

Phases of War

By
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HOME

CHAPTER ONE

Pomeroy, Washington
October 2

A snap of a twig made Stan Owens look back behind him as he walked with fellow United Western Alliance Soldier, Bud Allan. Looking like civil war soldiers, straight from that time era, long hair and long beards, they walked their horses up the hill at a comfortable pace.

“Nothing.” Stan looked ahead, his breath formed a fog that showed the coolness of the air. “I heard it though, did you?”

“Probably an animal.”

“Probably.”

“How much longer you wanna go until we stop for the night?”

“Hell Stan.” Bud laughed. “It’s only the afternoon. We got lots of good daylight hours to travel left.”

“True.”

“But the top of this hill is as good a place as any.”

Stan chuckled. “I’m with you. I think we’re gonna end up empty handed when we get home.”

“Captain says they’re out here.”

“Where?” Stan asked. “We’ve been scouting for a week. I haven’t seen any people.”

“Maybe the captain just doesn’t like us.”

“No that’s Craig he doesn’t like.”

“True. Hey, Stan. How big is this new town we’re moving base to.”

“I don’t know.” Stan shrugged. He started to lose his breath from the long journey up the wooded hill. “I hear it’s big.”

“We really need to get back to Bowman. We have lost . . .” Another snap of a twig made Bud turn around. “I hope it’s not a bear.”

“A bear would have gotten us already. Are there bears in Washington state?”

“Of course there are bears in Washington state . . . I think.” Bud guessed. “I think Washington was more famous for Big foot.”

Upon those words, both men stopped and looked behind them. They laughed at the thought that crossed both their minds.

Stan grabbed his stomach as they neared the top. “I must be getting hungry. I smell food.”

Bud slowed down. “I do too.”

Stan hurried and looked at Bud. “You think we found that rumored colony.”

“Don’t know. Think there are women?”

“God, I hope not. You know how they are. All we need is more dictating women to pick and chose us and . . . do you hear that?” Stan asked, referring to a

distant 'naying'.

"Shit. Bet that's them. Sounds bigger than the thirty."

"Sure does. Bet me we can get a good look from this hill."

"Probably on the other side. That's why we smell food." Bud said.

"Man here I was thinking Captain Slagel was wrong."

"Really how often is the captain wrong? He says there are colonies of survivors on the west, we have to believe him." Bud paused to tie his horse to a tree and he waited for Stan. "Looks like a clearing up ahead."

"Go on. I'll catch up." Stan fiddled with the rope. "My fingers are numb from the weather."

Laughing at Stan's low resistance to the cold, Bud moved ahead. "I'm hearing more . . ." He froze cold. "Holy shit."

"What." Stan finished tying the horse and he walked quickly to Bud. "Did you find the colony?"

"Worse."

"Huh, what do . . ." Stan froze as she stood side by side with Bud. "Shit. It's the biggest one we've seen and a colony all right."

Bud let out a worried Breath. "Of Savages."

Stan swallowed looking over the hill to what looked like was once a small town. Burned out and shelled. Below them the town swarmed with Savages. Too many to count. Too many for Bud and Stan to be seen by. Skinned bodies of people and animals hung from a wire and dangled over a deep fire pit brazing like a stuffed pig at a cookout. "Captain's gonna have to know about this."

"Fast too. It's bigger than the other two."

"I say this isn't the place to stop for the night." Stan suggested.

"Yeah and I say let's get the hell of this hill and as far away as possible."

"Now?"

"Now."

Stan and Bud both turned around at the same time and when they did, they were greeted with a high whistling sound. It happened so fast, Bud never saw it coming. Through the air a short spear sail and landed with precision dead center Bud's throat sending him flying back with the force of the hit.

"Bud!" Stan raced to him, and saw his partner literally nailed to the ground. "Shit." Stumbling and thinking of only getting off that hill, Stan raced to his horse. His fingers numb and cold, moved sloppily as he tried to untie the rope. Slipping the knot and breathing heavily, Stan pulled his horse then mounted him. He couldn't see anyone but knew the spear didn't come from no where. With the horse moving in confused circles, Stan tried to gain control of him while he drew his sword in readiness. The second it clinked and raised to the air was the second Stan knew it was over. He saw them only for an instant. Eight savages came from the trees, bows and arrows ready and they fired upon Stan. All eight arrows landed in his chest. Still holding his sword high in a battle mode, Stan wide eyed, bleeding and ridged, dropped sideways from his horse to the ground and died.

The savages engulfed him.

CHAPTER TWO

Beginnings, Montana

“Son of a bitch.” Joe slammed his hand on the counter in the cryo-lab, then ran his hand frantically over the top of his head in frustration.

Danny Hoi snickered.

“What in Christ’s name is so funny?”

“Well, I was just thinking. How long can one man hide from you in Beginnings? Dean’s doing a pretty good job.”

“If my asshole son would have told me Dean was with him we could have had this over with a while ago.” Joe began to pace around the lab. “I look for him. I can’t find him.”

“He’s little.”

Joe glared at him and continued. “I call him. He doesn’t answer. I look for him again.”

“He knows.”

“He can’t know.”

“He has to know Joe. Why else is he avoiding you. I mean, what else can be down here that he’s afraid you’re gonna wanna talk to him about. And let’s face it.” Danny laughed. “You wouldn’t wanna meet him down here if it had nothing to do with what’s down here. Just don’t tell him I told you what was down here.”

“You didn’t.” Joe stated.

“That’s right I didn’t. It’s been so long since we first, you know discovered it at the same time. And my God what a discovery that was . . .”

“Danny.”

“Yeah Joe.”

“I’m not a stupid man.” Joe quipped. “If you think for one second I believe you didn’t have a clue about that cryo case before today, I’m gonna start calling you Frank.”

“Sorry Joe.”

“And what the hell is this!” Joe moved all the way across the lab and looked into a large jar with pink fluid.

“It’s a failed hybrid. I’m guessing.”

Joe tilted his head to look at the animal floating in a jar. It had long ears like a rabbit, a snout like a pig and a tail like a squirrel. “Why the hell would he leave something like this just sitting out.”

“He didn’t.”

“He didn’t?”

“No. I found it when I was down here waiting for him for you. It’s looks neat. Thought you’d like to see it.”

“Thank you very much.” Joe looked at his watched and huffed. “This has to be the strangest day. Like I don’t have enough shit to deal with around here. Securing the perimeters from killer babies and now this.”

“This is big.”

“This is sick. Sick. I knew there was something wrong with him.”

“You think he snapped?”

Joe bobbed his head. "I'm gonna have to wonder." Again he looked at his watch. "And I'm giving him two more minutes than I'm screaming over the all-call radio for his little ass." Joe began to watch the second hand of his watch. "Christ Dean." Joe mumbled. "Let's get this over with."

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Not that Dean was interested, but he certainly made the appearance that he was. Folded arms, nodding head, serious engrossed expression upon his face. Dan, the security man rambled on about the new soldiers Frank brought and Dean, kept thinking, while staring at Dan, how right Frank was. At Dan's age, he really should have cut that long ponytail off.

"And then the guys, we have so many of them." Dan whistled. "They're now stuck building their own barracks."

"You don't say." Dean robotically responded while letting his mind wander off again.

"There are so many of them. Two-seventy-five, I think. I'm not sure. You'll have to ask Frank. He knows the exact number. Of course, Frank knows what he's doing with them. I haven't a clue. All I know is I am master drill sergeant and you aren't listening to me are you."

"Of course I am." Dean said.

"No you aren't. What did I say?"

"About?" Dean searched deep into his mind, somewhere Dan's words had to have seeped in.

"About the . . ."

"Dean!" Blasting through not only Dan's radio, but every radio in Beginnings and the speaker system, Joe's voice rang out loud and shocking. "I know your ass is hiding from me!"

"Shit." Dean backed up. "I have to go, thanks for talking Dan."

"What did you do?" Dan asked.

"I don't know. I think I do. I'm not sure."

"It has to be bad if Joe's letting everyone know he's looking for you."

"That's what I'm afraid of." Dean placing one hand in the front pocket of his Levi's, turned around and stopped. His hand froze during it's mid, nervous sweep through his hair when he heard Joe again.

"Dean! You have five minutes to find me. After that . . . Frank has cart blanc to hunt you down and bring you in by what ever mean he deems necessary."

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Frank's soft, deep, raspy, 'oh yes' was accompanied by a smile as he set the timer on his watch for five minutes. It didn't give him much time to tell Ellen what he was searching her out to tell her, but he figured he get some of it out and save the rest for later. After all, he was living in her home. And that's

where Frank headed.

He opened the door to the modular home he deemed 'Frank size' and let the screen door slam loudly as an announcement to his entrance. Then he coupled that announcement with a loud call out. "I'm home!"

"Oh God." Ellen came from the back hallway pulling her hair into a ponytail. "Hey, Frank."

"El, I have something to tell you."

"I'm on my way back out. You wanna walk me?" She spun around in her walk and looked to her brother Richie who sat on the couch holding Nick. "He shouldn't need fed for while. But watch him, he's teething early."

Frank jolted in shock when he saw Richie sitting on the couch. "I didn't even see you."

Ellen rolled her eyes. "Why doesn't that surprise me. You failed to tell me you brought him home."

Frank fluttered his lips. "It's Richie."

"It's my brother Frank." Ellen stopped and stood before him. "I would think that is someone I needed to know about."

"I was gonna tell you."

"Frank, I have to go."

Frank looked at Richie. "Why are you being so quiet?"

"When can anyone talk when you're around?" He asked.

"True." Frank nodded. "Anyhow . . ." He grabbed hold of Ellen's arm as she raced to the kitchen.

"Frank, I want to turn the pot back on before I go."

"Yeah but El, I have to tell you something before I go and hunt down Dean in . . ." Frank looked at his watch. "Two minutes. Thank you very much Richie for eating up my time with Ellen."

"Frank." Ellen moved from his hold. "Why are you hunting down my husband?"

"Uh!" Frank shrieked.

"What?"

"Don't call him that."

"He is."

"But it doesn't count."

Ellen's mouth dropped open. "I'm turning on my pot and than I have to get back to the clinic."

"O.K., but can I tell you this?"

"What?" Ellen walked to the kitchen and to the stove.

"Check this out." Frank turned her from the stove, held up his hands and stepped back as if to brace her. "Ready?"

"Yes." Ellen nodded. "This is big huh?"

"How can you tell?"

"You're all upbeat."

"I am." Frank smiled. "O.K. ready?"

"Frank."

"My brother Jimmy's ghost yelled at me just about . . ." The beeping of Frank's watch shut him up. "Shit." He turned it off. "Fuck, I got a go. I'll talk to you later." He backed up, stopped, returned, kissed her on the cheek and raced out.

“Frank what . . .” Ellen tossed her hand up in the air, turned back to the stove and stopped when what Frank said to her sank in. Her hand paused on the burner dial. “Jimmy’s ghost?”

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Bowman, North Dakota

“Hey-hey-hey, Captain.” Sgt. Elliott Ryder was all smiles when he stood up from behind Hal’s desk, when Hal and Robbie walked in. “All yours. Hey, Robbie.”

“Elliott. Hey how was the trip back yesterday with Hector and them guys?” Robbie asked.

Elliott bobbed his head. “Hector started speaking to me in Spanish, I guess he assumed I knew because of the way I looked. I had to tell him I was born and bred and Cleveland my entire life.”

Hal laughed, gave a swat to Elliott’s back and then moved to his desk to sit behind it comfortably. He rocked back in his chair in such Joe style. “Since you made it back first, anything.”

“All right there.” Elliott pointed. “Scouts from New Mexico came back. Seven new men, one woman.”

Hal began to cringe. “Just tell me what you did with the woman.”

“Grace claimed her immediately.”

With a ‘ha-ha’ ornery laugh, Robbie sat down in a chair across from Hal. “Man, I can not wait to see the clash between your women and ours. God, I hope they don’t convince our women to become lesbians too.” Robbie saw Hal didn’t find what he said amusing. “Not that it matters to me. Too many men, not enough women and then you guys couple that by turning what women you do have into . . .”

“Robbie.” Hal stated his name strongly. “Enough. All right.”

“O.K.” Robbie shrugged. “Can I grab something to eat before I head out. I’m starving and I hate flying on an empty stomach.”

“Yes.” Hal nodded looking through the papers. “I’ll walk you to the mess.”

“Hey, Hal, let me ask you a question.” Robbie held up his finger. “How are you guys gonna handle not having a mess hall anymore.”

“We’ll still have a mess hall.”

“Why?” Robbie asked.

“Because some of us spend too much time training our men and on look-out to cook.”

“Got to be a big mess hall.”

“Robbie, why is this important?” Hal asked.

“It’s not. Just making idle conversation. That’s all.” Robbie tapped his fingers together. “How much longer, because I am really . . .”

“Robbie.” Hal raised his eyes slightly. “Elliott. How is the moving coming along?”

“Good. Good.” Elliott answered “I started going through the list like you wanted, you know picking out which men of ours can be taken off detail and

shipped to Beginnings to work.”

“I wanna get them out and up there before we start moving the town in two weeks. Especially with the brigade Frank brought back.”

“Are we getting them?” Elliott asked.

“Probably most of them will live in New Bowman. It’s roomier there. That’s where my dad is planning for growth. Yeah, they need those guys to get started on the new greenhouses.”

“Is your Dad worried about food supply at all?”

Hal shook his head. “Nah, they just won’t be dumping food on the savage camps. They have plenty. They grow more all the time. Plus we’re gonna clear our surplus and our fields. Their canning division is going to can what we have to put in distribution. Food is the last of their. . .”

“Speaking of food.” Robbie stood up. “I’m really hungry Hal.”

Hal huffed. “Robbie, I really have to get this done. I’m heading back to Beginnings in three days. There’s a lot to do when I’m commuting so much.”

“And your point?” Robbie asked.

“You’ve been around Frank too long.” Hal stood up. “It is my intention little brother to bring you under my wing.”

Robbie snickered. “Sure. All right. Food?”

Elliott kept his finger over his top lip to hide his laughter. He shifted his eyes about. “Take your brother.”

“I’ll be back.” Hal moved from around the desk and to Robbie.

Elliott turned as they were leaving. “Hey, Robbie. Tell your brother Frank, I didn’t get too much of a chance to talk to him with his home coming at all, but tell him, I look forward to meeting yet another Slagel.”

“You got it.” Robbie nodded. “But you’ll get a pretty big chance in two days.”

“What?” Hal asked shocked. “What do you mean?”

“Didn’t he tell you?” Robbie asked. “Frank’s coming down here.”

Hal couldn’t move, “When?”

“In two days.” Robbie said. “I thought I said that.”

“Why?” Hal asked.

“He loves you Hal.” Robbie chuckled and gave a swat on Hal’s arm. “To bring you up, that’s why? And . . . Ellen has to come down and do that Doctor thing she does down here with Red, I mean, Grey or is it Blue.”

“Blue.” Hal stated running his hand down his face. “And Frank’s bringing her down?”

“Yep.” Robbie nodded. “Of course I don’t think her husband knows. I don’t think Ellen knows. He’ll spend the day down here and bring you guys up.”

“He’s not flying is he?” Hal asked.

“Dad won’t give him a chopper. Frank thinks he flies well.” Robbie closed his eyes and shook his head. “Make us all throw up. Speaking of throwing up. I have to eat before I think I’m going to. Let’s go.” Robbie opened the door.

“Captain.” Elliott called out. “You shouldn’t worry. I mean, having your oldest brother coming down. You’ve done well here. It’ll impress him.”

Robbie bit his bottom lip. “Yeah, Hal, it will. Show off for him.”

“You think?” Hal asked.

“Yeah.” Robbie tugged him. “Food.”

“Food.” Hal started to leave and stopped. “Elliott. I’ll be back. And start

thinking of an agenda for my brother to occupy him, just . . . just on the chance he needs something to do.”

“Got it.” Elliott winked. “And like I said, don’t worry. I don’t think you’ll feel that big-brother intimidation.”

“It’s not intimidation I feel from my brother Frank. It’s irritation.” Hal saw Robbie open his mouth. “I know. I know. Food. Bye Elliott.” Hal pulled the door.

Elliott watched the door closed. He laughed at Hal and found it really hard to believe that Frank was all that irritating.. Because Frank, to Elliott--in the brief moment he had met him--really didn’t seem that bad.

CHAPTER THREE
Beginnings, Montana

The last little bit of smoke from his mouth came out loudly and Frank tossed his cigarette and brought the microphone of his headset closer to his mouth. He leaned with his back against the armory building, looking around the bend while he whispered instructions. "All units. This is to be treated as a code 7. But, uh, let's make it code 7B because it's an inside job. You see him. Grab him. Secure him. Get me. Four free work hours to the man that apprehends him first. Double time gentlemen." Frank turned the bend of the building and headed toward center town. Just as he started to lower the headset microphone away from his lips, Frank stopped and smiled. "Oh yeah. Looks like I'm getting time off. Ha." He darted out into view quickly. "Oh. Hey Dean!"

Dean stopped in his entrance to the library. He looked back and saw Frank and Frank was barreling full speed his way. "Shit."

Frank laughed and began his pursuit as Dean took off running.

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Quantico Marine Headquarters

In the hospital bed where George slept, Steward his right hand man, stayed by his side. His left hand crippled and distorted, George looked like a stroke victim only worse. His face pale, one side drawn. It seemed as if whatever was given to him affected only his one side. The last he spoke hours before his speech was starting to go.

"We're in luck." Dr. Walker, one of George's veterinary biologists came into the hospital room.

"You found something." Steward smiled in relief.

"In Binghamton we gathered up everything we thought Dr. Hayes used to create the virus." Dr. Walker said. "I'm still new in this division. So, please be patient, you guys tossed me over to . . ."

"Get on with it."

"The scientists that were working up there have arrived. We think we may know the combination."

"Yes." Steward closed his eyes. "Can you help him?"

"We believe in a few days, we'll at least be able to stop the progress, and hopefully with more work, reverse it. He's gonna pull through."

"How much damage is done though?"

Dr. Walker shrugged. "Hard to tell. His mind didn't deteriorate and that really is what we need right?"

"You're right."

"So we'll keep him in the induced coma until we come up with the anti-serum."

"Thank you." Steward nodded. "Keep me posted."

“Without a doubt.” Dr. Walker, lanky, thin and older, nodded and stepped out of the room.

Steward looked at George in the bed. “A few more days.” He grabbed the phone from the night stand and dialed. He waited through the rings. “Hey, it’s Steward. Yes. Good news Johnny. We’re making progress with George.”

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Johnny tapped the just hung up phone to his chin. His peaceful smile was apparent.

“Well?” Bev asked, almost impatiently with folded arms.

Widening his eyes first, Johnny set the phone down on the end table in his livingroom. “They think they’re gonna be able to reverse it. They’ll at least be able to stop it.”

Bev’s head dropped forward, her shorter dark hair flung in her face. “There’s hope.”

“Yeah. Fuckin Dean and his virus shit. I couldn’t get out of him what he gave him. He said he didn’t remember what he mixed together. Good thing they only had so much in Binghamton or George would die. I know it. I know what he makes.” Johnny looked at his watch. “I’d better go. And try to stay away from me. You hanging around me is only gonna breed suspicion I don’t want. Not now. Especially with all that’s gonna start to happen.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll make sure we aren’t seen together.”

Johnny shook his head. “Good. And I’m sorry for snapping. It’s just this pisses me off.” He stated with anger. “You know I used to like Dean.” He moved to the door. “But after this. I hate him.”

“Makes it all worth it.”

“Yeah, I was feeling bad at first. But now. All I can say is excellent timing and good job Bev.”

Bev smiled. “Thanks. Should I wait here.”

“No. I’ll get it to you. There’s nothing we can do with it until the program gets dropped off and that can’t be until Leo is on tracking watch. God, I hope Steward doesn’t screw this up with the timing.”

“He doesn’t want to do it while Daddy is in the coma anyhow.”

“Well George would want us to move ahead. We wasted so much time.”

“But this is gonna take even more time.”

“Yeah.” Johnny smiled. “But no more time than if we waited for George to get all better. And it’s a sure fire way to bring the distraction we need. And distraction will be our key to finding out everything without anyone noticing. And when we know all we can and get what we have to get . . .”

“We can get out of Beginnings.”

“You better believe it. Everyday here is like a prison sentence to me.” Johnny opened his door. “Now let’s just hope I followed the instructions right, and I didn’t screw something up over there.”

“Johnny.” Bev grabbed his arm. “This will work, right?”

Johnny closed his door. “How can it not. The ball is literally in our court. And once we start it rolling.”

“But it’s so simple . . .”

“Yes. And maybe simplicity is what we need. It’s been in our hands, we just didn’t know how to use it. Besides, when you look at all we have to do. Is it that simple.”

Bev only tilted her head in a ‘guess not’ manner.

“See. I’m out of here. Wait a few minutes then leave.” Johnny opened his door, looked and stepped out. He pulled the door closed and turned in the direction of the modular home living section.

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“And looking at your skills . . .” Henry flipped through the clipboard as he sat with Richie in Ellen and Dean’s home. “Joe wants to put you, starting tomorrow, in the building of the new barracks.”

“Construction?” Richie asked.

“That’s what you did before the world ended.”

“Yeah, but Henry. I hate it.”

“In Beginnings you do what your skills dictate. We utilize you where we need you. With the community growing, we need you in construction.”

“Don’t you have anything intellectual listed that I can do?” Richie reached forward and grabbed for the clipboard.

Henry snatched the clipboard back. “Richie please. This is mine.”

Richie raised one eyebrow. “Can’t I be a Frank soldier.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Frank didn’t say he needed you. You can ask if you can be on reserves.”

“You know Henry, I don’t know if I’m mentally capable of working yet. Andrea said I should wait until the adjustments over.”

“We can send you to containment full time instead of only being there when you aren’t working.”

“You mean stay in there with all those crazy people?”

“Yeah.”

“No.” Richie shook his head. “I can’t believe me sister is making me stay there anyhow.”

“Your sister is following rules. She got you out today didn’t she?”

“To babysit.”

“Better than containment. Now back to your work . . .”

“What if I just take a desk job somewhere . . .”

“Richie?”

“Yes.”

“Your lazy aren’t you?”

“Very much so, yes.” Richie nodded.

“Swell.” Just as Henry was dreading another Robbie Slagel, he turned when the door opened.

Johnny slowed in his walk into the house. His shock of seeing Henry and Richie was not hidden. “Hey uh . . . what are you guys doing here?”

Henry thought the same thing. “I came to talk to Richie. He’s watching the

baby. What are you . . .”

“I’m here to see my dad.” Johnny shut the door and called out. “Dad, I’m . . .”

“Your Dad is working.” Henry stated then looked to Richie. “Actually he’s on a Dean hunt. Which isn’t very nice.”

Johnny tossed his hands up. “Oh wow. I thought he’d be getting settled. Shit. I really wanted to spend time with him.”

“He’ll be home soon.” Henry told him. “Stop by later. I’m sure he wants to spend time with you.”

Johnny hesitated. There was an awkward silence he didn’t like. Bouncing from heel to toe he pointed to the hall that led to the bedrooms. “Is Nick in bed?”

“Yes. Thank God.” Richie answered and quickly shifted his eyes to Henry. “I mean. Unfortunately, yes.”

Henry shook his head and held up his hand. “No need to cover that remark. I know Nick is tough.”

“Can I go see him?” Johnny asked. “I haven’t seen him. I promise not to wake him.”

“Sure.” Henry answered. “But if you wake him . . .”

“I’ll handle him.” Johnny smiled. “Thanks..” He walked across the livingroom and into the hall. He slowed down his walk until he heard Henry and Richie slip into some conversation about construction, then Johnny walked on. He paused by Nick’s room, looked in, and then looked back down the hall. When he saw an all clear, and no one was coming, Johnny walked a little further, slipped into Dean and Ellen’s bedroom and shut the door slightly.

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Frank only laughed. His laughter echoed in the tunnels.

“Frank!” Dean screamed out. “You’re an asshole.”

“You’re lucky I’m not carrying you.”

“Oh, yeah, real lucky.” Dean squirmed and fought, his arms tied tight to his sides and a rope attached around his neck as Frank led him to the cryo-lab.

“Any means I deem necessary.”

“I would have come on my own.”

“Like you were.”

“Oh wait Frank. Just wait until I kill you.”

“Dean.” Frank spun around. “Little man threats do not scare me.”

“And to think I risked my life to bring you home.”

“Dean move faster or I’ll tug.”

“What do you mean tug?”

Frank yanked the rope and Dean flew forward. It took everything he had not to fall.

“I hate you.”

“You married Ellen.”

“Is this why you’re doing this.”

“No. I’m doing this under orders of my father.” Frank stopped at the cryo-lab. “Hey Dean, look.” Frank punched in the code singing in a childish manner. “You’re in trouble. You’re in trouble.” The cryo-lab door buzzed and Frank

pulled Dean in. "Got him."

"Christ." Joe stood up. "You got the man tied up."

"Yeah. So." Frank said. "Here." He handed Joe the end of the rope. "In case he leaves." Walking by Dean, Frank rubbed his hair, messing it up. "Bye Dean. I'll uh . . . see you at home."

"I hate you Frank." Dean snapped. "And wait. You're a dead man."

"Dean." Frank stopped in his leaving. "You don't have it in you. Fake or not."

"Bet me."

"That you can't kill me?"

"Yeah."

"Is this on the lines of what we decided in Colorado?" Frank asked.

Dean took a moment, "Where?"

"Colorado."

"We haven't been to Colorado in over a year."

"Dean, we just got back." Frank stated.

"Frank, you asshole. We were in Alabama."

"Oh, O.K."

"Then Yes." Dean nodded.

"Yes what?"

"On the same lines." Dean stated.

"As what?"

"As what we decided."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Frank was lost.

"Frank!" Dean yelled. "God, are you dumb sometimes?"

"If . . ." Danny held up his hand and inched closer to Dean lowering his voice. "If I may. Joe has been looking for you. And he doesn't look happy. And you Dean are arguing with Frank while you're all tied up like a baby calf." Danny nodded. "I'd watch who's calling who dumb right now at this moment."

"Yeah." Frank added. "I like you Danny. Bye Dean."

Joe huffing, stood up and started to untie Dean. "Frank don't go too far."

"From where?"

"Here." Joe said as he slipped the first knot out of the rope.

"From here, here? Or here in Beginnings?"

"Here!" Joe said.

"You want me to wait outside the door?"

"No. I just don't want you to go too far."

"Are you afraid Dean is going to get rough?" Frank asked. "Because dad he's . . ."

"Frank."

"Yeah?"

"Get the hell out." Joe snapped, perturbed.

"Do you still not want me to go too far?"

"Go!" Joe pointed.

"Fuck." Frank huffed out and headed to the door. "Yell at me. I just got home. You tell me one thing and get mad after I try to clarify it." He opened the door and left.

Joe took a calming breath. "Now . . ."

"Joe." Dean dropped the rest of the ropes from his body. "I know what

you're gonna say."

"You do, do you." Joe said.

"Yes." Dean nervously straightened his hair that Frank messed up. "And it's not cruelty to animals at all Joe. They're hybrids. And they died. Had they lived I would have treated them well. And I know it doesn't seem like it has any scientific merit what so ever. But genetically it . . ."

"Dean." Joe stopped him.

"Yeah?"

"This isn't about Hybrids."

"It's not?" Dean was puzzled then quickly shifted his eyes to a snickering Danny.

"Sorry." Danny held up his hand and stepped back.

"It's not." Joe said calmly.

"Oh." Dean let out a breath. "Here I thought you were gonna go off about how sick it was. I wouldn't have ran, I mean, I would have came right down here."

"IS that so?" Eerily calm Joe stepped to Dean. "Well Dr. Dean Hayes. I'm not here to discuss how sick those hybrids are." Closer Joe moved to him, voice soft until he reached an inch from Dean's face and then Joe . . . yelled. "I'm here to find out what the hell you're doing with my dead grandson frozen in freezer case!"

"Oh shit."

"Oh shit?" Joe raised his eyebrows and stepped back ignoring Danny who seemed to be enjoying it. "Oh shit you say. Well I have one question for you Dean."

Dean could feel his heart pounding in his chest. "Yeah Joe?"

"Does my daughter know about this."

Being happily married for a long time was the first thought that crossed Dean's mind. Slowly, trying to hide it, he took a deep breath. "No, Joe." Dean pulled a stool and sat down. His legs couldn't take it anymore. "Absolutely not."

Ellen's shriek rang out loud and shrill in the lab. She spun to Dean. "You told him!"

Dean hunched,. "El, I . . ."

"So you know." Joe stepped to her.

Ellen quickly shifted her eyes to Dean.

"I told him you didn't know." Dean said.

"I didn't Joe. I didn't know until this very . . ."

"Oh knock it off." Joe stopped her before she could start rambling. "Sit down!"

Ellen sat.

"Now." Joe, so frustrated ran his hand over his head. "Do you two mad scientist have any idea how sick this is."

"Joe." Ellen spoke up softly. "In the name of science . . ."

"In the name of science my ass!" Joe yelled. "What the hell were you two thinking? I turn my head from your antics down here. But this, this, this . . . this surpasses any immoral boundaries that even doctor Frankenstein crossed."

Ellen snickered.

“What?” Joe asked her. “You think this is funny.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just that. Don’t you think you may be overreacting?”

Joe saw red, so much so he couldn’t even speak. “I . . . I don’t even know what to do. But I’ll tell you what, Frank needs to know about this.” Joe picked up his radio. “Frank.” He called into it.

The cryo-door opened and Frank walked in. “Yeah.”

Joe tossed his hand up. “Were you waiting out there?”

“Yeah. You said not to go far. Hey El. So like is Dean in all kinds of trouble? You kicking him out Dad?” Frank gloated.

“If I kick Dean out., Ellen goes.”

“What the fuck did you make her do!” Frank yelled at Dean.

Dean flipped him off.

“Frank.” Joe’s voice softened. “There’s . . . there’s something you need to know. I . . . I don’t even know how to tell you this.”

“What?”

Joe looked to Danny. “Danny, could you?”

“Oh sure.” Danny waved his hand to Frank and led him to the back room.

Frank looked back in wonder as he followed Danny.

In the silence Joe looked to Dean and Ellen. “I don’t know how he’s gonna handle this. I wouldn’t want to be you . . .”

“No!” Frank’s voice cried out.

“See?” Joe held out his hand. “Do you see?”

“Oh my God!” Frank stumbled emotionally as he came from the back.

“Frank . . .” Joe moved to him.

With a quick action, Frank shot up his hand halting his father. He flung himself into the lab counter. “What have they done? What in God’s name have they done? Why? Why?”

Dean took one breath and his face turned red. “Frank! Knock it off. You were as much a part of this as we were.”

Frank lifted up suddenly and spun around. “You lie!”

“Oh bullshit.” Dean slid off the stool. “If we go down, so do you.”

“You knew?” Joe looked at his son. “You knew?”

Frank’s lips moved, his hands went up and his head bobbed from side to side. He then glared at Dean “You’re dead.”

“Bite me.” Dean sat back down.

“Blow me.”

“You’re an asshole.”

“Fuck you.”

“Boys!” Joe yelled out. “Knock it off. Now . . . before we continue on with trying to figure out what the hell we’re supposed to do about this . . .”

“Nothing.” Ellen said. “Absolutely nothing. It’s science Joe. It’s our work and our lab.”

“Ellen, it’s desecration and you three crossed the line.” Joe pointed. “Danny, get Henry on the radio. Tell him I need him down here.”

“Sure thing.” Danny grabbed the radio.

“Now, as I was saying. Before we go any further, is there anyone else involved that I should know about?”

Frank, Ellen and Dean just looked at each other and it wasn’t a split second later that whistling was heard they all turned to look when the cryo-lab door

opened.

Jenny Matoose stopped whistling a happy tune the second she stepped in. With her mouth still puckered, her eyes shifted about. "I think I came at a bad time." She turned to make a hurried escape.

"Hold it." Joe called out. "Why are you down here?"

"Me?" Jenny laughed nervously. "Are you talking to me?"

Joe had a mocking sarcastic tone. "Yes, I'm talking to you. Why are you down here?"

"Nosy." Jenny answered.

"You're being nosy?" Joe asked. "Your husband is clinging to his life up above and you decided to come down to the lab to be nosy?"

"Um, yes. I'm always nosy down here. Especially this time of day." Jenny looked at Ellen. "Isn't that right?"

Ellen, seated next to Dean, hands folded only raised her eyes to Jenny. "He knows."

"He knows what?" Jenny asked.

"He knows." Ellen reiterated.

"I know." Joe said.

Jenny hurried and looked at Dean. "Dean?"

"Oh, boy does he know." Dean nodded.

Frank held up his hand. "Hold it. Are we talking about the same thing, because I don't want to be lost or . . . ow!" Frank grabbed the back of his head after the loud smack rang out. "Dad. You hit me."

"Yeah, Frank I did. You asshole. What the hell did they do to you out there, you're worse now than you ever were."

"What?"

Joe grumbled.

Dean shook his head in a pacifying manner to Joe. "The head injury was bad. He's still recovering."

"It's no excuse for stupidity." Joe stated. "Jenny. How long did you know?"

"Know what?" Jenny played dumb.

A growl, deep and long came from Joe. "Jenny! How long did you know! From the beginning?"

"Um . . . yes."

Ellen looked up to her and whispered. "Grab a seat. We're about to be chastised."

"Ellen." Joe called her. "You don't get it do you. You don't understand how demented this is. Now, this isn't the leader of this community talking, it's your father, a grandfather."

"But Joe . . ." Ellen shook her head.

"Don't, but Joe me. All right. Wait a second." Joe held up his hand and looked to Jenny. "Why *do* you know?"

"Caroline is in there." Jenny answered.

"Oh my God! Caroline's in there too?"

Jenny looked at Ellen. "I guess he didn't know that one."

"It's starting to make sense to me." Joe took a second to get calm and stared at the four before him. "I . . . I understand the loss that you four suffered. To lose a child is . . . it is the most terrible loss. But, we move on. As hard as it is, we have to. We can't hold on. We can't keep our dead . . ."

Frank's finger snapped loudly as he released an 'oh' and turned to Ellen. "Speaking of dead. What did you think about what I told you El?"

"About?"

"About my brother Jimmy's ghost yelling at me."

"You really saw him."

"Yeah."

"Wow."

"Can you believe that." Frank said amazed.

"And he really yelled at you?" Ellen asked.

"Fuckin rambled on and on and on too."

"Why?" Ellen asked. "You would think if his ghost appeared, he would rather talk than yell. Are you sure you just didn't misunderstand . . ."

"Hold it!" Joe screamed out. "Beside the fact that you Frank have careened way off the goddamn subject."

"Not really." Frank held up a finger.

"Shut up. What the hell are you talking about? Are you saying you saw your brother Jimmy's ghost?"

"Yes. In my office today."

"Oh brother." Joe growled out and looked at Dean. "You'd better check his head."

"What!" Frank defended. "You don't believe me?"

"No." Joe answered.

"I saw him."

"Jesus Christ, Frank, you didn't see your brother's ghost?"

"Yes I did and he was bitching because we don't talk about him."

"Well then he's gonna have to bitch some more, because we're moving off the Jimmy subject."

"Then you deal with him."

"I will."

"See you believe me now."

"Frank!" Joe was about as near a stroke as he could get. "Enough! Dean!"

"What did I do?" Dean jumped.

"Check him the hell out before I put him back on full perimeter watch." Joe let out a breath. "Please."

"Joe." Dean snickered. "Honestly. He's fine to do his job. Instincts drive Frank. Not brains. God knows if Frank was intellectually driven to protect this community, we'd all be dead."

"Be that as it may." Joe said. "Check him out."

Dean nodded.

Buzz. The cryo-lab door opened and Henry walked in. "Hey, Joe, you called for me?"

"Yes." Joe stated in relief. "Yes I did. We have a problem."

"Oh my God, we certainly do!" Henry barked out and moved across the lab to the hybrid in a jar. "What is this. Dean?" He spun around. "What are you doing to animals?"

Dean was at a loss for words. "It has to do with the series of genetic experiments me and Ellen are working on. We're getting there."

"This is sick." Henry pointed. "Is this why you called me Joe. Is Dean being the mad scientist again?"

"Yes, Henry he is." Joe explained. "But it's not about the hybrids. It's worse."

"Worse?" Henry questioned.

"Worse." Joe had to take a second to put it into words. "It appears . . . it appears that Dean, Ellen, Frank and Jenny, have Brian and Caroline's bodies frozen in the freezer case we've been so protective over."

"Well, Joe." Henry acted very calm. "They are their children. They really can do with them what they want."

"What!" Joe blasted.

"There you have it." Ellen stood up. "Let's go. I have patients to check on and things to get ready for my trip to Bowman."

"Hold on Missy Jane." Joe kept his eyes on Henry. "Hybrids offend you but dead babies in a freezer case don't."

"Oh Joe." Henry cringed. "Have some tact."

"Tact! Tact?! You tell me to have tact when they have Brian and Caroline in a freezer case?"

Henry held up his hands. "Calm down Joe, they aren't dead, they're only . . . only . . ."

"Only what?" Joe stepped to him. "And how do you know what they are when you just found out?"

Henry hunched. "Because I knew from the beginning?"

"Oh Jesus Christ."

"Can I?" Dean slid from his stool. "At first, O.K., I understood your being upset about this. But, Joe, this is my lab, my experiments. I can conduct them as I see fit for the better of this community."

"Lab experiments?" Joe questioned "Dean this is your son."

"My son." Frank corrected.

"Frank's son." Dean pointed.

"Yeah, Dad." Frank said. "You're thinking of that one time frame that you knew about when you were there but forgot about when we changed it. That was the time frame that Brian was Dean's son, not this time frame."

Very calmly Joe faced Frank. "Thank you for clarifying that."

"You're welcome."

Joe looked at Dean. "Why are you experimenting on Brian?"

"I'm not experimenting on him Joe. I'm . . . I love him. He was a big part of my life. And I have every intention of watching him walk, talk, and grow up. I promised Ellen. I promised her she would never lose another child. And she won't. She won't."

"But Dean, he died." Joe told him.

"No, Joe he didn't. And he's not dead in that case He's cryogenically frozen. Him and Caroline both. Suspended animation."

"Did you bring him back to life?"

"No, he never died." Dean took a long breath. "How did you find out he died?"

"When I came to in the morning, you told me."

Dean shook his head. "In our time frame," He held his hand in a motioning manner to Frank, Ellen, Jenny and Henry. "He died in his crib and you walked in one minute later."

Joe's eyes widened. "In your time frame?" He looked behind him to a

silent Danny. "You know who to call."

Danny gave a thumbs up.

"You . . . you went back in time to change it?" Joe asked. "You stole the time machine?"

Ellen stood back up. "Joe, Frank was bad. Dean was bad. I couldn't handle it. Jenny, Jenny couldn't handle it. We failed to beat something we knew was coming. I had failed to save my own son."

"And what in God's name made you come up with turning back time?"

Ellen looked to the faces in the room and they recalled the exact conversation . . .

"It's still no consolation!" Dean so emotional slammed his fist into the counter of the lab. He turned and face Frank and Ellen. "I can't take it. I just can't."

Ellen was at loss for words. Dean's guilt. His quietness. His complete feeling of failure. "I want him to be alive too Dean. I wish to God we could have realized it sooner."

"Stupid." Dean closed his eyes tight. "How did I miss something so obvious. What I wouldn't give to go back and tell myself to check the mice."

"Dean." Frank's voice spoke up soft. "Did you hear what you just said?"

Dean raised his eyes. "No, Frank. No."

"Yes." Frank stepped closer to him. "We can."

"We can't." Dean argued. "What happened, happened."

"And five miles from here in a isolated sector of Beginnings is a way to change what happened." Frank spoke intense. "Dean. I want Brian alive. We've done it before and we can do it again."

Joe shook his head. "Did any of you even realize though, how selfish a choice that was. Six other children died that night."

Henry interjected. "We knew Joe and we had every intention of changing that as well."

"What?" Joe seemed shock.

"We had it all planned." Dean said. "We went to Henry because he would know how to work the time machine. We were going to tell me, my past me, about the mice, that's it. Figuring past me could come up with the antiserum earlier, give it to Brian and the others that died. Me, Frank and Ellen would go through the time machine. I would go to myself, they would go to whoever else needed to know, for example Henry. All intentions were there to stop the losses."

"What happened?" Joe asked.

Dean nodded to Henry.

Henry answered. "Jason had rigged the time machine to stop just what we were going to do. Stop someone from taking the machine to make time as they wanted it. Instead of being able to pick a day, date and time. We had to calculate hours to go back."

"We calculated wrong." Ellen said. "Or at least that's what we think. There could have been something with the time machine as well. But, when we got there, we got there at five in the morning on August 19th. At that point Dean had already discovered the anti-serum, it had been given out and the six other

children had already died. All except Brian and Caroline.”

“So you took them.” Joe said.

“We took them.” Dean answered. “We didn’t have any anti-serum on us, we know that Brian and Caroline did not react to it. So we brought them back, only after of course we told past me, Ellen, Frank, and Jenny. It was the only way Joe. They’re still alive.”

Slowly Joe began to pace, his hand running over his mouth. “What do you plan on doing with them?”

“Keeping them froze for a while.” Dean replied. “We have to. I remembered we had those animal cryo cases. And they worked in our favor. Right now, they are building strength back up and El and I are working on a stronger anti-dote. But even if we come up with it, we have to still wait at least six months until they are strong enough to release them.”

“So you see Joe.” Ellen had an innocent tone. “We tried , but we failed. We don’t want to fail this time. It’s not all that bad what we’re doing. And, you know, it’s really throwing whoever is working for George through a loop. They think the embryos are in that case.”

Joe gave an agreeing look then looked up when the cryo-lab door opened once more bringing in Jason Godrichson. “Jason.”

“Hey Joe. Ellen, your patients are waiting up there. All two of them.”

Ellen rolled her eyes at Jason’s sarcasm.

“Jason.” Joe spoke. “There is something you need to be aware of.”

“What’s that Joe?” Jason asked.

“These . . . these five. They used your time machine. They took it and used it, broke into your lab, I’m guessing and went back and changed time because of Brian and Caroline’s death. I thought you’d want to handle it.”

Jason slowly nodded, placing his hands in his lab coat. He looked about the faces in the room and then back to Joe. “Remember one time Joe I told you I may be guilty of a lot of things in Beginnings, but helping George was not one of them?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, this is one of the things I’m guilty of. I helped them go back in time and I was there when Dean, Frank and Ellen came through with Brian and Caroline.”

Joe said nothing, he just walked to the door.

“Joe.” Henry called out. “Where are you going?”

“Before I get even more pissed off, before another person walks through this door that knows about this little cover up . . . I’m going back to work.” Joe opened the door and left.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ellen hesitated in her turning on of the coffee pot that evening when the loud bang from the livingroom vibrated the floor beneath her feet in the kitchen. “Frank!” she screamed out in warning then turned on the coffee pot. Another bang, made Ellen spin and race into the living room. Alexandra, and Joey sat on the floor. Billy was on the couch.. “Where’s Frank.”

Six year old, Billy peered up from his book and pointed.

As Ellen turned to look behind her, Frank who had his back tight against the wall, grabbed hold of her.

“Frank!”

“Oh, no.” Frank did a commentating voice. “She’s struggling to get free from the champ.”

Alexandra and Joey laughed.

“Frank knock it off.” Ellen kicked her legs as he had her braced around the waist.

“Going for the pin.” Frank kicked out her legs, brought Ellen down to the floor and got on top of her. “I need help, she won’t stay down!” Frank moved Ellen’s leg up and down mocking a kick. “Help.”

Alexandra and Joey took that as their sign to dive right in and they did directly on top of Frank’s back.

Ellen grunted from the extra weight. “Frank. Let me up.”

“El, I can’t. They got me.” Frank smiled. He wasn’t in the usual wrestling pin position, Frank was in more of what he would call a ‘missionary pin position’. He tilted his head and brought his lips closer.

Ellen snickered. “What are you doing.”

“Kiss me.”

“No.”

“El.”

“No.” Ellen moved, laughing away from his searching lips.

“Dean’s not here. One kiss. A little one. Come on.” Frank tried again.

“Frank . . . get off.”

“El, please. Not right now.” He dropped his voice to a whisper. “There are little children in the room.” Upon Frank’s words, the front door opened and Dean stepped in. Frank looked up. “And speaking of little.”

Dean looked down to Frank and Ellen on the floor. “Swell.” He shut the door.

Rolling her eyes to see an upside Dean above her, Ellen reached up her hand, “Dean. Help.”

“Frank, get off my wife.”

“She’s not your wife. You cheated.”

“Whatever.” Dean grabbed Ellen’s hand. “Billy, has he been like this all night.”

Billy turned a page in his book. “This is the first time he’s tried to molest your wife.”

With a ‘huh’, Frank scratched his head and lifted off of Ellen. “Dean, you need to tell him he’s a kid. I bet any money you were the exact same way.”

“I was.”

Ellen rolled to her knees and stood up, grabbing onto Dean’s hand. “I saved you dinner.”

“Thanks.” Dean kissed Ellen on the cheek., ignored Frank’s ‘uh!’ and walked to the kitchen with her. “You made coffee too.” Dean walked to the stove and peeked at the plate. “This looks good.”

“Frank cooked?”

“Frank cooked?” Dean poked his finger in the gravy and tasted it. “Frank can be of some use.”

“How’s John Matoose?” Ellen asked.

“Got the bleeder. Hopefully, we won’t run into anymore unexpected surgeries with him.”

“Is he gonna make it?” Ellen asked.

“Hard to say right now. I know he’ll never walk again. I don’t think.” Dean hunched at the loud children’s shrieks from the livingroom. “I guess a quiet evening alone with you is out of the question.”

“No work at home tonight?”

“I wasn’t planning on it.”

“We can still have quiet evening.” Ellen pulled Dean closer to her.

“With Frank?” Dean put his arms around her.

“We’ll ignore him.”

“Ignore Frank?”

Ellen pressed her body against him. “Just kiss me. I’ve missed you.”

Smiling, Dean ran his hand up her back to under her hair. He lowered his lips to hers with a moan and started to kiss Ellen.

“All right.” Frank said loudly walking into the kitchen and causing Dean and Ellen to stop. “I would appreciate the mushy Mike and Carol Brady antics not happening in front of me.”

Dean huffed in irritation. “Frank.”

“What? Oh hey Dean, you want me to go home.” Frank laughed. “Wait. I am.”

Not letting him get to him, Dean released Ellen and kissed her quickly.

“Uh!” Frank shrieked.

“Stop that.” Dean scolded. “El, I’m gonna get changed.”

“I’ll get your dinner ready.”

“Thanks.” Dean, tired, walked from the kitchen,

“Isn’t that nice.” Frank said sarcastically.

“Frank, what are you up to.”

“Last I checked two-forty, or somewhere in the vicinity.”

Ellen shook her head. “You know what I mean. You living here.” She took Dean’s plate and placed it in the microwave.

“El, I don’t have a house. It’ll be a while until I get one of these babies. And . . . you and Dean, this marriage thing . . .”

“This marriage thing?”

Frank laid his finger on her lips to silence her. “It isn’t fair. You said you would marry me. You took my ring. You accepted my proposal and you married him while I was gone. How do you think that makes me feel?”

“Frank.”

“Bad.” Frank nodded. “And so, if I can’t have you . . .” Frank winked.

“Neither will he.” Frank started leaving the kitchen. “At least not easily he won’t.”

Dean was feeling his exhaustion with each step he took, walking into his bedroom he reached for the door to close it and he scraped his hand against the edge of it. The door didn’t budge. Oddly, Dean looked at it and tried to close it again. He gave it all he had and still nothing. “El?” He called out heading back to the livingroom. “El? How did the bedroom door get broke?”

Ellen looked curiously. “The bedroom door is broke?”

“Yeah it won’t shut.” Dean replied.

“It’s not broke.” Frank said.

“Yeah it is.” Dean argued.

“No, it isn’t. I cemented the hinges.”

“You what!” Dean blasted. “You cemented our hinges. How am I supposed to shut our door, Frank? What about privacy?”

Frank smiled.

Dean, still on that vow that he wouldn’t let Frank see that he got to him, headed back to the bedroom. Mumbling all the way there, Dean walked in his room, grabbed his clothes from the dresser and walked to the bathroom. Just as he stepped in, he paused. A white dust caught his attention as it sprinkled on the floor. Bending down, Dean picked some up running it through his finger tips. *Plaster?* Dean questioned in his mind. Standing, he looked around the room. He didn’t see any holes in the wall. Figuring it was something else Frank did, Dean, bracing himself for anything went into the bathroom to change.

Jess Boyens’ blue eyes lit up and sparkled whenever he watched Robbie. Even doing something so simple as watching Robbie do his hair. It amused Jess. The way Robbie, with no where to go would still--as if he were in the old world--take time to make his appearance neat. Of course Jess didn’t understand Robbie’s method of thinking when it came to his hair. Jess wore his hair neatly cut--thanks to Bentley the town barber. Robbie had his hair cut in an inch long clipped cut. Which would have looked just fine after Robbie showered, but Robbie insisted on putting ‘hair hold’ on his hair as it dried making the top stick up in every different directions. To Jess, it made Robbie look like the child that somehow was still inside of him.

Robbie never noticed the stares, usually they came when the two of them were engrossed in conversation. Jess figured either Robbie didn’t notice or he said nothing. Credit had to be given to Robbie, at least in Jess’ book. Robbie was aware of how Jess felt and what Jess was. But Robbie, didn’t let that deter him from keeping his friendship with Jess, or keeping Jess as a roommate. With the exception of a few people, Robbie was the only one who knew Jess was gay. Jess didn’t look gay, nor did he act the part of the way the old world perceived a gay man to act. Tall, built, strong, blonde and handsome, the women pegged him a tie with Blake the soap opera God, as best looking. He had two offers from two different women. Which was quite a compliment to Jess considering there were only eighteen women in a community with hundreds of men. Jess didn’t want those women. He wanted Robbie. More than he should and in a way he

could never have. But Jess had to accept that, He decided, whether it hurt or not, he would stay that valuable friend to Robbie. And never try to push it again.

“Jess?” Robbie walked out of the bathroom door and passed Jess who was standing there. “Did you want something?”

“Um . . . yeah.” Jess snapped his finger. “I wanted to remind you to take that salsa over to Ellen, I made her some.”

“That was nice.” Robbie grinned with a swat to Jess’ arm. “Bearing gifts for El, is always a bonus.” Robbie headed to the steps.

“Is that why your doing your hair?”

Robbie snickered as he walked down the stairs. “What do you mean?”

“To look good for Ellen.”

“Of course.”

“Robbie.” Jess followed him across the livingroom. “Frank is there. Frank’s your . . .”

“Brother, I know.” Robbie moved to the diningroom. “This it?” He pointed to a bowl.

“Yes and it’s not right.”

“Did you not have the right ingredients?” Robbie asked.

“That’s not what I mean.” Jess stopped him. “Frank is back. Him and Dean, they have kids with Ellen. They need to take the opportunity and really make an understanding work. Now’s the chance. Maybe, maybe it’s time you and Henry sit down and both of you just lay back and stop . . . pining for Ellen.”

Robbie chuckled. “Dean said nothing about giving the understanding to Frank, in fact . . .”

“I know. Dean said some nice things about you. You and Dean could actually have an understanding that works. I believe that. But . . . Frank loves her. He’s loved her forever and . . . why are you smiling?”

“I can’t help it.”

“I’m being serious.”

“Yeah, but you complimented me. You think I’m a threat to Frank and Ellen.”

“Hell yeah.” Jess nodded. “And is it fair to Ellen? She has an obligation to you she tries to fulfill.”

“Jess.” Robbie winked. “El and I are friends. And . . .” Robbie picked up the bowl of salsa. “There are no women anymore. At least not enough. And . . . and it’s not fair. I don’t want to be with Ellen to get sex, even though . . .” Robbie snickered “It wouldn’t be bad perk. But, I just want to keep our closeness. Our time. That companionship I get from a woman. That’s all. The other women, I guess I could, *pine* . . .” Robbie chuckled. “Over them. But, how fair is it to them? How many men are they juggling as well. One to live with. One to sleep with, one to give comfort to and talk . . . they divide up their time as much as possible. And if I’m going to be intrusive in a woman’s life. It’s going to Ellen’s.” Robbie started walking and stopped. “God, did that sound wrong or what?”

“Take the salsa.” Jess waved his hand to him.

Robbie paused in opening the door. “Jess, when I was fifteen, I use to sunbathe with Ellen in her yard. I . . . I’ve wanted her since I realized how cool it was to watch her stomach move up and down when she breathed and seeing those little beads of sweat form on her . . .”

“Robbie, that’s sick.”

“Yeah.” Robbie grinned ornery then shuddered. “O.K. I’m out of here . . .”

“Robbie.”

Robbie stopped and looked back. Jess was holding up a book. “You wanna take this.”

“Shit. Yes. Thanks.” Robbie hurried in and took it. “You wanna come over and hang out for a while. Frank’s back. At the very least we can have fun irritating Dean.”

“Sure. Why not.” Walking to the door, Jess paused at the closet.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting my coat.”

“It’s not even cold.” Robbie opened the front door wider.

“It’s winter.”

“Pansy.” Robbie allowed Jess to walk out first, then pulling the door closed, he left.

It was quiet as Dean ate, which made for easier digestion. But his suspicious eyes kept shifting up from the diningroom table to the empty livingroom, as if waiting.

“There are pros to him living here.” Ellen stated as she sat with Dean.

“Like what El?”

“He cooks, better than you or I.”

“He should find his own place.” Dean said.

“He bathed the kids. We hate that.”

“Well . . .” Dean bobbed his head.

“Who’s putting them to bed?”

“El, he cemented our bedroom door. Our bedroom door.” Dean dropped his fork. “What about when I want to make love to you.”

“You can still make love to me.” Ellen scooted her chair closer.

“Yeah when he’s not around. Or in the bathroom. I’ll want to make love to you in our bed, at night, some time that urge will strike me.” Dean picked up his fork pouting. “In fact, I wanted to . . . tonight.” He played with his food and smiled when he felt Ellen’s lips on his cheek. “El, tell me he’s not breaking us up.”

“He’s not breaking us up.” Ellen whispered. “I vowed Dr. Hayes to make this marriage work with you. And unless you do something to totally screw it up . . .”

“Which I won’t.”

“Which you won’t, then we’ll be together for a very, very long time.”

Smiling, Dean turned his head and kissed Ellen.

“Uh!” Frank walked into the livingroom. “Enough.” He pulled out a chair at the table. “Kids are in . . .”

A single knock on the front door was all the Robbie-warning they had. “Hey, Frank. El . . . Dean.” Robbie walked in with Jess behind him. He moved to the diningroom table, set down the salsa and pulled out a chair and sat, so did Jess.

Ellen grinned as she brought the bowl closer. “For me?” She looked at

Jess.

“For you.” Jess said proudly. “Fresh too.”

“I’ll get the chips.” Ellen sprang up. “I can’t believe I ate that last batch so fast.”

Frank tipped the bowl his way. “Looks good.” He stuck his finger in it and nodded. “You made this Jess?”

“Yep.”

Ellen returned with the chips. “And these. He makes homemade tortilla chips. Try one.” she pushed them to Frank.

“Impressive,” Frank lifted a chip.

“And speaking of impressive . . .” Dean lifted his fork. “You should taste these special eggs he makes, Frank. Since you’re the big food guy.”

“I like to eat.” Frank dipped his chip and ate it. “Oh, this is excellent.”

Dean swallowed his food. “We actually had Jess make dinner for us.”

“And his cheesecake.” Robbie added. “You like cheesecake, Frank. Jess, you should make one for Frank.”

“I will.” Jess nodded and folded his hands.

“Cheesecake?” Frank questioned as he grabbed another chip.

“Don’t forget the sour rabbit.” Ellen nodded and brought about agreeing verbal nods from Robbie and Dean.

Frank swung his views to Jess. “Wait a second. Salsa, chips, special eggs, dinner, cheesecake, sour rabbit. You do all this shit?”

“Yes. And clean.”

“What are you gay?” Frank grabbed a chip, the table went silent.

Jess seriously looked at him. “Yes.”

“Right.” Frank shoved the chip in his mouth.

“Oh.” Robbie snapped his finger. “Here El.” He pushed the book forward. “Elliott sent that for you.”

“Behind the Brady Bunch.” Ellen grabbed the book. “This is great.”

“Who’s Elliott?” Frank asked.

“Sgt. Ryder.” Robbie answered.

“Who?”

Ellen asked. “Sgt. Ryder. I can’t believe you don’t remember. He went back to Bowman before Hal. He was the one that freed you when we were taken prisoner.”

“Oh.” Frank nodded. “The Mexican looking guy.” Suddenly Frank’s expression changed when the thought of what Elliott looked like hit him. “El, why is he sending you books?”

“Why *is* he sending you books?” Dean asked.

“To be nice.” Ellen flipped through the pages. “Oh look, a special section about Greg and Florence Henderson.” She snickered.

Robbie shrugged. “Anyhow, he’s looking forward to talking with you Frank, you know, because your Hal’s brother. And speaking of Hal.” Robbie nodded. “He’s anxious for you to come down there.”

“Oh yeah?” Frank was impressed.

“Yep.” Robbie said. “Wants your advice on running things.”

Jess quickly looked at Robbie then shook his head.

Frank, engrossed in his chips, looked up, “I’ll make sure I give him my advice when I go down.”

Dean smiled. "You're going to Bowman?"

"Hey!" Ellen yelled, reached out and smacked Frank's hand. "Quit eating all my chips."

"Easy El. Jess will make you more." Crunching loudly, hovering the bowl of salsa now even closer to him, Frank looked at Dean. "Yeah I'm going to Bowman."

Dean grinned.

"Day after tomorrow . . . when I take El, down. We'll be back the day after that."

Dean tossed his hand up. "Swell." As his hand hit the table, a knock, a polite one was at the door, followed by a popping in head. Danny's Hoi's.

"Hey." Danny grinned and stepped inside.

Dean leaned back in his chair. "Grand central station."

"Funny." Danny snickered. "I know you don't mind me being here, Dean, after all I got you this house. And . . . you signed a favor slip."

Dean cringed, gave up and tried to eat again.

"I'm here to ask Ellen for a favor." Danny said. "El, Jenny said you may have a disk I can use. I have to load some stuff on for the paper."

"Are you out?" Ellen asked.

"Yep." Danny walked to the table and stole a chip. "I can get more when I run into New Bowman tomorrow, but I need one now. Jenny said you save a bunch of shit. I'll print stuff up for you in exchange."

Ellen grinned. "That sounds great. Come on." She stood up from the table. "Follow me." She led him to the hall.

Danny followed and paused. "Are you taking me . . ." He raised his voice higher. "To the bedroom."

Ellen laughed and led him to hers and Dean's room. "Don't shut the door, Frank cemented the hinges."

Danny stopped to look at it. "Funny. Good thinking on his part though." He walked over and sat on the bed.

Ellen opened her top drawer and pulled out a small box. "I just have a few disks. They're no where near filled. So you can squeeze stuff on them." She handed four of them to Danny. "If you can print up or find a way to print up the blue one, I'd appreciate it. That was all Josh's school work."

Danny tapped the disk on his hand. "Consider it done. Whats this. Robbie-Ellen letters."

Ellen, with folded arms moved closer to him. "Oh, that's the file of mine and Robbie's email. We had quiet the correspondence thing happening for a while."

"Any juicy ones?" Danny asked.

"Most. Pretty funny. Some are . . . well, raunchy. Don't tell Frank."

Danny smiled. "I won't. Can I read them?"

Ellen took a moment to think. "Sure go on. What the hell."

"Thanks." Danny slid the disks into his tee shirt pocket. "And I appreciate you lending me these." Danny started to stand up and he stopped. He peered up to the ceiling.

"What's wrong?"

"You have . . ." He walked across the room and bent down. "Plaster on your floor. Wonder where . . ." He looked around some more. "I'll stop by

tomorrow and check the structure and stuff. I don't see anything."

"Sounds good."

Danny looked once more and started to leave the bedroom. "I guess I'll leave you to your Slagel party. Poor Dean."

Ellen laughed.

Danny walked into the livingroom. "See you guys!" He called out then halted and walked over to Robbie, standing behind him. "Hey, check out what I got permission to read." From his pocket he pulled the disk, covering it he brought it to Robbie's eyes. Pulling it away he gave Robbie a pat on the back. "See ya."

Robbie sat there, hands folded on the table in wonder and then it hit him when he heard the door shut. "Shit." He stood up and raced to the door. "I have to go." He flung it open and stopped bouncing in antsiness. "El, you . . . do . . . why . . . you know . . . it's . . . fuck." Robbie flew out.

Dean, like Frank and Jess, looked at Ellen. "What was that all about?"

"I don't know." Ellen started eating her chips again. "It's just a disk of a few letters Robbie and I wrote to each other when he was in the service. No big deal." Ellen ate her chips nonchalantly, she noticed Frank snickering, "What's so funny?"

"Nothing." Frank opened his mouth wide and ate a doused chip. "These are good." Frank grabbed another, "I was just thinking. Living here, Dean getting little man attitude, you, Robbie being Robbie. Danny starting trouble. God, El, I missed this place. It's great to be home."

INNER SANCTITY WARS

CHAPTER FIVE
Beginnings, Montana
October 4

The clank of the wrench echoed in the hanger as Johnny tossed it in the tool box upon his entering. He picked up a cloth to wipe off the oil that had gathered on his hands. How he got so dirty just from fixing the side door on the chopper, he'd never know. He needed to warm up, even though it wasn't that cold out, working on the chopper outside for so long made his hands numb. Johnny also needed to take a short break before going to the clinic. He heard rumors that twenty-two of those new soldiers his dad brought in had come down with a stomach flu, and he wanted to get into the mind set before Dean had him examining fecal material for bacteria all morning and afternoon.

Stuffing his cloth in his back pocket, Johnny made it past the two chopper inside and toward the back hanger office. Just before he stepped foot into the glass walled room, he heard Bev call out his name. Stopping in irritation, he turned. "What?"

The heels of Bev's little flat shoes clicked against the cement floor as she ran to Johnny. "I need to speak to you."

"I told you tonight."

"You avoid me."

"For a reason." Johnny stated.

"I'm getting nervous. You didn't say whether you did or not. You haven't said anything but that you'd get back to me. You haven't."

"Bev . . ."

"Johnny I'm just as much a part of this as you. If not bigger. I need my mind set at ease."

With a huff, Johnny took her arm and brought her into the office. He led her to a chair and then he too sat down. "I hope you know you're using up my relaxing time."

"I'm sorry."

"What do you need?"

"Did you."

Johnny grinned. "And it hasn't left my side. Just remember Bev . . ." He pointed. "Your attitude is so important to this working."

"I don't like the attitude you want me to project. It's not me." She folded her arms with a pout.

"Well, you being you, doesn't wash around here, does it?" Johnny leaned back in his chair. "The new approach is best."

"Isn't it contradictory to what we're doing?"

"You know Bev, for as much as I am impressed by your usage of that word . . . no. It's not. You listen to me all right. You do what *I* say. You ran amuck too much before. You sucked at trying to get places. Trust me, I know these people better than you. I know how one reaction will breed the reaction I want."

"Can I see it?"

"No."

"Please."

"Its not gonna mean anything to you."

"Still."

"All right." Johnny reached into his chest pocket. He pulled from it a tiny black case no bigger than two by two inches. He flipped it open. A purple disk was in there, round and shiny. Johnny poked his pinky finger in the center hold of it and lifted it. He spun the round object around his finger tip with arrogance. "Last seventy-two hours and seventy-two before he left. If it worked. We have plenty."

"No, this isn't the one." Danny Hoi spoke to himself staring at the name 'Blade Runner' painted on the outside of the chopper that set in front of the hanger. "Has to be inside." Carrying what looked like briefcase and tool box, Danny walked into the hanger. "Muff Diver. Muff Diver." He moved to the second chopper. "There you are. Robbie's." Danny set down his things and looked at the name *Muff Diver*. He laughed and looked around. "How the hell do they get these choppers out of here?" He peered up to the high ceiling and shrugged. Bending down, Danny opened the tool box. "Shit. My wires." He scratched his head and tried the briefcase. Nothing. Grabbing his phone from his belt, he started to dial. Putting it to his ear, he heard the loud static. "Henry? Can you . . . Did I leave the wires . . . Henry? Shit." He shut it off and stood up. Snapping his fingers he remembered the phone in the office and Danny headed that way.

"So you see." Johnny blew on the disk. "If we did get . . ." The creak of the office door made Johnny spring forward.

"Hey." Danny said with a smile. "What in the world is that?" He pointed to the disk.

"Um . . ." Johnny was answerless. "A disk."

"I never saw one like that. Ever." Danny reached for it. "Can I?"

"No."

"No?" Danny chuckled. "Funny." He lifted it off of Johnny's finger. "Where did you get this?"

"Bev had it. She . . . uh found it in some of her stuff. I hadn't seen one since I was a kid. It was for a hand held video games."

"Weird. I never saw one this small. Or this color." Danny handed it back. "You should let me take a look at that. Maybe I can figure out a way for you to play it again."

"Maybe." Johnny set it in its case again.

"Cute." Danny referred to the black case. "You must have been one of those video junkie kids."

"You can say that." Bev answered, impressed with her quick thinking answer.

"I need to use the phone." Danny pointed. "Do you mind?"

John shook his head. "Not at all. Go ahead." He watched Danny walk around to the edge of the desk, sit on top of it and dial. After hearing Danny--with his back to Johnny and Bev--argue with Henry that he didn't place a crank

call, Johnny gave a breath and facial expression of relief to Bev.

^^^

The beeping heart monitor, the clicking of the respirator and Jenny's occasional snuffle, were the sounds in John Matoose's room. His bed was slanted, his body swollen, pale. He barely looked like his usual thin self.

"O.K." Ellen pulled up a chair by Jenny. "He has an infection.. When Dean initially did the emergency surgery they did it under extreme circumstances. Do you understand that." Ellen spoke factual and calm.

"Yes."

"Now, had Dean not done the surgery, John would have died right there and then."

"He's dying now." Jenny sobbed.

"He still could live."

"But you said his organs aren't functioning properly."

"We're keeping them going. Hopefully . . ." Ellen held up two crossed fingers. "Last night's surgery cleared a little of the infection and the anti-infection strain Dean is using will start to kick in."

"But it hasn't yet." Jenny stated.

"Why tried something new last night with the anti-infection. Yes, we're pumping it into him, but, the region that holds the infection most is the stomach region." Ellen slid her hand over her own stomach. "In Chemotherapy, the technique would be called a perineal wash. Where the chemical is placed directly inside and the area submerged. That is what we did with the agent last night. We went into the body cavity and gave it one big dose. John's body is shutting down what it can in order to conserve his energy. It doesn't mean he's dying. It doesn't. O.K.?"

Jenny nodded.

"Don't give up hope." Ellen gave a squeeze to Jenny's hand and stood up. "I have to go get ready to leave for Bowman. You can call me at Hal's if you need me. All right?"

"Thank you Ellen. Thank you for taking the time with him."

Ellen only nodded, she grabbed John's chart and slowly left the room. Before pulling the door closed, she looked back in. No matter what John had done, Jenny had become her friend, and it was disturbing watching Jenny go through so much pain. Closing the door, Ellen walked down the hall, trying desperately to get herself into the mind set she needed for her trip to Bowman with Frank.

Bowman, North Dakota

"There has to be laws." Hal reviewed a large stack of papers with Elliott. "Unfortunately, Beginnings laws are few and strict."

"And we have to follow these?" Elliott asked.

"They really aren't too bad. Actually, my understanding is, Bowman rules

will apply to New Bowman, but in the final decision, it boils down to Beginnings' law."

"Maybe we can use some influence over them."

Hal snickered. "Over my father? I highly doubt that. And his council, well, they'll do just about anything he wants."

Elliott glanced at his watch quickly. "We'll have to really form our own . . ."

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in." Hal called out.

"Sir." Len stepped into the office and stood at attention.

"At ease, Len. What's up?" Hal leaned into his desk and folded his hands.

"Sir, my scouts have not returned from the north. They were due back this morning. As of yet. Nothing."

"Stan and Bud?" Hal questioned.

"Yes sir."

Hal reached to his right and to a folder, he opened it. "They went to Washington. Perhaps they got held up in the colony. But still, let's not waste too much time. I'm leaving for Beginnings, rest assured if they don't return tomorrow Sgt. Ryder will select a search party to find them. Just make sure you supply him with the exact route they took."

"Yes sir." Len nodded and saluted. "Thank you sir." He took a step back, turned on heels and walked out.

Elliott looked to Hal. "You're not worried."

"Nah." Hal shook his head. "Stan did that the last time he went out. He tends to stop earlier and not utilize all his day . . . day . . . light. Elliott, why do you keep looking at your watch?"

"Sir?"

"Your watch. That's the eighth time you looked at it. Is it broke?"

Elliott smiled almost embarrassed. "No, I was wondering what time your brother arriving?"

"They were supposed to be here, but my father wouldn't let them come until Frank had his head examined."

Elliott tried not to laugh.

"Funny, isn't that. Why the interest in my brother?" Hal questioned.

"To be honest." Elliott cleared his throat. "Actually, it's Dr. Hayes, I can't wait to see."

"The female Hayes."

"Yes."

"Are you sick?"

"No, I mean, I may be, I don't believe so." Elliot coughed. "I might be coming down with something."

"Really? Are you sure you aren't developing a little crush on her?"

"No." Elliott shook his head. "It's not that. She's very nice to me. She talks to me and not like I'm a criminal like our women speak to me, I like that." He fiddled nervously with his hands. "It's nice to have a woman talk to you. In fact, I'm hoping to steal some conversation. I sent her a book. I figure that will open the lines up." He nodded.

Hal laughed. "Elliott, if you spend time with Ellen, my brother Frank will . . . will . . ." Finishing the thought *'will be so pissed off'* in his mind, Hal leaned

back in his chair. "Be grateful. I'll have him so busy, poor Dr. Hayes will be at a loss on how to spend her time. You should set up an agenda, as I will for Frank."

"Do you think he'll mind, or get angry. My last conversation with your brother showed his temper and, not to mention he was placing a bullet in the heads of dying men."

"Nah." Hal shook his head. "He won't notice. Not at all. Now . . ." Hal snapped forward. "These Laws."

"Laws Yes." Elliott smiled. "Captain . . . thank you."

Hal winked, thought of Frank, smiled at the pleasantries of Frank's irritation and returned to working on the laws again.

Beginnings, Montana

"You know, Dean." Frank sat on the side of the table in the examining room. "I can't believe I'm sitting in here. I oughta have my fuckin head examined."

Dean paused in his looking at the x-rays to peer over his shoulder at Frank. He shook his head with a laugh and looked back up at the scans.

"Pretty funny huh?" Frank bit his nails.

"Sort of." Dean flicked off the light.

"So, Dean what do you think about me and El, going to Bowman?"

"I don't worry." Dean turned around. "I trust my wife." He grabbed a stool and slid it over to Frank. "It's you I don't trust."

"Understandable." Frank bobbed his head from side to side. "So. Results. I literally had my head examined. What's up?"

"It's bad Frank."

"You're shitting me." Frank hit his own head. "It feels good."

"Well, you're not gonna feel major brain damage."

Frank's mouth dropped open. "Brain damage?"

"Yes. It's affecting your reasoning and thought process."

"How bad is it?"

"You can function." Dean clapped his hands together once. "But, let me phrase it this way. If you were a child in the old world, you'd be riding the short bus to school."

"Oh my God. I'm retarded now?"

"What in Christ's name?" Joe quipped as he walked in the room.

Dean stood up laughing.

"Dad, did you hear?"

"Christ Frank." Joe stepped into the examining room. "You believe him?"

"Dean?" Frank looked at him with question.

"Frank, you're fine." Dean faced Joe. "He's fine. The injury is still healing, but that's nothing to do with Frank. Frank is . . ."

"Cool." Frank nodded.

"No." Dean shook his head.

"Awesome."

"No."

"The hero?"

"Frank!" Joe yelled. "Knock it off."

"Frank *is* shirtless." Frank grabbed his tee shirt and placed it on. "I hate being this way in front of Dean, he gets excited."

Dean rolled his eyes. "Anyhow, Frank is just healing. I was paying him back for cementing the hinges to my bedroom door."

Joe looked oddly at Frank. "You cemented the hinges on his bedroom door?"

"Yeah, so it wouldn't close." Frank slid off the table. "Hey Dean, when I get back, Are you gonna try to kill me?"

"I look forward to it."

Joe shifted his eyes. "Frank, you're telling Dean to try to kill you?"

"Yeah. Not for real. Like a challenge between us. Which he knows he has to be creative."

"Glad to see you boys are semi-getting along." Joe stated awkwardly. "Before you be-bop off to Bowman Frank . . ." Joe raised an eyebrow when Frank snickered. "I want you to know when you get back, we're moving on a patrol to look into these killer babies. And Dean, any chance I can get you to me later for a suspect meeting." Frank's loud 'aw' made Joe turn back Frank's way. "What?"

"How come I'm not invited to the suspect meetings?"

"You will be when you're around. Right now, aren't you leaving for Bowman?"

"Not right now."

"Frank I meant . . ."

"Later. But not really later. It wouldn't be later. But it wouldn't be now." Frank rambled.

Joe turned to Dean. "And you checked him out?"

"Unfortunately." Dean grabbed a chart off the counter. "As much as this pains me to say, Frank is fine to go to Bowman." He saw Frank grin. "And don't touch my wife, Frank." Dean moved to the door.

Joe reached out and grabbed Dean's arm. "In all seriousness. Get back here."

Dean backed up. "What's up."

Joe saw Frank getting ready to leave. "You as well. Wait. Now, I know Frank living at the house isn't a good thing."

"I like it." Frank nodded.

"You would." Dean said back.

"Shut up Dean, it's your fault. I don't have a house."

"We thought you were dead."

"Obviously, cause you snatched Ellen right up." Frank snapped his finger. "So, fair is fair."

Joe shook his head. "Never mind what I was going to say. Forget I was going to say anything."

"Dad? What?"

"Yeah, Joe spit it out."

Joe rubbed his forehead. "I was just going to make the suggestion. Maybe now, with understandings being as common place as marriages were in the old world. That you two should maturely, scratch that, that you two should seriously, that's the word, seriously sit down and lay out an understand so this fighting shit stops."

Dean shook his head and lifted his shoulder. "I'm not having an understanding with anyone Joe. Not at all. Not yet."

That surprised Joe. “Dean? Henry had one with you? It’s almost a way of life.”

“It’s not my way of life.” Dean looked down to the folder he held. “I know it’s not right, and I know it’s something I should do. Chances are, I will. But if I do . . .” Dean turned to Frank. “Sorry, Frank, it won’t . . . it can’t be with you. My mind us made up. If I have an understanding with anyone, it’ll be with Robbie. I like him. Him and I get along. Sorry.” Dean walked from the office.

At first Frank’s jaw twitched and then his anger showed. “I won’t wait for your permission Dean.” Frank called out causing Dean to stop. “I’ll just take her.”

Dean only lifted his shoulders and walked away.

Slowly after watching Dean leave, Joe swayed his views to Frank. “You’ll just take her?”

“Well . . .” Frank shrugged. “I was pissed.”

“That attitude really helps in getting an understand with him.”

“Dad, I don’t want an understanding with him. The way I see it, he took Ellen from me. He knew I was alive, he married her for face purposes and now he’s taking it seriously.”

“So is Ellen.”

“For the time being.”

“Frank . . .”

“No.” Frank held up his hand. “Wait.” He nodded. “That’ll change, trust me.” He walked to the doors. “I have to get the truck ready.”

Joe let a long breath as Frank walked out.

^^^

“Sorry.” Dean apologized as he walked into Jeff the security man’s hospital room. Ellen was there and Jeff’s wife, Trish. They stood anxious and waiting. Setting the chart on the tray, Dean took a long look at Jeff, face bandaged from his run in with the killer babies. “El, I thought you’d be getting ready for Bowman.”

“I wanted to assist. I want to see the unveiling.”

Dean only raised his eyes.

“We’re anxious.” Trish added.

Dean grabbed the scissors. “Don’t expect too much. This just happened.” he began to snip.

Ellen took the first piece of gauze. “So how’s Frank’s head.” She turned to Trish. “Frank had his head examined by Dean.”

“Frank is fine.” Dean cut the bulk of the bandage. “His injury still evident. But then again, Frank is the only man I know that could have brain damage and no one would notice.”

Jeff laughed. It sounded odd, muffled and distorted.

Trish agave an odd look. “Will he talk normally after those bandages are off Dean?”

“Possibly. I don’t know, I wasn’t here when this happened. So visually I haven’t seen the extent of the injuries.” Dean sat on the edge of the bed, hands

gripping the bandages that covered everything but a hole for Jeff's nostrils. "Ready?" Leaning into Jeff and blocking Ellen and Trish's view Dean lifted them up some. He whistled and laid them back down. Standing up he ran his hand through his hair. "Oh boy."

"Ut's ong?" Jeff asked.

"Um . . . uh . . . shit." Dean's hand went to his mouth and then he quickly grabbed the chart. "Ellen, this is your handwriting. Why is there no mention how severe his injuries were."

"Well, Dean, I really didn't see the need. It's obvious."

"Ut's ong?" Jeff asked again.

Trish was curious as well. "Dean? Is it that bad?"

Dean walked around the bed and waved his hand to Trish. Leaving the room, Trish followed. "Trish look." Dean hesitated. "All right, when I take off those bandages, no matter what, do not show any signs of shock. Got that? Try to act normally."

"It's bad."

"It bad." Dean nodded.

"Then I'll behave. I know how sensitive people can be about their appearances."

"Good. Let's go." Dean walked back in the room. "Sorry Jeff." He resumed his position. Sitting on the bed, with a deep breath Dean lifted the bandages revealing not only that Jeff had been mutilated facially by the killer babies, but he was missing one entire half, nearly down to the bone as well. He looked to Ellen and whispered. "Let's clear all mirrors from this room."

Jeff's only eye shifted quickly as Dean began to stand up. "Eh-Et-Ad?"

Dean shook his head. "No it's not . . ."

Trish's horrifying scream rang out, then in nineteen-fifties, sci-fi horror film fashion, she covered her gasping mouth with the back of her hand and raced from the room.

Ellen looked down to Jeff. "O.K., well . . . it's bad."

Quantico Marine Headquarters

Steward ran fast down the corridors of the hospital making his way to George's room. When he arrived, Dr. Walker was stepping out pulling George's door closed. "You . . . you called for me." Steward spoke out of breath.

"We got the last results back. The virus has stopped progressing."

Steward let out a breath grabbing on to his knees.

"The president is awake now. He wants to speak to you." Dr. Walker said.

Steward grabbed hold of the door handle and Dr. Walker stopped him.

"Steward. Don't stay too long. He'll weaken easily."

Nodding in agreement, Steward walked inside. George was propped into a sitting position on the bed. Both of his hand were drawn into his chest and he looked more sickly than Steward expected. Yet, George's eyes were open wide and that was the one thing that looked alert. "You wanted to see me sir."

George nodded then motioned his head to a chair.

Steward walked over and sat down.

Words, breathy, painful and slow, George spoke. “To talk about plan.”

“What about it?”

“Johnny?”

“Moving right ahead. Has things under control in Beginnings.”

“Good.” George closed his eyes briefly. “I . . . I need time . . . to get . . . well.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I . . . need you to pull . . . pull in all troops. All . . . of them.” George said.

“From across the country?”

“Continent.”

“And do what?” Steward asked.

“Re Re . . . group. Beginnings . . . grows.”

“And you don’t want to leave them out there?”

George shook his head. “Bring . . . them . . . all home. Get them sit”

“Situated?”

George huffed, he may had been temporarily physically and verbally disabled, but he knew he could eventually finish his own sentences. “Get them ready.”

“Can I ask ready for what?”

George hesitated before answering. “War.”

CHAPTER SIX

73 Miles due west of Beginnings

Robbie had listened to about all the Elvis Presley he could take. He turned off the tape flying his surveillance at just about the point when all the songs began to sound alike. But Robbie was bound and determined he was going to listen to the tape, especially after all the trouble he went to to borrow it off of Denny, Andrea's son and Robbie's newest little brother. Really Robbie didn't want it, he just asked, but when Denny went possessive over it, Robbie kicked into his determined phase. Denny was attached to it, especially since Joe told him the guy singing used to live in Beginnings and baby sat Denny. Denny insisted he remembered his baby sitter Elvis vividly, arguing with anyone that told him differently. Of course, Denny at the age of fifteen, also believed in Santa Clause.

Robbie had a lot of ground to cover from the air. With Johnny filling in at the clinic for Ellen, he had to be out extra long making up for what Johnny couldn't do. He made the best of it, talking over the radio with Frank. Trying to land the chopper or at least hover really close to Frank's truck as he drove. Getting a kick out of hearing Ellen bitch over the radio. But despite the fun and games, Robbie still had to keep his eyes open. He anxiously awaited the radar system Danny was adding to the choppers.

Leaning bored against the pilot's door window, turning the chopper to head back home, Robbie perked up and lowered his glasses when he saw smoke in the distance. It was further than he was supposed to go, but smoke meant one thing and it wasn't that something was burning, smoke meant people.

Tilting the chopper, Robbie revved the engines and flew in the direction of the smoke signal. Clearing over the trees Robbie gripped the stick. "Shit." He saw the reason for the smoke, small tents set up were probably used as homes. So many of them and when they heard Robbie, they didn't flinch nor run. They stayed put as if settled for good. And they weren't just a large group of people, they were . . . savages.

Bowman, North Dakota

Proudly Hal watched the truck from Beginnings drive down the main street. He stood before his office building, hands behind his back, standing with Elliott and waiting for Frank and Ellen to get there.

Frank beeped the horn, his speed into center of town made Hal cringed inside but he didn't show it. Watching Frank drive in, made Hal's mind quickly flashback to when Frank taught him how to drive. It didn't matter *what* Hal read in the manual, Frank had him convinced that whenever you saw the speed limit sign, that was the amount of speed you were allowed to go over and above what you felt comfortable driving. Hal still didn't know why he believed Frank, perhaps it was the big brother thing. But he learned his lesson when he failed his

driver's test, and lost his permit for driving sixty-five in a twenty-five zone.

With the double slam of the truck doors, Hal looked up with a smile to see Frank and Ellen step from the truck. They both looked tired to him, but knowing once again how Frank drove, their exhaustion was understandable.

Ellen grinned as she approached Hal and embraced him. "Hey you." She kissed him on the cheek then stepped to Elliott. "Hi." She hugged him and moved back. "Thanks for the book I . . ." She saw the shocked look on his face. "What's wrong?"

"You embraced me." Elliott said. "Again. Thank you."

"Sure." Ellen giggled. "It's just my form of saying hello. Especially to you since you saved me and Frank."

"Not to presume." Elliott spoke. "But if you ever do it again, could you let me know. I would like to take that second to enjoy it instead of being stunned."

"Elliott?" Ellen called his name.

"Yes?"

"I'm going to hug you hello." She stepped to him and tossed her arms around him so he would know.

Elliott smiled and held on. Taking in the moment and the feel of something he had not had in a very long time.

"O.K.! O.K.!" Frank shouted out in disgust. "Back up pal." He separated Elliott and Ellen. "Enough of the full frontal touching."

"Frank." Ellen spoke his name through clenched teeth. "I told you be nice."

Hal, he hid his smile.

"El, I'm being cautious. He's wearing a sword near his groin, you don't . . ." Frank grunted when Ellen backhanded him. "I'm fuckin abused anymore."

Ellen, ignoring Frank, looked to Hal. "I have my bag, can I take it to your place before I head to your clinic."

"You sure can." Hal said. "Frank, what do you think of my town."

Frank nodded. "Nice. Very nice. Impressive."

Hal grinned.

"Yep." Frank clapped his hands together. "Aside from the pansy fuckin outfits you have your men running around in, it looks good . . ."

"Frank . . ." Hal's mouth opened.

"You probably don't need too much of my help." Frank reached out and gave a friendly punch to Hal's arm. "I'd like to see more of what you got here, before I put a plan in motion to help you out in the new place." Not noticing one bit the red tint of irritation on Hal's face, Frank, hands on hips, looked around. "But first. Where's this house of lesbians?"

Hal, with a grunt, walked to the truck for Ellen's bag. He let himself calm down as he got them. Frank was being Frank. But, it had been a long time, but Hal knew soon enough, around Frank, he would become the old Hal.

Beginnings, Montana

Johnny wanted to meet her.

As usual, Bev dropped everything she was doing, despite what Hector said

about her up and leaving her work at the greenhouse. Bev didn't mind taking a break from that. Working in the greenhouse was hard work, but at least she was out of the bakery. It was too close to town and too much Josephine overdose. There was only so much of sex swapping stories Bev wanted to do with the eighty-something year old Josephine.

So off to meet Johnny Bev went. Taking the west tunnel to the cryo-lab, staying out of site going there. Johnny didn't want her seen, and Bev understood that. To her, that probably was the reason he met her there. *'Go down to the cryo-lab now, Bev.'* Johnny's words played over in her head. *'We have to set up for the plan, it's starts tomorrow'*

To Bev, anything Johnny wanted she would give him. Not only per her father George's instructions, but she really liked him. She fantasized of the day when they left Beginnings and lived with her father starting their own lives.

Empty the tunnels were a good thing, and Bev made it to the lab door. She wondered at first what she would do if someone came by, she didn't have the code to get in. And then Bev saw the small piece of wood keeping the door an inch ajar. Pushing open the door and kicking the wood, Bev stepped inside. "Johnny?" The door shut. "Johnny?" She went back to the back room and tried the knob. Locked. Not like she expected it to be open, that was the place where the case was kept. The same case, Bev believed to contain the embryos her father wanted and needed.

Bev looked at her watch. Johnny had to have gotten held up between his call and her arrival. She only hoped he didn't get irritated over waiting, she got there as fast as she could. Hands behind her back Bev moved with a slow skipping pace about the cryo-lab. She spotted a jar with pink fluid, and tilting her head in oddity, she went over to the large jar and the animal that floated inside of it. "Neat." She tapped her finger on the jar a few times.

Sighing she stood up, bored and hating to wait. She just started looking around the lab.

"I'm gonna be held up for a while." Dean spoke as rapid as he walked in the tunnels with Andrea. "So just incase, I'll show . . ."

"Sweet Jesus Dean." Andrea tried to catch her breath. "I'm an old woman. Slow down."

"Sorry." Dean snickered and slowed down his pace. "Anyhow, you should have enough. But . . . on the outside chance you don't. El and I have another batch put in the fridge."

"It's not locked is it?" Andrea asked. "I don't have time or brain space to remember another combination."

"Nah. Not the fridge. We only lock the freezer cases themselves. We access the fridges too much." Dean stopped before the cryo door.

"I'm not gonna open it and see anything disgusting am I?" Andrea asked.

"Shouldn't." Dean reached up to punch in his code. "As long as you open the one we use for meds and old samples." The door buzzed and he walked in. "That's the white one. The silver fridge is the one we put . . ." Dean slowed down. "Bev."

Slamming the freezer portion to the white fridge, she spun around. "Oh, Dean."

Andrea, folded arms and motherly scold, stepped forward. "Little girl,

what in the lord's name are you doing in this lab and why are you going through the fridge?"

"I was bored. Nosey." She shrugged. "I came down to look for Johnny. And I waited."

"Did Johnny tell you to meet him here?" Dean asked.

Bev hesitated and then she shook her head. "No. I thought he would be here."

Dean grabbed hold of her arm and led her to the door. He opened it. "Out. Look for him somewhere else." Not giving her a chance to say anymore, Dean waited until she left and he allowed the door to close. Frustrated and huffing he turned around to face Andrea who was shaking her head. "I really, really do not like her."

Andrea raised an eyebrow in sarcasm. "I wonder why." She chuckled and awaited for Dean to begin showing her what she needed to know.

^^^

"How many again?" Joe asked, sitting behind his desk.

Robbie didn't look happy. He walked, taking a seat between Henry and the empty chair. "I estimate seventy-five. Just hanging out, cooking something."

"Feel like taking Frank for a ride out that way. Let him examine the situation tomorrow?" Joe asked. "Not that I don't trust your judgement, but I want to see what he wants to do about this."

Robbie lifted his hands. "Sounds good. We'll be able to get a better fix and numbers on them once Danny gets my radar tracking hooked up."

Joe looked at Henry. "Any idea how long it'll take him?"

"He started today." Henry said. "It's Danny. So, not long."

"Good." Joe nodded. "Johnny made no mention of these savages his scout yesterday?"

Robbie shook his head. "For all we know they came in last night. Savages tend to travel at night. If they weren't cooking, he wouldn't have seen them, they aren't in range."

"Glad you saw them then. Seventy-three miles is too close to home." Joe commented.

"Sorry." Dean walked into the room with a quickened apology. "I got held up. We have six more admissions from the new guys."

Joe tilted his head in question as Dean sat down. "Did they get a bad batch of food. That's unusual here."

"No." Dean shook his head. "Dietary adjustments. Their systems are just not handling what we give them. We also enrich a lot of our food so added nutrients are foreign to their systems now." Dean let out a loud breath of his finally stopping. "So."

"So." Joe laid both hands flat on the desk. He then grabbed for three stacked folders and laid his hand flat on them. "Before we begin, I wanted to thank you three for taking time. We had to put this aside for a tiny bit, but it's back to business. Before that happens, I have news. Tomorrow I'm holding the monthly meeting a few days early. Hal will be in town, I thought he'd like to get

a chance to sit in, seeing how New Bowman will be under our govern. But, one of the main reasons, Andrea told me this morning, she is withdrawing from council. Now . . .” Joe held up his hand. “Not out of anger mind you. She prefers to be a doctor. And . . . we have two hundred and seventy-five new people, not to mention the five hundred or so in Bowman coming up our way. She also will probably, which she doesn’t know, be needed to help handle the church things. Um . . .” He rubbed his eyes. “I’m gonna sound cold here, I love her, but it’s for the best she withdraws. I mean she never showed up,”

“Joe.” Henry gasped. “That isn’t nice.”

