "Robbie! Robbie!"

Robbie came out of a patient room. "Dean what is . . ."

"Where are the twenty-seven men you brought in?" Dean asked him.

"They're helping out. Henry said they could."

"Get them. Get them now. You get them and you sent them back out, you join them too, get Henry. All of you go out and find me every single mouse you can. Gather them up and bring them in. We got it. We got our host. We're gonna beat this thing." He spun from Robbie and raced down the hall. With a loud, screaming 'whew!' as he skipped up in a jump, Dean grabbed hold of Ellen who stood in the hall, lifted her in a hug, spun her around, kissed her excitedly and set her down. He then grabbed her hand, pulling her back into his lab to begin their work. And they would start by taking advantage of the sacrifice rodent who bled upon their counter. His blood was still fresh, it held the host virus, and most of all it was a quick start to the end of it all.

CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX

AUGUST 19

(1)

It was early, but not too early to begin checking on the progress of the antidote that Dean had administered. After draining the host virus, creating a serum, injecting the virus into everyone, then hitting them with Agent Seventeen, It was well into the late night. But before the previous day's end, there wasn't a soul in Beginnings who was sick and who hadn't been given the cure. Unfortunately, like Dean had been saying since the begging, the virus wasn't as deadly as the symptoms itself. And it was evident when some who were stricken failed to respond at all. There was always a down side to every up. Beginnings may have not stopped the virus from coming, but they certainly stopped it from claiming all of the lives that the future told them it would take. And even with the loss of some lives, Beginnings could claim this as their victory. Because they were still standing when it was all said and done. They were still alive.

(2)

It was a different feel in the hospital, while making that first set of rounds. Dean could hear it in the noise level. Chattering instead of moaning. And it was so clear to him that his antidote worked at least on one individual. Joe. He was buttoning his white shirt when Dean walked in the room. "Joe." Dean laughed. "What are you doing. Get back to bed."

"I'm feeling better Dean. And I'm sure you can use help."

"Yeah, getting Frank to get into bed. He's sick Joe."

"I'll talk to him." Joe sat on the bed as he finished tucking in his shirt. "How did you do it? How did you find it you son of a bitch."

"Well your daughter is going to tell you it was divine intervention. I kinda had a shouting match at the big guy." Dean pointed up. "But I was standing there rambling, trying to think what could have brought it in. And then I saw him, the mouse. It was so simple, yet scary. What better way to get us all then to lace our food supply. The mice go into the fields, nibble on the food, we eat the food. All of our men were probably exposed to it already. But when the gas hit them, it was such an abundance it took over immediately. George planned it all to happen. It wouldn't surprise me if he planned it all to happen in the same day."

"You said our food supply is laced. Is it safe now?"

"Yes. We're all immune." Dean nodded.

"So I'm going to take it that the antidote was a success."

"If you want to." Dean looked sad. "See, for the most part, people are responding well. Some are responding slower than others, and unfortunately, some aren't responding at all."

"How can that be?"

"The symptoms Joe. The symptoms have them. They are not dying of our virus, they're dying from the ravishing effects of the symptoms. It's the weaker ones Joe. The old and . . ."

"The children."

Dean's head dropped. "We've lost . . . we've lost kids Joe. And I'm fearing we're gonna lose more before it's all done. They're fighting with everything they have. We're giving them everything we have. But it may not be enough."

"How many people have we lost total Dean?"

Dean hesitated before answering. "We lost three adults so far and six children."

"Six!" Joe closed his eyes. "We only had thirty."

"I don't want to think about it." Dean backed up. "And . . . And I really should go check on patients."

"Dean." Joe called out to him. "I know you're blaming yourself for the losses. But you have to know. You did all you could, you and Ellen did more than that. You stopped it. You stopped fate from being so cruel to us again."

Dean nodded slowly in appreciation to Joe, he moved from the room. What he needed to see was good results, and for that all he would have to do is look at the numbers of people whom the day before couldn't open their eyes. People who walked and talked now. That was his good results and that would make Dean feel better.

(3)

It was music to Ellen's ears. The sound of Alexandra's giggles flowing out into the hall as Ellen approached her children's room. She put on a bright smile and cheerfully walked in. "Alex."

"Mommy." Alexandra sat up reaching out her arms.

"Hey Sweetie." Ellen kissed her and hugged her. "You look so much better today."

"I feel so much better. Look, Billy drew on my hand."

Ellen looked down to the flowery artwork. "Nice." She turned some in her seat on the bed looking at Frank's back as he leaned over the crib. "Frank did you see how good Alex looks to . . . Frank?"

When he spoke, he barely spoke. "El."

"Frank what's wrong?" She stood from the bed. "Frank."

Frank turned his head to her, his eyes were red. "Something . . . something is wrong with Brian."

Ellen edged her way to the crib, when she looked down at her son she nearly wanted to fall over. "Oh my God." She pulled out her stethoscope and listened to his chest.

"El." Frank stroked Brian's head while holding his hand. "Help him."

Ellen began to hyperventilate, she backed up. "Billy, take Alex from this room hurry." Her words held tears. "Frank. I'll get Dean." Jumping across Alexandra and Billy as she darted from the room, Ellen skid in a stop of terror at the anguish scream that come from the room down the hall. Jenny's scream. Ellen had heard that scream before, she had made that scream herself. Afraid to look, Ellen swayed her head into that room and she saw Jenny. She sobbed uncontrollably, unable to stand up, John held onto her for support as she cradled her lifeless daughter in her arms. "Oh God." Ellen breathed out and raced down the hall again, More than anything she did not want that to be her again. "Dean!" She cried out in panic. "Dean!"

"Ellen what's wrong?" Dean came flying out of a room.

Ellen caught her breath between her words. "Bri . . . Brian. There's something wrong with Brian."

Like the two of them were in a race together, they flew down the hall back to Brian's room.

Frank still stood the same way. He looked so desperate at Dean when Dean walked in. "Help him Dean. Help my son."

The visual of Brian was more than Dean could handle when the small boy came in his full view. Brian laid upon his back, his arms spread out. As Dean laid his hand on his leg, he could feel the coolness of it, dry. It matched the pale grey hue that had cast over Brian. His green, now grey, eyes stared out blankly, he didn't blink. And the only sign that give hint that he was still alive was the struggling breaths that the baby took. Breaths that weren't eased by the oxygen that flowed into him. Huffing breaths, short, quick, almost gasping. And little Brian's head twitch slightly to the right with every breath he fought to take. They were the only sound that filled that room.