“Yeah, Henry, I know. But I also know her typewriter ribbon matched the letters to George that he kept. She had the affair with George. If anything comes out, it’s best she’s not on council when it does. I have a feeling it will get out. So, spread the word of her leaving council, I’ll have her do the same. This way people can think of a replacement. We’ll do it like we did with her. Nominee, second nominee and I’ll validate the nomination. Community vote and so forth.. All right . . .” Joe slid the folders to in front of him. “Reverend Bob.” Joe knew there would be silence, and there was. “Last we got together he and Andrea topped our suspect list.” He saw Henry raise his hand to question. “Yes Henry?”

“Frank said, George was given that virus Dean made.”

Dean shook his head. “I don’t know if it worked or not.”

“Still.” Henry nodded “Frank says George is dead. I understand finding out who worked for him . . .”

“Henry.” Joe interrupted. “Even if Frank is right. If George is dead, the Caceres society is not. They may not be as big of a threat. Hell, they may not want us anymore. But . . . the society still exists.”

“Sorry.” Henry lowered down in his chair. “I just feel bad about the Andrea part.”

“I do too. And Reverend Bob. I like Rev. Bob. But still . . . Robbie . . . Robbie’s gathered up some interesting information while learning to be a . . .” Joe paused to snicker. “Ministry assistant.”

Robbie made a scoffing face. “Dad, I did really well. I passed his tests on church laws and . . . did I not read to the congregation.” Robbie nodded.

“Badly.” Joe passed out folders to Dean and Henry and opened one for himself. “Take a look. This is info Robbie gathered and copied as evidence. Good job Robbie. In here is a copy of Reverend Bob’s yearbook page. A copy of his original ordination.” Joe shuffled through the stack. “A statement from Forrest Caceres. A copy of the agenda from the Caceres society meeting on population control. Tracking of incoming phone calls. He gets many. Dean’s statement that the blood found on the floor of the cryo-lab by the broken in freezer matched the blood type of Reverend Bob’s, and a statement that his hand was also sliced.”

Dean held up his hand. “Joe, that is substantiated evidence. The sample was contaminated and I was unable to obtain a clean DNA. Thirty-six other people have . . .”

“Dean. This isn’t a court of law. But thanks.”

Dean nodded. “O.K. So then why the evidence.”

“I feel, and I want to ask you gentlemen, I feel it’s enough to bring Rev. Bob in and question him. We’ll do that tomorrow when Frank’s here. He gets answers out of people. That way . . .” Joe held up the folder. “We have back up

for the meeting tomorrow should anyone question our actions.” Joe raised an eyebrow. “Agreed.”

They all agreed.

“One more thing,” Joe closed the folder. “It’s another reason I want to wait until tomorrow . . . Henry . . . he’s been gathering a folder just like this, on my wife.” Joe closed his eyes. “I would like to speak to her alone, before we bring her in as well.”

Robbie slouched in his chair. “I can’t believe you even suspect Andrea.”

“She’s a viable suspect.” Joe tossed up his hands. “Henry’s reluctantly gathered evidence.”

“And I didn’t even try.” Henry defended. “I did, but I didn’t.” He shrugged. “I feel bad.”

“I do too.” Joe sad sadly. “That’s why I want to face her with it alone tonight. Unless you boys have a problem with it.” He watched them shake their heads. “Good.” Joe leaned back. “Then tomorrow. We start to end this person’s ‘I spy for the society’ reign.. I feel a closure coming gentlemen.” Joe stated with confidence. “Real soon.”

^^^

“Let’s just hope it’s not worse than we expect . . .” Joe’s voice came through the tiny speaker set up next to a transmitter on a table in a food pantry. A hiss of static accompanied Joe’s voice, and Johnny smiling, turned it off. He looked down to his notes with a smile, tapped the small notepad on his hand and stood up. Stepping away from the small table, Johnny pulled a shelf from his right. It closed like a door, blocking out the view of the table and radio transmitter. Placing the notepad in his chest pocket, Johnny, pleased, left his little pantry.

Bowman, North Dakota

It was supposed to be payback day for Frank. Hal planned on that the second he start inadvertently insulting everything Hal did. Hal knew Frank didn’t do it on purpose, Frank just wasn’t smart enough to think of insults that bad on his own. Hal would get him back, he was already working on it. Nothing mean, nothing big, just adult replicas of what Hal used to so much enjoy doing to Frank in their youth. He kept checking his watch, telling himself that soon Elliott would be done with his training and Ellen would be done with her clinic work. And just about the time that those two end and start doing something together--hopefully--Hal would be done with his tour with Frank. He wasn’t trying to start trouble, well, maybe he was, but in a clean way. Driving Frank just about as nuts as Frank was driving him.

But despite his personal irk Frank vendetta urge that seemed to seep forefront as if Hal were teenager again, there truly was one thing Hal looked forward to doing with Frank.

“Oh, yeah.” Frank grinned and spoke in his husky manner. Hands on hips

he stared at the big white house. “The house of Lesbians.” He looked over to Hal. “What exactly are you wanting me to do?”

“Well, Frank, these ladies, are not very nice . . .” He paused while Frank fluttered his lips. “They won’t listen to us telling them about the move in two weeks. The house isn’t even ready.”

“You guys are afraid of them.”

“Wait until you meet them.”

“Ha, I’ll handle them.” Frank in his combat boots clomped up on the steps . He knocked on the screen door. “Are they home.”

“They don’t leave unless we clear the street.”

“Of what?”

“Us.”

“Why?”

“They don’t trust us.”

“Of course not. They’re lesbians.” Frank reached to knock again. “Wait. These women have been without men. You don’t think they’re gonna rape me when they see me.”

“Frank.”

Frank knocked again. The door opened slightly and Grace popped her head through the crack. Frank jolted back. “Hey.”

“We aren’t expecting you.” Grace stated.

“No one ever is. I need to come in.”

“You need to learn manners.”

“And your point?” Frank asked. “Now correct me if I’m wrong, but doesn’t the Captain here run the town.”

“Well yes, but . . .”

“Step aside. Gergerace.” Frank open the screen door and reached for the door,

Hal was impressed “Frank, how did you know that was her?”

“Hal, you described her to the tee.” Frank pushed on the door. It wouldn’t budge. “Lady.”

Grace held it tight with her foot. “Captain, we don’t appreciate the intrusion. Especially by a man.”

“Here’s the deal.” Frank stated. “Now you either open the fuckin door and let me in to explain this move you women are ignoring or . . . they leave you here.”

“This is my brother.” Hal said. “He’s from Beginnings.”

“He’s your brother?” Grace cased Frank. “He’s so barbaric.”

Frank rolled his eyes. “I don’t have time for this. Open the fuckin door lady.”

Grace huffed, but she obliged.

The second Frank stepped inside he sneezed, along with Hal. A Slagel trait, a nasal weakness for perfume.

“Ger . . . Ger . . . ace.” Hal swallowed. “If you could gather the women.”

“They’ll be frightened.” Grace stated.

“Please.”

Grace walked out, and Frank sneezed again. He sniffed loud. “Fuck. What’s with the perfume Who are they gonna impress, they’re lesbians.” Standing in the foyer Frank watched the women come down the steps. They

wore long nightgown and thick robes tied tight around the waist. Frank looked at his watch. "It's two o'clock in the afternoon Hal, Don't they get dressed. No wonder they never leave the house. Oh look, old magazines." Frank pointed to a table and walked to the magazines.

Grace brought her women into the livingroom she stepped into the foyer. "Mr. Slagel." She didn't get a response from Frank. "Mr. Slagel. Mr. Slagel!" She screamed.

Slowly Frank turned around. "Is she talking to me. I'm not Mr. Slagel, my dad is. Wait, I am Mr. Slagel. Sorry. What?"

Grace paused. "Um . . . we're ready."

"For?" Frank asked.

"You wanted to speak to them."

"Oh, yeah." He followed her into the livingroom. The women sat huddled together almost frightened. Frank clapped his hands together once. "All right. I'm Frank. Get used to me, you'll see me a lot. My brother . . ." He pointed to Hal. "Tells me that you aren't ready to move. Well, two weeks, that's it and you'd better be ready. So pack it up ladies."

"Captain Slagel." Grace spoke up. "Will you at least send men to do the work for us."

"Yes." Hal answered.

"No." Frank stated.

"No?" Hal questioned.

"No." Frank shook his head. "Absolutely not." He looked at Grace at the same time Hal hid his smile. "No. Do it yourself. They'll get you boxes, there's what? Twelve of you. Ha. Pack. The men are busy. They're protecting you and packing up the city."

"We don't have to listen to you." Grace barked.

"No." Frank shook his head. "Probably not. Unless it is a security issue, then, you listen. But . . ." He snickered. "See, Bowman, Bowman grows food and has it stocked but . . . they grow everyday. One, two, a few here and there. They don't have enough food. The soldiers, they don't eat so you women can gain weight. And let's face it, you're all pretty healthy looking." Frank nodded. "Now, Beginnings. Man, we have plenty. And Bowman is going to work for it. With all the protection, supplies and a better way of life. Bowman is joining Beginnings. And here's the kicker. You'll like this. You may only listen to Hal here, but Hal, in two weeks time has to listen to Beginnings. You will live under Beginnings rule. So you might as well start now. Pack it up." He looked to Hal. "Good?"

Hal shrugged. "Sounded good."

"Good." Frank nodded. "Now let's get out, the fuckin perfume is giving me a headache." Frank began to leave the room.

"Mr. Slagel." Grace called out.

Frank turned around this time. "Yes."

"If you insist on being so crass and obstinate, must you use the foul language as well?"

"Yes. I must." Frank nodded again, twitched his head to Hal and both of them left the house.

Grace, totally flustered, turned to face her women and heard the sobs begin. "No. No. Don't worry. I assure you, most men in Beginnings are not like

that.” She looked back. “Let’s hope.”

^^^

“And our supplies are nearly packed up.” Blue, the Bowman doctor told Ellen in the examining room. “I’m leaving out only what I feel we may need. The Captain has told me of no unseen raids. So I’ve no injuries to prepare for.” His eyes shifted to the door.

“Good.” Ellen closed the last file. “And you know, I want to get you used to our clinic in Beginnings. Work there every once in a while to break your monotony.”

“I’d . . .” Blue shifted his eyes to the door again. “I’d like that. I’m sorry you were so busy today.”

“I hope your feeling weren’t hurt.”

“Nah.” Blue shook his head. “I understand the two women wanting you to look at them, and I know the men weren’t wanting a second opinion from you. It’s because . . .” Blue looked to the door. “It’s because you’re a . . .”

“Woman?” Ellen finished his sentence then turned around to see where Blue’s eyes were fixed.

“Sgt. Ryder.” Blue called out. “Is there something you wanted?”

Nervously and with an embarrassed look, Elliott stepped inside. “I . . . I was wanting to speak to . . . Dr. Hayes.”

Ellen smiled. “Is something wrong?”

“No. I mean, yes. Yes.” Elliott nodded.

Blue looked at Ellen. “You need me to stay?”

“No, we’re buddies.” She winked at Elliott. “I’ll be fine.” Ellen waited until Blue left and she patted the examining table. “Hop on up.”

Elliott did.

“What’s the matter?”

“I . . .” Elliott cleared his throat. “I . . .” Again he cleared his throat.

“Is your throat sore?” Ellen stepped to him and felt his neck and glands. “I don’t feel anything swollen.

Elliott coughed. “And I have this tickle.” He coughed again.

“Let me take a listen.” Ellen grabbed her stethoscope. “Take off your shirt.”

“No.”

“No?”

“I . . . I can’t.”

“Is there something wrong?”

“No” Elliott shook his head.

“I mean, if there’s a scar or something, Trust me I’ve seen it all. We have a man in Beginnings with half a face, you know.”

“No, that’s not it. It just wouldn’t be appropriate.”

Ellen laughed. “I’m a doctor. Sort of. Yeah. Take off your shirt.”

“Dr. Hayes . . .”

“Ellen.”

“Ellen. I’m very sorry. I’m not sick. I was not honest.”

Ellen folded her arms and tilted her head. "What's wrong then?"
"I was just wondering . . . I was . . . have you read any of the book I sent you?"

"Oh, yeah. Half. It's very good and I don't read."

"Good." Elliott smiled. "Can we talk about it."

"The Brady Bunch?"

"Oh." Elliott grunted in frustration. "I apologize again. I'm coming off . . . stupid." He slid off the table. "Thank you for your time."

"Elliott? What's wrong?"

"I just wanted, please don't yell. I wanted to know if I could have a conversation with you. Just talk to you. I'm being pushy."

Ellen laughed. "No. You wanna just hang out and talk."

Elliott sighed in relief. "Yes. Could we? I really enjoyed when we spoke in Beginnings. It was different for me and I was hoping this time we could speak about things that had nothing to do with what's going on."

"For instance, the Brady Bunch?"

"If you'd like? The weather as well."

"Idle conversation."

Elliott snapped his finger. "That's it."

"Sure."

"Really?"

"I'm done. I just have to clean up."

"I'll let you do that then." Elliott backed up. "I'm going to go change myself. I'm still dirty from training." He moved to the door. "Ellen, Thank you. This is a gift and I don't think you realize it. Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me Elliott. Really. And when you get used to being around Beginnings, there are lots of women and people in general that will stop and have idle conversation with you as well."

"I look forward to it. I'll be back." Elliott knocked his hand once off the door frame, smiled and darted out.

Ellen snickered and shaking her head she turned back around to her work.

Quantico Marine Headquarters

George held as best as he could to the phone. "Just . . . just follow through." He coughed. "We'll contact . . . Bob tonight. Get the others . . . prepared Johnny. We'll handle it." George nodded. "I feel good be . . . because the heat . . . will be off . . . of you." George twitched his head to Steward and then to the phone.

Steward retrieved it. "Johnny. He's not worried. Neither should you be. Keep your mind on what you need to have it on." He winked at George when he saw he was saying what George wanted. "Bob knows what to do, you just inform the others. Take care." Steward hung up the phone. "All right. When our team that's meeting Johnny checks in, we'll have them stay put. Sound good."

"Yes." George rested back in the bed.

"We expected this." Steward folded his arms. "I'll prepare things here."

George wanted to speak more, but he was wearing thin. Assured by the doctors he would grow stronger each day, George counted on that. As for the

time being, George had to give into his illness. Before he was finished with his meeting, he had fallen asleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN
Beginnings, Montana

“Romantic evening?” Andrea questioned as she set the coffee cup down in front of Joe at their table.

Joe, who was staring out, looked up to Andrea when she broke his train of thought. “I’m sorry?”

“Were you planning a romantic evening with me?” Andrea slid into the table with her own coffee “You sent Denny and Katie to Dean’s.”

“No. I needed to be alone with you.”

“Oh, I love alone talk.” Andrea smiled. “Did you want your desert now.”

“No, Andrea we . . .”

“Can we have some time to discuss Beginnings’ Day next week. I have so much I want to do, little time to do it and you know it’s gonna be big.”

“Yeah, it is. All those new people.”

“Frank bitching about the scheduling yet?” Andre smiled and shook her head. “I remember last year how bad he was. But of course, last year he and Ellen had broke up. Bad time.” She sipped her coffee “This is nice.”

“No it’s not.”

Andrea nearly choked. “What?”

“I’m hating myself Andrea. But right now, I have to talk to you. As . . . as the leader of the community.”

“No, Joe, I am not changing my mind. I have to withdraw from council. But sweet.” She reached over and tapped his hand.

“It’s not about that.” Joe pulled out the chair next to him and picked a bible up from it. He laid it on the table and slid it in front of Andrea.

“Are we praying?”

“No. I need you to have this near you for when I ask you some things.” He flipped open the cover and pulled out the two typed letters that George had kept. The two letters Joe found, from Beginnings to the past, warning George of the plague and trouble. “Andrea.” Joe sighed.

Andrea looked to the letters then to the bible. She pushed the bible away. “How dare you. I am insulted that you would bring the bible and toss it in my face as if I would be less than honest with you. Ask your questions Joe Slagel.”

“What do you know about these letters.”

Without hesitation, Andrea answered. “I wrote them. I tried to stop George from making his mistake. I thought if I could just . . . I was wrong.”

“Did George know you wrote these letters.”

“I don’t know.”

“Final question and Andrea, I’m gonna believe what you tell me, all right? But before I ask, I have to tell you. You know someone has been working for George in Beginnings, right.”

“Yes.” she nodded.

“Things . . . things don’t look good for you, Andrea. So, just tell me, do you or do you not still have contact with him. Are you working for him.”

Andrea breathed slowly out. “You know me better.” she stood up. “Looking bad for me or not, I can not believe you asked me that.” Andrea began

to walk away.

“Andrea. You didn’t answer.”

Andrea spun with a loud huff. “No, Joe Slagel. I have not nor do I now work for George.” With another spin of her hurt and disposition, Andrea stormed off toward the bedrooms.

Joe sank deeply into his cup of coffee.

Bowman, North Dakota

Frank released the curtain of the livingroom window. He turned in Hal’s apartment to Hal who had pictures scattered about the two seater table. “Is it me or is it dark already?”

“It’s been dark for an hour Frank.” Hal stated.

“Then what the fuck is taking them so long.”

“Don’t know.” Hal shrugged. “Hey did you see this picture of you playing baseball?” Hal held up the photograph.

“No.” Frank shook his head. “Are you sure she’s safe with him?”

“Elliott? She is very safe with him.”

“I can’t believe this shit.” Frank began to pace. “I finally get a chance to be semi-alone with her and she darted off in a free for all day with Chico and the fuckin man.”

Hal snickered. “Frank, be nice. And if you’re that worried about them. Go over his house and check on her.”

Frank spun to a sudden stop. “She’s over his house?”

“Yeah. After their walk they were going there to talk.”

“Fuck Hal.” Frank tossed out his arm. “Why didn’t you tell me that’s where they were.”

Hal grinned. “You never asked.”

“Fuck.” Frank stormed for the door barged out and slammed it. A few seconds later Hal’s apartment door opened. “Where’s this Sgt. Ryder live?”

“To me . . .” Ellen took a second to swallow her wine as she sat at the totally opposite end of the diningroom table from Elliott. Dishes from dinner still spewed out. “Hal’s still the same. Hardly ever shows anger, very polite. Up to something always.”

“The Captain?” Elliott questioned.

“Yeah. Hal was a shit when he was younger. But so likeable, no matter what he said right or wrong, lies or truths, you always believed him.”

“Did you know we were stationed in Hawaii together?” Elliott asked.

“No, I didn’t.”

“Yep. I didn’t deal with him much. He was Ex-O. But always fair.”

“He earned that Hawaii position.” Ellen said. “He worked really hard for that.”

“I know. Top recruiter.”

“Hal, could convince the pope to join if the pope wasn’t too old.” Ellen

laughed. "Top Recruiter for the whole entire western United States for three years in row."

"You know what amazed me was. He never forgot a face or name. When men he recruited were stationed at our base. Captain Slagel knew them, remembered them. Cities they were from too."

"You respect him."

Elliott reached for his wine. "Very much so."

"You know what though, Elliott." Ellen pointed her finger. "I would be a little pissed at him. How long have you known him and worked for him and he hasn't promoted you yet in ranking."

Just as Elliott started to laugh, one single loud bang was heard from his door.. He looked quickly. "Odd."

"Yeah, always odd. Frank."

"How do you know?" He asked.

"El!" Frank blasted out before he just stepped into the house. "There you are."

"Oh, hi Frank."

"Oh hi El." Frank mocked her and walked to the diningroom. "I'm waiting and waiting, stuck with my fuckin brother while you're off on a date."

Elliott's eye's widened. "A date? No." He stood up. "Frank, we were just talking and . . ."

"Yeah, yeah." Frank waved his hand to Ellen. "Let's go El, say good bye to Elliott."

Ellen looked at her watch. "Oh, shit, Elliott, look how late it is?"

Elliott looked at his. Worry hit him and he moved his views to Frank. "I'm sorry. I didn't know I have kept her so long."

"Yeah." Frank nodded, stepped closer to Ellen and took her hand. "Say goodbye." He helped Ellen to her feet then waved her hand for her speaking in a high voice. "Bye Elliott, see you tomorrow."

"Frank stop." Ellen pulled her had away. "God." She huffed then smiled to Elliott. "I do have to go anyhow, we're leaving at dawn. Will I see you then?"

Elliott nodded. "For sure. I'll be in Beginnings in a few days. Mr. Slagel has some things he . . ."

"Hello!" Frank called out. "El, talk to him another time."

"Frank, knock it off. Elliott, goodnight."

"Ellen." Elliott extended his hand to her. "It was a great day. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Now." Frank gave her a tug.

"What is the rush?" Ellen asked.

"It's late. I want to spend time with you and . . . I have a great story to tell you." Frank led her to the door. "I went to the house of Lesbians today."

"No way?" Ellen said shocked as Frank opened the door for her.

"El, I had to fight them off."

Yelling 'night Elliott' Ellen waved once as she walked out. Frank, right behind her, pulled the door closed and stopped. And so as not to leave the impression that he was rude, Frank reopened the door, popped his head back in, wiggled his fingers in a wave to Elliott then left again.

Beginnings, Montana

“I understand.” Rev. Bob had his face buried in his hand as he spoke on the phone. “I understand completely.”

“And you won’t be forgotten.” Steward stated on the other line.

“I better not be.” Rev. Bob rubbed his eyes. “Are you sure though?”

“Positive.”

Letting out a long breath, Rev. Bob sat back in his chair. “All right then. If this is the way George wants it to go down. That’s the way it will. But I’m doing this under protest and for my best interest only.”

“This is the only way to get you out of there safely.”

Rev. Bob nodded. “I understand. I guess, Johnny, from here on in will be in touch.” Pulling the phone away from his ear, Rev. Bob looked at it and then hung up. He let the events of the phone conversation play over and over in his mind. He knew what he had to do, and he would spend the rest of the night getting ready for it.

Bowman, North Dakota

Like a fine wine or an exotic cup of tea, Dean’s deep laughter seeped soothingly over the line to Ellen.

“Give my thanks to Elliott Ryder.” Dean said.

“Frank was really funny.” Ellen laid on Hal’s bed, on her stomach, phone to her ear.

“I bet. And speaking of funny. Not that it is. El? I was looking at Jeff’s face tonight.”

“That’s terrible Dean.”

“Yeah I know. Anyhow, I was looking at him. And you know what I was thinking.”

“It plays with perfect timing into our new set of experiments?”

“Exactly.” Dean said. “You think he’ll be a guinea pig?”

“Really, what choice does he have?”

“Not much. Wanna talk to him tomorrow with me?” Dean asked.

“Sure. I’ll be back early. Frank’s driving us out of here at dawn.”

A short chuckle escaped Dean. “Why does that worry me.”

“Um perhaps because the last time I was beyond the walls with Frank, it turned out to be more than expected. Don’t worry Dean. Hal will be there too. Two Slagel’s are better than one.”

“Actually one Slagel always does the . . .” Dean’s voice slowed and he looked up from his lying position on the couch.

“Dean?”

What Ellen didn’t see was Dean’s expression when he saw Joe, so down walk in to this house. “El, hold on Joe just walked in.” Dean covered the receiver. “You O.K.?” He asked as he sat up.

“Nope.” Joe huffed out and sat on the chair. “Thought I’d give you a break from the kids. Why don’t you go down the hall.”

Dean removed his hand. "El, call me in the morning all right?"

"Dean, is everything O.K.?" Ellen asked.

"I'm sure it is. Be careful, I'll talk to you later."

"O.K. I love you."

"Love you too." Dean hung up the phone. He stared at Joe who was silent in the livingroom, just staring down to the floor as he sat in the chair.

Ellen felt something was just not right when she too hung up. Getting ready to leave the bedroom, she heard the roar of Hal and Frank laughter from the other room. Figuring she was tired and really not in the mood to rehash through stories she found irritating years before, Ellen picked up her Brady Bunch Book and decided to read and look more at the pictures.

Beginnings, Montana

Holding the cell phone tight to his ear, Johnny leaned against the east tunnel entrance opening. "I see him Leo, give it a few more minutes."

"Got it Johnny. But tell him to hurry out of range. Danny checks the history of tracking."

"I'll tell him to dart around. They'll think it was an animal. Got a go. Here he comes." Johnny disconnected the phone, placed it on his belt and stood ready when a tall Society Solider approached. He handed Johnny a small black case. "Thanks."

"We'll be east in Cohegan. Tell them they'll have to meet us there." He spoke almost monotone.

"Got it." Johnny nodded. "And on your way back out. Dart in zig-zags so tracking thinks you're a deer."

The man did not look pleased with Johnny's suggestion. But Johnny didn't really care nor did he see the society soldier's expression. Johnny, with the case, had quickly hopped on the awaiting motorcycle and sped through the tunnels.

An ornery, breathy, 'ha-ha' escaped Johnny as he held the case and stepped into his single bedroom townhouse. He shook the chill from him, shucked his coat, tossed it over the couch and flew up the stairs. "I'm back." He announced racing into his bedroom.

"I've been waiting." Before a desk, a laptop computer booted up, Bev sat, stark naked.

"Man Bev, get some clothes on." Johnny sat the eight inch case on the table next to the laptop.

"That it?"

"Um, yeah." Johnny rang with sarcasm. "Get dressed."

"I'm being ready. I thought I could entice you."

"Doubtful. You're getting fat."

Bev gasped in offense and slowly stood up from the chair. She walked to the bed and lifted a long tee shirt and placed it on. She crossed her arms and watched Johnny. Inside the case was a clear one, he flipped it open and pulled out the normal size round disk.

“The program.” Johnny smiled.

Bev walked closer to the cases. She reached in and her fingers touched upon the tiny cassette tape. “What is this?”

Johnny grinned. “That is this . . .” Johnny pulled from the case a small round disk. Similar to the one Danny Hoi had found them with. “In a program.” Johnny took the cassette. “This part is gonna be one of the funniest.”

“When do we hit with that?”

“Once the ball starts rolling.” Johnny moved the laptop computer to more in front of him. He handed the one small disk to Bev. “Put this away. This can’t be seen. We’re taking a chance as it is with the other one.”

“But if they don’t have the program. They can’t see what’s on here. Right.?”

“Right. But still . . . Hide that somewhere. I’ll load the program now.” Inserting the larger disk into the computer, Johnny began to work.

Bev smiled holding the small round disk. “Johnny could I look at this sometime?”

“Why?” He asked with edge.

“It was a lot of fun doing this and . . .”

“Bev. get over it, all right. Fuck.” Johnny shook his head in disgust and continued working on the laptop.

Bev, drawing up disappointment, walked across the room looking for a place to stash the disk.

“And when you’re done putting that away. Get dressed and go down to the hall. I’m out of whiskey.” Johnny exhaled. “I have a feeling I’m gonna need it.”

^^^

It was something new Robbie had been working on. Nothing impressive, just a chord pattern he picked through on his guitar. He sat in a chair in the social hall, legs extended on another chair, guitar in arms, and his drink on the table. Jess sat with him, laughing.

Robbie stopped picking, “David.” He reached for his drink.

Jess shook his head. “David is not gay.” He sipped his own drink.

“David does.”

Jess rolled his eyes. “So what? That’ll only make me a piece of meat.”

Robbie choked on his drink and set it down. “That was funny.”

“Ha. Ha.”

“I’m just trying to fix you up. With in the odds, you have a greater chance than I do.”

“You trying to get me laid.”

“Same difference.”

“No it’s not.” Jess set his glass down. “Sex is one thing, Companionship is another.”

“You have me for companionship.” Robbie started playing again.

“Exactly. Sow why do I care. You’re my friend. I’m good with that.”

“You’ve been tense . . . do you like this chord pattern.”

“It’s O.K., I like the slower one better. And I’m not tense. My shoulders been bothering me since Josh dove on me yesterday when your brother Frank

told him I used to be a wrestler. God that kid.”

“Tense.”

“So what?” Jess shrugged. “There are ways to take care of that.”

A snicker entered the conversation from Danny Hoi. He tapped Robbie on the shoulder as he passed the two sitting men. “Robbie knows all about that.” He winked and kept walking.

“Shit.” Robbie sprang up and handed Jess the guitar. “Hold this.”

“What wrong?” Jess asked.

“I have to take care of something. Fuck.” Robbie hurried over to Danny. Nervously he ran his fingers through his hair as he approached Danny at the dart machine. “Danny.”

“Hey, Robbie, did you wanna play?” Danny looked around the hall. It was Sunday and not many people were there. A few men.

“No. I need to talk to you about that disk.”

“What disk?”

“The one Ellen gave you.” Robbie whispered.

“You mean the one with your little emails, private little raunchy, sexually explicit emails?”

“That’s the one.”

Danny grabbed the darts. “Haven’t read it.”

“Danny, then why did you make that comment when you walked by me and Jess?”

“What comment.” Danny smiled.

“Nothing. Can I have that disk. Please?”

“Why?”

“I want it.”

“Why?” Danny asked.

“It’s personal.”

“Can’t be that personal. Ellen let me have it. Besides she said I could read it when I print things up for her. I haven’t printed anything up for her. I’ve been busy with the news paper. Did I mention I was adding a gossip section.”

“Oh shit.”

“What?”

Robbie shook his head. “Danny, I would really appreciate you giving me back that disk before you read it. It’s really, really personal.”

“I won’t say anything.” Danny winked. “I’m looking forward to reading them.”

“Oh, God.” Robbie slapped his hand over his own face. “Danny, if you insist on reading them. You can not. Not. Let what’s on them get out.”

“Me? Why would you suggest that?” Danny asked.

“For starters the nicknames you and Trish gave yourselves for the paper. Danny ‘Rather’ Hoi and Trish ‘big scoop’ Koenig.”

“Sounds funny when someone else says that.” Danny laughed. “Robbie, rest assured. I wouldn’t dare think of mentioning those letters in my newspaper if that’s what you’re afraid of.”

“Yes.”

“Don’t be.”

“Thank you.”

“Darts?” Danny showed him three darts.

"Maybe just a . . ." Robbie paused in his speaking when his eyes made it to the open door. Bev had walked in and not five seconds later, Dean did.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing." Robbie shook his head. "Let me grab Jess and we'll ask Glen if he wants to play teams."

"Excellent."

"If not, we'll do a threesome." Robbie stared to walk.

Danny snickered. "A Robbie preference."

Robbie slowed down, looked back at Danny, cringed in thought to himself, he was allowing his fear to take over, then he walked on to get Jess.

Henry sat at the bar. His eyes shifted suspiciously to Bev who walked around to behind the bar and then to Dean who sat down next to him. "Dean?"

"Huh?" Dean straightened his hair. "It's getting cold out. Is it gonna snow Henry?"

"No." Henry's eyes shifted again. "Why . . ." He twitched his head to Bev.

"Huh?" Dean looked in wonder. "Oh, she walked in at the same time as me. Stop that." He looked at Henry's glass. "What are you drinking?"

"Wine."

Dean took the glass.

"Why are you here?"

"Joe kicked me out of my own house. He was feeding your son. Henry when are you coming over to get him?"

"I was thinking tomorrow if I'm not too busy."

Dean nodded.

"Excuse me." Bev, smiling leaned her face to the two men. "Henry, where's the sign out sheet for booze?"

Henry pointed backwards with his thumb. "In the storage room."

"Thanks." Bev walked off.

Henry rolled his eyes. "I'm glad you're here Dean." He tapped his hand on the bar. "I want to talk to you about something."

"Sure." Dean sipped on Henry's glass of wine.

"I was wondering . . ." Henry shuddered at the outburst of screams that came from Robbie and them, playing darts a few feet away. "I was wondering if enough time had passed for you and I to talk about an understanding."

"Henry." Dean closed his eyes.

"I know you aren't in the share mode yet. But, Dean, come on. It's a way of life. In order to not be a target and for things to not be so tense. You are going to have to."

"I know." Dean let his fingers trail the glass. "And I probably will. But, Henry, I'm sorry, like I told Frank. When and if I have an understanding, it will be with Robbie."

A clatter of glasses, a rattling ashtray and a stool being knocked over were the noises that precluded Robbie's hands that slammed down between Henry and Dean. With a grin, Robbie faced Dean out of breath. "Tell me I just heard what I just heard."

"Robbie." Dean shook his head with a snicker. "I was just telling Henry . . ."

“You’re having the understanding with me.” Robbie nodded. “Yes? Right?”

“When the time comes . . . yes.”

“Yes!” Robbie shrieked out with a jump. “Oh man.” He laid both hands on Dean’s face, pulled him unexpectedly to him and kissed him hard and fast on the lips with a smack. “Yes!”

Dean laughed. “Robbie calm down.”

“Oh man. This is great. Dean, I’ll make it work with you. I will. This is great. Thank you. Oh wow. Wait . . . family solace time.” Robbie lowered his head. “Poor Frank.” He lifted it with a grin. “Oh well.”

Dean couldn’t help but laugh. “You have to calm down. It may not be for a long time.”

“Still Dean. I’m secured. My position. I know El won’t have a problem with it. I know it.” Robbie rattled. “Wait, I’m gloating.”

Dean nodded.

Robbie cleared his throat and swiped the smile from his face. His voice deepened. “Can I ask what made you come to this fine decision.”

“To be honest.” Dean raised his eyes to Robbie then to Henry. “You Robbie, are the only man ever involved with Ellen that has never hurt her.”

Robbie nodded. “True and I never will.”

Henry’s hand slammed down. “Dig taken.” He stood up violently screeching his stool. “This is bullshit Dean. It’s fuckin bullshit!” He pointed at him. “You don’t play by the rules that everyone else does. It was fine when you wanted one and me and Frank gave her up for you.” Henry began to storm away.

“Henry.” Robbie called out. “Dean’s not doing anything wrong.”

“Fuck you Robbie.” Henry with another spin barged from the social hall.

Robbie whistled. “Temper. Oh, well. I’m gong back to play darts.” He let out a shuddering breath “Thanks Dean.” With a swat to Dean’s arm, Robbie returned to his game.

Dean lowered his views down to his drink, catching in his peripheral vision, Robbie leaving and Bev as a blur running out of the hall.

“Henry!” Bev called out running down the street holding her bottle of whiskey. “Henry! Wait!”

“Damn it.” Henry cringed and turned around. “Bev back off.”

“I heard.” She walked to him.

“So what..” Henry started to walk again.

“It’s all my fault, isn’t it.”

“Uh, yeah, Bev, you helped.”

“I can make it up to you.” Bev scurried to keep up. “I can. Henry. I can help you get Ellen back.”

Henry stopped, his look of irritation and anger predominant. “How in the world can you do that.”

“Because I know what’s gonna happen ahead of time. I know something. You can use it.”

“I don’t play games.” Henry started to walk along.

“Neither do I.” Bev grabbed his arm. “O.K., I do. But this isn’t a game. It’s real. It’s very real and works to your advantage. If you use the knowledge

wisely.”

“Another set of lies?”

Bev grinned. “Hardly. Can you keep secret?”

Henry’s attention was caught and even momentarily he was all ears.

Bowman, North Dakota

Ellen shook her foot trying to shake the tickling she felt as she turned the page. She was enjoying reading about the early years of The Brady Bunch. Inner secrets unofficially released. But that annoying twitch in her foot drove her nuts as she laid on the bed. “Frank!” She yelled. “Knock it off. I’m trying to read.”

Frank laughed as he climbed up from the floor at the bottom of the bed. Sneaky-like, on his hands and knees he climbed on the bed and crawled to Ellen.

“Go away.”

“El, you’re killing me.”

“You’re killing me” She turned a page.

Frank took the book from her hand.

“Hey!”

“You don’t read.”

“I enjoy the pictures.”

“You can enjoy me.”

Ellen laughed and rolled on to her back. “Hal sleeping?”

“Yeah, so we can fool round.” Frank tried to kiss her.

“Frank.” Ellen covered his mouth with her hand. “Don’t O.K.?”

“Why?”

“You know why.”

“Because you’re married to Dean?”

“Um, yeah.” Ellen said.

“El, it’s not real.” Frank laid on his side facing her.

“Frank. It is. And as much as you hate it, I married him. I can’t divorce him. I won’t. I wanna try to make it work. And until the marriage gets settled into, we have to be platonic until you and Dean sit down, set up an understanding and we do this you and me thing right.”

“You’ll have an understanding with me?” Frank asked.

“Yes.”

Nodding, Frank ran his fingers down her face. “So if you’re gonna have an understanding with me anyhow, why can’t we fool around?”

Ellen let out a breath. “I wanna do things right. O.K., You and I have never done things right by Dean. I don’t want to hurt him Frank. And I would appreciate it if you were good.”

“I’m always good.”

“You know what I mean.” Ellen rolled on her side to face him. “You are my weakness.” She watched Frank grin. “You’re also my best friend. You can make me fold and I’m asking you not to.”

“Only if this request is contingent on the fact that we will eventually be together somehow.”

“If Dean allows it.”

“O.K.” Frank nodded. “I’ll be that best friend. I’ll be good.” He stole a kiss. “Can we at least sleep in bed together.”

“You’ll behave?”

“El, please.” Frank scoffed. “But I must warn you. I will not be good if you attack me in the middle of the night.”

Laughing, Ellen grabbed the book from his hand. “Give me that.”

“Is that book really that interesting.”

“It has me being literary.” Ellen stated.

“True.”

“Here look at the pictures.” Ellen opened the book.

“Oh shit.” Frank started to laugh. “Brings back memories. I remember this episode.” His huge finger pointed down to the picture. “This is cool.”

“Yeah. Informative reading.”

“With great pictures”

Ellen smiled, laying the book between their two bodies, and together, overlooking it, Frank and Ellen, like many things, shared it.

Beginnings, Montana

Huffing, grunting and panting mixed in with the sounds of Johnny’s clinking ice as he swished the liquid in his glass walking to his bedroom. He shook his head and opened the door. The noises were louder. Bev, engrossed sat at the laptop, wearing only the tee shirt again. Her eyes wide stared at the screen of the computer as she slumped in the chair.

“Bev. Turn it down.” Johnny took a swig of his whiskey and set the glass next to the computer leaning over her shoulder. “God.” He cringed. “Are you at least getting anything valuable from this?”

A soft, ‘mm-hmm’ came from Bev.

“Something is not right about watching this.” Johnny reached for his glass. “Of course . . .” He tilted his head. “It could have it’s advantages.” With a smirk, he drank and he watched the scene of a bedroom. The camera angle down to the bed. “Can you zoom in?”

Bev reached up and controlled the mouse. The shot of the two people making love came in closer. Dean and Ellen. “This is the best one. This is right before he left.”

“Many on here?”

Bev nodded. “They’re active and . . . interesting.”

Johnny let out a slow breath “What exactly are we . . . are . . .” He tilted his head with a smile as he watched Dean, on top of Ellen, lift from her body and slide down. “Zoom in more.”

Bev did.

“What are we watching for?”

“Routine. Consistencies.” Bev spoke soft. “Tech . . . tech . . .” She let out a soft moan.

Johnny’s eyes shifted down. “What the fuck are you doing?” He saw Bev’s hand secured tight between her legs. “That’s sick. That’s like my mother.”

Bev squirmed in her seat and reached her free hand back laying it on Johnny’s crotch. “Right. Like you’re viewing her as your mother right . . . right

...” She breathed heavily. “Now.”

Johnny swallowed. “Pause that.” He felt her hand moving from him and he stopped her. “I’ll do it.” Gliding her hand to him, Johnny controlled the pointer of the computer to the pause button. The image froze on a close up, intimate shot of Dean and Ellen. He slid the laptop over and using his foot he moved Bev’s chair to face him

“Johnny.” Bev whispered his name, gliding her hand to his zipper.

Johnny stared down at her. He saw her starting to stand from the chair. “No.” He laid both hands on her head. “Me first.” Pushing her down to her knees, and holding tight to her hair, Johnny leaned back against the desk and pulled Bev into him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Bowman, North Dakota

October 5

Frank dropped less than gently, Hal's bag in the back of the pick up truck. He walked around to the passengers door and opened it for Ellen. "And no. Don't ask. You're not getting the window seat."

"I'll get car sick." Ellen complained.

"Tough. Puke. I'm not riding a hundred miles smashed next to my brother."

"You're only being like this so you can cop a feel when you shift gears."

Frank smiled. "In." He walked over to where Hal stood talking with Elliott. "Hal. Let's go. I wanna be in Beginnings by seven."

"All right." Hal took a step back. "And if they aren't back by ten."

Elliott nodded. "I'll send a four man search party out."

"Good." Hal nodded "I'll be in touch."

Elliott saluted.

Frank widened the door for Hal with rolling eyes. "Why do you make them men do that to you."

"Frank. It's called respect of authority. I should make you salute me."

"Yeah, right. I out rank you."

Hal paused in getting in. "How do you figure."

"I'm older. I'm better and I'm Frank."

Shaking his head, Hal made the attempt to get in the truck, but stopped when he heard the call of his name.

"Fuck." Frank stomped. "Can we possibly leave this place?"

Hal stepped away from the truck and saw Len coming his way. "What's wrong?"

Len caught his breath. "I just heard from our Kansas men. They radioed. They aren't returning."

"They're supposed to be back today." Hal stated.

"They said sir, something is up and they are investigating further. Seems the society camp they stumbled upon . . . the soldiers yesterday packed up the entire base and moved on."

Hal quickly looked at Frank in worry. "Which direction. North?"

"No." Len shook his head. "Get this, east. Due east."

"Home?" Frank questioned.

Hal returned to Len. "Tell our men to track the movement another hundred miles then head back. This is unusual. No society bases ever go east."

"Will do sir." Len saluted and stepped back.

Hal walked to the truck with Frank. "What do you make of it?"

"Odd. It's one base."

"True."

"How many are out there that you're aware of."

"Many."

"Vague fuckin answer." Frank nodded and walked around the truck. "When we get back to Beginnings let's talk to Dad about getting a plane up and

running for Robbie. Scout by air any other bases.”

“That’s a good idea. See if anyone else is moving.” Hal got in the truck.

Ellen looked to her left and to her right when both Hal and Frank got in the cab of the truck at the same time. Immediately she felt her air and physical space leave her when both big Slagels got comfortable. “Swell.”

Frank looked at her, turned on the truck, shifted gears and grinned.

Beginnings, Montana

Nervously, Johnny looked up and down the hallway of the clinic then flew back into the main lab. Bev stood there.

“Johnny if I’m going . . .”

“You’re not. Not yet.” Johnny breathed out. “I’m glad I caught you. I spoke to your Dad. He said wait to see what happens today. He’d rather hit them daily than all at once. I agree. So hold off until we get the O.K.. O.K.?”

“O.K.” Bev stated apprehensively. “I was all ready.”

“I know. But a few days. Maybe even tomorrow. And I got to run. Update me later on your Dean notes.”

Nodding, Bev’s mouth dropped open when she didn’t even get a chance to say goodbye, Johnny was out the door.

Reading off a chart, walking blindly down the hall, Dean turned into the lab.

“Hi Dean.” Bev waved.

Dean closed his eyes and his shoulders dropped.

“Hey Johnny.” Henry watched him whiz by him. “Bye Johnny.” He looked and smiled at Johnny’s wave and then he walked into the clinic. He checked out the time on his watch and moved to the lab. As he hit the door Bev was walking out. “Bev?”

“Just . . . seeing Dean.” She winked and kept on walking.

Watching her walk away, Henry’s bright look for the day left and he walked into the lab. “Dean.”

“Oh, hey Henry.” Dean popped his head from the fridge.

“I’m heading to containment. Do you have that batch of meds. Robbie says he needs them.”

“I’m getting it now. I was busy.”

“I bet.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“I’ll bring it right over.”

Henry didn’t even say goodbye, he just turned and left the lab.

Mumbling ‘I guess he’s still pissed’ Dean went back into the fridge.

Standing in the skills room door with Robbie, Joe looked oddly inside at Ellen's brother Richie. He watched as the survivors in containment, bowed as they passed him. "What in Christ's name is he doing to them."

Robbie shrugged. "He told them he was the prince of Egypt."

"Christ."

"He's bored. He wants out."

"Ellen says he's not ready. And I have to agree." Joe pointed.

"Ellen's making him pay for all the money he borrowed off of her all his life."

"Oh, that's ridiculous. As petty as she is, she wouldn't stoop that low. That's her brother." Joe turned from the door. "Anyhow, what do you think?"

"About the plane idea?" Robbie started walking with his father. "I'm game. Movement could be bad."

"Especially if they're pulling all troops in."

"Regrouping?" Robbie suggested.

"Or worse, they could be planning to hit us with something . . . something I don't want to think about it."

Robbie paused before he headed into the office. "Scarey shit." He moved in and sat in a chair. "So when's the Rev. Bob thing go down."

"As soon as Frank and you get back from scouting them savages. Last radio they were close to home. Another fifteen minutes or so I guess." Joe sat behind Ellen's desk. "I'm not looking forward to this."

"This or Andrea?" Robbie asked.

"Andrea."

"Hey Joe." Henry came into the office. "Sorry. I'm trying to get everything in today so I'm free and clear for this afternoon." Henry looked at a small notepad. "Which appliance needs fixed here. Ellen just put appliance."

Robbie looked up. "The fridge is not staying cold. Still mad at me Henry?"

"No." Henry shook his head. "It's not your fault." He put the pad in his back pocket.

"Can't Danny help today?" Joe asked.

"Danny's in New Bowman for another hour, been there since dawn situating power. And Robbie, Dean will bring that . . ."

"Got it." Dean walked into the office. "Crowded." He laid a bottle in front of Robbie. "Give that to him four times a day. Do you need me to check on him?"

"No." Robbie shook his head. "It's just a cold."

Joe looked at Dean. "Make sure you clear time for today. I need you up there. You're a part of this suspect thing."

"Sure." Dean nodded.

"Joe." Henry spoke up. "I'm out of here. See you there." He backed up and left the office.

Dean hurried and left as well waving as he did. "Henry." He hurried down the hall. "Look. I don't want you to still be mad at me all right. We shouldn't let this come between . . ."

"Dean." Henry was cold and hard when he stopped walking and shut him up. "I'm really not wanting to talk to you."

"I can't believe you're this mad at me. And realistically Henry, you have to think. After what went down with you and El, how much would Ellen respect me if I gave the understanding to you."

Henry only shook his head with a laugh. "She shouldn't respect you at all."

"Why?" Dean tossed his hands up. "Because I won't give you an understanding?"

"Because no matter what I did. You Dean, are a bigger asshole than I could ever be. Excuse me." Henry turned and walked into the dining area.

Dean blinked slowly. "O.K." Sure that Henry was just being a 'Henry' and stewing about the night before, Dean gave no more thought to the radical Henry comment and left containment.

^^^

Stepping from the school, Ellen peered up to the sky and watched the helicopter in the distance fly away. She stood for a moment, watching, then doing something she always did but never bragged about, she said a short prayer for Robbie and Frank in their endeavor then moved on toward the clinic.

The streets were pretty empty which was odd for Monday. Usually they buzzed about with people trying to get out of work, and having a hard time getting back into their weekly routine after a day or two off. The streets should have been even busier. It was the first Monday in October. It was supposed to be Beginnings day. But Joe postponed it because of all that happened and new additions. One more week. A little disappointed because Ellen enjoyed that free day, she at least took comfort in the fact that it gave Robbie and his band an extra week to learn new material.

No sooner did Ellen step into the clinic and she saw Dean coming out of his lab. With a quick 'hey' call from her, Dean, stopped, turned around with a bright smile and quickly made it to her.

He gave a pleasure grunt embracing Ellen and lifting her from her feet. "I missed you. When did you get back?"

"About twenty minutes ago." She kissed him. "Dean." Ellen stepped back. "I . . . was a good girl."

He winked. "I know." Kissing her quickly, he grabbed her hand. "Did you see the kids?"

"Just came from there. They didn't know I was gone."

"Yes, they did." Dean started to walk with her. "Ready to try this?"

"Our big talk." Ellen nodded. "I'm excited."

"Trish is in there now."

"She'll find out eventually. Do you think it's a good time?" Ellen asked.

"As good as time as any. I want to start this." Turning the bend, Dean and Ellen headed to Jeff's room.

Trish's arms felt chilled and she rubbed them to warm them despite the fact that she wore two shirts. She knew it wasn't the temperature that gave her goose bumps. Her face crinkled too. Probably for the same reason. She kept her face pointed to Jeff, but her eyes shifted about. She hoped with his distorted one

eyed vision he wouldn't notice. It was hard enough for Trish to understand what he was saying, let alone watch him speak through a mouth that was pretty much gone. No lips. No means to control the saliva that seeped out with every word.

Jeff handled it well, dabbing with a tissue the drool that ran down his chin after each sentence. He did his best despite the fact he never got it all. Understandable to Trish, since he was missing half a face, he was missing nerves as well. How could he feel it rolling down a face he just didn't have?

"So ew see . . ." Jeff spoke slow and dabbed. "I ha in it ew for ears."

"Yes, four wonderful years we've been together." Trish looked at the ceiling.

"Ut. I oh I ook ad."

"Well . . ."

"And I ill understand . . ." Jeff paused to get the drool. "If ew never ant to E ith E again. I'll understand if ew alk a-ay."

"Oh." Trish said perky. "O.K. thanks. Bye." She turned and walked from the room.

Dean and Ellen who stood in the door merely looked at each other as Trish practically skipped out of the room. Poor Jeff's moans of sorrow seeped out.

"Oh my God." Ellen's mouth dropped open and then she laughed. "Sorry. Understandable decision on Trish's part."

"El." Dean shook his head. "But, this is also a really good time. Let's go take advantage if it." Still holding Ellen's hand, Dean pulled her into Jeff's room.

73 Miles due west of Beginnings

"God! Are you miserable." Robbie griped and rubbed his temple as he flew.

"What?" Frank questioned.

"You. You're miserable."

"Fuck Robbie. I had to drive a hundred fuckin miles with Hal."

"Not good"

"No. Not at all." Frank kept his eyes glued to the windshield as he leaned back biting his nails. "He's going on and on about this United Western Alliance . . . and did Dad say anything to you about us being called that."

"No."

"Well Hal insists we are." Frank nodded. "United fuckin Western Alliance. What the hell does that mean."

"No way."

"Yeah. I refuse to tell people I'm from United Western Alliance Montana. That's like way too fuckin long."

Robbie chuckled. "Frank, I don't think that's what he meant."

"That's what he said."

"I think he's implying that's what the force is going to be called."

"What force?" Frank spit a piece of nail from his mouth.

"The armed forces." Robbie explained.

"Whose. His or ours."

“Frank.”

“What?”

“Forget it.”

“Forget what?”

Robbie bit his bottom lip. “And Frank, quitting spitting your nails on my chopper floor.”

“I can’t open a window Robbie. What the fuck else am I supposed to do with them.”

“Don’t bite them.”

“Man.” Frank shook his head and spit another piece of nail out. “You talk about me being miserable.”

“I thought you quit biting your nails.”

“I bite them when I don’t smoke, Can I smoke in here?”

“No.”

“Then I bite my nails.”

Robbie cringed when he watched Frank shoot a nail particle on the floor.

Frank snickered. “So, anyhow . . . Well what the hell does it mean?”

“What the hell does what mean?”

“What we were talking about.” Frank asked.

“Your nails?”

“No, the fuckin Western Alliance bullshit. What does that mean.”

“You can’t tell?”

“No.” Frank shook his head. “We aren’t west. We’re like sort of in the middle.”

“It means . . . shit.” Robbie sat up.

“Yeah.”

“No.”

“No?”

“Shit. Look.”

Frank did. “What am I looking at.”

“Nothing.” Robbie said soft.

“Uh, no shit Robbie.”

Robbie shook his head. “They’re gone.”

“Who’s gone?”

“The savages.”

“Is this where you saw them?” Frank asked.

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.” Robbie answered.

“Maybe you just thought you saw them here and they were elsewhere.”

“No. I have the coordinates correct. Besides, look out your damn window Frank. What do you see.”

“Nothing.”

“Besides that.”

“Nothing.”

“No, Frank. See the burned out fires. Old tents. They were here.”

Frank peered. “Oh yeah.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t see that. Sometimes I have to wonder if Dean is right about you having brain damage.”

“Hey. Don’t make fun of my disability.” Frank rubbed his head. “Land.”
“Why?”
“Just lower down. See if we can figure out what direction they went.”
“What if there are still some down there.”
Frank only looked at Robbie with a wide grin.
Robbie smiled back. “Yeah. Let’s land.” Robbie lowered the chopper.

Beginnings, Montana

Ellen’s voice was high pitched and soft, sounding more like Mr. Bill than anything else. “No. No. Dean. No. Don’t do this to me.”

“Ellen.” Dean on the other side of the center counter in the cryo-lab peered up to her. “Stop.”

“He looks so helpless.”

“Yes. Well. If we want our experiments to work. There has to be sacrifice. Find me the head strap.” Dean told her.

“Here.” Ellen handed him the tiny leather strap. “Do you suppose it hurts him being in that position. Seeing how it’s not a natural one for him.”

“Probably. But not for long. We’ll knock him out. Hold his head.”

Shrugging, Ellen placed her fingers on the face of the rabbit. A rabbit who laid on a tray on his back. His body trembling as he was spread eagle. Arms and legs bound by tiny straps. Dean secured his head and the only thing that moved on the bunny was the twitching nose and shifting wide eyes.

“Sedative ready?” Dean asked.

“All prepared.”

“Scalpels and sutures?”

“Yep.”

“All right let me look at Jeff’s x-rays once more before we remove his face.” Dean lifted up Jeff’s x-ray up to the light. “The only thing I see is a tiny piece of bone chipped from Jeff’s cheek. We can rebuild that.”

“Should we mimic that on the rabbit.”

Dean looked down to the bunny. “No, let’s try to get through phase one first, then we’ll try it on the next one.”

“Listen Dean.” Ellen, ear first leaned toward the rabbit. “He’s whimpering.”

“Rabbits make noise. Go ahead and inject him.”

Ellen took the syringe and injected the entire liquid into the shaking rabbit. It was a few seconds later that the rabbit stopped moving. “Out.”

“Good.”

“Dean?” Ellen walked around the counter.

“Tomorrow I want you to do a fat analysis on Jeff. Let’s see the best areas to do the grafting.”

“Chunking.”

“Grafting.”

“Dean.” Ellen moved to him. “It’s chunking what we’re doing. Skin chunking. Think about it.”

“I guess you’re right.” As Dean went to lower the x-ray, he saw Ellen right

before him. "What are you doing?"

"Dean." She softened her voice and stepped right against him. "Let's fool around."

"El, the rabbit."

"He won't mind. He's out."

"How about we finish this. I have that meeting with Joe." Dean kissed her quickly. "Rain check? Tonight?"

"Sure." Ellen stepped back. "In our bathroom or are we wanting to experiment in voyeurism with Frank with our bedroom door cemented open."

There was only a slight delay from Dean. "The back room?"

"Sounds good." Ellen smiled.

Dean took her hand led her quickly to the back room, he stopped, looked back at the helpless spread out rabbit awaiting de-constructive surgery. He took a moment to debate whether he should or shouldn't, the poor rabbit was there, on the counter waiting. Then shrugging and tugging Ellen, he pulled her in the back room, closed the door and shut the blinds.

^^^

It probably wasn't the most sensitive thing for Trish to do, taking the photo of Jeff off her desk and placing it in the bottom drawer. She contemplated hanging a sheet of paper over half of his face, to capture the new likeness of him. But seeing him like that was more painful than seeing a picture of how Jeff used to look, and seeing Jeff period was painful to Trish, so she got rid of his picture. After all, he did break up with her from his hospital bed.

In a break from the hecticness of history, Trish stared at the empty spot on her desk, trying to figure out what she would put there. A clock perhaps, Vase. A picture of some one else. A twitch of revenge hit Trish, that would pay Jeff back for breaking her heart. She looked up surprised when the door opened--she knew no one had a history viewing appointment--and Danny Hoi walked in.

"Oh, Danny." Trish began to bend behind her desk. "Wait, I need my 'scoop' visor."

"No, this isn't paper business." Danny shut the door, he carried a folder.

"Is it history business? Because you don't have an appointment."

"No. This is . . . big."

"Big?"

"Real big." Danny sat on the edge of her desk facing her.

Trish perked up. "Really big . . . gossip? Scoop? News? What?"

"All of the above." Danny laid the folder in front of her. "When you get a chance. Read those. This is hush-hush and it's only a sample. There's more."

"Oh." Trish started to open the folder, and Danny stopped her.

"Wait. You can't tell anyone you've seen those."

"Scouts honor." Trish held up two fingers.

"Wait." Danny stopped her again. "For embarrassment sake, wait until I leave."

"O.K." Trish laid her hand on the folder. "Are you leaving now, because I have some time to read this."

"I'll leave." Danny slid from the desk and spread his hands wide as he walked backwards to the door. "Oh, and Trish . . . big."

"Got it. Really big." She winked.

"You may need a glass of water." Danny nodded and walked out.

"Water yes." Trish hurried from her chair, sprang up to the water cooler Danny had gotten her from New Bowman. She filled a little pointed paper cup, sat back down and flipped open the folder. Not ten seconds into her reading, her hand tensed closed crushing the paper cup and sending fluid raining everywhere. Then sitting there in a wet mess, Trish turned bright red.

^^^

Quiet, so quiet a pin could be heard dropping. A stomach growling. There were no sounds. Joe sat behind his desk. Dean and Henry on chairs off toward the door. Frank, arms crossed in a 'get ready' interrogation pose, stood by the file cabinet with Robbie right next to him. They were waiting and prepared to back up their mouths. They got what they didn't expect.

"Well?" Joe asked Reverend Bob as he watched the reverend close the folder.

With a long breath Reverend Bob laid the folder on the desk. "I'm sorry. I . . . should have told you from the get go. George Hadly is my first cousin. We grew up in the same house."

"You're admitting this?" Joe asked.

"Yes." Reverend Bob nodded.

"Why . . ." Joe's voice squeaked in surprise. "Why in God's name didn't you tell any of us this sooner?"

Reverend Bob fiddled nervously with his folded hands "When I was first picked up on a survival run. George was the one that approached me. He asked if I would not say that we were related. I was shocked by this. But not surprised, see I distanced myself from George years prior to the plague."

"Why?"

"Because I knew what he was doing. I tried to stop it. I tried to form a radical group to undermine it. I got involved with one already in process. But . . . as you see by our world around us. I wasn't successful. For two years, my cousin had a price on my head. I lived in hiding from the conference on."

"Knowing this. Knowing he lived among us, why didn't you come forward."

"Fear for my life. A demented family obligation." Rev. Bob shrugged. "Don't know. I'm giving you the most honest answers I can."

"So, you've been helping him ever since."

"Absolutely not Joe." Rev. Bob shook his head. "No way. I love Beginnings, it is my home. I wouldn't do anything to jeopardize my life here. I'm afraid Joe, the only crime I have committed was the crime of silence. I told you nothing. I should have."

"Did you know of the new plague?"

"No."

"Any of the attempts on me, Frank, anyone?" Joe questioned.

"No."

"You know I'm finding this extremely hard to believe."

"And rightfully so." Rev. Bob spoke soft. "I would too. And I knew as soon as I was found out, I would be in trouble. I would lose everything, possibly my life. But I swear to God on my faith, that I partook in no wrong doings here. That's not to say, George hasn't tried to get me involved. Yes, he has called me since we got phones. His people continuously badger me to be with them, but . . ."

"His people?" Joe saw everyone in the room was giving of their full attention. "People meaning more than one."

"People meaning a group. A whole group. Living here, working for him, pretending to be dedicated Beginnings residents when all they do is try to find out what they can and keep George informed."

"Do you know these people?"

"Yes." Rev. Bob nodded. "In fact, just the other day, George called, he was having a hard time getting in touch with . . ."

"Wait!" Frank spoke up. "George called you?"

Reverend Bob turned some in his chair. "He does it often. I hang up not too long into the conversation."

"The other day meaning when?" Frank asked. "A week, what?"

"Two days ago." Rev. Bob answered.

"So George is alive?" Frank's eyebrow raised.

"Yes. Very much so. Sick but alive."

"Fuck!" Frank stomped about in angry circles. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

"Frank!" Joe screamed out. "Knock it off!"

"Fuck!" Frank's hand cut through the air and landed in a point to Dean. "George is alive and this is all your fault."

"My fault!" Dean nearly laughed. "How is this my fault Frank?"

"You virus sucks!"

"I told you ahead of time." Dean argued.

"Fuck." Frank, pissed off, exclaimed again. "I can't believe he didn't fuckin die. Fuck."

"Frank! Enough!" Joe yelled, "George is alive. What the hell are you gonna do about it."

"But, Dad. I thought I killed him."

"Well you didn't. So get over it." Joe returned to looking at Rev. Bob.

"We ought to call him Stepheno Damara." Frank nodded.

"Who?" Joe questioned.

"Dad, you don't know who Stepheno is? God, even little man Dean knows who Stepheno is." Frank said.

"I doubt that." Joe came back. "Not everyone lives in Frank world."

"Uh . . . Joe." Dean held up his hand. "I know who Stepheno is. From *Days of Our Lives*. The Phoenix rises from the ashes."

"Oh!" Frank snapped his finger. "We should code name George the Phoenix."

"Frank." Joe snapped his name. "We're in the middle of a goddamn interrogation here can we not get off the subject?"

"I'm not off the subject." Frank defended.

“You are too.”

“No I’m not. I’m talking about George. So are you.”

“Frank!”

“What?”

“Knock it off.” Joe’s hand slammed on the desk in aggravation.

“Fuck, Dad. I wish you wouldn’t yell at me. I’m temporarily mentally disabled you know.”

Joe closed his eyes briefly. “You’ve been mentally disabled your entire goddamn life.”

Frank, in shock, quickly looked at Robbie and whispered. “Did you know that?”

Joe, after letting out a breath, looked back to Rev. Bob. “Now. You know these people?”

“I do.”

“Will you tell us who they are?”

“I will.” He saw Joe getting a piece of paper. “On one condition.”

Joe hesitated in his writing. “You’re wanting to name conditions.”

“No, Joe, I’m wanting to live. I give you these people and you find out for sure that they do work for George, I want to walk out of Beginnings, not be carried out with a bullet in my head. I know the unwritten laws on traitors.”

Joe was silent, thinking and he glanced around the faces in the room. “How many are we talking about.”

“Eight. I think. I have to name them for a total count.”

“Eight?” Joe was shocked by the number. He leaned back in the chair. “How do I know you aren’t just naming people to save yourself.”

“I believe if you start an investigation into them, like you did with me, you’ll prove them traitors.” Rev. Bob said confidently. “And I gonna trust you Joe, that you’ll let me walk. You can keep me in holding for as long as you like, until you prove their guilt. Then all I ask is that you let me phone the society and take them up on their invitation to join. I call them and I walk out. Alive.”

Joe rocked back in his chair, he played with the pencil he had. “Eight?” He waited for Rev. Bob’s nod and he snapped his chair forward. “All right. I prove these people guilty, all of them, and you walk. A free man. Not before I prove all of them guilty. If one, if one is not proven guilty, you’re a dead man. Deal?”

Rev. Bob agreed. “Deal. What happens to them.”

“We have to decide on that. I’m not sure.” Joe pulled the paper forward. “Names.”

“I would like to do this in private.” Rev. Bob spoke soft.

Joe looked up to those in the room. “Boys.”

Slowly they all stood up, not one of them looking happy about having to leave. Frank looked the worst. A whining expression glazed his face as he was the last one to step out, pulling the door closed.

After hearing Frank’s compliant that ‘it’s like we’re on a commercial break’, Joe held the pencil ready, eyes peeled to Rev. Bob. “Names.”

Rev. Bob took a deep breath.

^^^

Elbows on knees, cigarette between his hands, Frank tapped his foot rapidly like an expectant father. "Dad."

"Frank." Joe looked up calmly.

"Dad." Frank said again.

"Frank. Wait."

Frank huffed and sat back. "The suspense is killing me."

"Then die." Joe stated. "But wait. Did you have that list of men I need?"

"Yeah." Frank pulled from his tee shirt pocket, a slip of paper. He handed it to Joe.

Joe shook his head and smoothed out the wrinkles. "Christ Frank, you wrote this ten minutes ago,"

"Yeah. So?"

Joe quickly looked up when his office door opened and Hal walked in.

Frank immediately let out a bitching whine. "Aw, Hal? We're waiting for Hal? What's he got to do with this."

"Not much." Joe answered. "But I need his outside opinion. Hal."

"Hey Dad." Hal shut the door. "What's going on?" He stepped inside.

"It appears . . ." Joe held up a folded sheet of paper. "Rev. Bob in exchange for his life, gave us the names of the people he says are involved with George."

Hal raised his eyebrows. "You trust that? I remember reading about the McCarthy trials."

Joe nodded. "That's why I wanted you here. You have a different view. I need that."

"Sure." He hurriedly looked at Frank who gave a sarcastic flutter of his lips. "What?"

Frank shook his head.

Hal took a seat. "What can I help with?"

"We're getting teams. There are eight names. Two man arrest teams, synchronized arrests."

Hal nodded. "Sounds good."

"Sounds good." Frank mocked.

"Frank!" Joe yelled.

"What!" Frank sat up. "This isn't right dad, he's from somewhere else this isn't his problem."

"It can be ours." Joe quipped. "What if these people are innocent. What then. We have to prove their guilt to who. Are we fair judges?"

"Yes." Frank answered.

"I agree." Robbie added.

"Me too." Said Henry.

"Dean?" Joe questioned.

"I'm pre-prejudiced."

"Exactly." Joe nodded. "So am I. Hal?"

"You really want my honest opinion?" Hal asked and waited for Joe to nod. "All right. You have these eight names. Arrest them, like you want. Hold them. Question them. And then gather evidence like you are planning to do, but, let another person or persons decide if the evidence warrants action."

"Like a trial?" Joe double checked his son's suggestion. "We never held trials."

“That’s because it’s only been you people inside these walls. Who’s to fairly judge? Yeah, they work side by side with these people. But . . . go on, present the evidence to the masses of Beginnings. These are men and women who lost children to your recent plague. Lives to the society soldiers. They are gonna hear the word of Rev. Bob, a trusted man who is a blood relative of George’s and his word will be . . . excuse the terminology . . . gospel.”

Joe sadly agreed. “So you’re suggesting we show the evidence elsewhere.”

“Exactly.” Hal said. “You never held trials before, because in a closed in community it’s basically everyone’s the jury and it’s a kangaroo court. Council basically makes final decisions. Council can still make final decision, on what happens to those found guilty. But now you have over five hundred unbiased opinions. Select a few, a jury of my people and let them decide. Hold trials. We do.”

“Are they fair?” Joe asked.

“Very. We try.” Hal shrugged. “I know it’s not how you work it. Like I said, he could be naming names just to name them for his freedom. They may be right. You may get a few who confess. You decide what to do with the guilty. But the ones who proclaim their innocence, let someone on the outside look at what you got. Fairly judge these people.”

Joe, inhaling loudly fiddled with the folded piece of paper. “This is difficult, but it’s the best way. I think you men, when you hear list will be in favor of trials for these people, because basically, the names are going to shock you. So I need a vote. Henry, Dean, Robbie, Frank, give me a ‘nay’ if your against trials.”

“Nay.” Frank spoke out.

“Frank.” Joe shook his head.

“All right. All right. Trials. Read the names.”

Joe slowly unfolded the paper. “Ready.” He waited until he saw they were. “First name given. The man in containment, sent here to be a spy . . . Jeremy.”

“Yes.” Robbie clenched his fist. “I didn’t like him.”

Joe looked up again. “Leo in tracking.” He saw the shocked look on Frank’s face. “Wait, one of your men? Try another . . . Doug.”

“Fuck.”

“Yep.” Joe continued. “Peter in paper. If he’s found guilty we have to find yet another division leader. Garret in the field. Women, oh yes, women, Cindy from bakery, Sissy in clothing. And Walt in plastics.”

Frank counted on his fingers. “Wait. That’s only seven. Who’s the eighth?”

Joe sadly looked about the faces with slight hesitation. “Andrea.”

^^^

Tuned into a private channel on the radio, Joe paced about the half empty warehouse. Dean stood right by him. Joe spoke in the radio. “O.K. You can be dramatic but make sure no one dies. Tell them what’s going on. Bring them all to warehouse four. Except . . . Jess?”

“Yeah Joe.” Jess answered standing outside the clinic with Hal.

“Take Andrea to holding, send Hal back here and stay with her until I get

there.”

“Got it.” Jess agreed.

“Gentlemen.” Joe looked at the second hand of his watch holding the radio to his mouth. “Four . . . three . . . two . . . now.” He lowered the radio and peered to Dean.

Like they were two cops from some old television series, Henry and Dan burst through the double doors of the skills room.

“Jeremy.” Dan extended his gun in a point.

Jeremy looked up.

Henry smiled. “Let’s go. You’re under arrest”

“. . . for suspicion of treason.” Robbie held a gun to Garret in the field. “Let’s go.”

Without surprise, Garret followed as Robbie and Steve escorted him.

“Frank?” Doug questioned leaning against the side of the bakery building. “Your dad said now.”

“I’m letting it be my call.” Frank peered around seeing Cindy escorted out by two of his men. “When *I* say ‘now’ it’s time. You got that?”

“Got it.” Doug agreed.

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

“Now.”

Just as Doug stepped, he stepped right into the barrel of Frank’s gun.

Frank grinned and pulled back the hammer pressing the point of the gun directly to Doug’s forehead. “Guess what Doug. You’re under arrest.”

Their boots moved in perfect slow synchronized steps down the corridor of the clinic. Together, side by side, Hal and Jess turned the bend. Andrea was coming out of a patient room.

She smiled and waved high. “Oh, Hal.” After laying her charts on the nurses counter, she trotted to him. “I’m glad I caught you. You’re stopping by for dinner tonight right?”

Hal lowered his head. “Jess.” The word barely came from his mouth.

Jess, too, spoke soft and sad. “Andrea. We’re here for you.”

Andrea tilted her head in curiosity. “I don’t understand.”

Jess gently took hold of her arm. “Come with us. We have to bring you in. You’ve been named . . . Andrea . . .”

“What’s going on.” Andrea pulled her arm away. “Hal?”

Jess swallowed. “Please Andrea, don’t make this hard. Please.” He begged.

“What did I do?” She asked. “It seems like I’m being arrested. No one ever is arrested in Beginnings.”

Jess peered through the tops of his eyes. “Unfortunately, now you are.”

“For what?”

“Suspicion of treason.”

Andrea knew it. Her eyes showed it. She knew and had been waiting for it to come. Lifting her head high, she took a deep breath. “Let’s go. Take me where you have to.” Between the two men she slipped and walked ahead of them, with dignity and no emotions, down the hall.

CHAPTER NINE

Beginnings, Montana

In the cold dim holding room, through the metal walls, Rev. Bob could hear the muffled voices. One female, one male. He didn't know who they were, nor really did he care. He was mentally settling into what would be his new home.

But not for long.

Things had been arranged. The people had been talked too. There were too many of them, for Beginnings not to just oust them. And there was a little bit of pressure relief on Rev. Bob's head. They knew they would be arrested and they also had their confessions ready, ahead of time. And for Rev. Bob, it was a matter of waiting until everyone's guilt was positively discovered and he would walk away.

Not that he wanted to. Beginnings was his home. He reflected on his choice not to tell Joe. A choice--as he sat in his would-be cell--that he knew was wrong. And so was the choice wrong to join the society. But it was either join them or die in the wilderness. Rev. Bob knew his time was short, and he knew eventually it would come down to him. And he would do what he did, pull together everyone that worked for George and get them to follow the predesignated plan. There was nothing more that Rev. Bob wanted then to just add the two names of Johnny and Bev to the list, take a chance on the wilderness and live with a clear conscious. Johnny and Bev were trouble and their motives for their wrong doings were not even minutely justified. No political motives. No family loyalty. Greed. Hatred. They were the motivation for the two young Beginnings residents who would continue to live in Beginnings, and more in the clear, since all weight of suspicion was lifted off of them. Just like George wanted if things started to heat up in the investigation.

Rocking some as he sat on the bed without a sheet, Rev. Bob folded his hands in prayer. He hoped that he could just move on with his life with as little on-earth punishment as possible. Eventually he would. He'd be free and clear, as long as everyone involved with George in Beginnings, confessed and followed the plan.

^^^

The handwritten note from Joe slipped to Henry simply read '*a copy of this video tape is to be made and stored in history*'. Henry read it, nodded and folded the note as they sat at a long table. He, Joe, Dean, and the three Slagel brothers. Across the table, clothing, notes, letters gadgets, syringes, society weapons, evidence that the seven people standing before them turned in. The seven, lined up ten feet from the table where Joe and the others sat. A video camera recording the confessions was behind the table.

"I was sent in as a spy." Jeremy's raspy cracking voice spoke. "I haven't

had a chance to partake in anything. But I have worked for George setting up the society long before the leaders, CME's, and scientists were released from the cryogenic holding."

"Sissy." Joe called her name.

"I've always worked for George." Sissy took her turn. "I knew him in the old world. I am a biology and virology specialist and you found me right after I was cryogenically released. See, I bare the mark." Sissy lifted her hair. "My sole purpose was to monitor Dr. Hayes' work and throw a monkey wrench in here or there. I did. Several times in his cryo lab and mobile lab. I got the security entrance codes from our people in security and easy knowledgeable access from, of course, Andrea. Her and I changed his batch formulas or tried to, on whatever he worked." Sissy held back a chuckle. "He actually blamed Ellen. I was also the one that knew Jenny had the main strain of the virus. How could I not. I know who gave it to her. I slipped into the lab and exchanged blood so you could not find a cure for the new virus using the original strain."

"I helped a lot." Cindy confessed. "Especially when it came to the virus. I was given the secondary strain and I added it to about forty loaves of bread. Just one of things I did. I also was a contact, and spy for The society. I also . . . I also was the one who gave Jenny the direct dose of the virus. She was upset with John, I seized my opportunity and when she came to talk to me, I put it in a glass of water."

Joe stayed calm despite hearing the disturbing news. "Peter." Joe pointed to him.

"I was known as the runner." Peter replied. "Besides sending messages, I would sneak out of the perimeters at night to deliver messages to soldiers of the society who waited. I'd use their radios to contact George. I helped with the new plague as well."

"They delivered the mice to me." Garret explained as he volunteered to go next without being called upon. "Cases full, brought in by Peter, and I release them into our fields, little by little so as not to draw suspicion."

"In contact with the society as well."

"Always." Garret lowered his head.

"Doug." Joe called out.

"George convinced me to side with him from the beginning. He told me of the way of life and how we were protecting ourselves from foreign invasion. I spied for him since he escaped. I helped rig the cryo lab for the explosion. But that never happened."

"Did you work hand and hand with John Matoose?" Joe asked.

"No." Doug answered. "John Matoose was reluctant like Rev. Bob, so he wasn't aware of my participation. I'm sure John knew there were more of us."

"What other wrong doings did you commit?"

"Aside from working with Leo here. He and I were the biggest parts of the security breaches. We let people in and out. When Danny Hoi got the tracking up, we shut it down at night. I was an avid helper of Andrea's and Reverend Thomas who worked side by side with George. One of his biggest links. I was there at the mobile lab. I helped him take away Ellen. I was almost found out when That big guy, new man, Sgt. Baily was in here . . ."

"And I killed him." Leo stated. "An arrow through the neck. Doug was waiting to let me in, we were messing with the beam to try to . . . to well, fry

Frank. He saw Doug, I got him. I also, I also killed Bill the night of the mobile lab. And . . . I tried to kill . . . to kill Dean that night. I thought I did.”

Dean slowly raised his eyes. He remembered being strangled, kicked in the head. All the visions he thought were dreams weren't. Explanations were being given. But still so much didn't make sense.

Frank's chair creaked as he slowly stood up.

Doug spoke for the group. “You got our full confessions. You've video taped it. When are you giving us back to the society. We confessed it all. You have to let us go.”

Joe only looked up as he leaned over his notes.

There was a slow series of steps as Frank made it to the line of seven. Then with a cold stare upon his face. A stone look that reflected the hatred and anger in his gut, Frank pulled out his revolver, shifted the chamber, and fired a single shot into Doug's head. A shift of his hand and Frank took out Leo. Leo's body wasn't even to the floor when another shot hit Garret and Sissy. Cindy's hands went to her face but not before she too received a bullet in the forehead. And in the midst of her falling body, Frank's arm moved to the right, he fired a shot at Peter, swung to the left and unloaded one bullet into Jeremy. Within seconds, all seven of George's people lay dead, in a pile. The shower of blood and brains that splattered across the room, the walls, and on Frank, happened before anyone had time to react. Before Hal had even made it to his feet, it was over.

Frank, with the back of his hand wiped the blood from his face and turned around as he put his revolver away.

“Oh my God.” Hal was horrified. “Frank?”

Frank just swallowed, still holding the cold expression.

“How . . . how could you do that? They never saw it coming.”

“They were traitors. They killed our people. Did we see what they did coming! No!” Frank shouted. “So sit the fuck down or leave. This is Beginnings and this is the way we deal with it.”

“No one told you to do that Frank.” Hal argued. He looked at his father who said nothing, along with Robbie, Dean and Henry who were silent as well. “No one.”

“And no one does.” Frank took a step to him. “This is what I do.”

“You shot them in cold blood.” Hal said. “How can you live with yourself?”

“A hell of lot better now knowing not another one of our people will get hurt or die because of them.” Frank pointed to the pile. “Welcome to Beginnings Hal.” Frank stepped back, stepped over the pile, moved to the door and left.

“Christ.” Joe tossed up his hand. “And he leaves us with the mess again.” Joe saw Hal was confused. “Hal, this is the way it works. Immediate execution. Perhaps not that immediate.” Joe tilted his head. “They admitted some pretty horrible shit.”

Hal slowly blinked. “I . . . I understand. But . . . Frank? I just watched my big brother do something I could never do.”

Robbie slowly stood up. “That's his job Hal.”

“But it's so . . .”

“Cold?” Dean finished the sentence Hal was having a hard time saying. “Yeah. A lot Frank does takes the ability to lose all emotions.. And I'll tell you what. We in Beginnings are awfully glad Frank has that ability. Or else . . .”

Henry interjected. "We would have been screwed along time ago."

Still not having the best understanding of what, not only the post-apocalyptic world, but Beginnings had made his brother into, Hal returned to looking at the bodies. He tried to let his beating heart slow down. He would get past it, he would have to.

"O.K., well." Joe stood. "I guess we should start thinking about that meeting tonight. Looks like the battle with the society has come to an end."

"Not quite Joe." Henry spoke with solace. "You still have the first ever trial coming up, A trial for treason." Henry hesitated before saying it. "Andrea's trial."

Joe slowly let out a sad breath and turned to face the door.

^^^

Andrea rose slowly from her seat on the bed when the door to her holding room opened. A lump formed in her throat when Joe stepped in and closed the door behind him. "Joe."

"Hey." he spoke soft, hands in his pockets.

"I don't know whether to hate you at this moment or hold you." Andrea stayed strong.

"I wish you would hate me because I don't deserve anything else."

"Jess, Jess told me some of what was going on. Can you?"

Joe nodded and stepped to her. "Let's sit." He motioned his hand to the bed and sat down at the same time as Andrea. "All right. Rev. Bob admitted to knowing everything and to being in contact with George. He states he partook in no wrong doing, and he named the names of people that he said were actively involved in the society ring within Beginnings."

"I see. And he named me." Andrea said.

"Yes."

"That son of a bitch."

"Andrea . . ."

"What did he do Joe? Just name names to get out of trouble?" Andrea asked.

"Unfortunately the seven others he named gave full confessions, explained their positions and listed wrong doings."

"Oh my God." Andrea was shocked. "Seven people."

"Yeah."

"And you think I'm part of this ring?"

"No." Joe shook his head. "I don't. I asked you once Andrea if you were involved with George, you told me no. I will not ask you again."

"Then you believe me, despite what the others admitted?"

"I do." Joe told her.

"So what happens now. I'm innocent."

"I know." Joe took deep breath. "You're gonna stand trial in New Bowman in a couple weeks."

Andrea's eyes widened. "A trial?"

"It's the only way. We can not present evidence to the people of Beginnings. Hal brought up a valid point. They'll think of their losses and

become a lynch mob. We're going to chose twelve Bowman men who know nothing. We'll pick someone to stand over the proceedings, like a judge. The jury will determine your fate."

"My fate?" Andrea gasped out. "Joe, I began this place. Why would I betray it."

"I know."

"They'll shoot me, or hang me. I know the way it works around here."

"But these are Bowman men. Bowman has held trials. They aren't quite as severe as we are and . . . it works in your favor that none of these twelve men are from Beginnings, so therefore none of them have been personally effected."

Andrea closed her eyes. "What becomes of me until the trial?"

"I'm working on that."

"How bad does it look?" Andrea questioned. "The truth."

"Bad." Joe told her. "The letters. Testimonies. Your access to things . . . not too mention your close connection to Rev. Bob."

"He's the Reverend, what doe that have to do with it."

"This is going to shock you, but, Rev. Bob is Actually Rev. Bob Hadly, George's cousin. Family." He looked for the shocked expression on Andrea's face. He saw none. "Andrea?"

"Yes."

"Did you know that?"

Andrea let out a humming, moan.

"Oh, my God, and you never told me?"

"I promised him. He swore that he was disconnected to George. I believed him. He's a man of the cloth."

"And others will believe him too. He has a whole slew of testimony about you. With you knowing about him. This . . . this doesn't look good."

"So basically in Frank's words, I'm fucked."

Joe snickered. "No. We're going to gather evidence to counteract it. Don't you worry. Me and the boys, we'll gather it."

"So tell me this. Who will prosecute me and who will defend me."

"I have an idea about your defense. Someone energetic, quick thinking, bright, charismatic, likable and intelligent, someone who loves to get to the truth. I believe he will. But just incase by that description, you're thinking Frank . . ." He paused when Andrea laughed. "It's not. I'll let you know when I talk to him. I think he'll do it and do well, but I want to check with him first."

"All right. And the prosecutor."

"Probably someone from Bowman." Joe saw Andrea shake her head. "No? Why?"

"I want someone that knows me. I want someone that will present their case fairly and not resort to any low blows."

"I understand." Joe thought about it and smiled. "I think I know who. He'll do a fair job. Present what he has and will gather. For fairness purposes, we'll probably assign a Bowman man as his assistant. But . . . if it ends up being someone you know, you can not hold it against him or hate him."

"No, Joe I won't." Andrea reached out and grabbed Joe's hand. "I'll pray for him."

Joe tapped her hand with a reassuring smile, leaned to Andrea and kissed her on the forehead. "We'll get you out of this mess. I promise."

Andrea closed her eyes.

^^^

The shifting of Alexandra's tiny body back and forth on the stool, caused a tiny squeak as she sat at the counter opening between the kitchen and dining area, patiently awaiting her lunch.

"Alex." Ellen laid a sandwich in front of her and one across from her. "Go to the bathroom."

"I'm fine." Alex sniffed the sandwich.

"O.K." Ellen shrugged and walked back to the stove.

"Hey, Uncle Hal." Alex called out.

Ellen, holding two bowls laid them down and peeked through the opening. "Hal?"

"Frank here?" Hal asked as he stepped inside.

"He's in the back, banging round. I don't know what he's doing."

"Did . . . did you see him?" Hal asked.

"Nope." Ellen slid a stool close to the counter on the kitchen side of the opening. "Want some lunch?"

"No, I'm fine. Why aren't you in school Alex?" Hal asked. "Education is important."

"It's Monday. I have lunch with Mommy on Mondays"

"That's nice." Hal smiled. "Can I go back and talk to Frank?" He pointed with his thumb.

"Sure." Ellen told him. "See if he wants to eat?"

As Hal nodded, he noticed Alex shifting in her seat. "Oh my God."

"What?" Ellen asked.

"She does the same thing as you. Alex, honey, do you want me to walk you to the bathroom?"

Alex giggled. "I can walk myself. I can't go though. Uncle Frank says not until he cleans all the blood from the tub."

Ellen looked up in shock at the same time Hal looked at her. "Hal?"

"He's fine. Not hurt. He'll tell you about." Hal nodded with one eye closed.

"O.K." Ellen said apprehensively. "Tell him I have lunch."

"I will." Hal walked down the hall that led to the bedrooms. At the end he could see Frank, carrying a bundle of clothes and wearing only a towel. "Frank."

"Hey Hal." Frank walked by him. "What are you doing here."

"I wanted to talk to you."

"Sure. Let me throw these in the washer." Frank kept moving toward the living room.

Hal followed him.

Alexandra giggled as Frank walked by in his towel. "Look at Uncle Frank"

Ellen's eyes shifted to the pile of clothes in his hand. "Frank?"

"We'll talk later." Frank walked behind her and kissed her leaving a damp spot on her cheek from his wet goatee. When Ellen cringed, Frank grinned at

Alex. He stole half of Ellen's sandwich and move to the laundry room. "Be out in second!" Frank yelled. After a few bangs of the metal washer and the rumbling of water, Frank emerged into the kitchen, sandwich in mouth. "El, can you . . ."

"I'll make you one."

"Thanks." He took another bite and laid the rest on her plate. "That's good." dusting off his hands he headed back to the hall. "Hal?"

"Yeah." Hal snapped out of it. He was stuck in the thought of how nonchalant Frank was being. He trailed behind Frank to the bedroom.

"So what's up." Frank walked into his and Josh's room. "Hey, Hal check out how good I taught Josh to make a bed."

"Tight." Hal ran his hand over the spread.

Frank stepped into his boxers and pulled them up under his towel. "So what's going on? Why the visit."

"I'm worried about you."

"Me?"

"Yeah, Frank." Hal reached back and closed the door. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine. How are you."

"No, I'm talking about . . ."

"Today." Frank nodded. "Well, don't worry about that. I'm used to it."

"Really. It bothered you."

"No it didn't." Frank started to get dressed.

"Frank, you swallowed."

"I swallowed?" Frank laughed. "I always swallow."

"But you swallowed heavily."

"O.K." Frank tossed his tee shirt on over his head.

"You showed emotion for a split second. That means it bothered you."

"Hal." Running his hand over his wet hair, Frank stepped to his brother. "You brought it to my attention, that's all. No one ever has."

"That's because no one wants to."

"What?" Frank questioned. "What do you mean."

"If they bring it to your attention, then you may start to think about it, you may stop. They can't have it because they don't want to do it. I'm worried about how all this is affecting you."

"It isn't."

"It has to." Hal told him.

"Hal. It doesn't. I'm used to it. I shut it out. I turn into someone else. It's what I have to do, yes, because no one else will take care of it. I appreciate your concern little brother, I do." Frank pulled on his pants and zipped them.

"Well, just know, if you need to talk about it, let someone else outside of these walls know you aren't always the big tough guy . . ."

Frank laughed.

"What."

"Hal, please. I'm always tough."

"O.K." Hal laughed. "You're Frank."

"That's right." With a tilted head, Frank grinned. "And ease up on the concern, it's not you and it's making me feel weird."

"You're right." Hal shook his head. "But just know . . ."

"I know."

Hal let out a breath watching Frank tromp into his boots. "How about that lunch?"

"Sounds good." Frank stood up as Hal led the way from the room. He laid his hand on Hal's back as they walked in a means of gratitude Frank wasn't fully verbalizing to Hal for wanting to be there.

^^^

"All right then, it's settled." Joe sat at his table position before the rearranged social hall packed with silent Beginnings residents. He finished writing on a sheet of paper and handed it to Henry. "And . . . and I want to thank all of you for that." Joe spoke in sincerity. "I know it took a lot, but I promise you, I will insure the rules you set forth. And also, should anyone have any questions regarding what transpired this afternoon and why, please feel free to see me at anytime I'll answer any questions you have. All right . . ." Joe stood up. "Next on agenda. Council position. Andrea, by her own accord dropped from council. That position needs filled. How we'll handle it is, one of you will nominate, someone else has to second, I'll approve or disapprove on qualifications and then the community votes. Got it. Let's do it. Anyone?"

There was silence and then Jenny spoke up. "I nominate Dean Hayes."

Ellen's short shriek of excitement rang out. She held on tight to Dean's hand as she sat next to him "You'll be so good at that."

Dean grunted a 'hmm'.

"I second the nomination." Robbie spoke, then gave a thumbs up to Dean.

"Nomination approved." Joe said. "Dean, do you accept nomination?"

"Yeah, sure, why not." Dean tossed his hand up.

Henry peered up from his papers. "I nominate Jason Godrichson."

"Second." A voice called from the crowd.

"Nomination approved." Joe said. "Jason, do you accept?"

Jason nodded with a closed mouth. "Sure, Joe. Thanks."

Danny Hoi raised his hand. "I nominate Ellen."

"I second it." Ellen interjected quickly.

"Ellen." Joe snapped. "You can't second your own nomination."

"Why?"

"Because you can't."

"Then I second it." Frank called out.

"Figures." Joe rubbed his head. "Nomination denied."

"What!" Ellen gasped out. "You can't do that."

"And you can't serve on council." Joe pointed his pencil at her. "When are you going to find time Ellen? You work in Bowman, at the clinic, containment, and in that sick torturous laboratory."

"Henry works on council and he does a lot." Ellen defended.

"Henry doesn't have all those children either. Christ, Henry has one child he pawns off."

"Joe." Henry shouted. "That isn't very nice."

"Ellen." Joe looked to her. "Do you really want to be on council?"

“Yes Joe, not only would it be fun competing with my husband, but I’d be really good and work hard too. A voice of the people.”

“Christ, all right. I’ll put you on the ballot.”

“Yes.” Ellen nearly jumped from her chair. “Wait. You know what? Never mind.”

Joe grumbled loudly. “Anyone else?” He called out. “Anyone.” No one responded. “Then we have Dean and Jason. Normal secret vote procedure, come on up and write down your vote. And remember people, this isn’t a popularity contest, pick the council member based on who you think would best work for the community. Whenever you’re ready.” Joe sat back down next to Henry who was already ripping strips of paper.

In the far corner of the social hall, Dean stood with Ellen. It was quiet there, and the hall was packed. Everyone hung out waiting for Joe to tally the results.

“El.” Dean saw her staring off. He kept one hand in the front pocket of his Levi’s. She watched toward the front as Joe sat alone counting. Dean had his back to Joe. “El.”

“Did you ever notice how much different this place looks when the tables are moved out of the way and the lights are all the way on.”

“Yeah, well Joe should get a new place for meetings, we can’t fit everyone in here anymore.”

“Oh, Dean that can be your first order of business as new council member.”

“El, I don’t want to be on council, Really.”

“Yes you do.”

“No, I don’t.” Dean stepped to her. “El, let’s just go home. Get the . . .”

“Hey, El.” Henry interrupted. “Look at my finger tips.” He held up his hand.

“Oh, Henry.” Ellen looked at the tiny sliver slices. “What happened?”

“Paper cuts.” Henry shifted his eyes to an irritated looking Dean then back to Ellen. “I want to know if I can stop by tonight.”

“Sure.”

“El.” Dean spoke up.

“Dean.”

Dean clenched his jaws. “El, I want to . . .”

“I won’t stay long.” Henry stated. “I have something for you.”

“Oh! Surprises. I love surprises. Sure Henry come by.”

Henry grinned at Dean. “Thanks El.” He looked back to Ellen. “It’ll be a while, we have to straighten out the hall and speak to the new council member.”

“Which is?” Ellen asked.

Henry shrugged. “I don’t know. Joe’s not telling me.”

“Hey El.” Robbie approached. “Dean.” He gave Dean a thumbs up. “Bet me you’re new council.”

“I really don’t want to be. I hope Jason wins.” Dean said. “Really.” He turned to Ellen. “El, can we get home. Let’s grab the kids, head home before Frank . . .”

“What?” Frank stepped into the small circle. “I heard my name.”

“God!” Dean exclaimed.

“There it is again.” Frank chuckled as he tugged on his own ear. “Dean, the little man council guy.”

“I don’t want to be council. I just want to go . . .”

“Dean.” Joe called his name as he walked to them.

Dean turned around. “Yeah, Joe. I guess you’re finished counting.”

“I am. And I want to talk to you about . . .”

“Joe.” Dean held up his hand. “Look, being on council really isn’t what I want to do. It isn’t. I went along, you know, because I was nominated, but I really don’t want it.”

“Good.” Joe gave a swat to Dean. “That makes my job right now a whole lot easier.” Joe let out a long breath. “Dean, you didn’t win.”

“What!” Dean was aghast. “What do you mean I didn’t win. I lost to Jason?”

“Yes.”

“How can that be, he’s only been here a little over a year. I lost to Jason?”

“By one vote.”

“One vote!” Dean was pummeled.

“One eleven to one twelve.” Joe told him.

“Uh, Dean.” Henry tapped him on the shoulder. “I thought you didn’t want to be on council.”

“Yeah, Dean.” Frank added. “What was the long speech you just gave about not really wanting to do it.”

“Shut up Frank.” Dean snapped.

“Whoa, wait a second. Yell at Henry.” Frank pointed. “He started it. And this really shouldn’t shock you. You don’t have any friends.”

“Neither do you Frank.” Dean came back.

“Dean, please.” Frank said sarcastically. “Everyone loves me.”

Dean ran his hand through his hair holding it up when he reached the crown of the head. “One vote. Joe, just tell me. Did you vote for me?”

“Yes.” Joe nodded. “How did Rev. Bob put it. Demented family loyalty.”

“El?” Dean turned to her.

“Dean of course.” She laid her hand on his cheek.

“Hen . . .” Dean waved his hand and faced Robbie. “Robbie?”

“Dean, I *understand* where you’re concern lies and I also am *understanding* to this community’s needs. *Understanding* that, and *understanding* how much I like you. *Understand* Dean, of course I voted for you.”

“What the fuck was that?” Frank asked.

“Frank?” Dean questioned. “I know this will be a ‘no’ but did you vote for me.”

“Fuck no.”

“There it is.” Dean held his hand out to Frank. “My one vote loss.”

“Dean, I’m kidding. I voted for you.” Frank nodded.

“No you didn’t.” Dean said.

“Yeah he did.” Joe added. “I know. I read the ballots three times for the count. I know Frank’s writing and . . . he spelled your name wrong.”

“What?” Dean chuckled in disbelief. “What did you do Frank, forget the

‘E’ in Hayes.”

“No.” Frank answered quickly. “I know how to spell Hayes. And I didn’t spell your name wrong.”

“Really?” Joe questioned. “Spell the name ‘Dean’.”

“D--E--E--N.”

A unison ‘Uh’ Screamed at Frank from all of them.

“What? Is that wrong?” Frank asked.

Amidst the high pitch hyena laugh that came from Robbie, an appalled squeal was the sound that escaped Dean first before he spoke. “Yes! It’s D--E--A--N!”

“Oh.” Frank nodded. “Well, when did you change it.”

“Frank . . .” Dean stopped himself and bit his bottom lip. He shifted his eyes to Robbie who couldn’t stop laughing. “Never mind.” Dean turned. “El, walk back to the seats with me.”

“When?” Frank yelled out. He received a pacifying pat from Ellen who walked off with Dean, Henry and Joe following. “When?” He looked to Robbie. “How do you spell Dean?”

Robbie, after wiping a tear from his eye, looked up. “D--E--E--N.”

“See.” Frank shook his head in disgust. “Fuckin Dean. Probably messing with me because I’m temporarily mentally disabled.”

“Yeah.” Robbie agreed.

“Yeah. Let’s go sit behind Dean and make fun of him because he lost.”

“Sounds good.” Robbie, shrugging, trailed behind Frank back to their seats behind Dean and Ellen.

Bowman, North Dakota

“And I’ve moved on now to my personal belongings.” Elliott spoke on the phone to Hal in his bedroom. “Your office is pretty much done.” He opened the flap on the box that sat on his bed.

“Are you packing with care?” Hal asked.

“Very much so.” Elliott opened his night stand drawer and dumped it in the box.

“Good to hear. You don’t want to be searching for things when we get to New Bowman.”

“No, I don’t.” Elliott moved for the stack of books on his night stand and stopped. His hand retracted to the small white name tag that sat there.

“Speaking of searching for things. Ellen wants to know if you found her name tag.”

Elliott closed his eyes tight, his facial expression saying ‘damn it’. “Um . . .” His finger ran across the printed name of Dr. Hayes. “Yes. I did. I have it right here.”

“Don’t lose it.”

“Never.” Elliott set it back down. “As far as everything else back here . . .” He moved to his window. “It’s fine. A very peaceful night. It’s pretty cold out and . . .” Elliott spread the curtain further.

“And?”

"Damn it." Elliott thought at first it was his imagination. But then he saw it again. From his second story window, he could see the mountain in the distance of Bowman. And distinctively, despite the distance of the mountain, Elliott could see four dances of orange light. "Fire."

"What?"

"Captain. Let me call you back. I'm spotting what looks like campfires on West Mountain."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive." Elliott released the curtain. "Four. Someone's out there."

"Are you checking with look out?"

"On my way . . ." No sooner did Elliott step from his bedroom that he heard the knock on his front door. "Stay with me Captain." He trotted quickly down the stair and to the door. He opened it.

"Sgt. Ryder sir." Clark, a sentry guard stood out of breath.

"What is it?" Elliott asked.

"Look-out wanted me to inform you sir. We have . . . we have Wildcats on West Mountain. Nighttime is making them hard to count, but through the scope we can tell there is at least fifty."

Elliott spun away from the door and brought the phone closer to his mouth. "Captain, did you hear?"

"Unfortunately." Hal said heavy. "Savages."

"Let me get things situated Captain and I will call you back." Not waiting for a good bye from Hal, Elliott hung up the call, grabbed his coat and immediately left his home with Clark.

Beginnings, Montana

"Dean." Frank's hand hit heavy on the diningroom table, rattling the chess pieces on the board that separated them. "Some fuckin time today."

"I'm concentrating." Dean's eyes shifted to the opening between the kitchen and dining area. An opening sealed off with the closed shutters. "Why do you suppose Henry and Ellen need the shutters closed?"

"They're screwing around. How do I know. It's girl talk. They're probably discussing menstrual cycles."

"If Ellen still had one." Dean mumbled. "Now she doesn't have an excuse." He reached for a chess piece and stopped.

"What do you mean? She's got years of excuses left. Take your turn."

"No, she doesn't Frank. How could she."

"I can't believe we're discussing Ellen's period. O.K., let me explain something to you Dean." Frank leaned into the table. "Since Eve slept with Adam, God cursed women. They are cursed until they're old." Frank winked. "Ellen's not quite old enough to stop. Look at Andrea, she still gets hers. I think. Yeah."

"How the hell do you know about Andrea's menstrual cycle?" Dean asked.

"I'm Frank. I know all." Frank snickered. "No, my Dad bitches. Now take your turn and quit talking about periods."

"You started it because you think it's possible that . . ." Dean reached for a

piece and slowed in his reach. "You don't know."

"Know what?"

Dean's eyes widened. "Ellen didn't tell you."

"Tell me what? And take your fuckin turn here, I'm gonna need a second dinner break soon."

"Tell you . . . tell you . . ."

"Tell me. Tell me . . . WHAT!" Frank blasted.

"That I suck at gynecology. I never could get it right when women do and don't." Dean shrugged in his rattling. "Thanks for enlightening me Frank."

"You're welcome. Now, take your turn."

"Why are you bitching?"

Frank huffed.

"Seriously Frank. You took forever last turn."

"Yeah, but I have an excuse. I'm allowed to be slow."

"Why is that?" Dean was curious.

"Because I'm temporarily mentally disabled. Speaking of which, when will I not be anymore?"

"Um . . . probably next Tuesday. I'll let you know for sure."

"Thanks."

"Your welcome." Dean moved a piece.

"Thank God!" Frank tossed his hands up. "Oh look, they're kissing."

Dean hurried and turned to look behind him. "They are . . ." Dean turned back around. "Give me back your queen."

"Shit." Frank gave it back.

"Take your turn." Dean nodded.

Frank folded his hands, rested his chin on them and smiled when Dean exhaled loudly while Frank stared at the board.

"And I really see a clash coming." Henry said sitting on the stool across from Ellen in the kitchen

"Why is that?" Ellen asked munching on rice cakes.

"Well you know Jason. He likes to think about everything. Remember when we convinced him to go back about Brian." Henry nodded. "It took him a day."

"Joe doesn't like to wait for decisions."

"No." Henry shook his head. "But, still, I think it's for the best that Jason won over Dean."

"Henry, that's terrible. He's my husband. Why would you say that?"

"Well, El, you never know what could happen." Henry shrugged. "How are things with you two?"

"Good." Ellen took another bite. "Even with Frank here."

"Well, you know if something should happen, or if things don't work out. You know where to find me."

Dean's gasp alerted them to his presence in the kitchen. "Oh, my God Henry. What a dick thing to say in my own house."

"Speaking of dicks." Henry stood up.

"Excuse me?" Dean stepped to him.

“You heard me.”

Ellen took a bite. “Oh boy.”

“Henry.” Dean swung out his arm in a point backwards. “Get out of my house.”

“Oh you would just love to keep me away from Ellen with what I know.” Henry’s voice raised.

“What do you know?”

“You know what I know.”

“I now that you’re an asshole, coming into my house . . .”

“Dean.” Ellen snapped out. “I can’t . . .”

“Oh.” Henry’s word held out. “You call me an asshole?”

“Henry.” Ellen switched her views to him. “Could you please . . .”

“Where the hell is this attitude coming from.” Dean stepped closer to Henry.

“Call it protective instincts.” Henry stated.

“Over who?”

“Over Ellen.”

“From who?”

“From you.” Henry pointed.

Dean laughed. “I don’t what the hell you’re thinking. But you can’t walk into my house . . .”

“My house. My house.” Henry repeated. “This is Ellen’s house too. And I’m here to see Ellen.”

“My wife.” Dean nodded. “And I’m telling you to go.”

“And I’m telling you I’m not.”

“Frank!” Ellen called out.

At the same time, Henry and Dean looked at her.

Frank came into the kitchen. “What’s wrong.”

“They’re fighting.” Ellen indicated to Henry and Dean.

Henry shook his head. “We aren’t fighting. Not yet.”

“What is this shit, not yet?” Dean questioned.

“Gentlemen . . .” Frank’s voice was calm.

“Not yet.” Henry reiterated moving closer to Dean. “It’s building.”

“What the hell for! All because I won’t give you an understanding?”

“It goes way beyond that!” Henry shouted.

“Where!”

“Gentlemen . . .” Frank cleared his throat.

“Where Henry!” Dean stated. “You have no one to blame for things you don’t get. Don’t forget your mistakes!”

“Don’t preach to me Dean. Not you!” Henry shook his head as he argued. “You of all people . . .”

“Gentlemen!” Frank shouted. “Knock it the fuck off. You wanna argue, take it outside.”

Henry with a smug look glared at Dean. “I’m up for it.”

“Outside?” Dean laughed. “You know what Henry? Don’t tempt me.”

“Let’s go.” Henry motioned his head.

“Let’s go.”

Ellen peered at Frank. “Thank you very much.”

Frank rolled his eyes and stepped in between them. “All right. Enough. No

one is going outside. This is bullshit. I don't know what you two are arguing about. I don't care. Henry . . ." Frank turned his head to him. "Go home."

"But Frank I . . ."

"Go home." Frank stated slowly. "This is Dean' house. Not yours. You don't come into a man's house and give him shit. I heard him to tell you to leave once, now I'm telling you . . . go home."

"Fine." Henry backed up. "El, I'll see you tomorrow." Henry started to leave and stopped "You know what Frank, you defend him, go on. How long have we been friends. Trust me when I tell you, soon enough you'll feel like the fool for defending him when you find out what he did." He stormed out. The front door slammed loudly there after.

Dean tossed up his hands. "What did I do?"

"I don't know. He's fuckin goofy." Frank said. "Now we have a chess . . ."

Nick's high wail silenced Frank.

"Fuck." Frank's hand cut through the air. "Not only does he come here, fight with you, but he wakes his kid up." Frank started to leave the kitchen

Dean closed his eyes briefly with a smile. "You know what Frank. I'll get him."

"No." Ellen interrupted. "I'll get him you two, you go on and finish your game." She smiled at them both and walked between them to leave the kitchen.,

"Excellent." Frank held out his hand. "Let's go. I'm winning."

Dean laughed. "How do you figure." He walked into the diningroom. "Frank. You did not capture my queen."

"Did too. When you were in the kitchen."

"You weren't even in position to . . . you know what?" Dean sat down. "You're right. You did. Let's play, I'll beat your ass anyhow."

With a 'ha' Frank brought his leg over the chair to sit before the board. "Your move."

^^^

"Mom." Denny, Andrea's teenage son, bolted to her when the door opened and her and Joe walked in.

"Hey little man." Andrea embraced him and kissed him on the cheek.

"How was Bowman?" Denny asked.

Andrea quickly looked to Joe. "Um fine sweetie. Where's Katie."

"I put her to bed. Want me to wake her?" Denny asked. "She's like sleeping though."

"No," Andrea shook her head. "Let her sleep. I want to sit." She walked over to the couch and plopped down.

Joe looked to Denny who stood there. "Denny, can you put some water on for tea for your mother."

"Yes." Denny nodded.

As Joe started to sit, he noticed Denny still standing there. "Denny, I asked if you can put some water on."

"And I answered." Denny said. "I learned how to do that awhile ago."

Joe covered his own eyes and slid his hand down his face thinking of one word 'Frank'. "Denny, could you go and do that for us now. Show us your

skill.”

“Oh, yeah. O.K..” Perky, Denny hurried from the livingroom.

Andrea looked over her shoulder as Denny slipped into the kitchen. “Joe, I can not believe I’m out of there.”

“The community voted to let you out and work until the jury determines things.”

“I’m grateful. What about Rev. Bob?”

“Has to stay in holding.” Joe stated. “He’s admitted his guilt. You’re proclaiming innocence. I’m sorry though that there are restrictions.”

“No.” Andrea shook her head. “No apologies. I can live with out my personal phone, and restricted activities. Just allow me to be at Beginnings day next week and I’ll be fine.”

“Andrea.” Joe kissed her on the cheek. “You’ll be fine anyhow, You’re gonna be just fine.”

Andrea grabbed his hand and sadly nodded.

^^^

Dean’s eyes shifted to the illuminated alarm clock right next to his head. He saw the time of three a.m. and grinned. Sneaky like, he lifted his head, looked at Ellen, rolled over and opened the top drawer to his night stand. Smiling, he pulled out a syringe. Gently flinging off the covers, Dean slipped from bed.

“Dean.” Ellen grumbled.

“Shh.” Dean told her.

“What are you up to.”

“Killing Frank.”

“O.K.” Ellen rolled on to her side, and pulled up the covers.

It was perfect and Dean knew it. Wearing only his boxer shorts, he dropped to his knees at his bedroom door and crawled across the floor, arm over arm. No noise, no clothes to make a ruffling sound. Frank was in a deep sleep. He had to be. He made it to Frank and Josh’s room and the door was closed, hoping it wasn’t lock, Dean reached up and slowly turned the knob. A minor creak emanated as he pushed the door open.

Dean was small and he didn’t need much room, so he only opened the door slightly and he crawled on in. Frank was sleeping on his back, one arm above his head. Grinning, syringe in mouth Dean without even disrupting the floorboards made it to Frank’s head.

Taking the syringed from his teeth and mouthing the words ‘bye-bye’, Dean lifted the syringe and brought it to Frank neck.

The loud ‘Ha!’ and quick snap of Frank’s hand grabbing Dean’s made Dean shriek.

In the dark room, holding on to Dean’s wrist, Frank grinned., “Too slow.” He snatched the syringe from Dean, and swung his legs over the bed as he sat up.

“Shit.” Dean stumbled backwards and then saw Frank coming at him with the needle. “Shit.” He said louder, rolled to his knees and stammered to a run

just as Frank swung down and missed his backside with the diving syringe.

Not only did Dean take off out of that bedroom, but Frank followed in pursuit.

Joe couldn't sleep. He napped. Restless, dreaming of the events of the day, waking from the dream to discover very little time had passed. On the edge of the bed, hair mussed, Joe smoked a cigarette. Trying to relax was forefront, needing something to take his mind off of everything is what he searched.

The first metal slam followed by three thumps caught his attention. But the second slam followed by two made Joe get up and look out the window. "What the hell." Running right by the window, across the yard, behind the modular home, was Dean. Not only was he just in his underwear but he was barefoot as well. Joe was about to chalk it up to something eccentric he was working on until he saw Dean look back. *Dean was being chased?* Joe questioned, then saw the answer. Frank sped by Joe's window, clad only in his underwear as well. Stepping back, hoping nothing was wrong, Joe sat back on his bed. The moment he did, he heard Dean scream and right after, Frank laughed loudly. Smiling and glad to see Dean and Frank were getting along, Joe put out his cigarette and tried again to get some sleep.

CHAPTER TEN

Bowman, North Dakota

October 6

Hal tossed his still burning cigarette in the dawn morning as he walked the streets of Bowman sipping from his steaming cup of coffee. Robbie, armed, walked one side of him, Elliott the other. They neared the landed chopper.

“You sure, you’ll be all right?” Robbie asked.

Hal nodded. “They’re still a good fifteen miles. Haven’t moved.. We’ve been here before. A few may dart in, never all and usually they just go away when they see the numbers we have.”

“True.” Robbie said. “You have a hundred men front lines.”

“Exactly.” Hal sipped.

“And . . .” Elliott added. “We’ve been in black-out all night, so they may also of lost site of us through the trees.”

Robbie stopped at the helicopter door. “Well, the only problem is, whether they see you or not, there isn’t a damn thing you can do about it until they do something. Like us, there’s nothing more me and Frank would like to do than just blow away their camps. But is it right? No. They’re animals . . .”

“But they’re still lives.” Hal concluded. “And you guys make fun of our uniform, but doesn’t it fit into the feel of this whole thing.”

Robbie tilted his head with a smile. “Yeah, it is cowboys and Indians like isn’t it.” He opened the door. “I have to head back. Let Dad know you’re secure, he’s worried.”

“We’re fine.” Hal extended his hand. “We’ll be in contact if we need anything.”

Robbie shook his brothers hand then extended it to Elliott. “And make sure you guys keep us up to date.”

Elliott nodded. “We will thanks. Oh, and Robbie . . .” Elliott reached into his coat pocket and pulled out an envelope. “Could you give this to Dr. Hayes.”

“Sure.” Robbie looked at the wax seal. “This is cute. We have to introduce you guys to this stuff we have in Beginnings. It’s called glue. I’ll give this to Dean.”

“Not Dean, Ellen.” Elliott corrected.

“Got it. Ellen.” Robbie stuck the envelope in his back pocket. “Hal. Elliott.” He jumped in.

Hal and Elliott stepped back as Robbie started the helicopter engines.

“So, Captain.” Elliott looked at Hal. “Your brother. He’ll remember to give that to Ellen.”

“Oh, yes. Without a doubt.” Hal said assuredly.

“Do you . . . do you think he’ll read it?”

Hal watched Robbie lift up into the air. He looked at Elliott with a grin. “Oh, yes . . . without a doubt.”

New Bowman, Montana

It was not a sound in the old world that Joe wanted to hear at seven in the morning, let alone hear it at all. It irritated him. The ‘bang’ of all fifteen pounds of the hard plastic ball on the alley, the rolling of it across the planks the ‘clunking’ as it hit into pins, and the annoying shriek of victory all because some one knocked a few things over. “Christ.” Joe grumbled. “Danny! Come on!” Joe yelled to him as he sat there with his coffee and cigarette.

Danny lifted his hand in an acknowledging wave then picked up another bowling ball as he played center alley of the bowling hall.

Jason Godrichson was at the table, along with Henry. Jason snickered. “At least Joe, we’re getting the morning council meeting out of the way.”

“At a bowling alley. I thought we were through with these.” Joe shook his head.

Henry pointed. “You’re talking about Danny. The man who’s determined to bring civilization back even better.”

“Speaking of civilization. Did you think about it Henry?”

Henry was dumbfounded. “Civilization?”

“No, what I asked you to think about. Running the prosecution end of the . . .”

“Oh, Joe.” Henry shook his head. “I can’t. I can’t do that to Andrea. I love her.”

“Do you want to see someone else do it, and possibly unfairly?”

“No.” Henry answered. “But, still, no matter what she says, she’ll hate me.”

“She’s already gonna hate you Henry.” Joe said. “You gathered the evidence.”

Henry looked at Jason. “What do you think about it?”

“I haven’t had time to give it any thought. I will though.” Jason replied.

“You don’t have an immediate gut response?” Henry asked.

“It’s never wise to give an immediate response. I’ll let you know my feelings tomorrow.”

“Swell.” Henry tossed up his hand.

“Hey guys.” Danny, a little out of breath, approached the table then sat down. “Whew.”

“Bowl well?” Joe asked.

“I suck. But it’s been a while. So what brings you guys to New Bowman so early?”

“New Bowman.” Joe answered. “We need her up and running Danny, ASAP. Bowman has savage problems, Robbie just got back. And it’s best, especially with the camps being spotted here and there, that we put them under our reigns soon.”

“Joe, we’ll be doing that in two weeks.” Danny stated.

“Can it be done in one?” Joe questioned. “How much more is left?”

“Well as you can see, power is up and running. We still have lots of houses to finish getting ready . . .”

“That can be done when they get here.” Joe commented.

“And housing distribution.” Danny added.

“Minor.”

“Tab’s Tavern is still in shambles.”

“Danny.”

“Tracking. That’s the big one.” Danny nodded. “We have the receivers set up in the circumference. We still have to put some up around the power plant and the new roadway from Beginnings to here, we need continuous safe passage. We have to link them, check their signals and test.”

“Can you get on it today with the tracking?” Joe requested.

“Sure. I’ll have to go back to Beginnings and get supplies. But I’ll start.”

“You’ll give me an operational New Bowman in a week?”

“Joe. I’ll give you an operational New Bowman in six days.”

Joe smiled. “You’re the man.”

“But of course.” Danny stood up. “Now, I really have to get back to work. Especially if I have a rush on things now”

“You go right ahead.” Joe told him. “We’re gonna finish up our meeting and head back.”

Danny nodded, waved and moved away.

Henry watched Danny walk over to the alley to gather up his things. “Joe, you didn’t mention the other stuff.”

“Nah. Not yet. I’ll hit him with it later.” Joe picked up his coffee. “One thing at a time.”

Jason intervened. “Do you think he can handle it all.”

With a gasp of his Bowling alley coffee, Joe nodded. “Danny thrives on being busy. Besides, what the hell else does he have to do right?”

Jason and Henry agreed but with some pity because they knew what all Joe had planned ahead for Danny Hoi.

Beginnings, Montana

Dean limped.

The walk to the cryo-lab was just a little too long for Dean’s backside’s liking. When Ellen examined it for him she said the bruise was huge and there was a lump. Had Dean not seen the needle to the syringe, he would have sworn when Frank rammed him with it, the tip broke off and lodged deep into his fleshy tissue waiting to get sucked into his bloodstream and cause a massive stroke.

Frank.

The mere thought of the name filled him with two extreme emotions. Aggravation and pleasure. Not that Frank was a pleasant thought, but the thought of pay-back was.

Dean capped the red marker at the same time the cryo-door buzzed open.

“What’s wrong?” Frank asked upon his entrance.

“Someone tried to get into the Brian case again.”

“Shit. Why didn’t he alarms go off?”

“I don’t know. I thought since, you know, you’re security you could take a look.”

“Shit.” Frank moved to the back room. “Is the case O.K.?”

“Yeah, just the lock is broke again.”

“I’ll look.” Frank walked further away and turned into the room. He slid to a stop when he saw the case. It looked fine. “Dean, I think you’re . . .”

Slam.

Frank turned around, the back room door slammed shut and the door lock. Thinking it slipped, Frank tried the inside security panel. Nothing. “Fuck. I forgot this doesn’t work.” Just as he was about to call out, he heard the tapping on the window. He turned to look and Dean was standing there.

Dean smiled and waved. He held up a piece of paper to the window. In bright red marker it read ‘*you are stuck.*’

“No shit.” Frank said.

Dean held up another, ‘*a poisonous gas will be released into the room*’ He switched sheets. ‘*You have thirsty seconds to get out.*’ Another paper switch and Dean grinned widely. ‘*Starting now.*’ He looked at his watch.

Frank rolled his eyes and tapped on the window. When Dean looked up to him, he flipped him off then smiled with arrogance as he reached into his back pocket and pulled out a screwdriver.

“No.” Dean shook his head.

Bobbing to the door, Frank, biting his bottom lip, placed the screwdriver to the hinges and lifted them. Looking as if he was humming something, he shifted the door enough for him to slip out.

“No.” Dean sang out.

“Free.” Frank gasped. “Smell that fresh cryo air.” He smiled at Dean. “Nice try though. Hey, How’s your butt.”

“I hate you Frank.”

“Try something else, that was fun.” Frank started to leave the lab but stopped on his way out. “Oh, and Dean. The case is fine. I don’t think anyone tried to break in.”

Dean used inner strength to refrain from a sarcastic comment. He knew it would be mental torture because a ‘Frank-style’ comment would be made in return and a battle of half-wits would therefore ensue. “Thanks Frank. Perhaps I was mistaken.”

“Sure.” Frank walked out.

Dean let out a subtle whine as Frank left. He couldn’t walk easily, he certainly lost the ability to sit comfortably for the next day or so, and with the failure he felt from not succeeding to kill Frank, Dean plopped his head on the counter in defeat.

Quantico Marine Headquarters

Dr. Stevenson had made the trip onto base from his special lab in former Washington DC. He wasn’t as presentable as he wanted to be for meeting the president, and the gash across his left cheek didn’t help his appearance either. But he had to see George, it couldn’t wait.

Deemed as making ‘fine progress’ George looked pathetic to Dr. Stevenson. Sitting in the high back wheelchair, head propped up with pillows, the side of his face looking like an extreme case of Bells palsy. In fact, with the way George’s one eye didn’t move, Dr. Stevenson found him almost scary as well.

“They’re ready.” Dr. Stevenson told George and wondered at the same time if George could comprehend him. “Actually they’ve been ready. The batch we were working on and the new batch that we made especially for

Beginnings.” Dr. Stevenson still waited for a response. Was George sleeping, maybe he was and his eyes just wouldn’t close. “I know you’ve pulled in everyone, my God I have a staff again. But even with the staff, we can’t handle them. Should we just destroy them or . . .”

“Send them.”

Dr. Stevenson jumped back. He really wasn’t expecting a response. “Did you just speak?”

“Did you think . . . I couldn’t?” George asked raspy.

“Yes. I mean, no. I mean . . .”

“Send them.”

Dr. Stevenson smiled brightly and with a sound of relief. “With pleasure. Consider them on their way to Beginnings.”

Beginnings, Montana

It would have been like a game of *Let’s Make a deal* to Jess on picking the right garage that Frank was in. But hearing the music of the band *Journey* playing out, led him correctly as if a guiding light.

Carrying a tool box, Jess walked into the garage closest to town. Two trucks were in there and Frank was under the hood of one. “Hey Frank.”

Frank turned his head to the call of his name. “Jess. Hey, Thanks for coming.”

“Robbie said you needed help.”

“Yeah, I want to get my truck running again and I figured, with me and you working on the truck, hey two hands are better than one.”

“Four.”

“For fixing the truck.” Frank explained. “Anyhow, you take under. She’s leaking brake fluid.”

“Brake fluid?” Jess said shocked. “Out of the blue. What are you working on.”

“The rods. Knocking like a bitch when I started her this morning. And I noticed the brake fluid.”

“Odd.” Jess set down the tool box.

“I didn’t interrupt anything you were doing did I? I knew I didn’t have you scheduled.”

“No. Just sleep.” Jess got on the cart and laid on his back.

“Good.” Frank returned his full views under the hood.

Sliding underneath the vehicle, spot light in hand, Jess felt the drip of fluid on his nose. He rubbed it and looked. “Frank.”

“Yeah.”

Jess rolled out and sat up. “Your brake line has been cut.”

“Did it tear?”

“No cut. Someone did it on purpose.”

“Fuckin Dean.” Frank made an adjustment. “He is loving this killing me shit.”

“You could have been killed for real.”

“Nah.” Frank shook his head. “I don’t drive that fast.”

“Don’t you think?”

“I try. But it’s been hard lately. I don’t feel any different but Dean says I’m

temporarily mentally disabled until next Tuesday.”

With a slow nod of Jess’ head, he laid back on the cart. “I’m gonna check it out again.”

“O.K.”

Jess slid under the truck.

“Frank.” The slight peeping shy sound of her voice, described Denice better than any detailed description. Tiny soft, and young, just like Denice looked.

Frank thought it odd she was there in the garage. Very odd. So coming out from under the hood, he grabbed a towel to wipe off his hands and prepared himself in case Denice was there to try something deadly on behalf of Dean. “Hey, Denice. What’s up.”

“I need to speak to you Frank.”

Frank turned his head to the rolling wheels. “Hey, Jess. Do you know Denice.”

Jess sat up then stood. “I think we met twice.” He shook Denice’s hand. “Johnny’s girlfriend or ex.”

“Yes.” she nodded. “You’re Robbie’s roommate?”

“Yeah. Hey Frank, I have to run down to storage. There’s another fuel line down there.” Jess backed up. “Nice seeing you Denice.”

“Same here.” Denice smiled politely, like she always did, then returned to Frank. “Thanks for talking to me.”

“Sure. Not a problem. Stop by anytime.” He returned to the truck. “But we didn’t talk for long. Maybe next time.”

“Frank.” Denice walked to the truck. “I didn’t talk to you yet.”

“Oh, sorry.” Frank stood straight. “What’s up.”

“Johnny.” Denice sighed his name. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed but he’s been different lately.”

“No, I haven’t. Of course, I’ve been out of town.”

“I heard. Anyway, the problem is he hasn’t seen or been around the baby in two weeks.”

“El had the baby yesterday,. Didn’t she pick her up from Johnny?”

“No.” Denice shook her head “He’s blowing me off. He doesn’t even ask about her. It’s rough Frank. You, Ellen and Joe take the baby for an hour or so, but I really need a break here and there. If you could schedule Curt less . . .”

“I can’t. We’ve moved to level three security. If we were at two, I’d say yeah.”

“Can you talk to Johnny?” Denice asked. “She’s his daughter.”

“I can talk to him. Sure.” Frank began to work on the truck. “I’m sure something’s just been up. Not that it’s an excuse, but I’ll talk to him.”

“Thanks, Frank. I appreciate it.” Denice backed up

“And if things don’t change, just tell me and El, all right. We’ll take the baby for a day or two.”

“But there are so many children in the house already.”

“Exactly.” Frank stated. “One more doesn’t matter.”

“Thanks, I’ll take you up on that. And I’ll let you be.” Crossing her arms Denice moved to the door.

“Oh, Hey Denice?”

“Yes?” she said as she turned and stopped.

“Thanks for not killing me for Dean.”

Denice’s mouth opened and closed, her eyes shifted in wonder and she put on a confused, fake smile. “Sure. No problem.” Widening her eyes with a slight roll, Denice turned around and left Frank alone with his truck.

^^^

There had to be a reason for it, Ellen figured. The buzz of the cryo-lab door opening didn’t even make Dean flinch. Was he engrossed in deep thought? Was he standing and leaning over the counter to expose to her his rear? Ellen stepped closer. Dean didn’t move. His small body, so cute to Ellen, just sort of laid there. At first she wondered if he died, but before fear struck her, she saw the rise and fall of his back as he breathed. And then she snapped her finger in realization. Dean had found a better way to view a sample using his microscopic vision. He’d hover over it. “Dean?” She called and stepped to him. “What are you viewing?”

Nothing. No words. Nothing.

“Dean?” She tapped him on the shoulder.

“Huh?” Dean’s head sprang up.

Ellen laughed. “Were you sleeping like that?”

“No. No.” Dean rubbed his eyes. “I dozed off for a minute.” His eyes shifted to his watch. “Shit. Sixty minutes.”

Ellen snickered. “How in the world . . .”

“Ow.”

“What?”

Dean merely moved an inch. “I can’t move.”

“What do you mean.”

“My back. It’s stuck like this.”

Ellen bit her bottom lip to stop herself from laughing, “Do you want me to get a chair and lower you into it?”

“No, I can’t sit. Thanks to Frank. Just help straighten my back.”

Ellen shrugged and walked behind him. “This is a true sign of your getting old.” She braced his shoulders, lifted her knee, pressed to the small of Dean back and yanked him up.

Dean shrieked.

“Better?” Ellen asked.

Dean tilted his head. “Yeah, thanks.”

“I take it you didn’t kill Frank today.”

“No.” Dean shook his head.

“What’s next.”

“I have to seriously reevaluate how I’m gonna do this. Any chance that Frank can turn it around is a chance I don’t want to take.”

“Your poor rear-end.”

“Tell me about. And trust me when I tell you, there isn’t anything scarier than being chased at three in the morning, outside, in the cold, by a fast moving six-foot three, two hundred forty pound man in his underwear.”

Ellen laughed.

“Enough of Frank.” Dean exhaled. “Do you have it?”

Ellen grinned and lifted from her lab coat pocket a petri dish. She handed it to Dean. “Fresh flesh off the former face.”

Dean glanced down at it. “Oh, El, good sample.” He took it to the counter. “Thanks.”

“How did he handle the biopsy?”

“Pretty good. He doesn’t have any nerve endings so he didn’t feel a thing. And it’s not like anyone is gonna notice we took a little more off of him.”

“True.” Dean moved to the sink and turned it on. He began to wash up. “I’ll get the equipment, you get the rabbit samples. I think it’s time we cultivate.”

“Oh Dean I love when you talk scientifically dirty to me.” Ellen fake shuddered, grinned and walked to the fridge.

Shaking his head, Dean continued in washing up.

^^^

It was the right thing to do, especially since Frank was in town checking the access codes on all the buildings. So close to the clinic, Frank only felt it his responsibility to boost the moral of one of his men who lay in there. Especially since Dean had placed Jeff on a suicide watch.

How evident it was to Frank that the day was winding down. The clinic was quiet, and his heavy walking was like an announcement over the speaker system that he was there. He turned the first bend to the patient rooms and the steady beeping caught his attention. He slowed down at the door and peered in. John Matoose, bandaged and with tubes coming every which way from his body, lay there.

“He’s pretty bad,” Johnny spoke behind Frank.

Frank jolted around. “Hey, John. What was that?”

“In case you’re wondering. John Matoose is bad. He’s in a coma.”

“Oh.” Frank looked back in. “O.K., I’m off to see Jeff.”

“Don’t you care?”

“Not really. But . . . I’m glad I’m ran into you. Denice stopped by to see me.”

Johnny closed his eyes in a wince. “What did she want.”

“John?” Frank had wonder in his voice. “What’s with the attitude?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why all of the sudden do you hate her?”

“She broke up with me Dad.”

“So is that why you haven’t seen your kid.”

Immediately Johnny’s mouth dropped open. “What?”

“She said you haven’t seen your kid in two weeks.”

“Bullshit.”

“That’s what she said. Is it true?”

More than anything Johnny wanted to snap at his father, hoping that Frank wasn’t gearing into a lecture, because to Johnny, Frank had no right. “I’ve been busy.”

“Busy? Too busy to see your daughter.”

“Where!” Johnny’s voice raised. “Do you get off?”

“Excuse me?” Frank stepped closer to him.

“I said, where do you get off.”

“John.” Frank had warning to him.

“No.” Johnny shook his head. “I’ve been busy. Yeah. Too busy for my kid. Sound familiar . . . Dad?” With edge to his tone and demeanor, Johnny turned on his heels and stormed off.

Frank bit his bottom lip, wanting to charge after him, but he didn’t. He stayed calm and remembered his purpose for the clinic visit.

Jeff.

Poor Jeff. And hoping he could help, Frank headed to his room. He put on the perky attitude and strutted in. “Hey . . .” Frank stopped cold. Jeff’s bandages had been removed since the last time he saw him. “Oh my God! I mean, bad cut you have there on your face.” Frank cleared his throat and stepped closer to the bed, trying not to wince as he stared at what looked like muscle and bone.

“Hey Hank.

“Frank.”

Jeff rolled his one good eye.

“So . . .” Bound and determined to act normal, Frank pulled up a chair and sat. “I only have a minute. I have to meet Robbie, we’re checking perimeters that you usually do with him. Not that I’m complaining about doing your work.” Frank held up his hand. “How are you?”

Jeff shook his head.

“I heard Trish dumped you.”

Jeff moaned.

“What? No.” Frank said. “You can’t get upset about that. Please. Jeff.” Frank leaned closer, got too good of a look and pulled back. “Women aren’t all that anymore. Not that I’m telling you to not like them, but . . . did you ever wonder why God wiped out most of the women on this earth. So us men don’t have the stress. We’re all gonna live longer. You’re gonna be fine without her.”

Jeff nodded slowly taking in Frank’s words.

“Besides, it’s a good thing. Now you won’t have that extra added burden.”

“Huh?”

“Yeah. I mean, think about it. If she didn’t leave you, then you’d have to worry about her leaving you anyhow for someone better looking. Not that you aren’t a handsome man.” Frank nodded. And mumbled ‘half’. “But . . . Women are fickle. And . . . you have to worry about these experimental treatments that Ellen and Dean are gonna do to you.”

Jeff’s one eyebrow raised in curiosity. “Ut do ew een?”

“Did you ever see what they have in that mad lab of theirs. Man . . . you should see what they did to this one rabbit. Boy is he fucked up. Well.” Frank slapped his hands on his own thighs and stood up. “I have to go. Just wanted to pop in and cheer you up.” He tapped his hand on Jeff’s leg. “I enjoyed the visit. I’ll stop by tomorrow.” Frank walked to the door.

Jeff shifted his eye and moaned in relief as Frank left.

^^^

At first, Denny whined with a stomp, then Josh, did the same thing.

“Aw. No.” Denny complained. “We’re busy Danny.”

“Doing what?” Danny laughed.

“Walking.” Josh answered.

“To where?” Danny asked.

“Home.” Denny nodded. “See ya.”

“Whoa.” Danny reached out and snatched the teenager by the arm and yanked him back. He handed him a folder. “Take this to Trish, she’s home, you go right by her house.”

“Aw.” Denny whined again. “But that’s like what Josh? Ten extra steps?”

“More, because we would have to actually walk up the real steps to knock on her door.”

“Twelve.” Denny said. “Twelve extra steps.”

“Tough.” With a tilted head and a bright smile, Danny stepped back. “See ya. Thanks.”

Both teenage boys stood with their mouths hanging open.

“God.” Josh exclaimed. “The grown ups kill us.”

“I know. Work us to death.” Denny moved two feet to the second row of house. “Like Danny couldn’t take this.”

“I know.” At the first house, they walked up the two steps and Josh knocked. “She’s not home.”

“Let’s go.”

Just as Josh stepped off the porch, the door opened. With a turban style towel on her head, and a tan jogging suit, Trish pushed open the screen door. “Hi.”

“She’s home.” Josh looked at Trish and quickly turned around.

Trish looked at the silent teenagers who just stood there., “Do you want me for something.?” They were quiet. “Hello? Did you want to come in?”

“No!” Denny moved forward. “Danny said to give this to you.” he looked away.

“Thanks.” Trish took it and noticed the boys staring at the ground “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Josh said nervously.

“Nothing.” Denny repeated.

“O.K., thanks.” Trish, happy to get the awaited second batch from Danny, excitedly opened the folder as she kicked the door closed.

Whistling, Josh moved from the house. “Did you see that?”

“Yeah. I can’t believe she answered the door like that.”

“I thought women always did their hair before being seen. I mean does she know how dumb she looked with that thing wrapped on her.”

‘A towel. No, or she wouldn’t answer the door like that. Like, I wouldn’t and I’m a guy.” Denny said.

“Neither would I.”

“I couldn’t look at her or I would have laughed.”

“Me too, it was tight and pulling her eyes like this . . .” Josh pulled on the corner of his eyes.

So engrossed in their conversation the boys were, that Denny nearly knocked over Gemma who really tried to get around them.

The older woman stumbled back. “Boys!” She said with a scold. “Watch

where you going.”

“Sorry.” Denny apologized.

“Sorry. We were talking.”

“Yeah, about Trish.”

“That’s not nice.” Gemma told them. “You shouldn’t talk about people.”

“But she answered the door in a towel. Can you believe that?” Denny exclaimed. “Man.”

“A towel?” Gemma asked. “Just a towel? Only a towel.”

“Yep.” Josh nodded. “And . . . it was just on her head.”

“Oh my God.” Gemma stepped back. “Did she say anything?”

“She said Hi.” Denny answered. “And then she asked of if we wanted her.”

Gemma gasped.

“Then.” Josh added. “She asked us in her house. We couldn’t do it.”

“No.” Denny shook his head. “Not with how she was, you know, with that towel on her head.”

“You were very good boys.” Gemma patted Denny on the arm. “Your mother will be proud and Josh, how un-Frank like of you.”

“Thanks.” Josh smiled.

“You boys go on home. I think I’m gonna talk to Joe about this. This isn’t right, she shouldn’t have showed herself to you like that.”

“No way.” Denny said. “I wouldn’t answer the door like that.”

“Me either.” Josh commented.

“Thank you for telling me this.” Gemma seemingly offended, stepped back and began to walk briskly away.

“See.” Denny pointed. “Gemma agrees.”

“I’m glad it’s not just us.”

“Me too.”

“Let’s go to your house, your mom’s a better cook.”

“O.K.” Denny shrugged and then in their own teenage world, the boys moved nonchalantly home.

^^^

Bev ducked from the water and glass particles that flew about when Johnny sailed a glass across the livingroom smashing it off the far wall.

“Johnny, calm down.”

“I hate him.” Johnny’s voice was growling. “Do you even understand how much I hate him. God!” Johnny tensed up bringing his closed fist into his body. “He has nerve calling my house, telling me he told Denice I would be over to get the kid.”

“It won’t be long.” Bev told him. “It’ll be over.”

“Fucking dead. That’s what he has to be. And . . . the brake thing didn’t work.”

“Did you think it would?”

“What?!” Johnny spun to her.

“Did you think it would work. Come on Johnny, it was so obvious, you keep that up, another investigation will start around here. We just lost suspicion.”

“As much as I hate to admit it, you’re right.” Johnny rubbed the top of his head and then scratched it hard in frustration.

“There has to be a way to make it look like an accident. Or at least like someone else is doing it.”

“Yeah, but there isn’t anyone around here that wants my father dead.” Johnny suddenly swung his head Bev’s way, the glare of anger was replaced with a grin. “Oh no, this is too easy.”

“What is?”

“The solution to my dilemma. One word.” Johnny held up his finger. “Dean.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Bowman, North Dakota

“Scattering.” Elliott told Hal as they walked to the east portion of town.

“How many, which way?”

“Scouts say, teams of six.”

“They plan.”

“We under estimated them.”

Hal stopped walking. “What . . . what is making this so different. When did they start this shit?”

“Maybe they had it in the works and just wanted to wait until their numbers were larger.” Elliott guessed. “But are they that smart?”

“Obviously we’re finding out.” Hal started walking again and picked up the pace. “I know it’s exhausting to our men, but let’s keep the heavy lines up, relief of posts every four hours.”

“Got it.” Elliott began to go in a different direction, he stopped and spun to Hal. “Captain. I was thinking about something”

“What is that?”

“We sent two scouts out yesterday morning to look for Stan and Bud. They went in the same direction that our savages came from.”

Hal’s head dropped. “I didn’t even think of that.”

“Sorry.”

With a heavy breath, Hal lifted his head. “Let’s get this situated now and when it’s clear, I’ll get my brother to fly down here, we’ll look for them by air.”

“Sounds good.” Elliott backed up to walk.

“And Elliott, get some rest. You’ve been up all night. You can’t be on your toes if you’re tired.”

“Yes, sir. Maybe in a bit.”

Receiving his salute, Hal moved at the same time as Elliott, both of them to the front lines of two different parts of Bowman.

Beginnings, Montana

“Robbie.” Frank reached for Robbie’s back pocket but Robbie jumped away.

“No, Frank.”

“Let me see.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“It’s personal.” Robbie moving back from Frank, tauntingly pulled the envelope, crinkled and folded from his back pocket. “See. Dr. Hayes.”

“Why is he writing her letters.” Frank reached for it.

“Who Elliott?” Robbie chuckled and pulled his arm back. “To be nice. To have conversation, sort of.”

“Conversation?”

"Yeah. He likes having conversation with her."

"Why don't you just say 'talking' to her."

Robbie shrugged and tapped the envelope on his hand.

"You read it, didn't you. I see, the seal's broke."

"I sat on it."

"Bull shit. It's open now, let me see."

"I don't know Frank, maybe . . ."

"Robbie!" Frank snapped and held out his hand.

"Because you're my big brother. Here. Don't say anything." Robbie laid the letter in Frank's palm. "Read as you walk, I wanna get this perimeter done."

Frank slipped the note from the envelope. "Is this right? I mean reading this."

"Frank, please. Ellen would share anyhow."

"You're right."

"Besides," Robbie walked. "I don't believe, not that I know for sure mind you, But I don't believe there's anything in there that . . ." Robbie felt the slightness of it hit his leg at the same time he heard the tiniest 'snap'. "Frank?" Robbie looked to his right then as he peered down to see the thin wire on the ground, a simple 'pop' rang out followed by a small emergence of white smoke. "What the hell?" Robbie waved his hand to clear the smoke.

"Bet me I know." Frank walked to in front of Robbie, pulled on the wire and followed the smoke. "I knew it." Stuck to a tree where the wire was attached, was a note. Frank ripped it off. "Dean." He handed the note to Robbie.

Robbie laughed as he read it, "*Frank, if you read this, you must have found my trap. Ha. Ha. Ha.*" Robbie shook his head. "How immature."

"Yeah." Frank grabbed his radio and called into it. "Dean. Dean. Dean. Dean. Dean."

"What!" Dean blasted back over the airwaves.

"I found your trip wire and enjoyed the little puff of smoke."

"Then I killed you?"

"No, Dean, you killed my fuckin brother."

"Shit."

"Yep. But, nice try. Oh and Dean, it's moments like this that really show that you were an officer in the armed forces, Bye." Laughing, Frank lowered the microphone away from his mouth,. "Now." He lifted the letter from Elliott Ryder to Ellen with a grin and opened it.

Mark in security was an avid reader. Never without a book, especially while working tracking. Of course it was something that he didn't let Frank see him with. He felt like a kid with a dirty magazine every time Frank busted him reading. But working tracking was boring. The occasional beep of an animal entering the zone would take Mark from his reading long enough to identify size and weight. He had to admit it was pretty interesting with the killer babies running around up there, but they seemed to have either wandered off or died and Tracking returned to being boring once more.

He enjoyed reading *Gone with the Wind* and expected great things from *Scarlet*. But reading material and choices were running so short in Beginnings,

Mark started to contemplate becoming the world's next great author. After all, to Mark, competition was minimal.

He was enjoying his daydream of literary compliments from those in Beginnings when the beeping caught his attention. Peering up from his page stare, the book dropped from Marks hand. The beeping blared steady and loud and Mark grabbed the radio. "Frank. Come in."

Crinkling the letter in his left hand, Frank held up a 'wait' finger to Robbie as he adjusted the microphone on his headset. "Yeah." Frank's eyes lifted to Robbie. "Shit. Where . . . Fuck. . . How many? All right I'm on my way." Last word spoken and Frank handed the letter back to Robbie as he started to briskly walk. "Go to the hanger get the chopper ready. We have a breach."

"Where."

"Area twenty-two. Three miles and moving top human speed."

"Too close to home."

"Too close to our most vulnerable area."

"SUTS?"

"Don't know." Frank shrugged. "My guess." He paused. "Savages."

"How would they know enough to hit our vulnerable area. Can't be."

"We'll know when we hit the air now, won't we?"

Robbie stopped walking just at the point where they would separate and he would go toward the hanger and Frank to tracking. "Firepower."

Frank had to think for a second. "The area's dense. Dean-2 tipped, no, wait, Dean-3, tipped, that will work."

"Got it."

"See you in five." Frank took off running toward the direction of the utility buildings.

"A pedophile." Gemma stated to Joe.

Joe's head just dropped forward onto his desk and he whined.

"Joe?"

Joe lifted his head with an almost laugh. "Trish?"

"She exposed herself to the boys and . . . and . . . offered herself."

"I find that really hard to believe." Joe defended. "Maybe you miss understood those boys, they can be morons."

Gemma gasped. "They are our young. Our future."

"Oh God." Joe began to rub his temples.

"Talk to them."

"I'm going to have to. This is a serious offense you're accusing her of. And knowing those boys, what actually happened is no where near what you're telling me."

"Let's just hope. Because the last thing anyone needs is . . ."

"Dad." Frank called out as he just walked into the office.

"Frank." Joe stood up. "Glad you're here."

Frank, seeing Gemma sitting there, motioned his head back in a signal to

Joe for him to come out side.

Joe happily obliged and closed the door behind him. "What's up?"

"Got a breach, area twenty-two."

"Near the east tunnel."

"Twenty humans, heading fast, now about one and a half miles from the tunnel entrance."

"Christ."

"We're taken them out by air."

"Frank . . ."

"They're too close. They have to be taken out. Especially if they're savages."

Joe sighed. "Frank, they can't be savages. They hitting out most vulnerable area."

"My gut tells me otherwise."

"What do you plan on using?" Joe asked.

"Can't fire on them. Too dense and we can't take a chance on hits spreading. We're gonna try the Co-2, tipped missel."

"No. It's too deadly."

"No other choice. We're going with tip three. That's our best option. The oxygen saturation of 1.28 percent is only in a half a kilometer circumference of ground zero. It'll dissipate the further out it goes."

"Half a kilo is not much room."

"They aren't spreading out any further."

"Be accurate."

"Got it." Frank backed up. "I'll radio."

"Frank." Joe called out as his son took off. "Masks. I mean it."

With a mere nod, Frank charged for the hanger.

"Well, I'll be a son of a bitch." Robbie sat up in his helicopter seat. "You're were right."

Frank nodded. "Savages."

Below them through the trees they kept a steady pace, they ran, in a group, straight toward Beginnings.

"This is gonna be tough." Robbie commented.

"They're scattering. I'll fire you drop, hover as close s you can. We have to nail it."

"Got it." Robbie tilted the chopper and swung out preparing to make another sweep. "Masks."

"Masks." At the same time, both Robbie and Frank lifted and secured their gas masks. Frank stood up from the seat and moved to the back of the chopper. He grabbed his M-16, slid the door open and braced himself in the opening. "Ready!" He aimed to fire and with his weapon on automatic. He began to lay fire. But the savages kept running forward even as the dropped.

Robbie slowed the chopper down to a near hover releasing the missel. The slight long whistle precluded the crack and then the cloud of smoke that rose up.

Frank stepped way form the still open door, leaving it that way so as they flew the deadly smoke that seeped into the chopper would eventually air out. He

moved up front and saw Robbie reaching for his mask. “No.” He grabbed his hand. “Leave it on.”

“You think it worked.”

Frank looked out the window, he couldn’t see a thing through the thick cloud that lingered in one small section of the woods. “We’ll have to wait and see. We’ll be landed before it even takes effect.”

Mark watched the strong life signal beeps of tracking, one by one, stop moving and stop beeping. He smiled, pleased, knowing full well what that meant. Two to three minutes, according to Dean’s tests and the Dean-3 tip missel will have completed it’s destruction. Mark looked at his watch. Two and a half minutes. The twenty beeps had made it to eight then five. It was a count down, but Marks eyes stayed on the ones that still moved, but had to have inhaled enough of the deadly substance. Four . . . moving . . . three . . . still moving . . . two . . . moving steady . . . one, and Mark waited. He watched the screen intently waiting for the lone strong beep to stop, before it hit the entrance it was so close to.

Nothing.

Beeping.

Silence.

Relief.

Alarms.

“Shit!” Mark sprang forward his eyes moving to another monitor as a different alarm sounded off. More of a siren. “Frank.” He spoke rapidly into the radio. “East tunnel. Motion just picked it up. We have an intruder!”

^^^

“And squad four, you take the two tunnel entrances center town.” Frank ordered out through his headset as he dropped down into the east tunnel by the quantum and mobile labs. Robbie, Dan, and three other security men stood there waiting. Frank shoved a clip in his M-16. “O.K.” He spoke to them. “I have teams coming in from the north, south and west. The only way out is this way or up. Dan, you stay here.”

“Got it Frank.” Dan readied his weapon.

“Robbie, the rest, fan out. These fuckin tunnels are like mazes. He may be panicked because he’s trapped.” Frank pumped the chamber on his M-16. “Shoot to kill, gentlemen. Let’s go.” He started to march ahead.

“Frank.” Robbie called out. “Wait.”

Frank turned around in his walk. “What’s up.”

“Center town. Four o’clock. Where are our mad scientists?” Robbie questioned.

“They better be fuckin home.” Frank reached for his radio.

“Whew!” Ellen waved her hand in front of her nose as she turned the speed of the fan up high. The fan pointed out the open cryo-lab door.

“It’ll air out.” Dean said waiting at the counter.

“I hope.” Ellen made her way back. “We have to do this now? It really stinks in here.”

“Yeah, El.” Dean stood over a trembling rabbit, strapping him down. “We could have done this earlier had *someone* checked on the last rabbit sooner.”

“I thought he was sleeping. Sorry.” Ellen moved closer and placed on a pair of gloves then stood on the other side of the counter.

“It shouldn’t take as long to do this rabbit . . .”

“Face lift?”

Dean raised his eyes with a chuckle. “Did you call Hap to tell him we’d be late.” Dean looked oddly around. “Do you hear that crackling.”

Ellen listened. “Sounds like static, with that fan going it’s hard to tell. And yeah, I called Hap.”

“You know what he was like the last . . .” Dean turned his head quickly to the right. “Is that my radio?”

Leaning far to her left, Ellen tried to hear. “Yeah.” She grabbed it, bits of her name made it through, but it was interrupted by the static. she banged it off her hand. “It has to be the fan. But it sounds like Frank.” She depressed the button. “Whatever you’re saying Frank we can’t make it out!” She yelled out and set the radio down. “If it’s urgent he’ll find us.”

“The sedative ready?”

“Nope.” Ellen reached for the vial and the syringe. “How much. He’s a big rabbit.”

“Twenty-five milligrams should be enough. No overdose, you killed the last one.”

“God, make me out to be a bunny murderer.”

“Get the syringe read, I want to do this.”

Ellen held up the vial and lifted the syringe. Before she could plunge the needle into the tip of the vial, the loud ricocheting crash of the knocked over fan made her jolt. When she looked up to the door her mouth opened. A scream came out but it wasn’t her.

War call. Savage.

“Shit.” Dean jolted his views. “Duck.”

Ellen did when the tall boney savage sailed a small spear across the room at her. It whizzed above her head just as she lowered and then it smashed into the wall. Instincts telling her not to stay on the floor, Ellen stood fast to her feet from behind the counter. There wasn’t a split second to look at Dean who was standing. The savage charged across the room, leaped in a hurl mid-lab and lunged toward Ellen. His body made it to the counter when Dean barreled his small frame onto his back, crashing the savage into the counter’s edge. There was a slight bounce as the edge seared into the savage’s gut, and with the velocity of the bodily hit Dean gave, both the savage and Dean careened down to the floor. They rolled a few feet in an entanglement Dean was not expecting. Coming to a stop the savage jumped up, his long hair dangling in his face, and he reached for another spear from his the strap on his back. Raising it high to Dean who was backing off, he didn’t hear the long cry out ‘no!’ from Ellen. Just as he went to plunge the spear, he dropped it, grunted out, grabbed his calf,

lifted it and began to hop. He spun around with vengeance to see Ellen backing up.

'She kicked him? What the hell . . .' Were the immediate thoughts to race into Dean's mind as he made it to his feet in time to see the savage go after Ellen. Knowing he was smarter than kicking the savage, Dean in an attempt to stop him again, leaped up onto the savages back.

The savage did not go down.

Crying out louder, the savage swung back and forth in angry annoyance trying to shake off Dean who clung to his neck and was attached to his back.

"El." Dean called through his struggles to hold on and hold back the savage who was at least a foot taller than him. "Call Frank."

"Frank!"

"Radio." Dean grunted as he and the savage began to crash into things.

"Shit." Ellen stumbled in a run to the counter, reached for the radio and stopped. She smiled brightly, grabbed the vial and the syringe. In her hurried move back to Dean she plunged the needle into the vial and filled it all the way up. "Hold him!"

"What?"

"Hold him." Ellen moved about her arm trying to aim for a spot.

"What do you think I'm doing. Call Frank."

"No." Ellen squatted, stood, leaned to the left and the right.

"El!"

"Dean. I'm trying to find a . . . yes!"

"What . . ."

Ellen dropped from sight.

"El?"

A high pitch squeal, long and gasping, came from the savage at the same instance his legs buckled and he dropped to the ground slamming hard to the floor knees first with a bang. The inhaling, wheezing scream continued as the savage's hands joined in a cup to his crotch. As Dean lifted from his back, the savage, still squealing and with rolling eyes, fell face forward to the floor. He didn't move.

Dean looked to Ellen who grinned and held the syringe. "You knocked him out."

"Yeah. I found the perfect spot. He's out like a light." Ellen nudged him with her foot. "I need another needle." she moved across the lab tossing the syringe she just used in the bin.

"For what?"

"For . . ." Ellen, with another syringe, plunged the needle in the vial. "To ensure his sedation. This *is* bunny Thorazine. But we did use it on that deer the one time." Shrugging she bent down to the savage.

"El." Dean ran his fingers through his hair. "Why are you doing that?" He watched Ellen inject the savage with another full syringe into the neck.

"I told you . . ."

"Yes I know to ensure he's out. Why, Frank's just gonna kill him anyhow."

"No." Ellen stood up.

"No?"

"Dean listen." Ellen stepped back and dropped the syringe to the floor.

“Think about it. What were we just discussing?”

“Lots of things. When? Be more specific.”

“About our meds. How we’ve abused the poor field workers long enough testing them. How Joe how won’t let us try anything too dangerous on them.”

“Yeah, so.”

“So.” Ellen twitched her head down to the motionless savage.

“No.”

“Dean, why? It’s perfect. No one knows about him. He’s a savage. Who cares?”

“Ellen, that’s right. He’s a savage. He’s wild.”

“So are some of the animals we’ve brought in here. We have the deer room in the back. It’s not clean, but neither is he.”

“El.” Dean held up his hands. “No. Joe will have a fit.”

“How’s Joe gonna know? Really. Think of it. Skin chunking tests. Anti inflammatory agents that we want to try. Surgery techniques. You name it. Anything, he’s fair game and . . .” She held up her finger. “If it tortures him we can justify it.”

Dean bobbed his head in thought. “True, really, how many humans has he tortured?”

“Exactly.”

“You’re getting like me.”

“You’re my husband.”

Dean’s smiling face peered up to Ellen who smiled as well. “O.K., go get the shackles ready in the back. I’ll start to drag him.”

Releasing a ‘yes’ as she skipped, Ellen spun and ran to the far left corner of the lab as Dean bent down with a shaking head to the savage.

^^^

Hiss.

“Frank.” Robbie spoke though Frank’s ear piece. “Nothing this way.”

“I’m running a blank too. Where the fuck is he?”

“He couldn’t have gotten out. Hey, I got a hold of Dean. They’re fine.”

“Did they lock up?”

“I guess..”

“I’m right near there. I’ll check on them.” Frank rounded the bend. “Get back to me.”

“I will.”

Taking few steps closer, Frank could see the light from the cryo-lab seeping into the hallway. “Shit, they didn’t lock . . .” Frank immediately cringed “What is that smell? Fuck.” He kept his hand over his nose as he made it to the cryo-lab door. The disturbed fan flipping and making a racket on the ground while it still ran, sent warning signs to him. Reaching down to turn it off, Frank saw the lab at the same time silence hit. “El!” In a panic he called out racing in.

“Oh hi Frank.” Ellen came from the back.

“Hey Frank.” Dean followed behind her and shut the door.

Frank breathed out in relief looking about the disrupted lab. “What the hell happened in here.”

“Him.” Ellen pointed to the rabbit on the counter all strapped down.

“Him?” Frank asked.

With a ‘whew’ and a chuckle, Dean stepped forward. “Yeah, he was all over this place.”

“And the smell?” Frank asked.

“Death.” Ellen quickly answered. “Yeah, we found a rabbit, dead, you know, it happens.”

“I smelled dead animals before. It doesn’t smell like that. Smells like . . .” Frank cringed as he sniffed. “Rancid body odor.”

Dean gave a nervous chuckle. “Good adjective choice.” He lifted up his arm and smelled. “El, you should have told me.”

“Sorry.” She hunched. “I didn’t want to be rude.”

“El.” Frank said strong. “Be fuckin rude. He reeks. Fuck Dean.”

“Sorry.” Dean apologized and moved to Frank. “Well, we want to finish . . .”

“Not too close.” Frank backed up. “Wait, before I go.” Frank held up his hand. “There’s a savage loose in the tunnels. I think you two should secure up and come with me until we find him.” He looked oddly at Ellen’s laughter. “What?”

“A savage.” She tsked.

“A savage El.” Frank told her. “They’re uh . . . deadly.”

Ellen fluttered her lips. “We’re fine. You’ll find him. He probably left anyhow.”

“Yeah.” Dean added. “It was a little bit ago that Robbie called us. He’s probably way out of Beginnings by now.”

“How the fuck is he gonna get out?” Frank asked. “I have men on every entrance. He’s still down here. I want you two out. He’s gonna get more wild the more he feels trapped. Fuck he’ll tear this place . . .” Frank shifted his eyes around. “. . . apart.” He took a step and sniffed again. He moved to Dean. “Let me smell you.”

“No.” Dean shook his head. “It’s embarrassing.”

“Dean.” Frank reached out, grabbed Dean’s wrist and pulled him nearer.

“Frank. Stop.”

“Dean . . .” Frank leaned down and smelled. “I don’t smell it.” Without saying anything, Frank yanked Dean’s arm up nearly lifting him from his feet. He took a whiff under Dean’s arm, “Ha!”

“God.” Dean pulled his arm back. “I can’t believe you’re smelling my underarms.”

Frank turned around and walked to the end of the counter, Ellen quickly stood before him.

“Frank.” she spoke soft. “We’re really busy.”

“El. Tough.” He stepped around her and he heard the roll of it. His eyes moved about the floor and he saw the syringe. He moved to it. Just as his fingers touched and took hold of it, his peripheral vision caught the broken small spear. Frank jolted in a quick spin to the pair. “Where is he?”

“Who?” Ellen asked.

Frank bent down and picked up the spear. “The savage.”

“Frank?” Ellen had question in her voice. “You’re security. Isn’t that your job.”

“El. A spear.” He held it up. “Where is he?”

“The savage?” Ellen asked.

“Yes.”

“I don’t know. Dean?”

“Frank.” Dean said sarcastically. “Why would we have a savage down here. You said yourself they’re dangerous.”

“Yeah, well, knowing you two sick mother fuckers . . .” Frank moved across to the far left where he remembered Dean and Ellen coming from. Taking the shrieks of his name as a sign that he was on the right course, Frank, ignoring the grabs of Dean and Ellen, opened the back door and stepped in.

Dean and Ellen both faced each other in a hunch when Frank’s loud ‘FUCK!’ rang out.

With a two step heavy stomp and a frustration filled growl, Frank barreled out of the room. “You . . .” He pointed back. “That . . . uh!”

“Frank.” Ellen held up her hands. “Calm down.”

Frank’s usually deep voice actually cracked and squeaked as he tried to yell but the tenseness of his throat inhibited him. “What the fuck were you two thinking!”

“Of science.” Dean stated so calmly. “The medical future and survival of this community.”

“He’s right.” Ellen pointed with a nod. “That savage can be so useful with things we want to try out but can’t because Joe has limitations on human guinea pigs.”

“El!” Frank blasted. “That’s a savage! Besides the fact that he will be deadly when he’s conscious. He’s still a human life.”

“Oh like you care.” Ellen snapped back.

“I care.” Frank turned around, and swung his M-16 to in front of him.

“Frank!” Ellen shrieked out grabbing his arm. “You can’t kill him.”

“The hell I can’t.”

Ellen gasped. “You big dopey hypocrite!”

“What!” Frank was shocked.

“Oh yeah, it’s inhuman for us to use him for the good for Beginnings, but it’s fine and dandy for you to shoot him in the head when he’s under a triple dose of Bunny Thorazine.”

“El.” Frank pulled his arm away. “I’m not gonna shoot him when he’s out. I’m gonna free him. Wake his ass up, *then* I’m gonna shoot him.”

Dean had to try. “Frank you can’t. Don’t. We need him.”

“Dean, I’m supposed to be finding him. I found him. Now I have to take care of him.”

“No.” Using his size to his advantage, Dean swiftly ducked passed Frank, raced to the door, reached in, hit the lock and pulled the door closed with a smug ‘ha.’

Frank rolled his eyes. “I’m security Dean. You think I don’t have a key to that room.”

“No, Frank, I *know* you don’t have a key to that room. I put that lock on myself.”

“Fuck.” Frank stomped and held out his hand. “Give me the key.”

“No.” Dean shook his head.

“Dean. Give me the fuckin key!” Frank order stronger.

“No.”

“Dean.” Frank took a step to him. He brought his hand up in a cutting action to his own temple. “I’m telling you what. Give me the fuckin key *now* or I will take it from you.”

Dean folded his arms. “I don’t have it on me.” His eyes sent a smiling look to Ellen who gave him a quick thumbs up.

“Then where is it?” Frank questioned.

“I’m not telling.” Dean said smug.

“Then *I* will.” Frank lowered the microphone to his headset. “Dad.”

‘*Christ what now*’, ran though Joe’s mind as he followed his summons to the cryo-lab. Frank was vague, telling him to get down there immediately, he was needed to handle something. And knowing it was in the cryo-lab, and knowing whose domain the lab was, Joe inwardly cringed at the thought of what he possibly had to deal with.

Dean and Ellen.

“This better be good. I want to go home.” Joe stated as he walked into the lab. “And what in Christ name is that smell?”

With a curling ‘come here’ finger Frank led Joe to the back room.

Joe only glanced at Dean and Ellen as he followed Frank. He stopped cold inside. “Oh my God.” On the floor, breathing heavily and passed out was the savage. Three chains off the wall were attached to him. One around each of his wrists. The third, attached to a thick leather strap around his waist. Gliding his hand down his face Joe stepped back out of the room. “What . . .”

“Joe.” Dean stepped forward. “Look, before you say anything. We actually have a good idea about this. Now, think. We need human beings to study the effects of drugs and treatments that we want to try on Beginnings’ residents. But, we can’t. We can on him.”

Joe took a moment to gather his thoughts. “Dean, I don’t know what the hell you did to him, but when he wakes up . . .”

“He’s chained.” Dean said.

“And if he gets out of line . . .” Ellen added. “We can hit him with the Bunny Thorazine.”

“Next question.” Joe held up his hand. “And no interruptions. When did you plan on telling me you had the savage down here.”

“Soon.” Dean answered.

“Real soon.” Ellen reiterated.

“Soon?” Joe raised an eyebrow as he stared at them. “You were actually going to tell me.”

“Um, no.” Dean shook his head.

“No.” Ellen repeated.

“I’m sorry. I can’t allow it.” Joe stated. “It’s a danger. Too dangerous. We can’t take a chance. Frank’s gonna have to take him out.”

“No.” Ellen argued. “Come on Joe. We can use him. He’s viable.”

“Christ Ellen. This is getting out of hand.” Joe said. “Mutated animals in a jar. A frozen grandson in a case. A savage in a back room. Dead animals just

laying around.”

Dean’s mouth dropped open in offense. “Joe. We do not have dead animals just laying around.”

“Oh yeah. What about him.” Joe pointed to the motionless, wide eyed rabbit strapped to the counter.

“Shit.” Ellen raced to him. “Shit. He died. See Frank.”

“What?” Frank replied. “No see Frank. How about, see Ellen. See Dean. See how fuckin sick they are.”

Dean applauded slowly. “Once again Frank impresses us with his outstanding ability to recite what he learned to read in the first grade.”

“Fuck you Dean.”

“Enough.” Joe warned. “Dean, it has to go.”

“Come on Joe. No.” Dean tried his hardest. “I’ll take precautions. I’ll perform a behavioral modification lobotomy first thing tomorrow. He won’t be a danger. And there should be no guilt in what we do to him. He’s not an innocent. Frank was going to shoot him anyhow.”

“What exactly are you wanting him for?” Joe asked.

“Dad.” Frank called out shocked.

Joe held up his hand to silence Frank. “Dean?”

“So much Joe.” Dean explained. “We have about six new strains of anti-infections we can’t get a good reaction from on the animals. Not to mention the new skin grafting procedure we want to use on Jeff and anyone else who suffers from disfigurement.”

“And cancer.” Ellen added. “We’d like to give him cancer.”

“El.” Dean called her name through clenched teeth.

“No, Dean.” Ellen told him. “Joe, we have yet to come across a case of cancer. Yet, the more people we get, the more chances we have of running into it. We have different samples of carcinoma cells, but any treatments we derive or work on are useless without human testing. If testing on him could save or prolong one Beginnings’ persons life, then it’s worth it.”

Joe closed his eyes. “I can’t believe I’m allowing this.” In the midst of Dean and Ellen’s excitement and Frank’s complaining, Joe held up a hand to silence them. “But . . . I have to draw the line on giving the man cancer.” He moved to the door. “Keep him sedated until the lobotomy is finished.” Joe paused at the door. “And hose him down or something, it’s stinks down here.”

Frank, shaking his head, followed to the door. “Sick.” He walked out after Joe.

Ellen smiled and faced Dean. “I can’t believe he’s allowing it.”

“I have to tell you El, I feel much better that he knows.”

“Me too. We should hose him down.”

“Yeah, then go home. I’m hungry.”

“So am I.” Ellen stopped mid-walk to the back room. “Dean, Joe may have said yes to keeping him, but he put his foot down on the cancer issue.”

“El.” Dean shook his head slowly and gave a reassuring look. “What is our motto down here.”

“What Joe doesn’t know, doesn’t hurt us.”

“Exactly.” With a gentle pull, Dean brought Ellen to the back room. It was time to finish up and call it a day.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Beginnings, Montana

Andrea's mood was a deep one. She hadn't left the house not even to go to distribution. She swore to Joe, that the next day she would 'get it together'. She'd go back to work, and try to come up with a replacement for Rev. Bob at the church. But Andrea wanted to dissolve in her thoughts for a little bit more and sink into the Bible for passages that would give her comfort in her time of need.

Joe understood. Sort of. So instead of giving her his typical, 'what ever floats your boat' attitude, he came off as compassionate, told Andrea he understood her emotional turmoil, encouraged her to enjoy the Bible, then left the house for a drink at the hall.

Joe recognized the heavy tromping that echoed behind him on the dark streets of Beginnings. He stopped third street in and turned around. "Frank."

"Hey Dad."

"What are you doing? I thought you were in for the night."

"Hardly. I'm out for the night."

"Giving Dean and Ellen time?" Joe started walking with him.

"Right." Frank scoffed. "No, I'm uneasy. Since Robbie spotted that second Savage camp too close to us, I wanna be on the ball tonight incase they hit us or New Bowman. Him and I are pulling the night."

"What is up with the Savages. They're getting bold." Joe asked.

"They raped the land. They're starving. They want what's next . . . us."

Joe hesitated in his step. "How philosophical."

"Is?"

"Is what?"

"You were asking the question. You asked, how philosophical, but you didn't ask who or what is philosophical.

"Frank."

"Yeah."

"Never mind." They had reached the hall. "I'll be in here for awhile if you need me."

"For?"

"Anything." Joe said with a hint of aggravation. "Be careful Frank."

"Of?"

Joe opened the door and walked into the social hall. He had to wonder if Dean's little running joke about Frank's temporary mental disability was a joke after all.

There were a few more people in the hall, which made for a pretty decent evening for Joe if he wanted to get in some conversation or a game of darts. But first thing was first, he spotted the nightly patron, the one he needed to speak to. Danny Hoi. "Danny." Joe approached him as Danny lined up his next conquest for darts.

"Hey Joe. Wanna play, that is of course after Josephine." Danny winked at her.

"No darts. I need to talk to you right now. Can you come with me."

"Sure." Danny handed Josephine the darts and followed Joe. "What's up."

"I want to discuss . . ."

"New Bowman." Danny nodded. "I got the tracking under control. We should be good."

"No, not New Bowman."

"Beginnings day events? I have some . . ."

"No."

"Neville competition. I'll tell you Joe when you threw that at me today as well, I was a little overwhelmed, but when I thought of it, I thought, wow, Beginnings day could be the kick off for the 'lift your spirits' movement you want me to . . ." He saw Joe shaking his head. "O.K., now what you need to talk to me about, is it about something you need me to do."

"Yes."

"Something you already asked me today?"

"No."

"Shit."

"Danny." Joe laid his hand on his shoulder. "Final request today."

"Lay it on me Joe. I'm ready and I'll handle it."

"Good. Good." Joe tapped him. "That's the spirit."

"That's me. Mr. Spirit."

"Well, Mr. Spirit, I need you in my office tomorrow morning. You are now officially, the defense attorney for my wife in the first ever Beginnings trial. I'm getting a drink."

For the first time in a long time, as Joe walked away, Danny Hoi was speechless.

Bowman, North Dakota

Hal nodded in acceptance to the salute he received from a soldier who passed him on the Bowman streets. There was a sense of relief in the air and Hal felt it. Elliott, felt exhaustion more.

"It shows." Hal told him.

"Am I moving that slow?" Elliott asked.

"You have dark circles under your eyes."

"It's my heritage." Elliott explained.

"No, it's the fact that you've been up for forty hours. Sleep Elliott."

"I plan on it. Especially since the savages dispersed."

"They always do. And good thing for you too, you stay up any longer and you'll be looking like a younger version of my brother Frank."

Elliott stopped. "Beggging your pardon Sir, but, your brother isn't . . . he's not pleasant to the eye."

"Younger version." Hal assured. "Before this world got to . . ." A metal clunk, odd and not usually heard stopped Hal in the middle of his sentence. "Elliott?"

Elliott had stopped walking. "Did something fall?" He stepped away from Hal and walked to where the sound came from.

Behind him Hal followed,. "It sounded like a . . ."

“Manhole cover.” Elliott finished the sentence when he saw it on the street up ahead. As his eyes looked to the round metal object that had been moved from the opening, up from the sewer system, though the hole, came the upper portion of a savage. He held a bow and arrow, aimed and shot. Elliott grunted and flew back as the closely shot arrow seared into his gut. He dropped to the ground in his stumble.

“Elliott!” Hal cried out at the same time the savage bellowed out his war cry. Withdrawing his sword in his charging run, Hal leaped over Elliott’s downed body, raised his sword up and swooped it down with precision and speed beheading the savage before he could fire again. Using all his strength, Hal moved the manhole cover with his foot, then kicked the head of the savage out of the way as he went to Elliott. Blood flowed from the stomach wound where the arrow was imbedded deeply. Bracing Elliott under the arms, Hal slowed down in his lifting of his right hand man, when he heard the frightening sound of it. In the distance, close, metal on concrete.

Clank. Clank. Clank. Clank.

“UWA!” Hal called out as he dragged Elliott backwards toward a building. “On guard! UWA” Hal reached back and opened the door. “On Guard!” Pulling Elliott safely into the building, Hal laid him down and took the sword from Elliott’s waist. He stepped onto the street pulling the door closed. Stepping out into the street knowing it wouldn’t be long before his men were there, it began. The war calls. The screams. The sound of bare feet pounding the pavement. To his left and to his right, they came, and they charged. Savages.

Hal blessed himself and then . . . he braced himself and raised his swords.

Beginnings, Montana

“I just don’t know how I will handle it.” Henry sulked over his drink at the bar, complaining to Jess. “How are people going to judge me.”

“Why are you concerned about it?” Jess asked.

“She’s my friend.”

“Then you have to do what’s right. You gathered the evidence against her Henry. Anyone else might use that evidence wrong.”

“True.”

“And you’re council. It’s really part of your . . .”

The boom of the flinging open social hall door made Jess and Henry, along with everyone else spin their views to Frank and Robbie who marched in.

“Jess.” Robbie hurried over. “How much have you been drinking?”

“Water.” Jess held up his glass.

“Let’s go.” Robbie twitched his head to the door. “We need you.”

Joe saw from across the room as Jess hurried and followed Robbie out, before Frank could make it to him, he made it to Frank. “What’s going on. Savages?”

“Yeah.” Frank said. “But not us. Bowman was hit.”

^^^

They took advantage of their house being just theirs, moving in a certain slow synchronized rhythm in their prelude to making love. The warm shower water slipped between Dean and Ellen's touching bodies. More laughing than moaning occurred during the kisses, as they tried to make the best of an awkward stance. Dean held on to Ellen, closely behind her, lips moving on her neck, hands gliding about her.

Ellen felt his playful nibble and her head flung back with a silent laugh. Dean's soapy hand found a grip on her arm and he lifted it, pressing her palm flat against the shower wall. Moving Ellen closer to the wall, Dean lifted her other arm, then lifted his lips from her when the pounding at the bathroom door startled him. "No,," He whimpered out burying his forehead to her shoulder blade. "I thought he was working all night."

"Dean!" Frank pounded. "The fuckin doors locked."

"There's a reason Frank." Dean yelled back. "We're trying to make love."

"Yeah, well put it on pause. El's needed. She has to leave now. Bowman was hit bad by savages." Frank leaned against the door. He heard the running water stop, the shower door slide open, and a few moments later after being hit in the face with a cloud of steam, Ellen slipped out wearing a towel.

"How bad?" She asked wiping the water from her face.

"Bad." Frank answered. "Jess is gonna fly you down. I can't leave. Not with things so tight around here. Hal says seventy-five injured, at least thirty serious."

The bathroom door opened again and Dean came out with a towel on as well. "Do you need me?"

"No I . . ." Frank looked at Dean's attire. "This is fuckin embarrassing. Get dressed El,"

Ellen flew passed him to her dresser. "Is Hal all right?"

"Hurt, but fine."

"Elliott?" Ellen questioned.

"Who?" Frank asked.

"Elliott Ryder. Is he hurt?"

"How the fuck should I know." Frank snapped.

"You don't need me to go? That's a lot of injured." Dean said as he reached for his clothes.

"No, you have to be here. Jason's flying down as well." Frank cringed. "God, a naked Dean and Ellen. Can I be hit emotionally any harder."

Ellen rolled her eyes, jeans in hands, and wearing only a long tee shirt. She picked up her shoes and darted to Dean. "I'll call you. I love you." She kissed him quickly, shook her head at Frank's 'uh' and moved to the door.. "Let's go Frank."

"El, be careful." Dean called out.

Frank placed a hand on Ellen's back as she darted out then he looked back to Dean with a grin. "Bye Dean."

The word 'bye' and a wave to his wife never got to emerge from Dean. Between the events taking him from his moment so fast and Frank's snatching Ellen away, Dean's head was spinning. He sat on the bed allowing the newest reality shock to hit him. Twice in one day, at two different locations, the savages struck.

Bowman, North Dakota

The still smoldering flames below on the streets of Bowman and the scattered bon fires were the only guiding light Jess had as he glided the helicopter through the thick black smoke. He had to land in the distance, clear from main section of town.

The three of them, Ellen, Jason and Jess were greeted by a corporal who led them to the main street. Ellen's heart pounded with each step she took. UWA soldiers lined the streets protecting as well as the ones who tried to aid the injured who had flowed out of Dr. Blue's clinic. She could barely breathe and she knew the contents of her little black 'Dean' bag were just not going to be enough.

"They didn't tell us." Ellen looked to Jason.

"Seems they left some details out." Jason hid his heavy exhale looking around the destroyed buildings, blood lined streets still filled with carnage of savages that had not yet been burned. Bodies of UWA soldier who had failed to survive the surprise attack were being carried--some in pieces--off the street.

Ellen made her way first, through the men and into the clinic. Blue looked frazzled and Ellen directed Jason to him as she spotted Hal, standing. She sighed heavily in relief when she spotted his back and long pony tail. His shirt was blood stained, but that was to be expected from the battle he had just emerged from.

"Hal." She laid her hand on his shoulder.

Hal turned around.

Ellen gasped. What had happened to the man so much like a brother to her. His face cut, gashed and bleeding. His shirt and pants totally saturated with blood, filled with holes and tears, and he still bled. "Oh my God." She heaved out.

"I'm fine."

"No, Hal, no you aren't. Let me take a look at you."

"Ellen."

"Hal. No." She grabbed his arm and he winced, trying to hide his pain. "Sit." She brought him to a chair. She knelt before him as she undid his shirt. She closed her eyes briefly at the wounds to his chest and stomach. "Hal, you need stitched and . . . you still have." Her fingers moved about him in a count. "Seven arrow heads in you."

"They'll stay. They aren't deep. They can be removed later."

"No, they'll be removed now. I'm putting you on a chopper with some of the others to go to Beginnings."

"No, Ellen." Hal stated strong and closed his shirt. "This is my town. My men. I have to stay."

"And what?" Ellen questioned. "Die of infection? Because that's what's going to happen to you."

"I can't go."

"And I can't let you stand up and handle things in your condition. You let me fix you or I knock your big ass out and they take you out against your will."

Hal nodded slowly.

"All right." Ellen stood up, holding back her bangs with her hand. "Blue's

tried as I can see, to organize this. Don't move." She held her hand to him. "I'll find a place to put you. Just don't move or I'll be pissed." Running her hand down his face, Ellen turned around and walked over to Jason. "This is bad."

"Tell me about it." Jason responded. "Blue says at least fifteen need major surgery. Major. They don't have the facilities here."

Ellen peered around the room. "Has he divided them?"

"As best as he could. Major injuries are in the back. How's Hal?"

"He should be back there. Stabbed, speared, arrowed, you name it. But, he won't go, I'll have to operate here."

"Will you need assistance?" Jason asked.

"No. I'll be fine. As for now, grab someone healthy get them to gather all the ones that need help but not immediate. Get them up to the second floor patients rooms. Have them wait and have them out of our way. Keep the other ones that would be, let's call them stage twos, 'serious, but not so serious, if need be we could handle them."

"What about them."

"Keep them on this floor. I'm gonna get Blue to go on in the back, we'll start stabilizing those for the trip and getting the most serious ones out ASAP with Jess."

Jason nodded. "I'll find assistance and aid Blue."

"Good. I'm gonna prep Jess, pick out someone to help him, and we'll start loading the choppers. Then I'll come in and deal with Hal. Can you prep him?"

"Without a doubt."

"Excellent. First thing is first, I'd better call home." Ellen getting an agreeing nod from Jason, edged her way through the crowded first floor of the clinic and out into the street. She couldn't believe what she was seeing. It was all such a nightmare. The smell of death and burning flesh filled the air. She knew Bowman, and knew where she had to go to find a phone. Through the destruction, that's where Ellen went.

"Oh God." Ellen covered her eyes as she spoke on the phone. "Dean, I'm out of my league here."

"El, no, you aren't." Dean tried to be reassuring.

"I can't do this. This is your field."

"No. It's yours. Organization is vital. You're doing that. We'll be ready here."

"Is Joe sending the choppers?" Ellen asked.

"Robbie's in the air now. Johnny is getting the next one ready."

Ellen's long deep breath seeped over the phone. "Jason or I will call back with stats of the serious. I just know from the looks, blood will be in demand and prepare for a long night of surgery."

"Get beds ready?"

"You better believe it. The ones we fix here, we may ship them up as well."

"El, it'll be all right."

"Dean. It's a war zone."

Dean was silent for a second only. "El, what do you expect. We're at war.

Of course, when it started against the savages . . . none of us know.”

^^^

By the time Ellen had made it back, Jason had begun prioritizing. The six most vital were placed closest to the door for their easy removal and loading on the chopper. Three of them had limbs missing. Blue had cauterized the wounds so as not to have to use a tourniquet. To Ellen it was like a civil war scene. Weapons used were so primitive, yet they devoured in a deadly way.

Ellen hadn't seen him at all and assumed he was running things for Hal at the front lines. So surprised she was that Elliott was in the clinic, let alone number six to be loaded in the chopper on the critically ill run.

Elliott laid on his back, on a cart, staring up to the ceiling with impatience. A blanket came up to his chest and his face was pale. He didn't shake, moan or make a noise, he just looked antsy.

Her hand laid on his arm first and then Ellen moved into his view. “Elliott?” She called his name softly.

He turned his head her way. “Dr. Hayes.” He smiled and spoke through a raspy voice.

“Will you just call me Ellen. What happened?”

“I had a run in with a savage. I feel fine. I've stopped bleeding, but your Dr. Godrichson said I have to go immediately to Beginnings, why?”

“I don't know.” Ellen quickly visually examined. Two arms, Two legs. No facial wounds. “How do you feel.”

“I'm all right as long as I don't breath too heavily or cough.” He tried to smile. “Or . . . laugh.”

“No pain except when you move?”

“No pain unless I'm moved. Ellen . . .” His voice dropped. “I can't feel my right leg. Tell me . . .” He swallowed. “Tell me it's still there.”

“It's still there.” Ellen assured. Her thoughts quickly raced. Spinal injury. She had to tell herself ‘no’ or Elliott wouldn't be on his back. She lifted the bottom of the blanket to examine his right leg. Her hand moved up it. “Can you feel this?”

“No.”

As she hit the thigh she saw the saturation of blood on his pant leg. “Elliott? Where were you hit.”

“The stomach.”

Covering his legs back up, Ellen lowered the sheet from his chest. She didn't see it, she should have. The portion of the arrow that remained. It protruded from center of his mid section, the rest so deeply imbedded, Ellen could see no end to it. The blood had clotted around it, causing the outwardly bleeding to stop. But she feared worse. “Elliott. This may hurt. Can you bare with me?”

“Yes. I'll be fine.”

Ellen hovered him, securing one hand under his hip and the other his shoulder, using her strength she rolled him on his side slightly and to her. Her eyes shut instinctively at first then she opened to see. The lower portion of Elliott's back was near black with settled blood, the cot under him damp from

the internal bleeding that found another means out. Soothingly she laid him back to the cot and felt the pain of his cringe.

“It’s bad, isn’t it?” Elliott asked. “I can tell by your face.”

“It’s . . . it’s . . . it’ll be fine.” She smiled at him. “Wanna know why? My husband is taking care of you personally and I will see to it.”

“Should someone need assistance before me then . . .”

“No. You take priority.” Ellen leaned down to him and whispered. “Between you and me, the Captain, he’s in bad shape. He’ll need you well fast.”

“He’s walking, I’m not.”

“He’s mentally distraught. Him and Frank will be a great pair. Mentally disabled, mentally distraught.”

Elliott choked a painful laugh. “Thank you.”

“Get better. Hey, at least when I return home you and I will have lots of time to talk while you’re in that hospital of ours.”

“I look forward to it. Just like I said in my letter.”

“El.” Jess’ hand came down upon her shoulder. “We have to take him.”

Ellen nodded and stepped back. “Careful Jess, please.” She lifted her hand in a wave to Elliott as they started to move him. As he left from her sight and Ellen turned to go to the patients, her mind snapped to Elliott’s last words. Ellen was baffled. “What letter?”

Beginnings, Montana

Frank’s hand slammed on the arm of the chair at the same time he stood to his feet emotionally spent. “Fuck. Why didn’t Hal tell us it was this bad?”

Joe, confused, yet calm, behind his desk tossed up his hands. “I don’t know. Jason said, there’s casualties.”

“How many.”

“No count yet.”

“And Hal.”

“Ready?”

“Yeah.”

“Sit.”

Frank didn’t question, he just sat down. “How bad.”

“Seventeen arrow hits. Three spear hits and his thigh was knifed.”

Frank couldn’t speak, his hand only swiped down his face.

“Frank, what the hell is going on with these savages?”

“I don’t know Dad. I don’t. My questions are, why all of the sudden, why after all this time.”

“You had a good theory on that earlier.” Joe said. “They got what they could from the land and they want more.”

“I said that?” Frank bobbed his head. “That was good.”

Joe grunted.

“Still.” Frank stood up and began to pace. “What happened down there, would not happen up here. Guaranteed.”

“You can’t guarantee that Frank.”

“Fuck I can’t. We can see them coming, unless they take out the tracking and then they’d have to break the perimeter. Which they couldn’t, unless they had two of their men block the means in a suicidal opening of the gate.”

“Frank. So they can get in. Take out tracking, barge the front or back gates, or by the fields.”