Hovering close to Brian, Frank's squeezed his hand. "Dean, come on help him."

Dean closed his eyes tightly, he knew. No amount of medical knowledge, no amount of hope or praying was going to help.

"Dean." Frank sounded as if he begged.

Dean's hand widened over Brian's leg, his head dropped and he raised only his eyes to Ellen who stood on the other side of the crib. In his grip onto Brian, Dean felt his entire being tense up as if his soul were getting ready to leave him. His chest hurt, his ears rang. The breathing, Brian's breathing . . . *Huff* . . . *buff* . . . *buff* . . . *buff* . . .

Silence.

Brain's head stopped twitching and dropped to his right toward Ellen.

Ellen's eyes caught Brian's, it was if her baby stared at her. Like so many times before but only this time without that precious life behind them. She couldn't look, she spun from the crib and into the counter, gripping the edges of it. Breathing so hard, closing her eyes.

Dean let go of Brian's leg. His arms folded close to his body as he stepped back. The pain wrenched through his stomach, burning up to his chest. He huddled over, digging his own elbows into his gut as he buried his face in his hands.

"Bri." Frank shook him lightly. "Brian." He shook him again. "Come on. It's Dad. Brian." Frank lowered his lips to his son. "Brian please wake up." He kissed him. "Breathe . . . please breathe for me baby." He stared at his baby, who did not respond. "No." The word quivered from Frank's throat. "No." He spoke stronger. "NO!" Frank's head went back and his one cry out rang out long and hard filling the room and carrying throughout the clinic. His shoulders bounced as his hand gripped the railing to the crib.

Ellen's entire insides trembled listening to Frank cry out. Tears streamed from her reddened face as she finally turned around. Dean had his back faced to them, leaning forward into the wall. She looked to Frank, ready to go to him when she saw him reach into the crib. "Frank."

"Brain! Oh God!" Frank pulled the oxygen from him, and then the intravenous. He cried out even more as he lifted Brian up and his son's arms that used to cling to him, flopped with no life as his head fell back. An angry growl emerged from Frank and he turned completely red, bringing Brian tightly to his chest, cradling his head in his huge hand, gripping Brian's back, and planting his lips to his son's cheeks. The wide shoulders of Frank's bounced up and down, as his eyes closed as tight as they could get, trying to squeeze the pain from himself. Praying and hoping with all of his heart that he hadn't just lost his son. The son he prayed for, the one he waited for, the son that taught him how to be a father again.

It was a Frank no one had seen before. Filled with deep anguish, he backed himself into a corner and slid down the wall, sitting with Brian on the floor. His long legs bent up as he wrapped his arms completely around the baby, holding him tight to his chest, wedging Brian's little head between his broad shoulder and his tear filled cheek. Frank wept. He shook violently, sobbing from the depths of his soul. And Frank held on to Brian, embracing him with all of his love, knowing it would be the last time he would ever hold his son again.

Ellen trembled so badly her breathing was out of synch. Through her nose, and partly opened mouth, she quivered with every short breath she took. Her shaking hand reached out as she knelt down to Frank. "Frank."

"No." His head buried in Brian, he spoke so soft, so barely audible.

Slowly her hand touched upon Brian's head, she gasped when she felt the lifelessness of him.

"He's gone El." Frank wiped his tears over Brian. "He's gone. My son is gone. Why El? Why did he have die?" He pulled Brian's hand to his mouth, gripping the pudgy fingers that used to hold his and he kissed them.

With the back of her hand Ellen wiped the tear for her cheek, but it didn't matter, they were replaced with the fresh ones that kept falling down. Through her mother's sorrow she leaned forward to Brian, laying her lips gently to his head, holding her hand to his face and whispering through her kiss to him. "I love you. Mommy loves you so much.." Fighting back breaking down, Ellen's body shook and she pulled back, swaying her head, turning and running from that room as fast as she could.

Joe was nearly barreled over by her as he approached the door. "Ellen . . ." Reaching out and missing, Joe looked in the room to see why she had run out. His mouth dropped open and he felt the pain as he witnessed his son, his strong son, totally broken and holding his child in his arms on the floor. He looked to Dean who leaned face forward into the wall as if it were his only means of support. "Dear God." Joe had to turn from the scene He couldn't witness it, he couldn't see the loss of his grandchild. Turning he faced Robbie who stood stunned in the doorway.

With solace Robbie walked into the room moving to Dean first and laying his hand on Dean's shoulder. "Dean . . ."

Dean turned around to the touch, his face was red as he looked up to Robbie. Dean wanted to say something, but his pain stopped him and he shook his head. "Excuse me." Like Ellen he took off from that room.

Robbie could hear his big bother's cries, slowly he walked over to Frank and brought himself down toward the floor. "Frank." Robbie tried not to look at Brian. "Frank, I'm sorry. I am so sorry."

Another burst of sadness came from Frank as he blindly reached up and grabbed for his brother, pulling at Robbie, clenching at him, bringing him to him. Then as Robbie dropped to the floor, Frank fell into him. And Robbie held his brother, trying to be a strength for him. Trying to be any type of comfort in a situation Robbie knew that there just was no comfort to be had.

Ellen ran hard and fast. Her feet pounded on the ground as she ran through the empty streets of Beginnings. Her hurt was her drive and she wheezed out with every step she took. She didn't stop until she physically couldn't run any more. She fell, slamming knees first into the hard uneven ground in the underdeveloped section. Clenching her fist and pulling out the long grass, she threw her head back and Ellen screamed from her gut, loud and deep, it was filled with every ounce of pain she had. She started shaking when she began to cry, lowering her head, tossing it back and forth, digging her fingers into the dirt with ever sob she released.

Ellen didn't hear his footsteps, nor did she hear him approach at all. She merely saw his knees as he dropped them before her.

Henry removed her hair and slipped his hands upon her cheeks, raising her face to him. His hands held her firm, his thumbs moved in a brush across her tears. He didn't say anything, he stared at her. And no words needed to be spoken, his eyes conveyed it all. He was there for her. He was right there.

"Henry." Ellen's lips quivered. "This wasn't supposed to happen again. I wasn't supposed to lose another child. How can I live with this? It hurts so bad Henry. It hurts so bad."

Just as her head began to lower again, Henry stopped her, lifting her head back up, bringing his face closer to hers. "There are no words that I can say to you right now. There is nothing I can do to take this pain away from you. I wish with all of my heart I could feel this for you. Because I would take it . . ." Henry swallowed. "I would take it for you. Just know El. Whatever it is you need from me to help you through this, I will do. If you want to cry, scream, yell or hit, I will help you in anyway I can. I'm here for you. Let me help you. Whatever you need."

"I just need you to hold me Henry. Just . . ." Ellen fell to him. ". . . hold me."

Henry grabbed on to her, holding Ellen as close as he could, clenching her, steadying her trembling body as she cried. And Henry, closed his eyes tightly trying to stop the tears that formed there. Tears for the loss of Brian. But more so, tears for Ellen and all the pain she felt that he just couldn't do anything about.

(4)

Henry pulled the jeep up directly in front of the clinic and he shut it off. Holding on to the steering wheel he looked over at Ellen who just stared at the building. "You don't have to do this El. You can go home."

"No I can't." She shook her head. "I've been gone long enough. I just needed some time for me to grieve."

"An hour is not enough time."

"No it isn't. But it was enough time for me to get some of it out. Out enough to face everything a little stronger. I left Frank a mess Henry. I just left him. And Dean . . . I never saw that look on his face before. He was crushed as much as Frank. Now here's my problem." She looked at Henry. "I love them both. Who do I go to? Who is it that I comfort, because I can not be in two places at the same time."

"El." Henry reached over and grabbed her hand. "You be with who needs you the most at the moment. And I will back you up. I will help you with them. But remember, you are going through this too. You are going to need help too."

Ellen gave Henry a sad smile. "That's where you come in Henry. I have you." She slid the hand of his she held across her cheek. "I am so glad for that. Thank you." She kissed his hand and raised her head to look at the clinic. "This is a nightmare. And the worst part is, I'm going to realize soon that I'm just not waking up from it." Releasing Henry's hand she stepped from the jeep and walked slowly to the clinic.

For as much as Ellen loved Joe, he was the last person she wanted to see when she walked through those doors, because she knew the instant she laid her eyes upon him, she would fall apart. Just like the little girl who scraped her knee and was always fine until her father walked in the door. Just the sight of Joe, just the sight of the strength he had, the strength she needed, made her cry. He wrapped his arms around her, placing his lips firm to her forehead.

"Sweetheart." Joe held on to her. "I am so sorry."

"Me too Joe." Ellen tried not to cry. "I'm sorry for you too."

"We'll get through this." Joe pulled back from her and wiped his hand under his own eye. "We will . . ." He cleared his throat, trying to shun the emotions he felt so powerfully. "We'll . . . get through this." His hands gripped hers. "As a family, you hear." He kissed her. "As a family."

How much Ellen's heart broke more looking at Joe, his eyes red and glossy. And she listened to his simple words that they would get through it and she believed them because it was Joe who said them. And for as much as Ellen told herself she was going into the strong-mode, she took a few extra moments to be weak again, because with Joe she never had to be strong. Even in his pain he had enough strength for the both of them, and she just wanted to escape into his strength before she had to face her pain again.

CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN

(1)

Frank stumbled into the kitchen after taking his shower, barely standing straight, wiping the chill from his arms as he threw on a sweatshirt. "It feels like it twelve o'clock at night." He spoke to Ellen who stood at the counter. "It's not even four yet."

"It a long day."

"The longest one of my life." He saw her fiddling with something. "What are you doing?"

"I have some medication for you I need you to take." Ellen walked to him holding out her hand.

"No." He shook his head.

"Frank please, one is for the pneumonia and the other will help you sleep, you need to sleep and rest. You won't get well if you . . ."

"No!" Frank snapped at her pushing away her hand. "I don't care right now."

"Well I do." Ellen grabbed onto his arm spinning him to her. "Enough of that horrible future I saw has come true. Don't let anymore of it happen." She grabbed his hand slamming the pills into it. "Now take the goddamn medicine right now, or I swear to you Frank I will knock your ass out and shove it down your throat. Take it!" Her hand shook as she covered her eyes. "I'm sorry."

Frank placed the pills in his mouth and grabbed the glass of water that set there, he took a long drink. "Happy?" He slammed the glass down.

"Why are you being like this with me? I know you're hurt. But you won't speak to me, talk to me, let me help you."

Frank slowly swayed his head. Turned to the sink and bent down to the cabinet under it, He began to rummage.

"What are you doing?"

"I need a drink."

"No you don't." Ellen reached for his arm, he pulled it away.

"I need a drink El."

"Frank." She grabbed for the bottle.

"I need something to take away this pain."

"Let me help you." Ellen pleaded.

"You can't do it."

"Why!"

"Because you don't understand the way I feel."

"How can I not understand?" Ellen asked emotionally. "And you think taking that drink is going to make it all go away! No, it'll only come back Frank. It'll come back worse. There is no reason for you to drink that."

"Bullshit! My son died today!"

“My son died today too!”

Frank’s face grew red with anger. “And you ran away! You ran! You couldn’t face it! And right now I can’t face you! You worked hard on this fuckin virus! You saved everybody else. Why El! Why couldn’t you just save our son!” With a vengeance, Frank swung out the hand that held the bottle smashing it against the refrigerator just above Ellen’s head. Glass and whiskey shot out everywhere.

Ellen shook as her arms reached up shielding her from the glass that flew about, she backed up, first into the wall, she wiped the whiskey that splatter across her face and she began to run out.

“El!” Frank chased her.

“Leave me alone.”

“Ellen please.” Frank dove forward for her, grabbing her arm as she headed toward the door. “Please” He grabbed onto her, dropping to his knees. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.” He laid his head against her back

Ellen started to cry. “No your right. Why couldn’t I save him Frank. Why couldn’t I have saved Brian. Why Frank? Why did I argue with Dean about giving our kids the antiserum? He wanted to give it to them. If we would have done that, Brian would be alive. I might as well have killed him.” She turned around and let his head fall into her stomach. “I’m sorry for taking your son from you. If I could give my life to bring him back. I would.”