“All right, all right, they can. Or like the did before, come down into the underdeveloped section.”

“Which . . .” Joe added. “Is slowly becoming developed.”

“Shit.” Frank took a deep breath. “They can’t be that smart. They can’t. That would take massive amounts of planning. Watching us from a distance. Dad, they’re savages.”

“They were once functioning human beings. All right, master of security. What’s the plan.”

“Now, barring the fact that I’m temporarily mentally disabled, here’s what I have in mind.”

“Shoot.”

Frank held up his hand. “Robbie’s plane should be ready. I want surveillance for savage camps. He has to get fuel priority. He has to fan out. Besides checking out society bases he has to look for other large savage camps. Map them.”

Joe nodded “He’ll get it.”

“Next. Hal’s men have to be kept as soldiers. We have man power, I’ll transfer him some extra. But I want full force around the clock security in Beginnings and New Bowman. Hourly tracking checks, no matter how much of a pain it is. Hourly gate checks. Tracking or no tracking, we will get back to setting traps around the whole perimeter. Frank and Robbie traps.” Frank nodded. “I also want Henry and Mechanics on extra perimeter beams. I want those beams placed on every underground, tunnel or sewer entrance into New Bowman or Beginnings.”

“You got it. Anything else.”

“Yeah . . . by the numbers Hal said came into his camp and the ones that fled . . .” Frank walked back over and sat down in his chair. “And knowing what we’re up against with the society. We need more men.”

“We’re close to a thousand strong.”

“Yeah, but . . . think about it. The bigger we get Dad . . . the more space we need. The more space we use . . . the more vulnerable we become.”

Joe slowly nodded, temporarily mentally disabled or not, Frank had a valid point.

Bowman, North Dakota

The clank of the arrow head hitting the tin basin was the only sound in the small operating room Ellen used. Hal laid still, wide awake and quiet.

“You all right.” Ellen asked as she cleaned the wound.

Hal nodded.

“Last one.” Ellen reached for the sutures. “We could have been done sooner had I not had to stop . . . Captain . . . to check on your men in Beginnings.”

"I . . . needed to know."

"I'm so worried about infection with you Hal. Dean's sending something very strong down. I have to put you on intravenous for three days so . . ."

"No."

"Hal." Ellen held off stitching the final arrow gash. She laid down her things and moved to the head of the table. "These arrows were dirty. They were in you for hours. Please."

"I have a camp to run."

"You can't run it dead." Ellen insisted.

"I'd say yes, but my right hand man is down."

"Don't you have a left hand one?"

The first smile cracked on Hal's face. "I guess."

"Then stay in bed, let the anti-infection work, and bark orders to him."

"How long . . . how long until Elliott's well." Hal asked.

"What? You want to wait until then?"

"No. I'm curious."

"Awhile. He won't fight for awhile. He's bad Hal."

Hal quickly shifted his eyes to her. "Is he going to die?"

"No." Ellen answered without hesitation. "No, Dean says he'll live. He'll take some time to recuperate."

"So he made it through the surgery."

Her slowly released breath hit against Hal's face. "Not yet. Dean will be in with him at least until dawn."

Hal closed his eyes. "What did I allow Ellen?"

"Hal."

"I put these men at risk. I didn't see the attack coming."

"The hell you didn't." Ellen lowered her face to his. "This place was guarded. How did you know they'd come up from the sewers. You didn't. So no blame, Captain Slagel. Don't. If you keep it up I'll have to start calling you Frank with all these body scars."

"Pretty bad huh?"

"Nah, I've seen worse." She winked and laid her hand on his face. "It'll be fine. We just have to get you better and strong for the move." She started to lift up and Hal stopped her.

"Tell me." He gripped her hand. "Tell me honestly. Does this sudden move of my town make it look as though I'm running for protection."

"What?" Ellen laughed. "Are you kidding me? You're five hundred strong. You aren't rushing to New Bowman in the wake of this savage thing for Beginnings' protection, You're rushing to New Bowman to help protect Beginnings."

A shudder of emotions escaped Hal in his self blame and instead of letting Ellen leave, instead of saying words, braving it without permission he pulled her down to him and reached for her. Ellen followed the lead, and whole heartedly embraced him with her upper body and arms as he lay on that table. She felt what he searched for. Pausing before returning to care for Hal's external wounds, Ellen took time out to care for his emotional ones.

INDISCRETIONAL WARS

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

New Bowman, Montana
October 12

It brought back the same feelings Robbie used to get when he flew in the old world for the United States Army. The rush of the speed, the beauty of the red sky at the crack of dawn. Inferred cameras with a vision of things normally not seen in the darkened sky. The noise of the aircraft, yet the silence of being alone. So many times in the past Robbie had the feeling that he was all alone in the world. The billions of people below him were no longer there. Never did he imagine as he flew, that one day, all those feelings would suddenly be reality.

He landed the plane on the newly designated airstrip a half a mile outside of the main sector of New Bowman, formally Jordan. An area still within the protective range of tracking. Robbie announced his landing ahead of time so as not to send the Trackers of New Bowman or Mark in Beginnings into another frenzy when Robbie zoomed through the tracking signal. He heard about it two days earlier from his father when Mark and the New Bowman man sent security into an uproar.

He stepped from his plane, and secured the small tape in the inside pocket of his leather jacket. He closed the plane up tight and headed in his walk into New Bowman, still carrying the feeling of 'great' he received from flying that plane. He moved quickly, hands in his pockets, leather flight book under his arm, to New Bowman where he would pick up a jeep and head home.

First . . . food.

Robbie knew Hal's mess hall men worked as early for Hal, as the mess hall staff worked for the United States army. The smell of coffee and eggs hit Robbie before he even opened the door. It was a welcoming warm smell and it made his stomach growl. Every time he went there, he loved Hal's mess hall more. It was to Robbie, the single 'domestically-insufficient' guy's paradise.

Robbie didn't expect many men to be in the mess hall at the early hour it was. But he wasn't surprised to see his brother. Never did Hal hunch to his coffee, Hal brought the mug to his lips as he sat up straight, a breakfast tray in front of him and a copy of Beginnings Times in his hands.

"Hey." Robbie gave his announcement with a hand to Hal's back.

"Hey, little brother." Hal set down his coffee. "Grab some grub."

"Thanks I will." Laying his keys and leather book on the table, then taking off his coat and placing it on the bench seating, Robbie walked to the chow line. He was greeted by the two men who worked the line, with respect and unnecessary 'sirs' that Robbie did kind of like. He didn't take much, he planned to eat later. He had too. He didn't want to disappoint Andrea when she fixed him up a plate of whatever she prepared for breakfast, setting it aside for Robbie to indulge in when he had a chance in his busy schedule. "Danny made me leave that on your door when I came for the plane this morning." Robbie said of the newspaper as he sat across from Hal.

"Tell Danny, I appreciate it." Hal coughed violently.

"Still congested?"

"Ellen says I will be, but . . . the infection's clearing."

“Cut back on smoking?” Robbie asked.

“Um . . . yeah.” Hal smiled and shook his head.

“Anything good in there.” Robbie pointed with his fork.

“Oh . . . not really, and yeah.” Hal set down the paper when he saw Robbie snicker. “I mean, when isn’t what Danny and Scoop wrote good. Never is it a hundred percent honest unless it’s factual news, but its always entertaining. They did list events for Beginnings Day today and . . . the series of upcoming Neville competition events. Did you know . . .” Hal folded his hands. “That Bowman’s football team and Beginnings’ football team will play a game of Tackle, no protective equipment, football? And . . . mind you, all the members of the winning team get Neville points.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“No?” Hal sat up straight. “I didn’t even know I had a football team.”

Robbie laughed. “You better get one together.”

“I’d better.” Hal held back laughing, it made him cough.

“So how’s the settling going?” Robbie asked.

“Good. The mess hall is still working with half equipment. But canning from Beginnings and food preservation sent some pre-made items to make it easier. We’re still far from unpacked, we’ll get there. Inventory of our food stock and weapons needs done. We did get our greenhouse contents up to yours. However I think it probably looks minuscule and pitiful in comparison to what you guys have.”

“Nah.” Robbie shook his head. “How’s dad with you. Is he putting the rush on you yet?”

“Dad? No. He said, and his words, ‘no rush’. He wants us to enjoy, without hassle, our first ever Beginnings Day today, get settled, then . . . we get back to business.”

“Oh, yeah, when?”

“Tomorrow..” Hal chuckled and coughed. “He’ll be here first thing. Wants to run down governing, wants to run down distribution of man power and so forth.”

“No rush.”

“No rush.”

“Dad.”

Hal tilted his head with a crooked smile. “Got to love him, So . . . how was the flight.”

“Beautiful.”

“Aside from that.”

“Informative.” Robbie dropped the fork he held. “You coming in for the meeting?”

“If I say ‘yes’ are you not going to tell me.”

“Hell no.” Robbie said. “I’ll tell you.”

“I’m there.”

“O.K., act like I didn’t tell you O.K.” Robbie winked. “Got work for your guys, well your scout teams. Found a colony up near Manitoba and . . .”

“What the hell are you doing flying up there. I thought it was southeast today.”

“Hush-hush.” Robbie held up his hand. “I felt like going north while the wether was still good. Anyhow, spotted a colony. Non divisional, meaning they

didn't look society and they definitely weren't savage. We'll have to view the inferred tape to get a count. It was still dark, so there could be more than what is picked up. And . . . most importantly, I have good news and bad news but it's all one news, I can't determine which it is."

"Robbie." Hal said his name with a snicker. "What the hell are you talking about."

"All right. I'll tell you what it is and you can determine if it's god news or bad news."

"Go on."

Robbie leaned closer across the table to Hal. "Got the end results on tape, seems we aren't the only ones with the savage problem . . . the society isn't immune from savage prejudice."

"East?"

"North east."

"Shit."

"Good or bad?"

"Actually . . ." Hal said as he peered at his little brother wearing a half-shitty grin. "Both."

Beginnings, Montana

Frank sniffed the aroma of the contents of the bowl, even though the steam from the heating had ceased somewhere in his trip to his security office. A pleasant smile not often seen on Frank's face appeared as he took another whiff. He unwrapped the bread he had in a cloth, thick sliced and held it in one hand, while he gripped a fork in the other. Ready to devour, Frank drifted into 'Frank' thoughts and he stopped because he amused himself.

Jess the cook?

Chef Jess?

Jess Chef?

Frank grinned widely and nodded, '*Jess Brocket.*' He liked his new chosen name for Robbie's roommate. Never had Frank met a man that could cook as well as Jess did. No wonder, Frank figured, that was why a bunch of already taken Beginnings women wanted him. Frank was glad Ellen didn't jump on the 'I love Jess' bandwagon. It was bad enough that his 'just about' ex-daughter-in-law, but former love interest of his son, wanted Jess. Frank liked Denice, he thought she was a nice girl, timid and a bit boring,, but the extra conversations she seemed to have with him got on Frank's nerves. They started about one thing and ended with Jess. And Denice, like the other two women seemed to think that just because Frank ran security and Jess was in security, that Frank had the magic Jess link. Frank didn't. Nor did he care. Actually Frank wanted these women to knock it off, they were already involved with three of his other security men and the last thing Frank needed at a tense moment was relationship ripples. Of course Frank was grateful Jess was such a nice guy and wouldn't dream of interfering in already established relationships . . . he hoped.

Jess.

Eggs.

Hunger. Frank shoved the fork into the eggs, smiling with each fork full he laid on the bread. He pictured Dean opening the fridge, getting the eggs Jess made, and seeing only the note Frank left that he took them.

With a snicker and a bite, Frank shoved his egg sandwich in his mouth. He happily chewed, swallowed and took another bite. About the third bite into his sandwich, which nearly was the end, Frank felt it in his mouth. He swished his mouth to the left, then to the right. Chew. Stop. Chew. Stop. It was hard and didn't taste like eggs. Using mouth maneuvers, he separated what he knew was food from the foreign object in his mouth. He swallowed the good part and spit the other on his desk.

"Huh?" Frank spoke out loud, scratched his head when he saw the inch long white object. It was paper, rolled up tightly and tied with a little string. Frank's big fingers fumbled it, rolling the string off, then unrolling the paper. It opened out three inches and Frank undid the single fold. "Fuck." He shook his head and slammed his hand. "Fuck." Picking up the phone he began to dial.

Two rings.

Dean answered. "Yeah."

"Dino."

Bang. The rattling phone being dropped carried to Frank.

Frank pulled the phone away from his ear and looked oddly at it. He listened. Nothing. "Hello?"

"Oh my God."

"Yes, I am."

"Frank." Dean stated his name with a hint of shock. "Why did you call me that?"

"What?"

"Dino."

"I don't know." Frank shrugged. "I really don't know. I'm supposed to be better tomorrow, maybe I'll know then."

"No one has called me that since my father. Odd."

"Yeah."

"Especially since today is his birthday."

Frank dropped the phone and spun quickly around in his chair looking about.

"Frank?"

Frank lifted the phone. "Safe."

"Safe from what?"

"I thought your dad's ghost might be here possessing my mind or something. I have problems with, Ghost. I saw my dead brother you know."

"God." Dean huffed. "Frank, why are you calling me?"

"Oh. Check this out. Asshole. I'm dead." Frank pulled the phone from his ear when Dean shrieked. "Yeah, you poisoned me you wimp."

"Wimp? I did it, didn't I."

"Bet me you can't do it again. Only this time in a more physical way."

"I'll bet you. What?"

"If in three weeks . . ." Frank tapped his hand on his desk. "If you can kill me in two weeks . . ."

"I though you said three?"

"Shut the fuck up. If you can kill me, in two weeks, I'll move out. But . . ."

if you don't kill me, you sleep on the couch for a month."

Dean laughed. "Wait. Where will you be?"

"In my own bed, in Josh's room. The couch and my moving for my death?"

"You're on."

"Thanks." Frank hung up the phone. He looked at the rest of his sandwich and eggs in the bowl, figuring he was dead anyhow, Frank finished his breakfast.

Dean was laughing when he hung up the phone in his lab..

"My Dad?" Johnny asked.

"Yeah." Dean laid down his phone and drew up a thinking look. "Seems he ate the eggs. He's dead."

"Bet he's pissed." Johnny stood before the centrifuge.

"Not really. He wants me to try to kill him again." Still thinking, Dean reached for his coffee. "In a more physical way."

"Oh you can do that." Johnny said.

"Yeah, I have a few ideas."

"What are they?"

Dean paused in bringing his cup to his lips, he stared at Johnny for a second. "You won't tell will you?"

"No."

"All right." Dean grinned. "I'll tell you before I go down to the lab. Some of them are great." He hurried across the lab, filled with the excitement of a kid, pulled up a stool and sat down next to Johnny.

Dean made a huge mistake . . . he spilled his guts.

^^^

At first Bev thought it would bother her having to walk to the clinic across the oddly crowded streets of Beginnings. But no one seemed to notice her, they were all too busy setting up for Beginnings day, an event that reminded Bev of a neighborhood carnival. She neared the clinic, but saw him off to the right. He knelt before a tall plastic case, attaching some kind of bolts securing it. Before her clinic stop, Bev made her way to Henry.

She stood behind him waiting to be sensed. Nothing. Bev reached down tapping him on his back. "Henry."

Henry peered over his shoulder. "Yeah." Then he returned to work.

"Why do they have Beginnings day in October. It's cold."

"Because . . ." Henry made his adjustment. "People will go in sooner, Joe theory . . ." Henry grunted as he worked.. "If we have it in the summer, people will stay out until three. Hell it starts at noon."

"Makes no sense."

"What do you want Bev." Henry kept his back to her.

"I'm being nice. Today's the day. You have a huge responsibility coming

your way. Emotional hero, so-to-speak.” she shrugged. “Anyhow, I’m off to the clinic. Like I said, today is the day that the truth comes out.”

Henry’s hands had stopped moving somewhere in her little ‘edge-on’ speech. He kept staring, mind racing, until he sensed and felt she was gone. When he looked back over his shoulder, she was. He didn’t want to question anymore, he wasn’t supposed to know. And knowing that, Henry decided to play the ‘ill-informed’ part.

Bev made it to the clinic in her long way around things walk. She had a skip to her, a sneaky skip, along with a twinge of nervousness. That nervousness was doubled when she saw Dean and Johnny walking down the corridor to the main doors. Bev stopped cold as they kept walking. She took a breath, smiled and walked again, this time blocking Dean’s way. “Hi Dean.”

“Bev.” Dean tried to get by her, Bev still blocked his way. “Excuse me.”

“Oh sure.” She stepped aside. “Oh, wait, Dean.”

Dean, in his walk with Johnny, stopped and looked back.

“Wish me luck, today’s the day you know?” She gave a thumbs up with a smile. “I’ll see you later.” Turning back, in a happy stride, she moved down the hall.

Johnny looked down to Dean who still stared in oddity to the hallway Bev once was at. “Dr. Dean? What was that about?”

Dean shook his head and shrugged. “Who knows.” He looked at his watched. “I’m heading down, if anyone’s looking for me . . .”

“Meaning Bev?”

“Ha-ha-ha. Funny. I’m in the lab.” Still shaking his head slow, Dean headed from the clinic.

Johnny, with arrogance and cockiness . . . smiled.

Quantico Marine Headquarters

Dr. Walker finished untwisting George’s intravenous tubing, and lifted George’s head upright. The silence in the room projected by Steward told him it was something of importance, and Dr. Walker really didn’t want to be around for anything ‘delicately’ discussed. George was making progress, getting better day by day. Physically he was improving, his left hand was still crippled, that, Dr. Walker, feared may never be normal. And with the exception of his head which uncontrollably fell forward or to the side every so often, George’s face was looking less grotesque the more nerve feeling that came back. But verbally and mentally, George was the old George. He yelled again, snapped again. Even worse because he grew more frustrated with his slow physical rehabilitation.

After Dr. Walker had left, Steward wasted no time dropping a stack of papers before George on the tray before his high back wheel chair. “Scouts just came back. Hit somewhere about Indiana.”

George’s good hand flipped through the papers “did we take any out?”

“About twenty.”

“Twenty? And they still wiped us out. Jesus Christ how many were there?”

Steward shrugged. "Had to be more than us. We lost a hundred and twenty-five men, not to mention the equipment that was destroyed."

"They just attacked?" George's hand tapped on the stack.

"Appears so."

"Makes no sense. What did they take?"

"Our scouts spotted our weapons, but no food."

"There couldn't have been that much food." George stated. "Not to justify this. I know Savages from my Beginnings day. They strike areas that have what they need. Areas they can rape and move on from. Not moving brigades. Now granted, more recently they've had unprovoked attacks. Usually what, bands of eight. But entire armies of them?" George shook his head. "Where are they coming from. Do we know?"

"No sir."

"First order of business. They have to be in that area. They . . ." George's head plopped forward. "Steward could you . . ."

"Certainly." Steward reached forward and lifted George's head.

"Thank you. What's our latest head count on accounted for troops?"

"Almost all in sir." Steward answered. "We have about three movements still due in. Here at Quantico we're nearly at capacity. In fact we followed orders and moved the excess down south to our factories and plantations."

"I know I called them all in. But send out a scouting party. Ten man, heavy artillery, best trained. Head straight out to that area and pull a circumference search around. That many savages will have to be in that area. Orders to take them out."

"Yes Sir." Steward grabbed the stack of papers. "Shall we increase security around the bases, plantation, factories and such."

"No." George shook his head, he shouldn't have it, fell drastically to the side.

Steward straightened it.

George acted like the head falling thing was nothing. "Savages are basically Midwest bred. They tend to stick in that part of the country. Going out some. Our main bases are too far east or south. I highly doubt they'll hit us. I think this could be an isolated incident."

"Then we'll eliminate them as ordered. I'll return later sir." Steward moved to the door.

"Oh, Steward. Make sure, if you hear anything from my daughter, you get me. Today's the day."

Steward paused in the door frame, he turned around. "Can I . . ." He held up a finger. "Take a slight chance here on getting my head torn off. But, what does this plan have to do with anything?" He braced himself.

George huffed. "Dr. Hayes is a very vital link to not only their biological and medical future, but he is vital to security as well."

"So why this plan, I thought you wanted him for us."

"I do. But . . . like I have always said, if you can't get them to join you, you might as well destroy them."

"This will destroy him?" Steward asked.

"Enough to make up for what he did to me. Yes."

"I understand. Payback is a real bitch?"

"You got it. Especially when it comes from me." George chuckled. It

didn't sound normal. Steward smiled in return and George nodded a goodbye. The second the door closed, George's head fell forward causing his chin to meet his chest. "Damn it."

Beginnings, Montana

Pacing about his cryo-lab always helped Dean think. Pace, talk about it out loud as he reviewed his notes. "I had to miss something." Dean said, hearing the clink of a chain every movement he made. "But where?" He waved his hand to the top of his hair in a flinging manner. "Bub, please. Not now." Dean moved back over to the counter and set his notes down. The buzz of the door made him look up.

Bub, the lobotomized savage, shaved head and healing scar, squealed and moved about his shackled hands in excitement when Frank walked in.

"Hey Dean. Bub." Frank nodded to Bub's little corner of the lab. The place Dean and Ellen brought him and hooked his chains to when they felt Bub needed to get out of his deer room.

"What's up Frank?" Dean asked. "And don't feed him."

"Just a cracker." Frank was reaching into his pocket.

"No. I'm testing him before I leave for Beginnings day. I'll feed him after."

"Dean you suck." Frank inched his way over to Bub and handed him a cracker.

Dean looked back when he heard Bub's squeal. He saw Frank patting him on the head. "If my tests get messed up."

"Run them again." Frank smiled to Bub who devoured the cracker, reminding Frank so much of a zombie with facial color.

Dean grunted as he reviewed his notes. "What's the reason for the visit Frank."

"I need to talk to you."

"Oh good." Dean was sarcastic.

Frank pulled up a stool and knocked on the counter. "I need your attention."

Dean set down his notes. "Will you leave if I give it?"

"Yes."

"You got it."

"All right. This mental disability, how much longer." Frank questioned.

"I told you probably tomorrow. I don't know, you can't be too sure on these things Frank."

"Fuck."

"What?"

"Do you have anything you can give me to make me normal."

Dean laughed. "Frank, listen to you."

"Serious Dean. I have a very important strategic meeting and I can't take a chance on this temporary mental disability getting in the way. You don't have an experimental smart pill hanging about down here?"

"No, I don't have an . . . an . . ." Dean smiled. "Actually Frank, it's funny

you should ask. I have an experimental intelligence pill.”

“Will that be the same thing?”

Dean hesitated. “Um, it may. I only have one, and . . . it’s experimental. It’ll only last twenty-four hours and it may delay this temporary mental disability from leaving.”

“I’ll chance it. Let me have it.”

Dean stared at the hand held out to him and he hid his sneaky grin. “I’ll be right back.” Dean stood up and headed to the back. The man in him couldn’t resist the payback, but the scientist in him was even more curious. For as close minded as Frank was about some things, he was way too open minded about others. Vulnerability and placebos would make for an interesting case study. Mind over matter had always been a scientific debate. And for future reference and generations to come, Frank himself could be a study all on his own. Part one would be Frank’s believing he had a temporary mental disability, which actually did have some medical merit with the slight swelling of the brain Frank was still experiencing from his head injuries. So easily Frank bought it and fell into it, getting worse if that was even possible. Part two would be the small green pill, made of tea leaves, that Dean had developed for the three hypochondriacs of Beginnings. A pill for Frank purposes, Dean would call the ‘S.I.P’. He laid it in Frank hand. “The S.I.P. Super intelligence Pill.”

“Whoa.” Frank looked at it.

“Take it.”

“How long will it take if it works?”

“Immediately.” Dean nodded, knowing what he was doing could be considered medically and psychologically unethical. But it was Frank.

“O.K.” Frank placed the pill in his mouth, grabbed Dean mug of coffee and washed it down. “Nothing.”

“Wait.”

“Nothing.”

“Frank you have to give it time.”

“Dean, I’m . . . whoa . . .” Frank lost his balance a little.

Dean held back his snicker. “What.”

“I feel clearer.”

“Really.” Dean pulled a notepad in front of him and marked the time. “How clearer.”

“Very clear.” Frank snapped his finger. “My mind is racing. Shit. I feel smarter.”

“Really.”

“Yeah, ask me anything. I bet I know. I know . . .” Frank nodded. “Ask me math. I sucked at math, but right now, I feel like a virtual math vat.”

“All right.” Dean thought about it and wondered. If Frank became dumber when Dean told him he was mentally disabled, would the opposite hold true since Frank believed he took a smart pill?. “Let’s start easy . . .”

“Difficult. Let’s really test it. Lay it on me,” Frank bobbed his head from side to side.

“All right. Confidence. Half the battle.” Dean began to write as he told Frank. “Listen carefully. Three-thousand-four hundred, times two, minus seven-hundred and fifty, divided by six.”

Without hesitation Frank answer. “Two thousand three hundred and

seventy-four.”

Dean looked at his answer of, one-thousand eight, point infinite threes. He looked at Frank. “Amazing.”

Frank snapped his finger. “It just came to me. Thanks Dean. I needed this for the meeting.”

“You could be worse tomorrow Frank.”

“I’ll deal with it then.” Frank nodded. “But . . .” He looked at his watch. “I have to go.”

“Oh Frank.”

“Yeah.” Frank stopped in his reaching for the door.

“Square root of one million, four hundred-fifty-three thousand.”

“Seventy-six.”

“Unbelievable.”

Frank knocked on his head and opened the door. “You created it.”

Dean smiled as Frank confidently left and when he was alone, he laughed. He stood back up grabbing his notes to get back into his thinking pacing and he saw Bub staring at him. “What?” Dean said to him. “I know. I know. It’s mean. But . . .” He held his finger up to Bub. “It’s Frank. He deserves it. One day I’ll sit down and tell you about all the shit he’s down to me and then you say, I’m being much too easy.” After taking a moment to chuckle at the thought of the ‘now’ temporarily intelligent Frank, Dean paced off to the other end of the lab.

^^^

Andrea’s hands both laid on the door of the examining room as she closed it. She leaned her forehead on the surface for a moment to gather her thoughts, then with a deep breath she turned around. Bev sat on the table and Andrea walked to the chart on the tray. “What exactly little girl are you up to with this?”

“Nothing.” Bev shook her head.

“Then why say it.”

“It’s true.”

“I can prove you wrong.”

Bev shook her head. “I doubt that.”

Andrea’s head nodded as she bit her bottom lip. “Listen to me and listen to me clear. This . . .” She held up the folder. “This information does not get out. Do you hear me.”

“I don’t want it to.”

With a motherly ‘hmm’ Andrea dropped the folder. “This is in my corner. I will deny what you tell me if you open that mouth of yours. We don’t need trouble if that’s your intention. The only people I want to know are the parties involved. You understand.”

“Yes.” Bev answered.

“Good.” Andrea walked to her and laid her hands on the table on both side of Bev’s legs. She leaned her face, stern close to Bev’s. “Cause hear me out little lady. I want silence. Absolute silence about this on your part. If this gets out. Word of this gets out before the parties involved want it to, I will come to you. If I come to you, God help you. I may not be able to get you out of Beginnings,

but I sure as Sweet Jesus can have to held up in New Bowman at the house of Lesbians until this things is resolved. And it will be. Got that?"

Bev swallowed.

"Good." Andrea grabbed the chart and walked to the door. "No word about this. I will deal with it. And *I*, not you will deem who finds out." With hostility and anger, Andrea stormed from the room confident her warning was heeded.

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After looking at his watch once more, Joe returned to looking at Hal who was seated across from him in the office. Robbie and Jason waited there as well. "He's got for today about three buses. On the norm, one will run every two hours. First in the morning to bring the workers here. I'll have them run until about eight. Danny's transportation, or as he calls it, Dan-Tram." Joe shrugged. "If anyone from New Bowman works late they can stay in Beginnings or, we can get them back. We're not talk all that many people."

"Plus." Hal added. "You're giving us two trucks."

"Exactly."

"How do you spare the gas?" Hal asked.

"Engines and fuel injections systems were adapted to our own alcohol slash gas."

"Dad." Robbie spoke. "Where's Frank? I want to get started."

"I don't know."

Frank made his entrance with a response to Joe's words. "That used to be me and now it's not. Hey Jason, Robbie . . . Hal." Frank gave a swat to the back of Hal's head then took the chair next to him.

Joe, annoyed, peered at Frank. "Really, really afraid to ask . . . what used to be you."

"Huh?"

"You walked in here and said it used to be you."

"Oh, yeah, I know. I don't know."

"Huh?" Joe scratched his head.

"You said 'I don't know' I used to not know but now I know, ask me a math fact."

"Frank." Joe's hand slammed down. "What the hell are you talking about."

"Ask me a math fact. Any math fact." He looked around the faces in the room. "I'm smart. I took a sip."

"A sip of what?"

"A sip. Super intelligent Pill. Dean gave it to me."

Joe's head fell with a bang to the desk, Robbie snickered and Hal was appalled.

Jason on the other hand, crossed his legs and looked intrigued. "Was it a little green pill."

Frank snapped his finger. "Yeah, that's the one. The smart pill."

There was a slight flutter that escaped Robbie as he really tried not to laugh.

"Frank." Joe said with edge. "Dean did not give you a smart pill. There is no such thing. No pill can make anyone smarter."

“Ya huh.” Frank nodded. “Ask me anything. Anything. Dad . . . I’m a whiz.”

Robbie lost it. “Excuse me.” He stood up.

“Dad ask me anything. I know.”

“Frank I . . .”

“I’m game.” Jason interceded. “I’ll ask you something.”

“Go on.” Frank nodded. “The answers just come to me like that.” He snapped his finger.

“You don’t say. All right.” Jason rubbed his chin in thought. “How many letters are there in . . . the Pi alphabet?”

Frank held out his hand and wiggled his fingers in a count. “Fourteen.”

Joe looked quickly at Jason who nodded approvingly at Frank. “And how, Frank, did you derive at that answer.”

“It just popped into my head, then I confirmed it by counting.”

“Counting?” Joe asked.

“Yeah the letters in the words ‘the pi alphabet.’”

Hal was not the least bit amused, turning in his chair he faced his brother. “Frank, did Dean tell you his pill would make you smarter.”

“Yes.”

“Did he tell you it didn’t work?”

“It worked. Dean gave me a math fact. I’m a vat.”

Hal looked back at his father. “I like Dean and all, but this isn’t right Dad. He’s taking advantage of the fact that Frank has brain swelling and he really is temporarily mentally disabled.”

“Yeah.” Frank agreed. “Or I wouldn’t have qualified for the smart pill.”

Joe held off rubbing the skin off his face in frustration. He saw Jason getting ready to spew another question Frank’s way and Joe stopped him. “Enough quizzing Frank, he’s already the star of Beginnings Day today. Frank can we get off the smart pill and on to this meeting.”

“Yes. But I want to take advantage of it. It only lasts twenty-four hours and I have . . .” Frank looked at his watch. “Twenty-three hours and seventeen minutes worth of smart time left. Go on.”

“Thanks.” Joe tried to continue.

“Of course I wish he made a pill for ghosts.”

Joe’s hand slammed down hard on the desk. “What the hell are you rambling about now, Frank? Are we back on that seeing Jimmy’s ghost again.”

“Nope.”

“Good.”

“William’s.” Frank nodded.

“You saw William’s ghost?”

“No.”

Joe closed his eyes. “Then why in Christ’s name are you bringing it up.”

“Because he possessed my mind.”

Robbie didn’t want to be at the meeting, he wanted to save it for later and get on to Beginnings day, but Frank was making his trip to the office well worth while. “William’s ghost is possessing you Frank. No wonder you’re so smart.”

“Yeah.” Frank nodded.

“Frank.” Joe cringed. “Why would you think William’s ghost is possessing your mind?”

“Dad.” Hal interrupted. “Why is this important?”

“I want to know what’s wrong with your brother.” Joe answered. “So shut up.”

“Yeah, shut up Hal.” Frank came back.

“You shut up Frank.” Hal snapped.

“You.”

“Boys!” Joe ran his hand down his face. “Christ. Frank. Why? Why do you think William’s ghost is possessing your mind?”

“I called Dean, Dino.” Frank nodded. “Out of the blue, on William’s birthday.”

“Did you ever stop to think William was the only one who called Dean that name, and now you and Dean are getting closer . . .”

“No we aren’t.”

Joe stayed calm and held up his hand. “Let me finish. It was a special nickname William called him and now subconsciously you’re seeping out a special name for Dean.”

Robbie saw the lost look on Frank’s face. “He means like a pet name Frank.”

“A pet name?” Frank asked his father. “You mean like Dean’s my lover or something?”

“No Frank that ‘s . . .”

“Dad, are you implying that Dean and I are lovers.”

“Frank!”

“What!” Frank yelled.

“Forget it.”

“Oh I can’t.” Frank sat back and huffed. “I can’t believe you think Dean and I are gay.”

Hal closed his eyes briefly and opened them very clam. “Frank, Dad is saying sometimes we have names for our friends no one else calls them by. It’s part of our friendship bond.”

“I never thought you and I were all that bonded Hal to have a friendship bond.” Frank replied.

“I give up.” Hal said.

“Can I?” Robbie asked.

“No.” Joe replied.

“Then may I?” Jason tried.

“Go on.” Joe held out his hand.

“Frank.” Jason turned his body to look at Frank. “I know why this is. See, you went through such a series of time machine trips that bits and pieces of that vat mind of yours picked up knowledge from other time frames and stored it. And now they are just popping out. Like seeing your brother. You did see your brother, but it was an image left over from a time machine. An air pocket, that your body inadvertently expels.”

“So like my mind is burping out the unnecessary garbage from time it picked up.”

“Yes.” Jason nodded.

“Got it.” Frank understood with a thumbs up. “So I should expect to see other weird things.”

“Yes.” Jason nodded again, hoping to end the whole entire conversation.

“Good. I just hope I don’t see Ben Franklin or something like that. He was a scary looking . . .”

“Frank!” Joe yelled. “Can we move on? I would like to enjoy Beginnings Day which starts . . .” Joe looked at his watch. “In an hour. Now . . . Robbie. The tape.”

Robbie stood up and walked over to the television set up. “You may want to move in for this. The picture isn’t the best. It’s better viewed on a little screen, but this will help visualize what I saw.”

The tape stopped. Silence.

“Frank?” Joe called his name bringing his son from the intense stare of the screen.

“Could I have that to view.” Frank requested. “I want to look at it some more. In detail and on a smaller screen.”

“Sure. Did you see something?” Joe asked.

“I don’t think they’re our savages. I can’t be sure, but from what I saw right away, I’m getting the feeling they aren’t.”

“Impossible.” Hal stated. “To do that much damage would suggest a large band of them. We know the ones that hit us fed from a larger camp. They were the same ones.”

“I doubt it.” Frank gave a single tilting twitch to his head. “Look.” He leaned forward, turned on the tape and backed it up. He paused it. “It’s hard to see, if we could get black and white stills from this, it might be better. I’ll speak to Henry. But check this out . . .” Frank hand moved in hover over the screen. “Tire tracks. These are George’s men. At least a hundred dead. Heading where? Home. East. Right? There isn’t enough vehicles here to transport that many men. The tire tracks go at a thirty degree angle north east.”

“Maybe some escaped.” Joe stated. “And headed home.”

“Why northeast?” Frank question. “South east, yes. I’ll have to view all the details of this. I’ll know in a few days. But my guess, they took more than the truck. And their camp is more north.”

Robbie spoke up. “Then we have to worry, are they of the same, I don’t know, tribe? If so, do they communicate?”

Joe shook his head. “I’ll have to say no. Hal?”

“They’re savages. If they are a different group. They aren’t with the others.”

“I don’t know.” Frank shrugged. “The attacks are too similar.. We strike different, you strike different, the society strikes different. The savages strike the same. It’s not a case of ‘I saw this once so let’s do it’. Frank commented. “I think they’re in communication.”

“Setting up strategy.” Joe added.

Frank shrugged again . “If that’s what you want to call it. Until we know what they want and why they are doing these huge attacks, we have to just stay with, why they got their name, savage hits.”

Joe took a deep breath and leaned back. “All right, Take the tape. View it. Don’t rush Frank. I want to see concrete points you bring up. We have these people in Manitoba we have to get in touch with. They’re in danger, but how do

we get them from there to here if they want to come.”

“I’ll work on something.” Hal interjected. “But first, let’s work a way to get through to these people. Even if it’s dropping some sort of communication.”

“Work on that as well.” Joe pointed. “Jason, you haven’t said anything.”

“I was thinking Joe. May I say something and risk the chance of Slagel ridicule since I’m outnumbered.”

“Sure.” Joe leaned back further in his chair.

“The savages are a problem. We agree?” Jason looked around. “They may not be a big threat to the land of Beginnings or New Bowman now. If some get through, damage minimal, but . . . they’re a threat to supply runs, scout runs, survivors out there. They are also a threat to the society, which in turns makes it a threat to us.”

Joe was a little confused. “Eliminating the society helps us.”

“They’re big boys with big toys. We lost men beyond our walls to the new plague. Robbie, how did they get it?” Jason asked.

“The savages had it.” Robbie answered.

“And how did the savages get it?” The next question came from Jason.

“They hit the SUTs with it.” Robbie closed his eyes.

“Point taken.” Jason continued. “What happens if these things hit, let’s say a George bio lab. He had one in Binghamton, how far is it from this attack. What happens if they get something, carry it to us. Hence we have another bad situation on our hands.”

Heavily Joe breathed. “I never thought of it like that.”

“We’d better.” Frank interjected. “Thinking like Jason, because I’m smart now, means if these savages are banning together, communicating, starting a civilization then . . .”

“We have to find them.” Hal finished for Frank. “Take them out?” He asked Frank.

“Take them out.” Frank stated.

“One more thing” Jason held up his hand. “This no longer is our problem. It’s the problem of the survivors out there and the problem of the society. I think, I think it may be time Joe, you got in touch with George.” Jason hunched at the unison gasps. “No, I am very serious, If this was the old world and we were the US, George Russia, say we were at war. All of the sudden Japan jumps in and starts throwing us both through a loop. Would we, the US take them out for Russia. Would Russia, take them out for us. No. The elimination of the threatening third party would be a joint effort. Trust me. Yes we are at a sort of war with the society. But, whether we win or they win, it won’t mean shit if we can’t leave the sanctity of either of our walls if the savages grow and lurk. Think about it Joe . . .” The room had drew up a silence of contemplation during Jason’s words. “Think about it. It just might be time.”

^^^

Elliott stared at the waist of his jeans after he had placed them on. How long had it been since he had worn jeans? He had become so accustomed to wearing his UWA uniform or camouflage to relax in, jeans never even crossed his mind. In his clinic room he reached for his shirt which lay on his hospital

bed. A long sleeve, almost long-john underwear material. He chuckled at the tag, that read '*Ben and Todd creation*' And the tiniest words reading, '*made in Beginnings.*'. Lifting it slowly to place over his head, he heard the knock on his door. "Come in." He looked and Ellen walked in with a smile. Elliott quickly turned his back to her to placed on his shirt.

"How's my favorite patient?" Ellen asked laying the chart on the foot of his bed.

"Fine. Dr. Hayes. Much better today."

"Gees, Elliott." Elliott saw him struggling with the shirt and helped pull it own for him. "Call me Ellen. We're friends."

"I'm just trying to show respect." Elliott faced her.

"Elliott, trust me. You show nothing else but respect. I don't think you know how not to." Ellen lifted his chart. "Let's sit." She sat in the chair bedside while Elliott sat on the bed. "Then you're feeling better."

"Much. My leg, it doesn't want to move. I don't have much control over it."

"Feels sort of like it's in a perpetual state of falling asleep?"

"Exactly."

"Does it hurt?" Ellen asked.

"No. Just bothersome."

"That'll come back with physical therapy. Which I have you schedule for twice a week. That's not to say you don't do the exercises everyday. Got that?"

"Yes."

"We want full movement back."

"Worse case scenario?"

Ellen took a breath. "Really, some numbness, not the agility you used to have. I'm confident though, you'll be sprinting miles again and jumping off horses. There was no permanent spinal chord injury."

"Your husband saved my life."

Ellen looked up with bright eyes. "Dean doesn't surgically give himself credit. But I won't argue. He's brilliant. Twelve hours he operated, he wanted to make sure it was right. You're strong and were in good health. You . . . you could have died Elliott."

Elliott blinked long. "It's so funny, I didn't even feel like I was dying."

Ellen flipped open her chart and grabbed the pencil from her coat pocket. "I'm releasing you today because it's Beginnings' day. Our foundation day, it's so much fun. I'm hoping for great things this year. Danny Hoi was social coordinator."

"I'm looking forward to it."

"I wish all the men of Bowman felt that way."

"Dr Hayes, I mean Ellen. They would love to be here." Elliott explained. "We're new. It's not that we don't want to be a part of Beginnings, but some of the men are just . . . shy?"

"I'll accept that." She peered up to Elliott. "You look good. But I didn't want to let you out today. Hal promised me tomorrow he would see that you are on house arrest for another two days, then . . . light duty for three weeks."

"Three weeks!" Elliott was aghast.

"Three weeks. Maybe longer. Let's see how the therapy goes." Ellen winked. "Enjoy the break. I know the Slagels. I know how hard they work you.

Let me see . . .” Ellen reviewed his chart. “Melissa said your weight dropped. We have to get that up. And she says you vitals are strong.”

“Good. Melissa is very nice.”

“Yeah.” Ellen smiled. “She is. All of our, well most of our women are. Melissa is having an illicit affair with a twenty-year-old paraplegic former society soldier turned defector named Tom.”

“Huh?”

“O.K., well she hasn’t spilled her guts about it. I think she should. Tom, the twenty-year old, former society soldier turned defector paraplegic, loves her. Melissa is already involved with Glen, whose like ninety. Go figure.” Ellen rattled as she read. “And she’s married to Mark, who’s become quite the security bore since Frank named him the man of tracking. That happens to security guys. She only occasionally , how can I say, fulfills or helps out other men, that’s when no one else will. But I think she should get involved with Tom. I’ve been encouraging. He’s cute., young, energetic and . . he’s twenty. Of course, personally I’d feel like a pedophile since my step son is nineteen. But that’s me, not Melissa, she should go for it, don’t you think?” Ellen turned another page in the chart. “And don’t mention pedophile, especially around Trish. My sort of pseudo son Frank gave me is claiming she answered the door only wearing a towel on her head. I don’t believe it. Gemma the bible thumper is giving her hell about it. Of course, my son thought nothing of it at first, now he and his friend sit in front of her house everyday waiting for her to answer the door in the towel.” She finally looked up to a quiet Elliott. His mouth was open and his face a slight shade of red. “You’re blushing.”

“You rambled about things I haven’t heard come from a woman in some time.”

“Get used to it.” Ellen shut the chart. “Especially if you’re gonna be my friend and hang about Beginnings.”

“I look forward to the conversation.”

A single light tap on the door, brought in Andrea. “Ellen?”

“Oh hi Andrea.” Ellen stood up. “Just finishing up.”

“Do you have . . do you have a minute to spare?”

“After I’m finished. I have two more patients.” Ellen answered.

“Good. Please stop and see me, it’s important. Before . . before you go off to Beginnings Day.” Andrea gave serious, yet solemn look.

“I will.” Ellen had question in her voice. “Andrea what . . .” Andrea had left without another word. Ellen turned back to Elliott. “Was that me or was she upset.”

“I’m not in tune with women, but I’d guess, sad.”

“You may be right.” Ellen gave a swat to Elliott’s arm. “I have to finish up. And . . . Hal will be by to get you for our Day.” She backed up.

“Will I see you there?” Elliott asked.

“Without a doubt.” Waving once more, Ellen, in an upbeat, carefree mood, walked from the room.

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Danny Hoi was busy. In fact, he thrived on having things to do. The more the better. But Beginnings Day was heavy on his mind. Soon, Danny thought it would start, and his worries on whether he did his Social Coordinator job well would be behind him. Danny had boasted and bragged that it would be the best Beginnings' Day ever, then he began to worry if his mouth was going to be big enough to hold his foot. However, self confidence was never a lacking on Danny's part.

Danny moved across main street, so busy, so filled with the smell of food. He had two stops to make and then it was back to the big 'BD' as he called it. Stopping at Henry, who stood before a large, plastic vat of water, Danny patted him on the back. "Good job."

"This . . ." Henry wiped the sweat off his head. Sweat that shouldn't had been there considering it was October. "This was the biggest pain in the ass yet. I missed a council meeting."

"Yeah but . . ." Danny grinned. "It's gonna be so entertaining and worth it."

Henry tried to look serious, but he couldn't. A grin that matched Danny's crossed his face. "You are so right."

"You rigged it."

"I rigged it."

"Excellent." with another pat on Henry's back, Danny moved to containment. He walked through the small office and then was buzzed through to the main building. He headed straight to the skills room where his 'inside' worker was waiting. Danny hated to dump the manual work on him,. But he was stuck in there, what else was Richie, Ellen's brother going to do.

Richie sat on the floor of the skills room. A big box before him.

"Tell me." Danny spoke as he walked in. "Tell me you finished."

Richie exhaled heavily. "Cut, counted and bounded."

"You Richie, are the man." Danny crouched down to the floor.

"Yeah, I'm the man who can't go to Beginnings' Day."

"Next year, your sister says you should be out."

"Danny." Richie stood up at the same time as Danny. "There is nothing wrong with me."

"I know that. But . . ." Danny shrugged. "What can I do, right? I'm just the lowly social coordinator." He picked up the box. "But I did give you the honors of helping to edit the first ever Beginnings's best selling novel didn't I."

"Yeah." Richie said less than enthusiastic. "I guess that's a little . . . payback?"

"You got it. And I got this and I have to go. Thanks again. I'll set some aside for when you get out." Danny told him.

"Thanks. If that ever happens." Richie waved sadly.

Danny felt bad as he left. Especially with all the work Richie did for him. But there was nothing he could do. He could try to talk to Ellen again, but Ellen was very insistent that Richie stay. Somehow, Danny truly believed it had nothing to do with Richie's behavior. Especially since Ellen had mentioned numerous times that Richie, in the old world, owed her twenty-seven hundred dollars, and that with accrued interest would be up to somewhere in the vicinity of sixteen thousand.

History was Danny's final 'work' stop for the day. And then, hopefully, he like everyone else, could relax and Enjoy the festivities.

Danny chuckled at the ringing bells when he stepped inside of History. "Scoop. Tell me."

Exhausted like, Trish swivelled around in her chair. "I am killing you." She said so serious.

"Ouch. What?"

"Do you even realize what you asked me to do Danny Rather Hoi? It's not like I'm not swamped as it is in history."

"Um . . ." Danny looked at the neat, clutter free, empty office and then he stepped back. Trish had a madwoman premenstrual look to her.

"Trish, now, it's for Andrea. You agreed to be part of my legal eagle team."

"True." Trish's demeanor changed some.

"See? Prestige. How far did you get?" Danny asked.

"Not very." Trish made it back to her desk. "There's a lot more involved than you think."

"Why is that? I would think, pull the events, look, put them back or print them up."

Trish shook her head and returned to behind her desk. "Why did you say we needed this information."

"To cross check events that transpired with things that a George person was suspected of being involved in. Use those events to place Andrea far from the scene of the crime so to speak."

"Exactly. For example, to jar a more recent memory. When the cryo case was broken into where was Andrea?"

"No one knows. The story is making dinner. Katie is the only back up to that. And she's seven."

"Not really."

"She's not seven?" Danny joked. "Kidding." He sat on the edge of Trish's desk.

"That was the day Hal showed up. That was also the same day that nothing else happened except the Hal thing."

"So we're at square one."

"No. See, you have to look beyond that. I did. The day before a few things happened."

"What does that have to do with the cryo-case."

"Some. If notations had to be made in history for events that happened the day before, they would have had to be brought in, verified the same day that the cryo-case was broken into."

"O.K."

Trish pushed copies of papers to him. "Andrea was in here for Joe to verify the history insertions. She as council. She was here for an hour. Here's the print up with the time of when she logged in and when she logged out."

"Trish this is great." Danny's face lit up. "How legal savvy of you."

"Yes, well those O.J. Simpson trial tapes you brought over really helped."

Danny chuckled. "O.K., I understand where you're going with this. Check out every angel you need to." Danny peered at his watch. "And I have a Beginnings day to coordinate right now. We'll meet tomorrow."

“Do I still get to go with you to interview potential defense witnesses?”

“And depositions Trish.” Danny winked and stood up. “I have to go. See you out there. And . . .” Leaning over the desk, Danny kissed Trish on the cheek. “Thanks.”

“Oh, any thing you need.” Trish giggled and blushed and a smile stayed bright as Danny walked to the door.

“I’ll remember those words.” Danny left.

Smiling brightly, Trish returned to her paper work and it hit her. She made a fatal mistake, she just unknowingly volunteered for even more Danny work.

^^^

As soon as the cup of tea set down in front of Ellen in Andrea’s office, Ellen knew. Something was wrong. “What did I do?”

Andrea shook her head slowly as she walked around the desk and sat down. “You did nothing.”

“Something’s wrong.”

“Yes.”

Ellen took a sip of her tea. She gasped. “This . . .” She choked. “Is spiked.”

“Oh yes.” Andrea crossed her legs and leaned back. “We have a situation and it isn’t pretty. In fact, it will only get worse.” She closed her eyes with a deep breath. “No one knows. Not yet. It is up to you who finds out. My lips are sealed. I’ve also made some assurances that word doesn’t leak.”

Ellen tilted her head in wonder. “Andrea, what is going on?”

“I’m breeching every ethical standard coming to you first. But, as a woman . . .”

“Andrea.”

“Bev is pregnant.”

Ellen’s reach for her tea hastened and she took a gulp. “Oh, God, she’s making me a grandmother again. To Johnny? Right?”

“No.”

“Whew.” Ellen let out a breath.

“To Dean.”

Silence.

Andrea with folded hands leaned into her desk. “The little girl is claiming that this summer her and Dean had an affair and occasionally it is still going on.”

Ellen still was silent.

“She’s about fourteen, fifteen weeks along. Her dates of the affair coincide with her pregnancy and the fact her primary was out with Robbie on raids back then.”

“Kevin wasn’t around.”

Andrea shook her head.

“It could be anyone’s. It’s not Dean. I would think if he slept with her he would have told me.”

“I know.”

“He’s not now. I know that.”

"I believe that as well." Andrea leaned back again.

"But you don't believe they didn't have the affair this summer."

"I don't know Ellen." Andrea tossed up her hands. "She stated the first time to me, and I distinctly recall . . . I recall you and Dean fighting horribly back then. That is what she told me started it."

Ellen swallowed the tenseness in her neck. "Well." She cleared her throat. "I refuse to believe it. I think it's a ploy to start trouble."

"Good. I'm glad you have that attitude. Because the more she insists, the uglier this will get."

"So it's her word right now against his."

"She says, test on the baby will prove it's Dean and she claims to know details . . ."

"Details? Details of what?" Ellen was dumbfounded.

"And she says she has other proof if you need to see it. Proof they were together."

"Proof. What, did she keep his sperm." Ellen jumped up near hysterics. Hand over her eyes, Ellen took a calming breath. "I'm sorry." She closed her eyes. "Who the hell keeps proof of an affair."

"Obviously Bev, if it happened."

"I won't believe it. I won't. Why does she want my husband so bad Andrea. Why would she start this?"

"I don't know. What's the gain."

"She hates me." Ellen stated. "What I did to her, I'll never know. So when does she plan to let the whole community think my husband dogged me?"

"Public humiliation?"

"Exactly."

"She says she won't say a word to anyone. She says . . . she wants no one to know but Dean."

Ellen laughed. "You can't believe that."

"I don't. I threatened her though. She won't tell. It's up to you and Dean to let whomever know. I say, let's keep this a secret until all facts are in."

"I'm with you." Ellen moved to the door. "But right now, before we go on with this big Day, there someone that needs to know this . . . this little secret."

Slowly Andrea stood up from behind her desk. She grabbed the mug and handed it to Ellen. "Take a drink before you go and tell Dean."

"Why? You think he'll be that mad?"

"Yes and . . . you never know. Just be prepared in case he tells you something, you don't want to hear."

Ellen snatched up the mug and hot or not, she took three good gulps. "He won't." She closed her eyes and opened the door. "I hope."

^^^

"Dean." Ellen said his name soft when she walked into the cryo-lab.

"Oh hey El." Dean grinned as he stood with Bub. "I'm just about done."

"Dean, we have to . . ."

"Did you see the Psoriasis on Bub's arm. It really is clearing up."

Ellen walked closer and peered. "The ointment worked."

Dean kissed her. "Have you been drinking?"

"Dean we . . ."

"Couldn't wait." Dean chuckled and hurried to the counter. "Beginnings day starts in . . ." He looked at his watch. "Oh shit. Now, do you want to go on up and grab the kids. I can . . ."

"Dean." Ellen said his name boldly. "Please."

Dean stopped. "What's wrong."

Breathing deeply, Ellen walked over to him. "We have to talk."

"What's wrong?"

"We have a problem. A big one."

"When don't we?"

"This is serious." Ellen sat down.

Dean saw it on her face. "Serious enough to have a drink."

"I think."

"What is it."

"I'm just gonna be 'Joe' blunt. All right?" She waited for his nod. "Bev is fifteen weeks pregnant, she says it's yours. You had an affair this summer and you still sleep together occasionally."

Dean laughed.

"Dean this isn't funny."

"El, it is. Think about it. It's ridiculous." He kissed her quickly with a smile. "I love you. Thanks for not believing it."

"Dean. You didn't have an affair with her this summer did you?"

Dean stopped smiling. "I can't believe you're asking me that."

"Dean."

"No El. I refuse to answer that." He shook his head. "Next thing you know you'll ask me if I'm still sleeping with her." He saw it on her face. "Don't." He held up his hand. "Don't ask. "You're my wife. I love you. She's a little girl, El. She's young enough to be my daughter. Think about it. O.K.?"

"She says she has proof."

"Then she has bad proof. There's nothing that can prove I slept with her or knocked her up. How can you have evidence of something that never happened."

Ellen's head dropped.

"El." Dean walked before her and laid his hands on her arms. "Don't think about this. None of it is true. She's not pregnant to me. That would be impossible. All right?" Softly he kissed her. "Trust me."

"I do."

"Then let's not let this ruin our family day. O.K."

Ellen nodded and stood up. "I'm going to go on up and get the kids. I'll meet you topside."

"El." Dean rushed to her. "You are my life. I have waited forever to be like this with you. I've seen this 'you and me' thing coming way before this summer affair she is alleging. So why would I screw it up. I wouldn't. Please believe in me. Don't let this get you down."

Ellen looked into her husband's eyes. Eyes she did trust. "I'm sorry I doubted you."

"Don't apologize." He kissed her again. "You can however, go get our kids ready."

Ellen smiled. "I can do that." She moved to the door. "Meet you at the dunking booth?"

"You bet." Dean grinned.

As Ellen went to leave she heard the sad squeal, she stopped and turned around. "I'm sorry. Bye Bub." She waved and left.

Dean, with no worries over what he heard, went back to work.

^^^

"Amazing." Hal spoke in awe walking into the festivities with his father and Elliott.

"All these people." Elliott added.

"Some of them are yours." Joe snickered. "But, it's a great day here. Great food. Kids love it . . . and speaking of kids." Joe spotted Ellen walking toward the living section. "I'll be back, I have to stop her from getting hers." Joe hurried from Hal and Elliott through the people. "Ellen." He called to her as she walked, arms close to her, head down. "Ellen."

Ellen stopped walking and turned around.

"Sweetheart." Joe caught his breath. "Frank brought the kids here. Of course, I need you to get them from him, he's the star of the . . ." Joe saw it in her eyes and concern hit him "What's wrong?"

Ellen just stared at Joe. She fought that effect he had on her, the ability to draw out her tears no matter how strong she tried to be. She shook her head.

"What is it? Don't bullshit me."

"Can we . . . can we just talk. Please?"

The tiny soft voice that Ellen used to make her request of Joe sent warning signals to him. Without even answering, he laid his arm tightly around her shoulder, gave a hug-tug pull of her into him, and a simple kiss to the top of her head. They walked away from the festivities.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The touch of Joe's lips on her cheek made Ellen smile. "Thanks."

"Better?" He asked.

"Yeah, thanks for the talk." she turned to him.

Joe brushed what look like crumbs from Ellen's cheek. "Alexandra kissing you?"

Ellen giggled. "If it's not me at this food table. It's her."

"It's both." Joe pointed. "Every year, we know this is where to find you."

"I monitor dietary intakes."

"Did you hit Jenny's pizza booth this year?"

Ellen looked to where Joe pointed. "No. I am so impressed with everything Danny did."

"Me too. He has some sort of coupon idea. Do you know what the hell that is about?" Joe questioned.

"Haven't a clue." Ellen shrugged.

"I guess I'll find out soon enough. Well, I better go do the leader thing and mingle. Make sure you don't hang out here the entire time. You want to secure at least one turn in the Frank line."

"Not me." Ellen shook her head. "I think I'll enjoy watching. I've got a great view."

Joe peered over to the Frank line. Mobs of people were there. "You better hope that crowd thins out by the time Frank gets there."

"Trust me, seeing is half of it. Hearing is the other half."

Joe gave a tap to Ellen's cheek. "If you need to talk about this anymore, you know where to find me."

Ellen slowly nodded.

"Cheer up." Joe kissed her, backed up and bumped into Dean. "Whoops. Sorry." A hand on Dean's shoulder was Joe's goodbye and he kept walking.

Dean stepped closer to Ellen. "Please don't tell me you told him."

Ellen looked up with panicked eyes.

"You did."

"Dean, he's my Dad."

"God Ellen." Dean covered his eyes. "This is ridiculous. If you let this bother you I'm gonna get pissed."

Ellen closed her eyes and opened her mouth. "How can you say that to me?"

"How can you let it bother you?"

"Do you hear what she's saying?"

"Do you hear what I'm saying?" Dean placed his face closer to hers. "This is all a big lie on her part. She's been trying to get you through me for a while. Don't believe it. As much as this bothers me to reiterate, I will. I wasn't, nor am I with her. O.K.?" Dean kissed her. "O.K.? El . . ."

"O.K." She nodded.

"Good. Where are the kids?"

Ellen pointed over to the Frank line. Dean could see Josh's tall body. "Are they with Josh?"

"Yeah."

“Do you mind if I secure my spot . . .”

“Go on.” Ellen swayed her head. “Have fun.”

“Oh, I will.” Quickly Dean kissed her, snatched up a cookie and hurried away.

Ellen in deep thought, and with a little sadness reached for a tortilla chip courtesy of Jess. She wasn’t in the mood to smile, but it happened when she heard Frank and Danny’s voice in conversation as they headed to the ‘Frank’ line.

“Oh yeah.” Frank slowed down in his walk with Danny. “All these people are here to see me?”

“You’re the star Frank.”

“What am I doing. Am I posing for them?”

“For as much as I’d like to say yes . . .” Danny led Frank through the awaiting crowd.

“Fuck.” Frank saw it.

“You agreed.”

“Fuck.” Frank tossed his head forward with a stomp of his foot. “A dunking booth.”

“Please don’t tell me you’re changing your mind. Everyone’s been waiting Frank. They are really up for a challenge.”

“You’re a dead man Danny. Especially if Dean dunks me.” Frank saw Dean smiling and waiting his turn in line. Robbie was first, behind him Henry. “They’re like wolves waiting for me.” Frank shuddered.

“But you’re the man Frank. Besides, they have to back up.”

“Back up?”

“Yeah, they’ll stand twenty-five feet from that little target.”

Frank fluttered his lips. “I’m dry. Line them up.” Arrogantly, Frank moved toward the booth. He removed his revolver and handed it to Robbie then hit the booth. So confident Frank climbed up. He enjoyed the roar of cheers he received, flexed then sat down. He grinned as Danny pushed everyone back. He watched Robbie get ready. “Ha! Little brother. In baseball you can hit a ball but you sure can’t throw one.”

Robbie just grinned back.

Frank listened to Danny yell out ‘three tries then the next person gets a try’, smiling at the thought of how dry he was going to remain, Frank lost the smile when he saw Danny with a gun handing it to Robbie. “Whoa. Whoa. What the fuck is that. They can’t shoot me Danny. Dunking booth? Get it.”

“Oh no Frank, they aren’t shooting you. They’re shooting the target. See.” Danny held up the gun then pulled what looked like three long darts from his back pocket. “Henry and I made this. Spring action. The darts are weighted. If they hit the target you go under.”

“Fuck.”

Danny, smiling, moved with a bounce and handed the gun to Robbie.

Robbie looked to Frank who didn’t seem pleased. “No offense big brother.” Smiling, Robbie took an aiming stance.

“Robbie.”

Robbie fired . . . Ping, it hit into the metal

“Fuck.”

Splash.

Ping

'Fuck'

Splash.

Joe shook his head and laughed as he lifted the cheese from his slice of pizza. "I don't know how you do it Jenny." Joe enjoyed the taste.

"Danny's impressed as well. So impressed he hired me out." Jenny said as she stood behind the counter at the pizza booth.

"Hired you?" Joe asked. "How in God's name can he . . ." Joe was quiet when two UWA soldiers approached the booth.

"Sir." The one nodded and saluted Joe.

"Afternoon sir." The other saluted as well.

"Boys." Joe acknowledged feeling a little awkward from the salute.

"Ma'am." One of the soldiers faced Jenny. "May we have some of your pizza."

"Absolutely." Jenny turned around and a moment later returned with two slices. "Here you go."

"Thank you ma'am." The soldier smiled, bowed his head and stepped back.

The other one did the same.

Jenny sighed and leaned on the counter.

Joe did a double take. "Why did you do that?"

"They are so nice those UWA men. Aren't they?"

"They *are* polite."

"Nothing like our Beginnings' men."

"You can say that again." Joe started to eat his pizza and saw Jenny's mouth open to repeat herself. "Don't. And tell me how Danny hired you. You mean asked you to volunteer?"

"Hired. Fifteen Danny Dollars a week."

"Danny what?"

Danny Hoi's voice answered. "Dollars." He laid a stack of what looked like monopoly money in front of Joe.

"What in Christ's name is this?" Joe picked it up and nearly choked when he saw the sketch of Danny on the front, "No." He slid them back to Danny. "Absolutely not."

"Joe listen to me."

"No." Joe shook his head.

"Joe." Jenny tapped his hand. "You really should listen to his idea."

"Danny." Joe was firm. "The last thing we need is for greed to hit. If people have to have Danny Dollars to have things they'll get greedy. We can't have that in a 'I scratch your back, you scratch mine barter society.'"

"But this is bartering." Danny explained. "Actually a means of control."

Joe shook his head not understanding. He just wanted to eat his pizza.

"This isn't a reward." Danny said. "Nor is it a means to buy. It is, but it isn't. What Danny Dollars are, are my means to control the entertainment I set up in Bowman. Plus a real morale booster."

"I'm listening." Joe told him.

"All right. I have twenty-six lanes at the alley. Two movie houses with limited seats. One pool hall and a soon to open Danny Diner."

Joe chuckled. "Who's running these places?"

"I have Bowman men., a few from here. People want to Joe. It's a way to break the monotony of going to the hall."

"I agree." Joe said. "I have no problem with all these means of entertainment you set up. Hell, didn't I actually pat you on the back for the Blockbuster Video."

"Danny Buster Joe."

"I stand corrected." Joe faced Danny. "So why the Danny dollars if entertainment ifs free."

"Reserve space. It will take so many Danny dollars to do each thing. There are more people than seats at the show, seats at the diner or bowling allies. Everyone gets one Danny Dollar for every hour they work. Plus Joe I see it more as a morale booster."

"How do you figure."

"People in general like to buy things. They earned them. Yeah they work for free things here, but this is just a little bit more. If Dean takes Ellen to the Danny Diner, I'm sorry Joe, but it's gonna mean more to Dean if he earned enough to not only take Ellen to the Diner but to a show, than if we just said 'go.'"

Jenny interjected. "And from a woman's stand point Joe, it would mean a lot to us as well."

"My mother . . ." Danny continued. "Never worked. My father wouldn't let her. She hated when it was time to give him a gift, why? Because she had to use my father's money for it. It didn't mean the same thing. If a gift personally costs you something to purchase, it means a hell of a lot more when you give it to someone than if it coast you nothing to get. Understand?"

Joe was silent for a second. "The only thing I don't like is say you charge four Danny dollars for the show."

"Six."

Joe whistled. "That's a lot. What about the people who haven't earned enough but want to go."

"They still can go. But the Danny Dollar thing is just a little way to make people feel like they're back in the old world."

"I just don't know Danny." Joe shook his head.

"How about this." Danny held up his hand. "We try it on a trial basis. We tell people it's on a trial basis. If it doesn't work. It doesn't work. No biggie. What do you say."

Joe debated. "All right, listen. I want a detailed explanation sheet on my desk for me to review. If I approve your explanation of how Danny Dollars work, you will give a sheet to every single man and woman in New Bowman and Beginnings. Then, after they get that, then we can try the Danny Dollars."

Danny's 'yes' made Joe jolt but not as much as the kiss on the cheek he got from Danny. Joe cringed, grabbed his cold pizza and walked away before he got roped into any more 'Danny' ideas.



Dark blonde hair in need of a cut. Little baggy Levi's. A face pressed so tight into his hands as he sat off alone. A miniature Dean was how Billy Hayes looked.

"Hey." Ellen sat down on the curb next to him.

"Hey." Billy stared forward.

"What's wrong?"

"I've been abandoned."

Ellen chuckled and looked across the way to Dean. "Daddy is just enjoying the get even with Uncle Frank moment."

"Daddy never enjoys Beginnings day."

"No. He doesn't. Not usually." Ellen said. "But he enjoys dunking Uncle Frank. Don't you want to go try?"

Billy lifted his eyes with a 'you got to be kidding' look.

"O.K. Maybe not." Ellen clapped her hands together once. "What do you want to do?"

"Go home."

"You can't. What about playing with the other kids. They're all . . ." Ellen got that look from Billy again. "Maybe not."

"They all hate me."

"True but . . . look at your father. He out grew that. Only a couple years ago, but still. He outgrew it."

"I want to go home."

"Well, you can't. Tough. It's Beginnings' Day. It's the one day a year that only happens once a year."

Billy rolled his eyes.

"Please don't do that. You look like your father. Hey, I got an idea."

"What?" Billy asked.

"What do you usually do at Beginnings' Day?"

"Sit with Dad and listen to him complain."

"Exactly. Go bitch at him." Ellen pointed.

"Huh?"

"Yeah, march right over and bitch at him for not being miserable with you. It's your day, it's what you do. Go on."

A bright smile hit Billy's face. "Can I?"

"Sure, go on."

"Thanks." Billy jumped up.

"Wait."

"What?"

"Kiss."

Darting in, Billy kissed Ellen and quickly raced away toward Dean.

Pleased with her motherhood skills, Ellen stood up from the curb to resume her culinary watch at the food table. Right before the tortilla chips and salsa.

In her hand's reaching for a chip, Ellen lost her appetite.

"That was really great how you made Billy smile." Bev's irritating voice spoke right behind her.

Ignore her. Ellen told herself.

Bev spoke a little louder. "I just hope I can be as good with my son or daughter. Of course, I think it will be boy. Do you think Dean would want another boy?"

Ellen spun around.

"I'm sure he does." Bev stated. "I hope this child looks just like him." She spoke pleasantly running her hand across her own stomach. "I was thinking Nick and this baby would grow . . ."

"Bev." Ellen silenced her. "Go away."

"We have so much in common Ellen. We should bond. Besides . . ." She moved right next to Ellen. "This is the food line. I'm hungry. Us pregnant people have to eat. I have to take care of myself. Dean wants another child so badly . . ."

"Then I'll leave." Ellen started to walk away.

"And since you can't have anymore."

Ellen stopped cold.

"Whoops let that slip, didn't I?" Bev covered her mouth.

Ellen stormed back to her. "What in the world would make you say that."

"It's true." Bev spoke as she ate. "You aren't a whole woman anymore. Dean let's me in on all your little bedroom secrets."

"You don't know anything."

"I know enough that he would get irritated when you would bring it up after he *had* to be with you. I remember one time, not to long ago, he said to me, 'God Bev, she won't drop it. I'm laying in bed with her and she wants to talk about it.'" Bev giggled and dropped her voice to a whisper. "Actually, he tells you it was for the best. Nick did damage. But . . . he tells me, there was nothing wrong with you. He took it out because he didn't want to chance ever having a child with you again."

Ellen felt the heat form under her neck. She had to remember a pregnant woman stood before her.

"Really, Ellen how would I know these things if he didn't tell me. Does anyone else know?"

Ellen said nothing. She knew what happened in the operating room after Nick had been born. Frank was chasing Henry. Jason had Nick out of the room. *I didn't close up completely El.* Ellen heard Dean's voice in her head as he spoke to her while they were alone. *I want to go back in. Now. Too much damage has been done. I'm afraid of postpartum complications if we don't.* Ellen looked at Bev.

"God, Billy, drop it." Dean snapped at his son. "I'm next in line."

"You hate these things." Billy whined.

"Yeah, I do. But I also hate Uncle Frank." Dean smiled. "And I'm next."

"Dad."

"Billy." Dean happily took the gun from the person before him.

"I hope you miss." Billy pouted.

"Yeah, Dean." Frank yelled, soaking wet from the booth. "I hope you . . ."

Ping

"Fuck"

Splash.

“HA!” Dean loaded the next dart in. “This is way too easy. Billy, hurry and tell your mom to watch.”

“She’s busy.”

“She’ll want to watch.” Dean held the gun in aim.

“Dean!” Frank yelled. “Do it again and I’m . . .”

Ping.

“Fuck.”

Splash.

Dean laughed. “Oh this is too great. Hurry Billy tell her.”

“No, I hate who she talking to.”

Dean quickly turned his head and a burning feeling hit him when he saw Bev with Ellen.

“Dean.” Frank called him. “You’re a dead little man if you do it again.”

Without taking his eyes off of Bev and Ellen, Dean handed the gun to Dan, the security man, behind him.

“See.” Frank laughed. “Sacred him.” Frank saw Dan aim. “Dan, you suck.”

Ping.

“Fuck.”

Splash.

Dean knew all things were not well and fine the closer he drew to the table. His heart pounded with every step because he could see the look on Ellen’s face. He swallowed once before making it to them. Swallowed in anger. “El.”

Ellen looked away.

“Oh hi Dean.” Bev said chipper. “We were just talking. Ya know we have to now. Anyway I have to go. Nice talking to you Ellen.” Bev backed up and stopped. “Oh.” She giggled. “Dean, I am so sorry. I let it slip that you told me how Ellen can’t have anymore children. Sorry. I’ll talk to you later.”

Dean’s eyes stayed on Ellen and he never watched Bev leave. “El, I never told her that.”

“Then how does she know Dean. Huh?” Ellen stepped to him. “Did you tell anyone?”

“No.”

“I certainly didn’t. I didn’t even tell Frank. Frank.” Ellen spoke soft yet emotional.

“I didn’t tell her. It’s our secret.”

“Then how . . . how does she know. Did you change the chart?”

“No.” Dean shook his head. “El. Listen. That subject is a source of conversation for us. A lot. She may have overheard. Don’t let her get to you.”

“How can I not?” Ellen covered her eyes and slid her hand across the bridge of her nose. “She knows a secret that is ours. Ours Dean. She’s claiming you told her. What am I supposed to think.”

“That she over heard us.”

“Just like that?” Ellen asked.

“Just like that. El, I swear to you I didn’t tell her.” Dean held up his hand. “I wouldn’t do that.” Dean watched Ellen stare up and let out a heavy breath. “El?”

"I really . . . I really don't want to talk about this now."

"But . . ."

"Daddy." Alexandra tugged on Dean's jean jacket. "Can we . . ."

"Not now." He looked to Alexandra. "El . . ."

"Not now for us either Dean." Ellen told him. "Later. Now is not the time or place. All right?"

Dean looked down at his daughter who stared at him with her big brown eyes. He grabbed her hand as he glanced back to Ellen. "Tell me El, you believe me."

"I . . . I believe you."

"Swear."

"Dean."

"Swear you believe me." Dean requested. "Come on, El. Swear."

"I swear."

Still holding his daughter's hand Dean kissed Ellen softly. "I love you."

"Take Alex to do whatever."

"El, I love you. You."

Ellen merely mouthed the words 'I love you' and stared a little beyond Dean when he kissed her again.

"I'll be back. Let's go Alex." Giving a grateful smile to Ellen, Dean lifted up his daughter, holding her balanced on his hip and walked away.

Ellen just wanted to go home. She just wanted to find Billy, tell him she changed her mind, take him home and eat there. Beginnings' Day, which Ellen usually loved was not turning out to be the day she wanted. She was starting to think she was going to call them 'end' days because for the second year in a row, she had a bad experience.

It had to be the food line. Perhaps it should be time to leave it. Find her family's table, sit there and wait. It wouldn't be long before everyone would want to settle down and eat. The longest table there was deemed the Slagel table. Ellen visually searched it out. Andrea sat there sipping a cup of coffee. Joe holding her hand. Ellen could only image what they talked about. Andrea kept her spirits up, but she had to be wishing deep inside, like Ellen, that the events that had transpired recently in her life would just come to an end. Ellen had six more months to her agony. Andrea, had a trial to wade through and for that, she had to wait until they found a suitable judge.

Joe knew. Andrea knew. Maybe the two 'parents' in her life were who Ellen needed to speak to. She felt as if she were going nuts. Felt wrong for even having the slightest bit of doubt in a husband she loved. But a big part of her felt that doubt was justified. Ellen, tired of standing anyway, stepped away from the food line.

"Tell me its wasn't me." Elliott's voice spoke.

Ellen stopped and turned around. "Elliott?"

"It's not me right?" He took a step, a slight limp to him, and he extended her a small cup. "I was searching you out. I approached you and . . ."

"I
walked
away.
I'm
sorry. I

didn't
see
you."

"O.K., well, a bruised ego is better than being avoided." He extended again the small cup. "Here."

"For me?" Ellen snickered in embarrassment. "Sorry. That was stupid. Of course it's for me. Thanks." She took it and smelled it. "What . . ."

"Gemma's version of cappuccino. Danny got that machine for her, can't you hear it?"

"Where's the foam?"

"Well, she doesn't have that part down. But I thought you would . . ."

"I do. Thanks." Ellen sipped it. "Not bad."

"Danny wants her to run the first ever Danny-Bucks?" Elliott twitched his head curiously. "Does that make sense?"

"Yes. Joe will not allot him the beans. Crops were bad. We're expecting better."

"Ours were fine." Elliott stated.

"How . . . never mind."

"What?"

"Well, how were your crops fine? Coffee beans take five years to mature. You haven't been in existence that long."

"Long story." Elliott explained. "Let's just say, three of our scouts lucked out with a green house in Mexico." He winked. "They've been doing well ever since."

"Maybe Joe *will* allot Danny the beans." Ellen's tone lacked her usual enthusiasm. "We'll have to meet at the Danny-Bucks when I am in New Bowman."

"I'd like that. How often will you come?"

"I'm going to try every other day. I have containment here, and the lab. Blue and I will be pulling the switch soon, so I'll get a nice little break from Beginnings for a couple days."

"Really? When?" Elliott asked.

"Soon. I know Andrea wants him to learn the clinic ropes here. So I'll man New Bowman and he'll be here. Oh!"

"There it is."

"There's what?"

"I thought there was something wrong. You weren't . . . perky. Sorry. 'Oh' what?"

"You and I could go to the movies when I'm in town."

Elliott smiled. "I would really like that. Would your husband mind?"

Ellen's mind drifted momentarily.

"Ellen?"

"I'm sorry. No, Elliott, he wouldn't mind at all. In fact I may ask you to make me dinner again instead of eating at that mess hall thing you guys have."

"I would enjoy that. I don't cook for myself. I mean, why? Right?"

"Right."

"Mom." Deep, so deep the little boys voice spoke up as Joey tugged on Ellen's jeans.

Elliott laughed. "I can not believe how much like Frank that boy looks."

"Don't he?" Ellen smiled and looked down to Joey, Marcus was with him. "What's wrong?"

"We want to dunk Uncle Frank but they won't give us the gun,"

"Bastards." Ellen shook her head. "Do the team thing. You don't need a gun. Marcus is big enough. Have him lift you up and hit the target."

"With what?" Joey asked.

"Your hand, head, what ever you think of first."

"O.K., come on Marcus." Joey gave a tug to Marcus who happily grunted and followed Joey in the direction of the dunking booth.

When Ellen turned back around to face Elliott, she saw the expression of shock on his face "Is it Marcus?" She inquired of Elliott's demeanor. "It takes some time."

"I'm being rude. Aren't I? He's just a child. I apologize."

"No, don't. In a little bit he'll look just as normal to you as every other child. He really is just a normal little boy. Well, with the exception of the skin, and of course the lack of hair and teeth. Then again, the verbal skills need some work on and not to mention he has to be caged when he's not with Joey. Hey, at least I got him to stop teaching my son to hunt rabbits with his bare hands. Of course you know, Frank thinks that's a really neat survival skill that Joey is . . ." Ellen stopped when she saw the dropped look on Elliott's face. "My rambling will take some time to get used to as well."

"Ramble. I . . . I enjoy it. I think." He smiled.

"Wanna sit?" Ellen motioned to a table. Getting an agreeing nod from Elliott, Ellen, grateful for the change of subject her mind drastically needed, walked slowly with Elliott to the table Joe and Andrae sat at.

Henry huffed. Verbally and visually. "Who is this guy?"

"Elliott." Robbie answered from behind him. "Sgt. Ryder."

Nick's scream was shrill and loud and it ricocheted in Henry's ear from the back carrier strapped to Henry's back. Henry spun around. "What did you do to him?"

"Nothing." Robbie answer "Oh look, are they huddling."

Henry returned to staring at the table where Ellen and Elliott sat. "No they . . ." Another Nick's scream rang out. "Robbie." Henry spun back around. "Knock it off."

"I'm not doing anything. Your kid is just fussy."

"He is not. Your pinching him or something."

"Who me?"

Henry grunted and started to look back at Ellen, he stopped mid turn spun around to see Robbie, snatching his hand back quickly. "I knew it."

"What?"

"Leave him alone."

"Henry, you're just pissed because Frank said it's time to be father."

"Frank claimed him Robbie. The moment he was born."

"Frank still claims him." Robbie said. "He just has too much going on right now, him and Dean both, They want you to . . . bond? Yeah, that's it, with your son."

"I have every intention of bonding with my son. When he walks." Henry defended.

"What? To school."

"Ha-ha-ha. You think you're so funny. First abusing my child . . ."

"Henry don't start to bitch. I'll have to kick your ass, baby strapped to you or not."

Henry stared at Robbie.

"Oh look Henry. They're kissing." Robbie snickered.

Henry, believing Robbie, hurried and turned around only to spin, bumping the back carrier into Jess as he approached. Nick cried. Henry whined. Robbie laughed.

"I'm sorry." Jess apologized. "I didn't mean to make him cry." Jess reached for the baby.

"Jess no!" Robbie warned. "If you know what's good for you. Don't."

Jess retracted his reach as Robbie walked away. "What's the matter with your kid Henry, that I shouldn't touch him?"

"Robbie's being an asshole. Instigating my baby and all." Henry shook his head in disgust. "Like I need this? I am so busy and Frank just makes me have him. He says take him Henry. What am I supposed to do with him. I'm always working."

"Well, I can help. I love kids." Jess held a finger in a playing manner to Nick. "Just let me know."

Henry smiled.

"Fuck."

Splash.

Nearly grunting, Frank emerged from the water, flung the wetness off his face and climbed back on the bench. "I need a break!" He screamed out. "Hal! Don't shoot that gun again!"

"What's the matter Frank?" Hal held the gun. "Can't handle it?"

"You think you could?"

"A little water?" Hal snickered.

"A little water?" Frank came back. "I have been dunked twenty million fuckin times."

"Quit whining."

"You're right. I shouldn't whine." Frank held up his hand, trying to enjoy the short moment of 'dry'. "After all, I have enough balls, to sit up here and let *my* men take a shot at me. I'm giving them a little payback. You couldn't handle it."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Hal lowered the gun, handed it to the man behind him and walked toward the booth.

"Nothing." Frank said innocently. "I just don't think you have big enough balls to come off your Captain pedestal and climb on this bench and let your men take a crack at you. Of course I haven't seen one of you men take a shot at me. Probably because they can't shoot a gun. Then again, I am a true leader, someone my men look up to." Frank exhaled. "You on the other hand put yourself so high above . . ."

"Step down out of there." Hal ordered.

“No, I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Frank. Get out.”

“O.K.” Frank shrugged. “If you insist.”

Hal took off his handgun and sword laying them down by the ladder of the booth. He waited until a sopping wet Frank climbed down and then he climbed up. Once Hal was situated sitting on the bench, he called to Frank who was walking away. “Line up my men Frank.”

Frank turned around with a smile. “No fuckin way.” He snatched up the dart gun from the man who had it and Frank aimed fast.

Ping.

“Shit.”

Splash.

“Ha.” Frank bit his bottom lip and aimed again.

Nick was too fussy. To Jess he reminded him so much of Henry. The way his tiny body was so wiry. Balancing the baby in his arms, Jess walked over to what seemed to be the second most popular booth. Trish sat behind the counter with a clipboard.

“Signing up?” She asked with a smile. “And why do you have Nick?”

“Long story. Signing up for what?”

“The first Beginnings best selling novel.” Trish said. “Wanna sign up. There are only going to be so many in print.”

“Who wrote it?” Jess questioned.

Danny Hoi stepped into the conversation. “We sort of did.” Danny motioned his finger back and forth between himself and Trish. “And what are you doing with Nick?”

“Long story. You wrote it?” Jess asked.

Trish, with a tsk, waved her hand at Danny. “We edited it. It’s written anonymously. You know, to protect the identities of the author.”

“Names have been changed.” Danny added. “To protect the innocent. It’s all true.”

“All of it.” Trish nodded.

“Every single word.” Danny said.

Jess’ head was spinning. “Well if I get a chance I’ll sign up to buy . . .”

“Borrow.” Trish corrected. “We’re just calling it the best selling novel. It will actually be the best first novel ever. Best borrowed Danny?”

“You got it . . . hey.” Danny snapped his finger. “Here.” He reached down to a tattered grouping of paper. “Sample of the first chapter. Sorry it was read a lot today. Take a look.”

Holding Nick, Jess’ eyes glanced down to the paper. He really wasn’t in the mood to read, until he started, then Jess, handed the baby to Danny and sat down with the chapter.

“Hey El. Hey El . . . lee it.” Robbie snickered as he joined them. “Henry’s

jealous. It's hysterical. What are you drinking." He snatched up Ellen's cup.

Joe rolled his eyes. "Can you be anymore rude. We're in the middle of a conversation."

Robbie laughed. "Conversation." His eyes shifted quickly. "Shit. Oh . . . um, El?" Robbie reached inside his coat pocket. "I forgot to give this to you." He pulled out Elliott's letter. It looked worse than beaten. "El, it's from El . . . lee it."

Elliott eye's widened. "That . . . that . . . looked much better when I gave it to him."

"Robbie?" Ellen held the letter with question. "What happened to this?"

"You name it. Sat on, dropped, wet . . ." Robbie fluttered his lips. "We got busy with the savage thing you know. Sorry El, sorry El . . . lee it."

"Robert." Joe's hand slammed on the table. "Why are you saying his name like that."

"What way am I saying his name?" Robbie asked innocently.

Ellen saw it coming and leaned closer into Elliott. "Get ready. You've never experienced all the Slagels together have you. A treat." She looked up to the kiss on her cheek. The smile went frigid. "Hey Dean."

"Burr." Robbie shuddered. "Was that a cold 'hey Dean' or was it me?"

Dean sat down at the table. "Is he getting like Frank or is it *me*?"

"I was about to say the same thing." Joe commented. "You should hear the way he's been saying Elliott's name. Then I ask him about it and he plays dumb."

"He should take a sip." Frank sat down on the other side of Ellen. He hurriedly rubbed his wet goatee across her face with a smile as he set his plate of food down. "Fuckin starved. Wet. Freezing. My balls are nonexistent anymore."

"Christ Frank." Joe complained. "Is that dinner conversation? And go get some dry clothes on."

"Why? And what are we talking about?"

Robbie pointed next to him. "Elliott."

"Why are we talking about him?" Frank asked.

Ellen saw the panic of Elliott's face. So confused on everything he was. The conversation that just flew about. "Yet another thing that takes time getting used to."

"What?" Frank asked. "Probably were talking about me."

Dean shook his head. "The world doesn't revolve around you Frank."

"Oh, yeah, then why did everyone shut up when I sat down."

Joe's hand hit hard on the table. "Because you hog the entire goddamn conversation that's why. If you . . . if you . . . if . . ." Joe's eyes lifted.

"If I what. Fuck dad. Maybe you need to take a sip."

"What in the world?" Joe questioned when Hal, just as wet as Frank, sat down. "Why are you wet."

Hal swung in a point to his brother. "Frank. He made me get in that booth Dad. Pulled me up and humiliated me."

"Frank!"

"What?" Frank looked clueless

"What the hell is the matter with you." Joe scolded. "Your brother just got over that infection. You ought to have you goddamn head examined."

"Ha." Frank nodded. "I have." Bringing his fork to his mouth and blocking

out his Dad's bitching he looked at Ellen. She was staring blankly. "El." He whispered. "What's wrong?"

Ellen shook her head with a fake smile.

Frank's looked at her staring eyes and he caught where they stared. Bev. Quickly he turned back. "El. Did she . . ."

"Frank." Ellen shook her head 'no'.

Jess hated to do it, but he had to interrupt. Knowing it could be an invitation to a headache or insult, holding Nick he walked up to the Slagel table and tapped Robbie on the shoulder. "We have to talk."

Robbie turned around. "Why do you have Nick?"

"Long story." He walked to Dean and handed him the baby.

Dean looked oddly at Nick then Jess. "Why did you have the baby?"

"Long story." Jess, seemingly occupied moved a little from the table.

Robbie stood up. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, boy." Jess blew slowly from his mouth.

"What?"

"O.K." Nervously, Jess ran his hand over the top of his own head speaking softly. "Does this mean anything to you? Listen carefully to how I say it. You may know it." Jess paused and took a breath. "Seclusion. Nudity. No one but us. Kneeling before you my hand on your hips. My lips on your . . ."

"Jess." Robbie, a deep shade of red, motioned his head back to the silent table that stared at them. "Why the hell are you saying something like that? This makes me look . . ."

"Robbie." Jess smiled to the table. "I'm not directing those words to you. I'm quoting something I just read."

"O.K." Robbie nodded.

"Quoting."

"O.K."

"The new Beginnings Best seller."

Robbie laughed. "Man, is it a dirty novel?"

Jess nodded. "Called . . . Letters Afar. The Helen and Bobby story."

"Letters a . . ." Robbie's eyes bulged. "Seclusion. Nudity . . . oh shit!" Robbie spun to the table. "El . . . it . . . fuck." He took a step, it turned into a nervous skip. He hurried back to the table, waved his hand and took off again. "Fuck."

There was quiet all around the table as they watched Robbie hit the book booth. Then with Frank's comment of 'I guess he wants to read it'. Everyone continued in their talk.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The sounds of Robbie's band *The Starters* carried in through the slightly cracked bathroom window. The same window Frank used to air out some of the steam, brought in music that made him smile. He paused in his getting dressed and leaned against the wall listening to his little brother. He could see the community, still celebrating strong, bon fires burning to ad warmth on the cold night. Frank really wanted to be out there and he really wished he hadn't missed the previous two and a half hours. But he had to sleep. Night shift on security was what he had to do, especially since the closer of the savage camps hadn't moved in days.

Frank's hand reached up and slid shut the bathroom window muffling the sound of the music completely. He had to get moving, finish getting dressed and go to work. He planned to stop by the winding down celebration on his way. Grab some food, say goodbye to the kids, see El for a minute and annoy Dean. Really start his night on an 'up'.

Tossing on his tee shirt Frank ran his fingers through his hair as a means of a comb. Felt his face, wished he would have shaved then picked up his towel from the floor. Damp, he tossed it over the towel rack and walked from the bathroom. Turning to go to his room, Frank's heart dropped when he saw the blur of a movement sweep across Ellen and Dean's room. As soon as he realized it wasn't another ghost, Frank felt better and then he saw it was Ellen. Opening his mouth to call out, he stopped when he reached her bedroom doorway and saw what she was doing.

Before Dean's dresser Ellen stood. Her hands lifting each article of clothing, carefully looking through the folds and replacing them neatly. Did she lose something? Did Dean forget something? Frank had to wonder.

Ellen didn't know she was being watched. So consumed she was in her search she shut the third drawer and moved to the last. Past experience in dealing with men told her to go to the bottom of the drawer, and she did. Dean's old pants. Her hand fumbled yet quickly searched out the four pockets. Nothing. She moved to the pair on top them. Right front pocket. Left front pocket. Back . . . Ellen paused. She felt a square shape. Debating she pulled out her hand then stuck it back in. When she pulled the object from Dean's pocket she saw it was what looked like a folded piece of paper. Ellen began to undo the fold to read.

"El."

If her heart could have stopped any longer, Ellen would have sworn she would have dropped dead. Instinctively she slammed the drawer shut with her shin and shoved that folded piece of paper in the front pocket of her pants at the same time, and then she stood up.

"El?" Frank had a chuckle and question to his voice. "What . . ."

"Frank." Ellen spun around. Nervously she ran her fingers through her hair. Her face was flushed and her heartbeat so strong. "What is it?"

"What are you doing?"

"What am I . . ." Ellen took a breath. "It really isn't any of your business is it. This is my bedroom."

“That’s Dean’s dresser.”

“Frank!” Ellen lost it. She blasted his name so loud it startled him. “Fuck you!”

“El, shit. I was . . .”

“It’s none of your business! All right! All right!” She barged across the bedroom.

As Ellen stormed by him, Frank grabbed her arm. “I didn’t mean to . . .”

“What spy?”

“Can I finish.”

“Can I go?”

“What is wrong with you.”

“Nothing.” Ellen snatched her arm away. “God! I can’t even be in my own bedroom without someone spying on me.”

“The door was open and . . .”