“It’s not your fault El, and I’ll never forgive myself for saying that to you. Never. I’m so angry and I’m so hurt. And I’m scared. I’m scared that I can’t live with this.” He clung to her. “I keep thinking of our son, where is he now El. What if he knows he’s alone. What if he’s scared too. What if he’s looking for me? Cause I know I’ll spend the rest of my life looking for him. And he won’t be there.”

Ellen could feel Frank’s face rubbing back and forth across her stomach.

“It’s not fair El. It just not fair. We went though this pain once. Why are we going through this again. Why would God make us go through this again?”

Ellen didn’t have any answers to give Frank as she held him. How could she? When she herself was asking the exact same questions.

(2)

It was such a switch of atmosphere for Ellen her head spun. Walking into Dean’s house, and immediately hearing the footsteps above her head. They were coupled with screams and laughs. Ellen smiled, Alexandra and Joey were getting better by the hour. So much at that moment, Ellen

wanted to be a child. Because children have a way to escape everything, slip into their own words, sick or not, hurt or not, and forget about it all. She could hear sounds coming from the kitchen, water running, pans moving about. Slowly Ellen walked to there and she saw Dean moving about as if he were hurrying to get dinner on the table. "Hey." She called out to him. "Henry told me you finally came home."

"Yeah." Dean ran his hand through his hair, stepped to her and kissed her on the cheek. "And I want to get the kids fed. Are you staying for dinner?"

"I'd like that. Can I help?"

"No." Dean faced the stove.

"Dean, how . . ."

"How's Frank." He interrupted.

"Sleeping."

"Good, He needs to sleep to beat this pneumonia."

"Dean." Ellen called to him. Was he too blaming her? Why wouldn't he turn around. "Are you all right? I came to be with you."

"I'm . . ." Dean slammed a pan. "I'm fine."

"Are you?" Ellen asked wearily. "Because I'm not."

Dean shut off the burners, holding on to the sides of the stove and just staring at the wall behind it. "Ellen. I can't even think right now. I set the high chair El."

Ellen looked behind her to the diningroom, Brian's highchair sat at the corner of the table near Dean's chair. Brian's little blue plate sat on the tray.

"I wasn't even thinking." Dean said. "It was automatic. And now I can't move it. I can't bring myself to take it away."

"Dean." Ellen walked up to behind him laying her head on his back. "I'm sorry."

Dean's head dropped forward. He spoke slow, his voice deep. "I never thought I would feel this much pain in my entire life. I never thought I would want to just curl up and die somewhere. And I just want to curl up and die right now. And you know what the worst part is El? I lost my son today. My flesh and my blood died today. *My* son. And nobody even knows." Dean's fist hit onto the counter. "Nobody knows."

"I know Dean."

There was sizzle that broke the silence. The sound of Dean's tear as it rolled down his cheek and hit onto the still hot frying pan. His knees fell forward and his body began to shake as he let go for the first time all day and cried. He turned around suddenly and without letting Ellen see his face, he took her into his arms, pressing his head to hers, and he held her. Feeling her in his arms, his hands moving around, as if reaching for something in Ellen that could take away his pain. But nothing would, and Dean could only hold on to her and cry harder.

(5)

He had just taken his third pill, and Frank knew that it wouldn't be long before he fell back to sleep. That was all right to him, he was emotionally drained and sleep would help the day end. He needed the day to end. It was too quiet in his house, Ellen had left for the third time to go see the kids and Dean. Frank understood, why that was he didn't know. Just as he reached to turn off the livingroom light, he heard a knock at his front door. He closed his eyes and shook his head, wishing whoever it was would just go away. But they knocked again. Upset over the intrusion, Frank stormed to the door, flinging it open and seeing Henry standing there.

"Hi Frank." Henry spoke nervously. "I know . . . I know this isn't a good time. But can I come in."

Had Henry not been holding Nick in his arms, Frank would have said 'no'. He didn't answer he only opened the door wider. "What's up Henry."

"It's Nick. I can't . . . I can't get him to calm down Frank. Look at him, he's fussing.. I think. I think he just wants you."

Frank reached out his hands to the whimpering baby, lifting him from Henry and taking him into his arms. The moment Nick touched Frank's chest was the moment Frank gasped, felt his legs weaken and he had to sit down. He held Nick so tight, the small baby got lost in his arms. He ran his lips over Nick's head, closing his eyes. "He's usually sleeping by now. Did you feed him Henry?"

"What?"

From his hold of Nick, Frank raised his eyes. "Feed him. Food?"

"Um . . . I think."

"You think?"

"Well . . . yeah, of course I did. I just don't remember when."

"It's almost midnight Henry. Was it dark out when you fed him last."

"Oh no Frank. It was still light. I wouldn't want to feed him too close to his bedtime and have him get a stomach ache."

"Henry. He's needs to eat, That's why he's still awake."

"Oh. O.K." Henry reached for the baby.

"What are you doing?"

"I'll take him home and feed him."

"No." Frank held Nick tighter. "Just . . . just go home and get me a bottle. I don't have any fresh ones. I'll feed him. I want him fed right."

"Are you sure Frank? I don't want to bother you."

"I'm sure Henry. Go."

"Thanks." Henry darted toward the door.

"And Henry?"

"Yeah Frank?" Henry opened the door.

"Thank you. Thank you very much." Frank didn't see the smile Henry gave him, he was to engrossed with getting comfortable on the couch. He

brought his legs up to the cushion and he just held Nick. And more than he realized, he needed to do that.

CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT

AUGUST 24

(1)

The mounds of dirt were still high and fresh, laying in a row in a part of Beginnings that used to be underdeveloped. Far from the living section, they placed it. Beginnings' first cemetery. There were fifteen graves all together. Nine of them belonged to children. Six adults. Beginnings suffered a loss. The loss of talent and devotion that the adults gave to the community. And the loss of life and laughter that children brought to everyone. Their graves were marked with simple crosses. Wooden crosses. The names of those lost burned in an etch upon them. A fence was erected around the graves, flowers draped over them from the daily visitors that walked out there just for a moment, to feel those they lost. On the fence was a plaque. It simply read:

For those who lost their lives in the battle for Beginnings

May they forever find a resting place within these walls they had called their home.

Frank read the words, like he did everyday since Brian was buried there four days earlier. But was his timing off on this day? He was surprised to see he wasn't the only one there visiting Brian. And it was the first time since the burial that Frank saw Dean there. Quietly Frank walked up to him as Dean sat on the ground staring at the grave, and he sat on the ground next to Dean.