“The door was open asshole!” Ellen screamed. “Because you cemented it that way!” Ellen tried to shut the door as a visual for him and it didn’t budge. “Now it won’t close. It . . .” Ellen kicked the door. “Will never . . .” She kicked it again. “Close!” With a spin, she slammed the side of her fist into the door and stormed away.

Frank took a step to follow Ellen and stopped. He debated in his mind what would be the right thing to do. And considering he had a community to protect and tracking to watch all night long, mental stress and verbal lashing would only be detrimental, so Frank, figuring she was still mad about the cementing the door issue, returned to getting ready for work.

Ellen paused on her porch catching her hyperventilating breath. She heard the applause that seeped to her from center town. The heart beat pounding in her ears matched the count off of the next song *the Starters* began and she reached into her front pocket and pulled out the squared piece of paper. She hesitated in thought before unfolding it. *Was it any of her business. Was it anything at all?* She stared at the folded paper lit by her porch light. A part of her wanted to look, a part of her felt guilty for the way she found it. But she *did* find it. Tucked in the back pocket of a pair of pants Dean hadn’t worn since . . . Ellen smiled . . . pants he hadn’t worn since they had gotten married.

Exhaling deeply in relief Ellen immediately thought it had to be something that had to do with their wedding. She unfolded the first fold, then the second and then she stopped. Ellen realized at that moment, right or wrong for having that note, she couldn’t read it. The note could be anything. A picture drawn by Alex. A note from herself. A formula. Anything. Anything but what Ellen’s mind feared it was. She was wrong. Dead wrong. Wrong for taking the note, and wrong for searching Dean’s things. She told herself she trusted Dean, believed him, and with those thoughts, she placed the note back in her jeans, made a mind-plan to return it the first chance she got, and then Ellen stepped off her porch and headed back to town.

^^^

In the midst of their laughter Johnny held a finger to his lips to quiet Bev. He pointed to the wall. "Like paper."

"I'm sorry." She whispered then laughed again. "Did you see Ellen when she came back?"

"On man." Johnny flung his head back. "And then my Dad . . ." Johnny paused to laugh. "Him asking me to keep an eye on Ellen, something was wrong."

"You'll do that."

"Oh yeah. Right away." Johnny walked over to the couch and plopped down. "How did you pick that up? I have to tell you, brilliant."

"Persistence." Bev joined him on the sofa.

"And here I thought all you got out of those bedrooms scenes was off."

The smile dropped from Bev's face.

"Lighten up." Johnny nudged her. "Your Dad is gonna be so proud."

"Wait till we call him. It fell in my lap. I think it was like the fifth time I watched that one bedroom scene and I finally let the conversation play all the way through."

"It is amazing what people discuss in the privacy of their bedrooms."

"Amazing." Bev returned to smiling. "And the plants."

"Tucked away and waiting to be found. We have to push this along before it get past the point where we'll not be able to pull it off."

"Pull it off?" Bev questioned. "We pulled it off. We just need to put the icing on the cake. And we have to get to that soon."

"Yeah, I know and we only have like a week before we can't use it anymore."

"Tomorrow will get us there. If Ellen was shaken today, tomorrow . . ." Bev smiled. "She falls over."

^^^

Another glance at the time and Dean's hand tapped the empty spot on the bed next to him. He could hear Ellen rustling around in the livingroom, what she was doing he didn't have a clue. He'd tap his hand as he sat on top of the covers, wearing only his jeans, pillows propping him up. Tap, listen, lean forward, peer. No Ellen. He tried to zoom in for kid sounds, but he knew they were worn out and passed out from the day. Thinking maybe Ellen was getting something special ready, Dean reached onto his night stand and pulled out his book. He'd wait.

Opening to his bookmark, made by Alexandra, Dean only made it to the third sentence when it startled him. The rumbling of the vacuum. "You have got to be kidding?" Dean spoke out loud. He set down his book, swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood up. Was Ellen trying to wake up the kids. She knew he was waiting for her so they could take advantage of a Frank-free night. Walking from the bedroom, Dean followed the sweeper sounds. When he reached the end of the hall, arms folded to his bare chest, he saw Ellen sweeping away in the living room. "El." He called out.

She kept sweeping.

“El.” He walked closer.

“Huh?” She moved the vacuum.

“Did you spill something?”

“No.” She shook her head.

“I see.” Dean nodded once, looked for the chord, followed it to the wall and pulled out the plug.

Silence.

“Dean?” Ellen spun around, he was winding up the chord. “What are you doing?”

“What are *you* doing?”

“Sweeping.”

“At Midnight.”

“It needed swept.”

“Not at midnight.” Dean grabbed her hand. “And especially not on a Frank-free evening.” Dean, without waiting, headed back to the bedroom pulling Ellen with him.

“Dean, the house needs cleaned. We have work . . .”

“El.” Dean turned around in the hall. “I thought we planned this? I thought as soon as we found out Frank was working all night again, we were gonna use this time.”

“Not tonight.” Ellen walked by him to the bedroom.

“Not tonight?” Dean followed her. “Are you tired?”

“Not really.” Ellen walked to her dresser and opened the front drawer.

“No feeling well?”

“I’m fine.” She pulled out her tee shirt to wear to bed.

“Mad at me?” Dean walked to her.

“No.”

“You’re not made at me?” He watched her shake her head ‘no’ as she dropped her jeans from her body and stepped out. Dean smiled. “Oh, I get it.” He walked up behind her. “You’re kidding.” Immediately his hands moved to her bare legs, his lips to her neck and as he kissed her, his hands slid up, lifting her shirt.

“Dean. Stop.”

Dean felt it. Her rigid body. She didn’t move, flinch or even breath. She stared at their reflections in the dresser mirror. Dean lifted his eyes, his lips still hovering the nape of her neck. He saw the expression on her face and he stepped back “What’s wrong?”

“I’ve got . . . I’ve got a lot on my mind.”

“Talk to me.”

“No.”

“El, if it’s something I did . . .” Dean nodded slowly. “She did it to you.”

“Who?”

“Bev.”

Ellen turned around and faced him. “Why would you bring *her* name up right away. Are you thinking about her?”

“What?” Dean had a laugh to him. “No. I just think it’s pretty obvious with all that’s been said today.”

“I’m sorry.” Ellen held up her hand. “I shouldn’t have snapped.”

"You shouldn't be thinking what you're thinking. Seriously El, you think I can sexually juggle two women? I'm uh . . ." Dean tilted his head. "I'm getting old."

"It's just that she . . ."

"She's trying to start trouble between us and . . . you're letting her. Come on El." Dean laid his hands on her waist and pulled her into him. "It's one of those nights where it doesn't matter if our doors cemented open. No one yelling out, 'I hear a bed squeaking . . .'"

Ellen laughed. "That's a Frank insurance step so we don't."

"He drives me nuts. He's not here."

"All right."

Wanting to say 'yes' in excitement but opting to kiss Ellen instead, Dean brought his lips closer.

"Dean?"

With a soft 'hmm?' Dean kissed her.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Does it have to do with making love?"

"Not really."

"Then no."

"Dean."

Dean stepped back. "What's wrong?"

"When you did the hysterectomy . . ."

Dean let out a whining laugh, moving dramatically back. "Do we have to talk about this now. Right now?"

"I need to talk about it."

"Ellen, you always need to talk about it."

Ellen suddenly looked up at him. "That is a really cold thing to say."

"I'm sorry." Dean held out his hand. "I am. I didn't mean to be cold. It's just that, I think more than the surgery, the secret is killing you."

"It's not a secret anymore."

"No, Bev knows. And probably because you and I talk about it a lot. Ellen it had to be done. O.K., there's nothing wrong with you. Your period would be due now, wouldn't it?"

"What?" Ellen was shocked.

"Every month. Once a month we go through this."

"Dean . . ."

"I'm just saying . . ." Dean held out his hand in defense. "The hormones will do that to you. You still have your . . ."

"Knock it off." Ellen walked by him.

"What?"

"You're being a dick about this."

"A dick? El, sweetheart." Dean tried pleading and speaking sweetly. "I just don't know what more I can say to you. That's all. Maybe you need to talk to someone else. Jason, Andrea . . ."

"No."

"Gemma. How about Melissa? Melissa went through the same thing at the same age. Remember, she felt the same way. Talk to her."

"Maybe . . ."

"Or Frank."

“No.” Ellen shook her head. “Frank has this ideal of me. God, he plans on my birthing another child to him someday.”

“You can’t.”

“Obviously.” Ellen rolled her eyes.

“And why would he even plan on that?” Dean asked. “Seriously. *I* didn’t even want to chance having another child with you.”

“Oh . . . fuck you.” Ellen tried to storm by him.

“What did I say?”

“Fuck you.”

“I did not say *that*.”

Ellen spun harshly to him. “Chance having another child with me? What? Will I strap you to me Dean? Is that why you did the surgery, Dean, so you don’t have to have another child to me?”

“Now I *will* say it. Fuck you.” Dean took a step to her in anger. “How dare you question my ethics as a doctor or motives behind why I would operate!”

“Don’t you raise your voice to me.”

“Don’t you ever insinuate that to me again! Ever. I am not to fault that you had problems with Nick. I am not to blame that your body could not take anymore. I only did what was best for you, not as a doctor but as a man who loves you. God Ellen! You think I would even remotely want to risk your life by you getting pregnant. Not to mention the fact that after the birth, you could have at any moment, started to hemorrhage and died. Died! That is not a chance I would take. Not with anyone, and especially not with you!”

Post-argumentative silence hit at that exact moment and before anymore could be said, the phone rang.

Dean released his tense breath and moved to the phone when he saw Ellen, take a step. “I’ll get it.” Really upset at the bad timing of the call, Dean picked it up. “Yes.” he rubbed his eyes. “This *is* Dr. Hayes.” He looked up to Ellen. “Hold on.” He extended the phone to her. “For you.”

Ellen, arms folded tight to her, reached out for the phone. “This is Dr. Hayes. Hey, Blue . . . you’re kidding. Just monitor the . . . can’t you . . . she what? You’re kidding. I’ll be there in a half hour.” Ellen walked by Dean and hung up the phone.

“You’ll be where in a half hour?”

“New Bowman. Our high risk Pregnancy, Monica, is in labor. We’re going to let her deliver.”

“Blue can’t handle it?”

“Yeah, he can. But she won’t spread her legs for him Dean. She wants me.” Ellen walked to the dresser, bent down and picked up her jeans.

“Repeat that.”

“Repeat what?”

“Why Blue can’t deliver the baby.”

“She won’t . . . she won’t uncross her legs.”

“That’s what I thought you said.” Dean’s pointing finger came to his lip and he hid his laugh.

Ellen lost all seriousness and smiled as she finished getting dressed. “That is kind of funny.”

“Yeah it is.” Dean moved to her and helped her tuck in her shirt. “Can we not fight before you leave? Please.”

"I don't want to fight with you Dean. I'm so . . . so tense about all this trouble. I wish you would understand that."

"If I promise . . ." Dean softened his voice. "If I promise to try to understand, really try, to understand better, will we please not be fighting when you leave?"

"Will you call Frank and get me a ride to New Bowman."

"Aw." Dean made a fake crying sound. "I hate calling Frank. I'll call Joe."

"He'll tell you to call Frank. When Frank works nights, Frank's in charge."

"Shit."

"Please."

"It's torture calling him." Dean shaking his head in reluctant agreement, grabbed the phone and dialed. "Frank."

"Dean."

"Frank I have a favor."

"No, Dean I will not tuck you in." Frank said cocky on the phone.

"Frank, you're an ass. Listen, Ellen needs to get to New Bowman."

"When?"

"Now."

"Now?" Frank's voice raised. "It's night. There's fuckin savages be-bopping around out there. She has to go right now. Why?"

"The only pregnant woman in Bowman is having her baby."

"They have a doctor."

"Well, get this." Dean said. "She won't spread her legs for him."

"You gotta be fuckin kidding."

"She wants Ellen."

"It's the lesbian thing. You're a doctor, get on the phone, tell her to open her goddamn, legs and let the man do the job. Leave Ellen in Beginnings where it's safe."

Ellen tapped Dean on the shoulder and whispered "What's he saying.?"

Dean covered the receiver. "He's thinking of something." He moved his hand. "Frank. Can you."

Frank grunted long. "All right. Tell her Robbie will be by with the jeep. He'll fly her there but she's gonna have to wait until dawn for him to get her, one trip out at night is enough."

"Can't Robbie wait?" Dean asked.

"No, Robbie can't wait." Frank snapped. "I need him here. Besides, we don't know how long it's gonna take this broad to birth this kid. Tell Ellen to be ready."

"I'll tell her. Thanks." Dean got ready to hang up the phone.

"Oh hey Dean." Frank called him back.

"Yeah?"

"Man, I'm not there, kids are probably sleeping. Bowman ruins another night again. Bye." Frank hung up.

Dean grumbled as he set down the receiver.

"What's wrong?" Ellen asked.

"Robbie's on his way and . . ." Dean pointed to the phone. "I hate that man."



Robbie never minded flying, but it had been a really long day for him. He snuck in the hour nap, but it didn't help the fact that he was pushing twenty-four hours awake and still had several more to go. He hoped could kick back, and crash in the chair while working tracking with Frank.

It was quiet. He didn't hear any noise seeping through the tracking door and that was a good sign. He walked in. Frank was in the chair, legs on the counter, papers in his hand.

"Hey Frank." Robbie dropped the keys down.

"Hey little brother."

"Reports?" Robbie pointed to the papers Frank read as he pulled the chair out to sit.

"No, check this out, I'm reading. The sample chapter of that New Beginnings Book."

Robbie stood back up and headed to the door.

"Where are you going?" Frank asked.

"I feel really bad Frank."

"Why? Are you sick?"

"No, about that." He pointed to what Frank read.

"Robbie, Fuck. Give someone else a chance. You read it at the booth. Beside, Danny said you didn't even sign up for a copy. Too bad."

"But Frank . . ."

"Nope. I'm ahead of you. How do you like that. I plan to read a book." Frank snickered. "A dirty one, that's probably why, Huh. I don't think I read anything since I was in the third grade. What was that book." Frank paused to think. "*Are You My Mother?* Yeah, that was it."

"You're not saying anything Frank. That worries me." Robbie hesitatingly sat down. "Does it make you mad?"

"Mad. Yeah. I have to fuckin wait until Dan reads it. I know he's gonna tell me about all the good parts."

"No, Frank, I mean, you didn't say anything about who it's about." Robbie grew nervous.

"Who? This Bobby and Helen? Who the fuck are Bobby and Helen. I think Danny's making them up. No one write shit like this. Listen to this . . ." Frank read. "*Dear Bobby. I swear if it's the last thing I do, I will never sleep with Pete again. I know he's my husband, but I can't do it.*" Frank failed to see the pale look on Robbie's face as he read. "*I got through it with your advice. I know it wasn't advice, actually your letters, LOL.*" Frank looked up with a dumbfounded look. "What the fuck is 'LOL'?"

"Laugh out loud."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"Anyway this Helen woman goes on to say how when she slept with her husband she imagined it was this Bobby person, because he asked her to pretend she was sleeping with him the next time she was with her husband."

Wistfully, Robbie spoke soft with a grin. "Yeah, and she wrote back with all the details of what she imagined."

Frank lifted the pages. "Where?"

"Huh?"

"Where?" He looked through the sheets he had. "I didn't get that. Fuck. Danny didn't give it to me."

"Oh, um . . . I got an extra sneak preview. So . . ." Robbie cleared his throat. "You haven't any idea who Helen and Bobby are."

"Nah. I don't think we're supposed to. This is old world stuff. They're probably dead."

"Probably." Robbie let out a silent breath.

"Probably. But I can't . . ." A beep shut up Frank and he dropped the papers springing forward in his chair. One beep. "Robbie. Did you see that?"

"I heard it."

"Pull a history, see where it was."

"Maybe it's a glitch."

"It might . . ."

Another beep.

"There." Frank's finger pointed to where a blink of light flashed on the screen and quickly disappeared.

"Too short Frank. History didn't pick it up either."

"Whatever it is didn't get through."

"Animal?"

"I don't know."

Another beep sound with a quick blink of light, then another. It happened four more times., Each one with a single beep, a quick flash of light then nothing.

Frank looked to Robbie. "It's north. You just flew over there. Did you see anything?"

"Nothing."

"Last savages were more west."

"Can't be savages. Unless they took out tracking."

"Test." Frank pulled the keyboard in front of him.

Robbie read the screen. "Seventeen good. Eighteen good. Nineteen good. Twenty. All good in that area."

"Feel like flying with the spot light?"

"Want me to take anything?"

"Three miles out. Yeah, take a Dean-three. You see anything drop it."

"It's only eight beeps, you wanna take a ride up there and search manually?" Robbie asked as he stood.

Frank stared at the screen for a minute. "No. It's too risky. Nothing got in. Or too far. Just run a check, I'll heat up the perimeter fences in that area and send three extra guards up. We'll run a check of the region in the morning. Also those small predators might be back and we can't see them coming in the dark."

"Small predators?" Robbie questioned.

"Fuckin killer babies."

"Cool." Robbie opened the door. "I'll check back."

Frank nodded, reaching for his radio to make the calls he had to make. Never did his eyes leave the screen. A screen that sent eight warning signals. A screen that would remain silent the rest of the night.

New Bowman, Montana

It was so quiet that Hal heard Ellen coming down the hall of the New Bowman Clinic. He and Elliott stood from their seats in the waiting area and went into the hall.

“El.” Hal walked up to her. “You look exhausted.”

Ellen smiled. “Not as tired as you do.”

“The mother and child?” Hal inquired.

“Both are fine. The baby is premature. No danger. We want to transport both first thing in the morning with me to Beginnings, just as a precaution. I uh . . . told her . . .” Ellen cleared her throat. “. . . Partner to gather up some things for her. Right now, both women are sharing a tender moment.” Ellen said with awkwardness.

Elliott lowered his head with a slight snicker. He raised his eyes to Hal. “I guess we’re used to that.”

“I guess so.” Hal raised his eyebrows. “I’m going to go intrude anyhow and see how Monica is doing. Ellen?”

“Go on.” Ellen moved from his way.

Hal stopped. “Elliott are you joining me?”

Elliott looked to Ellen then to Hal. “No. I think I want to talk to doctor . . . I mean, Ellen.”

“Very well.” Hal took another step. “Oh, El. Good job.”

“Thanks.” Ellen nodded placing her hands behind her back. “So . . . you’re here to keep me company?”

“If you’d like.” Elliott said.

“Yes. Feel like taking a walk? It’s not too cold. That is if it’s not too much on your back or legs.”

“I need the exercise.” Elliott with one hand out, and a touched hand upon Ellen’s back, guided her. “Can I over step a boundary?” He walked to the front doors with her and opened one side.

“Sure. This isn’t a personal issue?”

“It may be.” Elliott slowed down in his step outside. “Are you . . . are you all right?”

Ellen turned quickly to him. “Why do you ask.”

“You are usually so upbeat. You talk so fast and now . . . Maybe you’re just tired.”

“Maybe.” Ellen looked up. “Listen. Do you hear?”

“A helicopter.”

“Robbie” Ellen smiled. “Something must be up. You can hear it in the distance. So clear as if it’s so close.”

“That’s because it’s the only noise.”

“Yeah.”

“You changed the subject. It was delicate. I crossed a line I shouldn’t have.”

“What?” Ellen smiled. “About my mood? No, no lines crossed. I think it’s

nice that you noticed and no I'm not . . ." Ellen's head lowered. "Some things have . . . transpired, put it that way. Things that I didn't expect nor did I want to hear about. They are supposedly not true, but still . . ." Ellen covered her eyes. "I can't believe I said that."

"Said what?"

"Supposedly. Of course they aren't true." She stopped walking and faced Elliott. "What is wrong with me?"

Elliott stared at her for a few seconds. "Ellen, I can't even begin to tell you what is wrong with you because I haven't a clue what you're talking about. What isn't true?"

"What was said."

"And this is something you don't want me to know about?"

Ellen took a breath. "It's something I don't want anyone to know about. Five people know, the semi-involved parties. Anyone other than, they'll judge. And I don't want that."

"Why . . . why don't we change the subject."

"You don't want to talk to me about this?"

"Ellen . . ."

"It makes you uncomfortable. I understand."

"I can't judge."

"Of course you can judge Elliott, really you'd be the best one. When you think about it, aren't you a outside party?"

"Yes." Elliott answered.

"Then your opinion would be unbiased. You wouldn't judge. Hal, Robbie, Frank . . . they'll judge him. And then they'll start on me for my choices and I don't want to hear about it."

"Of course not."

"No." Ellen started to walk. "So what's your opinion?"

"On?"

"What we've been talking about."

"Let me see if I got this straight. Something has happened. Or at least you heard about something that has happened. It's not true, at least its not supposed to be true. You can't go to Frank, Robbie or the Captain because they'll judge. So talking to them is out."

"That's right. God I feel so much better."

"Glad I could help." Elliott widened his eyes, still clueless.

"So what do you think, though, you didn't give me the Elliott opinion. Is it true or isn't it?"

"Ellen."

"Yes?"

"You still have yet to give me any specifics."

"I didn't, did I?" Ellen cringed. "Can I?"

"Give me the specifics? Yes. If you want. And . . ." Elliott raised his right hand. "It is between you and me and I won't mention a word."

"I can use an honest, outside opinion."

"I'll do my best."

"No beating around the bush." Ellen said. "No being gentle with me. I can . . ."

"Ellen, Tell me."

Ellen looked around to where they had wandered. "Lets go to your house."
"If you want." Not far from where they were, they turned the corner to the first street. Two house down was Elliott's. "Here." Ellen pointed to the gray two story frame house.

"This is nice. Small."

"It works." Elliott smiled and led her to the door. "I like it." He opened the door for her. "Make yourself at home."

Ellen stepped in. "Warm." She rubbed her arms and watched him close the door. "Can we sit." She received a nod from Elliott and walked over to the couch.

Elliott joined her. "Is this what's been bothering you all day."

"No." Ellen lifted up some and reached into the front pocket of her jeans. "This is." she handed Elliott the small folded piece of paper. "I don't know what that is. But . . . I want you to open it up. Read it, don't tell me what it says and then I'll explain the problem."

"All right."

"Don't let on what it says either." Ellen turned her body to face Elliott, she brought one leg up while he unfolded the note and read.

"Now what?" Elliott asked.

"O.K. the problem. I was snooping. I searched through my husband's things and I found that placed the pocket of a pair of pants in his bottom drawer. A pair of pants he hadn't worn in a while. Now . . . the reason for the snooping." Ellen watched for signs or hints on Elliott's face. He held a poker expression. "There's this woman in Beginnings. No wait, this girl, not much older than twenty. For some time and some reason, she doesn't like me. She likes my husband. She's . . . she's claiming Elliott, that not only did she have an affair with my husband this past summer, but it is still going on, and to make matters worse, she now claims she's pregnant to him."

Elliott couldn't hide the swallow. "And you don't know what to believe?"

"I believe my husband. I want to believe my husband. I should. But . . . she knows things that she shouldn't. Things that I swear only Dean and I know. He denies it adamantly. She swears it's true. She swears it's his baby. Elliott." Ellen's hand laid on the back of the couch. "What is it with me? If this turns out to be true, what am I doing wrong?" Frazzled she ran her hand through her hair. "There are hardly any women, None. So many men, yet every man I get, they . . . they dog me. Dean, he swore me off a while ago, and with good reason. Frank, there was a time last year Frank was so mean to me it was almost a crime. Henry, Henry you can say cheated. Cheated in a world where there are no women. I don't want to believe that another man who says he loves me can hurt me like this. This would kill me."

Elliott stared at her for the longest time. "First let me start by saying, there is nothing wrong with you. People . . . people make mistakes. Whether there's one hundred people in a community or one hundred thousand. Errors happen. It's human nature. We pick ourselves up, we hope to atone for our sins and we move on. I'm sure Frank, Henry . . . and Dean, I'm sure they have apologized for any past mistakes."

"They have."

"And they've meant it. I am sure. We hurt those we love. Seldom do we ever make the same mistake twice. Nobody means to mess up. Don't you

agree?”

“Yes.” Ellen nodded. “But if this is true, then this isn’t a mistake. This would constitute an ongoing thing. Then again, maybe she’s making more out of it. Maybe he slipped up this summer and was with her once. Maybe she is pregnant to him. Dean probably is afraid to tell me. But why lie. Why keep lying. Then again, why sneak into his drawers right? I mean, that’s wrong . . .”

“Ellen.” Elliott stopped her.

“Yes.”

“Do you love your husband?”

“Yes, yes I do.”

Elliott refolded the note and handed it to her. “Put this back where you found it. And forget you were snooping as you put it.”

There was a certain amount of relief in the breath Ellen let out. “I will.”

“If you love your husband. Then you must work through this ordeal, trust him and believe in him.” Elliott stood up from the couch. “Would you like some coffee.”

“As a matter of fact. I would.” Ellen began to put the note in her pocket. “I know it’s late, but I enjoy it. Thank you Elliott. I mean it.”

“You’re welcome. I’m glad I could help. Just remember, Ellen.” He paused. “Dean’s your husband. Bev is only someone starting trouble. You have to take Dean’s . . .”

“Stop.” Ellen stood up, note still in her hand. “I never said it was Bev.”

“You . . . yes, yes, you did.”

“No I didn’t. Elliott, how do you know it’s Bev.”

“You said it right away.”

“I distinctively danced around her name. Why did you . . .” Ellen’s eyes shifted down to the note in her hand then back to Elliott.

“Ellen.” Elliott saw her starting to unfold it. “You said you were going to put it back. Why would you . . .” Elliott bit his bottom lip when he saw the look on her face. “Ellen.”

Ellen had lump in her throat. Her voice cracked as she read the letter. “*She may get your name, but I am grateful I will always . . . have your . . . heart. Thanks . . . thanks for the reassurance last night. I love you . . .*” Ellen folded the note back up. “Bev.”

“Ellen, I’m sorry.” Elliott spoke soft.

Ellen shook her head. “No. Don’t be.” she took a deep breath and slipped the note in the pocket of her jeans. “I’m sure there’s an explanation right?”

“Right.”

“Now how about that coffee.” Ellen moved to the couch. “It’s gonna be a long night for you.” As she sat down on the couch she saw the look on Elliott’s face. “Oh, no. No surprise. You volunteered to be my friend. You started this talk about the problem thing. Guess what.” Ellen brought her legs up as she curled in her seat on the couch. “Were talking my new friend. Even if we talk all night long.”

Elliott gave a gentle smile. “I should make a whole pot then.” Nodding his head once then he turned and headed into the kitchen.

The moment Elliott slipped from view, Ellen lost the strong appearance. She closed her eyes as her hand went back into her pocket and pulled out that note. In Elliott’s absence from the room, Ellen, sadly and with a heavy heart,

read the note again.

EMOTIONAL WARS

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

New Bowman, Montana

October 13

How Joe did it always astonished Dean. A huge Beginnings' celebration. Food, music, games, an event . . . a mess. But it never failed, when Dean woke up the next morning, Beginnings was normal. As if the clean up fairies had come in during the night and touched upon the streets. Dean always heard the beginning sounds of clean up, but he usually fell fast asleep before they ended.

A few things still laid about as Dean made his way to the clinic after coming up from the cryo-lab where he fed Bub. A napkin here and there, a paper, decorations. The dunking booth was still standing, though all the water had been emptied out. It was back to work as usual in Beginnings. Bright and early. A catch up day more so than anything else.

Henry was fixing the left door of the chapel, a house of worship that was slated to open its doors again when Andrea announced Rev. Bob's replacement. An announcement she said she was on the verge of making. Dean waved to Henry, receiving a half assed wave in return. He didn't make anything of it, Henry had been odd with him for a while.

Dean made it into the clinic, hoping to find Andrea, hoping she would allow Johnny to assist Dean down in the lab with some skin grafting he needed to do on Bub. Tests he needed that second pair of hands for. And since Ellen wasn't around, Dean needed someone.

After leaving a note on Johnny's work space if he could meet him at the cryo lab in an hour, Dean asked Melissa if she had seen Andrea. Melissa, tending to a little girl who decided she was sick and didn't want to stay in school, directed Dean to left wing patient rooms. Andrea was doing early morning rounds. Stomach flu cases were still plentiful. Some of the men Frank brought in had been without proper nourishment or nutrients for so long, it was like Beginnings food was a dose of the plague to them.

Turning the bend to that wing, Dean passed the window without a second thought and then he stopped about five feet from it, backed up and looked again. A single bassinet was in the nursery. A lone baby under bilirubin lights laid there.

It struck Dean as odd, seeing the child laying in there. He had to race in his mind who was pregnant that he didn't know about. Wanting to know who the baby belonged to, Dean reached for the nursery door.

"She's fine." Andrea called out stopping Dean. "But you're more than welcome to give the little one a once over."

"Premee?"

"Yes."

"How early?" Dean asked.

"Five weeks. But big and strong. Mother was very healthy."

"Whose . . . whose baby is this?" Dean was almost embarrassed to ask.

"Whose?" Andrea chuckled. "Whose do you think Dean." Andrea shook her head with a smile. "Monica, the New Bowman woman."

"Oh." Dean nodded slow and then froze. "When did the baby get here?"

“Mother and child arrived about an hour and a half ago.”

“Who brought them?”

“Robbie.” Andrea told him. “When he picked Ellen up. Well I have to go.” Andrea began to walk away.

“Andrea?” Dean reached back and grabbed on to the sleeve of her lab coat. “Where’s my wife?”

“You don’t know?” Andrea asked.

“No. I didn’t know she came back.”

“She’s been back for a while. She was at the school. You should check there.”

“Jenny started classes.” Dean looked at his watch.

“Patient rooms. She still has a few.”

“Yeah. That’s where’s she is.” Dean nodded. “Thanks. I’ll go look.” Saying his goodbye to Andrea, Dean began down the hall. Ellen’s patients were kept together, the Bowman men liked it better when they were close to their colleagues.

He peeked in every room even if the patient wasn’t Ellen’s. He didn’t want to take a chance on missing her. Moving down the corridor he saw her coming out of the last room. “El.” He called out to her then walked quickly to meet up with Ellen. “Hey.”

“Morning.” Ellen kissed him quickly and headed down the hall.

“El? You’re back.”

“Been here for over an hour.”

“And why didn’t you tell me you were back?”

Ellen shrugged as she walked. “I didn’t think it was a big deal. I knew you were busy.”

“You’re my wife.”

Ellen snickered sarcastically. A laugh Dean didn’t hear.

“You went to see the kids, right?”

“Yes.”

“Did you forget about me in there somewhere?”

“Dean.” Ellen stopped walking. “Really. I knew I would see you.”

“How was New Bowman.”

“Good.” Ellen started to walk, turning the corner to the main lab.

“Rough night.”

“Not really.” Ellen shrugged. “Went pretty easy. She had no complications during delivery.”

“I have to tell you, I’m surprised you’re back. I thought for sure you’d catch some sleep at Hal’s and head back after. Especially after doing the delivery all night.”

“Monica delivered about an hour after I got there.” Ellen headed into the lab.

“An hour after you got there?” Dean followed her. “I called Hal’s. He said you weren’t there.”

“That’s because I spent the night with Elliott.” Ellen took out two tubes of blood and placed them in a rack on the counter. “Where are the reqs. I want to do an order for Johnny.”

“Spent the night with Elliott?”

“Yes. Talking. Those reqs should be in clear view. Are you cleaning up in

here again?" Ellen smiled as she began to search out the requisitions.

"All night."

"Yes."

"Did you sleep at all?" Dean asked.

"I caught an hour on his couch." Ellen bent down.

"So you slept at his house as well."

"Yes." Ellen stood up. "Here." She laid the reqs on the counter. "Keep them out. I have too many patients to be searching for these things."

"I don't know if I like this."

"Like what?"

"This . . . this . . ." Frazzled, Dean's hand went out. "This you and Elliott, all night thing that happened."

"Dean, we were talking."

"I don't care." Dean raised his voice a little. "I don't know him. Not really. And it's not right."

Ellen laughed. "What is not right about talking with someone."

"All night?"

"If that's what it takes. And I have therapy before our lab work."

"El." Dean called her as she started to leave. "I'm talking to you about this."

"Dean, you're making too much out of it. We talked."

"All night." Dean repeated. "First, you know, when you go to Bowman you spend time with him. When he was here in the clinic you made special visits. Yesterday at Beginnings Day, how much were you with him. Last night . . ."

"Dean." Ellen snapped his name. "Where . . ." Her words squeaked. "Where are you going with this?"

"Is there something I should know?"

"Like what? Like me and Elliott are having an affair." Ellen shook her head with a ridiculing laugh. "He's a very nice man who has become my friend."

"He's your patient. Don't cross those lines."

"Back off on this Dean. He's my friend and drop it. Drop it." Ellen began to leave the lab again.

"I have every right to be concerned about . . ."

"You have no right!" Ellen yelled as she stopped cold. "None! All right? I vowed to make this marriage work. To be with you. Only you. If I wanted to have an affair on you I would have. And I wouldn't have waited until we built a town called New Bowman, I wouldn't have waited until I made a new friend in Elliott Ryder. If I wanted to be with anyone else, believe me when I tell you I would have been with Frank already." Twitching her head in anger while she turned, Ellen said no more as she stormed from the clinic.

Dean stood dumbfounded. His hand raised up and slowly fell back down landing on the counter. He ran his fingers over the top of his head and tossed his hand up once again in defeat. "She spends the night with a man." Dean mumbled as he shook his head and started to leave. "And I get chastised for asking about it. Go figure."

New Bowman, Montana

“Ladies!” Joe said like such a Joe when he stepped into the livingroom of the women’s house, or according to Frank and Robbie, A.K.A., The House of Lesbians. Onto the oval coffee table which was set before the sofa in the filled room, Joe dropped a stack of papers. “Those.” He pointed to them with a tone of crass. “Are the standard Beginnings inductee questionnaire. When anyone comes to Beginnings, they fill one out. Now . . .” Joe held up his hand. “What it does, is tells us who you are, what you did and basically gives us an idea of where to place you in the work force. Simple. Granted . . .” Joe picked up the stack again. “Some people, you know, they’ve been whacked out by the goddamn world. They can’t read or write, they just forgot how. That’s O.K., we understand. It doesn’t make you a moron, just a field worker. O.K., getting that out of the way . . .”

Hal stood in the corner of the room, arms crossed, hand at his own chin, watching his father pace about before the women. So casually business like. Brown slacks, a white button down shirt, a ‘won’t give an inch’ attitude. And Hal enjoyed it. It was round two of another Slagel versus the House of Lesbians.

Joe continued. “Five hundred and thirty-seven people in New Bowman, last count. Did you know that?” Joe whistled. “That’s a lot. And . . . that’s a lot of questionnaires. We have a copy machine, we make our own toner, still . . . five hundred and thirty-seven copies.” Another whistle came from Joe. “That took some patience and work. Not to mention, mind you, deciphering them, getting to know them, filing them. But, it’s a standard thing. Everyone. I mean everyone fills one out. So . . .” Joe softened his voice. “Why am I here.” he let out a loud breath. “I’ll tell you. I don’t like making my staff in Beginnings do any extra work. They complain, it irritates me and I get pissy. No one likes me when I’m pissy. Of course, some people say I’m pissy all the time. Be that as it may. Last week, I gave my son, your captain, five hundred and thirty-seven questionnaires, actually, five forty, for his people to fill out. They came in, trickled in one day, bombarded us the next. But they came in. All but twelve. Those twelve. This stack.” Joe dropped them again. “They are why I’m here. Empty. Now will one of you women, care to tell me why not a single goddamn standard Beginnings questionnaire was filled out?”

There was silence and Grace spoke up. “We, Mr. Slagel, saw no reason to.”

“You saw no reason to.” Joe nodded. “My rules state everyone fills them out. Whether you are man, woman, child, or lesbian, everyone fills one out. All of you included. You don’t fill them out, I have to guess. I hate to guess, but I do it. Now I don’t like when someone doesn’t follow standard Beginnings rules. So, I’m just gonna safely assume, that none of you had a pencil and I’m gonna have to play Harry goddamn Houdini with the lot of you.” Joe pulled out from his back pocket a sheet of paper. It was folded once. He laid it on the table. “This is a list of job openings and areas we need help in, in Beginnings. Some are here in Bowman, most are in Beginnings. You’ll see the starting times, days of work and so forth. The Dan-tram, will make a special stop . . .”

“Wait one second!” Grace stood up and moved to Joe. “Work?”

“Um . . . yes. Work. As I was saying, those . . .”

“Mr. Slagel! We do not work.”

“Excuse me?” Joe tugged on his ear. “I didn’t hear you correctly, I’m getting old, my hearing is going. Repeat that.”

“We do not work.”

“You do now.”

“I beg to differ.”

“No, Toots, I beg to differ. You wanna eat, you wanna have clothes, electricity, running water, heat to this house, protection from this world, then you will work. You will pull your weight.” Joe nodded in a motion to Grace’s size. “Everyone pulls their weight. That is the way it is.”

“We have never been asked to work for basic means of living.”

“You’ve never been a part of Beginnings before.”

Grace gasped. “We are not now.”

“Oh you certainly are. You my dear are New Bowman, a subsidiary of Beginnings Montana. Being a subsidiary, you may have you little local rules, but you live under Beginnings rule. Beginnings rule states, everyone works. Everyone does something. We have one, big growing community and there’s lots to be done. Teachers. Day care workers, nurses, which my daughter and wife will train you as. Cooks, bakers. You name it.”

“The captain . . .”

“The captain.” Joe interrupted Grace. “Or my son, has been way too nice. I’m not that nice.”

Grace looked at Hal. “Captain Slagel. It appears I . . . I owe you a grave apology. Here all along I took you for an arrogant, snide man. But since meeting not only your father but that beastly brother, you, Captain Slagel, are the saint of your family.”

“If we could save the tender moment.” Joe stated and took from his front pocket a small notepad. “I’m a busy man and I’d like to start getting the assignments over and done with. Let’s start with you.” Lifting a pen from his pocket Joe pointed the tip at Grace. “Name.”

Grace didn’t answer.

“Name!” Joe yelled.

“Grace.”

“Grace. Grace.” Joe looked to the ceiling. “I don’t recall a questionnaire being filled out by a Grace. Did you fill one out.”

“No.”

“Not a problem, you didn’t have pencil. All right. Grace.” Joe looked at her. “You seem like a healthy, nutritiously conscience kind of gal. I have a slot in our bakery open. That’s where I’ll put . . .”

“Bakery!” Grace gasped. “I will not work in a bakery.”

“How about the fields or greenhouses.”

“Nor that.”

“Grace, sweetheart, we’re running out of options here. I’ve no idea what old world skills you had, so therefore I have to assume you had none.”

“I’ll have you know Mr. Slagel.” Grace said with attitude. “I had plenty of skills. Not only did I have a law degree from the University of Minnesota, I sat for thirteen years as a local municipality circuit court judge. So there.”

Joe stopped in his writing and quickly looked to Hal. After returning his

stunned looks back to Grace, Joe immediately glanced down to his note pad and scratched out the word 'baker' after Grace's name. He looked back up to her with a smile.

Beginnings, Montana

M-16 was in a ready grip in his hands and an extra clip hung on Frank's belt. Fire power. And he also was armed, with not only his revolver in his shoulder harness, three gas grenades, but a large hunting knife strapped to his legs. He moved slowly through the high weeded area of sector twenty, just beyond the fields. His jeep was parked a darting distance from him. Softly he spoke into the microphone so close to his mouth. "I'm not seeing or hearing anything."

"Keep your eyes peered." Robbie responded through Frank's radio ear piece. "Tracking states steady, human six signals just on the edge."

"Not moving?"

"Not moving."

"Dead?" Frank questioned speaking into his headset.

"Too strong."

"Keeping my eyes, ears and nose open."

"Me too."

Lowering his mouth piece with a grin, Frank looked behind him. "O.K., enough games."

Robbie caught up to him. "Seriously Frank, when we do that, it makes anyone listening think we're really fucked up."

"We are."

"True."

"Smell anything?"

"No. You?"

"Nothing." Frank brought his radio back. "Tracking, come in, Mark what do you have?"

"Eight. Steady and strong still. I have you two now on tracking."

"How far from us?" Frank asked.

"Frank don't move." Mark said.

"Why?"

"Frank! Stop." Mark warned. "They're close."

"How close?" Frank pumped the chamber on his M-16 and motioned his head to Robbie who did the same. "Mark?"

"Frank, they're right . . ."

A loud war call scream precluded the jumping up of the eight savages two feet from Frank and Robbie.

"Fuck." Frank called out, standing firm. He lifted his M-16. "Robbie fire at will." Just as the eight savages charged, spears in hand, at Frank and Robbie, Frank's finger laid upon the trigger. Pressure to depress and fire was minimal when a blur of fleshy color sped past Frank and the first savage flew back with a horrid scream. "What the fuck."

A high pitched gurgling and rustling of weeds sounded off first and so fast it happened. The seven remaining savages went down as quickly as the first. All flying back, screaming painfully as they fell into the high grass. From the field which surrounded Frank and Robbie, a fountain of spaying blood and flesh shot up in the air.

“Robbie! Watch your back!” Frank stepped back.

“I hear more coming Frank. Back up.” Robbie moved backwards.

“Tracking! What do you see?” Frank called out.

“Ten, no wait fifteen.” Mark replied.

“Shit.” Frank spun around. “Robbie.”

“Run?”

“Fly.”

Robbie spun around and started to charge forward while Frank kept up his speed, racing backwards, keeping an eye on behind them. He could see the grass of the field waving fast as what he could only believe was the small predators in pursuit. “Robbie mask.”

“No time.”

“Fuck it. Hold your breath.” Frank stopped running.

“Frank.”

“Go.”

“Shit.”

“Little pain in the asses.” From his belt Frank lifted the gas Grenade. “Hit the jeep..” Frank pulled the pin with his teeth. He waited. Closer, louder, fifteen feet they were, ten . . . Frank tossed the grenade, pivoted in his run and took off for Robbie and the jeep. A ‘pop’ caused a cloud of smoke to raise up and hover in a thick blanket directly above where Frank tossed it.

Robbie dove for the jeep standing beside it with his gun held high. He watched Frank move closer and closer. The grass stopped moving and Robbie lowered his weapon.

Frank wheezed out the breath he held as he got to the jeep. “We’ll wait until the smoke clears and go check it out.”

“Sounds good. But why.”

“Dean might want to . . .”

“Frank!”

It snarled as it leaped out. It’s little body, so used to not being upright, barely uncurled it’s crawling stature as it lunged up in a shooting motion, mouth wide open at Frank. Inches from Frank’s chest, he lifted his M-16 and like a batter trying to force the run home, he bunted the killer baby hard. The grotesque animalistic infant squealed from the hit, flew back, banged onto the hood of the jeep and bounced to the ground. “Yes!” Frank dove for it.

“Frank what the . . .” Robbie charged forward when he saw the killer baby roll to a crawling position and try to get away only to have it’s feet grabbed by Frank who landed hard on the ground right by it. “Frank.”

“Get the tarp.” The baby’s body flipped up and down and it growled as Frank held on to it.

“What for!” Robbie asked.

“Just get it And get the M.E.K.”

“All right.” Robbie backed up.

“Hold still.” Frank yelled at the little beast. It’s wiry body trying to reach

around and snap it's long toothed mouth at him. "Fuck it." Frank, like he was playing a game of sadistic Twister, and still holding the feet of the infant firm to the ground, swung out his right leg wide. He grunted from the awkward stretch as his leg, in a counter clockwise turn came around and laid upon the back of the baby holding him down. "Trapped." Once Frank had him, stretched out or not, Frank did not move.

"M.E.K. and tarp." Robbie dropped them. "What the hell are you doing."

"Put your foot on him."

"What?"

"Hold him down." Frank ordered.

"Frank it's a baby."

"It's a fuckin lab creation. Secure it."

Really not wanting too, but having to listen to Frank, Robbie stepped down upon the Killer baby's back. His combat boot held the squirming body down.

Grunting in relief, Frank removed his leg and stood up, jumping to get rid of the cramp. He bet down to the M.E.K., or Men's Emergency Kit and opened the small box. He pulled out a roll of duct tape. Ripping off a long strip, Frank crouched down before the baby. It's saliva and blood filled jaws snapped and it's beady eyes stared with a hunger at Frank. Frank grinned, extended the duct tape to the infant and tightly covered its mouth, wrapping the tape all the way around the distorted head. "There." Frank stood up, chuckled some as the Infant swished it's head back and forth trying, unsuccessfully to free itself. "Safe now from the killer fuckin jaws of death."

"Good." Robbie still stood foot on its back. "What now."

Frank smiled. "The tarp," Frank grabbed the gray cloth. "I have an idea." Frank undid his belt, pulling it from the loops. "Dad is gonna love it."

^^^

The tapping was light and fast. Steady as well, and Joe couldn't take it anymore. Setting down the phone that he held, he raised his eyes up to Henry who sat in a chair across from his desk. "Henry. Knock it off."

No tapping. Silence. Sorry. Joe. I'm just nervous. Go on."

Huffing Joe picked u the phone again, he looked to Jason and began to dial. The tapping started again. "Henry!" Joe slammed down the phone.

"I'm sorry Joe." Henry held up his hand. "But my foot keeps going. This is monumental. Historical. Dial. Go on. Call George. I think . . ."

"Henry." Joe said clm but with slight warning.

"Yes Joe."

"Quiet." Joe placed the phone to his ear and dialed.

"Is it ringing?" Henry asked.

"I'm killing him." Joe looked to Jason then shook his head. "No answer. Are we sure Rev. Bob gave us . . ." Joe paused and quickly looked up when the other line answered. "This is Joe Slagel, Whom am I speaking to? Steward Who? Listen. I need to speak to George Hadly. Do you know who he is. Tell him . . ." Joe covered the receiver. "We're still connected he placed down the phone. Maybe he's . . ."

“Joe.” George stated his name.

“Dear God.”

“Close.”

“That’s a Frank comment if I ever heard one.”

“I just had my lunch, don’t make me sick.”

Joe grumbled. “Listen, enough of the friendly thoughts. We have a problem. You and I . . .”

“You’re surrendering Beginnings?” George said arrogantly.

“Christ no. This has nothing to do with our territorial wars here asshole. This has to do with the Savages. I think we need to discuss this situation that seems to be . . . hello? Hello? Shit.” Joe set down the receiver. “He hung up.”

“Bastard.” Henry gasped.

Jason shook his head. “That’s fine. He’ll think about what you said. Trust me. It may take another attack, but he’ll remember why you called. He’ll call back. It’s our turn to wait. You did your part.”

Joe tossed his hands up in the air. “I gave . . .”

Loudly Joe’s office door flung open and banged into the file cabinet causing it to rattle. With a tromp of his heavy boots, Frank walked in. “Dad.”

“Jesus Christ.” Joe’s hand slammed down on the table. “And what the . . .” He slowed his speech when Robbie walked in. “What in Christ’s name happened to you two?”

“Savages.” Frank said as he stepped in. “Man, their blood sprayed all over us.”

“Yeah.” Robbie stated. “We were so busy we didn’t notice.”

“Well go take a shower or something.” Joe waved his hand. “Are either of you hurt. How bad was it.”

“Fuckin beautiful.” Frank commented. “They went down one, two, three . . .”

“Four, five, six, seven, eight.” Robbie grinned. “Fast.”

“Real fast.”

“Super fast.”

“Boys.” Joe stood up. “Why were we not radioed about this?”

Frank scratched his head. “Because. We got busy up there.”

“Real busy.” Robbie nodded.

“Super busy.” Frank reiterated. “Which . . .” He held up his hand. “Brings us to the reason why we’re here. I have a plan.”

“Oh brother.” Joe dropped to his chair.

“I need a meeting. A big meeting. Can I have one?” Frank asked.

“Why?” Joe questioned.

“Hold that thought.” Frank pointed and darted out the door. He came back with the tarp, bunched up like a sack and secured with Frank’s belt. It wiggled. “Solution time.” Frank walked over to Joe’s desk and dropped the tarp on it with a thump.

“What in God’s name is that.” Joe asked of the moving tarp sack.

“Check this out.” Frank nodded. “A killer baby.”

“Killer baby!” Joe scolded as Henry’s chair squeaked as he flew backwards from the way. “Frank, why are you capturing killer babies.”

“I have plan. I told you. But I need to get in touch with Dean, or at least get him up here. Can we have a meeting?”

“Why? Is the baby situation bad?” Joe asked.

“I think.” Frank answered. “In fact, we were talking in the jeep. We now estimate . . . a lot of them up there. I think their reproducing.”

Joe just stared at Frank. “Reproducing?”

“Yeah. You know, when you get a male killer baby and a female killer baby and they . . .”

“Frank I know what reproducing is.” Joe yelled. “The killer babies are not reproducing!”

“Dad, they are.”

“Frank. They aren’t.” Joe said annoyed. “They’re babies for crying out loud.”

“Killer babies.” Frank corrected. “And if they aren’t multiplying, how are we getting more?”

Joe took a calming breath. “Perhaps, the society sent them.”

“Oh.” Frank stated. “Possible. Not probable.” Frank jumped at Joe’s hard hitting hand on the desk. “What? I’m thinking rational here. But . . . I have a plan that has to do with our savage situation and our killer baby situation.”

Joe peered to Robbie. “Do you know about this plan?”

“Yeah.” Robbie nodded. “And Dad, I think it’s good. You ought to listen to him. Frank, despite temporary mental disabilities, strategically comes up with some good ones.”

“True.” Joe bobbed his head.

“Wait.” Frank held up his hand. “It’s Tuesday. I’m finished being temporarily mentally disabled.”

“If I may.” Jason interjected. “Frank, Dean can only determine that. He diagnosed you, so until he gives an all clear, you’re still temporarily mentally disabled.”

“Fuck.”

Joe glanced to Jason. “Thank you very much for that . . . O.K., Frank, one hour we’ll meet for the meeting. But get cleaned up, you smell like death.”

“Got it.” Frank turned for the door. “See you in an hour.”

“Frank.” Joe called out as Frank was leaving. He stood up and lifted the moving sack. “Your friend. Take him to Dean.”

“Oh, yeah, thanks. I will.” Frank turned, took a step, reached sloppily forward and grabbed the sack. “I’ll be back.” As he turned to follow Robbie out the door, the filing cabinet clanked loudly when the sack swung into it. “Whoops.” Frank snickered and walked out.

“Christ.” Joe shook his head and plopped into his chair.

Quantico Marine Headquarters

“I’m sorry, Sir, I don’t understand what you’re saying.” Steward leaned closer to George’s high back wheel chair.

“If you . . .” George’s chin met his chest. “Would lift my goddamn head.”

“Sorry.” Steward, fingers under George’s chin, pushed him back up. “Perhaps if we strap you to the chair.”

“No.”

“Just a suggestion.”

“Dr. Walker says it will come back. Eventually. Now . . . as I was saying. Beginnings must be in trouble to be calling us about the savage problem.”

“It could work in our favor.” Steward said. “I’ll speak to Johnny to see what he knows.”

“Good idea. And ask how it’s been going, they haven’t checked in since yesterday.”

“I’ll ask.”

“And about my cousin Bob as well. I need to know when I can expect to have to send a team for him.”

“Do you think they’ll let him go?” Steward asked.

“In exchange for his testimony. Yes. Joe’s a man of his word. An asshole, but man of his word.”

“Do you really think he called for help?” Steward questioned.

“No.” George replied. “Beginnings wouldn’t ask us for help.”

“Then, why do you think he called about the savages?”

“I haven’t a clue. I guess we’ll figure it out” George lifted his one good hand. “But we’ve been hit only once. So really, they aren’t our problem.” George’s head dropped drastically, and suddenly forward. “Steward.”

Steward reached out and aided George.

New Bowman, Montana

There was a slight separation between the thicker lips of Elliott Ryder. Frozen lips that seeped out small huffs of steam filled breaths. His eyes transfixed upon Hal looking up to the much bigger Slagel in wonder.

Hal blew the smoke from his mouth and tossed his cigarette. He watched the training of his men in the new field and applauded their efforts. When he returned to looking at Elliott, the expression hadn’t changed. “I like that look.”

“Tell me you’re joking Captain.”

“I’m not.” Hal grinned arrogantly.

“Begging your pardon, I like your father . . .”

“So do I.”

“What is he thinking?” Elliott asked.

“Of solutions.”

“Solutions.” Elliott shook his head a couple times fast. “Remind me not to get into any trouble.”

“That’s the whole point.”

“Terrorism.”

Hal laughed heartedly and gave a swat to Elliott back. “Actually, it’s not that bad. Really, think about it. On cases such as Andrea’s, Gergerace will preside over the proceedings, no decisions to be made. A jury. She’ll just make sure rules are set and followed. That’s a good thing.”

“But . . . But you mentioned other things she will handle.”

“Ah, the proverbial domestic instiller.” Hal laughed. “Look, Rev. Bob is no longer in Beginnings working. Our Fr. Jensen couldn’t possibly, he could, but

come on, he wouldn't want to handle people's domestic squabbles, now would he?" Hal did a fake hiccup and stumble. "God help those who seek his advice." Hal raised his eyebrow and smiled.

"Can Gergerace mediate domestic problems?"

"She was a circuit court judge. But, no one is really going to sue. The way it will work is she basically will handle the relationship decisions like Rev. Bob did. Granting divorces and so forth." Hal shrugged. "As far as John Smith versus Joe Brown in a battle over whose lawn mower it is, things will still have to be settled on their own."

"So basically she's only handling things your father doesn't want to be bothered with right now?"

"Yes." Hal nodded. "And neither do I. Plus punishment issues. Who will spend time in holding, for how long. Oustings will still be decided by council unless there is argument to warrant trial. Then, like with the Andrea proceedings, the jury will decide fate."

"What about appeals. Her word is final?" Elliott questioned dubiously.

"No." Hal answered. "My father thought of that. A combined joint effort by Beginnings' council and ours will not hear another hearing, we'll review why Gergerace made her decision and stand behind it or ask her to change her mind."

"What is Grace's view on all this?"

Hal laughed. "Her head is spinning right now. But, I think our illustrious she-warden of the House of Lesbians is enjoying this. She picked a secretary and guess where they are now?"

"I wouldn't begin to."

"At the small court house . . ." Hal snickered. "Cleaning. Cleaning Elliott, can you believe that. They said they are also tossing out all old dockets files and getting ready for new."

"Oh my God." Elliott's hand went to his own face. "I'm frightened sir."

"Nah." Hal removed Elliott's covering hand. "It'll be fine. There are some law books in the court house, but my dad is sending a team to get federal statute books for Gergerace. She's into this establishing firm rules."

"And this is all stemming from the need to have someone preside over Andrea's hearing."

"Yep. And you do know she is on Neville committee." Hal gave a 'so there' look.

"Who . . . who is our council Captain. We don't have one."

"Sure we do." Hal said upbeat.

"No, sir, we don't." Elliott shook his head. "You run New Bowman."

"And you're second in charge. If I die, you're the man, so you're on council. Good job." Hal gave a thumbs up.

"Third member?"

"I haven't decided. I've been referring to the third member as 'him', in front of my father, so don't let on."

"Never." Elliott shook his head. "Sir, I don't mind being second in charge, but, this council thing, I don't know. It's . . ."

"It's your duty Elliott. And a way for you to make frequent trips to Beginnings. There are gonna be meetings my father will want me to attend. You as official council, can go there."

Elliott smiled. "I guess it wouldn't be all that bad." The smiled dropped

from his face. "Uh-oh, captain."

"What?"

Elliott pointed to the training men. The large group in the field parted ways allowing for a strong, waddling, moo-moo wearing Grace to come through. "She doesn't look happy."

"She loves me now."

"Right." Elliott snickered. "Do I have to watch this?" He asked as Grace came closer.

"What?"

"You know what she's like."

"Nonsense. Not any more."

"Captain." Grace snapped out.

Elliott grinned. "See."

Hal only shifted his eyes to Grace. "Yes?"

"Captain, my dear man." Grace reached out and grabbed his hand sweetly. "Would it be too much trouble for you to issue me an escort on the Dan-tram to go to Beginnings. I've phoned Mr. Slagel and he does have some new attire he can issue me. And the Dan-tram is due to arrive shortly."

"An escort?" Hal asked. "You need new clothes?"

"I must for my new position." Grace smiled. "Plus, I'd like to visit that barber I heard about. Can I, I'll be alone, with the exception of your escort."

"But of course." Hal grinned. "An escort to take you there would not be a problem. In fact, no need to wait for the Dan-tram, a woman of your stature shouldn't ride mass transportation." Hal stepped back. "Elliott, council man, take a truck and Judge Grace to Beginnings. Thanks."

Before a stunned Elliott couldn't even respond, a snide grinning Hal escaped off barking orders to his training men. Cringing with a fake smile, thinking how much he was going to kill the captain, Elliott looked to Grace.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Beginnings, Montana

“Andrea.” Danny Hoi followed her about the clinic.

“Danny, I am so busy.” Andrea dropped a stack of charts on the nurses counter as she stopped to take breather.

“I realize this. But you have a trial coming up.”

“And I’m sure you’ll handle it.”

“I need to find time to talk to you about this.” Danny leaned on the counter. “Joe found a judge.”

“Good.” Andrea stayed upbeat. “We can end this thing.”

“I need witnesses.”

“I’m sure you’ll find them.”

“Andrea I know being optimistic is the good thing to do. But we have to sit down, lay this out. I want to go over where my strategy is.”

“Danny, please. I’m trusting you.” Andrea tapped him on the hand and opened the chart. “You’ll find witnesses to help me.”

“We had seven. But unfortunately Frank put a bullet in their heads before they could be cross examined or broke on the stand . . .”

“Listen to how authentic sounding you are. Broke on the stand. Cross examined. Danny, you are just gonna do great.”

“Andrea Henry has the video taped confessions in his corner.”

“I’m certain they aren’t that incriminating. Really, Danny, I’m innocent. What could they say. Did you see these tapes.”

“Not yet. But now since Joe found a judge, we’re in an all-go.”

“Good. Now, if you’ll excuse me I have forty-seven patients to attend to and I’m up to my knees in vomit and diarrhea.”

“Gross.” Danny cringed.

“Just keep me posted.”

“I will, but I still need a viable, heart wrenching, George worker witness.”

“Andrea!” Down the hall came Jenny Matoose. “Glad I found you.”

“What’s wrong?” Andrea asked, a hint of panic and concern was in her voice.

“John.” Jenny caught her breath and grabbed Andrea’s arm. “John’s come out of the coma.”

Saying nothing more to Danny, Andrea flew down the hall with Jenny. And Danny smiled brightly.

^^^

Grace was nervous. Her stomach actually fluttered. She hoped she looked all right. She did her hair but now felt self-conscious about the big blue Moo-moo she wore. Especially since she arrived with Sgt. Ryder through the gates of Beginnings. She sat in Joe’s office, getting worse by the second as he was on the

phone. Not often did she leave her home, but never did she leave the sanctity of the Bowman township, whether in Montana or North Dakota. Now she had ventured out. A part of Grace liked it.

“Frank.” Joe rubbed his forehead as he spoke on the phone. “I know this is your big moment in the strategy sun, but give me another hour. All right? Go hang out with Dean, you haven’t brought him the killer baby yet. Good. Good. Bye.” He hung up.

Grace shifted her eyes over to Elliott in the corner. She didn’t even want to ask about the killer baby.

“Welcome to Beginnings.” Joe stood up from behind his desk.

“From what I’ve seen.” Grace cleared her throat. “It’s very . . . very . . .”

“Military installation like?” Joe smiled. “Yes, but Danny Hoi is working to change all that. We have modular housing.”

“You have a nice set up.” Grace stood from her chair. “Are you certain you have clothing for me?”

“Most definitely.” Joe nodded. “And I talked to Bentley our barber. He can take you in an hour or so. But first let’s get you to distribution.” Joe moved to the door. “We’ll take my jeep. If we find nothing there, we have this pair of tailors. Todd and Ben, they’ll make you what you need.”

“Wonderful.”

Joe stopped, back facing Grace and mouthed the word ‘wonderful’. He shook his head and reached for the door.

“Mr. Slagel. Would it be possible and allowable, for me to take a small tour of your town. Get to see it while I’m waiting on my hair design?” Grace asked.

Joe shrugged. “Sure. We can show you around some. Elliott?”

Elliott snapped out of his zoning. “Yes?”

“You care to take Grace on a Beginnings tour?”

“I . . . I really am not that familiar.” Elliott looked innocently. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh.” Grace turned. “A small tour will be fine then. Whatever you can do. I was wanting to stop by the hospital and personally speak to Dr. Hayes.”

“The clinic.” Elliott perked up. “I know where that is. I can take you there. No problem.”

“All right. We’re settled.” Joe opened the door. “Off to Beginnings’ Sax Fifth Avenue.” Joe stepped out. “Distribution warehouse fifteen.”

Elliott was the last to leave Joe’s office. He kept his distance behind Grace and her moo-moo that flapped about as she walked. The ride to Beginnings was quiet. Elliott cringed at his council man duties and spending the time with Grace. But a tour of Beginnings wouldn’t be bad, it would give him a chance to get to know the town better. To Elliott, it wasn’t turning out to be all that bad of a day. Yet.

^^^

“And these aren’t done.” Johnny laid a few requisitions in front of Ellen on the counter in the clinic lab. “But I have to work on that chopper. So I have to go.”

"This was great. Thanks." Ellen smiled. "Be careful."

"I will. And Dr. Dean's checking my work now." Johnny kissed Ellen on the cheek. "See ya later." Johnny began to walk away.

"Johnny." Ellen called to him as she reviewed her notes. "Are you picking up the baby today?"

Johnny let out an annoyed breath that was well hidden from Dean and Ellen in that lab. "Yeah."

"Can you bring her by?" Ellen asked. "I know your father wants to see her and so does Pap."

"Yeah. I can do that. But I have to go." Johnny took off his lab coat as he walked across the lab. "See ya Dr. Dean."

"Johnny." Dean kept his eyes glued to his computer. "Uh-oh El." His fingers clicked on the keyboard.

"Uh-oh El, what?"

"You have staph."

"What?" Ellen chuckled.

"A patient named . . ." Dean sprang forward in his seat and lifted the req. "You just have 'Link' written down."

"What about him."

"He has the beginnings of staph."

"Shit." Ellen's hand slammed down on the counter. "How did that happen?"

"El, look at who injured him." Dean stood up and walked over to her. "We'll start him on an IV anti-infection. It's early enough. He'll be fine."

"I guess. I feel bad now."

"Hey it was bound to happen. You're lucky there was only one." Dean moved closer to her. "And . . ." He grabbed the edges of her lab coat and pulled Ellen to him. "You've been quiet."

"I've been busy."

"You didn't say anything at all during the skin grafting."

"I'm sure I did." Ellen wanted to pull back.

"Bub noticed."

Ellen snickered. "Bub did not. And speaking of skin grafting, we have to prep those tissue . . ."

"Not now." Dean tried to kiss her. "I've been with you all day and I feel like this is our first alone moment." Lightly he kissed her. "Let's sneak off and go home."

"Let's not. I have to start Link on the . . ."

"After that."

"Dean. No." Ellen shook her head. "We're busy."

"What is wrong." Dean kept his face close. "Huh?"

"Nothing."

"Ellen." He softened his voice. "Come on. What is it?" He just received a shake of her head as an answer. "Have I told you recently how much I love you? How happy I am with you? Or how about how incredibly sexy I find you." Dean's moving lips searched out Ellen's reluctant ones, but he didn't get his kiss.

"Dean." Ellen pulled her head away. "Not now."

"Something is wrong. Will you please tell me what it is? Why are you

pulling away from me.”

“Because you suck.” Frank spoke loudly from inside the lab. He grinned. “Oh yeah, trouble in paradise.”

“Frank?” Dean, irritated moved away from Ellen. “How long have you been there?”

“Long enough.” Frank looked at Ellen and grinned. “I guess the little man pity is starting to wear thin.”

“Frank.” Dean walked to his counter. “Don’t you knock.”

“No. And nothing was happening. Even if it was, don’t you have a home for that sort of thing. Oh, wait, I forgot, you don’t have a working door.” Quickly Frank glanced at Ellen. “I’m joking don’t yell at me.”

Dean grumbled. “Frank. What is it.”

“Oh, I brought you a gift.” From the floor Frank lifted the sack and plopped it on the counter with a ‘thump’. “For you Dean. And of course you El.”

Dean and Ellen both moved closer to the bag.

Holding his hands toward the moving sack, Dean glanced at Frank. “What’s in here, an animal.”

“Nope.” Frank said proudly. “One of those killer babies. Caught it outside the perimeter. Fuckin tough little bastards. Killed eight savages. Not him, his buddies. I gassed the others.”

“What did you use.” Dean reached for the belt that held the sack secure.

“Dean-ami. Ammonia based twenty-five feet, highly concentrated grenade number seven.”

Ellen shook her head. “Knocked them out. Didn’t kill them.”

“Fuck.” Frank said shocked. “You’re kidding me.”

“Nope.” Dean replied. “They’re tough. Built to withstand the elements.”

“Good thing I didn’t go back for the bodies huh?” Frank asked. “Anyhow. Thought you’d want this. I have an idea I want to talk to you about.”

“This is great.” Dean started to undo the belt.

“Dean.” Frank stopped him. “Only his mouth is secure. He’ll get loose.”

Dean pulled back. “We’ll wait until I get him down to the lab. I’ll knock him out and pen him up. Thanks Frank.” Dean smiled in gratitude.

“Sure. And . . . there’s lots more where he came from. I think they’re reproducing up there.”

Snickering, Dean looked at Ellen who wasn’t amused, then back to Frank. “Frank they’re infants. They can’t reproduce yet. And even if they could. I believe they’re asexual.”

“A sexual what?” Frank asked.

“Asexual.” Dean repeated. “You know, asexual.”

“A sexual what?” Frank questioned again. “Dean, El’s a big girl, if there’s something you wanna call them, you can say it in front of her.”

“Never mind.”

“O.K.” Frank shrugged and reached for the sack. “Let’s take this . . .” He stopped. “El? Are you all right? You look really tired.”

“I am.” Ellen said soft. “Thanks for noticing.”

“If she’s tired Frank.” Dean interjected. “Ask her why.”

“I know why.” Frank said. “She probably was up all night.”

Dean nodded. “She was. Ask her where she was.”

“I know where she was.”

"No Frank, ask here *where* she was."

"Dean." Frank snapped. "I know where she was. In New Bowman."

Dean shook his head. "Well, she was there, but was done delivering that baby in an hour. She spent the night with Sgt. Ryder."

Frank quickly jolted his angry view to Ellen. "You what?"

Ellen rolled her eyes. "God, we were talking."

"Talking. All night?" Frank raised his voice with question. "What is up with him El? First you wander off when we go to Bowman. You're always here with him when he was a patient." Frank didn't see Dean's nodding head in agreement. "Then, yesterday, Beginnings day," Frank fluttered his lips. "He was your puppy dog. He writes you letters."

Dean's arrogance in Frank's scolding of Ellen left. "El, Sgt. Ryder writes you letters."

"Yes." Frank nodded.

"Frank?" Ellen stepped to him. "What do you know about the letter?"

"Nothing." Frank answered quickly.

"El?" Dean questioned. "Why is he writing you letters?"

"It was a note. A short note." Ellen responded and snapped to Frank when he let out a 'ha'. "Frank, What do you know about the letter? Did you read it?"

"No." Frank stepped back.

"You did."

"No."

"El?" Again Dean spoke up. "Why is Sgt. Ryder writing you letters?"

"Frank." Ellen called his name. "Then if you didn't read it, how do you know about it?"

"Robbie showed me." Frank nodded.

"El." Dean tried to get her attention.

"Dean!" Ellen blasted his name. "What!"

"Why is he writing you letters!" Dean yelled.

Ellen spun her body to Dean. "It's not to proclaim his love! It's not to thank me for the reassurance I gave him!" She stepped to him with each sentence she spoke causing Dean to step back, "It's not to ridicule marriage! It's not to say he'll always be in my heart! It's wasn't for that!"

"And thank God." Frank commented "I couldn't have taken it. The part about conversing was bad enough that . . ."

"Frank!" Ellen yelled his name. "I thought you didn't read it!"

"I didn't . . . I . . . was . . . Fuckin Hal. He made me. He hates Elliott. He uh, doesn't trust him. He said, Frank, read this because he's writing Ellen love letters."

"Love letters?" Dean screamed.

"No!" Ellen yelled. "Frank, you're an asshole."

"No I'm not." Frank lifted the sack from the counter "And if you two are gonna fight, I wish you wouldn't do it in front of me. It gets my hopes up." He walked to the door. "Dean, come down to the lab with me I have to drop this off and talk to you about . . . UH!" Frank shrieked and jumped back when Grace stepped into the lab. "They let her out! Uh!"

Grace gave a scolding face to Frank.

"Dean, come on." Frank grinned, turned serious, pointed with a warning look to Elliott and walked out of the door.

"I'll be right down." Dean called out, then watched his visitors step inside. "Can I help you?"

Grace merely glanced at Dean and stepped to Ellen. "Dr. Hayes. I've come to speak to you. Elliott has been taking me on a tour and I wanted to take advantage of my visit to . . ." Grace let out a breath. "Apologize for my behavior with you." She extended her hand to Ellen.

"That's all right." Ellen shook Grace's hand. She peered around Grace and smiled to Elliott. "Hey, Elliott."

Dean's one eyebrow raised. "What . . ."

"Grace, this is my husband." Ellen introduced Dean. "He's the basis of our medicine here in Beginnings."

"Dr. Hayes." Grace nodded to Dean then returned to Ellen. "As a good will gesture, when you come to New Bowman to fill in for Blue, I would like to have you for dinner. Sgt. Ryder tells me you'll be coming in a few days."

Before Ellen could respond, Dean spoke up. "And why, Sgt. Ryder, do you know when my wife is going to New Bowman?"

Elliott was shocked by this question. He stumbled for an answer.

"Dean." Ellen whispered his name in warning.

"No, El." Dean looked at Elliott. "What exactly is your intention with my wife Sgt. Ryder."

"Dean." Ellen scolded his name. "Stop it."

"Intention?" Elliott question. "I am only trying to establish a friendship. I apologize if I've over stepped my boundaries Dr. Hayes. I will step back."

"You will do no such thing Elliott." Ellen told him. "I'll get pissed. Dean, knock it off. All right?"

"No, El." Dean shook his head. "I believe I am well within my rights as your husband. You spent the night with him. He writes you letters. He hangs around you. I have every right to want to know what his intentions are."

Grace interrupted. "Whatever Sgt. Ryder has stated as his intentions, I can assure you that he is honest with you. I've learned one thing Dr. Hayes." She spoke to Dean. "That the men of Bowman are nothing like the men I have met of Beginnings. Perhaps instead of scolding Sgt. Ryder, you should learn a thing or two from him." She gave a smile to Ellen then turned to Elliott. "Sgt., Ryder, I believe I have a hair appointment. You'll escort me?"

"Yes Ma'am." Elliott nodded and moved to the door.

"Dr. Hayes." Grace took a step. "Dr. Hayes." She said her farewells.

No goodbye? When Ellen realized that Elliott said nothing to her, she held her hand up to Dean and raced from the room. "Elliott." She called to him as he moved down the corridor to the main door with Grace. "Please wait."

Elliott stopped. He stared at the door for a second, placed on a polite smile and turned around. "Dr. Hayes."

"Stop that." Ellen told him. "Grace excuse us for a second." Grabbing the sleeve to Elliott's uniform she tugged him into the waiting area. "Don't do this."

"Ellen, I mean . . ." He saw her glare. "Ellen. I've caused trouble. It wasn't right for me to . . . to be friends with you especially if it caused tension between you and your husband."

"It's fine."

"He's upset."

"He has no right to be."

“He is your husband.”

“Elliott. You know everything. Do you think he has the right to judge our friendship?”

“Ellen.” Elliott lowered his head to her with a whisper. “I’m sorry. I really want to be friends with you, but he is your husband. I will respect that. And his wishes. I’m sorry.” Elliott took one step back, and turned to leave the waiting room.

Calmly, Ellen spoke up. “Well then, fuck you.”

Elliott turned around with a shocked expression. “Ellen?”

“You heard me. Fuck you.” Her voice raised just a little.

Quickly looking around, Elliott hunched and stepped to her to silence her.

“Fuck you!”

“Ellen.” Elliott spoke her name through clenched teeth.

“Fuck . . .” Her words were muffled by his hand.

“Ellen, please.”

“No.” Ellen swiped his hand off of her. “I can’t believe you’re doing this to me. I came to you. I told you everything. You know everything. You’re the only one. I can’t believe at this point in my life, with all that’s happening, I can’t believe you’re abandoning me. I need you.”

A whining, crying, frustration moan came from Elliott as his head flung back and his eyes rolled. “Ellen.”

“What?”

“Your husband . . .” Elliott stumbled for the words. “My honor.”

“Oh fuck your honor.”

“Why are you using that language.”

“Because I’m pissed. I told you I’d be pissed.” Ellen folded her arms. “You agreed to be my friend. Last night, you agreed to let me vent on you about this, ‘Husband, spoiled princess and the impending baby’ issue. And now look what you’re doing.”

Elliott slowly nodded his head. “Ellen, then my honor . . .”

“Oh Fuck your . . .” Again his hand covered Ellen’s mouth.

Slowly Elliott slid his hand from her mouth and leaned even closer. “My honor lies with you.” he gave a quick smile and stepped back. “But right now my duty lies with . . .” Elliot swallowed. “Grace. We’ll talk later.”

“We’ll talk later.” Ellen said softly with a smile as Elliott waved once more and left. Feeling a little better, she walked from the waiting area back down to the lab. Dean stood center of the room . . . waiting. “What?” She asked as she walked in.

“You chased after him.”

“Knock it off.”

“What . . . what did I do to deserve this ‘old’ Ellen-style attitude.”

“Old?” Ellen stepped angrily to him. “Old? Are you calling me old?”

“El, I was . . .”

“Too old for you Dean? Perhaps someone younger would be . . .”

“El!” Dean screamed to shut her up. “I was referring to your attitude. All right. God!” He curled his fist and stepped in frustration. “You know what . . .” Dean calmed down. “I’m not arguing. You’re just tired. That’s it.” He quickly kissed her. “You get like this when you’re tired. And hungry. Eat something.” He walked to the door. “Take a nap. Have a drink. Something.” He walked out

and stepped back in. “But I *am* telling Frank about you chasing him out.” Dean left.

Ellen snarled, “Tattle tale.” And returned to her work.

^^^

“Oh, this is really looking good.” Henry ran his forearm over his face as he stood side by side with Jess in an area just off the security training area.

“I’m actually really looking forward to the Neville competition now.” Jess nodded looking at what would be the ‘street’ scene Olympic site, for the next set up round of competition. “I think Joe’s right. It will really take people’s mind off of things.”

“Danny knows how to set things in motion. Of course, he pawns the work off on everyone.”

“Hey, it’s exhausting being a great mind.” Jess smiled. “This set up is coming along.”

“Just have to finish the gun.” Henry glanced at his watch. “We’d better head bk to the security area, Robbie is waiting to drive us to the big strategy meeting.”

Jess started to walk with Henry. “Any idea of what it’s about.”

“Savages and killer babies.”

“Swell.” Jess commented. “Two issues that deal with messy deaths. The Slagel brother’s favorite topic.”

“You’re learning them.”

“I’ve learned Robbie.” Jess slowed in his walk. “Not to be taken the wrong way.”

“Not taken that way.” Henry smiled. “I bet he’s looking forward to the competition.”

“Oh, yeah, he is. Especially with how nervous he is with the release of this ‘Letters’ book.”

Henry whistled. “How’s he handling that.”

“He’s not. Well, he is. Nervously. And with understanding. He idolizes Frank. He’s worried about it. Even if the letters were written in fun. How’s Frank gonna handle it?”

“You mean when he realizes they are about Robbie and Ellen? Not well. Hopefully no one will tell him Bobby and Helen are Robbie and Ellen.”

“How does he not know that?”

“It’s Frank.” Henry shrugged.

“Valid point. Anyhow . . . I want to talk to Robbie about all this, but he’s been so busy lately.”

“Tell me about it.” Henry said. “Frank and him. I have to have my son all week. Not that I mind. I love my son. But we have this Neville thing happening in less than a week. I have things to do too. I have this gun to rebuild for the competition.”

“Chancing being stuck with your kid again.” Jess paused to snicker. “I can help you out. I’m off tonight. Bring Nick by and I’ll help you with him and the gun.”

“Really?”

“Sure.” They neared the main training area.

“Jess, that would be great. I wanted to get Danny’s help, but we’ve been avoiding conflict, you know, with this trial happening. I should finish up with Mechanics about . . . eight?”

“Sounds good.” Jess slowed down in his walking. He smiled brightly when he saw Robbie by the jeep.

Henry shook his head when he saw Jess’ expression. “Really, Jess, you couldn’t be more obvious.”

“What do you mean?”

“You look like a teenage girl with that expression on your face.”

Jess swiped his hand down over his face removing the smile. “Better?”

“Much.”

“Tonight then.” Jess cleared his throat as they drew closer Robbie. “Food or no food.”

“If you can hold off eating. Food will work for me.”

“Sounds good.”

Robbie looked up. “What sounds good.”

“Oh,” Jess climbed in the jeep. “Henry’s coming by, we’re gonna work on the gun for the Neville competition and grab something to eat.”

Robbie grinned as he started the jeep. “A date.”

“Ha-Ha-Ha.” Henry got in the back of the jeep. “Jealous?”

Robbie shifted gears with a quick joking smile to Jess. “Very.” He jerked the jeep as he drove. “But you know, one person’s heart belongs to someone whose heart belongs to another. In Beginnings it’s a never ending circle of unrequited wishful thinking.” He looked at Jess then in the mirror to Henry. “Hey, that was pretty good, I should be writer.”

“Uh Robbie.” Henry leaned forward between the front two seats. “Your book comes out in three days.”

“Scratch that writer thought. We have a strategy meeting.” Robbie shifted gears. “If I ever suggest writing anything again, some one shoot me.” After grumbling slightly, Robbie silently drove, the nervous feeling Robbie got every time the impending book was brought up, had returned again.

^^^

The smell of the clinic hit them when Danny and Trish walked in. It brought forth a forbidden excitement as they moved sneaky-like down the hall.

“Dean is going to have a fit.” Trish commented,

“Dean’s a nobody when it comes to patients. Trust me.” Danny stated. “Nor does he want to be, In fact, we’re doing this for Andrea. If we don’t get her off on the treason charge. Dean will have to run the patient end of the clinic.”

“There goes standard bedside compassion.”

“True.”

“But is this right?” Trish asked as they turned the bend.

“Trish, he’s perfect. He’s the beginning man in the George Beginnings saga. If anyone knows, he does.”

“But he just got out of a coma.”

“What better time to talk to him. He may be a little foggy but we have to find out what he knows. I meet with Judge Grace in a couple days for our first trial meeting.”

“Oh boy. I saw her.” Trish stopped outside of John Matoose’s room, “She looks tough.”

“I’ll charm the moo-moo right off of her.”

“If anyone can Danny Rather Hoi. You can.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Let’s go,” Danny motioned his hand and walked into John’s room first. “John, my man. Hey.”

“Hi John.” Trish waved and immediately grabbed a chair.

John’s glossy eyes shifted. The respirator tube was in his mouth and his breathing controlled by machine. So pale he looked, still swollen.

“My,” Trish exhaled. “You are looking well. Much better than Jeff. He doesn’t have a face you know. Well, half. But Dean and Ellen have been experimenting with that. I haven’t seen him, he broke up with me you know.”

Again, panicked John shifted his eyes.

Danny laid his hand on John’s arm. “So, buddy, how you feeling.”

A gurgle came from John.

“Good.” Danny tapped. “O.K., here’s the scoop. A circle of people have been busted in the working for George ring here in Beginnings. Most of these people, including . . . John open your eyes.”

John did.

“Good. Don’t fall asleep on us. This is important. As I was saying most of these people, including Rev. Bob, named Andrea as working for George. First trial ever to prove her innocence is happening and I’m . . . John, the eyes.”

John woke up again.

“I’m the defense attorney. That’s where you come in. We want to know what you know and if you know what we hope you know, we want to know if you will testify.”

John murmured, words, raspy and thick.

Trish leaned one ear into him. “I’m sorry John. You’ll have to speak clearer, it’s hard to hear with that respirator thing happening.”

John tried again.

Trish shrugged. “Danny, I can’t understand him. It’s useless.”

Danny looked around the room. “Jiggle it out of his mouth for a second, I don’t think it would hurt.”

“O.K.” Trish reached for the respirator at the same time John’s eyes grew horrified and wide.

^^^

“Actually he looks pretty cute.” Frank commented to Dean walking side by side with him toward Joe’s office.

“Yeah, There is something about it. I felt kind of bad chaining him up.”

“He’s a killer baby Dean.”

“Yeah. Bub laughed.” Dean smiled.

“Bub thought it was funny.”

“Shit it’s cold.” Dean placed his hands in the pockets of his coat and shivered.

“If you’d wear normal fuckin coat. Be stylish, like me.” Frank patted his black leather jacket.

“I couldn’t even dream of being like you.”

“Tough when even fantasies are hard to live up to.”

Dean chuckled. “So, hating to beat a dead horse. Are you positive about the letter?”

“Positive.”

“You’re sure you’re not leaving details out to spare my feelings.”

Frank stopped and looked down to Dean. “Think about what you just said. I’m fuckin surprised I didn’t exaggerate. No, Dean . . .” Frank walked agin, the view of Joe’s office in sight. “Simple boring letter. He likes talking, I’m sorry, conversing with her.”

“Risking total mental retribution at this moment, I’m gonna ask you something. Honest opinion, honest Frank.”

“When am I not.”

“Always.”

“True. What is it?” Frank asked.

“Am I going overboard about this? Ellen, she’s making me feel like I am.”

“Truthfully?” Frank watched Dean nod. “I’ve never seen you so possessive with her, ever. Not in all these years. I mean, let’s face it, you’re still with her, aside from the hoax marriage, you’re still with her because someone allotted you an understanding.”

“True.”

“You refuse to have one with anyone else. And that’s fucked up in a world where it’s not only common, but, courtesy. Would that be right?”

“You can put it that way, Yes. And . . . I guess I will . . . in time. I am being possessive. I know this. I can’t control it.” Dean stopped before Joe’s door. “Why am I talking to you like this.”

“I know Ellen better than anyone. And because I know her, maybe you’re looking to justify how you’re being.”

“Lord knows you won’t do that.”

Frank paused before opening the door. “Dean. I’m gonna take myself out of Frank mode here. All right. Pretend I’m not Frank and pretend I never said any of this to you. If this gets back to her, I will kill you.”

“It won’t. What?”

“I think you have every reason to not only be jealous, but possessive. History . . . history proves it. Ellen, she strays. Plan and simple. I haven’t helped matters. I take advantage of that. I know. But I love her. I can’t help it either. Fact is, she strayed on Pete, she strayed on you, she strayed on me. This is the perfect fuckin relationship world for Ellen now. A place where it’s perfectly all right to have her cake and eat it to. But . . . you’re human. You just don’t want it to be that way.”

Dean was astounded. “Oh my God.” He wisped out.

“What?”

“Thank you.” Dean nodded. “Thank you for saying that. Not that I feel

better about the way I'm being but . . . I feel less wrong."

"Yeah, and I understand why you're like this. Fear of losing her again has to be lurking. Especially knowing some strapping, hulky, head of security guy named Frank, whose actually a sexual stallion, is chasing after her."

Dean laughed. "You had to do it."

"Had to. I love to irk you."

"Meeting." Dean pointed to the door.

"Meeting." Frank opened it and they walked into Joe's office.

^^^

Ellen giggled.

"Ellen, come on." Richie followed her from the skills room. A determined pursuit.

"Richie no."

"You have to let me out of here."

"Oh, I beg to differ, see, this is my domain." She turned into her office.

"It's also Robbie's domain."

"Robbie fears me." Ellen dropped some file folders on her desk. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have to get back to the clinic, I have work."

"I can not believe you're doing this to me." Richie said with irritation. "I'm your brother."

"You are also a former society worker. Not a defector mind you, worker. Worker."

"So."

"So. Really Richie, you can't be trusted. I have to go." She hurried from her office.

"I'm stuck in here. You're leaving me stuck in here forever."

"Don't be silly, of course I'm not. As soon as I know you can live in society, you'll be free. Besides, you have to pass the test. You have yet to pass any of the tests I have given you."

"Ellen, I hardly think that 'what's the atomic weight of the following elements' has anything to do with living civilized."

Ellen gasped. "Do you second guess our tests? I'll have you know Leroy in there got six out of ten right."

"Bullshit."

"This attitude Richie, will not help get you out." She moved to the main door and reached for the key pad.

"Then I want to leave Beginnings."

"O.K."

"Just like that. You'll toss your brother out, just like that."

"Richie patience." Ellen spoke pacifying. "Really. I give you so much freedom, don't I? I let you out."

"To watch your kids."

"You're still getting out for air. And don't I put you in charge at night."

"Big deal."

"You have a television in my office."

“To watch Perry Mason episodes and the O.J. Simpson trial.”

“You are so ungrateful Richie.” Ellen punched in her code. “Really, I’m trying here. I’ll speak to Joe again. He keeps saying ‘No’.” The door buzzed and Ellen opened it. “If it was up to me I’d let you out, even though you still owe me twenty-seven hundred dollars from the old world, which by the way with accrued interest is sixteen thousand. See ya.” Ellen slipped out.

Richie turned away from the secured door. He tossed his hands up. “My God, I’m paying interest.”

Ellen liked the feeling of bickering with her brother. Innocent fighting, irritating her younger sibling filled her with the giddiness of her childhood days.

That feel was an ‘up’ Ellen needed and it stayed with her in her walk to the clinic. However, it quickly left when she walked into the lab. “Bev.” Ellen spoke coldly when she walked in.

“Hi Ellen.”

Ellen rolled her eyes and walked across the lab. “I need you to leave,”

“Where’s Dean?”

“Haven’t a clue.”

“He wanted me to meet him at the cryo-lab, I did and he never showed.”

“Oh bull.” Ellen spun around slamming her hand on the counter that Bev stood by. “He did not.”

“Really.” Bev held up the note Dean had left Johnny. “Says meet me in the cryo lab in one hour. Recognize the handwriting.”

Ellen snatched the note from her hand, crumbled it and shoved it in her lab coat pocket. “Leave.”

“Ellen we really need to talk.” Bev pulled up a stool, sat down and got comfortable.

“I don’t think so.”

“I do. You are really having such a delusional problem believing what I’m saying, it’s projecting all this hostility at me . . .”

“Bev.”

“You really are coming off pathetic.”

“Why would you even begin to call *me* pathetic.”

“You don’t believe what I’m saying.”

“I believe my husband.” Ellen said.

“Then, Ellen, you are a fool.”

“Bev, you run around saying you are pregnant to my husband. You say you’re fooling around with him. This is what you say. It’s your word against his. I have to take Dean’s.”

“I have proof.”

“What proof can you possibly have aside from this baby’s paternity which will prove not to be Dean’s. Right now, you have none.”

“Ha.” Bev stood up.

“Ha?” Ellen laughed. “Oh, good comeback. I applaud your quick wit.”

“What do you want to know? Huh Ellen? What? You want the painful truth?” Bev stepped to her. “I have on me painful truth. And I’m not just talking about this baby. More. But you know what, you can’t handle it. You don’t want

to handle it.”

“There is nothing to handle but your lies.”

“Try me. It started after you gave birth to Henry’s kid. Remember? Flirting began with me and Dean, you never saw it. It was there Then you two started fighting. Fighting because you were hanging out with Frank when he needed you. Needed you because he was going blind.” Bev nodded. “We sat one night after you two fought in the street outside the social hall. One thing led to another and that was the start of it all. I was the comfort he sought, and trust me Ellen, from your bed to mine he went because you are nothing to him.”

Ellen stayed cold. The last thing she wanted was for Bev to see any reaction.

“How many times?” Bev said. “Too many to keep track. Not as often any more, because of this marriage thing. You have him so strapped down. But he does love when you go to Bowman, or rather New Bowman. Kids tucked away, you gone, Dean plays . . . with me.” Bev giggled. “It’s so funny, you broke it off with Henry forever because of him and me, and Henry and I didn’t sleep together. Hell, Ellen, Dean slept with me an hour before he married you.”

“Bullshit.”

“Believe what you want. And that marriage. Why did he marry you? I can tell you what he told me. One word. Frank. He hates Frank. He hates Frank so much that he would do anything to pay him back for all he did to him. So Dean married you, the ultimate payback. He said to me once . . .”

“Bev, Get out of my lab or I will call security.”

“You mean Frank. Call him. It’s the only chance you two ever have to be together. Dean said he’ll lay the guilt on you for thinking about Frank. He basks in the fact that he has you away from him. Really, Ellen, you should just go back to Frank. He’s your one true love anyhow.”

“Bev, instead of angering me with these words. You’re annoying me. Little girl rambling is what you’re doing, so leave. Because you really know nothing. You have no so-called proof.” Ellen started to walk back to the computer station.

“What about the way Dean makes love.” Bev smiled snidely when Ellen stopped. “The way he likes to make love across the bed instead of long ways because he hate when a bed squeaks. Or . . . Dean is far from a selfish lover. He likes to secure his victory. Never does he end if you don’t? He’ll even pause mid act to . . . go down.” Bev whispered and moved toward Ellen. “He loves that and speaking of that type of sex. You don’t like to do that, do you?” Bev asked. “No. But, Dean’s the one and only man you have on occasion taken care of. The one and only.” Bev tsked. “Not even poor Frank. Trust me Ellen, Dean tells me all those little bedroom secrets you two have.”

Ellen knew exactly why she stood there torturing herself listening to Bev. Bev was saying things that could truly be labeled ‘bedroom’ secrets no one should know.

“He laughs about you. Makes fun of you. And the biggest laugh we had about you was how sappy you were when he left Beginnings. No one was supposed to know. But I did. He came to me that night. He had to see me. We couldn’t be together because you had used him up. He degraded you so bad and your daughter . . .”

Ellen looked up. “Don’t even say a word about my daughter.”

“Why not? Her own father does. She reminds him so much of you he can’t take it. He said for a child, she makes his skin crawl.”

“Bev I am warning you, Pregnant or not I will knock your ass through a wall you say one more word about my daughter.”

“I’m merely repeating Dean’s words. And I have proof.”

“There you go again. Proof, proof of what? What is . . .” The hard bang on the counter made Ellen look down. When Bev lifted her hand a small Gods-eye laid there. Purple and pink yarn, a little heart pasted to it that read ‘I love you daddy’.

“Recognize this?” Bev asked. “How did I have it? I’ll tell you and I think you know. When’s the last time you saw this?”

Ellen’s words were barely audible. “When Dean left.”

“What was that? When Dean left?” Bev tugged on her own ear. “Alex gave this to him that night. You told her to make him something special and it was wrapped up in a piece of red material for him on his dresser. You put it in Dean’s bag. And you know what? He took it right out at my house and left it there.”

Ellen’s heart sunk.

“Of course he never did give me back my St. Christopher’s medal he took. If you find that I’d like it, it was a gift from my mother. And I can see by your face, Ellen, I’ve given you unwanted proof. What more do you need to open that closed mind of yours to the fact that Dean and I are lovers.”

“What is it that you want from all this.”

“The truth?” Bev shrugged. “Dean. Let him go. Get him out of your life so I can have him. And then him and I can raise our baby together.”

“That!” Andrea’s voice seeped in the lab. “Has yet to be determined.” She walked in with an angry stride, holding her hand up to silence Bev. “I heard enough out of you little girl and no matter what, nothing but that child’s paternity is gonna prove anything. So take your little accusations and leave my hospital. And when that baby is born, then, then we will end this.”

“Why wait?” Bev said. “Why wait. There are other ways to determine it, aren’t there. And . . . I believe I’m far enough along.”

Ellen whispered in her tranced thoughts. “An amnio.”

“That’s it.” Bev pointed. “I’m far enough along. Do it. End it all now. Show Ellen who is right. I am.”

“Ellen.” Andrea looked at her and spoke softly. “She is far enough along. We could end this all . . .”

“Do it. Set it up, get it ready.” Ellen grabbed the Gods-eye off the counter. “We’ll do it.” She stormed to the door, stopped and spun around. “But I swear Bev, right here where I stand, when it’s proved your little ass has been doing nothing but starting trouble, it’s gonna take an act of God to stop me from killing you.” Ellen raged out.

After watching Ellen leave Andrea turned to Bev.

Bev happily started to leave. “So when do we do this test? Today?”

“No. I need a few days.” Andrea spoke coldly. “Then we will end this. Then Bev . . .” Andrea waited until Bev stopped at the door. “. . . fear for your life. You are a marked woman.”



Reckless, sloppy and full of emotions, Ellen searched. Nothing like the day before. No neatly placing her hand between items, returning them undisturbed. Ellen pulled everything from Dean's drawers. The contents and drawers themselves were dumped about. She checked every fold, pocket and crease, tossing the item out of her way when she reached for the next. Out of breath Ellen turned around looking at the mess she had created of her bedroom. The clothes from Dean's side of the closet were scattered about the floor. Ellen even checked her own clothing. She just wanted to prove nothing was there. She needed to prove that. In the second drawer of Dean's barely empty night stand, Ellen pulled out the papers and tossed them on the bed. A old book was in there and she shook it. Nothing. Three pairs of black socks Dean never had on, were rolled up neatly and tucked in the back of the drawer. So frustrated, Ellen grabbed all three pairs in one hand and with an emotional grunt, tossed them across the room. They smacked into her dresser mirror.

Click.

Ellen turned with a zoom into the sound that shouldn't have come from thrown socks. Heart beating she raced to her dresser. Her hands felt the pairs of socks. Unraveling the first she found nothing. As soon as she started to unroll the second, a small quarter size heavy gold medal flung out. It rattled as it landed in the dresser. Hand shaking Ellen slowly reached for it. St. Christopher was on the front and when she turned it over, she saw all that she needed to. An inscription that not only engraved letters into the gold but hurt into her soul read, *'To Bev, love Mom'*.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Christ Frank.” Joe complained out his name loudly. “We come here to listen to all this savage warning bullshit for this?”

“Dad, it’s a good idea.” Frank defended. “Kill two birds with one stone.”

“Frank, in the words of Denny and Josh, it sucks.”

“Joe.” Dean held up his hand. “I think . . . I think it’s a good idea.”

“Oh you would.” Joe snapped. “Anything sick and demented is a good idea to you Dean. And catching all the killer babies and using them as attack dogs against the savages is sick. Sick. Sick.”

Dean shrugged. “I think it will work. With a properly executed plan to capture the babies and then specialized training in using them, we can utilize those infants for what they were actually designed to be used for.”

“Dean.” Joe tilted his head. “Designed to be used for when they are adults, not infants. Christ.”

“These new ones are different. They aren’t the same as Marcus. This is from visually examining the one Frank brought.” Dean said. “Of course I have to pull an autopsy before I know any better.”

Joe quickly looked at Frank. “Did that baby die?”

“No.” Frank shook his head.

“Autopsy?” Joe looked back at Dean. “Don’t you dare kill it just to do an autopsy.” Joe looked up at Frank’s laughter. “Why are you laughing?”

“Listen to you.” Frank shook his head. “You act like they’re human.”

“They are!” Joe yelled. “Distorted, mutated and animalistic killing humans, but human none the less.”

“Like you care.”

“Oh my God.” Joe smacked himself in the face.

Robbie spoke up. “Dad, it’s a good idea. I can be trained to use them.”

“Yeah.” Frank said.

“Jess.” Robbie continued. “Can be trained.”

“Yeah.” Frank yelled out.

Robbie was on a roll. “And we can use Frank as bait to capture the babies.”

“Yeah! Huh?”

Henry turned in his chair to look back at Frank. “Your idea Frank.”

“Fuck.”

Joe looked at the faces in the room. People who didn’t argue. “All right. Listen, since I’m getting old and I don’t want to hinder anymore of my chances of getting into heaven, I will not make the decision on this. You people will. It’s your call.”

Ellen had ran so fast through her emotions she didn’t even know she physically had it in her. Hands in her lab coat pocket, fingers still felling the gods-eye, medal and crinkled note, Ellen raced to Frank’s office. She skid to a stop when she saw his jeep outside of Joe’s.

Frank was there.

Near wheezing, Ellen knocked once on Joe’s door and flung it open

running it. "Joe I need to see Frank is . . ." She stopped cold when she saw she barged in on a meeting. "Oh, I'm sorry."

Joe saw it on her face. Near panic. "Ellen, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. I needed to see . . ." She shifted her eyes to Dean who sat in a chair. "I needed to see Frank."

Frank's simple 'hey' from his hide behind the open door caused Ellen to jump and shriek. "El?"

"Sorry." She raced out and pulled the door closed.

Everyone stood up.

Frank held out his hand. "I'll see what's wrong. Go on vote." He opened the door and closed it as he walked out. He looked toward town to see Ellen walking. "El. Wait up." He jotted to her.

Ellen stopped and turned around. "Frank, I didn't mean to take you from your meeting. Go back."

"No. You came up here, out of breath. Looking like someone died. What's wrong."

"It's silly."

"What is it."

Ellen brushed her hands up and down her arms. "I just . . . I just needed to see you."

"Just see me?"

"I needed to see you. Sometimes Frank, no, a lot of times, just being around you helps when I feel down."

"Why are you down El? Did something happen?"

Ellen shook her head.

"Nothing's wrong?"

"Nope."

"Though I love it, I don't buy it. You just needed to see me out of the blue."

"Yep. Frank fix."

"A Frank fix?" Frank slightly shook his head. "El . . ."

"And I got it. Thanks." Ellen smiled. "I'll let you go."

"El."

Ellen started to leave, she stopped and went back to him. "Thanks." She tipped toed up and put her arms around Frank's neck.

Frank felt the squeeze in her hold. It wasn't just a 'thank you' he knew Ellen's touch. It was an 'I need you'. "O.K. Let's go off somewhere and talk., my meeting was done."

"No." Ellen still held on. "This worked."

"It works real well. But is just a hug all you need."

"Yep." Ellen let out a breath and released the embrace. Her hands slid down his arms and she grabbed his hands. "After all these years, you're still the one I run to." She leaned up to him, kissed him on the cheek and stepped back "Stop and see me later?" She winked. "I'd like to just talk."

"El."

"We'll talk. About . . . anything." She spoke as she walked away. "Anything."

"El." Frank's raised hand fell as she moved further and further away.

Ellen turned in her continuous walk. "Go." she pointed as she walked

backwards. "Your meeting."

Frank stood there not knowing what to do. Ellen kept walking, and feeling lost about what was wrong and helpless to do anything, he just watched her leave his sight.

^^^

Andrea's fingers touched down upon the 'Bev evidence'. Examining each piece, including the note Ellen found in Dean's pants. She looked upon them as if they were injuries on a patient. And actually they were injuries, Ellen's.

"Andrea." Ellen whispered as she watched Andrea pick up the note. "You can't yell."

"Why would I yell. You mean this?" Andrea set down the note. "You sought out like any woman in your position would."

"What does this mean?" Ellen asked.

"What do you think it means? What does your instincts tell you?"

"I have no instincts on this. I heard what Bev said. She has said things Andrea, no one should know and that's not just today. Physical evidence. And don't think I haven't thought that this physical evidence wasn't a plant. I have. But . . . How did she know about Alex's gift. Where it was laid, what it was wrapped in. How? Other intimate details of Dean and mine's life. Then on the other hand, my biggest argument to all of this, and all of what she said. I know Dean. I know my Dean." Ellen clenched her fist close to her chest. "I believe he loves me and he wouldn't have a continuous affair."

"I don't believe he would either."

"So you think she's making it all up?" Ellen questioned.

Andrea was silent.

"Andrea? What do you think? You said you don't think he would have a continuous affair."

"Ellen. It really doesn't matter what I think."

Ellen closed her eyes. "You think he did."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't say otherwise. Andrea . . ."

"Ellen." Andrea gathered up the items on the table. "Put these away."

Ellen grabbed them and started to place them in her pocket. "I wish you would just tell me what you think."

"Does it really matter?"

"Yes."

Andrea stared at Ellen. "You can't get mad at me."

"I won't."

"I think . . . I think." Andrea held up her hand. "I don't think he's had an on going affair. I don't even think he's slept with her multitudes of times. I *do* think he made one . . . one mistake and it's coming back at him."

"This summer?"

"Yes." Andrea nodded. "And he's not admitting it. What man would."

"But why lie? Why keep lying. If it's one time, why not say, 'hey I did it'."

"I'd hate to say it's because there's more to it. But unless he owns up to it,

we'll never know, unless the baby is his."

Ellen, who was looking down, raised her eyes. "We'll know soon enough."

"Are you sure you want to wait."

"You said you wanted a couple days to get ready."

"I can rush it."

"No." Ellen shook her head. "I need to just step back. I'll use that time."

"You're sure you can get a large enough sample for us to all run a test?"

"Yes." Ellen nodded. "I think it's my way to check, double check, triple, you name it. We'll secure a big enough sample. Trust me. Dean did an amnio on me at the same gestation with Brian. There was plenty."

"But we never used it." Dean spoke as he walked not only into the conversation, but into the lab. He grabbed a lab jacket and kissed Ellen. "Remember?"

"Yeah. We decided not to." Ellen replied.

"What's up with the talk of Brian's amnio. I thought the three of us labeled that subject taboo?" Dean stated.

"We uh did." Ellen answered. "Mary wants to try to have a baby, And at her age, we were concerned and were talking about amnios, that's all. What . . . what are you doing here? I thought you had a meeting."

"It's over." Dean answered. "I wanted to get those anti-infections agents and head down to the cryo lab. Are you coming?"

"Um . . ." Ellen shifted her eyes to Andrea.

Andrea got the optical hint. "I have to go." she pointed out to the door. "Ellen, take care."

Dean watched Andrea leave. "Take care?"

"Yes." Ellen nodded.

"Does this have anything to do with your burst into the meeting?"

Quickly Ellen looked up. "No. I was just looking for Frank."

"Yes, I know. What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I was looking for him for something really stupid."

"Oh yeah? What?" Dean asked and walked to the fridge for his samples.

"Just something I came across. I thought he'd want to see it."

"What was it?" Dean took three bottles out of the fridge. "Did it have to do with your college days, I know you always . . ."

"Dean." Ellen silenced him. "We have to talk."

"Sure. Can we talk on the way to the lab."

"No. You go on down. I'm not coming. I have things to get ready here."

"For?"

"I'm leaving."

Dean looked surprised. "Where are you going?"

"To New Bowman. I have to do pap smears. All those women are due."

"No wonder you're in a weird mood." Dean shook his head. "How long will you be gone?"

"Till Thursday."

"Thursday?" Dean chuckled. "There aren't that many women. Go tomorrow and come . . ."

"I'm leaving tonight. I'll be back Thursday."

"El?" Dean, picking up his bottles, walked to her. "Can I at least try to spend some time with you before you go? Please?"

"I'll try. But I have things to get ready. I want to leave before dark."

"Dark is still some time away."

"Then I guess we'll spend time together." Ellen placed on an awkward smile. "Why don't you go down to the lab. I'll do what I have to do here and meet you."

"Sounds good." Giving Ellen another kiss, arms full, Dean walked to the door. "Bub will miss you."

"Won't you?" Ellen asked.

"Of course." Dean turned around with a smile. "But let me let you in on a little secret." He winked. "When you're gone, it's not like you are. Alexandra fills in. Bitches, yells at us, she is so much like you El . . ." Dean shook his head. "She drives me insane at times. I'll see you at the lab."

Ellen closed her eyes as Dean said those words and left. She turned from the door and reached into her pocket. She pulled out the gods-eye and held it in her hand. Thinking of Alexandra, Ellen's fingers ran over the little heart with the note to her father. Her head raised up when there was a tap on the door. Ellen slipped the artwork into her pocket.

Henry's voice spoke soft. "I really have no one to turn to about this. I figured, it wasn't that long ago that we were close. I'm hoping for an honest opinion. I think El, I think I made a big mistake. What do you think?"

Drumming up a look of curiosity, Ellen turned around to face him, when she did, she nearly fell over. "Henry." She said in shock. "Your hair."

Henry's mane was gone. He still wore a longer style, but the sides of his hair barely covered his ears, and the back didn't touch anywhere near his shoulders. "You hate it." He ran his fingers through it.

"No. No." Ellen stepped to him. "You look . . . you look really handsome."

Henry smiled. "You think."

"Oh, yeah." Ellen stepped to him and brushed her fingers through his hair. "What made you cut it all off?"

"Nick."

"Nick?"

"He kept gripping those baby sweaty fingers on the edges and it hurt. So I decided to bring it up and Bentley did."

"It works for you." Ellen backed up and moved to the counter.

"So, El, what are you doing?"

"Getting things ready. I'm going to New Bowman for two days."

"What are you running from?"

Ellen chuckled. "Why would you say that?"

"Your entrance into the meeting. You were pale. Did something happen?"

"Nothing I want to talk about."

"With me?"

"With anyone."

"I can respect that." Henry walked over to her. "Just know . . . I'm here O.K.? If you need to talk."

Ellen quickly looked up at him. "Henry? Do you know something?"

Henry went silent.

"Henry?"

He let out a breath. "El, it's something I shouldn't know."

"What?"

“Bev . . . Bev . . .”

“Oh God.” Ellen covered her face. “She told you.”

“I should have . . . I should have said something to you when she did.”

“How long have you known.”

Henry shrugged. “I don’t know. I blew her off, sort of, about the pregnancy. Then yesterday she does that Bev thing, slips by me and in her passing says, ‘Ellen knows’. And your whole mood had changed El.”

“I don’t believe her.”

“Good.” Henry nodded. “But it has to still bother you.”

“It does. Henry, if you knew anything, you would tell me right? I’m asking you to tell me.”

“You mean about Dean and Bev?”

“Yes.”

“Only what she’s told me. She told me about them having an affair. She said it was my opening to get you back. I’ll be honest with you El, I believed her about the affair.”

Ellen’s mouth dropped open. “Why?”

“Because after she had told me, situations popped into my mind, and it bothered me.”

“Like?”

“Nothing.” Henry shook his head.

“Henry.”

“It’s no big deal. It plays into her hands see. So don’t worry about it.”

“I’ll tell you what . . .” Ellen let out a breath. “How about I *don’t* worry about those situations. Not yet. But if need to know, you tell me.”

“Deal.”

“Jesus Christ almighty.” Joe’s crass voice blasted in. “What the hell did you do to yourself Henry.” He walked up with a smile. “Goddamn that looks good. You don’t look like a woman anymore.”

Henry rolled his eyes. “Gee, thanks Joe. And I never looked like a woman.”

Joe reached up messing up Henry’s hair. “I like it. It’s about time.”

“Thanks.” Henry said.

“Anyhow, I need to speak to my daughter. Can I?”

Henry looked at Ellen. “I’ll let you two alone. Remember . . .”

“I will.” Ellen nodded. “Thanks.” She smiled with a slight sad smile when Henry lightly kissed her on the cheek. She waited until he left and then she looked back at Joe. “What’s up.”

“My question exactly to you.”

“You know the answer.” Ellen allowed herself to look down, no hiding it from Joe.

“Did something happen. Is that why you sought out Frank?”

“God.” Ellen flung her head back. “Was I that obvious?”

“Yes.”

“Things . . . things are piling up Joe.”

Joe closed his mouth tightly and stepped closer to her. “I know you don’t mean work.”

“I don’t mean work.”

“Things meaning . . .”

“Yes.”

“I see.” He nodded.

“They just keep coming in. My whole life has been turned upside down in a matter of twenty-four hours.”

“And these are things you’d really rather not face.”

“Not right now. I don’t want to face them, deal with them, or think of them. I’m going to Bowman for two days. I think that will help take my mind off of it.”

“Sure it will. Two days with my weird son Hal.”

Ellen laughed. “Hal is not weird.”

“No, not at all. But a different environment, different settings,. That always helps.”

“Yeah. And now we have the ability to do that.”

“And something else. I have an idea.” Joe closed on eye and titled his head. “Besides getting away, I think it may be just what you need. Nothing like it to take your mind off of things. Hell, it may be what we all need.”

“Joe.” Ellen gave a quirky smile. “What are you talking about?”

“I want you to think back about the first time of many. Think about it, that’s what you need. I guarantee things won’t be any different, no matter how many years have passed. Remember . . .”

Ellen folded her arms and listened to Joe speak. And with a smile upon her face, one she needed, she indeed remembered . . .

“Lock up.” Joe stepped from his blue car in front of Frank and Ellen’s college apartment. “And Hal, don’t . . .” Joe hunched and cringed at the loud ‘bang’ . . . slam the car door.” He spun and glared at Hal.

“Sorry.” Hal snickered. “It slipped.”

“It slipped my ass.” Joe laid his hand on Robbie’s back.

Robbie, eleven at the time, looked at the building, “I like coming here.”

“It sucks.” Hal commented.

“How would you know?” Jimmy snapped. “This is the first time dad brought you and me.”

“Yeah.” Joe nodded and reached for the door. “And there’s a reason for it.”

“Dad?” Hal called out. “Do you realize Frank and his roommate live in the slums.”

“It’s not the slums.” Joe held the front door open for his boys. “It’s a low income residential area.”

“Should we even leave our car?” Hal asked. “As a theft conscious . . .”

“Hal!” Joe snapped.

“Dad?” Jimmy led the way down the hall. “Which apartment.”

“Certainly not down there. Up.” Joe pointed. “Robbie, go first.”

Robbie darted up the steps, Jimmy and Joe followed. About five steps up, Joe stopped. “Hal.”

“Dad, did you see all the . . .”

“Hal!” Joe yelled. “Christ, get out of people’s mail boxes.”

With a ‘slam’ of the gold metal box, Hal hurried to catch up.

“Now don’t touch anything else.” Joe warned as the reached the first landing.

“Dad.” Jimmy spoke up “Hal’s not listening.”

“Hal!” Joe yelled out seeing his son reach for the knocker on a door. “Don’t touch. Christ.”

“Sorry.” Hal snuck up by Joe and to the stairs. “Robbie wait up.” He hurried up.

“Can’t take you anywhere!” Jimmy screamed up from behind his father.

“Jimmy.” Joe turned around warning. “I’m gonna have a stroke before we even get to the top.”

“Bet they’re having sex.” Hal said nearing the top. “They don’t know where coming. Bet me him and this girl are . . .”

“Hal.” Joe rubbed his own face and turned to Jimmy. “I’m not living through that boys phase of puberty.”

“Tell me about it.” Jimmy said. “I’d like to get into the bathroom.”

Joe, again stopped on the steps. “Did I need to hear that. No.”

Robbie stood before Frank and Ellen’s door waiting for Joe to make it up the steps. “Dad, can I knock?”

Before Joe could nod, Hal pointed to the wreath. “Look, pink.” He snickered. “Knock.” He shoved into Robbie. “Dad said.”

“He did not.” Robbie argued.

“Robert, knock.” Joe reached the top.

Robbie knocked.

Hal turned around and looked at Joe. “Bet me we interrupt them. It’s like a movie, you know we’re they don’t expect the parents to come. Frank will answer the door in a robe.”

Jimmy, so perturbed, shook his head. “Frank doesn’t wear robes.”

“Hey Ellen.” Robbie said innocently.

Hal spun to meet her. “But *she* does.”

Ellen pulled her robe closed tighter, looking slightly up to the fourteen year old Hal who stepped forward with a wide grin.

Joe shoved Hal out of the way. “Ellen, Frank here?”

“Um . . . Yeah.” Ellen opened the door wider. “Come in.”

Mouthing the word ‘sex’ to Joe, Hal snuck in the apartment first. “There he is!” He shrieked out, pointing to Frank who was sleeping on the couch. “Uh! Get him!” Screaming in a run, Hal dove for the couch.

Jimmy mimicked the bellowing cry out and dove right behind Hal on Frank.

Frank screamed. “Get off.”

“Beat him up.!” Hal pulled at his big brother.

“Miss us Frank?” Jimmy helped tugging him to the floor.

Hal Jumped on Frank when he flopped hard to the floor. “Yeah miss us Frank?”

“Oh, no. Get off!” Frank grunted When the weight of Jimmy joined in the surprise wrestling match.

Joe shut the door as he stepped in. “Ellen, those two on Frank, are Hal and Jimmy. Boys!”

Robbie, seeing the empty spot on the couch, stepped on top of Jimmy’s back in his route to have a seat. He looked at the television. “Check this out. They have HBO.”

“Huh?” Jimmy peered up, stopping the fight with Frank. “No way.” He

stood up. "How come you have HBO Frank."

"Whoa." Hal said amazed. "How can you afford HBO?" he stopped the wrestling match with Frank.

Frank, still half asleep stumbled to his feet. "Dad pays."

Robbie, Hal and Jimmy all turned their heads to Joe.

"Dad." Hal complained. "How come you pay for Frank to have HBO and we can't have it."

"I don't pay for Frank to have HBO."

"Yes you do." Frank said.

"Frank." Joe warned.

"Dad you gave us the . . ."

"Frank!" Joe yelled. "I don't pay! And why is this girl running around half dressed."

Ellen quickly

"Dad." Frank complained. "Why do you have to scare her every time you come up here."

"Can I help it she's afraid of everything. Christ. And Hal, where are you going?"

Hal stopped in his sneaky walk across the livingroom. "I have to use the bathroom. It was a long drive."

"Go," Joe pointed. "And put the seat up so you don't piss on it. A female lives here."

"O.K." Hal raced down the hall. "Found it!" He shouted out.

Joe shook his head when he heard the door close. "Surprised Frank?"

"Yeah." Frank scratched his head. "Did you call and I forgot?"

"No. Thought we'd just take a ride up. Spur of the moment thing. You know."

Jimmy peered over his shoulder to Frank. "Bambi left him."

"Who?" Frank asked.

Joe waved his hand. "Don't bother Jimmy, Frank never remembers."

Kicking his feet and engrossed in the television, Robbie spoke up, "Tell him where we're going."

Joe held his hand in a hushing manner to Robbie. "Well, Monday's a holiday Frank, I thought . . ." He shifted his eyes when Ellen, seemingly so timid walked down the hall. She wore a big bulky sweatshirt and a baggy pair of jeans. "She dresses."

Ellen moved nervously to the kitchen. "I was getting ready to get in the shower."

"Well you don't answer door like that." Joe had scolding to his voice. "You never know who's there. What if it was some psycho."

Ellen pointed. "Frank was here."

Jimmy laughed from the couch. "Yeah, Frank will protect her."

"Does this mean she's still dirty?" Robbie asked. "Tell her she has to take shower dad, like you tell me. That's not fair. How come she doesn't have to take one."

Joe felt the pain growing in his eyes. "Robbie . . ."

"Can I have something to eat?" Robbie asked. "Dad wouldn't stop."

"Yeah." Jimmy added. "Do you have anything to drink?"

"Boys." Joe rubbed his eyes. "We're getting dinner. And what in Christ's

name is taking Hal so long.”

“Told you.” Jimmy said.

“God.” Joe closed his eyes. “Hal!”

“What?” Hal was right behind him. “Hey!” He sang out. “Look what I found.” He held up a box of Tampex. “Frank’s wearing tampons now.”

“What are tampons?” Robbie asked turning up the television louder and louder.

“Hal,” Frank reached around Joe and snatched the box. “Stop it.” He handed them to Ellen.

Ellen looked horrified and nervous. “I’ll just get . . . get something to drink.”

“Stop.” Joe called out.

“I’m sorry.” Ellen turned around.

“Quit that.” Joe told her. “And there’s something I have to say.”

“Can I put these away?” Ellen looked at Joe with her pleading eyes. “Please.”

“Here.” Joe took the tampons, turned and handed them back to Hal. “Put them back where you found them.”

“O.K.” Hal stepped back. “Wonder what else I’ll find.” He ran to the bathroom.

Frank charged after him. “Hal.”

Joe bodily stopped Frank. “Don’t worry about . . .” Hal’s loud shriek and laugh, made Joe turn his head to the hall then back to Frank. “I don’t want to know. Hal! Get out here! And don’t bring what you found!”

“Dad.” Hal returned. “Guess what Frank has in . . .” Hal looked at Frank’s red face and biting lip. “The . . . ow. Ow!” Hal’s head tilted drastically to the side and his body spun when Joe yanked his ear.

Holding Hal tight, Joe pulled him by his ear toward the couch. “Settle down! Now sit on the couch for five minutes.”

“Ow.” Hal rubbed his just released ear. “I can’t believe your punishing me to the couch. I’m fourteen.”

“You’re acting two. Sit.” Joe pointed. “Now . . .” Joe took a calming breath. “There is a reason why I’m here. I thought, I’m off, Monday there’s no school . . .” Joe closed his eyes tightly when the television blared. “Turn it down or no one goes!” Joe shouted, waited for the silence and started again. “Thank you. Now, I thought it would be nice to just take a break. Spend some family time. And with mid-terms over, you probably need a change of pace. Mini vacation. Take a ride to Erie. Tons of snow. We’ll try to lose Hal again.”

“Erie?” Frank asked. “This weekend?”

“You got something better planned Frank?” Joe asked.

Frank’s eyes shifted to Ellen. “Um . . . I feel bad leaving.”

“What?! Why?” Joe asked then finally noticed Frank’s drastic pointing eyes and twitching head. “Christ Frank, don’t you think I know by now, I can’t come up and take you anywhere without her?”

“God. Dad.” Frank hunched in embarrassment. “Can you be anymore rude?”

“Rude. I’m inviting her to come. She’s welcome. I had every intention of inviting her. Frank. What? I would invite Lenny without squiggly?” He looked to

his snickering sons on the couch. "Boys."

Hal leaned to Jimmy. "Frank's squiggy. He has the . . . ow." Hal flew forward when Frank hit hi in the back of the head. "Dad. Frank hit me."

Joe was on the verge of whining. "God, why do I torture myself?" He looked at Frank and Ellen. "What are you waiting for. Go pack a bag or something. Let's go. I want stop at Denny's and I want to get there before they stop serving baked potatoes."

Ellen nervously looked at Frank then Joe. "Mr. Slagel, thanks for inviting me, but I can't go. I don't have any money."

"Well, then I guess you're shit out of luck. Frank, pack your bag."

Frank looked like a lost kid. His face showing how bad he felt as he glanced at Ellen who looked on the verge of tears. "El, I have money. Dad, I have seventeen dollars. Can she use that and I'll owe you the . . ."

"Frank." Joe shut him up. "I'm joking. You're freshman in college for crying out loud. I know you have no money. I'm paying. Go. Go. Go." He swung his arm in the direction of the bedroom. "Pack the bag. I'll be pissed if I don't get my baked potato."

Frank and Ellen both ran past Joe.

Looking at his watch, Joe stepped near the couch. "I better get my potato."

"You know Dad." Hal played with the remote. "It's not fair. You pay for their vacation."

"I'm paying for yours."

"True but we're minors. It's the law you have to pay for us. And look, they not only get a cable box, but you pay for HBO, bet me you pay extra for this remote control. How come you play favorites."

"To irritate the rest of you." Joe placed his hands in his pockets.

"That's not fair." Hal switched the channel.

"Hey!" Jimmy grabbed the remote. "We're watching HBO."

"There's nothing on." Hal grabbed for the remote.

Jimmy tugged. "It's still HBO."

"Dad." Robbie whined out. "Tell them I was watching." His little body jolted from the struggling two teenagers on both sides of him. "Dad!"

"Boys!" Joe screamed out. "Knock it off."

"Give me." Jimmy pulled bringing Hal over Robbie.

"No." Hal tugged, yanking Jimmy.

"Dad!" Robbie screamed.

"Boys!"

"Jerk!" Hal tugged.

"Asshole!" Jimmy yanked.

"Boys!"

Crash! The tug-of-war between Hal and Jimmy ended when the remote control flew up in the air, sailed across the room and smashed into a shelf knocking over and breaking a small cheap vase.

"See." Hal pointed. "Your fault."

"My fault?" Jimmy snapped back. "Yours."

"Boys. Clean up the mess. Son of a bitch Bastard." Joe bent down and picked up the remote. "You boys are lucky you didn't break this." He showed them. "See. Property of the cable company. And don't think I wouldn't have turned you in." Joe handed the remote to Robbie. "Here, watch HBO."

"Thanks." Robbie grinned.

"You show favoritism." Hal complained as he walked to the broken vase. "I get my ear ripped off, Robbie gets control of HBO and I get blamed for everything when it was all Jimmy's fault. I didn't do anything." He sneered at Jimmy as they bent down to the floor.

"My God Hal, when do you ever do anything wrong." Joe said with sarcasm. "You know, some parents, they love when their kids are small. Me, I wait for the hassle free days when you boys are grown up. And you Hal, finally stop blaming everything on everyone else."

New Bowman, Montana

"Dad. Frank's cheating." Hal griped as he walked away from the alley they occupied at the Dan-a-Rama bowling center.

"I am not." Frank yelled walking up behind him. "You just suck. Dad, he sucks."

Joe gave a nod to Ellen as he sat at the table with her and Robbie. "Nothing's changed."

"You're right." Ellen said. "Hal is still blaming, Frank is still defending . . ."

"And I'm . . ." Robbie held up his hand. "Still the quiet innocent one."

"And cute." Ellen laid her hand on his leg.

"Dad." Hal pulled out a chair. "I am not blaming. I don't know how the man is doing it, but I'm doing better than a fifty-four."

"Ha." Frank sat down. "You suck. You get more gutter balls than anything."

"I do not." Hal argued.

"Gentlemen." Joe warned out. "Can we behave. My God, Hal, you run this . . ." Joe paused when three UWA soldiers walked by with salutes.

"Sir." The one paused saluted and moved on.

"President Slagel, sir." Another saluted.

"Evening sir." The third showed his respect.

Joe looked to Hal. "Can you tell your men that is not necessary."

"Absolutely not." Hal shook his head. "It's a form of respect and you deserve it. I may run New Bowman, but you not only run Beginnings, you run us."

Frank snickered. "President Slagel. That should be me." Kernels of the popcorn that sat on the table pelted Frank as everyone picked up a piece and pelted him. "What?"

"Who's turn is it?" Joe asked.

"El's." Frank pointed. "Go take your turn so dad can take his and I can be declared the official, awesome Slagel bowler. The greatest of them all."

Hal looked so annoyed. "Is there anything, Frank, you aren't great in."

"Uh . . ." Frank looked up to the ceiling. "Nope. Robbie? Anything I'm not great in?"

"No. Frank's cool." Robbie said,

"I'm cool."

"Grow up." Hal snapped. "Really."

“Me?” Frank laughed. “I’m not the one running around in a fuckin civil war uniform playing cowboys and Indians with the fuckin savage.”

“No.” Hal quipped. “You’re the one who dresses and looks like a cross between Mad Max and Rambo playing Terminator with the savages.”

“Yeah, so. Your point?” Frank asked.

Hal flipped him off.

“Dad.” Frank swung his finger in an aiming point to Hal. “Tell him.”

“Christ.” Joe rubbed his eyes. “How old are you? All of you.” Joe saw Frank counting on his fingers. “I was being facetious Frank.”

“Oh . . . huh?” Frank looked curiously. “Oh!!”

“What!” Joe jumped from Frank’s yell.

“You know what we have to do.” Frank said. “In order to save ourselves from any unwanted visits from our dead bitching brother. Not that we mind seeing his ghost, but I think we should take this moment to think of Jimmy.”

Robbie lowered his head. “Jimmy.”

Hal nodded. “Jimmy.”

Joe gave a bob to his head. “Jimmy.”

Frank exhaled. “Jimmy.” He dropped his hand to the table with a hard hit. “O.K., El, bowl.”

Rolling her eyes and shaking her head with a half smile, Ellen stood up. “I’m bowling. I hate bowling, I suck. But . . . I’m enjoying this.” She give a smile to everyone at the table. “Thank you for this night.” She walked up to behind Joe, wrapped her arms tightly around him and held her lips to his cheek for a long time. She pulled back and kissed him again. “Thank you Joe. I love you.” Another kiss and Ellen headed toward the lane.

Robbie shifted his eyes from Joe to Ellen. “What’s wrong with her?”

Hal turned around and watched Ellen find a new ball. “Is she all right Dad?”

Joe just held up his hand.

“Probably fuckin Elliott Ryder.” Frank stated.

“What?” Hal’s hand slammed on the table. “What does Elliott have to do with Ellen’s mood?”

“Everything.” Frank answered. “Probably. Well, mostly nothing but I had to blame him for something.”

“You’re an asshole.” Hal snapped. “You should be as nice as Elliott.”

“I am.”

“Boys.” Joe spoke out. “Frank, I want you to watch Ellen.”

“Why?” Frank looked over his shoulder at her then back to Joe. “I’ve seen her bowl.”

“No, Frank.” Joe tried again. “I want you to watch her.”

“Dad, I’ve seen her bowl, is she gonna do something different?”

“Frank!” Joe yelled.

“Is she gonna cheat?”

“Frank!”

“Dad!” Frank held up his hand. “Don’t yell, fuck. Dean hasn’t deemed me normal yet.”

“Frank!” Joe lost it. “Listen to me for crying out loud! I just want you to watch her! Watch her! All right!”

“All right! I’ll watch her!” Frank heard the ‘clunk’ of Ellen’s ball hitting

the gutter suddenly. “Fuck! El!” Frank stood up. “God you suck.” He marched to the lane complaining to her. “If I’m gonna watch you bowl can you at least get the ball halfway down the fuckin alley.”

Joe watched in disbelief as Frank went over with Ellen. He looked to Robbie who was snickering, then Hal who sat, mouth open, ready to say something obviously sarcastic. “Don’t.” Joe held up his hand to Hal. “Don’t. I know.” He glanced at Frank again who looked to be bitching at Ellen. “Oh, brother do I know.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Quantico Marine Headquarters

The society soldier amused himself making shapes from the smoke rings that came from his mouth on the cold October night. Standing outside the main gate, not far from the big red 'stop' sign, biding his time until he could switch places with Pvt. Hancock who was warm and toasty inside the watch booth.

He paced some thinking of the redundancy of his watch. Nothing ever happened. No one ever came in, no one left. The most excitement he had when he held watch was when a bear wandered close. Ten more minutes is what he thought, ten more minutes until he felt warmth. Not that is was all that cold out, but the continuous exposure reeked its effects.

The simple crack of a twig and a bird call that shouldn't have been heard alerted the soldier with some excitement. Walking back toward the booth, he raised his fist to knock on the glass when he heard another crack. "Pvt. Hancock, hit the lights." He called out raising up his weapon and staking only one step.

Four of them flew at him. Each sailing with a high pitch whistle and each arrow landed with a deep, deadened thump center of the soldier's chest. They wailed into him with such a force it sent him back and spinning face first into the glass of the booth he was so close to.

Pvt. Hancock heard the 'smack' against the glass and he turned around to see the face of his partner sliding down and out of view. "What the hell." He lifted up his rifle and opened the booth door only to be hit with a barrage of arrows he was helpless to avoid. Screaming from the burning, deep immediate pain, Pvt. Hancock stumbled back into the booth, spun around and fell face forward into the counter. Not only did his fall purge the arrows the rest of the way into him, but his face landed on the intercom camera and his hand on the compound warning sirens.

Sgt. Barrett, the Sergeant in charge, scurried to his the security monitors when he heard the blasting of the outside sirens. "Hancock, come in." He radioed. "Hancock, whats going on out there?" He shifted his eyes to the camera in the booth and it was blackened. "Hancock come in. Do you read me, what is . . ." It took another shift of his views to the monitor to notice, and when he did, he lifted the phone. The monitor that displayed the inside of the booth was not blacked out. It was *blocked* out and the closer Sgt. Barrett looked the more that he realized all he could see in that camera was the blankly staring eye of Pvt. Hancock.

George wished he could just jump up. He was grateful that he was able to at least lift himself to a sitting position on the bed. But he was alone. "Doctor!" He called out wanting so badly to find out what the sirens and commotion were. "Doctor!" He called out for someone, anyone. He heard the running footsteps

drawing closer and closer and then the door to his room burst open and Steward raced in, still wearing pajamas.

“President Hadly.”

“What’s going on out there?” George asked. “Why are the sirens blaring.”

“Sir we have two men down at the front gate. We believe we have security breach.”

“And you people are panicking enough to set off the siren?”

“But sir . . .”

“It’s two goddamn miles Steward. Two miles from that post to right here. We have ninety-eight hundred men on this base. I doubt ninety-eight hundred men stormed our gate. Get four brigades get up there, block the goddamn two miles and end this thing.”

“Yes sir.” Steward began to leave.

“Stew.” George called out. “Get back to me. I want to know what or who breached our security.”

Only nodding, Steward raced out.

Beginnings, Montana

“Here.” Jess extended the white tee shirt to Henry who sat, shirtless on the couch. “This will work.”

“Thanks.” Henry took the shirt and placed it on. “I can’t believe how easily they popped.”

“Messy too.” Jess sat down on the chair.

“It shouldn’t stain the carpet.” Henry stated. “I didn’t use anything in the blood that should stain.”

“I’m not worried about it.” Jess reached to the table and picked up what looked like a small bullet. “These are brilliant Henry. Brilliant.”

Henry smiled. “Thank you. It seems no one labels anything I make brilliant anymore.”

“Really?” Jess grabbed a squeeze bottle with a red substance. “I think it takes a really great mind to not only design the gun for the fake paint, but make pseudo bullets.” He squeezed the red substance in. “Of course, filling these are a pain in the ass.”

“We have a lot to fill.” Henry grabbed a bullet.

“We have all week.”

“I appreciate the help. And . . .” Henry motioned his head to the seat where Nick slept. “With him.”

“He crashed fast.”

“Yeah. I have such a hard time with him.”

“You don’t try.” Jess picked up another bullet. He saw the quick glance he got from Henry. “Do you think you do?”

“No.” Henry shook his head. “I don’t. I thought I would. I remembered when El was pregnant I was so excited, but Nick scared me.”

“Do you think if things would have worked out with you and Ellen, you’d be different?” Jess asked. “I hope you don’t mind me asking. Conversation, you

know.”

“I don’t mind.” Henry filled his bullet gently. “And as far as being different with Nick, I don’t know. It’s hard to say. El and I never had a chance after he was born.”

“What happened? I came on the scene too late.”

“What happened.” Henry repeated. “I screwed up big time. It started when we thought we were married.”

Jess laughed. “Sorry. But how . . . how can you think you were married?”

“Long story. We thought we were. Then we were going to make it official and I chickened out. Frank wanted her, I was breaking a promise to him. I bowed out and she got mad.”

“Did you try to patch things up?”

“Oh, yeah. But I lost patience and got depressed. And . . . I got drunk one night and made the fatal error. I turned to another woman.”

“How can that happen, women are scarce.”

“This one makes herself un-scarce.” Henry shook his head. “Nothing happened. Really. I couldn’t. But I still got busted and it looked like I did.”

“Do you really think it was the alcohol?”

“No.” Henry shook his head. “It made it worse, but . . . no. I was mad at El, I wanted to hurt her. That was so wrong.”

“Love makes us do things we really normally wouldn’t do.”

“Or need.”

“True.” Jess nodded.

“We were good together Jess. We were. We’d laugh, we talked all night. We did silly things. I thought it was so great. I even thought we were getting back. We patched things up you know.”

“Did you screw up again?”

“No, the society screwed us up.” Henry said. “The new plague hit. Then the thing with Brian, then she was helping Frank and Dean. Frank kidnaps her. She comes back attaches herself to Robbie for a while.”

“I remember that.” Jess said sadly.

“And then she married Dean.”

“And you got lost in the shuffle.”

“I got lost.” Henry tossed down the bullet he was getting ready to fill. “And now I’m really lost. Nothing’s the same. No one talks to me. I miss that. And the closeness. Sex isn’t important, it was the closeness.”

“I know that.” Jess agreed. “Just to be close. Maybe Dean will give you the understanding when he’s ready to have one.”

“Dean chose the one. He chose Robbie.”

Jess quickly looked up. “Ellen and Robbie are having an understanding?”

“Not yet. But Dean said Robbie is the only one he’ll give it to. Not Frank. Not me. Robbie. And Frank and myself allowed him time with Ellen when he needed it. I shared her with Dean. And I’m giving attitude again and my attitude has really burned bridges.”

“You’re bitter. It’s understandable.” Jess reached for another bullet.

“You think?”

“Sure. Trust me Henry, I know exactly what you’re feeling. I’m there. It’s not . . . it’s not an easy thing to really want someone you can’t have. You see them everyday, you stay close but no where near the closeness you want. It’s

hard. It's really difficult."

"Tell me about it." Henry ran his hand through his own hair.

"And depressing."

"Tell me about it."

"Let's stop talking about that." Jess reached for the bottle of whiskey on the table and poured a shot in his glass and Henry's. "Stop talking about unrequited love before we depress ourselves so badly we ruin tomorrow."

"Hey." Henry drew up a crooked smile. "That's good." He grabbed the glass and lifted it. "Cheers."

"Cheers." Jess opened his mouth to down the alcohol but stopped when a knock was at the door. He looked at his watch. "Who could that be?"

"You could answer it and find out."

Jess chuckled. "Or better yet." He cleared his throat. "Come in!"

"That'll work." Henry snickered and took a drink of his whiskey.

"Hey Jess." Johnny walked in. "Henry."

"John." Jess showed him the bottle. "Want a drink?"

"I need one. But no. Is Uncle Robbie here?"

Jess shook his head. "Nope. He's gone."

"Man." Johnny tossed his hand out. "I can't find a single family member. Where the fuck is my family?"

Henry had to laugh. "They all went out together to New Bowman. A family night."

"What?" Johnny's mouth opened wide. "A family night. Why wasn't I invited."

Henry shrugged. "Maybe they don't like you."

Jess quickly gave a swat to Henry even though he thought it was funny, "Johnny it was something you're grandfather put together for Ellen."

"Still." Johnny reached down and snatched up the bottle. He saw Henry's empty glass, took it and filled it. "They tell me get the baby, they want to see the baby and they all disappear on me. Shit."

Jess shook his head in disbelief. "I can not believe the way you two complain about having to get your children. I've never heard of that. No offence."

"None taken." Henry said.

"None taken." Johnny repeated and set down the bottle. "Wait. If Uncle Robbie, my Pap and My father are all in New Bowman, who's protecting us?"

"Dan." Jess answered.

"Dan? Dan?" Johnny finished his drink. "God, we're in trouble if the savages hit. Hey . . ." he set down his glass and looked to the table. "What in the world are these?" He picked up the clear red plastic shell.

"Bullets." Henry explained. "Not real ones, my new paint pellet. We had come up with rigging a new gun for Neville Day, but I thought this would be easier. They go in a real clip and, used by a real gun. They'll sting, but they'll pop."

"Oh, these are neat. Is this for when Pap uses us as target practice?"

"Yep." Henry nodded.

"Did Dr. Dean see these?" Johnny asked. "If he didn't I have to tell him. With that fake kill thing he has going with my Dad, he could place an 'X' on one of these, say it was a real bullet and fake kill him again."

Henry reached up and took the shell. "You should tell him."

"I will. He's been struggling trying to come up with physical ways to take him out. Maybe I'll get lab time off for helping. Neat." Johnny reached for the bottle again. "I'll have one more and let you two be. Unless you need some help. I'm not doing anything."

Henry moved over on the couch. "Have a seat. But watch your hands these things get messy."

Johnny peered at Henry with the tops of his eyes, poured more into his glass, set the bottle down and, for his own reasons, happily helped get together those paint pellets.

^^^

Dean must have looked at the clock for the tenth time in that hour. He was getting ready to go to bed, pacing around only in a pair of sweat pants. He calculated how long it had been since his last call. He picked up the phone to make sure it was working--there *was* the possibility that it was broken--and, seeing how he had it in his hand, he dialed.

After a single ring, Elliott answered the phone. "Captain Slagel's."

"Sgt. Ryder." Dean spoke. "This is . . ."

"Dr. Hayes. Yes."

"Did she get back yet?"

"No, sir, she did not."

"What are they doing? Do you know?" Dean asked.

"No, sir, I do not. Family time is what the Captain told me. I'm just babysitting."

"Is my daughter all right?"

"Fine, she's still sleeping like the last time you called."

"O.K., Sgt. Ryder will you tell her . . ."

"You called? Yes, sir I will. I've written each message for her."

"Tell her this time . . . I'm going to be going to bed. If she can, call me in the morning."

"I'm writing that down now as we speak Dr. Hayes."

"Thank you. Goodnight Sgt. Ryder." Dean hung up the phone shaking his head. He placed the phone on the coffee table and headed to the kitchen for a drink. Barely did he pass the door when there was a light knock. Dean back stepped and opened it. Before he could immediately close it, Bev slipped in.

"Hi Dean."

"Out." Dean held the door open.

"You shouldn't do that. It's drafty." Bev shut the door.

"Bev, I did not invite you in here. I want you to leave." He reached again for the door.

Bev laid her hand on his. "Ellen's away. Wanna play?"

"Out."

"I thought you could use the company since the news of our affair has gotten out."

Dean nearly dropped over. "What? You're believing your own lies now?"

"Dean, I'm crushed. All that we've shared. How can you deny it."

Dean laughed. "What is this all about? Who's gonna walk . . ." Dean watched her lift off her shirt. "I get it." Dean nodded. "Who's coming?"

"Us, I hope."

"God." Dean cringed. "You know someone's on their way over here. Who did you beat to the . . ." Dean snapped his finger when there was a knock on the door. "Knew it. What did you do, hear this person in the social hall." Arrogantly Dean opened the door.

"Hey Dr. Dean." Johnny stood there snickering, Henry beside him.

"Great." Dean smelled the alcohol on the two. "What . . ."

"Sorry." Johnny stepped into the house. "Hope you don't mind, we have something we . . ." Johnny quickly shifted his eyes from Dean to Henry.

Henry lost his smile.

"What's going on Dr. Dean?" Johnny asked.

"Johnny, she's up to her little tricks again." Dean spoke. "She must of heard you two talking about coming over here when you were at the social hall."

"Funny." Henry said stern. "We've been over Jess' house. Let's go Johnny, seems we came at a bad time."

"No." Johnny said. "Why is she here Dr. Dean? Bev?" Johnny glared at her. "My step mother is not here, why are you."

"To see Dean." She answered.

Johnny walked over, bent down to the floor and angrily picked up her shirt shoving it to her. "Did you see him? Good. Maybe you should go."

"Fine, it's crowded now anyhow." Giggling, Bev shuffled to the door. "Bye Dean."

When the door closed, Dean ran his hand down his face. "It was not want you think."

"I know." Johnny said. "God, how many times doe she pull this shit?" shaking his head, Johnny nudged Henry. "Lighten up."

"Yeah." Henry glared at Dean.

Dean felt the uncomfortableness of Henry's stares. "So what brings you two here."

"Oh!" Johnny spoke up beat and perky. "Wait until you see what we have to show you. You're gonna love this. Henry, tell him."

"You know what." Henry held up his hand. "I have to get back to Jess'. My kid is there. I'll, I'll see you later." Saying nothing more, Henry walked to the door and left.

Johnny saw Dean staring. "Dr. Dean." He snapped his finger in front of Dean's face.

"Sorry. Nothing happened here Johnny. But bet me Henry runs to Ellen."

"So tell her to run to me." Johnny stayed 'up'. "Hey, I've watched enough of Bev's tricks. I fake dated her to get to know them. Right?" Johnny winked and moved to the couch. "All right. I have this cool idea. This . . . you will love."

Dean let out a breath, his eyes still on the door, grateful he at least had Johnny in his corner. He walked over to the couch and joined Johnny, hoping what Johnny had to show him would take his mind off of everything.

Surrounded Ellen was, by the Slagel clan as they walked down the streets of New Bowman. Hal and Ellen back to his place, Joe, Robbie and Frank to the truck.

“Boggle?” Hal asked Ellen.

“You have Boggle?” Ellen smiled. “Sure.”

“We’ll see if we can get Elliott to play.”

“No!” Frank interrupted, sticking his face in between the walking pair.

Ellen stopped. “Why can’t Elliott play? You won’t even be here.”

“Uh . . . because .” Frank said.

Hal rolled his eyes. “Will you please get off the man’s back. What has he done to you.”

“Yeah, Frank.” Ellen asked him. “What has he done to you. Please don’t tell me you’re getting like Dean.”

“Uh!” Frank did his shriek. “No. I just don’t trust him.”

Hal slowed down shaking his head as they approached the truck. “Go home Frank.”

Frank bit his bottom lip and glared at Hal. “I think I’ll walk Ellen to your pitiful apartment.”

“Pitiful!” Hal snapped. “Why is my home pitiful? This ought to be good.”

“Fuck Hal, you lived on top of an old pharmacy last place. You live on top of an old book store this place. You would think, since you’re Mr. so-called Leader, you would have the best house. Of course, you run this place and what ranking do you choose? Captain.”

“Frank.” Hal squeaked out his name in irritation. “Where are you going with these insults?”

“I don’t know. But I know I’m going to walk Ellen to your place.” He turned around and looked back to Robbie and Joe. “Dad, do you mind.”

“No, not at all.” Joe walked up to Ellen and kissed her on the cheek. “See you Thursday.”

“Thursday. And thanks again.” Ellen kissed Joe, then reached her hand out and grabbed Robbie’s. She winked at him and mouthed the words goodnight before being yanked away and down the street by Frank. “Frank.”

“What?”

“Why . . .” Ellen felt him grab her hand and she stopped complaining. She just held tight. They moved, Hal leading the way another half a block to the corner store where Hal’s apartment was. All three stopped by the building.

Hal opened the door that lead to the stairs to his apartment. “I don’t think you need to walk her any further, Frank.”

“Night Hal.” Frank said.

“El?” Hal held the door open. “You coming?”

“Night Hal.” Frank said again.

Ellen hid her smile. “Hal, I’ll be right up. One minute. Let me appease your brother.”

Hal nodded. “Night Frank.” He stepped inside, retracted his steps and poked his head out. “Frank, she’s a married woman.”

“When hasn’t she been? Night Hal.” Frank flicked his hand in a wave to Hal and waited for the door to shut.

“So.” Ellen breathed out.

“So.”

Ellen looked around Frank to the truck “Joe and Robbie are waiting.”

“They can wait.”

“What’s up?”

“I just . . . I just wanted a minute with you.” Frank placed his hand on the archway behind Ellen. “I had a really good time tonight. It was fun.”

“Yeah it was. I needed that. I really love all you guys a lot.” Ellen smiled.

“El, so mushy. What’s up with that?”

Ellen shook her head, it lowered some.

Placing his fingers to her chin, Frank lifted her views to him. “You O.K.?”

“Yes. Yes I am. But I’d better get up there. I don’t know if Alex is still awake or not.”

“Why is she here with you?” Frank asked.

“I don’t know. I wanted to bring her.” Ellen shrugged. “I wanted her with me. A mother daughter thing.”

“I see. I just think it’s kind of odd, you know, you . . .” Frank’s view lifted in thought.

“Frank? What is it?”

“El.” Panic hit his face. “Something’s not going on with her is it?”

“What?” Ellen chuckled.

“Something didn’t happen to her. I mean, your moods, you coming here for two days, snatching her up out of . . .”

“Frank,” Ellen covered his mouth. “Alex is fine. Nothing is going on with her. I wanted her with me. That’s all. She can miss school.”

“O.K., just checking. Maybe I should go up and see her.” Frank took a step away.

Ellen stopped him. “Go home. It’s getting late. Beginnings needs you.”

“You’re right.” Frank looked over his shoulder at his father then back to Ellen. “You sure you’re fine?”

“Positive.”

“Because I just get this pulling here.” Frank placed his fist to his chest. “A gnawing like something is really wrong with . . .”

“Frank. Go home. I’m fine. Call me.”

“I will.” Frank leaned closer to her. “I really loved this night with you.”

“You bitched at me.”

“That doesn’t mean I didn’t love it.” Frank leaned down even closer.

“Frank, what are you doing?”

“Thanking you.” So close he moved his lips, then when he was right before Ellen, he closed his eyes and brought his face closer. No lips to lips, Frank brushed his cheek against hers as he brought his lips near her ear. “Thank you.” He whispered in her ear and kissed her lightly. “I love you. . . Know that.” After one more soft peck of a kiss, Frank stepped back, ran his fingers down her face and winked. “Night.”

Joe watched from a distance, the goodbye between his son and Ellen. But mostly he watched Ellen. He looked for anything, a smile, peaceful look, anything that would tell him Frank was helping. Joe could only hope, but he was doing all that he could. He really could do no more. The truth was, Joe knew

Ellen's mood and emotions hindered on one thing. The one thing, unlike everything else, Joe could not control . . . Dean.

Beginnings, Montana

Johnny's hand quickly covered Bev's mouth to silence her excited shriek. "Bev, you keep being so noisy, I won't let you over here."

"Sorry." Bev, like a little girl, covered her mouth and held the phone. "How did you . . ."

"It was hard." Johnny nodded. "But luckily he never noticed I switched his phone. Of course, now I have to go over there and switch it back." Johnny shrugged. "I'll figure out something."

"What if the clinic calls him?"

"They'll use the private line."

"What if Ellen calls that one?"

"Then . . ." Johnny tossed his hands up. "It doesn't work. Remember, this wasn't planned, so if it happens, bonus."

"Bonus." Bev cradled the phone in her hands as if it were a prized possession. "You were so good tonight."

"Wasn't I?" Johnny chuckled. "You actually looked like you believed me."

"I started to, then I remembered it was an act. How about Henry totally forgetting you went to the social hall for another bottle." Bev laughed and imitated Henry. "Funny. We were at Jess' house all night."

"It really couldn't have fallen into our laps any better. But I'll tell you, I was sweating bullets hoping Ellen didn't call while I was there."

"I bet."

"And speaking of bullets." Johnny reached into his back pocket. He pulled out a cloth and unraveled it. Laying center of it was a paint pellet.

"What's that?" Bev asked.

"You can say tonight I was handed a perfect way . . . to get rid of my father." Johnny held the pellet up with a grin. "Johnny-blame-free."

New Bowman, Montana

"Thank you so much Elliott." Ellen said, standing in Hal's livingroom.

"I have to say, I really enjoyed it." Elliott told her. "It's been a while since I was one on one with a child. She draws quite a bit."

"Yes she does." Ellen said.

"I'm not much on child rearing, so imagine my shock when I didn't have to read her a story to get her to sleep. I was a little disappointed she fell asleep so early."

"She had school today so she was tired." Ellen said.

"Look." Elliott pulled out a sheet of paper from his back pocket. "She drew me a picture. I hope you don't mind me keeping it. Now Captain Slagel will not be the only one in New Bowman with refrigerator art."

Hal held up his finger. "But keep in mind I am her favorite person now."

Not even her own father ranks up there with me.”

Hal didn't see it, Ellen lost her smile.

Elliott knew why. “Um . . . did you know . . .” He paused to laugh. “Did you know she really does this wiggle thing when . . .”

“She has to go to the bathroom?” Ellen finished his sentence. “Yes, I did.”

Hal leaned into Ellen from behind and spoke with a soft voice to Elliott. “It's inherited. So . . .” He stepped back. “Joining us Elliott?”

“I hate to intrude.”

“No intrusion.” Hal said. “It'll be fun, and it's still early.”

Elliott looked up with a smile. “If you two don't mind.”

Ellen shook her head. “We're glad you're here.” She moved back. “I'm going to put on a pair of . . .” She stopped when she saw it on the table. “Is this the Dean list?” She asked Elliott.

“That's the one I told you about. He called quite a bit.”

“And you wrote everything down.” Ellen snickered when she picked it up.

“Dr. Hayes really doesn't care for me much, the last thing I wanted, was for him to think I hid anything from you.”

“Thank you.” Ellen, list in hand walked to the phone. “I'll just call him before we play.” She dialed the phone. It rung only once and a groggy Bev voice answered.

“Hello.”

Ellen beeped the phone off and pulled it from her ear. She stared at the receiver.

“El?” Hal moved to her. “What's wrong?”

“Hal . . . Hal, could you call my home please. See . . . see who answers.”

“Sure.” Hal took the phone. “Did you dial wrong?”

“I hope.”

Hal began to dial the phone. He placed it to his ear standing so assuredly. His lips parted and a look of ‘stunned’ hit him. “Who is this?”

Click.

Hal pulled the phone away and stared as Ellen did at it.

“Hal?” Ellen questioned.

“She . . . I mean he hung . . .”

“Don't bother.” Ellen stepped back.

“El . . .”

“I'm . . .” Ellen pointed to the little hallway. “I'm gonna change, get the game ready. O.K.?” Placing on a fake smile, Ellen crumbled the ‘Dean-list’ in her hand and tossed it as she turned around and walked down the hall.

Still holding the phone, Hal turned around and faced Elliott.

“Captain? What is it.”

Hal looked at his watch, then set down the phone. “A woman answered.”

For a split second Elliott closed his eyes. “There has to be a mistake.”

“Yes. Yes there has to be. Because if there's not.” Hal very calmly, lowered his voice and leaned into Elliott. “I'm killing him.” With a quick raise of his eyebrows and a flash of a grin, Hal moved back. “I'll get the game.”

Elliot bounced slowly from heel to toe. He walked over to the crumbled paper on the floor and picked it up. He un-crinkled it, reading the numerous times Dean called and the many emotional messages. There had to be an error. Certain of it, Elliott checked to see. No Ellen in the hall, and the sounds of Hal

making coffee came from the kitchen. He picked up the phone and dialed Ellen's home. A number for some reason he knew by heart. Slowly he touched each number to make no mistake. It rang. Elliott listened. "I'm sorry. I've misdialed." Closing his eyes, he hung up the phone.

Beginnings, Montana

Though Dean really tried to read the book as he laid on the couch, he kept falling asleep. But the awaited clicking of the opening front door, jarred him not only awake, but to a sitting position from his laying down one. He set the book on the coffee table and straightened his hair.

Frank saw this as he walked in. "Ah, Dean, how nice. You waited up."

"Hey Frank." There was nervousness to Dean as he stood up. "I was uh, reading."

"O.K." Frank moved to the kitchen. "You ought to check out the sample of that new book. It's good."

"Did you just get back?" Dean asked.

"Um . . . yes." Frank raised his eyebrows. "Did you not see me walk in. Fuck and they call me mentally disabled."

"No, that's not what I meant." Dean leaned in the doorway of the kitchen as Frank rummaged through the fridge. "I mean to Beginnings."

"Yeah. But I'm on my way out. I should have gotten some sleep this afternoon, but who knew." He pulled a bowl from the refrigerator and sniffed. Cringing at the bad smell he put it back.

"So you were with Ellen the whole time?"

"Yep." Frank saw it on the stove. Another bowl. He lifted the cover. "Why?"

"She didn't call. I've called her and she never called back."

"Oh. Well, I just dropped her off about a half hour ago. She was with us all night. Are these noodles. Did you make these for dinner?"

"Yes."

"Can I take them for my lunch tonight?"

"Sure." Dean folded his arms. "So she was with her family all night."

"All night. Went to the Danny-plex, caught the classic film *The Birds*." Frank grabbed a small container from the cupboard. "Then we bowled. Which El sucks at."

"Good."

"That's what *you* say."

"No, I mean good that she was with you guys. I thought . . . I thought she was with Sgt. Ryder."

"Nope. And Dean . . ." Frank picked at a noodle as he dumped it in the new container. "These are good. Dean . . ." Frank closed the container. "You really have to stop worrying about this Sgt. Fuckin Ryder guy. Really."

"Are you sure."

"Yeah. El is not or won't mess with him. Guaranteed."

"How can you be so sure?" Dean asked.

"One, he runs around with a pansy civil war uniform. Two, he's got nothing on me in the looks department. Four . . ."

“Three.”

“Huh?”

“You skipped three.”

Frank held up his hand. “Yeah, sorry. Three. Their names. And I have to go.” Frank moved to the kitchen door and shut off the light. “Night.”

“Frank.” Dean had a chuckle to him. “What about their names?”

“Dean, think about it. Ellen wouldn’t marry you because she didn’t want to be Ellen Hayes. How would she like to be paired off with a man named Elliott. Elliott, Ellen. Say their names together three times fast. It can’t be done. Sure sign they won’t be a couple.” Frank walked across the livingroom. “Kiss the kids for me.” He open the door.

“Frank, before you go. Did Ellen say anything to you tonight?”

“About?”

“Anything.”

“Dean, that’s a vague fuckin question, she said a lot. Specifics.” Frank said.

“Us?”

“You and me?”

“No. Me and Ellen.”

“No. Night.” Frank started to leave and he paused. “Why are you questioning me like this?”

“I’m . . . I’m . . . Risking being a masochist right now . . .” Dean flung his hand through his hair. “I’m worried about us.”

“You and me?”

“No.” Dean nearly snapped. “Me and Ellen. Something’s not right . I think she’s being really different, but I don’t know if it’s my imagination.” Dean looked at Frank then closed his eyes. “I knew it. Forget it.”

“Night.” With a wide grin, Frank left.

“He laughs at my misery.” Dean tossed his hands up. “I asked for it.” Shaking his head, Dean stopped and smiled when he realized one thing. Yes, Frank may have enjoyed what was said, but Frank also eased Dean’s mind without knowing it. It had to be his imagination, if things were really bad, Frank of all people would have been the one Ellen went to.

Quantico Marine Headquarters

“What’s going on.” George questioned as two soldiers and Steward rushed in the room. The soldiers helped George from the bed to the wheel chair. “My head. My head.”

Steward hurried over and lifted George’s head. “They moved the front lines at the front another half a mile.”

“How many intruders are we dealing with.”

“We estimate three hundred.” Steward adjusted the belt on George’s wheel chair. “We’re moving you to safety just incase.”

“Stop.”

“What?”

“What in Christ’s name for?”

“Just in case they break . . .”

“Steward!” George yelled. “You asshole. How many men do we have? They’re getting that overrun?”

“The enemy is violent sir, they are using tactical means we haven’t trained in. The sergeant in charge called it gorilla warfare.”

George felt the chair begin to move. “I said stop!” the chair did. “Pull our men back. Retreat.”

“Retreat?”

“Yes.” George didn’t want to nod, but he slightly did. “Retreat. Load the mortars and gas the hell out of them.”

“Some of our men won’t have time to make it to safety range sir. If we give them that time the enemy could get too close.”

“Gas them. How many men do we have on front lines.”

“Three hundred.”

“Give the order to pull back and gas them. Now. Risk their lives it’s better than mine.”

“Yes sir.” Steward motioned to the two soldiers and they hurried to the door.

“Stew.” George stopped him. “Do we know yet who we are fighting.”

“Yes sir.” Steward hesitated in his leaving. “Savages.”

On Steward’s one word and his leaving George slumped in shock. “Savages?”

CHAPTER TWENTY

New Bowman, Montana
October 15

There was a certain amount of handsome arrogance across Hal's face. Hands folded on the mess hall table, a grin wide and bright as he chewed then leaned over the table and snatched another bite of the toast that Alexandra offered him.

Alexandra giggle. "You're funny."

"You're funny. Give me a kiss." Hal puckered.

Another giggle and Alexandra kissed his quickly. "You look like Pap-pap."

"No. No." Hal leaned back. "Maybe in his younger days. Pap's old. What did I tell you I was considered."

"Hot?"

"That's it." Hal looked across the table to Ellen who sat next to Alexandra. "I have to tell you El, I wish you were staying."

"I have to get back." she ran her hand down Alexandra's hair. "But I really enjoyed staying with you Hal. Next visit will be longer. I promise. And I can stay with you?"

"Oh my God, without a doubt." Hal grabbed his coffee. "El, listen, I don't know what's happening between you and . . . Ned."

"Ned?"

"Ned." Hal motioned his head to an eating Alexandra. "But something is."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"I understand." Hal held up his hand. "I'm not asking you to. Just know, I'm on your side, no matter what." He winked. "We're family. And . . . if needed, you should, you know, consider living with all the future commuting, living here in New Bowman."

Ellen laughed. "Frank would have a fit."

"Frank would have to live with it. We can set you up with a place to stay if you don't want to stay at my place. Even if it's a few days every week. Consider it."

"I may. Especially if it comes down to . . ." She saw Hal's attention was all hers with interest. "Comes down . . . we'll see."

"Good. Because I don't think you know how much having my family back and being around them means to me." At the very tail end of Hal's words a single loud air raid siren bleared. "What the hell?" He looked as he stood up. "We have sirens."

Alexandra looked at Ellen. "Code seven 'B' Mommy?"

"Wait . . ." Ellen held up her hand. "'C' Sweetie it didn't have the extra beep at the end."

Hal tilted his head in curiosity.

"Captain." Elliott walked to the table. "What was . . ."

It sound like blowing onto a speaker, and it was. A few blows then . . . Frank's voice. "Is this on." Another blow. "Good morning New Bowman." Frank spoke gruff.

Ellen's hand immediately covered her face, "Oh my God."

Hal tossed his napkin. "What the hell is my brother up to." He and Elliott moved across the mess hall. Ellen and Alexandra followed.

Frank continued. "What you have just heard was your introduction to the Beginnings emergency warning system. I had just blasted a code seven 'b'."

Alexandra stopped in her walk outside with Ellen. "Told you. Uncle Frank quizzes us."

"There are twenty-two codes." Frank said. "To learn. Each is a separate signal. One may mean nothing to you, the other may mean your life. You will learn them. You will recognize them. You will be tested."

"Frank." Hal stood before him. "What the hell are you doing?"

Frank held a silencing hand up to Hal while speaking into the microphone. "In one half hour, all those who are not in the field training will commence to learning, Frank Slagel warning signals 101. See you then." He turned off the microphone and set it down. "Hey Hal. El." He stepped to her and kissed her. "Alex." Frank reached down and lifted her up. "Man, I missed you."

Alexandra giggled as her little head tried to avoid the plastering kisses of Frank. "I was gone only two days silly. Ow. Beard Burn. Mommy."

"Frank stop." Ellen told him.

"What? I'm allowed.." Frank balanced Alexandra in his arms.

"Frank." Hal said. "What is going on? When did we get sirens?"

"We hooked them up about twenty minutes ago. They work good." Frank nodded. "And you need them. You have way more people than we have Hal. You need a warning to them. This is a start. So, I'm here to teach today."

Ellen shifted her eyes quickly when she saw Hal toss his hands up. "Today Frank?"

"Yep."

"Frank, I thought you were taking us home?" Ellen asked.

"Nah, Danny's coming in an hour or so for a meeting. He'll drive you back, I'll follow on the bike."

"Frank, I have to get back." Ellen said.

"Why?" Frank asked. "You've been here a couple days, what's a few more hours?"

"Everything." Ellen snapped. "Everything." Folding her arms, she spun around and stormed back off toward the mess hall.

"Man, Hal." Frank started to follow. "What did you people do to her? She hates it here. Then again, it's probably Sgt. Fuckin Ryder. Come on Alex, let's go cheer Mommy up, Uncle Hal has her miserable." Smiling and with Alexandra, Frank walked to the mess hall after Ellen.

Hal gave up, he had to remember, he was dealing with Frank.

Beginnings, Montana

I love you . . . Dean.

Dean signed his note and started to fold it. Catching glimpse of his wedding band, it made him smile. He turned it on his finger touching it in a good remembrance. Tucking the cream color paper into the envelope, Dean simply wrote 'El', on the front and placed it in his lab coat pocket.

"Done." Johnny laid down three requisitions in front of Dean. "What are

you doing?"

"Nothing." Dean shook his head then started to review the reqs. "You ran this batch twice."

"Double checked. Positive."

"Good."

"Want me to take it to Andrea?"

"Nah," Dean stood up. "I will. I want to let her know where I'm gonna be."

"Why?"

"For when Ellen get's home." Grabbing the requisitions, Dean moved across the lab and out into the hall. Drop off the reqs, speak briefly to Andrea then head down to the lab. As he drew closer to Andrea's office, he heard her voice. No one else's, she had to be on the phone. When Dean walked in with the requisitions he saw she was. Figuring he'd check on a patient and return, he held up the reqs in a showing manner to her, watched her nod, dropped them on the desk and walked out.

"Positive. I promise we will hold off for you Ellen."

Squeak. Dean's tennis shoes rang out as he skid to a stop two steps into his walk from her office. Hurrying, he back tracked and flew in.

Andrea was surprised as she glanced up to him unable to say anything because Dean snatched the phone right from her hand.

"Hey." He spoke into it. "Where have you been? I'm getting a complex here, you haven't returned any of my calls." Dean listened. Nothing. Silence. "El?"

"I'm . . . I'm sorry. I've been really busy." Ellen told him. "And I'm busy right . . ."

"Is Alex there?" Dean asked. "I'd like to speak to her."

"No."

"No? I can't talk to Alex?"

"She's playing outside. Actually Elliott's teaching her how to use a sword."

"Swell. So . . ."

"Dean, I need to speak to Andrea."

Dean hesitated. "Um, sure. I love you." he handed the phone to Andrea.

Andrea held up a waiting finger to Dean. "Ellen, yes, don't worry. Yes. See you then. Bye." Andrea hung up.

"When uh . . . when is she coming back?" Dean asked.

"She's trying to get back now. She may not be able to."

"I see." Dean nodded. "Please tell her to find me when she returns." He turned around and walked to the door.

"Dean." Andrea called to stop him.

"Yeah."

"One uh . . . one question." She crossed her legs and rocked back. "Was Bev at your home the other night?"

Dean rolled his eyes with an aggravated look, "Yes. She was there. And I'm heading to the cryo, find me or tell El to find me when she gets home please."

Andrea nodded.

Dean waved, tapped the door's frame and then he left.

Andrea picked up the phone.

New Bowman, Montana

Hal's office chair squealed as he set his hands on the arms and pushed himself to a stand. He walked around his desk and sat on the edge of the front before Ellen. "I know I promised . . ."

"You promised." Ellen held up her hand.

"And if anything, I am a man of my word."

"You're a Slagel"

"And . . ." Hal reached down and grabbed her hand. "So are you. No questions, no comments, as I promised." He tilted his head with a smile. "But I want something from you."

"What is that?"

"Whatever this situation is, whatever is going on, I want to help. Just so you know. And a part of me by guessing, knows why you can't go to Frank. I'm here. Like I said before, I'm on your side no matter what."

"Thank you. And thank you for the early ride to Beginnings. I need to get this personal issue done and out of the way. I can't wait another minute or I'll be crazy."

"I understand." Giving a pull, Hal guided Ellen to stand. He placed his one arm around her neck and brought her into him, laying his lips to her head.

Ellen closed her eyes and felt the strength of Hal. She imagined herself pulling some of it from him. Stealing just an extra bit because she knew she was going to need it.

"Captain Slagel." Elliott stepped through the open door. "My apologies sir, I'll return." He took a step back.

"Elliott. No." Hal released his embrace of Ellen. "We were saying goodbye."

Elliott stepped into the room. "Ellen, you're leaving now? I thought you were waiting."

"Elliott." Ellen spoke soft. "I can't. Not . . . not *today*." She raised her eyebrows to him.

"Oh, yes." Elliott nodded. "I understand."

Hal cleared his throat. "I am going to assume, Elliott is just begin cordial with that last comment, because if I assume he knows something I want to. . .I'll be pissed."

Elliott looked panicked.

"So." Hal clapped his hands together once. "Elliott, I called you because I need you to take Ellen and my niece back to Beginnings now. But you have to return."

"That would not be a problem." Elliott said with a slight smile. "Are you ready now Ellen?"

"Yes I am." Ellen turned back to Hal. "Hal, thank you for everything,"

"Call me." Hal kissed her on the cheek. "Any time. You call."

Ellen nodded and walked to the door. "See you soon."

"Tomorrow." Hal spoke as he followed behind her.

"Tomorrow?" Ellen asked surprised. "I'm not coming here tomorrow."

“Nope, I’m in Beginnings tomorrow. Elliott has the reigns here. Some sort of . . . of . . .”

Elliott ended the long pause of Hal’s searching words. “Distribution meeting.”

“Yes.” Hal snapped his finger. “Thank you Elliott. How did I forget that. A distribution meeting.”

“Huh?” Ellen looked confused. “I’ve never heard of them.” She shrugged. “That’s probably a good thing, I hate meetings. I’m gonna go head down, grab Alex and say good bye to Frank. Elliott? Meet me at the truck?”

Elliott agreed.

As Ellen walked out the door, Hal let out a slow release of breath and widened his eyes once to Elliott with a silent ‘whew’.

Elliott shook his head with a chuckle. “Concern for your family Captain, there’s really no need to cover that up.”

“Nah.” Hal whispered lifting a view to see Ellen go down the steps from his office. “I’d rather her not know I’m there because I’m concerned. I’d rather just happen to be there if she needs anything.” He started to walk again.

“Without really saying, can I say that’s a very wise choice to go.”

Hal paused. “Elliott, I was very serious, if I find out you know something I should, I’ll be pissed.” He started to walk again. “But I should be there?”

“Chancing you being really . . . pissed at me Captain . . . someone outside of the whole Beginnings circle, should be.”

Hal nodded once in gratitude and moved on.

Quantico Marine Headquarters

He could walk with the aid of a cane. Minimal periods of time and short distances but George was mobile. And after being driven to the front gate George assessed the damage that had happened upon his camp two nights earlier. “Where in the world did all the savages come from?”

Steward didn’t have an answer, he supposed saying, ‘the gate’ would have gotten him hit with that cane again. “Sir, intelligence team scoured the hillside. At best as they could, figure they came from the south.”

“South?” George turned, leaning on his cane. “O.K., we have farming and factories down there. I know I wanted to regroup and train but we have to send armed forces down there to protect our industry.”

“Got it.”

“And pull me a meeting of minds. I want to get surveillance teams together. Not to go take them out, but just to send out to find out where these three hundred came from.”

“Maybe they were a roaming community.”

“Doubtful. If there are three hundred, there’s more. They weren’t going to chance having their entire existence wiped out and they knew there was a chance of that coming on this base.”

“Is it safe sending men out?” Steward asked. “Our last party never returned.”

“That’s because we sent our last party out to take out a bunch of savages we under estimated.”

“I thought it was impossible to underestimate the savages. Their name says it all.”

“The western world under estimated the Indians for the same reason. Surveillance parties only. We have to find where they feed off of.” George happily moved back to the jeep. His legs were getting like rubber and he didn’t want to take a chance of falling again. It was difficult enough being taken serious when his head fell forward on occasion.

Steward walked beside him. “Do you suppose this is why Beginnings called.”

“What do you mean.”

“To forewarn us of this attack? They mentioned savages.”

“And I mentioned they weren’t our problem.” George slid into the jeep. “They are now. And I think it may be approaching the time to find out what exactly it was that Beginnings wanted.”

Beginnings, Montana

“Camps are mobile at about seven miles northeast.” Robbie stated. “Two small ones.” he zipped up his leather jacket walking toward the hanger with his father.

“So we know something is imminent.”

Robbie shrugged. “Mobile, meaning east to west, not toward Beginnings.”

“They know we’re watching.”

“Of course.”

“What about the camps south?”

“Stationary at twelve miles, making a nice little home.”

“Any chance we can get you to check further out, see if anymore are coming.”

“You got it. But they move in at night dad, and I can’t see them coming.”

“That I understand.”

“Good. Here’s what I don’t understand.” Robbie reached his chopper. “Why can’t we just take them out. Gas them. Eliminate any threat they pose.”

“Because how do we know?” Joe said. “How do we know that’s what they are up to? We don’t. Until they cross our borderlines of tracking, then we can’t do anything about it.”

“There are no laws saying that.”

“True.” Joe said. “But in a world we’re there are very few left, it is not Beginnings to help take out more. We and New Bowman are not aggressors despite the fact that we have Frank on our side. We’re the good guys, remember?”

“Yeah.” Robbie nodded. “Tomorrow first light, I’m scanning out to Manitoba. Hopefully weather will be better for me to lower that radio.”

“Get those people out of there.”

“Or at least try to figure out a way how.” Robbie opened his side door to the chopper. “All right Dad, I’m out of here, see you in an hour or so.”

“Robert. Careful.” Joe gave him a pat o the back and stepped back.

Stepping inside, Robbie extended out his hand in a wave, shut the door, lifted his glasses then lifted his chopper . . . northeast.

^^^

“Watch you don’t get dirty, Henry.” Mark snickered in the tracking room, wheeling out of Henry’s way as he worked on a chair.

“Why this was so important I don’t know.”

“Maybe you can say I wanted to see you all dressed up.”

“You have to stop bouncing in your chair.”

“I can’t help it. I’m excited. This is like a puzzle to me trying to find the beeping nesting of the killer babies.”

Henry pulled at the tie he wore. “I’m choking.” Squatting before the chair, he brought his screwdriver up. “Just . . .” He grunted with a tightening turn. “Want to get this stupid pre-trial meeting over with. What is up with that. Who does this Grace person think she is.”

“Uh . . . the judge.” In the midst of Mark’s laughing at his own joke that Henry found not one bit amusing, the snap of static caught his attention. Drawn immediately to a seriousness, He turned his chair to the screen. “What the hell.”

“Aw.” Henry whined as he stood up. “Please don’t tell me tracking’s screwed up.”

“What the hell is that.” Mark squinted as a single white line, no noise, twinkled on the screen.

“Static?” Henry guessed. “We’re not expecting a storm. I hope tracking is not . . .” A blip of light came on the screen accompanied by the single, mild warning siren that usually sounded off when the computer identified the intruder as a single source. “Quiet that.” Henry whispered.

Mark did. “Is this like the biggest indicator light we have ever seen?”

“Yeah, wonder what kind of animal it is.”

“I don’t know.” Mark clicked on the keyboard. “It’s big, that’s probably why we had that static.”

“Confused the computer?”

“Possibly. Entered the sector . . . two and a quarter miles from the road to the main gate.”

“Bear again?” Henry asked.

“Computer’s figuring.”

“Still? Why is this taking so long?” Henry grew antsy as they watched the light.

“I don’t know. Moving slower than human average speed.”

“That’s good.”

“Shit.”

“What?”

Mark looked at the read out. “This can’t be right. The computer estimates this thing to be twenty-two feet long and forty-seven hundred pounds.”

“Oh my God, it’s something prehistoric.”

“What?” Mark laughed.

“Its sounds like a dinosaur. You never know what George had frozen.”

Henry looked at his watch. "Robbie's in the air." He grabbed his radio. "Robbie. Robbie come in."

"Eagle one please."

Henry rolled his eyes. "Hey, we have a dinosaur crawling into the perimeter."

"A what?"

"Well check this out." Henry said. "Moving at a mile per hour. Slow and twenty-two feet long, four thousand pounds."

"Holy shit."

"Exactly."

"What the hell is George sending us now?"

"Who knows." Henry said, "How far are you and how much trouble would it be for you to swing back."

"Give me three minutes it will be in my scope."

"Thanks." Henry set down his radio. "We'll find out what . . ."

"Henry-O." Danny walked into tracking. "Got Trish in the truck. Ready?"

"Danny." Henry spoke, eyes glued to the screen. "What do you make of this?"

Danny walked over and peered at the screen. "What's the computer saying?"

"Animal." Mark answered and pointed to the readout screen.

"That can't be right." Danny said. "Can I?" He asked Mark.

"Sure." Mark rolled out of the way.

"Nothing is that big." Danny's hand moved to the key board. "Henry watch the other monitor with me. I'm going to pull a simulation."

"Got it." Henry moved over.

"Look closely." Danny rolled over to the 'dummy' monitor and waited for the simulation to play. The replay of the 'blop' came on the screen. "No. Something is not right." Danny shook his head, reached blindly over and clicked on the keyboard again. "Watch it." Again, eyes glued they waited and saw it. "Shit." Danny slammed his hand. "Did you see it?"

"I saw it."

"They almost pulled it off."

"They joined up too soon."

"Damn it that was smart."

"I'll get security on it."

"I'll get numbers." Moving completely over to the 'dummy' computer, Danny hands move frantically.

Henry lifting his radio, turned to Mark, "Get Frank on the phone." He held in the radio. "Robbie, Robbie, come in."

"It's not three minutes." Robbie replied.

"We have intruders."

"What?"

Henry quickly moved across the tracking room and grabbed the other radio as he spoke. "They came in separately then joined. But they did it so fast, tracking didn't have time to pick it up. They're moving slowly because they're moving as a group." He lifted the other radio. "Joe, Joe, come in. I need you in tracking, tune into channel seven. We have a breach."

"I'm there." Joe replied.

“Henry!” Robbie spoke over his chopper noise. “I’m almost there, I’ll see if I can take them out.”

“Too close to home Robbie.”

“I have Frank.” Mark held up the phone.

Henry looked to Mark. “Tell him we have the breach.”

“We have . . .” Danny slammed hard on the keys. “Come on.” He played the blip back. “Got it. . . forty two.”

“Shit. Forty-two.” Henry spoke to Robbie. “Robbie see what you can do, they’re awfully close.”

“Frank’s on his way.” Mark said. “He said if Robbie can’t take them out. Ground him and get his ass in Beginnings.”

Henry nodded. “Robbie, if there’s nothing you can do. Frank wants you grounded.”

“I see them Henry.” Robbie came back. “Savages. Nearing the front tunnel gate.”

Danny looked up from the keyboard, “they’re a mile away.”

“Too close?” Henry asked.

Joe blasted into Tracking. “Were are they?”

“One mile front gate.” Danny replied.

“Robbie’s on them.” Henry said.

“Frank’s on his way.”

With a nod Joe lifted his radio. “Tower hit a code five. Simple code five.” Joe heard the sirens blare. “Robbie, they’re too close to the front tunnel gate. What’s your scope.”

“Thick in the trees. I’m gonna be shooting blind at them unless I drop fire.”

“Too close. Too close.”

“Picking up speed.” Danny informed. “Separating.” The alarm system began to sound off. “Moving fast. A hundred feet.”

“Squad team leaders in position.. Do not, I repeat do not go into the tunnel.” Joe called out. “Robbie where are you.”

“Setting down as soon as I find a spot close enough to the front.

“Seventy-five feet.” Danny notified. “Fifty.”

A crackling came over the all-call channel and then motorcycle noise precluded Frank,. “Where we at. I’m in range.”

“Twenty-five feet.” Danny said.

“There on us Frank. Nearing the front tunnel entrance.” Joe replied, the noise and alarms in the room near deafening.

“Dad.” Frank called out. “Do not send my men in there.”

“I gave the order all ready.”

“Ten feet.” Danny spoke up.

“Joe.” Henry called his name.

Joe spun around.

Silence. The alarms stopped.

Joe lifted the radio. “They’re in.”

“Fuck! Tower!” Frank yelled. “Lower the gate. Do not open it. Let the bastards get trapped.

“Tower in. Gate sequence loaded. Two minutes.”

Henry let out a breath. “Cutting it close. But they shouldn’t make it.”

“Gas Frank?” Joe asked.

“Yeah.” Frank came back. “Robbie meet me at the back gate. We’ll go in the front and let them have it.”

“I’ll get things ready.” Robbie said.

Steve from tower’s voice interrupted. “Frank. Problem with the gas.”

“We have to blast them. I’m not sending my men into a dark . . .”

“Frank.” Steve interrupted. “A truck is moving toward the tunnel.”

“Fuck.” Frank screamed out. “Scratch the gas. I’m heading in.”

Joe gave his warning. “Frank. Do not take that chance.”

“Dad just make sure they keep that gate down.” Frank’s voice seeped over the airwaves and then the rev of the cycle engine. “I’m gonna try to stop them. That’s Ryder and Ellen.”

“Christ.” Joe turned to Henry. “Get her on her phone and . . .”

“I’m already trying.” Henry dialed.

“Tower?” Frank questioned in his ride. “How far are they.”

No response.

“Tower?”

“They just drove inside”

“Hello?” Ellen answered her cell phone in the truck. “Henry?” She looked at Elliott shaking her head. “Henry I can’t hear you. What? Henry I’m in the tunnel can it wait?” Ellen turned her head oddly to Elliott. “Why does it look like the front gate is closing.”

Elliott saw it, the light at the end of the tunnel slowly disappearing. “It is.”

“Henry?” Ellen called into the phone. “Are you telling us about the . . .”

Four bangs, loud and echoing in the tunnel shot out one right after another. The truck dropped as all four tires were blown out. With the screeching rubber on the ground, Alexandra’s scream, the truck veered out of control toward the wall.

Ellen grabbed on to her daughter. “Elliott.” She closed her eyes.

It took Elliott everything he had, but he jerked the wheel of the truck seconds before they hit. The side of the truck, Elliott’s side, slammed into the wall with a mighty jolt.

“Mommy.” Alexandra whimpered.

“Shh. It’s all right.” Ellen raised her eyes over to Elliott. “What happened.”

“Tires were blown out.”

Ellen grabbed the phone. “Dead.” She dropped it and looked into the black tunnel. “Elliott?”

Elliott swallowed before he did it. Reaching for the headlights, he flicked them on.

Savages.

War call. From near the other end they charged.

“Shit.” Elliott quickly unrolled his window. He edged his body out. “Shut this.”

“Where are you going!” Ellen screamed. “Get back in!”

“I can’t let them near this truck. Lock the doors and windows!”

“Mommy!”

“Elliott!” Ellen screamed as he climbed out, nervously cradling Alexandra to her chest she reached over and wound up the window. She heard the clomp of

Elliott's boots on the roof of the truck. Her eyes shifted to the closing in savages who screamed in their pursuit, and Ellen blessed herself. She jolted bringing Alexandra even tighter when four gunshots went off.

A loud 'thump' caused Ellen to shriek and the body of a savage rolled over onto the hood of the truck. "Oh God."

"Mommy."

"Please. Please. Please." Ellen closed her eyes. She heard the savages banging against the truck. No more gunfire. "Please. Oh God. Oh God."

The heavy swing of the sword sent the head of the savage that came for Elliott, flying like a baseball, it sailed down and on to the ground. He kept his stance firm balancing on the roof of the truck. He knew he had to do his all to keep the savages from the truck. One break of a window, and Ellen and Alexandra were a goner. They came for him. No more than two at a time as if it were a game to the savage. They knew Elliott was trapped. He couldn't use his gun. Running out of bullets would leave himself vulnerable. So they began to occupy him, confusing, sailing arrows at him. Arrows that Elliott batted away using his sword. From the left, the right, behind, front. Elliott swung, pivoted and turned.

He grunted hard and his stance weakened when an arrow sailed into his leg. He broke his rhythm in swinging and in that window of opportunity another sailed into his side.. Quickly he broke it off, continuing in his plight to fight them off. So many. Trapped in the tunnel with him Ellen and Alexandra.

How many. How many? Raced through Elliott's mind trying to get a count using the light of the headlights and the other end of the tunnel to see, where we they coming from?

Elliott's heart raced when he saw one dive on the hood of the truck.

Ellen screamed trying to block Alexandra's view, the savage was close. Face near the windshield s he held an object rearing to break the glass. She hunched, mind spinning with thoughts of what to do. Just as the savage struck down, he flew back when the boot of Elliott nailed him in the side of the face sending him flying off the hood.

Ellen saw Elliott leap down to the hood then to the front of the truck. She could only pray as she watched them encircle him, and Elliott, back to the truck, fighting them off as best as he could. Swinging, turning, swinging his sword again. There were so many and there was only one of him. Then Ellen saw. In the reflection of the side view mirror, a speck of a shadow darted through the brightness of the sun at the front entrance. Eyes peeled to that mirror, speck growing closer, Ellen's shoulders dropped in relief . . . Frank

Frank could barely see the truck the savages were bombarding. He could see them sailing back. Some whole bodies, some only heads.

Heart racing, rush of tunnel air beating against his ears, Frank, full speed, whipped around his M-16 as he steered the bike with one hand. Spinning the rifle, he gripped it by the barrel and zoomed forward.

It was the shot that knocked Elliott back. Straight through his shoulder blade, with such a force the arrow sailed. The tip of it clanked against the metal

of the truck as it sent Elliott back and the sword dropped from his hand. Elliott hadn't the chance to even reach for his sword, four of them dove on him pinning him against the side of the truck. A fifth raised up his spear and from across the tunnel, screaming all the way, he charged forth. Inches before Elliott's chest, a split second before the spear plunged devastatingly into Elliott, an explosion of blood erupted from the attacking savage when the butt of a M-16 smacked into the side of his head with the force of Frank who rode by.