Dean moved his hair from his eyes, that the wind had blown. "I'll leave Frank."

"Why?"

"I know you want to be alone out here."

"That's O.K." Frank brought this knees up. "I've never seen you come out here Dean."

Dean gave a soft chuckle. "I'm here everyday Frank."

"Me too."

"I know it might make you angry to hear this. But I'm not trying to take anything away from you. I just miss him Frank. I really miss Brian."

"I miss him too Dean. And you're not taking anything away from me." Frank looked at him, Dean's head hung low. "I know you loved him. And I would have to be pretty cold to think you're not feeling this too."

"I can't get passed this. I keep thinking, what could I have done? What could I have changed?"

"I do the same thing."

"I keep thinking we missed something. Something went wrong. We should have been able to save him. We should have had the antidote sooner. A piece is missing Frank. Something is missing."

"Do you feel that?"

Dean nodded strongly. "Yes. In my gut I feel that. And a part of me is justifying that as a way to put the blame elsewhere. Blame someone else for me not being fast enough. I don't know."

"Were gonna go into our minds for the rest of our lives searching for the answers to this. But maybe Dean, maybe it was just out of our hands. Maybe those who were supposed to go on, did."

"Thinking like that doesn't make the pain go away."

"Oh I know that." Frank's hand reached out to the grave and he lifted the dirt.

"I'd better be going back. I have to pick up the kids. Thanks for not . . . I don't know, making me leave."

"Dean." Frank called out before Dean stood up. "You and I raised Brian. Don't think for one second, that I have forgotten that he was just as much your son as he was mine. We made that agreement and I lived by that. And I'm sorry Dean. I'm sorry you lost your son too."

Dean's heart dropped along with his body and he just couldn't stand up. "You don't know how much that means to hear you say that."

"I think . . . I think you and I have this common ground now Dean. More than we ever had before. If you have to leave, O.K., but right now, it wouldn't bother me at all if you stayed."

Dean stared at Frank for a moment, he reached his hand up laying it on Frank's hand. And to his surprise Frank brought his other hand up and covered Dean's. There was an unspoken understanding right there between the two of them, as if to say. It was *their* spot, *their* time, and *their* grieve over the loss of *their* son.

(2)

Ellen looked up from her desk in containment to the soft knocking on the door. Such an apprehensive knock it was, Ellen merely called out softly, "Come in."

"This may not be a good time." Jenny walked in. "But I wanted to see you."

"What's up?" Ellen asked, pointing to a chair for Jenny to sit.

So sadly Jenny took a seat. "I was going through Caroline's things to return to storage, and I found a few things of Brian's."

Ellen's head dropped.

"Those babies were always together Ellen. And I want to give you Brian's things back. But a part of me can't. I can't remove anything from my house that is a part of Caroline and Brian was a part of Caroline."

"I know." Ellen spoke near whisper. "I can't even bring myself to look at his things. I can't go into his room . . .

" . . . look at his toys."

"It hurts so much. You know Jenny, it's odd isn't it. I was at the cemetery today. And I looked at their graves. Have you looked. Have you noticed."

Jenny nodded. "They were born and died on the same day."

"Both of them came into this world within minutes of each other and they left this world within minutes of each other. Why do you suppose that is?"

"I have a story in mind I keep telling myself about that. It helps. Can I share it with you?"

"Please."

"Brian and Caroline were angels. And God knew how much that we needed them in our lives. But see, they were partners up there, little soul mates. And one said, 'I won't go without the other' So god sent them both. At the same time, the same day, because they couldn't be apart. And when they were called to come home. They couldn't be apart then either. And maybe only one of them was destined to leave this earth. But the other one said 'I won't go without the other' . And they joined their little hands and they're together again, looking down at us, knowing that they gave us life and meaning, if only for a little while."

"And they did their jobs well didn't they?"

"Oh they did their jobs great. And you know what, I made myself a promise. I promised myself that I would not get angry for not having Caroline longer, I would be happy for having her at all."

Ellen looked up at Jenny, though the sadness was there, there was a certain peacefulness upon Jenny's face. And Ellen hoped that she could remember the words that Jenny had just told her. And for as much as Ellen didn't want to be and feel like Jenny when she saw her in that room holding the daughter she had just lost, Ellen wanted to be and feel like her now.

(3)

Where was Frank? Henry wondered. If he didn't hurry he was going to miss it. The first set up, the finding of George. Henry held Joe off, making him wait until he could locate Frank. And Henry searched, he searched everywhere he thought Frank could be until he finally found him at home.

"Frank." Henry walked softly into the child's bedroom where Frank sat. "We need you in communications."

"I was on my way. I had to change. Oil from the truck." Frank shrugged as he sat in a chair in front of Brian's crib, staring in it. "I guess I just got held up."

"I understand." Henry moved to him.

"Do you?" Frank looked up at him. "Because I don't even understand it myself. Sometimes I pass this crib and still see him in there. I still smell

him Henry on his blanket. And nothing is making it go away. I'm not getting any better."

"You need more time Frank." Henry laid his hand on Frank's back. "You lost your son." Henry stepped closer. "Maybe all of this isn't good for you. Maybe you just need to take some time and step back."

"What do you mean?"

"You're still hurting and you will for a while. But maybe while the hurt is still so fresh, you need not to look at everything and everywhere that reminds you of Brian."

"How can I not. I live in this house."

"Don't." Henry stated then received an odd look from Frank. "I'm not talking forever Frank. I'm talking a few days, maybe even a week or so. But get out of this house. Go somewhere else. Take my house if you'd like. Hell, maybe even pitch a tent somewhere and hang out. Take Ellen, perhaps that's what you both need."

"Pitch a tent?" Frank asked.

"Oh sure. We have all this land. Seclude yourself. Heal."

"Like a vacation." Frank's eyes lit up. "You may have a good idea."

"You know I'm the idea man Frank."

"Yeah but . . ." Frank released Brian's blanket. "El wouldn't go for it."

"Tell her she has to."

"But what about the kids?"

"They'll be fine. How far can you take her, really?"

"Not far."

"Exactly." Henry nodded.

"Pitch a tent. Seclusion." Frank stood up. "Thanks Henry. I might just do that. What do you think about taking El and surprising her with it?"

Henry crinkled his face. "I don't know Frank. You should talk to her first about it."

"We'll see what the moment brings right? But I do know." Frank looked around the room. "I need to get away from this house for little while. At this point in my life, it hurts too bad."

"I know that." Henry laid his hand on Frank's back as they walked out. "Did you want me to find you a spot. I have some great ideas."

"No, I think I know where I want to go. Thanks Henry. Let's get to that meeting."

Henry was glad his on-the-spot suggestion was helping Frank. And where ever he took Ellen, the underdeveloped section, the area near the cliff, or maybe even 'the hill' wherever it was, Henry was certain it would help both Frank and Ellen.

They were in the communications room. John Matoose sat in a chair, holding a telephone. Joe stood behind John, a earphone in his ear to eavesdrop. Frank stood watching the indicating screen, waiting for John to place the call so they could get an exact location on George. Henry stood by the computer, he turned off the signal alarms and he just waited to read where the signal would come from.

There was one more man in the room. A man by the name of Jess Boyan. He was a defector, he gained a sense of Joe's trust during the recent virus crisis. And he was there to say whether or not, John was calling the main headquarters. A trust assurance, Joe called him. John had lost all of Joe's trust and at that second, Joe wouldn't put it past John to lie again.

"Make the call." Joe told John.

John took a deep breath and dialed, bringing the phone to his ear, he looked at Frank. "It's ringing."

George answered the phone, and when he did, Joe looked up, snapping his finger to Henry to get ready.

"Hello." George said gruff.

"George, it's . . ."

"Don't you dare call me again, or my personal line, you hear. I'm finished with you. Finished." George disconnected the call immediately.

Joe still looked at John and he took off the earphone from his ear harshly. "Did we get it?"

Frank only pointed to the flash on the board. "We got it." He turned to Henry. "Where is it coming from, we know the east."

"South of Washington D.C. it says." Henry looked up with question on his face. "Quantico Marine headquarters Frank."

Frank's eyes widened. "That place is huge." He faced Jess. "Is that where you were at?"

"I guess. I know it was near D.C., big place. But Frank, that's not his only site, I don't know where the other ones are, but I know there were several divisions."

Frank shrugged. "Yeah but if we take out Quantico, take out the heart, we dismantle the whole being."

"How?" Joe asked. "We don't have the air abilities to fly all the way over there. Ground troops, storm in?"

Frank nodded. "A few soldiers, scientists, right amount of men, we can do that."

Jess had to disagree and he did it verbally. "You haven't a clue do you. You can't storm the place with troops. There aren't just a few soldiers and scientists. Hell it's a city. You're talking from what I have seen . . . you're talking thousands."

"Dear God." Joe gasped when he heard what Jess had to say. Words he felt he had to believe. "How big *is* this thing we're up against?" With that thought Joe sat down and another immediately crossed his mind. With the

size that George had grown and all the places he supposedly had, how did Beginnings survive this long?

(5)

George put down the antenna on is cellular phone. More like slammed it down. It was bad timing on John Matoose's part to call him right then and there. George stood on the street of Quantico looking at the forty-one men who stood before him. That was it. That was all that remained of is four-hundred and seventy men he had sent to do in Beginnings. And he only had them because these were the ones that ran when they heard the helicopters coming.

Having been informed by them that twenty-eight defected, one of which they shot, George grew even more angrier. Not only did Beginnings beat his virus, but they now had some of his men. So much like the villain at the end of a Scooby-Doo episode, George felt. Wanting to say he would have gotten away with it had it not been for those pesky kids. And to him, Dean was the biggest pesky kid. But he was a pesky kid that George now wanted on his side of the country. And he knew he could only get Dean if he got Beginnings.

A battle lost. A war not over. Not by a long shot. And if George wanted Beginnings back all that they had, and the assets that it had, he would have to go back to his square one plan of thinking. That was his best chance. And probably his easiest. George's mind immediately went back into action thinking of how he would pull it off. He was certain he could do it. There would be no chemicals. No fire arms, no virus or destruction. He knew he would get back Beguiling and he was going to do it . . . from within their very own walls.

CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE

AUGUST 26

(1)

Henry looked up from the where he lay on this livingroom floor when he heard Ellen coming down the steps. He rolled to his side, a little away from Nick who laid with him to look at her. "You leaving?"

"Yes." She bent down to kiss him. "Look how cute Nick is."

"Check this out El. He's doing things. Look he can lift his head." Henry indicated to Nick. How like a turned with a strained face he lifted his head, then it quickly plopped back down. "Maybe not."

Ellen chuckled. "Give him time."

"I think he was talking El."

"Henry, he's two months old. He's not talking."

"Why do you suppose he can't keep his head up. Is it too heavy for his body. It doesn't look like he has a big head. But then again they say people with big heads are smarter. Does Dean have a big head?"

"No. Just unkempt hair."

"I've made a suggestion to him you know."

"So have I." Just as Ellen lowered herself to the floor, there was a knock at the door. "Must be Frank."

Henry looked at his watch. "He's early."

"I think he wants to call it an early night." Ellen walked to the door. "He said something about getting an early start." She opened it and smiled when she saw Frank standing there. He didn't dress like his typical self. Instead of his typical military pants and white tee shirt, he wore black tee shirt and jeans. "My goodness Frank. Out of uniform?"

"Yeah, they're my date clothes."

Ellen shook her head with a smile and opened the door wider.

Frank stepped inside. "Thanks for letting me have her tonight Henry."

Henry tilted his head back looking at Frank upside down. "No problem." He rolled onto his stomach and then to his knees. "Before you take her Frank. Can I talk to her for a second?"

"Sure." Frank shrugged.

Henry stood up. "El can you come in the kitchen."

Ellen, puzzled, followed.

Frank looked down at Nick. "Henry, you can't leave a baby on the floor like this. Someone will step on him." He lowered himself to lay next to Nick. "I let him watch and he mistreats you. Hey . . ." Frank called out to the kitchen. "He's lifting his head." He heard the plop of Nick hitting the carpet. "Maybe not."

"What's wrong Henry?" Ellen asked as they stood in the kitchen.

"I need you to do me a favor."

"Sure."

"I need you home early tonight."

"I told you Frank wanted to call it an early night."