Ten feet away, Frank slowed the motorcycle down enough to turn it into a spin and jump off before the bike had completely stopped. He charged ahead, lifted his weapon and aimed. Never missing a beat, never slowing down in his stride, Frank fired his first four shots. With accuracy and precision, the four savages that held Elliott were his first four targets. Down they dropped, each shot fired without hesitation of the next.

Elliott was freed, injured, but freed. He bent down for his sword, lifted it up and readied to fight along side of Frank.

Frank's determination was to get to the truck no matter what the cost., The savages that charged him phased him not one bit. The arrows that hit him didn't make him flinch. He kept his M-16 high and aimed, firing as he moved only pausing in his execution to use the rifle to belt a savage from his way. Swing out, knock him over, shoot him, move on.

"Frank. Frank. Come in." Robbie spoke in the radio just outside the tunnel. He stood with a wall of men.

"I'm a little . . ." A savage scream seeped through Frank's head set. "Busy right now little brother."

Three shots, and grunts emerged.

Robbie shook his head. "We're coming in."

"Stay back."

"Fuck that."

"Robbie!" Frank didn't need to turn around when he heard it. The shifting of a mechanical device soon followed by the rumbling of the opening gate at the other end of the tunnels.

Elliott could see it in his fight. The slow lifting of the gate, the emergence of sunlight and the shadows of a long line of Beginnings men that moved forward into the tunnel.

It was seen on the savages faces. Confusion of who to fight. The army that ensued in the short distance, or the one man radicle army in Frank who ensued with ease a few feet from them. Whom ever they chose to battle, they surely were going into a fight they were ill prepared for.

A wave of savages challenged Beginnings, and it wasn't long before the savages . . . lost.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

From her low, huddled position, body nearly laying over Alexandra's Ellen sprang up when the truck door open.

Frank.

Ellen gasped out and Alexandra jumped from her arms to Frank's. Her little legs, like a monkey wrapped as tight around him as her arms. Frank closed his eyes, laid his lips hard to Alexandra's cheek then lowered down to Ellen grabbing hold of her as she stepped from the truck.

"You guys O.K.?" Frank asked, feeling Alexandra's nodding head and Ellen's muffled 'yes; from his chest. "God, you had me scared."

Ellen quickly pulled away. "Elliott." She looked.

"I had them take him immediately down to the clinic." Frank answered.

"What about you?" Ellen asked, seeing the blood on Frank.

"I'm fine." He winked. "Let's get you two out of here." Cupping his hand on the back of Alexandra's head, Frank, put one arm around Ellen and they began to walk. "Alex, sweetie, just keep your eyes closed." Frank began to lead them through the bodies of savages. "Robbie!" Frank called out to Robbie who was doing a 'dead' check of a savage. "We're heading down."

Robbie nodded and moved on to the next.

Frank felt the jolt of Alexandra when a shot rang out in their tunnel. "Fuck." He called out. "Can you guys not shot anyone, my daughter's here." Frank shook his head then kissed Ellen as he still held her while they walked. "Man, no common sense.

^^^

Andrea beeped off her phone and peered to Bev who sat with a hospital gown on, in the examining room. "Stay put. Do not leave this room until I get back." She rushed from the room and pulled the door closed just as Jason and Dean raced down the hall with gurnies.

"Incoming." Dean notified moving fast to the main doors.

"Joe just called." Andrea grabbed the end of the cart. "Six."

"Not bad." Dean stated.

"Elliott's the worst."

"God, is the man in a contest with Frank or what?" Dean shook his head.

The doors to the clinic flung open and Andrea peered up to the two men that helped a very bloody Elliott walk in. "I'd say. At least he's still standing." She hurried to him and looked at the two men that aided him. "Help me get him on the cart."

"Elliott." Dean rushed to him. "My wife. My daughter."

"They're fine." Elliott said. "Just fine."

Dean let out a long breath of relief. "Good. I need you on this cart."

"I'd rather walk." Elliott stated.

Dean looked to Elliott's escorts. "Take him down to O.R. three." Dean

rushed to the next man brought in. "You can walk. Exam room two."

"No." Andrea called out. "I have a patient in there. One. Room one."

"One then." Dean shrugged as another came being carried. "I can not believe the injuries we're dealing with. What happened to the good old days of gunshot wounds?"

Smiling as she examined a guard on a cot, Andrea, in her mind, agreed.

"Pap." Alexandra called out as soon as Frank set her down in the waiting room of the hospital. She ran to Joe and Joe picked her up.

"Saving mother and daughter now Frank?" Joe asked as he held Alexandra.

"Joe." Ellen rushed in. "How bad are the men."

"No major injuries, thank God."

"Elliott.?"

"Fine."

Ellen backed up. "I have to find him. Frank? Find an examining room. We have to clean you up."

"Yeah, Yeah." Frank waved her off.

"I mean it." Ellen ordered as she hurried down the hall. She stopped at exam room one, knocking then opening it, Jason was worked on a guard. "Sorry." She backed up, knocked on room two and opened it. "Shit."

"Hi Ellen." Bev smiled. "I'm waiting."

Grunting Ellen pulled the door closed and moved to three. She opened the door. No Elliott.

"Ellen." Dean stopped working on his patient, and moved to the door, "Wait."

"I have to find Elliott." Ellen backed up.

"O.R. Three."

"Thanks. I'll be right back." She spun and raced down the hall. She turned the corridors that seemed to be even longer than usual, in her seek of the operating rooms. Room three wasn't far and Ellen rushed in.

"Girl." Andrea peered from her working on Elliott who sat up. "What did you get this man into?"

"Elliott." Ellen hurried to him. "Are you all right."

"I'm fine." Elliott told her. "Really. You?"

"Fine." Ellen laid her hand on his. "I wanted to thank you."

"Frank saved the day." Elliott said.

"You saved me and my daughter." She laid her hand on his cheek. "You were great."

Elliott lowered his head in an almost blush.

"We're finishing up now." Andrea stated. "I want to keep him in the clinic overnight, he's your patient, your call. But with arrows, he needs a good IV dose of anti-infections."

"I agree." Ellen said. "Sorry Elliott, you're stuck with us."

"I'm glad to be here on . . . this day."

Ellen quickly looked at Andrea. "I . . . I saw her waiting."

"I can send her home." Andrea said as she worked. "Everything's ready, we'll just have her come back when things are settled."

“No.” Ellen shook her head. “Are things under control with the injured?”

“Yes, just about.” Andrea answered. “Why?”

“Twenty minutes.” Ellen backed up. “That’s all I need. I’ll secure the sample, get her out of here, help you finish up and then . . . and then when the four of us are all free. We do it.”

“Are you sure?” Andrea asked. “Are you O.K. to do this?”

“I have to get this done. Elliott, I’ll check back.” Ellen moved to the door.

“Ellen.” Elliott called out. “Good luck.”

With a simple nod, Ellen left. She moved quickly passed the examining rooms and to the lab. She had to get the box that held the supplies. The one they hid in the paper storage cabinet. She heard Frank’s voice talking to Joe and knew she wouldn’t be seen by him. Dean was working on a patient, so he was occupied as well. Actually, to Ellen, the attack was a diversion in her favor. She grabbed her lab coat and placed it on. As she did, it fell from the pocket, an envelope. Setting her tray of supplies down, Ellen bent over and picked up the envelope. Her name was on front. She debated a second and opened it. When her eyes read the words her heart sunk and her throat swelled up. *“El, just wanted to leave you a note. I’ve done nothing but think about you while you were gone. How can I not. I love you that much. I just need you to know how much of my world you are. My life’s complete now that I have you. I love you, Dean.”*

Ellen closed her eyes as she folded the note and slipped it back into her lab coat pocket. “Please let this be a sign. Please Dean let this work out in your favor.” She picked her tray back up and walked from the lab.



“I certainly hope . . .” Bev said perky, yet snide. “You can perform this test with those shaking hands.”

“Bev.” Ellen looked down to her. “I would think, with the size of this needle, the last thing you would want to do is get me angry.” A small tray laid before the table Bev was on. The gown she wore was open to expose her stomach, a stomach that was starting to round. Ellen never thought it would bother her, but it did, not so much the rounding belly, but the image on the ultrasound of the baby. Tiny, small, heart beating, little legs kicking about. Holding the instrument, Ellen had to watch that baby and look for her pocket of opportunity where she could insert the anchor of the amniocentesis needle.

“Cute huh?” Bev asked, smiling at the image of her child.

Ellen glided the wand of the ultrasound in her hand. The most tedious of tasks would be to find a spot in the baby’s sac. And the baby kept moving. Wand held tight against the abdomen, Ellen kept the needle of the anchor with in millimeters of the wand, readying to take the chance when the baby shifted out of the way. “There.” Ellen whispered. “Bev, do not move. Take a breath. This is going to hurt.”

There was a certain amount of relief for Ellen when she inserted the anchor into the flesh of Bev’s abdomen. It meant it would be over soon.

^^^

"I'm killing your father." Dean pulled a vial out of the refrigerator.

"You got the cool way, Dr. Dean." Johnny said.

"No, I mean for real. He keeps saying, 'Dean just give me a fuckin shot, come on I got things to do.'" Dean grunted, placed the vial on his stack of folders and papers. "I'll give him a shot all right. Listen for the man to scream."

Johnny snickered. "Give it to him."

Carrying his stack of papers in his hand like a highschool kid carrying his books, Dean moved rapidly across the lab. "I'm finishing up Frank, I have one more patient then I have to shoot straight down to the cryo. I have sample I'm . . ." He stopped at the door, turning so quickly a sheet of paper flew out unnoticed from the stack. It dropped to the floor. "Johnny could you tell El, to find me or at least call me. Please."

"Will do."

"Thanks." Dean hurried out.

"Oh Dr. Dean you dropped . . ." Johnny raced across the lab and stopped talking when he saw it. "Ah, how cute." He smiled as he bent down to the half sheet drawing. A house, man, a little girl. Drawn well. The words 'I missed you Daddy. Love Alex'. Written in big red letters. Johnny slowly stood up, crinkled the art part way, laid it neatly on top of the trash, and with a wide grin, walked from the lab.

^^^

It was perfect, clear, more than enough and still warm as Ellen held the tube in her hand. Standing before the labeling machine Danny got her, she took a moment to stare at the amniotic fluid.

"*You will not, not mention this to anyone, until I personally give you the results, got that?*" Ellen heard herself warning Bev. She shuddered away her 'bad' feeling and typed into the label machine 'B' Sample DO NOT TOUCH! And pressed 'print'. The label ejected and Ellen swiped it around the tube taking the tube to the fridge.

The rack for special samples set right in front. Samples that always remained on hand for future reference until they no longer were viable or were frozen. Ellen set the tube in the rack.

"El." Robbie called out.

Nervously Ellen shut the refrigerator as turned around. "Robbie." She breathed out his name. "Hey."

"El?" He stepped to her. "Where you been? I've been looking for you."

"I have a patient who has . . . um . . ." Ellen dropped her voice to a whisper. "Female problems."

"Oh." Robbie leaned down and kissed her on the cheek.

"What . . . what was that for. That was nice."

With slight rolling eyes, Robbie smiled. "El, you were stuck in a bad

situation today. I wanted to see if you were all right.”

“Oh, yeah. Fine.” Ellen nodded. “Thanks for asking. But, I could really use a hug.” Ellen closed one eye as she asked.

Robbie fluttered his lips. “And you ask.” Another step to Ellen he didn’t have a chance to put his arms around her, Ellen grabbed him first. He felt the trembling of her body, the racing of her heart pounding against his chest as she gripped so tight to him. “El?”

“Huh?” Ellen still held on.

“Are you sure you’re O.K.?”

“Much better now. Thanks.” Ellen released her hold and stepped back. “So . . . what brings you here, anything beside me?”

“Actually, Yeah. I wanted to see Sgt. Ryder.”

Ellen closed her eyes, she wanted to kick herself for forgetting even momentarily about how he was doing. “I want to too.”

“I heard he did so well out there. He really protected you and Alex.”

Ellen tilted her head. “How did you know that? He did. But how did you know?”

“Frank.”

“Frank?” Ellen was shocked. “Frank praised Elliott?”

“Oh, yeah, Complimented him. Of course, you know, he used his ‘Sgt. Fuckin Ryder’ protected El.” Robbie snickered. “But in Frank’s way he complimented him. Wanna go together to see him?”

“Yes. Let’s go now before I check my patients.” Ellen walked to beside Robbie and grabbed his hand.

Robbie slowed in his walk as her fingers slipped in his. “Cool.”

Ellen snickered. “Oh, wait.” She release his hand stopped by the door.

“Hey.” Robbie indicated to his lonesome hand.

“Wait. My scope.” Ellen eyed her stethoscope laying on the counter by the door. Without moving her stance she leaned far to the counter, gripped it with her fingers and brought it to her. She smiled, held it up, and put it over her neck. As she went to turn back and grab Robbie’s hand, the color of it laying on top of the trash caught her eye. She held up her hand to Robbie, bent down and reached to the trash pulling out the half crinkled artwork.

“What’s that?” Robbie asked.

Undoing the wrinkles, Ellen stared at Alexandra’s recent picture to Dean for a few seconds.

“El?”

“Nothing.” She folded it up, slipped it into her pocket, and pretended all was fine. “Nothing. Let’s go.” She grabbed hold of Robbie’s hand, holding it a little tighter, and walked from the lab with him.

New Bowman, Montana

Elbows on his desk, Hal held the phone tightly to him. “He’s all right Dad?”

“Fine.” Joe answered on the other side of the line. “They’re keeping him at the clinic on intravenous to help fight off any infection he could get.”

“At least he’s not serious, right?”

“Have to tell you Hal. He did well. The man really fended them off”

“Elliott is a good man. That’s why he works side by side with me.” Hal leaned back in his chair. “So what now?”

“Now we beef up our end of security. I don’t think I need to tell you what to do on your end. Dan just came back from his surveillance, they’re stationary.”

“Moving in attack groups.”

“Yeah.” Joe said. “Which is really stupid. We’ll take them out.”

“What if they come in full force?”

“Still not enough of them out there. A hundred left. Toughest part is heading them off when they breach.”

“Which if we’re ready . . .”

“Shouldn’t be a problem.” Joe finished Hal’s sentence. “As for now, though the roadway is safe, we’re gonna go back to the closed gate policy of the tunnel. Post a man inside and control the gate letting the trucks and Dan-tram in and out.”

“I think that’s a good idea.”

“And before winter sets in we still want to perimeter New Bowman as well.”

“Dad.” Hal had a chuckle to him. “Our tracking goes further out than yours. We have a bigger scope of notice. No need”

“But we have perimeter beams.”

“I have more men.”

“Humor me. Christ.” Joe sounded irritated. “All right. I know Elliott’s here, can you get your third council man to hold down reigns.”

“Who?”

“Your third council man, what’s his name, uh . . .”

“Oh, yes, him.” Hal nodded and rolled his eyes. “Why him?”

“I’d like to get you in Beginnings tomorrow for a strategy meeting. A good chance of that?”

“I was coming anyhow.” Hal said.

“For what? Not that I mind, but I didn’t know you were coming.”

“Yes, the distribution meeting.”

“The distribution meeting?” Joe asked shocked. “What the hell is a distribution meeting?”

“Um.” Hal stuttered.

“Hal?”

Hal snickered. “Dad, call me ‘Frank’. I got confused, I was worried about Ellen and wanted to go there tomorrow so I told her I had a meeting.”

“All right . . . Frank.” Joe laughed. “I’ll talk to you later and fill you in how our meeting went this afternoon.”

“Good talk to you then.”

“Oh and Hal. No more Frank moments, all right? I can only handle one temporarily mentally disabled son.”

“Not a problem.” Hal said serious. Then as he hung up the phone realized his father’s sarcasm. He cringed and wanted to hit himself at his second momentary lapse. Right there and then Hal promised himself, first order of personal business, he would spend less ‘one on one’ time with Frank.

Beginnings, Montana

Ellen stayed facing the closed door of the clinic lab before turning around. She took a strengthening breath and stepped further in. First she looked upon the faces of Andrea, Jason and Johnny. "I . . . I've secured a large sample and have one for each of you." She walked to the fridge and opened it. She pulled out a small rack and took it to the counter where they stood before. Four tiny infant blood tubes were in the rack, each with amniotic fluid. "If you make an error or feel you need more, there is more of the sample left. Just let me know you took it, I'm monitoring it." Slowly Ellen lifted the tiny tubes. She'd hand one out, then pass on an empty folder. "I know this seems so 'I spy' but I need this secret and I need to be the first to know. We have two accessible computers. Under the file name 'DNA-SEQ-OR', I wrote that inside your folders, under that file name you can pull up Dean's DNA sequence. After you've run a sequence on Bev's sample, you can run the program to see if it's match. Please . . ." Ellen closed her eyes. "Please do not share this with each other. Just print up the results, place them in the folder and give them to me. I'm . . ." Ellen held up her tiny tube. "I'm going down into the cryo lab to perform mine while Dean's not there." She moved sadly to the door. "Thank you very much, all of you for taking time out of your day to help me out. Your help is so important to me."

They all watched Ellen leave, all of them with the same look of helplessness upon their faces. Hesitant, but knowing what they had to do, Andrea, Jason and Johnny, readied themselves to perform the test.

New Bowman, Montana

The slamming door echoed in the empty chambers of the court room. Trish led the way down the small aisle toward the front. "Oh wow." She spoke in awe, her hands touching the shiny wood of the chairs. "Oh wow."

Henry walked backwards looking around. "This . . . this is beautiful. Danny you did a good job."

"Don't credit me." Danny said. "Judge Grace and her assistant polished this bad boy up. Listen to the acoustics." Danny proceeded to sing, *'The Sound of Music.'*

Henry's laughter silenced him. "Do you understand what this . . . discovery hearing is?"

"Somewhat." Danny shrugged. "I know we sit at the tables up here and wait for the judge."

"Me on one side, you on the other?" Henry asked.

"I guess."

"Danny." Trish spoke upbeat. "Check this out." She pushed on the swinging small door that led to the two tables in the front of the court room. "It's so Perry Mason like. Episode 119. *Mother's Helper.*" She giggled and walked to her table.

Henry pointed to Danny's briefcase. "Nice uh briefcase."

"Thanks. Yours to."

Henry shook his head holding up his manilla folders.

"Where's your Bowman assistant?" Danny asked.

"I didn't think he needed to be here. I'll stop and fill him in." Henry walked to the table on his left. "I'll feel so all alone over here." He sat down and looked to Danny and Trish.

Danny popped open his briefcase leaving the contents in there.

Henry wished he would have thought ahead like Danny, to at least look the part. "Hey, what's up with that book. It's supposed to be out today."

"Tomorrow." Danny whispered. "We ran out of toner."

"Stop by, I'll refill you." Henry said.

"Thanks." Danny looked up when he heard the door slam and a woman in a black dress suit walked out. She was a taller woman, full figured, her age of late forties well hidden. Her hair pulled neatly up. And she carried a stack of papers, notepads and folders. She stopped before Danny, Henry and Trish. "All rise. The honorable Judge Grace Hawthorn presiding."

Henry tired not to snicker when Grace stepped out. She wore a long black robe which hid her bigger figure well. Her hair neat, shorter and old world professional.

"Be seated," Grace nodded and took her seat behind the bench. "Today's proceedings will be recorded audibly since we do not have a stenographer. Date October 15th. First order of Business. Mr. Kusakari, you have Beginnings business for me to review?"

"Yes Grace."

"Mr. Kusakari, outside this courtroom I will find it a pleasure to get to know your acquaintance on a personal level, but in my courtroom, you will call me 'your honor' or Judge Hawthorn' understood."

"Yes . . . your honor."

"Good, bring the business forward."

Henry grabbed a few of his folders and brought them to her bench. "Joe wanted you to handle these. These are petitions that were given to our former Rev. Bob to annul three different dedications. He wants you to handle them."

"Very well." Grace handed the folders to her assistant. "Carol, thank you. Mr. Kusakari tell Mr. Slagel I will review and set up hearing times. If you and Mr. Hoi can wait around our fair city after these proceeding, I'll schedule times."

Henry shrugged. "Sure." He returned to his seat.

"All right." Grace breathed out. "This is the first initial discovery hearing. Basically I want to set up final discovery and a tentative jury pool day. Gentlemen how does one week from today sound for final discovery?"

Henry nodded. "Sounds good to me."

Danny leaned into Trish over an open date book. "Your honor the twenty-second is busy in the afternoon for me, could it be morning, early?"

"Nine a.m.?" Grace suggested then peered to her assistant. "Schedule final discovery October twenty-second for nine a.m.. All right. Moving on. I want to see where we are with evidence. Final discovery will determine whether or not we need more time. I'll set a tentative jury pool dat for the twenty-fifth. As for now, let's see where we stand evidence wise and present our objections to what we have to date. Mr. Kusakari, will you make your formal appearance and let us know what you have."

Henry looked dumbfounded.

“Stand up, state your name and tell us what you have.” Grace told him.

“Sorry.” Henry stood. “I’ve never did this before.”

“Understandable. Go on.” Grace nodded.

“I . . . Have our video testimonies,” Henry flipped through his notes. “Some documentation and testimony from Mrs. Slagel herself. Some letters . . .” Henry turned a page. “And some witnesses in mind.” He went to sit down.

“Any names?” Grace asked.

“Of?” Henry questioned.

“Witnesses?”

“Nothing etched in stone yet. Ideas though.” Henry told her.

“You’ll give me and Mr. Hoi a complete list or at least what you have by next week?”

“Yes your honor.” Henry sat fully down.

“Can I have my copy of your list?” Grace asked.

“Oh, uh . . .” Henry fluttered his lips. “I didn’t make one. I can write it down for you while I’m waiting on those trial dates.”

“That will work.” Grace made a note. “And possible a copy for Mr. Hoi?”

“Yeah, sure.” Henry nodded.

“Anything else?” Grace asked.

“Nope. That’s it.” Henry tossed his hands up and hid the sneaky grin that crept upon his face. He knew Danny was next and it was time to see Danny under the ‘Grace’ pressure.

“Mr. Hoi.” Grace looked at Danny. “Will you make your formal appearance.”

“Yes, your honor.” Danny stood up and ran his hand down his tie. “Good morning. I’m Daniel Jefferson Hoi, representation for the defendant Andrea Winter-Slagel. This is Ms. Patricia Koenig, my legal assistant.”

Trish stood slightly. “Morning your honor.”

Grace nodded.

“Your honor . . .” Danny held up a folder. “If I may pass out what I have?”

“You may.”

“Permission to approach the bench?”

“Permission granted.”

Danny carried one folder up to Grace. “We the defense intend to prove Andrea Slagel’s innocence in a trial of treason through written historical documentation, discrediting the video testimony. . .” He gave a mouth open Henry his folder and Danny returned to his seat. “Witness and physical evidence.” Danny opened his own folder. “I have intent to file a motion to dismiss the video evidence your honor.”

“On what grounds Mr. Hoi.”

“On the grounds that no member of defense was present, and all of those witnesses whose video testimony will be presented, are now deceased. There is no way for them to rebuke or dispute.”

“I expect that motion given to me Monday morning for my review before final discovery.” Grace wrote something down. “I’m seeing this physical evidence and historical evidence list. Where are the witness list.”

“Page fourteen your honor.”

Henry, mouthing the word, ‘fourteen’ finally flipped open his folder. His

loud gasp of surprise at Danny's presentation was barely hid.

"I see." Grace nodded.

"Aside from Rev. Bob." Danny said. "You may notice a witness on there a Mr. John Matoose. Mr. Matoose is a quadriplegic on a respirator at this time. Now, not that we're going for the Christopher Reeve effect, but we may need to transport the jury and yourself to the hospital if his health doesn't improve."

"Request granted." Grace closed her folder. "Mr. Hoi, very nicely presented." She shifted her eyes quickly to Henry who gasped. "Very well. Discovery is adjourned until next Thursday. Mr. Kusakari I will expect you back here in one hour for those schedules. Good afternoon." Grace stood up.

Henry only nodded. He barely got time to stand up like Danny and Trish when Grace rose and left the courtroom. He turned his head to Danny who was closing his briefcase. "Danny."

"Yes?" Danny looked at him.

"You said you didn't know what was going to happen. You said in the truck you were dumbfounded."

"Yes I did." Danny grinned.

"Why didn't you two tell me what to expect?"

Danny chuckled. "Right Henry. Why would I want you to be prepared. I want to win. Let's go Trish, let's hit the mess hall while we wait to ride Henry back."

Henry's mouth stayed open as the two arrogantly walked by him so smug down the aisle and from the courtroom. "Bastards." Henry gasped. "I'll show them. Ha." Gathering up attitude along with his cheesy manilla folders, Henry in a huff, was the last to leave the court room.

Beginnings, Montana

It was a silver freezer case, small, and it sat in the corner of the small back room. The freezer sometimes referred to as the dust collector. Since Dean and Ellen could barely remember when they went in there. Emotionally, Ellen stood before the case closing the lid. Her hands shook as she turned the key lock on the case, secured it and placed the key in her pocket. Slowly, hand moving across the dust on the top of that freezer, Ellen stepped from the back room of the cryo-lab.

She tried to smile when a sad whimper came from Bub the savage. "I know." She said then saw Andrea standing there. "Sorry."

"Mind occupied?" Andrea asked.

"Very." Ellen walked to the counter.

Andrea smiled at Bub then held up a folder in a showing manner to Ellen. "Done." She set it in front of Ellen. "I suppose it's the last."

"The last." Ellen laid her hand on top of it and sat down.

"Did you review the others?"

"No." Ellen shook her head. "I know what I came up with. I was waiting for yours."

Closing her mouth, Andrea nodded. "I suppose you want to see those in private?"

"Do you mind?"

“Not at all.” Andrea walked over to her. “Joe and I would love to have you for supper tonight. We can talk about other things, my trial perhaps. Danny had the first meeting.”

“I’d . . . I’d like to talk about other things.”

“Everything works out.” Andrea laid her hand on Ellen’s cheek. “The Good Lord never places upon our shoulders more than we can handle. Remember that.”

Ellen slowly nodded her head.

“If you
need
me. You
know
where to
find
me.”

“Thank you.” Ellen watched Andrea start to leave. “Andrea.”

“Yes?” Andrea turned around.

“Can you . . .” Ellen cleared her throat, emotions caused her voice to crack. “Could you be the one to explain this to my father. I . . . I can’t. I can’t, not to him.”

“If you’d like.”

“I’d like.”

“Then I will. But he’ll be the only person I speak to regarding this.”

“I appreciate that.”

Andrea’s deep nostril breath rang out in the room, she gave a reassuring smile to Ellen then turned and walked out.

Ellen peered down to the folders. Her results set off to the right. She separated Andrea’s, Jason’s and Johnny’s result folders. Wringing the nervousness from her hands she reached for Johnny’s. “Here I go Bub.” Slowly she opened it. Ellen only blinked then closed it and placed it on top of hers. She opened Jason’s and projected the same response. A calm, cool, one. Andrea’s was last and Ellen, without hesitation flipped it open. Her exhale came out in the post reading of the final result. She gathered the folders and placed all four in one. She shook her head and looked at Bub. “There has to be a reason. An explanation, right.” Her mood charged up some. “Right.” Ellen nodded. “I missed something back there. I know it.” She moved with determination to the small back room. Once inside she pulled out her key and went back to the small silver freezer case. “I missed something.”

^^^

“I’m not a secretary, Dr. Dean.” Johnny griped.

“You are absolutely right,” Dean nodded. “You aren’t. My God, I’ve trained you for better.”

“You’re not the only doctor.”

“True.” Dean said.

“Andrea?”

“Busy with the church thing. Jason has a meeting.”

“Ellen?” Johnny suggested.

Dean went silent and lost all ‘up’ to him. “I’m gonna assume she’s really busy with the pap smear slides she has, she won’t let me down the cryo-lab.”

“Well what’s so important that you have to stop typing notes and I have to stop with the blood work?”

“Health issue Johnny. I do this or my notes.”

“Do your notes, I’ll do the emergency.”

“Excellent.” Dean smiled and handed Johnny the chart. “Glen, you know, at his older age has trouble. So he’s in room three with a fecal impaction.”

Johnny nervously chuckled and withdrew his hand. “Notes.”

From his pocket Dean tossed Johnny the little dictation tape. “Notes.” He stepped back. “Wish me luck. Everything’s ready, I’ve all ready started.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Johnny walked over to the computer. “Great choice for today.” He bitched to himself as he sat down. “I’m a secretary or I’m an enema.” He placed the tape in the player and put the headphones on. “Let’s see,” Johnny peered to the screen, rewound the tape some and pressed ‘play’. He read and bobbed his head from side to side positioning his hands on the keyboard. With a nod, Johnny hit a portion of the tape that wasn’t already typed. His fingers clicked, then stopped. He’d back up the tape, play and type again. In the midst of ‘really on a roll’ Johnny stopped. He tilted his head. Nothing was coming out. “What?” Bringing his hand to the player, Johnny paused and shook his head. “Swell Dr. Dean, don’t shut off your tape player while your talking. Boring.” Just as Johnny reached to fast forward, he pulled back his hand with a wide grin and jumped to his feet. “No.” He smiled wider. “No, I am not this lucky.” Just to be sure, he rewound the tape, played it and listened again. “God, you must love me.” He stopped the player, pulled off the headset, looked up to the ceiling with a silent ‘thank you’ and pulled the tape from the player.

Ellen couldn’t breath. Her chest was crushing and her air left her as fast as all hope did. The cold metal of the silver freezer case was soothing to her headache that began to pound. Against the locked freezer Ellen leaned, forehead pressed to the surface, hands flush to both sides of her face.

“El.” Johnny stepped into that back room. Not a smile upon his face, he had even taken the time to mess up his hair to give himself that extra look of dismay.

“Johnny.” Ellen sprang up surprised at the intrusion. “Hey, uh, what are you doing here?”

“This is not a good time.” Johnny backed up. “I don’t know what I was thinking. I’m sorry.”

“No, Wait.” Ellen flew forward grabbing his arm. “There’s reason you came down here. What is it.”

Johnny’s exhale was dramatically long and loud. He clenched his jaws and stared up to the ceiling. “I . . . I came across . . .” He shook his head. “Not today El. Some other time.”

“You obviously felt it was important. What?”

Johnny swallowed loudly. “I was just bothered, I’m probably making more

out of it, that's why I thought later would be better." He turned his back and Ellen grabbed his arm.

"Johnny, what is it?" She asked softly.

Johnny smiled before facing her somber again. "I came across something that really bothered me. It . . . it has nothing to do with what's going on today."

Ellen closed her eyes. "That's a relief."

"It has to do with Alex. Maybe because, you know, she's my baby sister and all but . . ."

"What's going on with Alex."

"I think you should listen to what I heard." He reached into the lab coat he still wore and lifted the small tape. "You don't have to now. But when you get a chance. It just really, really bothered me El." He gave it to her. "I'm sorry."

"What is . . ." Ellen felt the heaviness return when she looked at the small cassette tape in her hand. Dean's tape. His handwriting. His audible notes and Ellen was afraid to listen.

^^^

"So that's basically what I want to do." Frank explained to his father, Jason and Robbie. "Full squads, twenty four hour coverage."

Joe whistled as he leaned back in the chair. "That's a lot of men."

"That's pretty much all of our men." Frank walked over to a chair next to Robbie. He started to sit. "I originally wanted to . . . ow." Frank sprang up and paced. "I originally wanted to have men posted at each weak . . ."

"Frank." Joe interrupted.

"What?"

"Why did it hurt to sit?" Joe questioned. "Not that it has anything to do with anything. But why?"

"Oh, my ass hurts."

Robbie snickered.

Joe shifted his eyes with a warning to Robbie then back to Frank. "Why . . . why does you ass hurt. Did you get arrowed there?"

"No. Fuckin Dean rammed me."

Robbie lost it in laughter.

"Excuse me?" Joe questioned.

"Rammed me." Frank repeated. "Stuck a needle so hard in my . . ." He paused when he heard his father's exhale. "What?"

"Nothing. So go on. You were saying about the weaker points."

"Yeah, originally I wanted to have men posted at each weak point. But, we have so many, that would take too many men and exhaustion could hit at . . . Fuck!"

"What?" Joe jumped back.

"Fuck Dad. You thought I was making a gay reference. Dean?" Frank fluttered his lips. "Anyhow."

Joe rolled his eyes. "I'm never getting out of this meeting, am I?"

"Yeah." Frank answered. "Anyhow, between Robbie and myself, all twenty four hours will be covered as far as running security goes. You know,

tracking checks, perimeter checks.”

“You’ve moved us to level four security. That’s pretty high.”

“Better four than two and not see it coming.” Frank said. “Or be prepared.”

Joe looked at the figures before him. “That’s a lot of manpower Frank. Can we afford it?”

“Can we afford not to? No. If we have the coverage our people feel safe. If our people don’t feel safe. I’m not doing my job. I hate not doing my job.”

“What about our access road to Bowman. Still safe?”

“Yep.” Frank nodded. “Our road and Danny’s tracking did not fail us. We were out smarted. Out smarted by fuckin savages. It won’t happen again. When Danny gets back, he’s adjusting that hillside tracking to pick up savages. The perimeter beams on the road make it safe. That’s why I don’t think they took the road.”

“They watched us.” Jason commented.

“He speaks.” Joe pointed. “I thought you fell asleep.”

“I did, for about thirty seconds. I just have a lot on my mind.” Jason said. “I was merely commenting though, that they had to have watched us to know those beams were in place on the road. Or how else would they know our vulnerable spots.”

Robbie who also was silent, spoke up. “Our vulnerable spots will slowly not be vulnerable anymore. It’s a shame we have to wait until they are hit before we know they’re vulnerable.”

Joe slowly spun his views to Robbie. “My God aren’t you becoming the literary speaking guy.”

Jason looked up. “That’s because he’s the author of the new best selling novel of Beginnings.”

Robbie immediately turned pale and cringed in his chair.

Frank chuckled. “Well he’s gonna have to wait in line behind that other best selling author . . .” He walked to Joe’s desk dropping the remainder of his notes. “Yeah, I can’t wait until my turn to read it. Letters afar, the Bobby and Helen story. Now that’s the makings of a best seller. Maybe you could learn from it Robbie.” Frank moved to the door. “I have rounds, I’ll check back later.”

When the door closed, Robbie slid in his chair, closed his eyes and let out his silent sigh of relief.

Joe waved a pen at Robbie. “You are lucky that the everyday, common sense, portion of your bothers brain is permanently mentally disabled.”

“Dad, I . . .”

“I don’t want to hear it.” Joe stood up. “I don’t want to know. I’m gonna play dumb like Frank. I want no parts of that book.”

Robbie smiled. “So you aren’t gonna read it?”

“Nope.” Joe walked to the door. “Jason, let’s go finish up in distribution and call it a day.”

“Calling it a day sounds good to me.” Jason followed.

“Dad.” Robbie nervously stood up. “Really, it isn’t that bad. It isn’t. Since you’re not reading it, I don’t want you to think it is.”

“Oh I don’t know about that Robert.” Joe opened the door. “I have to tell you. After reading that little sample, you’ve already given to me a whole new meaning behind the phrase, ‘just hanging out in your boxer shorts.’” Joe smiled. “Bye son.”

With a close of the door, and a close of his eyes, Robbie let out an ‘oh God’ and plopped back down in the chair.

^^^

Ellen still felt the flutter in her stomach walking out of the cryo-lab tunnels. Thinking back, the feeling she had of when she listened to the tape was so strong with her. That tiny tape, like every other bit of evidence she came across was tucked in its first home, her lab coat pocket, from there it would go to her drawer.

Emerging from the tunnels, Ellen couldn’t believe how much the day had changed so quickly. In the short time span she was in the cryo-lab, the sky had become gray and dismal. So fast it happened, so dark . . . so much like her life. A light drizzle of rain fell upon her, cold it was, almost freezing, a mist that chilled her to her bones. She kept her pace steady, despite the fact she was getting wet. She wasn’t in any hurry to face the music.

To Johnny Slagel he felt like he was in a movie. In the waiting room looking for that Old Sports Illustrated to read while waiting on results, the climax unfolded. With a large roaring crack of thunder he saw Ellen, wet, enter the clinic, she held her folder, and better yet to Johnny, a look of despair. He snuck to the door of the waiting room and watched her go into the lab. He clenched his fist in excitement and followed.

“Oh, my God,” Dean exclaimed, stumbling off his stool in the lab as he stood. “My wife.” He grinned and moved to her. “El, you are soaking wet.”

“It’s um, raining.” She wiped the back of her hand across her face.

Hands on Ellen’s shoulders, Dean looked into her eyes. He stared for a long time. “Something is so wrong, isn’t it?”

Ellen could only nod.

“You’ve been avoiding me.”

“Yes.” Ellen swallowed.

“I see.” Dean nodded slowly. “I . . . I was worried you know.” He stepped back. “And I went through it in my mind.”

“Dean.”

“Let me finish.”

“I’ve been here before with you.” Dean looked up at her. “The pulling back. The not wanting me to touch you . . .”

“Dean.”

“Who is it El?” Dean asked. “I can handle it. I know it’s not Frank.”

“You think . . . you think I’m with someone else?”

“Yes.”

Ellen shook her head and let out an emotional chuckle.

“I think it’s someone from New Bowman. Hal or Sgt Ryder, I . . .”

“It’s not them. It’s . . . It’s Bev.” Ellen laid the folder on the counter.

"You're not involved or interested in someone else?"

"No. My God Dean I love you."

"El." Dean smiled. "I thought . . . never mind what I thought. It's Bev. Bev? Oh, El, I understand why you're upset about this, but . . ."

"Dean. Stop." Ellen held up her hand. "Let me say what I have to say."

"All right." Dean listened.

"Things, things have been happening. Little bits of information, I won't get into, but this information doesn't work in your favor. Like the hysterectomy she knew about but wasn't supposed to. Things like that."

"El, there's explanations for that."

"Yes, I know." Ellen nodded. "But I want this over with. I want this Bev thing behind us. Every single hour it got worse and worse for me. Dealing with it. You're my husband and my love for you, tells me to believe in you."

"Thank you for that."

"But, the human side of me, it couldn't take it. I . . ." Ellen reached out and laid her hand on the folder. "I did an amniocentesis today on Bev."

"You . . . you what!" Dean's emotional words conveyed his shock.

"I did an amnio . . ."

"Oh my God El."

"And I have the results right . . ."

"You had no right!" Dean yelled.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. You had no right. How . . . how can you doubt me. And this, going behind my back, doing the amnio, running test . . ."

"Stop it."

"No, you stop it El." Dean pointed "I have never done anything to make you think I would cheat on you. Never. What the hell? I of all people don't deserve this."

Ellen looked away. "I have the results." She grabbed the folder.

"I don't care."

"You don't care?"

"I don't care!" Dean yelled.

"You don't want to know what they say?"

"I don't need to know what this . . ." His hand flung out hitting against the folder she held "Says. I never slept with Bev. Test or no test, that baby is not mine!"

Ellen turned and began to walk from the lab. She brushed past Johnny in the hall.

"El." Dean raced to her. "Stop."

Ellen did. "What?"

"Where are you going? We're not done."

"I believe we are Dean. When you calm down, and you are ready to discuss this." She showed the folder. "Find me. Until then, I'm not going to stand before you and get yelled at. I won't."

"You have to understand where I'm coming from."

"And *you* have to understand where *I'm* coming from. Calm down. When you do. Find me." Ellen turned around.

"El."

"Don't follow me." She walked faster, folder in hand, down the corridor.

Dean grunted and tossed his hands up. After running his fingers through his hair, he spun around and went back into the lab. Johnny was standing there. Dean plopped down with a slam of his hand to the counter.

“Dr. Dean.”

“Not now.”

“Yes, now.” Johnny put on the nervous front. “I couldn’t help but hear the yelling. And what it was about.”

“Swell.”

“I know you’re upset. But . . . why?” Johnny waited for Dean’s eyes to raise up. “She says she has results. Whose field is DNA? Who studied it their whole life? I may be out of line and . . . God” Johnny exhaled. “El’s gonna kill me. But, the sample is in the fridge. If anyone is gonna run those DNA tests, and run them accurately, shouldn’t it be you?”

Dean closed his eyes and nodded. “Thank you Johnny. Thank you. You are so right.”

Johnny moved out of the way as Dean hurried to the refrigerator. As Dean reached in and sought out the obvious sample, behind Dean’s back, Johnny smiled.

^^^

“Oh!” So motherly Andrea gasped, holding that small towel in her hand. “Oh, look at you.” She raised up the towel to Robbie and holding his chin, she began to wipe off his face. “Soaking wet. That’s freezing rain. You are gonna catch the death of cold.”

“It’s awful.”

“You poor boy. Did you get any sleep yet?”

“No.” Robbie complained. “My Dad has me busy. And . . . I don’t even have time to change these wet clothes.”

“Oh Joe Slagel will hear about this. You poor thing.” Andrea tossed down the towel and stepped back. “So what brings you to the clinic.” She raised her voice to a singing one. “I bet it has to do with tonight.”

“Hey, that’s pretty good. It does.” Robbie grinned.

“You know I can’t tell you.” Andrea smiled in return.

“Tell me what?”

“About tonight.”

“Are we talking about the same thing?” Robbie asked.

“I believe so. The church gathering?”

“Um, no.” Robbie shook his head. “I came here because you know, you’re mine and Frank’s favorite stepmother ever.”

“Ah how sweet.” She reached up and touched his cheek.

“And you know Andrea, it’s cold. Really cold out there and we have to work all night.”

Andrea swayed her head. “The pressure of keeping us safe.”

“So like, we were brotherly wondering if we could, for this really, really, really cold wet night . . . get you to make us some soup?”

"Sweet Jesus Robbie, you know I take care of you boys. Big thermos of my coffee as well?"

"If it's not a problem." Robbie said innocently.

"I was fixing to make brownies as well."

"Andrea if you would . . . if you could toss a couple brownies in there. We'd be praising you."

Andrea blushed and tossed out her hand. "Don't you worry about this watch. Your tummies will be filled."

"Thank you."

"So this means you're coming to the gathering. It's before your watch. You have to be there. You really have to be there."

"I uh . . . I don't know." Robbie scratched his head. "I didn't know about a gathering."

"I sent a memo to the security office."

Robbie fluttered his lips and laughed. "There you have it. Never send a memo to security. I never go to Frank's office to read his bulletin board."

"Can you come? Seven. We're introducing the new pastor of the church."

"Oh." Robbie nodded. "Um, sure, why not. I'll be there for you. After all, you're making us soup."

Andrea tapped him on the cheek. "Can you get Frank there as well?"

"Frank in church?" Robbie laughed. "No. But . . . I'll be there." Robbie pointed. "And I better go, I want to catch some sleep."

"You do that. See you tonight."

Robbie with a raised hand wave, turned and walked from Andrea's office. He wasn't much of a church person, he had his fill while investigating Rev. Bob and he was deemed ministry assistant. But if it was for Andrea's soup and brownies, church was a small price to pay.

^^^

"Ha!" Dean shrieked loudly as he jumped from his stool in the lab. He grinned widely and with a stiff index finger he pressed the print button for his results.

"Good?" Johnny asked.

"Great." Dean stood before the printer. "Boy, was I stupid. El, had to come up with these. She had to. Here . . . Here I'm thinking she's trying to railroad me, when all my poor wife was trying to do was . . ." Dean grabbed the printed results. "Help me." He rolled them up and hurried across the lab. "I have to find her." His tennis shoes squeaked when he made his sudden stop at the door. "Oh and Johnny, thanks again. I won't tell her you told me."

With a wink, and a click of his tongue, Johnny pointed at Dean. When Dean was gone, Johnny had to contain his laughter. He walked over to the fridge and opened it. His face turned red as he held in his laughing, reaching for Bev's sample and holding it up. "Better get rid of you before Ellen comes back. Huh?" He snickered, reached into his lab coat pocket and pulled out an identical tube with an identical label. Johnny held it up next to the one he took from the fridge. He looked at them both. The sample he pulled from his coat had just a smidgen

more. Johnny knew the amount wasn't what was important, it was the results *that* sample would read. After all, who was going to notice a drop more of amniotic fluid, when Ellen didn't even notice the slight difference in cloudiness. And she was the one that took the 'real' Bev sample. He placed the sample from his coat, in the refrigerator rack, and the sample he removed from the refrigerator, Johnny took to the sink. "As for you." He removed the cap. "Never to be seen or tested again." He poured it down the drain, smiling the entire time.

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Deep in a conversation with Elliott, the test result folder right by her side, Ellen heard the squeak of Dean's tennis shoes before she saw him. From her view of Elliott in the bed, she turned her head to the door.

Dean walked in, rolled up paper in his hands. "El." He tried to hide his smile. "Can we . . . can we talk. Please?"

"I don't think it's a good . . ."

"Please." Dean stepped to her. "I owe you an apology for acting the way I did. You were completely right in what you did. My reaction was wrong." Dean stared at her, waiting.

"Elliott." Ellen looked to him and grabbed her folders. "I'll uh, be back later."

Dean took Ellen's arm and walked with her from the room,. He looked back to Elliott. "Thanks Sgt. Ryder, she won't be long."

"Dean . . ."

"Not yet." Around the bend he walked with her taking her to Andrea's office. "In here."

"O.K., sure." Ellen followed him in.

Dean closed the door, smiled, walked to Ellen and kissed her. "Thank you."

"Dean." Ellen shook her head stepping back from him. "Why are you thanking me?"

"For ending this. I was pissed. Don't get me wrong, but you know, after I thought about it, I realized. You weren't trying to condemn me, you were just trying to put it all behind us."

"I was."

"And I'm sorry." Dean tried to kiss her but Ellen stepped back. "I'm sorry. Can we not fight. Please."

"Dean, we need to talk about this."

"Yes. Yes we do. My reaction was way out of line. But, hey, at least we won't have Bev in between us anymore right?" Dean smiled. "Right?"

Ellen didn't answer.

"El?"

"Dean, she is gonna be there. Big time."

"She's a little trouble maker. And if you're worried about an affair that she says we had, the lie about the baby should show you she's lying about the affair."

Ellen's heart skipped a hard beat. "Lying? I have to question who the one

that's lying?"

"Not me."

"Dean . . ."

"El, really." He laughed and handed her the rolled up piece of paper. "The baby is not mine. How can I be the one lying. It's not even close to being mine." He watched Ellen read the results. "You aren't smiling. I thought you'd smile, You were trying to tell me you got the same results, right?"

"No."

The smile dropped from Dean's face. "No? You . . . you didn't get the same results?"

"No, Dean I didn't." She handed it back to him.

"Then you made a mistake."

"I doubt it."

"The results you got were wrong." Dean said.

"I doubt it."

"El." Dean sort of snickered. "You were tired. You had a bad experience with savages. You ran the tests emotional. It's understandable. You messed up somewhere. But, hon, hating to say it." Dean closed one eye and tilted his head. "I'm the expert here. My results say that baby is not mine."

"How convenient, don't you think?"

"What?" Dean was lost.

"That your results, yours Dean are the ones that say the baby isn't yours. Your results. What do you take me for, a fool? Did you think I'd buy that, tired, bad experience, emotional line? That I messed up? That you're the expert?"

"El, my results . . ."

"Mean nothing!" Ellen snapped and began to rant emotionally. "*If* I was too tired, *If* I was too emotional. *If* I screwed up, then explain . . ." She opened the one folder and pulled four others out. "Andrea's." She dropped the folder on the desk. "Jason's." She dropped another. "Johnny's." She dropped another, then the last one. "Four people ran that test Dean. Four. All of them saying the same thing." Ellen flipped open every single folder. "All of them stating . . ." Her hand slammed on each result with her each word., "Positive." *Slam*. "Positive." *Slam*. "Positive." *Slam*. "We're all not emotionally screwed up. We're all not tired! We all got the same results, but you!" Ellen swept up her folders in her arms. "Did you think for one second I wouldn't double, triple, quadruple check. How perfect for you Mr. DNA Expert, that *you* came up with the results, that disprove *your* paternity." Papers sticking out of the folders she carried, Ellen spun harshly and flew from that office.

Dean stood speechless. His pale face showed his shock. He closed his eyes tightly shaking his head. He wanted to follow Ellen, but Dean just couldn't move.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Quantico Marine Headquarters

George laughed. It made his head wobble too much for his liking, but he enjoyed the laugh he got as he was on the phone. Holding the receiver up so as not to clank against his metal neck brace, George smiled. "And what about the amnio Ellen took from Bev?" George semi-nodded. "Good. Glad you got rid of it. At first when you pulled the switch and you told me you didn't get rid of the original, Johnny, I wanted to kill you. Too risky, but this . . . this son was just the icing on the cake." George closed his eyes, his shoulders bounced and a tear ran down his face from his laughter. "He's what? Oh, my god." George laughed again. "Well stay away from that lab now. Reactions won't be hard to miss anymore. Now . . ." George let out that breath of after-laughter. "I need to know about what happened with you people and the savages. It's vital."

Beginnings, Montana

His hair peeked over his fingertips that held it up and Dean looked lost. Two tests results laid before him on the counter. One flat, the other slightly rolling from his carrying of it. Both results read differently. "I couldn't have made a mistake. I couldn't be the father." As Dean, alone in that lab, ran his hand down his face, he heard the clearing of the throat. He turned and looked. "El."

Ellen held two mugs of coffee as she slowly walked, folder tucked under her arm into the lab. She set down both mugs and folder before a surprised Dean. "Hey."

"Hey."

"Things . . . things got out of hand a little while ago."

"I know."

"Peace offering?" Ellen pushed the mug to Dean, as she did she saw the results laying there. Her eyes shifted to him. "Dean?"

"I ran them again." He grabbed both of his results and pushed them over.

"I want to talk."

"Good." Dean closed his eyes. "El, El I love you. I really love you."

"I know." Ellen laid her hand on his. "I love you. I've done some thinking and I'd like to tell you something."

"Please."

"Dean." Ellen breathed out. "I have made mistakes in our relationship. Big mistakes. Who am I to judge you. I know this. You, you took me back, you gave me a chance and look at us. We are so good together. I love you Dean, more than I ever thought possible. So much, that even if I never made the mistakes I did, I would still be standing here saying this to you. I want this behind us I want to move on." Ellen spoke compassionately. "I will move on. We'll deal with the baby. I'll forget the incident. All I want is for the affair to stop. Can you stop the affair?"

Dean only looked up at her.

"We can get past this. Talk about it, work through it. But I believe." She gripped his hand. "I believe we are stronger than this problem. If you love me, just stop the affair. End it. I know people are gonna say I look like a fool, but who am I to care what people say. Right."

"You'll look like a fool El."

"That's what I said. But I don't care."

"A fool because you think I would be with her."

"What?" Ellen, shocked, withdrew her hand. "Dean?"

"I wasn't with her."

"But the results."

"Screw the results. Screw them." Dean filling with a rising rage, stood up. "I can not believe you would stand here and ask me to stop the affair. An affair that isn't going on. Never has!"

"Dean, stop right now before you . . ."

"No!" He stepped to her. "No! I'm pissed off El. You believe in me, You love me. Bullshit! Bullshit!"

"What about everything else that has happened. The evidence."

"Evidence? El, my God this isn't a court case. I'm your husband."

"And you made a mistake." Ellen grabbed her folder off the counter. "People make mistakes Dean. I have proof."

"You have nothing. It's not my kid."

"It is!"

"I was set up!"

"How Dean! How!" Ellen started to lose her cool. "I checked, don't think I haven't. I checked the old freezer. The first thing that came to my mind was she stole a sperm sample of yours. Not a single one was touched. And I didn't just check once, I checked until, my fingers were so cold they couldn't move! I believed you didn't do it."

"What changed your mind?"

Ellen gasped in shock. "I can't believe you just asked me that. I'm holding paternity tests that show it's your baby. What more do you want. The truth is out. Dean, there is only one way that this child could have been fathered by you, and that is because you slept with her. All right." She calmed herself back down. "I know when we get backed into a corner we fight. We fight. But don't fight anymore. You have to stop lying."

"Lying. Now I'm a liar. A cheat and a liar."

"Dean, the test prove the baby is yours!" Ellen yelled. "If you don't admit it and stop hiding it we will never get beyond it."

"Fuck you Ellen! I will not admit to something I didn't do!"

"No!" Ellen tossed the folders at Dean, they smacked just below his chin and the papers flew about. "Fuck you!"

Dean felt his throat swell from his anger, Ellen had flew out of the lab. A sweep of his hand across the counter sent the papers that fell sailing about and Dean chased Ellen out. "Ellen!" He called her name loudly running from the lab. He saw her bolt out the doors of the clinic. "Ellen." He followed her out, calling her name, trying to be louder than the rain that poured down. He ran faster, his feet splashing in the deep icy water, slipping some in his pursuit. She didn't stop. Dean caught up. "Ellen stop! Look at me!"

Ellen stopped and turned around. "Don't come near me!" Ellen backed up.

"I was willing to forget it all! Willing to let it go! But not now! Not ever! I want you out of my house! I want you out of my life!" She turned and stormed off.

"Ellen!" Dean chased her again. His heart beat stronger with each chasing step he took. "Ellen stop." In his rage, rain pouring down his face, he reached out, grabbed hold of her arm and spun her around to face him. "Don't do this!"

"Don't you ever grab me like that again!" Emotionally spinning away from Dean and out of his hold, using the weight of her body, Ellen swung out her free arm and with a hard 'Crack' nailed Dean across his face with the back of her open hand. Dean's head flung slightly to the side and he kept it there not looking at her. Ellen heaved a breath as she turned to stand up straight. She swiped her hand down her wet face, stared heavily at Dean for a second then turned and stormed off.

Eyes closed, Dean dropped his head. So much hurt filled him, that not even the abundance of rain that poured down upon him in the middle of the street, could wash away the pain he felt.

^^^

"And he cheated, Joe." Henry bitched. "Cheated. Can you believe that. I looked stupid. Really stupid. Who knew it was going to be a real trial thing,"

"Danny." Joe looked up from behind his desk rubbing his temples. "Henry . . ."

"He could have let me know. Not that I want to look like the hot shot attorney and all but I didn't want to look stupid."

"Henry."

"What?"

"Do you see this?" Joe pointed to the vein in his temple. "It's throbbing Henry. Which means I'm millimeters away from a goddamn stroke. Do you want that? Do you want me to have a stroke. Because that's what this bitch session of yours is doing to me. I have problems of my own. I have to get home. My wife has a church gathering and I have five children including yours at my house to deal with."

"Joe?" Henry's whole demeanor changed. "Are you watching Nick tonight. That is really nice of you to . . ."

"Henry. Enough." Just as Joe slammed his hand down the phone rang. "Christ, what now?" Gruff, Joe answered the phone. "Hello."

"Joe." George said his name with a tad of 'humble'.

"I'll be a son of a bitch." Joe leaned forward. "Didn't you hang up on me last time." Grabbing a pencil, Joe wrote on his scratch pad the name 'George' and showed it to Henry.

Henry perked up with excitement.

"Yes I did. I realize now why you called. I think we know what the problem is." George said.

"Just to be clear. Why don't you tell me."

"Savages."

"I'm listening." Joe leaned back.

"Let's set up a telephone meeting about this situation. My council and

yours. I'll give you my thoughts, you share yours. Tomorrow, noon your time."

"I can do that."

"Tomorrow then."

When Joe heard the click of the hang up on the other line, slowly he set down his phone.

"What did he want?" Henry asked.

"To talk about the savages. Seems we have a telephone conference tomorrow with our sworn enemy." Joe nodded. "Like you said before, it could be historical."

"Well don't invite Trish to be there. She gets on my nerves her and her Perry Mason comments."

"Henry."

"No Joe you should have seen her. History or not I wouldn't be able to handle her being there. Not right now, I'm still too bitter."

Joe returned to rubbing his temples as Henry continued to ramble on.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Joe had to give a nudge to Robbie whose head kept falling forward in the third pew of the church.

Robbie sprang up, and sat up, blinking and trying to stay awake. He shortened his night's sleep by one hour for the church gathering and he kept telling himself that vegetable soup would make it all worth it, along with hoping Frank would let him catch some sleep.

"So many of you." Andrea stood before the packed church. "Thank you so much for coming on this cold evening. With everyone here, it truly accentuates the warmth of God."

A few 'amens' came from the congregation.

"I won't keep you long. You know why we're all here. It's exciting. A few of us who sort of helped Rev. Bob run the church, got together to discuss a replacement for him. And we decided on one man." Andrea smiled. "He is someone Rev. Bob placed his trust into. Taught. And took under his religious wing. So we would like to ask him to fill in and be our new pastor." Andrea turned a little. "Robert Slagel?"

"Huh?" Robbie looked up.

"Stand up." Andrea motioned her hand. "Don't be shy."

Robbie did.

"We would like you to be our new reverend. What do you say?"

"Me?" Robbie asked shocked looking around.

"Yes, you were ministry assistant. You learned the ropes. Will you be Rev. Robbie?"

"Me?" Robbie asked again.

"Robert." Joe grumbled in a warning.

"Um . . ." Robbie scratched his head. "Yeah, sure, why not?"

Applause ensued.

"Oh Jesus Christ." Joe covered his face and slid down into the pew.

^^^

Nothing. There was nothing there. Dean checked the case, he figured, probably more than Ellen did. The old silver freezer case in the lab. It hadn't been touched. The sperm samples, the only ones he made were still intact. The blue seals that they ran out of years before, were undisturbed on the freezer vials. And not only that, the safe guard Dean put on them to let him know if Ellen had opened them, was still there as well. Not a vial had been open. Not a drop of his sperm was missing. Dean was baffled.

Hours upon hours he thought about it. He stared at the results, each with two completely different DNA strands. One saying the child was his, the other not even in the same blood line relative. Dean couldn't figure it out. How did it happen? And with each hour that passed, it got harder and harder for Dean to go home. But he did.

It was still early in the evening when Dean got to his house. There was a warning 'silence' that exuded from his home making it worse for Dean as he walked in.

Quiet.

No kids. No sounds. Quiet.

Dean swallowed nervously looking around. He heard shuffling coming from the back and he headed down that hall, looking in each bedroom he passed. He stopped in his bedroom door. Two duffel bags set on the floor, Ellen walked by him to the dresser and poured a drink.

"I figured you'd come back for your things." Ellen downed her drink. "I guess Bev is going to be happy you'll be living with her. One big happy family." She grabbed the bottle again.

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Yes you are."

"And you're drunk."

"I am far from drunk Dean." Ellen slammed down the bottle. "This is my second drink. It's not my last, but it's only my second."

"We need to talk." Dean took the glass from her hand. "Don't . . . don't make me leave. All right. You don't understand what this is like for me."

Ellen laughed.

"No, El. Listen to me. Imagine." Dean made her face him. "Imagine this was the old world. And one morning you're getting ready for work, the news is on the radio, and it says something about a convenience store being robbed. You think nothing of it and go on with your day. That night, the police show up, arrest you. They have finger prints, pictures, you name it. Guilty. The only problem was, you were sound asleep. That's what's happened here. I didn't think twice about the Bev situation because I know I wasn't with her."

"The results say otherwise."

"There has to be an explanation."

"Why can't you just own up to the truth?" Ellen asked emotionally.

"Why can't *you* own up to the truth. I'll tell you why? It's easier for you to believe I did, then try to find out how I was set up."

"Get out." Ellen grabbed the bottle again.

"Ellen I . . ."

"Get out!" Ellen pointed.

"No!" Dean shouted. "Now I am willing to forget this hitting me thing and this . . ."

"Fuck you." Ellen sipped her drink. "Forget what I did? I want you out of my house Dean. The more I think about it, the more I lose all feeling for you."

"No. It's me El, me. I wouldn't do this."

Setting her drink down, Ellen spun to him. "You did and it's over. How long have you been sleeping with her Dean?"

"I haven't. And why would you think I have?"

"The baby for starters."

"You, Ellen are going to feel really stupid when you see how wrong you are." Dean pointed at her. "I will show you how wrong you are over this."

"How did she know about the hysterectomy?"

"I don't know."

"How does she know about the way you make love . . . if she hasn't been

with you.”

This shocked Dean, “What?”

“Oh yeah.” Ellen backed up to her dresser. “She knows things she shouldn’t. Trust me. And Dean, I found things. Notes in your dresser, her metal, notes you left her . . .”

“This is ridiculous. Ellen.” Dean moved to her. “Ellen, stop this. What notes. What letters what metal?” He laid his hand on her face. “Don’t give up on us. Believe me, not this . . .” Dean stopped talking when a handful of things was placed in front of him. “What is this.”

“What I found.”

“I’ve never seen any of this stuff before in my life.”

Ellen had a chuckle to her. “How did I know that was coming.” She grabbed her glass. “And you mentioned about me feeling stupid. Yeah, I feel stupid. Stupid because I actually contemplated staying with you, knowing they way you are with Alex.”

Dean lifted his eyes. “I’m lost. What does Alex have to do with any of this.”

“Nothing really.” Ellen shook her head. “Just another thing to leave you over.”

“What?”

“I told you I want you out of my house. I will let you see the boys, you will not . . . not go anywhere near Alex.”

“You can not stop me from seeing my daughter.”

“Watch me.” Ellen took another drink and put down her glass.

“Why would you even want to stoop that low as to try to keep my from my kid.”

“Because you could care less about her. She makes you cringe. That’s what you told Bev.”

“She’s lying.”

“Oh yeah.” Ellen lifted the gods-eye. “Remember this?”

“Yes. Alex gave that to me when I was leaving Beginnings.”

“Where was it Dean?”

“With my things.”

“Wrong.” Ellen said strongly.

“What do you mean wrong? It was in my . . .”

“It was at Bev’s!” Ellen shouted “Bev had it. Bev gave it to me!”

“And you believed that!” Dean shook his head. “Didn’t it occur to you that she may have come in here to find what she could? Plant these notes, this medal.”

“Yes.”

“And you still believe my daughter disgusts me.”

“Yes.”

“How! How can you even believe that. How can you even begin to think . . .”

A click silenced Dean. “I have this.” Ellen held up a tape player.

“*You’ve got to be kidding.*” Dean’s voice held aggravation as it played through the tiny speaker. “*Alex again? I swear to God she does this to me on purpose. She enjoys making my skin crawl.*”

Before Ellen could even shut off the tape recorder, Dean raged across the

bedroom, snatched the player from her hand and careened it across the room. It smashed against the wall and fell to the floor in pieces. “Now you have nothing Ellen.” Dean placed his face close to hers “How dare you take a conversation out of context to use it against me! Especially with my daughter. I love her! How dare you suggest any less!”

“How dare you act like this with me!”

“What do you expect!” Dean’s voice squealed and cracked with his outrage. His hands flew up and clenched as he stepped away from Ellen. “My life is falling apart right before my eyes and there is nothing . . . nothing I can do. I’m losing everything and you want me to remain calm! I don’t want to lose my life here, El. I won’t!”

“You have!”

“No! You’re my wife . . .”

“Not anymore!” Ellen pulled her wedding ring from her finger and flung it at Dean. It bounced off his chest and fell to the floor. She tried to control her breathing as she watched Dean, so lost, slowly bend down and pick it up. “I want you out Dean.”

“I won’t go.”

“You have no choice.”

“No, El! You have no choice. This is my house, my family and whether or not you have this on . . .” Dean showed her the ring, then tossed it with a slam to the bed. “You are still my wife. I did no wrong! I did nothing and I won’t leave! Not you, not anyone is going to make me give up what I have! Don’t think for one second I will walk away peacefully from it, because I am *not* going down without a fight! You hear me!” Dean knew it showed how upset he was. His face, his neck and heavy breathing. His body trembled in his emotions. So quiet Ellen was as they stared at each other. Dean thought he had gotten through, he felt a speck of hope, a break from the trouble . . . until Ellen walked out.

^^^

“Oh, My God, this is too funny.” Frank laughed.

“I don’t see the humor.” Robbie tossed up his hands. A knapsack was on the diningroom table and Robbie placed the thermos in there.

“Rev. Robbie.” Frank swiped his hand down his own face.

“Enough.”

“Hey, I have us starting at the UD sector and working our way clockwise.”

“Sounds good.”

Frank looked over his shoulder to the sounds of footsteps on the stairs, Jess, tossed hair and looking like he just woke up, placed a shirt over his head. “Morning sleepyhead.”

Jess gave a quirky smile to Frank.

“Of course, I got sleep too.” None of the kids are at the house. I think Dean and Ellen have a special evening planned. Remind me to stop and intrude on the way to the UD perimeter.”

Jess paused to see what Robbie placed in the knapsack. “Big lunch.”

“It’s for me and Frank. We’re working together all night. We wanted some

good things.”

“Oh!” Frank snapped his finger. “Speaking of good things. Jess, the nacho man, it’s been a while. Can you hook me up?”

The corner of Jess’ mouth raised. “Um, yeah, Frank sure. I’ll hook you up.”

Robbie snickered.

“What?” Frank asked. “I hope you weren’t taking that as a dirty comment. Not you . . . Rev. Robbie.”

Jess slid to a stop and back tracked. “She did it.”

“Huh?” Robbie looked.

“I thought Andrea was going to name you pastor. Did you accept?”

“Yes.” Robbie proudly replied.

“Congratulations. You must be honored.” Jess extended his hand to Robbie.

“Uh!” Frank shrieked out. “Don’t encourage this.”

“Why?” Jess asked.

“Because. That’s why.”

“Can’t win an argument with him.” Jess tilted his head and headed to the kitchen. “I’ll get those tortillas.”

“Excellent.” Frank commented then watched Robbie place the Bible in the sack. “Whoa-whoa. What are you bringing that for?”

“To read.”

“To read?” Frank laughed. “I have those sample chapters of the book.”

“I think I should stay clear of that if I’m going to be a man of the cloth.”

“Oh my God.” Frank shook his head. “You don’t have to read the Bible to be a man of the cloth.”

Robbie quickly looked at Frank. “I also need it to prepare for my sermon Sunday.”

“Oh my God.” Frank smacked himself in the face. “Three weeks.”

“Three weeks what?”

“Three weeks you’ll play the holy ruler than you’ll break.”

“I’m the new pastor.”

“Three weeks.” Frank held out his hand.

“You’re on.” Robbie shook it.

“You know what this means don’t you.” Frank watched Robbie place the last thing in the knapsack. “This means, you can’t swear, be rude, crude or obnoxious. You, baby brother are going to be boring.”

“Frank, a person doesn’t need to swear, be rude, crude and obnoxious to be any fun.”

“True.” Frank nodded. “But you need to swear, be rude, crude and obnoxious to be Robbie.” Frank grabbed the sack. “Jess! What about my chips.”

“You’re lucky I like your brother.” Jess came from the kitchen and handed them to Frank. “And if you keep hitting me up for these, you’re going to have to come over to make them.”

“I can do that. Are you going to teach me?” Frank asked and started to walk with Robbie toward the door.

“Sure.” Jess said.

“Do I wear an apron?”

“No.” Jess pretended to be very serious. “If I teach you Frank, you’ll have

to make them naked.”

“Why? Are they messy?” Frank questioned.

Robbie tugged on Frank’s arm. “Let’s go.”

“I don’t know if I like this cooking naked thing.” Frank complained on the way out the door. “I’m so manly, I may accidentally burn parts of me.”

Jess laughed as the door shut, but only for a second, Robbie stuck his head back in.

“You’re bad.” He pointed at Jess.

“I can’t help it. He doesn’t know.” Jess laughed again when the door closed, especially when he heard Robbie yelling in the distance, ‘Frank, fuck, will you shut up about cooking naked.. It was a joke.’

^^^

The second Ellen returned to the house and walked inside, Dean stood up. His eyes fixed upon her. “El.”

Ellen wouldn’t look at him, she moved toward the bedroom.

“El we have to . . .” In his step to Ellen, Dean saw Joe enter. “What’s going on.”

Joe closed the front door. “Son . . .” He motioned his hand over to the diningroom table. “We have to talk.”

Dean peered to where Ellen went, then back to Joe.

“Have a seat.” Joe pulled out a chair from the table. He saw Dean still staring down the hall. “Dean.”

Hesitantly, Dean walked over and joined Joe. He sat down with him. “Meaning no disrespect Joe, but, El and I have to work this out. This is our problem.”

“No, Dean, see. It’s my problem.” Joe spoke soft. “Ellen’s my daughter. She’s hurt. She’s really hurt. When your kid hurts, you hurt.”

“Joe.” Dean exhaled his name. “I didn’t do anything. I swear to you. I swear. I don’t know how any of this came about.”

“Be that as it may.” Joe told him. “Right now Dean, there is a twenty-three year old girl running around Beginnings with your baby. Your baby. How in God’s name is my daughter suppose to take that. Easily, with stride. No? Now . . . I’m coming to you right now, not as the leader of this community, but as a father. Ellen wants you out of this house. You will leave this house. Understand me?” A firmness hit Joe’s voice. “If you don’t leave this house, tonight, right now for as long as she wants you out, then . . . as a father I will take you from this house.”

No sooner did Joe speak those words, and no sooner did Dean lock into the seriousness of Joe’s eyes, that the front door opened and Frank walked in.

“Hey.” Frank said on his entrance.

“Great.” Dean slammed in his hand down on the table. “What? Is Frank your henchman Joe?”

Joe rolled his eyes with a heavy breath and stood facing Frank. “Anyone ever tell you, that you have perfect timing?”

An ornery grin crept up on Frank. “Well, yeah.” He cleared his throat.

“El’s told me that only several occasion. But that’s a personal question Dad, don’t you think?”

“Gees Frank.” Joe cringed.

“Rub it in.” Dean approached Frank. “Go on.”

“Dean, can I help it you don’t have perfect . . .”

“Fuck you, Frank!” Dean yelled.

“Whoa. What?” Frank held up his hand. “Sorry.” He shifted his eyes to his father. “Sensitive subject to some people.”

“Frank.” Joe clenched his jaws.

“You know what Joe?” Dean stepped back. “Don’t bother. He doesn’t need to handle this situation. I’ll go. And it’s yours Frank. Just like you want. Take it all. Take my house! My kids! My wife! Take it!” With a hard spin and heavy footsteps, Dean stormed from the room.

“Thanks.” Frank said then looked to his father. “Why is Dean giving me everything.”

“You . . . you don’t know?” Joe asked.

“Know?”

“Oh my God.” Joe was shocked. “Ellen didn’t come to you about this?”

“About . . . um

“She did not.”

“Did too. I know.”

“What do you know.” Joe asked him.

“About this situation.”

“Oh.” Joe waved his hand at Frank. “You don’t know shit.”

“I know enough to . . . what? Say again.”

At first Joe looked oddly, then realized Frank moved the conversation into his headset. “I hate when you do that. Can’t you hold up a finger or something to let me know.”

Frank held up a finger. “Go ahead Robbie , head up. I’m on my way. And don’t touch. See ya in a few.” Frank turned and walked to the door.

“Frank. Problem?” Joe questioned.

“No, a small uh . . . predator is up at the back gate. No problem. I’m going up to handle it.”

When the door shut, Joe scratched his head. “Small predator?”

Dean watched through the corner of his eye as Ellen finished a drink. “It doesn’t have to be like this.”

“Yes it does.” She gasped out from the burning alcohol and poured another.

“You won’t even look at me.”

“If you were me, would you want to look at you. Good bye Dean.” She brought her glass to her lips.

Dean tossed the straps of his bags over his shoulders. “El . . .”

“Goodbye Dean.”

Dean began to leave and then he stopped. He walked over to her and stood before Ellen. Reaching to his left hand, he gripped his wedding band. Fingers tight on it, ready to pull, Dean couldn’t do it. He couldn’t take it off. “No. No.

I'm not giving up. This is not the end."

"No, Dean. It's just the beginning."

Dean lowered his head and without saying anymore, and after seeing enough of the cold glances of Ellen, he took his bags and left his home.

^^^

The headlight on Frank's jeep shined upon the four men, including Robbie who stood by the perimeter fence just beyond the field. He got out, with his spotlight. "What's going on?" Frank walked to them.

Robbie turned around. "Was checking the perimeter. Happened right before I called you." As soon as Robbie stepped to the side, Frank not only saw it, but heard it.

Its whimpers were high squealing. Its mutated body trembled as the burnt portion of the killer baby was stuck to the perimeter fence. The left wide eye was pressed to the fence and it stared helplessly as Frank shined the light on it.

"Oh man." Frank cringed at the 'normal' baby sounds it made. "It's really hurt."

"We can't get it off. It's stuck." Robbie said.

Frank crouched down in front of the infant. It opened its mouth, face adhered to the metal as it seemlily cried for help. "Shit." He took a long blink

"We've tried to lift its fingers, pushing it." Robbie crouched down next to Frank. "No avail. It's stuck. It leaped at us and well . . . I can't shoot it Frank. None of us can."

"Get me a stick. Frank instructed.

"I tried that."

"Get me a stick." Frank repeated.

Robbie fetched the long stick they used and brought it to Frank.

"Thanks." Frank took it and held the flashlight close to the fence. The baby's chest was charred, the flesh peeling off. He looked for an open spot and placed the tip of the stick through the fence but didn't touch the baby. He held it there as he stood up lowering his radio headset. "Security room come in." He covered the mouth piece and looked to Robbie. "Get me a cloth."

Robbie nodded and backed up.

"This is monitoring."

"Hey, I'm up at the field perimeter." Frank said. "Here's what I need you to do. Leave off the local beams and set the perimeter for 220. Hit the perimeter switch on then off, no hesitation, and on my call."

"Got it."

Frank readied the stick. "One . . . two . . . now."

A short buzz sounded off and Frank pushed the stick through the fence at the same time a high squeal emanated from the baby. A blue single spark set off as the buzz immediately silenced and the baby flew back ten feet from the fence. With another squeal, he rolled himself then slowly and crippled-like tried to get away.

"Keep the fence down." Frank ordered, bent down grabbed the blanket Robbie got for him and headed to the entrance of the fence.

“Frank.” Robbie hurried to him, “Where are you going. Night is not a good time to go out there.”

“That thing is hurt. Keep the lights on me. I’ll be right back.” Flashlight and blanket in hand, Frank stepped outside the safety of the security area.

^^^

Jess’ lunch was no where near as big as the Slagel bother’s lunch. Jess supposed his appetite was no where near their’s as well. A piece of bread, and a pity amount of Vegetable soup Robbie left him. That’s all he planned on taking, that and the hope that the container kept the vegetable soup semi-warm. Grabbing his brown, beat up leather jacket, Jess, lunch in hand moved to the door. He heard the crash of thunder and the sound of falling rain. “Great.” In a full stride to move out, Jess opened up the door, Ellen stood there, her hand raised to knock. “El?”

“Hey.”

“Whoa.” Jess’ eyes widened. “Have you been drinking?”

“Very much so, thank you for asking.” Soaking wet and not moving very well, Ellen stumbled into Jess’ house.

“I’m on my way out.”

“That’s O.K.” Ellen wiped her hand across her wet face. “I need . . . I need Robbie.”

“Is everything all right.” Jess shut the door.

“Nope. I need Robbie.”

“Robbie . . . Robbie is working.”

“Where?”

“All over.”

“Shit.” Ellen tried to take a step and swayed. “Frank?”

“With Robbie.”

“Shit.” She swung out her hand and her whole body spun.

Jess grabbed her. “Can I help?”

“I doubt it.” Ellen fluttered her lips. “I need Robbie or Frank.”

“They aren’t around.”

“Shit.”

“So you said.”

“Fine. Sorry to bother you.” Ellen stammered to the door.

“Where are you going?”

“You have to work. And . . . I need . . . I need to find someone, hopefully with big shoulders, to get me through this night.” She reached and missed the door. “This . . . this is a bad night for me. Real bad.”

“El. Hold on. All right. Don’t walk out there by yourself.”

“Why?”

“Because you are in no condition. Let me walk you home.”

“I’m not going home.” Ellen told him. “I’m finding someone to help . . .”

“You through the night.” Jess moved to the partially open doorway and closed it. “Let me call Henry.”

“Oh!” Ellen said surprised. “Henry will work.”

"I'll see if he can sit with you tonight. O.K.?"

"O.K. you call." Ellen pointed. "I'm gonna go pee."

"You do that."

"I don't want to start wiggling around here."

Jess smiled and walked to where the phone laid on the coffee table. He saw Ellen before the steps. "You need help?"

"Nah." Ellen lifted her leg and brought it back down. She did a sloppy whistle. "There's a lot of steps. Were there always this many?"

"No. We just added more yesterday."

Ellen chuckled and started to go up the stairs.

Watching her move up them with the help of her hands, Jess dialed Henry's cell phone. "Henry."

"Hey Jess. What's up?"

"You sound faint."

"I'm up by the field perimeter. We had a short. Frank ordered an up and down and that can't happen."

"Shit." Jess twitched his head.

"Why?"

"Henry, Ellen 's pretty bad. I don't know what happened, but she's really drunk wright now and wandering around. She's in my bathroom."

"Damn it. I'm gonna be at least another hour or so. Can you stay with her."

"Can you tell Doug I'll be there as soon as you relieve me?"

"You got it." Henry said,

"I'll take her home, meet you at the house, and try to sober her up a bit so she's not feeling it tomorrow. Thanks Henry."

"No, Thank you Jess."

Just as Jess hung up the phone, he heard the triple thump. He turned around suddenly to see Ellen staring at the steps. "El, you all right."

"I tripped." Ellen scratched her wet head. "They were slippery."

"They get like that."

"You're funny." She snickered.

"And you're a mess. How did you let yourself get like this."

"The question is why." Ellen held up an unstable finger. "Why."

"Why?"

"I'd rather not talk about. But I shouldn't have drank so much."

"No. Hey, Henry's gonna meet us at your house. O.K.?"

"Great." Ellen tossed her hands up. "Let's go,." She moved sloppily to the door.

"Why aren't you wearing a coat."

"It's spring."

"It's fall."

"Same difference." Ellen opened the door. "Look Jess, it's raining."

"I see that."

"Let's run."

"Let's not. Let's grab an umbrella and . . . Ellen!" Jess tossed his hand up when Ellen took off. Hurriedly he grabbed his coat and the lunch he needed, shut the door and chased after her.

^^^

Elliott watched Melissa as she worked around him. She had come in to check his vital signs and give him medication he chose not to take. She didn't say much except, ask how he was feeling.

"Almost empty." Elliott commented while Melissa checked his IV.

"Yes it is. Should be done in a few hours."

"I really . . . really don't need all of that, do I?"

"It was ordered."

"I see." He received a smile from Melissa as she started to leave. "Melissa."

"Yes."

"I have a favor to ask. Pardon me if I'm being forward."

"What's wrong?" Melissa moved back to the bed.

"I would like it very much if you would dismantle this intravenous from my arm."

Melissa chuckled. "You would, would you? And why sir would I do that?"

"I want to leave."

"It's a long walk to New Bowman."

"I'll return. I need to check on a friend. Here."

Melissa's head raised in thought. "Seeing that you're new, I'm going to take a guess. Ellen?"

"Yes. I'm worried. Some things have happened and I really would like to go check on her."

"I can't do that."

"Melissa please. I won't tell."

"Sgt. Ryder, I have orders." Melissa tried to explain.

"And I have a feeling my friend needs me. Please." Elliott peered up his big brown eyes adding a puppy dog appeal. "Please."

"I'll get in so much trouble."

"I won't tell."

"You'll come back in?"

"Name the time."

"One hour."

"I'll be back."

Melissa reluctantly set down the chart she was carrying, and moved to his intravenous.

^^^

Dean wasn't in the mood to do much of anything, let alone work. He thought about burying himself in the back room of the clinic lab or finding a patient room to stay in while he figured out his next move. But the last thing he wanted to do was be a doctor, no matter how intriguing the patient was.

In a room far from everything, but near enough to the nurses station, Dean

stood with Robbie and the baby that had been burnt on the back gate. The baby breathed funny, rapid and gurgling. He was heavily sedated and slept with his eyes half open.

“Dean?” Robbie questioned.

“I don’t know.” Dean shrugged. “He’s bad.”

“But you’re averse in these things.”

“Not really. I know Marcus and I know the one in the lab. I’ve never dealt with a hurt one.”

“But you would work on them like their human right?”

“That’s what I’m doing.” Dean stared at the baby. “Only I’m combining it with the little knowledge I do have.”

“He should be dead, shouldn’t he?”

“They are made to withstand. They can take a lot, but . . . In my opinion . . .” Dean faced Robbie. “One of you should have . . . should have . . .”

“We couldn’t. Can you?”

Dean stared back at the baby. “No.”

“So we’re at square one. You’ll keep us up to date.”

“Yes.”

“I’d better go.” Robbie pointed back. “I have to catch up to Frank.”

“He actually went out and found this?”

“Frank surprises us all. I’ll keep the child in my prayers.”

“You do that, it couldn’t . . .” Dean hurried and looked at Robbie. “In your prayers?”

“Yeah, I’m the new Reverend you know. And . . . why are you still here? Go home.”

“I can’t.”

“Sure you can.” Robbie told him.

“You think?” Dean questioned. “With all that’s happened.”

“Especially with all that’s happened.” Robbie smiled, truly believing Dean was referring to the new patient.. “Got to go.”

“Thanks Robbie.”

“Sure.”

Dean looked back at the baby. “Maybe he’s right. I’ll try again after I finish up with you.” With a little more spunk, and initiative, Dean moved faster to finish things up.

^^^

“Feeling better?” Jess asked Ellen, sitting on her couch with her. Both of them facing each other, sides leaning on the back of the couch. Both with one leg up.

“Yes.” Ellen sipped her coffee and set down the mug. “I’m still . . .well.”

“Drunk?”

“I’ve been more sober.” Ellen shook her head. “Thanks for listening. I feel bad about you being late for work because of me. Why don’t you go. I’m fine now.”

“Nope. I’ll stay until Henry gets here. With what’s happened, you need to

be around friends. Besides, this 'one on one' thing here is nice. Robbie's been so busy we've hadn't had the chance to hang out."

"And do the 'one on one' thing?" Ellen asked ornery.

"Stop that." He smacked her leg. "You know what I mean."

"You were good at the 'one on one' thing huh? I mean relationship wise."

"I think so. I like to believe it. I was in a long term relationship for eight years."

"How did you pull that off being in the military."

Jess smiled. "People believed Lenny was my brother. Really. We had a good relationship."

"Can I ask you something." Ellen softened her voice.

"Sure."

Ellen started to speak, but paused to yawn. "Sorry,. Alcohol. Anyhow . . . when did you turn gay?"

"Turn gay?" Jess laughed. "Like it happened over night?"

"Stop." Ellen snickered.

"Yes." Jess deepened his voice. "I believe it was spring of 1994 when I caught the homosexual virus."

"Jess . . ."

"I'm kidding."

"I like this side of you."

"Thanks." Jess smiled. "Gay. I . . . I knew I was gay since I was twelve." He shrugged. "It was difficult growing up like that. Hiding it."

"Were you ever with a woman?"

"Sexually?"

"Yes."

"Well . . ." Jess reached to the table for his coffee. "I tried. I was nineteen and I tried. I did real well with the making out part, but . . . when it came down to it, I couldn't . . . let's say, get there." He slightly blushed. "So, I blamed in on the alcohol and tried other means with her."

"Other means."

"You know." Jess motioned his head downward at Ellen.

"Thought you'd be nice?"

"Yep."

"And . . ."

"I threw up." Jess set down his mug.

"Blamed it on the alcohol again?"

"You got it."

"Could you be with a woman if you had to be."

"Had to be? I think being gay works in my favor in this world."

"Say it didn't. Say you were alone in this world with a woman. Could you?"

Jess hesitated. "Yeah, I could. After so long, the need for physical companionship would have to come into play. Just a touch or a feel can make a difference."

"Tell me about it."

"Or kiss. God, I loved to kiss." Jess shook his head slowly. "And that is something I haven't done in forever. Years."

"Not true." Ellen held up her finger.

Jess swiped it away. "Robbie doesn't count. I mean kiss."

"Jess." Ellen scooted closer. "Kiss me."

"What?" He laughed.

"Seriously. See if you can do it. Kiss me. See if it's any different now that it's been so long."

"It won't be."

"Try. Experiment. I'm curious."

"You won't tell."

"I won't tell."

"Should be interesting." Jess moved closer. "God." He laughed. "This is awkward." He laid his hand on her cheek.

"Pretend I'm a man, I have the chest for it."

Chuckling, Jess brought his lips closer to Ellen's. He barely touched hers and they both smiled. "You have to be serious as well."

Ellen spoke in her deepest voice. "Kiss me Jess. Does that work?"

Shaking his head with a smile, Jess pressed his lips lightly to Ellen's. A soft touching of his to hers and his hand spread more across her cheek. "Can I?" He spoke through their kiss.

"Sure why not."

Jess pressed harder and widened his mouth bringing Ellen's more to him and sweeping his mouth against hers. A full kiss that lasted a while and then Jess pulled back, smiled and finished the kiss with a soft peck. "Well?"

"Nice. You."

"Not bad."

"You didn't seem like you minded it."

"Well." Jess shrugged. "I didn't. I thought more of the act of kissing instead of who I was kissing."

"Gee thanks." Ellen smiled.

"You know what I mean. I enjoyed having a kiss. Thanks."

"You're welcome but . . . I did sense the homosexuality coming through."

"Ellen . . ."

"You were waiting for me to take control, Huh?" Ellen joked. "It was the chest thing I have." She watched him smile. "Jess, really." She turned serious. "Thanks for taking my mind off of things. Even though the problem will still be there tomorrow, I got through this night."

"And we sort of sobered you up."

"Sort of." Ellen stood and swayed. "Maybe not."

"Where you going?" Jess asked. "Did I scare you off?"

"No. You made me feel better." Ellen shook her head. "I'm gonna let you get to work. I'm going to bed. I'm tired and spent, and you helped me a lot."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive." Ellen nodded. "I'll walk you to the door." She took a step and lost her balance some.

Jess took hold of her arm. "It's better when you're sitting still."

"Yeah. I'm getting that dizzy factor."

"Maybe it's not just the alcohol. You had a bad day."

"Yes, yes I did."

"Let me help you to bed?"

"You're not thinking about trying anything funny are you?" Ellen kidded.

“Who me? I’m probably the safest man you can be with in Beginnings.”

“Then in that case . . .” Ellen held up her arm. “Take hold.”

“Or better yet.” Jess placed his hands on her hips, turned her, lifted her and tossed her over his shoulder.

Ellen shrieked

“Please don’t.” Jess carried her down the hall.

“Jess this is so Frank-like of you. I’m getting turned on.”

“Frank’s my hero.”

“I’m telling him.”

“Goodnight El.” As Jess lifted her from his shoulder to plop her on the bed, Ellen’s leg accidentally hooked on his hip and Jess lost his balance. Not wanting to drop her, Jess held on and followed the falling lead. Both, together landed on the bed, Jess on top. They started to laugh. Jess shook his head and laid his hand on her face. “I better go.” He whispered. “Get some sleep. Everything will be all right.” He pressed his lips to her forehead.

“Thank you.”

“Would you mind . . .” Dean’s angry voice seeped into the bedroom. “Getting off my wife.”

Jess widened his eyes and he sprang up. “Dean.” He turned around. “Look, it’s not what you . . .” Jess never had a chance to finish his words. Dean had charged at him and nailed him so hard in the jaw, it stumbled Jess back into the night stand, knocking over a lamp. Stunned Jess was as he caught his balance, straightened the lamp and touched his bleeding lip. He blinked once and slowly turned to face Dean.

Ellen saw it, Dean going after him again. She sprang from the bed in time to intercept. “Stop it! Stop it!” It took her whole body to hold Dean back.

“Dean.” Jess tried to stay calm. He caught the blood that seeped from his mouth as he stared at Dean. So outraged Dean looked, his eyes wide and glaring, his facial muscles so tense they looked as if they would snap. “Listen to me All right. Can I explain? Can you calm down?”

“What is there to explain?” Dean raged. “El? Why are you doing this to me!”

“Doing what to you!” Ellen yelled back. “I’m not doing anything.”

“Were you or were you not on that bed with this man?”

Expected, but unexpected at that moment, Henry walked in catching Dean’s question to Ellen. “Jess?”

Slightly rolling his eyes, Jess exhaled in relief. “Henry. Calm him down.”

Henry turned to Dean. “What’s going on. I heard screaming.”

“I don’t need to explain to *you*.” Dean pointed strongly at Henry. “What goes on in my home.”

“This is not your home.” Ellen yelled.

“It *is* my home!!” Dean argued loudly. “And you were with someone else! I’m not even gone twenty-four hours! Is this what you want El, is this why you’re so quick to believe that I . . .”

“Dean.” Henry snapped. “Stop. Jess?” Henry faced him. “Were you with his wife?”

“No. Yes. No.” Jess grew confused and wiped the blood again. “I was helping Ellen to bed, she was dizzy, she fell, I fell. It’s stupid.” Jess closed his eyes. “Dean walked in. That’s it and he hit me.”

Henry turned to Dean. "You think you might have jumped the gun?"

Dean's face turned red. "You think you want to kiss my ass. Don't even come into my bedroom . . ."

"My bedroom." Ellen corrected loudly.

"My Bedroom!" Dean shouted. "My bedroom Henry. You come in here and pass judgement on me? I don't think so."

Henry blinked long. "I think you're upset Dean and you need to . . ."

"What?!" Dean questioned. "I need to what! How am I supposed to calm down! You tell me! I got kicked out of my house, I'm losing my wife. I'm being set . . ." Dean stepped back as he stared at Henry. He started to laugh. "Unbelievable."

"What?" Henry had to wonder if perhaps Dean was drinking as well. "What is so funny?"

"Set up. I'm being set up. This whole Bev thing. How are you pulling it off?"

"Me?" Henry questioned.

"Henry?" Ellen was shocked. "Oh now you're really reaching Dean."

"No." Dean shook his head at Henry. "It makes perfect sense. You and Bev have been in it from the get go haven't you. This Bev thing with me, her wanting me, when did it start? When you lost Ellen and I got her back! You lost her because of Bev."

"Dean. Stop." Ellen asserted. "Jess get him out."

"Dean." Jess stepped to him.

"Get off of me." Dean swung his arm out at Jess, keeping his stare on Henry. "You're behind this."