"O.K." Henry nodded. "But incase he changes his mind, can you be home early. Every night El, it's either you helping Dean, talking to him. Or you helping Frank, talking to him."

"I'm sorry Henry." Ellen laid her hand on his cheek and kissed him. "I didn't mean to not pay any attention to you."

"No El." Henry shook his head. "That's not it. You come home every night to me." He smiled. "I like that. But . . . tonight I would like you to come home and do it for yourself."

"Henry."

"No listen to me. You have to take time yourself. O.K.? You have to say, 'I'm tired of being there for everyone else, I just want someone to be there for me'. I worry about El. I see you, I watch you. Can you do this tonight?"

"Can you be the one who worries about me?"

"You know it." Henry embraced her. "I love you." Stepping away he kissed her. "And don't let him get you upset tonight."

"I promise." She held up her hand. "I'll see you in a little bit."

Henry smiled at her, watching her walk from the kitchen, meet up with Frank and then eventually leave. Henry couldn't wait for her to return home. Wanting to pass time, make it go faster, Henry figured he'd work on something, that always helped. So he walked out of the dining-room, around the couch and out his front door. He thought mechanics was a good place to start. Pulling his front door closed, Henry stood on his porch with an overwhelming feeling that he was forgetting something. Shrugging it off and figuring it would come to him later, Henry moved on to Mechanics.

(2)

Dean pulled the door closed to the mobile lab, he teetered a huge box which he carried with him to the jeep that parked there. There were other boxes in the keep, all virus material. And Dean was going to use this night, since Joe had the kids, to finally put the virus to bed. He took another look at the mobile lab thinking about how long it would be until he went back there. He liked that lab, but he wouldn't miss it. Because that lab was too much of a painful reminder to Dean of things that virus that took so much from him.

(3)

Henry paced. He paced in worry and he paced in anger. Ellen had promised him that she would be home, and there it was after four a.m. and she still wasn't there. What made matters worse was that Henry toted Nick out of the house to check at Frank's four times in the last five hours. And every time he went there, Josh said the same thing, they weren't there.

Having waited long enough, Henry tired it again, Where else could they be. Josh had to be mistaken. Knocking again, Henry waited. It took a little longer for the door to answer, Josh looked so perturbed with his messy hair, scratching his head in the open door.

"What Henry." He whined. "And like you should you be dragging that baby out."

"Josh, where is your dad and Ellen."

"They're not here."

"Are you sure?" Henry asked. "Maybe they went upstairs."

"No, I know they aren't here."

"Maybe you were sleeping when . . ."

"Henry!" Josh rolled his half closed eyes. "I said, I know they aren't here. I know this. I know this."

"O.K. But when you see them van you tell them I'm a little pissed doff. And if I don't hear from them soon, I'm going to Joe."

"Why?" Josh asked.

"Because I don't know where they are."

"Maybe there's a clue in his note."

"What note?" Henry asked.

"The one that's one the table for you."

"Josh," Henry scolded. "Why didn't you tell me about the note sooner." Henry walked into the house looking around.

"I wasn't allowed. Dad said wait until morning."

"Wait until . . ." Henry saw the note. Awkwardly while juggling a sleeping Nick he opened up Frank's note. "Aw." Henry stomped his foot. "Shit." Shaking his head and holding the note he moved to the door. "Wait until I tell Joe." so upset, Henry left Frank's house.

(4)

Dean kept telling himself that he was given a second chance. How he prayed all those years to be able to make up for failing to save the world the first time around. But he did this time. He pulled through. But unfortunately for Dean, it wasn't without loss and without the breaking of his heart.

Sitting in the clinic lab, tossing out notes he no longer needed, reading over them one last time, Dean grew more frustrated by the minute. Why did his gut keep telling him he was missing something. What was the reason behind it. How did everything so similar to the future he visited, differ in the most important of ways. When he needed it to be the same.

Tossing out a large stack of papers, Dean moved to the refrigerator to begin hitting the samples. When he opened it up, his eyes went immediately to the rack of labeled tubes of blood. It sat on the second shelf, in the same angle, with the same amount of tubes, the same names. All the same as the time he opened up that refrigerator in the future. And one of those same names stared at him. Jenny Matoose. In his copy handwriting, looking exactly like the one he took from the future. So how did the sample end up being different? Dean paused in his reaching for the rack. "Maybe they're not" Dean spoke out loud, snatching Jenny's tube from the rack. The blood he tested from the future was from that exact same rack, the exact same spot. How could the blood from the future have the host virus, and the Jenny's blood from the present not. Not when everything else fell right into place. Jenny's blood was the missing link, it was the piece of the puzzle that did not fit. And right there, Dean began to test it, hoping that finally he could fit that piece of the puzzle into the entire picture and close his book on the virus once and for all.

(5)

"Christ Henry, it's four-thirty in the morning." Joe snapped as he answered the door in just his checkered pajama bottoms. "And why are you dragging that baby around."

"Joe, we have a problem." Henry walked into his hose. "Nice PJ's"

Joe grumbled. "What's our problem?"

"Your son Joe. He's an asshole."

"What?" Joe closed one eye to block out the brightness when Henry turned on the light.

"He's an asshole Joe." Henry laid Nick on the couch. "He left Beginnings and he took Ellen with him."

"Oh he did not. You're full of shit."

"No I'm not Joe. Look." He handed Joe the note.

Joe walked to the coffee table, put on his glasses and began to read the note out loud. "*Henry, I left Beginnings. And whether she likes it or not, I took Ellen with me. Thanks Frank.*" Joe lowered the note. "Shit."

"See Joe. See."

"Calm down." Joe held out his hand. "I really don't think Frank left."

"He said he did. I can't find him Joe."

"First of all, how would they get out? Second, where would he go? He's hiding somewhere in Beginnings. This is a big place. He's doing this to throw you off."

"He took her. I know he took. I told him to take her camping, I didn't mean for him to do it outside of beginnings."

"He didn't leave Beginnings." Joe heard the light tapping on his front door. "And why is Dean knocking on my door at this hour."

"Oh no."

"What Henry?" Joe asked annoyed as he walked to the door.

"Oh dean will be mad. Frank took Ellen from Beginnings."

"He didn't take Ellen." Joe opened up the door. "Dean, what is it?"

"We have a problem Joe." Dean stormed in. "A big problem."

"See!" Henry pointed. "See!"

Joe hunched down, holding his hands up. "Quiet, the kids are sleeping."

Dean looked at Henry. "You know?"

"Yes I know/" Henry said. "I just found out."

"How?" Dean was puzzled.

"I read Frank's note."

"How does Frank know?" Den was puzzled.

"He would have to know Dean." Henry walked to him. "Wouldn't he? Especially if he took Ellen and they left Beginnings."

Dean rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Not that again Henry. Frank didn't leave Beginnings."

"Yes he did Dean." Henry handed him the note. "Look."

Dean's head bobbed back and forth as he read it. "He's hiding somewhere." He handed Henry the note back. "He's still here. And we have bigger fish to fry. Joe. We have a big problem. One that we didn't know we even had."

Joe tossed his hands up. "Wanna keep me in suspense Dean or would you like to share."

"Ready for this Joe." Dean began to explain. "I'm cleaning out the mobile lab and the clinic lab, trying to file away all the virus things. And I keep getting this feeling that we missed something. Every single sequence of events, even down to Frank's illness happened. It happened just like in the future. What was bothering me the most, was that we planned that if that happened, we always would have Jenny's blood to fall back on as a host. But Jenny didn't have host. Or at least we thought." At that instant he saw he had Joe's full attention. "Just when I was about to get rid of the samples, I looked at that rack of blood. Same names, same position, everything, so why wouldn't Jenny's blood be the same. And it dawned on me that errors could be made. There were a lot of patients coming into the clinic when Jenny and the baby came in. Five or six. I took a tube of Jenny's blood and called out for someone to finish while chased Ellen. Someone, I don't know who, we had five people taking blood, took her blood for me. When I ran the tests. I ran it off the tube of blood the other person took. But the tube in the rack was the one I took. I put it there from my own pocket. Just like I must have done it in the future. And had I run the tests off the tube I took, we would have had the cure a day earlier. The future wasn't wrong. The sequence of events did not change. Jenny did have the host virus after all."

Joe stepped back some. "How can that be? Everyone else had strains two and three."

"Just like in the future, with Jenny being the one host strain."

"Are you saying someone switched the tubes of blood?"

"No!" Dean answered sharply. "Not with the people I had working. I'm saying that with all the confusion, someone messed up. They put the wrong name on the wrong tube. In emergency situations, it happens."

"But here's the problem Dean, how did she get it?" Joe questioned.

"Just like we thought she got it in the future. She could have only gotten Joe if she was given it."

Joe shook his head. "I'm still not buying the fact that John gave it to her."

"Neither am I." Dean stated. "Not with all we know now about his situation.": Dean's eyes moved from Joe to Henry. "He didn't want Jenny to get sick. He didn't want his daughter to die. And this is why OI came to you Joe. Not about Jenny's host virus. But because Jenny *was* given the host virus. Which means it was here in Beginnings all along. Someone gave it to her. The question is . . . who?"

Joe literally lost his breath. "There's someone else here on his side."

Dean nodded. "And they have been for a while."

"Damn it." Joe's head twitched in disgust. "Henry, what do you make of it?"

"Very frightening Joe. Very frightening we have to look into it. But . . . what about this?" Henry held up Frank's letter.

"Henry." Joe snapped. "Give me the goddamn letter." He took it from Henry's hand and smacked him with it. "I told you he did not leave. And if he did, he has to be on foot. So how far could he have gone?"

CHAPTER SEVENTY

AUGUST 27

(1)

Frank peered out the windshield of the small pick up truck he drove to the just breaking day outside of the glass. He then looked at the gas gauge which read 'E'. "This place will do." He saw the small trailer set off deep in an over grown area, "Don't you think El? And just in time too. I didn't want to hit our return gas supply. Sorry about all the bumps." Frank pulled a little closer to the trailer and shut the truck off. "But the shocks are pretty bad." He stretched out his arms. "I'm tired. Are you. Probably not, you had that long nap. Hey, isn't this like when we were kids? We'd get into my truck and drive until half the gas was gone, stay a night and then go home? We ended up in Dairy Ohio, no wait, that was where we found the farmer." Frank shrugged. "Wanna unload now, or wait?" He looked over to Ellen. "I'd rather wait. We have time. Wasn't that nice of Robbie to help us take our little trip. Are you wanting to say something?" He reached across to Ellen who leaned against the passenger's side door. She swung out her arms at him,. Arms that were bound together at the wrist. He reached to her mouth and removed the tape. "What is it?"

"Frank!" She screamed at him. "What the hell are you doing?! Where are we!"

"I think Idaho. I'm not sure."

"Idaho!" Ellen growled. "Why are we in Idaho?"

"You and I needed to get out of Beginnings for a little while. To get away from it. We need it. I needed to be alone with you." He reached to touch her face and she turned her mouth to his hand and bit it. "Ow, why'd you do that?"

"Why am I tied up Frank!" She shouted. "Why are my arms and legs tied up? Why did you tape my mouth?"

"First." Frank held up his hand. "I had to tie you up El, I didn't want you to fight me on this. And I taped your mouth because I didn't want to hear you bitch about it."

"Bitch? Bitch!" Ellen went nuts screaming at him as loud as she could. "Oh you're gonna hear me bitch Frank. You kidnaped me you son of a bitch! You tied me up! Did it ever occur to you for one simple second you asshole, that hd you asked me, I would have gone with you?!"

"No."

"Well I would have."

"Oh." Frank immediately looked forward and tapped his hand on the steering wheel. He closed one eyes in a cringe at Ellen's loud mouth in the small cab of the truck.

"And don't think for one second that I'm gonna be a happy person about this Frank. I'm not! Prepare Frank, prepare for me to yell at you for a

very long time about this! I can not believe you did this. Wait until you untie me! Wait! I'm gonna kill you Frank. I am going to kill you!"

Frank's mind buzzed and his head started to hurt, especially with Ellen yelling like she was. But Frank knew he was tired from the long drive and no sleep. And if he was too tired to unload the truck at that moment, he was too tired to hear any more bitching. Knowing Ellen, and knowing she would still have the same things to say even hours later, he figured he'd listen to her and deal with her after he had some rest. So Frank simply reached over to Ellen, took the piece of tape that dangled from her cheek, secured it again over her mouth, kissed her on the forehead, then leaned back in his drivers seat and went to sleep.

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NEXT: THE FREEDOM FIGHT