"Behind what?" Henry tossed his hands up. "Setting you up? You'd like to believe that wouldn't you Dean? You'd like to believe someone else but you is to blame for your mess. But the truth is, for as ridiculous as it sounds, even if I set it up to look like you were with Bev, even if I did that, I could not make you sleep with her. I could not make *you* get her pregnant."

"Gentlemen." Stern and deep Elliott's voice called into the room, he stepped in just as strong, shifting his eyes about. "I think we should clear this room. I believe this is Ellen's home, her room. I believe this confusion isn't helping matters. Enough has been said." He moved to Ellen. "Are you all right?"

"Elliott." She whispered his name with wide eyes. "What are you doing out of the clinic?"

"I was concerned for you after today. I couldn't rest."

Dean rolled his eyes. "How chivalrous. Now is there anyone else that wants to make an entrance into my bedroom?"

"How about me?" Joe said stern. "Care to tell me why I'm sound a sleep, I get woke up by shouting? Then . . . I have to get dressed and come over here? What in Christ's name is going on?" Just as everyone's voice spoke up, Joe shot up his hand and brought about silence. "Ellen?"

"I was drinking Joe, heavily. Jess . . . Jess came to sit with me until Henry could. I was having a bad night, you know. Anyhow, I got tired, and I was still having a hard time walking. Jess helped me to bed, that's all. I'm not going to explain how it happened, but it was innocent, and Dean walked in and took it the wrong way. He hit Jess and stared ranting. Henry showed up, like he was supposed to, and him and Dean started fighting. Elliott . . . Elliott sneaks from

the clinic to see how I am and he walked into this mess. A mess Joe. I just wanted to go to sleep.” Ellen plopped to a sitting position on the bed.

Jess reached out his hand to Ellen and ran it quickly down her face. “I’m sorry. I am so sorry I started all this.”

“You didn’t.” Ellen told him. “You’d better go to work though.”

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” Jess winked and stepped from the room, pausing in his leaving to exchange glances with Dean.

“Henry.” Joe snapped his finger and pointed to the door.

“But Joe . . .”

“Out.”

“But Joe . . .”

“Out!”

Letting out a long breath, Henry looked at Ellen. “Night El. Sorry.”

Elliott moved to the door. “I’ll go as well.”

“No.” Ellen called out.

“No?” Dean questioned.

“No?” Elliott repeated just as surprised.

“No.” Ellen said. “Stay for a while. You came from the clinic, you shouldn’t be running about. Stay. I appreciate your concern.”

“This is bullshit.” Dean mumbled.

“And you.” Joe looked at Dean. “I thought I told you to leave this house.”

“I did.” Dean replied.

“Why are you here right now.”

“I wanted to talk to Ellen.”

“I told you to leave. Ellen, do you still want him to leave?”

Ellen only briefly looked at the glance Dean gave her. “Yes.”

“No El.” Dean pleaded strongly. “No. Stop this right now.”

“Joe.” Ellen closed her eyes.

“Dean.” Firm, Joe stated his name. “Now. I’m not kidding around. You have to leave.”

So lost Dean tossed up his hand. Heartfelt and sounding on the verge of emotional breakdown, Dean turned to Joe. “Where am I supposed to go? Huh Joe? Where?”

“I’m sorry.” Joe spoke soft. “Anywhere but here.”

Biting his bottom lip, Dean closed his eyes. Sadly he shook his head and lifted his hand as if he were going to speak. He didn’t. Turning and silent Dean walked out.

HEART RENDERING WARS

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Beginnings, Montana
October 16

A snap of a snarling lip on Frank's face said it all just as he pulled the trigger.

Bang!

The close range shot of Frank's revolver shattered the savage's head as if a china tea cup. Its contents, the blood, outpouring with thickness. Frank pivoted his arm to the right, only to catch in his view from the left, the oncoming spear. Closer, closer. Frank fired at the savage to his right, swung out his left arm, and batted away the spear just as it scraped against his forearm. The spear dropped on top of Frank's boot and he kicked out his foot ejecting the spear upward into his reach. Frank grabbed it and swung it, all in the same motion, cracking it into the side of a savage's head. The spear broke off and still holding on to the point, Frank spun it and rammed it into the chest of the stunned savage. Three down, more pursued.

Frank backed up. "I'm doing this." He spoke into his headset.

"Frank. Goddamn it. No." Joe ordered "Take them out."

With a hop and turn, Frank took off running. "There's too many!"

"Too many my ass. Stop this game and take them out."

"We have to." Frank leaped over a fallen tree and darted left to right. "Come on, if it doesn't work . . ."

"If it doesn't work, you're a dead man. You have a mile, that's an awfully long distance."

"I'm running. I have less."

"Frank."

"Dad!" Frank screamed. "I'm busy here. Don't fuckin distract me. They're throwing fuckin arrows."

"Move your ass Frank, they're closing in." Joe told him.

"I'm moving."

"Closer."

"Dad!"

"Too close to you Frank, you're not gonna make. Turn around, and lay fire with the M-16."

"Ye of little faith." Frank saw his target, the road. "Security synch with tracking. I'm in view."

"We got you." Security came back.

"This is too risky, Frank. Stop!" Joe warned.

"Ready . . ." The road drew closer and closer. Frank charged up his run. "And . . . down the beams." With a leap and a really big chance, Frank sailed his body up and out onto the road. He landed in his momentum and spun around quickly to see the savages so near. "Wait . . . wait . . ." Frank grinned. "Now!" Frank called then held out his arms. "Come and get me."

The savages mimicked his leap onto the road. The savages weren't so lucky.

A 'pop' and a sizzle preceded the howling, agonizing screams of the six

savages that got caught in the beam. The searing security beams, not only fried, but cut into the bodies of the savages as well. Charred limbs flew up and out in a mad spin landing everywhere. Behind the perimeter and on the road by Frank.

“Oh! Fuckin yes! This is beautiful!” Frank clenched his fist and gave an excited bodily stomp. “A sight to be seen.”

Joe’s exhaling grunt seeped over the radio. “Frank . . .”

Frank started to laugh. “You guys have to come out and see this. Oh my God!”

“Frank . . .”

“This is great! I knew what these things could do.” Frank rambled with enthusiasm. “I’ve seen what they did to animals but . . . man, get something going through there at a really high speed . . . it’s a fuckin Quisenart.”

“Frank!”

“What?”

“You moron. Get your ass back here.”

“What?” Frank was dumbfounded. “I was . . .”

“Was making me take a heart attack. Do you know how close you cut it.”

“Dad please.” Frank scoffed. “How much fun do I have in my life. I had fun.”

“You’re sick Frank. A sick human being. You realize you’re burning in hell.”

“Yeah, so.”

“Get back here and grab a clean up crew for those bodies.”

“Why don’t we take them up to where the killer babies hang out and leave the limbs for food.” Frank suggested.

“Frank . . .”

“It’s cooked.”

“Frank!”

Frank laughed. “Kidding.” He finally caught his breath. “Hey, at least we eliminated that movement as a batch of killer babies, huh?” He turned to his right. “Hey!” Frank saw the truck coming fast down the road. “Ellen’s back already from taking Sgt. Fuckin Ryder. I’ll grab a ride.” Frank stepped some to the road and waved up his hands, Ellen zoomed right by him. “Shit!”

“What?” Joe responded.

“She didn’t see me.”

“How in God’s name didn’t she see you and that massacre out there.”

“I don’t know. Man, is her mind occupied or what.” Frank watched the truck get smaller and smaller as it approached the tunnel in the distance. “I guess I’m walking back.” Upbeat and energetic from his early morning, mind spin-jumpstart, Frank, with a good walking speed, headed back.

^^^

Ellen’s race into the clinic lab was followed by a small huff of breath as she stood before the half empty counter catching her bearings. She closed her eyes, let her heart rate settle and pulled forward the stack of filing she had been putting off for two weeks.

“Morning.” Dean softly spoke from across the lab.

"Um . . ." Ellen breathed heavily. "Morning." She started to separate.

"You didn't need to rush back, everything is . . ."

"I wanted to take care of something. Thanks." Ellen kept her eyes on her work.

Dean slowly moved her way. "El, I'm going to need some help with the infant in the cryo-lab today. You know, use it to see if we can help the one Frank brought in last night. Can I get your help. If not I can get . . ."

"I'll be there." Ellen moved a paper to a stack.

Dean nodded. "Oh." He picked up a stack of folders. "I finished all your work ups last night. You know, since I didn't have much to . . ."

"Thanks."

"You're, uh, welcome." Dean laid them by her. "When are you going back to New Bowman?"

Ellen whispered. "Unbelievable." she then looked at him. "Tomorrow why? Wanting to get rid of me?"

"No. I . . . I could be overstepping my boundaries, he is your patient."

"Go on. I always respect your medical opinion."

"O.K." Dean shuffled through the stack of folders he laid down. "Your buddy, Ryder. When you go back, I think you should do a complete blood work up on him."

"Elliott?" Ellen grabbed his chart.

Dean moved closer to Ellen, peering over her shoulder. He stood where he thought was a safe distance but at a closeness he needed. "Take a look at his count. Last time he was here we attributed it to infection. But this time, take a look."

Ellen shifted through the results. "His leukocyte count is way too high."

"My thoughts exactly. Especially since he exhibited no signs of infection from his arrow hits."

Ellen slowly nodded. "I'll do a full work up."

"If we get the same readings, we know where to go with it."

"I understand." Ellen shut Elliott's folder.

"I'm gonna head out down to the lab. I'm all caught up."

"O.K." Ellen resumed her separating.

"See you later?"

"Sure."

Stepping back and looking once more at Ellen's back, Dean lowered his head and walked out. He passed Frank as he did so.

"Hey Dean." Frank greeted, then turned his head when Dean said nothing. He shrugged. "Hey El." Frank walked up to her, she didn't turn around. He plopped his bloody arm down before her.

"Frank!" Ellen moved her filing.

"I'm injured."

"God. What now?"

"Spear."

"Savage spear?"

"Well El, since the kids aren't tossing them at me, I say it's safe to say yes."

Ellen grunted at him and grabbed his arm.

"Ow."

“We’ll get you cleaned up. Come with me.”

“So, why did you abandon me?” Frank asked, following her to the examining room.

“What?” Ellen opened the door. “Hop up.” She hit the table on the way to the sink.

“Why did you abandon me. I’m fuckin standing on the road, waving my arms. I’m injured and in need of dire help and you zip right by in the truck.”

“You were standing on the road?” Ellen brought a basin and pan of supplies to the examining table. “Where?”

“About a half a mile from the tunnels. You ran over three savage limbs.”

“Frank, I’m sorry.” She began to clean his arm. “I wasn’t paying attention. I was, but I was listening to a Barbara Streisand song. There’s a player in the truck you know.”

“Barbara Streisand? Why are you listening to her?”

“I felt like it. Jess gave it to me to listen to.”

“Barbra Streisand? El, you better tell Jess he should watch who he shares his music and food with. People are gonna start to think he’s gay.”

“I’ll warn him.” Ellen worked on Frank’s arm.

“So, tell me. Ryder spent the night at the house last night?”

“Yes.”

“Alone. No Dean. No kids. Alone with you.”

“Yes.”

“Did you sleep with him?”

“Frank.” Ellen gripped his arm and he shrieked. “Stop that. And really, it’s none of your business.”

“I know. But did you?”

“Frank. No.” Ellen grabbed a bandage.

“Not that I would like that, but it would be understandable, you know with all that happened with . . .you and Dean?” Frank placed his face closer to Ellen’s.

“What are you talking about?”

“I know he’s out of the house and . . . I know.”

“You know?”

“I know. You know. I know. What happened?”

“How do you know what happened?”

“Word . . . it gets around. I’m surprised you didn’t come to me with it.”

“Well, knowing what happened, I’m sure you see why. Right?”

“Right.” Frank agreed really wishing Ellen would tell him what had happened and he wouldn’t have to pretend he knew.

“So what was your reaction?”

“To?”

“You know.”

“Aghast.” Frank said.

“Aghast?”

“Yeah. Aghast, it means shocked. And . . . I was um . . . really . . . uh surprised at Dean.”

“You aren’t the only one. Done.” She grabbed the pan.

“Thanks.” Frank slid off the table. “So how long do you think this will effect the two of you.”

Ellen chuckled. "Forever, don't you agree?"

"Um . . . yeah."

"I really have to get back to work. Stop by later and let me check on that."

"I will. And you're all right?"

"No, not really, come on, Frank, it was bad." Ellen moved to the door. "I mean, really, need I say more."

"Absolutely not."

"Talk to you later." Ellen opened the door and pulled it closed in her step out. She shook her head at Frank and it even made her chuckle on how he actually thought she believed he knew all about what happened.

^^^

Art class.

Fridays at school, Jenny always deemed the easy days. The kids had enough for the week and she always started them with art. And art class was the perfect class for Dean to interrupt. He could hear the laughter coming from the school, the broken English of Forrest Caceres as he taught. A break from the long night of not sleeping and working was what Dean sought. And that break would be with his kids.

Fully intending to slip in the school, Dean let out a peep of surprise and jolted when the door opened and Jenny literally slipped out closing the door immediately.

"Hey Jenny."

"Dean, what are you doing here." Jenny's tone was hard.

Dean paused with a blink. *Was Jenny giving him attitude? Nah! It was his imagination.* "I came to see the kids. Mind if I sneak in."

"Yes, I do."

"O.K., then can you get them?"

"No . . . no I can not."

"What?"

"Dean." Jenny hesitated. "You can't see the kids."

"What do you mean I can't see my kids?"

"Lower your voice."

"No."

"Then come this way." Jenny walked from the school door down the path.
"Dean."

Dean reluctantly followed. "Why . . . why can't I see them."

"Ellen . . ."

"Oh great. Great!" Dean's voice raised some more. "You believe Ellen?"

"I believe what Ellen showed me."

"What the gods-eye, the tape, the wrinkled picture?" Dean pointed as he spoke. "Jenny, you know damn well, better than anyone, she took that conversation out of context. You were the one I was talking to! You were there! Remember?"

"Dean, listen . . ."

"No! Alex ate another bug to get out of school. She doesn't make my skin

crawl. I don't hate my daughter. I want to see her." Dean tried to get by her.

Jenny stopped him.

"Let me by Jenny. I want to see my daughter. I need to see her."

"You *need* to see her?"

"What . . . what is that tone for?"

"How bad Dean? So bad it warrants this behavior?" Jenny crossed her arms.

"She's my daughter. You're stopping me. How the hell else am I supposed to react?"

"Not this shocked."

"Excuse me?" Dean asked with a tilted head.

"You wanna see her so bad. When's the last time you saw your daughter?"

"I saw her . . ." Dean paused to think. "I saw her . . ."

"Let me help you." Jenny had edge. "Monday night. Monday night Dean, at Beginnings' Day. It's Friday."

"I have seen her since . . ."

"No." Jenny shook her head. "No you haven't. You went to the lab early Tuesday. Ellen dropped Alex off at school. She was sleeping when you left. Ellen took Alex from school Tuesday, you didn't even see her leave. Yesterday . . . yesterday she had a traumatic experience. Did you Dean, once stop to see if she was all right?"

"I . . . I was busy. Things happened during the day that . . ."

"That what? Took precedence over your daughter. I'm sorry you and your little girlfriend have a problem. But when you stop letting it reflect on your child, then in my opinion you'll have the right to see her. Until then, I will follow the orders Ellen gave me."

"I am her father. And I'm . . ." Dean closed his eyes. "Thank God." He saw Joe. "Joe!"

"Call Joe over. Go on."

"What's wrong." Joe felt the tension.

"Joe, tell her." Dean pointed. "She won't let me see my kids."

"She what?" Instant anger hit him. "Jenny, you will let him see his kids."

"No Joe."

"No Joe?" Joe stepped to her. "No Joe?"

"He is not allowed and I am sticking to my guns." Jenny crossed her arms.

"You have no right." Joe stated.

"I have every right."

"Says who?" Joe squeaked out the words.

"Says you." Jenny reached behind her. "Did you or did you not give Judge Hawthorn the authority to make domestic decisions?"

Joe went silent.

"You did." Jenny slammed a piece of paper in Dean's chest. "She did. I take it Dean you didn't check your mailbox at the lab. Ellen saw her first thing this morning when she took Elliott back.

Before Dean could look at it, Joe took the order and opened. "I don't believe this shit. It's a temporary order to keep you away from all your kids. Son of a bitch."

"Joe." Dean sounded confused, he stared blankly. "She can't do this, can she? She can't keep me from my kids."

“We established Domestic relation laws Dean.”

“Oh my God.” Dean closed his eyes.

“But . . .” Joe held up his hand and the order. “She is not top of the line. Joint council is. We’ll go speak to Grace, get this straightened out. If we hit a brick wall, you bring this up to the joint council. You have a right to see your kids. You’re a good father. This is wrong. Let’s go. We’ll take a jeep to New Bowman now.”

“Thanks Joe.” Dean’s shoulders dropped in relief. “Thanks.”

Before Joe walked away with Dean, he harshly handed the order back to Jenny. “When you see my daughter, you warn her to steer clear of me. She’s crossed a bad line. She’s dead wrong.” With no more said, and with haste, Joe moved on with Dean.

^^^

The legal eagle apparel was not present, mostly because both Danny and Henry stopped in the middle of the work morning to have the interview with Rev. Bob.

“Morning Henry.” Danny was getting ready to sit at the prepared table.

“Morning.” Henry shut the door and walked over to the table. He didn’t carry a briefcase, he carried a tablet.

“Have your questions?” Danny asked.

“Yes. You?” Henry sat down.

“Right here.” Danny held up his tablet. “I brought a tape recorder, we’ll give you a copy of the tape and Trish will type up the transcripts.”

“Why are you so efficient?” Henry asked Danny.

“That’s me.” Danny looked at his watch. “Do you have a lot of questions. I have that oven at the bakery to work on.”

“Nah, you?”

“Nope.”

Both men looked up when they heard the shutting of a door. It came from down the hall where they held Rev. Bob. Johnson, one of security escorted him to a chair across from Henry and Danny, then Johnson, stepped back, staying in the room.

“Good morning boys.” Rev. Bob smiled. “You’re looking well.”

Danny nodded. “Thanks. How are you.”

“As well as can be expected. The good Lord is taking care of me.”

“Rev. Bob.” Henry spoke. “Since you’re a vital witness in the case. We’d like to ask you some questions.”

“Shoot.” Rev. Bob folded his hands on the table.

Danny turned on the tape recorder. “Henry?”

“You can go first.”

“Thanks.” Danny lifted his tablet. “Rev. Bob, you claim Andrea to be working for George Hadly. Why is that?”

“She approached me and told me.”

“Why would she do that?” Danny asked.

“Because my cousin wanted to get me involved.”

“And you have always been an unwilling participant?”

“Always.” Rev. Bob answered.

“So, how long ago would you say it was that Andrea approached you?”
Danny asked.

“Two, three years ago”

“Was it two or three.” Danny quizzed.

“Two. Yes. Two.”

“May I?” Henry asked. “Rev. Bob why would she approach you about working for George when George was still living trusted in Beginnings.”

“Things were going to happen. She was a part of them.”

Danny took another turn. “Did Andrea supposedly know everything.”

“Oh yes.” Rev. Bob said. “She was behind a lot of things. A lot. Which . . .” He shook his head with a chuckle. “Surprises me that you people have given her freedom around here.”

Henry held up his pencil. “How do we know you aren’t blaming Andrea to cover up for someone else working in Beginnings.”

Rev. Bob lifted his hands. “She’s the one. That’s what I can tell you. She shouldn’t be running around.”

“So you think she’s dangerous?” Danny asked.

“Dangerous?” Rev. Bob sat back. “Andrea is not directly dangerous. No. She has masterminded a lot of things. She is a smart, smart woman. Taking lives? No. But I wouldn’t put it passed her while she is on her borrowed free time, to ruin lives.”

On his words, Henry’s mind drifted off.

New Bowman, Montana

“Calm down.” Joe whispered to Dean as they sat in the courtroom waiting on Grace. “Her assistant said she’ll talk to you.”

“This is ridiculous Joe. One week we have a judicial system and already this is happening.”

“But it’s not the same.”

“Joe.” Dean slid his copy of the order to him. “It says I will be arrested. Arrested if I go near my children.”

“Dean.” Joe held up a calming hand. “We’ll handle this. If not, you present your point to joint council. At least they’re all men.”

“All rise.” Carol, Grace’s assistant walked into the court room.

Grace came out from the back. “Please be seated, we’ll try to keep these emergency proceedings as informal as possible. Carol, you’ll record this.”

“Yes, your honor.”

Holding a copy of the order, Grace spoke. “October sixteen, Hayes versus Hayes. Dr. Dean Michael Hayes is appearing before this court. Dr. Hayes, how can I help you?”

Dean let out a soft chuckle and stood up. “You can rescind this stupid order.”

“Dean.” Joe called his name.

“Stupid?” Grace tilted her head.

"I want to see my kids." Dean tossed down the order.

"I'm sure you do. But for now, you can't. It is a temporary order Dr. Hayes, if you read, in ten days you can appear before this court and we will review what . . ."

"I will not wait ten days." Dean argued. "To see my kids? This is bullshit."

Grace remained calm. "The decision was made in the best interest of the children."

"How can keeping them from me be in their best interest. Better yet, how can a decision be made with out me being here."

"Evidence was given and . . ."

"What evidence!" Dean yelled. "What? A stupid tape recording?"

"Dr. Hayes." Grace slammed her hand. "May I finish a sentence please. Thank you. Now that tape played no part in my decision. It was obvious that your words were taken out of context when you listen to the whole thing. My decision was made, in whole, on other circumstances. As for you not being here, we are following old world guidelines. A temporary order can be issued if the court feels that the children are in danger."

"Danger?" Dean laughed. "From me?"

"Certainly not from your wife."

"Oh my God." Dean tossed up his hand.

"Have you not been upset lately?" Grace asked.

"A lot has happened."

"Will you disagree that your temperament and attitude have been far short?"

"Yes, I'll disagree." Dean nodded.

"Shall I play back the recording we have so far of these proceedings Dr. Hayes. You have not been calm yet."

"You're taking my kids from me!"

"For ten days then you will come . . ."

"I want them now."

Grace grabbed and slammed her gavel. "You will stop this tone in my courtroom. Your temper and violent behavior, past and present . . ."

"What?!"

Again Grace slammed her gavel. "You will stop interrupting me. These angry outbursts only reiterate my decision."

Dean took a second and calmed down. "I'm sorry. I'm emotional. I would never hurt my kids."

"When a person loses his temper, goes through a emotional time, they can't always control what they do. Your actions, like I said, past and present prove that."

"I haven't a clue what you're talking about. I'm not a violent person."

"Really?" Grace opened a folder. "Did you not strike a Jess Boyens last night. Did you not instigate a fight?"

"He was with my . . ."

"Answer my question."

"Yes." Dean said. "But I was angry because he was with Ellen."

Grace raised an eyebrow. "Point taken. And your anger has caused you to strike out against your wife."

"I have never touched my wife."

"You have never struck your wife?" Grace asked him hard.

"Never."

"You will stand before me in my court and lie to me? When I have words, written by your own hand to contradict those words." Grace held up a piece of paper and extended it over the bench. "Read this."

Dean stepped forward and took the paper.

"Is that your writing?"

"Yes."

"Read the second sentence out loud." Grace grew more hostile.

"El . . ." Dean's voice cracked. "I am so sorry I . . . I hit you." Dean's eyes closed and he murmured. "Oh God the ripple." He handed the letter back to Grace. "I swear I am a different man now."

"Try again."

"What?"

"In a fit of anger, in a pursuit of your wife, did you grab her yesterday and spin her around to face you?"

"Yes, but I just grabbed hold of her arm."

"Just grabbed hold?" Grace said. "Your wife showed me deep bruises on her arm Dr. Hayes from your so-called hold. You wanna try this non violent speech again.? You have showed as recent as yesterday that you can not control your actions when things get rough. Things are rough for you. And until you calm down, until you show this court that you are under control, then you Dr. Hayes, will not see those children for fear of their safety. If you go near them, you will be thrown in our holding center here in New Bowman. That will be all." Grace slammed her gavel and stood up. "Good day." She turned with a flap of her robe and stepped from her bench.

Dean was silent, lost. He clenched his fist in his defeat, and with his semi-lowered head he turned to face a standing Joe. "Joe. My kids."

"I'm sorry Dean." Joe sounded cold. "I am. Maybe you should just wait out the ten days."

"What?"

"I'm sorry you can't see them, Dean. But right now, I can't condone your actions with my daughter." Joe stepped to him "You struck her. Struck her. That's my family. That's where my obligation lies." Joe slowly turned around and started to walk from the court room.

"Joe." Dean hurried to him. "Where are you going? We have to head back."

"You go on." Joe kept walking. "I'll ride back with my son."

Dean felt it when Joe walked away from him. And there was nothing he could do. No argument. If defeat had a physical weight, Dean would have been crushed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Beginnings, Montana

So tired Jess was. All he wanted to do was turn in his perimeter reports and go home to sleep. He not only worked extra to cover his lateness of the night before, but he worked extra . . . just to help cover. Reports, home, bed.

He knocked once on Frank's office door and was surprised by Robbie's 'Come in.' not Frank's. "Hey." Jess walked in holding up the reports.

Robbie was reading off a clipboard. He lifted his eyes briefly then returned to his reading. "Jess." He said his name. "What's up."

"Turning them in." He dropped the reports on the desk.

Blindly Robbie slid some papers to him. "Feel like filing?"

Jess reviewed how many were there. "Sure, why not." He grabbed them and walked to the filing cabinet. "Where's Frank? Not sleeping yet?"

"Nope. He's out in the UD. One of guys spotted a problem."

"What's that?"

"Dean." Robbie answered. "They said he was just sitting there." He shrugged. "I don't know what's up with that."

Jess snickered. "So they sent his worst enemy."

"Actually no." Robbie flipped a page. "Frank volunteered to go. Seems he wants to find out what is going on. Ellen's not telling him."

"I wonder why." Jess kept his back to Robbie while he filed. "Her and Frank are, well, closer than close. She should have went to him with it."

"With what? Jess? What do you know?"

"Shit." Jess placed the report in the file.

"Did Ellen tell you not to tell me?" Robbie asked.

"No."

"Then tell me."

Jess stared out. "You didn't hear it from me. And I'm telling you because . . . it'll be out soon anyhow."

"How do you know about it?" Robbie asked.

"Ellen, she was drunk last night and that's why I was late for my shift. We started talking."

"What happened?" Robbie laid down the clipboard.

Jess shut the filing cabinet. "Did you know Dean is out of the house?" He turned around.

"No I . . . shit. What happened to your mouth?"

"Long story." Jess walked over to the desk. "Anyhow, Dean's gone. Seems . . . seems Bev's pregnant and it seems . . . it seems tests proved already that . . ."

"It's Dean's?"

"Yep."

"Shit." Robbie's eyes widened. "What's the scoop on that?"

"Looks like he's been seeing Bev for a while. That's what's being said. El is pretty upset. No wait, really upset."

"Oh my God." Robbie was shocked. "I have to go talk to her."

"That might not be a bad idea." Jess told him.

“So what happened to your lip? Did El do that in her drunken fit?” Robbie joked and leaned back in his chair.

“No.” Jess touched the bruised corner of his mouth. “Dean decked me.”

“Dean decked you? Why?”

Jess raised his eyes. “I was . . . I was innocently in bed with Ellen.”

Robbie’s chair snapped forward and all seriousness hit him. “How can you be innocently in bed with anyone. Were you sleeping?”

“No.”

“Then how?”

“I was helping her into bed and we tripped.” Jess tossed his hands up. “Dean walked in at the moment I was just getting up.”

“Oh.” Robbie let out his sigh of relief. “So nothing happened between you two.”

“Robbie, please, I’m gay.”

“Good.” Robbie relaxed.

“I mean, really. After the initial foreplay and getting naked part, the gay thing came into play and . . .”

“Jess. It’s not funny.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank God you are gay or I’d be really jealous.” Robbie stood up. “And, I have that meeting soon, I want to stop and see Ellen.”

“I’ll walk with you.”

“Sounds good.” Robbie moved to the door. “You know Jess, I can’t believe you let Dean get the best of you.”

“It was one punch. And I wasn’t hitting him back.” He followed Robbie out of the door. “After all I was kissing his wife.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Seriously Robbie. We kissed. Innocently.”

“Jess. Stop.” Robbie looked at him in their walk. “I don’t believe you.”

Jess reached out and grabbed Robbie’s arm, a nervousness hit him. “In all seriousness, Robbie. You’re my friend. You need to know. I kissed Ellen last night. Not out of emotions or need, but out of . . . we sort of tried an experiment. That’s it.” Jess held up his hand, he feared the worst. He knew how Robbie felt about Ellen. “I swear.”

“O.K.” Robbie shrugged, bobbed his head and continued to move toward town.

^^^

Dean didn’t mind the cold. In fact he didn’t feel it, his mind was so far off elsewhere. He no sooner got back to Beginnings and he started to walk. Walk and think until he wandered out into the UD section behind the homes. And he stayed there, sitting. Legs bent up, arms draped across his knees, head down, and crumbled court order in his hand.

That was the way Frank found him.

Letting out a long, loud grunt, Frank sat down. “Ah, the perfect place to take a cigarette break.” He pulled one from his pocket. “Great place Dean.”

Frank lit it. "I got a radio call from one of my men saying they seen this speck of a pest. They thought it was human, they couldn't tell, it was too small. So I came out. I found you."

"What did you do Frank. Come here to gloat?" Dean didn't lift his head.

"I wished I was. Unfortunately, I don't know what to gloat over."

"Yeah, right, Frank. Ellen didn't tell you?"

"No. I even tried that 'I know' routine. She didn't buy it."

"And I don't buy you not knowing." Dean said.

"Dean. I'm serious. Here. Let me give you the Frank perception of what I see going on. So broaden your horizons for a minute O.K.? From the Frank point of view, you got pissed off because of your inability to have perfect timing and you gave me your wife, you kids and not too mention a nice house."

Dean lifted his head. "And you're taking them."

"If you giving them."

"Frank! God! See." Dean's hand cut through the air. "You're such an asshole. You would. You would take it. Things are bad, Frank. Things are so bad. And you . . ."

"Whoa. Calm down. I'm kidding here. Talk."

"No."

"Dean, come on. What's going on. Is it big?"

"To me it is. It's taken over my world."

Frank listened to the drop in Dean's voice. "What happened?"

"I guess you'll find out. Why Ellen didn't run to you, I don't know. Bev . . . Bev is pregnant. She's claiming we are having an affair and Frank . . ." Dean's voice peeped. "DNA testing showed, showed the baby is mine. I don't know how that can be. I don't." He ran his hand down his own face. "I'm confused."

Frank stared for a moment at Dean. "No wonder El didn't come to me. She probably was embarrassed."

"Thanks." Dean tossed his hand up. "Thanks a lot. Of course this shouldn't come as a surprise. And I can't blame you or anyone over this. Things look really bad for me and there's nothing I can do. No one believes me."

"I'm gonna ask you something and I want an honest answer. No judging you, all right? And it's a vague fuckin question and you'll know what I mean, so no pulling a Bill Clinton on me."

Dean had a sad chuckle to him. "Go on."

"Have you ever been with Bev?"

"Absolutely not. I've never touched her nor wanted to. That's where I'm lost, how can I have fathered a child when I have never even been with her."

Frank saw in Dean's eyes he was getting no less than the truth. "O.K., then you have a problem. Some one is setting you up. Come on Dean, look how simple it would be. What's that called? Artificial insemination. I mean, let's face it, you're always down in that lab jerkin off for science sake. How hard would it be for someone to take some. A little from here, a little from there . . ."

"My first thoughts exactly. But . . ." Dean raised his hand. "None of the samples were touched. None. I'm screwed."

"So tell me something. What did you ever do to this girl to make her do this to you?"

"I don't know. She's ruing my life. No, she's ruined my life. Everything I built, everything I have worked for is gone. I've lost it. My house, my kids . . ."

“Wait. Wait.” Frank stopped him. “Even if you did sleep with her, how did you lose your kids over this? It makes no sense.”

“It makes perfect sense. Our new judicial system. The things Rev. Bob used to handle . . .” He handed Frank the crumbled court order. “Judge Grace Hawthorn handles. They took my kids Frank. I have ten days until I go back and it’s still no guarantee.”

Frank felt how flush his face got when he read the court order. “What the hell is the matter with Ellen seeking this?”

Dean quickly looked at Frank. “What . . . what did you just say?”

“I said what the hell is the matter with El? They can’t take your kids Dean.”

“They did.”

“Fight it.”

“I tried.”

“This is stupid.” Frank’s voice raised a little as he handed the order back. “You’re a good father.”

“Thank you. But according to the court, I’m not in control of my faculties right now with all that’s going on. I lose my temper and . . . I’m violent.”

“You?” Frank chuckled. “Yeah, maybe with a lab experiment, or a deadly toxin. But your kids. What would make them think that.”

“They have proof.”

“What proof?”

“I hit Jess last night.”

“Jess?” Frank asked. “Jess Boyens the nacho man?”

“The one and only.”

“Can I ask why?”

“He was in bed with Ellen . . .”

“What!” Frank blasted. “I’ll fuckin kill him.”

“See.” Dean pointed. “But it wasn’t what I thought, I took it the wrong way. But in my defense, it didn’t look good and I lost my cool.”

“Yeah, but so would I. So eliminate that. I can’t believe they took the kids because you hit another man.”

Dean looked panicked for a second. “That’s not all. They said I hit Ellen.”

“You wouldn’t hit Ellen.”

“That’s what I thought.” Dean shook his head. “But they gave me a letter I wrote to Ellen years ago, apologizing . . . for hitting her. Only I don’t remember. I swear I don’t. I’m thinking it had to have happened in the history we screwed up.”

“Easy enough to get out of. You should have said, you’re a different man now. That’s not lying.” Frank nodded.

“Frank, I said those exact words. Those exact words. But . . .”

“But?”

Dean took a breath. “But yesterday, when all this Bev shit came out, things got bad between El and I. We fought, we screamed, she stormed out, I chased her and I grabbed her arm to stop her.”

“O.K.”

“I left a bruise.”

“O.K., you grabbed her hard.”

“I was wrong.” Dean said.

"Yeah, you were wrong, but you weren't being abusive. It's not like you knocked her down in the street or even slapped her. Shoved her? No. You grabbed her to stop her."

"Why are you justifying it. There is no justification."

"You're right." Frank agreed. "But I can't judge you or get pissed at you for something I have done. I've been wrong. I've grabbed her arm to stop her. Hell, Dean, you know things that happened between her and I last year. Come on, there was an incident that was so wrong. I'm still kicking myself over it."

"Thanks Frank." Dean was sincere. "Thank you.."

"And as far as your kids go . . ." Frank tossed his cigarette. "Don't worry about."

"How can I not? I want to see my kids."

"You will."

"In ten days."

"Ha." Frank laughed then fluttered his lips. "Wait another day, things will cool down."

"Frank. Did you read this?" Dean asked. "I will be arrested if I go near them."

"Who's gonna turn you in?"

"Ellen. The women in this community. Your father. You name it. I love my kids Frank. I live for them."

"Let me make a correction here Dean." Frank said. "Our kids. You hear me. We agreed a while ago they would be our kids. Right?"

"Yes."

"Well then you will see our kids. I don't care what people say, you and I, we are with those kids the most. When I have them, you will see them. Don't worry."

"Why . . ." Dean closed his eyes. "Why are you being like this?"

"Because I would hope you would do the same for me."

"I would." Dean nodded.

"I know."

There was silence as Dean stared at Frank. "I lost her Frank. I lost Ellen. She has no respect for me. She won't look at me. And I didn't do anything. I can't get myself out of this and I'm going to have to sit back and let it happen. Things, things were finally good."

"Dean, as soon as you prove . . ."

"Prove what?" Dean was so lost. "Prove the baby isn't mine? How? How? I tried and it slapped me in the face. Every corner something jumps out at me. And even if I do prove how right I am, do you think Ellen will wait. She's bitter right now. Really bitter and that frightens me. In the process I will lose her to someone else."

"Well." Frank breathed out. "You won't lose her to me in the mess."

"How can you say that. You know as well as I do, she's going to end up running to you."

"True."

"Thanks."

"But . . ." Frank held up a finger. He spoke with a certain amount of passion. "I've learned a lot in this life. And it may be an old saying but . . . you don't kick a man when he's down. You're down Dean. And for as much as you

and I have fought, we have never, *never* kicked each other when we were down. Ever. I won't start now. I give you my word."

Dean felt Frank's words. As much as he hated it, in his vulnerable state they were too much for him to handle. His head dropped again to his arms in his emotions. "What am I gonna do?"

"Dean." Frank spoke soft, yet firm. He looked at Dean, so sad and reached out his hand. He hovered it over Dean, then after a hesitation, Frank dropped his hand resting it on Dean's head. "Come on. Get it together."

"How?"

"How." Frank slid his hand down and gave a pat to Dean's back. "I'll tell you how. You're gonna fight. Fight for everything back." Frank stood up. "It may seem impossible, but you're right. And you can prove it. Trust me. Someone is helping her out, this is too big for just a stupid little girl to come up with on her own. And believe me, we'll figure it out. I'll help you. I'll . . . I'll give you a hand." Frank extended his hand down to Dean.

Dean lifted his head and saw the fingertips so close. He gripped Frank's hand and used it, and Frank's pull, to stand up. "I don't think you know how much it means to not only have someone believe me, but have that some one be you. Thank you for believing me."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"No one else does."

"Then everyone else is wrong. They're wrong. If they don't believe you, then they don't know you. You wouldn't do this. You wouldn't. All those years we spent hating each other, we got to know each other. I know you."

A closed mouth smile is what Dean gave Frank. "We should head back."

"Yeah." Frank zipped up his coat. "It's cold and I didn't bring my jeep. Fuck, Dean could you have wandered anymore out."

"No." Dean chuckled and started to walk with Frank.

"Oh and Dean." Frank stopped him. "One more thing. You have to stop this shit."

"What?"

"I know it's all still fresh, the hurt is there. But you have to toughen up. You aren't going to be able to fight this if you don't have a clear mind. Be strong."

"I'll try." Dean started to walk again. "Frank, you know what's weird."

"What's that?"

"Don't laugh."

"Oh, now I know I will. Go on."

"I know we've been the worst of enemies, but I swear some times . . . you're my best friend."

"Pretty pathetic isn't it. Hey, you know, I do look forward to helping you solve this. It's the Agatha Christy in me."

Dean started to laugh.

"And . . . you know what's a shame. It's a shame you don't have an older son. Like me. If I was in your situation, ha! I'd say, well . . . maybe it was Johnny's sperm. Could that happen? Could my kids', you know, make it look like my kid?"

"Oh sure, a child's DNA, especially a son's . . . Oh my God." Dean stopped cold. "Frank, you made me think of something. Oh, My God." Dean

began to think out loud. "Family DNA looks similar. A family member"

"Dean." Frank halted him. "I know where you're going with this. O.K.? Good thought. And it would work for me, because of Johnny, but I don't think Billy is capable yet." Frank winked.

"No Frank. A family member. It doesn't have to be a son. It could be a father's. A brother's. Like Robbie's."

"You think Robbie's DNA is like yours. You think he's responsible for . . ."

"No." Dean had to try not to laugh. "I'm just saying other family members."

"Do you think you have a brother out there?"

"Oh my God." Dean closed his eyes. When he opened them he started walking. "No, My father."

"You're father's dead Dean."

"I know this, but I have a sample if his, you know, sperm."

"I thought he didn't participate in the fluid gathering. We weren't there, but that's what I heard."

"Records show he didn't. But records show he did attribute, you know, for other things, I saw the vials."

"She could have gotten hold of that."

"Yes." Dean moved with excitement. "Yes, she could have and it would have looked like mine."

"Do you think his sperm is still good though? I mean he was old to begin with."

"Frank." Dean laughed. "Let's just head back. I have to check this out." He walked, stopped and looked back. "Thanks again for everything."

"Sure." Frank reached into his pocket for another cigarette. "But you do know, you owe me."

"Why did you do that?" Dean asked. "You do something nice then, say something like that. Why?"

"Because . . . I'm Frank."

^^^

Robbie thought about his approach the entire way back to town. What he could say, how to say it, attitude. It was all so important, because Ellen's situation was so serious. He figured it out just as he passed distribution and he stopped to work on it for a few minutes. Then headed off to the clinic.

The lab door was open when Robbie approached and he saw no need to knock. He took a step in seeing Ellen, alone with her back to him. "I could say, if you need a shoulder to cry on. Mine's available, but . . . you know that." He watched her stop working and lift her head, what Robbie didn't see was Ellen's smile from his words. "Then again, would you cry? I could tell you . . ." Robbie stepped inside further. "Dean's a big jerk. But that's been established. I could beat him up for you if you'd like. That's an option. But would it be a challenge?"

Ellen finally turned around and Robbie was right before her. "Robbie."

"I love you." Robbie said with certainty. "You know that."

"I know. I love you too."

Robbie stepped to her and embraced Ellen. "I'm here. Talking about it or not talking about it, I'm here." Robbie held her tighter. "And I am so sorry this is happening. It shouldn't be."

"Tell me about it." Ellen kissed him on the cheek and stepped back from the embrace. "Thank you."

"How are you doing?"

"Me?" Ellen folded her arms. "Stressed. Really, really stressed over this."

"You may get mad at me for asking, but . . . is there any way you two can work through this?" Robbie questioned. "I mean, you guys worked so hard to be where you're at. Besides, on a selfish note, really he's the only one that will give me the understanding." Robbie grinned.

"How do you know you're not going to end up with me eventually?"

"Who me?" Robbie chuckled. "All right. Sure. I know better. But it's a great fantasy, I'll save it for next time."

"Next time what?" She looked at Robbie's grin and smacked him in his chest. "Stop that."

"Seriously. Can you two work through it?"

"No." Ellen shook her head. "I wanted to at first. I tried. But Dean got mad, really angry and refuses to own up to the affair. Robbie, I asked him to stop seeing her and he said he wasn't with her."

"But she's pregnant with his kid."

"Yes."

"O.K. And he expects you to believe that he wasn't sleeping with her."

"That's what hurts. The lies. I'm so de . . . can we not talk about this."

"Sure. I have an idea."

"What's that?"

"Destiny." Robbie reached into his back pocket and pulled out three small folded pieces of paper. "Evening, one, two and three. I'm off tonight El, and I'd like to take your mind off of everything. So, if you're game." He held up the three. "Take a pick. They're all different."

Reaching her hand up, Ellen stopped. "I'm kind of afraid to know what's written there."

"I'll tell you the three choices. One, I watch the kids and you go to that period moon lodge woman meeting thing. Two. Andrea watches the kids and you and I spend some of my hard earned Danny Dollars in New Bowman. Or three, Andrea watches the kids and you and I get drunk and have sex." With a smile Robbie showed her the paper. "Take one."

Ellen debated and lifted the center slip. She opened it, read it and looked up to Robbie.

"So? What one did you pick?"

"I'm sorry Robbie." She handed him the slip. "I guess you and I are having sex."

Hal stepped in right then. "Excuse me. Having sex?" Hal questioned and walked into the lab. "Robbie you wouldn't cross that line. You wouldn't do that to Frank would you?"

Robbie snickered. "That's a really perverted thought not too mention, morally wrong. Of course I wouldn't have sex with Frank."

"You know exactly what I mean. Morning Ellen." Hal kept his eyes on

Robbie.

“God Hal.” Robbie gave kidding punch, “You are way too serious. I’m off tonight, Ellen and I are gonna go out and take her mind off of things.”

Hal looked at Ellen. “Are they worse Ellen?”

Ellen bit her bottom lip and nodded.

“Robbie, could you give me and Ellen a few minutes please?”

“Sure.” Robbie backed up. “El, I’ll see you tonight.” He moved to the door. “I’ll get real clean. Hey, I’ll even trim my arm pit hair if you want me to.”

Ellen chuckled.

Hal rolled his eyes. “Something is not right with him. So . . . talk to me.” He laid his hands on Ellen’s shoulders. “Yesterday when you left New Bowman, things were in a rough spot. And now . . .”

“You want to know?”

“I’d like to, but if you’re not comfortable with telling me, I understand.”

“Let’s . . . let’s have a seat.” Ellen motioned her hand to the counter.

^^^

“So, do you got it?” Frank asked Dean in their walk.

“I don’t know about it, Frank.”

“Dean, I’m telling you. Act confident. Not sorry assed. You have a point to prove and if you act like there’s no way to prove it, people will think you just ran out of options.”

“I’ll try to act unfazed.” Dean said.

“Good. And remember about those results. I know Ellen, giving her other ways that baby could look like yours, is not gonna work. We’re gonna have to prove you were set up and find the people behind it.”

“I’ll keep everything . . .” Dean stopped walking when they hit town.

“Dean?”

“There she is.”

“Who?” Frank looked. “Shit. Stay away from her.”

“No.” Dean started to walk. “This is the first time I’ve seen her since this all went down.”

“Dean, I’m telling you, not a good idea. Stay with me while I check the code on containment.”

“No Frank, I’m killing her.”

“Dean.” Frank called out, but Dean sped off quickly in the direction of Bev who sat in the ‘Joe’ park. With Dean already in a strong route to Bev, Frank gave up and went to containment.

“Bev.” Dean stated strongly.

“Oh hi Dean.” She stood up.

“Oh hi Dean.” He moved to her.

“Why are you doing that? You’ll upset our baby.”

“Bev, it isn’t our baby and you know it.”

“Dean-Dean-Dean. The test proved it.”

“The test prove that you are trying to set me up.”

“How? How?” Bev smiled and shook her head. “I’m not the bitter other

woman Dean. The truth is out. You just have to pay the consequences.”

Dean’s nostrils flared. “You haven’t any idea what consequences are. But you know what? You *will* find out when this baby is born what it means to pay consequences.” Dean’s voice graveled. “Trust me. When it’s born. I’m taking it. That child will not leave my site, nor will the blood sample I take from him. And I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, I will prove it’s not mine. And when I do . . . you Bev, are a dead woman for ruining my life.”

So snide, she slightly rolled her eyes and tilted her head to the right. “You hurt me with these words. Especially after all that we’ve done together.”

“I’d like to say right now, you’re delusional. But I’d be playing into your games. I don’t play games Bev.”

“Yes you do. Little . . .” She giggled. “Sex games.”

“You heard my warning that’s all I’m going to say to you.”

“I’m waiting for you to move in.” Bev stepped to him as Dean backed up. “Really, Dean. No more sneaking.” She had a slight snicker in her voice. “We can be together all the time. You’re welcome at my house. In fact why don’t you stop by tonight for a little fun.”

“Listen to you.” Dean laughed. “What possible reason could there be for me to even think about stepping foot inside of your . . .” A very obvious change of expression hit Dean’s face. His eyes shifted in thought then to back Bev. He took a breath and spoke smoothly. “You know what?” Biting his bottom lip he took a step to her with arrogance. He smiled before he said anything. “What is wrong with me?”

“Nothing?” Bev guessed.

“I think . . . I think I know why I don’t remember being with you.”

“You do?” She asked.

“Has to be the microchip.” Dean smacked himself in the forehead. “That’s it. It causes memory losses at times. I mean, that would have to be it right?”

“You know it.” Bev crinkled her nose in a flirting manner at him.

“And . . . I’m really dumb. My God, I’m not with my wife anymore.” Dean moved into her. “And I bet you . . . Bev, forgive me for not remembering. I bet you are incredible in bed.”

“Huh?” Bev was shocked.

Dean huffed out. “I think coming over your house is exactly what I need. Really. I need it. It’s been a while, as I’m sure you know. And really, being with someone like you would do wonders for my ego. I mean, . . .” Dean chuckled. “You’re like what? Twenty-three, twenty-four?”

“Well, actually.” Bev hunched. “I’m only going to be twenty-one. I kind of fibbed about my age.”

“Fibbed? So you’re even younger. Better. However, If you do the math, I really am old enough to be your father. But . . . that obviously . . .” Dean extended his hand in a motion around Bev. “Didn’t bother you. Now that I think even more about it.” Dean shivered. “I could be up for this. Well, it takes that added push at my age, but of course you know that.”

“You’re not *that* old are you?”

“*That* old? Not really, but in the physical department, after thirty-three as you know, it’s all down hill. Not with us though, huh?”

“Um . . .no.”

“Tonight, being with you Bev at your house is exactly what I need.” Dean

moved closer.

“Tonight?”

“Yes.”

“Did . . . did I say tonight?”

“Yes.” Dean nodded.

“I uh . . . I think I have . . .”

In Bev’s search for words Dean leaned his face closer and dramatically whispered. “To please me.”

Bev’s eyes widened.

Hands on the counter, Hal stared at his interlocked fingers and thumbs that danced in circles around each other in his thoughts. He raised his eyes to Ellen and nodded. So silent Hal stayed. He stood up and nodded again. Reaching his hand across the counter, he laid his hand behind Ellen’s head, pulled her to him and pressed his lips to her forehead.

Ellen saw it. Beneath the cool calm exterior was that tell-tale, Slagel, protruding anger vein in his neck. “Hal?”

Another nod and Hal stepped back, turned and walked out.

“Oh my God.” Ellen flew from behind the counter in a race. “Hal!”

“So what do you say Bev. Seven?” Dean whispered. “Seven is good for me.”

“S . . . S . . . Seven will be f . . . fine.” Bev stuttered with wide eyes.

“Good.” Dean smiled. “I can not wait. After all we’ll think of it as practice for when we are one big happy family. Right?”

“Yes.” Bev swallowed.

“I’ll be there.” Dean whispered. “And it will be, you, me and my fantasies.” He raised one eyebrow at her.

“Dean.” Hal’s heavy hard voice intruded.

Dean’s eyes widened and he spun around, trying not to let his shock show. His heart pounded, especially when he saw Ellen behind Hal. “Shit.”

“Shit?” Hal tilted his head and stepped to Dean. “Shit? Nice, very nice. You humiliate one of my family, deny it and then proceed to rub it in her face? You’re pathetic.”

“Hal, look . . .”

“Dean.” With an arrogant smile, Hal shook his head and held up a finger to silence him. “You’re a dead man.”

Dean heard it, then he supposed he actually felt the feel of the ground on his back before he felt the throbbing, burning pain searing at the side of his nose.

He could feel the blood pour down his face from the hit he took from Hal, that was all but a blur of a huge closed fist. He stumbled to a stand, turning to see Hal at least six feet away. *‘Six feet, he knocked me back six feet. Shit’*, Dean thought. Hal stood tall, waiting as if it was his full intention to allow Dean to regain his balance and knock him over again. Really debating on doing so, Dean stood up straight. “Hal, look . . .”

“Hal!” Frank called out.

Dean turned his head quickly to the right to see Frank walking over. When he returned his views to Hal, Dean saw him charging and was ill prepared. Just as his mind pondered, *'shit, why did I look away?'* and just as Hal was a foot from him, the motion blur of Frank came into focus. Dean heard the hard grunt and escaping of air. Frank used body as a tackle in an interception into Hal. Both big Slagel men flew back and landed in a roll on the ground. Grabbing the end of his lab coat, Dean spit blood from his mouth first then used his coat to wipe off his face.

"Dean?" Bev hurried to him. "Are you all right. Oh my God."

Dean nodded and tried to make his eyes meet Ellen's. She wouldn't look at him. Arms folded, she turned her head. Dean felt the pain of that more than the pain of his hurt face.

"Frank!" Hal, so outraged, rolled up and stood. "What the hell is the matter with you?"

"What the hell's the matter with you!" Frank yelled back. "You don't hit fuckin people for no reason."

"No reason?" Hal's head flung back and he laughed. "Excuse me for doing something, *you* big brother should have done."

"Why . . . why would I hit Dean?"

"For what he did to Ellen! Then he has the gall to stand . . ."

"Whoa!" Frank held up his hand and stepped to Hal. "You believe this shit?"

"And you don't?" Hal questioned.

"I believe Dean."

Hal's face grew red. "Then explain the baby Frank! She's pregnant to him! It's his baby. Explain that!"

"I can't. But . . ." Frank took on a calm demeanor. "Stranger things have happened."

"Stranger things have happened." Hal shook his head. "I am really disappointed in you. Really. How could you do this?"

"I'm not doing anything!"

Ellen stepped in between the brothers, facing Frank. "I'm telling you Frank, Dean was with her. That's his baby. Contrary to what he told you. Now you tell me Frank. Tell me you're not taking his word over mine."

Frank looked into Ellen's eyes and then he blinked long. "El." He breathed out. "I'm sorry babe, but you're wrong here. You are dead wrong." Frank shook his head. "It's Dean. Dean." He spoke with soft emotions. "Come on, you know him. I know him. He wouldn't do this."

Ellen's heart pounded. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. "You want to side with him. You go on." She said coldly. "But like him, I want you out of my house." Before anymore could be said, Hal placed his arm around Ellen, turned her from Frank and walked off with her.

Mouth closed tightly, Frank's top lip twitched and his jaw tensed up. He waited until Hal and Ellen disappeared into the clinic and then Frank . . . stomped. "Fuck!" He turned in a circle cutting his hand through the air with every hard stomp. "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!"

"Frank." Dean stepped to him as they stood alone. He wanted to say something, but the blood that seeped down the back of his throat choked him.

After a gag, Dean spit.

Frank looked over his shoulder with an odd, raised eyebrow look.

“Frank. Stop this. All right? Don’t you get yourself on the outs with her too. Just . . . just go tell her you were wrong.”

“I’m not.”

“Tell her. To keep peace.”

“No, Dean. I gave you my word. I’ll keep it. And you think her little . . .” Frank imitated Ellen. “I want you out of my house . . . tactics worry me. I know her. She’s pissed and acting like it. Me, I’m confident we’ll prove her wrong. That’s how I’ll act, like it doesn’t bother me.” Frank turned all the way around. “I can’t believe my brother decked you like that. Good punch.” Frank nodded impressed.

“What did Joe do? IV steroids into you all growing up? God, all you guy are strong.” He wiped his bleeding nose again. “But, I deserved it. I was kind of . . .” Dean dropped his voice to a whisper. “Setting up Bev. I have a plan.”

“A plan?”

“Yeah, I’ll need you. It will work in our favor.”

“A plan?” Frank asked again. “Well I hope this plan was worth getting your nose busted over.”

“Busted.” Dean scoffed then wiped the blood. “Trust me Frank, my nose is not busted.”

“Trust *me* Dean, it is. I broke my nose six times. Busted.”

“I’m the doctor.”

“O.K.” Frank tossed his hands up. “Well, I have that meeting.” Frank looked at his watch. “First thing’s first. Let’s go. We have to find my father.”

“For what?” Dean started to move with Frank, spitting and wiping blood with each step.

“Well, I’ve been kicked out of my new house. And . . . I need housing . . .” Frank grinned. “Roommate.”

Dean froze.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

It felt cold to Joe when he stepped inside of the communications room. Not because it set deep underground in the cryo tunnels, but because of the tension between Hal and Frank. He walked in with Jason early enough for their phone call, set down his clipboard and looked at Frank and Hal. He heard what had happened. And not from Frank who came to see him not long before for a new place to stay. Joe heard from witnesses.

Joe nodded a hello to Henry, patted a peaceful Robbie once on the back that looked to Hal and Frank. "I won't have this." Joe said sternly to his sons. "I won't have my sons fighting."

Robbie, who sat in a chair, looked up. "I'm not doing anything."

"Not you." Joe turned to Robbie, then to both Hal and Frank who sat staring in completely different locations. "You two."

"Dad." Hal spoke up. "I'm not going to say anything about Frank interfering in my physical confrontation. But I'm angry because of his stance with this whole Dean mess."

"I have every right to my opinion, asshole." Frank snapped back.

"Frank's right." Joe said. "Even though he pisses me off about it. He's right. He can believe what he wants. Now maybe you two boys should shake hands and make up."

"I'm not fighting with him." Frank tossed his hands up. "He's the one pissed off at me and giving me fuckin attitude."

"You deserve it." Hal snapped.

"Oh blow me."

"Boys."

Hal grunted. "You know what Frank. I really hope Robbie has a good time tonight with Ellen. She deserves someone on her side."

"What do you mean. Robbie?" Frank looked at Robbie. "What the fuck is he talking about."

"Oh." Robbie waved his hand. "We're just hanging out to take her mind off of things."

Frank grinned at Hal. "And you're trying to start trouble . . . as fuckin usual."

"I am not starting trouble. I am merely expressing my opinion. And I must of misunderstood when I heard Ellen tell Robbie they were having sex."

Robbie jolted his head suddenly to Hal with wide eyes. "Asshole."

"Robert." Joe smoothly warned.

"Figures." Henry mumbled.

"Henry." Joe said.

"Robbie!" Frank growled.

"What?" Robbie said innocently

"So I didn't hear that?" Hal questioned.

"Hal." Joe warned.

"Fuck." Frank's hand cut through air. "What the fuck Robbie."

"Frank." Joe grumbled.

"We were joking around Frank." Robbie stood up. "That's all."

Frank glared at Hal. "Fuck Hal."

"Why do you do that?" Hal asked.

"Do what?"

"Swear all the time." Hal told him. "It's obscene and disturbing."

"I don't fuckin swear all the time."

"You just did." Hal pointed at Frank.

"I did?" Frank scratched his head. "Still. I don't swear all the time."

"Frank you can't say a sentence without swearing." Hal stated. "The 'F' word is your favorite adjective."

"The 'F' word? 'F' word? What is this fifth grade." Frank snickered.

"I understand your need to exclaim your anger in a boisterous obscene manner. But do you have to subject everyone else as well. It makes me uncomfortable."

Frank fluttered his lips and flipped Hal off.

"See. One way or another."

"What?" Frank was lost.

"Bet me Frank." Hal stepped to him. "Bet me for twenty-four hours you can't go without swearing."

"I can too."

"No, you can't." Hal said. "Bet me."

Robbie raised his hand. "Can I get in on this bet?"

Jason agreed. "I can see this as fun."

Henry shook his head. "Never be able to do it."

"I'll bet you." Frank stepped to Hal. "What's the bet?"

"The 'praise me' prize. Remember?" Hal quizzed.

"Oh I remember." Frank said. "You're on."

Jason inched his way to Joe. "What is the 'praise me' bet?"

Joe whispered "The loser has to praise the winner to everyone for twenty-four hours. They've been doing this since they were kids."

Hal shook Frank's hand. "Twenty-four hours without a swear word coming from that mouth, starting . . ." Hal looked at his watch. "Now."

"Pansy." Frank flipped him off--after all that didn't come from his mouth--and he walked across the communications room. Nearing the map wall and away from Hal, the phone rang. It was noon.

"Robert." Joe twitched his head.

Robbie scooted the chair over to the console. "Ready and . . ." Robbie's hands moved and a click came over the speaker system.

Joe, hands in pockets, faced the speaker. "Yes." He called out.

George's voice carried through. "Joe."

"Uh!" Frank grunted in disgust and saw the glares he received. "What? I didn't swear."

"Joe." George repeated. "Glad we could have this little meeting."

"Like wise." Joe said. "Now . . . tell me why you wanted to have it."

"I guess for the same reason you called us." George explained. "The savages."

"What do you know?" Joe asked he reached in his shirt pocket for a cigarette.

"What do *you* know?" George repeated.

"This

isn't a
game.
You
called
this
meeting.
”

“But you called us first.”

“Had your ass not hung up, you would have known what I wanted.”

“All right. All right.” George called out. “I’m not going to bicker. I’m here to speak about a mutual problem. Savages. We took a surprise attack hit the other night.”

Joe whistled. “They attacked Quantico?”

“Three hundred. We stopped them, but their bold. Has Beginnings been hit.”

“They come in little packs.” Joe told him. “But yes, we’ve been hit.”

“What do you know about them?” George asked.

Joe shrugged. “Probably no more than you.”

“Three hundred was a lot. They’re are coming from somewhere.”

“Our thoughts exactly.”

“But where is their camp?” George spoke out loud his thought.

“Camps.” Frank corrected. “Camps. There’s more than one. There has to be. You have them over there with you just like we have them here.”

“Impossible.” George stated. “They aren’t that smart.”

Frank tossed his hands up in an ‘oh well’ manner. “Fine don’t listen to me. Who am I? Only the F . . . F . . . Savage warfare expert.” He leaned back in a chair and nodded arrogantly to Hal for his non use of vulgar language accomplishment.

“Joe.” George said. “Would you agree they have to be taken care of.”

“I would agree, yes. It’s not safe for our people to leave their perimeters.”

“I think our goal is to find the camps.”

Joe nodded. “Winter’s setting in, scouting parties can’t be out that long. And your retard, brainless soldiers make things worse.”

“How about this.” Georg paused long. “How about we draw up a cease fire between us and resolve this savage situation. Both send out parties. Both share what they discovered.”

“Why are you so quick to join forces with Beginnings?”

“Oh I’m not doing that.” George chuckled. “I’m merely stating we pull a cease fire and handle the threat that’s out there. Seriously, while you people live in your protected walls. We here on the real side of the country are rebuilding. We have industry spread out. Unprotected. I don’t want that hit. Trust me I don’t want to work with you as much as you don’t want to work with me. However, the savages are a big pain in the ass.”

Frank bobbed his head from side to side wanting to disagree. To him, the savage were a great source of training exercises.

“Joe.” George called out.

Joe had started pacing. “Hold on George.” He motioned his head to Robbie who put the call on hold. “Jason?”

Jason tossed his hands up. “I say, use them to help eliminate the

threatening camp or camps of the savages.”

“Henry?” Joe questioned him.

“I feel the same way.”

George heard the beep of the hold being released. “Joe. What do you say? How are we going to handle this. Separate or together as reluctant partners. What’s your answer?”

Folding his arms, Joe looked around the quiet faces in the room. He then looked at the speaker where George’s voice came from. “I guess we . . . I guess we go into a . . . cease fire.”

^^^

There was something nasal about Dean’s voice as he spoke into his pocket tape recorder, dictating his notes in the cryo-lab. “Zero-eight, twenty-two hours. Injured G.E.F., herein referred to as . . . Herbert.” Dean let out a breath. “A name not given by me, Ellen, if you are typing up these notes. It’s a Melissa name. She wants to raise it when we make it well. Back to notes. Sorry, I’m finding any way to talk to you.” Dean turned a note. “Burns third degree which cover seventy percent of his body show no signs of infection. Herbert is strong and lived passed the projected death time. Respiratory labored at times. Infant must be kept tilted on a thirty degree angle for easier breathing. Restraints are at a minimal at this time. Blood work shows white cell count down.” Dean walked over to the other cage. The killer baby in there bounced and snarled when he saw Dean. “Going to try a transfusion if we get a match from healthy G.E.F. Herein referred to as . . .” Dean grinned at the child. “Elliott.” He snickered and from the cage next to ‘Elliott’ Dean removed a small mouse. He dangled it by its tail above the killer baby. “Hungry? Here you go.” Dropping the mouse into the cage Dean watched the killed baby devour it like an appetizer. He continued in his notes. “Hopefully the procedure will boast enough to perform . . .” An involuntary gag came from Dean as his throat felt closed. He tried to clear it and gagged again. He shut off the player and set it down. He felt like he was choking, but he could still breathe. A thinness in his throat was there that seemed to go straight to a thickness in his left nostril. With watering eyes, Dean moved to the sink. He knew what the problem was. Closing off the right side of his nose, Dean lean over the sink, trying to expel the clotted blood that he knew gathering in his sinuses. The first pressure caused him to wince, then he tried again. The only thing that emerged was a gurgling. Dean gagged more, and, still leaning over the sink, trudged on in his efforts despite the pain.

When Ellen walked into the cryo-lab, she forgot for a moment that she was no longer happily married. Her first vision was Dean as he stood slightly leaning over the sink. As she always did, she checked out his backside, so little and cute. And then she heard the noise he was making. She had an odd smile to her, one she wouldn’t let Dean see. She walked to him dropping the folder she carried on the counter in her route there. She shook her head at his noisy attempts and his

oblivious nature to her being there. Moving right to beside him, Ellen wiped the smile from her face. "I don't think in all the years I have known you Dr. Hayes, I don't think I can ever recall you being this foul. What . . . are you doing?"

Dean coughed. "I can't get it out." He stood up and looked at her.

"Excuse me?"

"The clot it . . ." A gagging, tongue-against-the-back-of-the-throat noise came from Dean. "Won't come out."

Ellen snickered. "Sorry. But that's because it's probably so huge, the back of the throat is the only easy way out."

"It's gagging . . ." Dean gagged. "Me."

"Well you wouldn't have had this problem if you would have stayed upstairs after your x-ray."

"What for? And I had to start my dictation."

"Sit." Ellen pointed to the counter. "I'll get supplies."

Dean opened his mouth to argue, but decided, Ellen was speaking to him. Medically or not, Dean was taking it. "Sure." He walked over, gagging again on his way and sat down. He watched Ellen pull things out from underneath the one counter. She brought it over and set it in front of him.

"What are you doing?"

"Do you want help or not?"

"Yeah but . . ."

"Then I'm helping you." Ellen moved to the sink to wash up.

Dean's eyes shifted to the supplies she had, still in their sterilized packages. A suction bulb, tiny surgical tweezers, gauze, tape. "EI?"

Ellen joined him and opened the file folder she brought. "Broken."

"What is?"

"Your nose."

"I looked at this." Dean gave it back. "I didn't see."

"Well where on this were you looking?" Ellen held it up toward the light. "At this."

"Yes."

"No."

"Left lateral portion of the bridge, Dean. See." Ellen pointed. "You have a hair line fracture. Not bad. I've seen worse on Frank."

"Hal broke my nose? Shit."

"Well." Ellen set down the x-ray. "Perhaps if you weren't flirting with your girlfriend in the middle of the street, you know the little girl you swore you didn't sleep with, maybe Hal wouldn't have had to . . ."

"Defend your honor?"

Ellen giggled. "Yeah."

"What is he now, your appointed knight?"

Ellen drew up a smile. "Someone has to be."

"For your information. I was up to something with her." Dean pointed.

"Did I need to hear that?"

Dean closed his eyes. "No, that came out wrong. I was . . ."

"Dean." Ellen covered his mouth. "I don't want to hear it. The only thing I want to come out right now, is that clot." She laid both hands on his cheek. "Head back." Less than gently she tilted his head back.

"Is this a good idea?"

"The clot has to come out. Do you want to breathe."

"I'm gagging here."

"Exactly."

Dean could see the suction bulb come into view. "Easy with . . ."

"Dean. Enough."

"O.K." There was something frightening about a scorned woman placing a suctioning device in his nose. He had to believe that Ellen would place herself in the medical frame of mind. He could feel the instrument go into his nose and he panicked more. One quick suction and Dean almost threw up when he felt the clot slip from his throat.

"Out. Huge." Ellen held gauze under his nose. "Hold this."

Dean held the gauze and watched Ellen place a cotton swab into a small jar. "Phosphoreus?"

"Yes, and it will burn, but it'll stop any bleeding. Ready." She took hold of the gauze. As soon as she applied the Phosphoreus Dean shrieked. "Quit being a baby."

"That burns."

"I told you. Done." Ellen turned to her supplies.

"El." Dean stood up. "Thank you."

"For?"

"For being nice and not callous."

"It was medical."

Dean closed his eyes. "El, why does this have to be so bitter."

A slight laugh of disbelief came from Ellen.

"I miss you." Dean whispered. "I miss you so much." He moved closer. "This thing started and now it's been a week since I have touched you."

"Think of it this way Dean. It's better than when next year comes along and you're thinking how it's been a year since you touched me." Ellen took her things to the sink.

"I doubt that."

"Thanks."

"No, I doubt it because next year at this time, you're gonna be saying. Wow, Dean, I can not believe I doubted you. What was I thinking."

Opened mouth Ellen turned to him. "Have you been hanging around Frank too much?"

"Probably. But . . ." Dean held up a finger and walked to her. "Even though I'm going against Frank's advice here . . ."

"Oh my God. You're listening to Frank."

"Yeah and he makes sense."

Ellen shook her head.

"Going against his advice here, I'm going to tell you, I'm not giving up on us."

"Frank doesn't want you to tell me that? And you're buying that it's in your best interest."

"Yes." Dean said.

"Frank probably wants you to blow it all together with me."

"No he doesn't."

Again, facially, Ellen showed her shock. "What is up with you two."

Dean shrugged. "He's on my side."

“Thank you for reminding me. Now you both can be alone together.” Ellen walked over to the killer baby cage. “Are we going to do this or not?”

“Can we just . . . Just talk about us.”

“Nope.” Ellen said. “Yes or no? Killer baby blood transfusion or not.”

“Yes.” Dean said with disappointment. “You get the supplies, I’ll prep Elliott.” Dean saw her eyes widened. “I mean . . . I . . .”

“Don’t.” Ellen said coldly and walked away to get the supplies.

Mumbling Dean looked for the sedation. “Soon enough I getting through the days where I quit screwing everything up.”

^^^

Totally frustrated with her brother’s pleas for release, Ellen welcomed the ringing containment phone. “Containment.”

“Please El. Please.” Richie begged behind her.

Ellen swatted him away. “Dean.” She spoke in the phone. “I just left there.”

“Yeah, I know.” Dean said. “I have a question.”

“God.”

“Please El, I’ll clean your house.” Richie tried.

Ellen flung her hand at him. “What is it Dean?”

“What happened to the old freezer cases that we had in room two down here.”

“The little ones from early on?”

“Yes.”

“Please El.” Richie begged.

“Hold on.” Ellen covered the receiver. “Richie will you . . .” Just as she turned around she saw Frank in the doorway. “Swell. I’m inundated with annoying males.” She uncovered the receiver. “Dean don’t you remember, about three months ago, when we were prepping for the new plague we brought them upstairs because didn’t need them anymore.”

“Shit. That’s right.”

“Why?”

“Did we get rid of the stuff in them?” Dean asked.

“Yeah it was old and untouched.”

“O.K. the breakdown should be in the computer.”

“Dean.” Ellen said annoyed. “What? Why is this important?”

“No reason. Bye.”

Ellen pulled the receiver away and looked at it. Shrugging she hung up and turned back around. “Richie. Out. Frank. What?”

“Oh my God so rude.” Frank held his hand against his chest. “Richie get out.”

“I’m not giving up.” Richie backed up. “I’ll pester the hell out of you until you release me.” He stepped from the office.

“So he thinks.” El said. “I’ll sedate his ass. Now what do you want Frank.”

“I want to talk to you.”

“Nope. I’m really mad at you. Really mad.”

“And rightfully so.” Frank nodded.

“So if you came here to try to make amends, to explain why you’re siding with Dean. Don’t bother.”

“O.K.”

“O.K.?” Ellen was shocked.

“Yeah. Anyhow . . .”

“Did I mention I wanted you out of my house.”

“That’s why I’m here.” Frank told her.

“I knew it.” Ellen walked to behind her desk. “Nope.”

“Nope what?”

“No, I’m not changing my mind. I want you out.”

“I’m already gone.”

“Excuse me?”

“I packed up and left already. I got a new place and . . .”

“Already?” Ellen stood up. “You’re kidding?”

“Nope. You said you wanted me out.”

“But I didn’t think you’d leave so easy. No . . . trying to explain? No . . . guilt trips. No . . . arguments.”

“Nope.” Frank shook his head. “The way I see it is, why stress you out more. You are in a stressful situation. I’m sorry to add to that. You believe Dean dogged you. I believe someone is setting him up big time. This is causing a rift . . .”

“Rift?” Ellen walked slowly around her desk. “Some thing is different about you.”

“I shaved this morning. Look how defined my goatee looks.”

“Something else.” She neared him.

Frank shrugged. “Anyway . . .”

“No, I’ll figure this out.”

“Anyway . . . the reason I am here is . . .”

Ellen snapped. “You aren’t swearing.”

“No, I’m not allowed.”

“Not allowed? Who won’t let you?”

“It’s a bet, now can I finish why I’m here?”

Ellen stepped back. “You’re being different with me. Why? Are you mad at me?”

“No. I . . .”

“I didn’t do anything to you Frank.” Ellen raised her voice trying to start an argument and get the fight from Frank she expected. “You’re the one that defended Dean.”

“Yes I am.” Frank said calmly. “And I understand that makes you p . . . p . . . mad. Of course, when we prove how wrong you are you’ll be kissing our a . . . a . . . butts.”

Ellen snickered. “I want in on this bet.”

“Go see f . . . f . . . Goofy Hal.” He waited for her to stop laughing. “Anyhow, I heard you and Robbie are going out tonight.”

“Yes we are.” Ellen said smug. “What? You don’t like it?”

“I’m perfectly fine with it. You need to take your mind off of things.”

“Huh?”

“F . . . f . . . gees. I’m never getting to my point.”

“Go on. You were bitching about me and Robbie.”

Frank held up his index finger. “I was not.” He grinned. “My dad is running security tonight. I have my place, I don’t like it, but I have a new place. Can I have the kids while you go out?”

Ellen went quiet. “You want the kids tonight. That’s why you’re here?”

“Yep. No school tomorrow. Can I?”

“Um . . . yeah. Sure. About eight?”

“Eight’s a great time. Thanks.” Frank quickly turned and walked from her office, allowing Ellen to stay in the open mouthed, baffled state she had entered over his attitude. He grinned at how things were on their way to going as planned. And before he headed off to finish any work, Frank headed off to the clinic to tell Dean, court order or no court order, they were having the kids at their new place.

^^^

Henry’s thoughts should have been more on the meeting with Joe than where they were. Perhaps the call from Dean was the sign he needed. A sign he took. Holding a very small hand sized box he knocked on the clinic lab door to get Dean’s attention.

Dean stopped in his move across the lab. “Henry?” He seemed surprised. “That was fast.”

“I was headed this way.” He held up the box. “Be gentle they break.”

“I appreciate this. I do. Especially after last night.” He took the box and lifted the lid. “I just fill them?”

“Carefully. What are you putting in them?” Henry asked.

Dean stared at the empty plastic paint pellet shell. “I can’t say. But they break easily?”

“Very.”

“How easily.”

“Just any amount of pressure.”

“Excellent.” Dean grinned and put it back.

“Dean.” Henry pulled up a stool. “Can I ask you a question.”

“Sure.”

“Answer me as best as you can. O.K.?”

“O.K.” Dean nodded.

“If . . . if George was to have done this Bev pregnant thing to set you up. What would he have to gain by it.”

“I never said George set me up.”

“I know. You said Bev did. But, if George did, what could he have to gain by doing this to you. I need your answer. Anything?”

“I can’t see what.” Dean tossed his hands up. “Revenge for hitting him with that virus? But Bev is further along than the length of time since we hit him with it.”

“I thought of that.” Henry said. “What about this . . . how’s your work been?”

“Excuse me?”

“Are you on top of things?”

“Aside from missing the fracture in my own nose. Yeah.” Dean said. “Henry why are you trying to find a reason for George’s setting me up. It makes no sense.”

“Yeah, but I’m finding the reason so it makes sense.”

“I’m sorry.” Dean shook his head. “I am really lost. Bev’s pregnancy is too far along for it to be revenge, the only logical reason.”

“Not if Bev worked for George, and her pregnancy became a tool.”

“The tests showed the baby is mine.”

“That’s another loop.” Henry looked in so much thought.

“Henry.” Dean stared at him. “Don’t tell me you believe me now. I mean, yeah, tell me you believe me now. But why.”

“I don’t know. I am still not convinced you didn’t sleep with Bev . . . part of that is wishful thinking though so you lose Ellen for good. But, I interviewed Rev. Bob. Now he didn’t name Bev. Hell, we don’t even have a solid connection between her and George. Danny brought up a point that maybe Bob freely gave Andrea’s name as a diversion to someone else working in Beginnings. Divert attention from them so they can do the work.”

“And that person is Bev. Not Andrea?”

Henry swayed his head in debate. “I don’t know. If Bev is working for George. This baby could be a set up to get you to lose sight of your work, or screw up, or leave Beginnings. Let’s face it Dean your an asset here. But even if Bev is working for George. She can’t pull this one off alone. She needs someone who . . . Medically can help. Rev. Bob made me think. He said Andrea isn’t dangerous, but she could ruin lives while running around waiting for her trial. You’re life Dean is being conveniently ruined.”

Dean slowly backed up. “I didn’t think of it like that. Andrea?”

“We could be wrong. Bev could really end up being smart. I think secretly, without her knowing, we should start looking into her again.” He saw Dean smile. “What?”

“Henry thank you.” Dean rushed to him. “I mean it. This means a lot. And are you serious about looking into her some more.”

“Yes, I am.”

“Good. Then it will be like old times.”

Henry tilted his head. “What do you mean?”

“We worked so well together before. We fought. But we worked well. We can do this the three of us. You, me and Frank. We could use your help.”

“Sure. How?”

Dean grabbed the box of empty shells, held it up and grinned.

Flustered, Ellen’s voice called into the lab surprising Dean and Henry. “Dean!” She raced in and stopped mid run. “Oh, hi Henry.”

“Hey El.” Henry smiled. “What’s wrong?”

“Um . . . nothing.” Trying to whistle Ellen moved across the lab.

“El?” Dean called her attention. “What’s wrong.”

“When um . . . you get a chance . . .” She set bandages on the counter. “I need you to come with me.”

Dean’s eyes widened when he looked at the supplies she gathered and laid on a surgical cloth. Bandages scissors, sutures, scalpel. “El? What are you doing?”

"Nothing." Ellen began to roll the cloth around the supplies she gathered.

"I thought you went home."

"I wanted to check on the progress of the transplant. Today was the day."

"Shit." Dean covered his eyes. "I forgot."

"See." Henry pointed. "What were we talking about. Frazzle the mind, defeat the scientist."

Slowly Dean's hand slid down his face. His eyes shifted to Ellen. "Is there a problem with the transplant?"

"You could say so."

"Rejection?"

Ellen shook her head and grabbed the rolled up cloth. "Maybe you should just come down when you get a chance. See ya. Bye Henry." She flew from the room.

"Henry do you mind?" Dean started to follow.

"Not at all."

"I'll be back." Hurrying out, Dean saw Ellen turn the bend. "El." He raced to catch up. "Hold on."

Ellen stopped.

"What's the problem with the transplant. Didn't it take?"

"Oh it took." Ellen said and started to walk again,

"Can he not feel them?"

"He said he has numbness. But he's able to move them."

"Then I'm lost. The experimental mix must have work."

Ellen chuckled.

"El? Is it the color?"

"Um, in a sense yes."

Dean snickered with sarcasm. "What did I tell you. Chances were his lip color would be off. We can add pigmentation later. The important thing was to give Jeff back his lips. Next his nose."

"We have to really go back and review our theories." Ellen walked into Jeff's room.

"I don't understand." Dean said. "We mutated the cells to match human . . ." He saw he was in Jeff's ear range and he whispered. "To match human ones." He spoke at a normal level. "You said it took. No rejection. What's the problem and why do you have a surgical kit?"

"We have to remove our grafting slash transplant."

"Why?"

"Why?" Ellen walked to the bed and to Jeff. A full bandage covered his mouth. "Take a look Dean." She gently took off the bandage. "We have fur."

Dean placed on a poker face as he stared at what Ellen exposed under the bandages. Once skin they created in the lab, a new cross breed that they layered to form lips. Lips they surgically placed on Jeff connecting them to his nerves and muscles. Lips that once looked good were now a patch of brown and white fur. "Oh." Dean nodded. He saw Jeff's curious shifting eyes. Jeff didn't know.

"Well? Dean?" Ellen questioned. "Prep to remove them or what?"

Dean stared back down to the fur ball lips. He had plans and things to get ready. The removal was going to take up time, not too mention be disheartening and painful to Jeff. Hem-hawing in thought, Dean peered to Ellen. "Let's uh . . . see how bad they look when we shave them."

“O.K.” Shrugging, Ellen moved aside the surgical pack and sought out a good razor.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Quantico Marine Headquarters

George cringed rubbing his eyes, listening with the phone held to his ear. He wished he could lower his head and shake it. But that was impossible with the pins that held his head up. “Bev.” George tried to interrupt her. “Bev . . .” So fatherly he tried to be calming. He couldn’t make heads or tails out of her words, the hyperventilated breathing inhibited that. “Bev.” Finally, George lost it. “Bev!” he smiled at the silence. “Thank you. Now calm down. Why are you having such a problem with this?” George closed one eye listening to her go on. “What are you stupid? You don’t think you can get out of it? . . . well, of course Johnny’s not gonna be mad about it, Johnny doesn’t like you. Bev . . .” George tried, he really tried to remain calm. “Dean’s a man, goddamn it. You been throwing yourself at him, and his wife left him. It’s called revenge. He wants to screw away his depression. Bev . . . Bev . . .” He grumbled. “Bev! Damn it! Listen to me. What time is he coming over? O.K., listen O.K.” George spoke pacifying. “Leave before he gets there. Simple. bye.” Before he could hear anymore about it, George hung up. He took a moment to feel good about himself. It wasn’t very often he got to give fatherly advice.

^^^

Dean noticed Ellen’s fixed stare on the pair of lips that were submerged in the special solution in the petri dish. She walked blindly carrying the dish in her hand, looking almost sadly down to the lips. “El?”

“Hmm?”

“What’s wrong.”

“So sad. I thought we were doing good.”

“We did do good.” Dean told her. “Just the mixture was wrong. Hey, the transplant worked right?”

“True.” Ellen kept walking.

“At least we didn’t do the nose first. He may have grown whiskers.”

Very seriously Ellen stopped walking. She turned her head to Dean after his comment and with closed eyes, allowed herself to smile and shake her head. They were right before the lab and both of them walked in. “We’re done for the day.”

“Yeah.” Dean grabbed his jean jacket off the coat rack.

“Are you going down to the lab?”

“Me? No. It’s three-thirty.” Dean adjusted the collar on his coat. “I’ll grab the kids and head on home, maybe get supper . . .” He saw the stare Ellen gave him. “Started. Shit. Sorry.”

Ellen shook her head.

“El.” Dean said her name painfully. “I forgot because it’s so natural with you. Walking, talking, working. Natural. I’m a smart man El. Would I do something so stupid as jeopardize something so good?”

"Dean, you told her it was going to be you and your fantasies. I heard you. You gonna deny that?"

"No."

"No."

"I'm not . . . I'm not even gonna try. I won't." Dean took a step back. "Goodnight El. See you tomorrow . . ."

"No. You won't."

"I won't?" Dean turned in the door. "Why?"

"New Bowman remember? Or is your mind too cluttered with Bev thoughts."

"No it isn't. Don't forget the blood work on Elliott."

"Dean." Ellen cleared her throat. "Elliott is a man of integrity. He's a good man. He didn't deserve to have you in your sick childish games name a killer baby after him . . ."

"El, I . . ."

"No. So I would prefer in my presence, until he tells me otherwise, I would like if you refer to him as Sgt. Ryder."

A hard stare went to Ellen along with slightly angry puckered lips stemming from the insulting blow Dean took. He turned and walked out.

Grabbing the petri dish with the deformed lips, Ellen walked to the refrigerator. She wasn't in the mood to take the removed transplant all the way down to the cryo lab. She figured if she hid them far enough in the back of the fridge, no one would see them until she got them the next afternoon. Opening the refrigerator, she extended her arm in through the racks of blood. She laid the dish in the back, and as she went to move a rack to in front of it, she saw it. A half filled tube with Elliott's name on it. Ellen pulled her hand back out, looked once more at the blood and closed the refrigerator. She took a single step away and stopped. Looking at her watch, Ellen knew she didn't have much time, but how much time did she need for what she was thinking. After all what was in the tube was only a minuscule amount of blood. Only a few tests could be run. Debating shortly in her mind, Ellen returned to opening the refrigerator. She reached in, pulled out Elliott's blood and stared at it.

^^^

Dean supposed it was probably Joe's routine in the old world as well. He could see Joe doing that. Stopping at the local bar for a drink to relax on his way home. Joe did the same thing in Beginnings, before heading home. Especially on Friday's Joe stopped at the hall. And that's where Dean went to look for him.

He had to talk to Joe. He needed to. Words were not spoken to Dean all day. When he and Frank went to speak to him about housing, Joe was a man of little words to Dean then as well.

Joe was sitting at the bar when Dean walked in. Right where he always sat, fourth stool down right before 'Sam' the mannequin. The stool next to Joe was empty and Dean walked up to it and sat down. "Joe." He spoke soft.

Joe raised his eyes up. "Dean." Cigarette dangling between his fingers, he flicked the butt of it with his thumb sending the ashes into the ash tray.

“Joe, there’s something I need to say to you.”

“Dean.” Joe took a sip of his nearly gone drink. “There’s not much to discuss. Does this have to do with the community welfare?”

“No.”

“Problems at the clinic?”

“No.”

“Security matter?”

“No.”

“Personal?”

Dean hesitated. “Yes.”

“Then I’m afraid I can’t discuss this with you. If you have a problem, I’m not your man.” Joe didn’t speak cold, just matter-of-fact.

“Joe, listen . . .” Dean’s fingers ran nervously in a small circle on the bar. “I know . . . I know it looks like I did wrong . . .”

“Looks?” Joe gave a chuckle. “What will it take? Just look at it from an outside point of view for once. O.K.? Because you aren’t doing that. I’m sorry. You have a community, ninety-plus percent men. You Dean, had a wife. You Dean, played the field. That’s a underlying no-no. There are men in this community who would give their right arm for just a small taste of what you had. But you not only had that, you took a part of what maybe someone else could have had. I have to tell you, word ran rampant. Men are pissed. Rightfully so. She’s carrying your baby. Tests show that.”

“The tests are wrong.”

“Now am I correct in assuming that all other possible means of fertilization have been eliminated?” Joe asked.

“You’re right. They have been.”

“And how many people ran that paternity test?”

“Five.”

“Five.” Joe nodded. “Ellen said she tested it to make sure it wasn’t tampered. Did you?”

“Yes.” Dean said sadly.

“And you still insist their wrong. Son, if they turn up to be wrong, you will get a heartfelt apology from me. But . . . until then. I’m a man of fact. There’s a awful lot of fact staring me blank in the face. And it’s staring at you. Covering it up is useless.”

“I’m not covering anything up.”

“Dean, you need to wake up and see the situation.”

“So does everyone else. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Dean . . .”

“No. Joe.” Dean tried passionately. “I lost my wife. My kids. I did nothing but love them.”

“And you want me to believe you did nothing wrong.”

“Yes. Yes Joe, you of all people, I need to believe me.”

“I can’t.” Joe finished his drink and set it down. He stood up. “I just can’t Dean. And why it’s so important that I believe you is beyond me.”

“Because you’re Joe . . . you’re . . . Joe.” Dean said. “God, I look up to you. How strong you are. The way people respect you. You are the last person aside from my wife I want to disappoint. You’re so fair Joe. I’m asking for a

chance. You of all people, don't turn your back on me.”

“I'm sorry.” Joe turned from their conversation, hands in pockets, and walked out without ever looking back at Dean.

^^^

Before Ellen closed the file folder, she kept her hand over her mouth staring inside. Bringing her opened hand into a fist before her lips, Ellen shut the file and placed it on top of the other folders she had to take to New Bowman with her the next day.

“Knock-knock.” Jenny called pleasantly into the lab.

Ellen sprang up in surprise and spun around. “Jenny.”

“Bad time?”

“No I'm . . .” Ellen peered at her watch. “Shit. I'm sorry. The kids. I . . .”

“Josh took them home.” Jenny stepped inside. “We figured you were busy.”

“I got caught up.” Nervously Ellen took off her lab coat.

“I need your signature.”

“For?” Ellen walked to the counter where Jenny had a stack of papers.

“Petition. I have an appointment with Judge Grace. We want Bev removed from Beginnings. Joe said no.”

“Removed? Grace isn't over Joe's head.”

“True. But if I get enough signatures she said she'll try to influence him”

“They can't oust her Jenny.”

“I know.” Jenny handed Ellen the pen. “It's to get her new residence moved to the House of Lesbians.”

Ellen snickered and snatched up the pen. “Perfect.” She smiled and signed her name.

“How are you.” Jenny took the pen back.

“I'm doing O.K.”

“Robbie's bragging about your date tonight.”

Ellen snickered. “It's a date now?” She started to walk. “I'm heading home, walk with me?”

“Sure.” Jenny followed. “So it's not a date?”

“It's a night out.”

“You're so lucky.”

“Hardly.” Ellen stated.

“No, that's not what I mean.” Jenny held the main doors open for Ellen. “I mean to get to go to New Bowman.”

“You haven't been there?”

“No.” Jenny shook her head. “Patrick, he works mostly nights. He can't take me. Blake, he won't spend any Danny-Dollars. John, well, he's comatose.” Jenny sighed.

“You can tag along with us tonight.” Ellen suggested.

“Thank you. But I can't. Moon lodge meeting.”

“That's right. Maybe next time.”

“O.K.” Jenny said perky as they headed to the living section. “Maybe, you know, with you being so close to the men of New Bowman, you could find me .

. . . a date?"

This made Ellen stop. "A date?"

"Yes. It's time to move on. Not from Patrick mind you. He's rather boring though. Blake . . ." Jenny shook her head as if the thought of being with Blake was shuddering. "Blake is a God, yes, but self centered. John, I love him. I do. But he's done some things We have a lot to work out."

"Jenny." Ellen chuckled as they walked again. "You getting a date should not be a problem on your own. You certainly don't need my help. The men love you around here. Hell, pick up the radio, tell them tomorrow you want a date to New Bowman and they'll be knocking at your door."

Jenny blushed. "Thanks, But . . . I don't want a Beginnings man. The men of New Bowman, they are so . . ."

"Nice."

"Exactly. And respectful."

"We don't have that."

"A part of me thinks, this may sound silly." Jenny paused. "But part of me thinks that these men of New Bowman would appreciate a woman for who they are, not what they could give in bed. Make sense?"

"Perfect. And I see your point. Sure." Ellen exhaled. "I'll find a good one for you."

"I have someone in mind. You know him."

Ellen's walk hesitated as she looked at Jenny.

Jenny tried not to chuckle at the semi-frightened look on Ellen's face. "No. Don't worry. Not Elliott."

"I uh, wasn't worried." Ellen stated.

"Sure. Anyhow, ready?" She waited for Ellen to nod. "Hal."

"Hal?"

"Hal." Jenny repeated. "Hal is such a gentleman. And nice."

"He is nice." Ellen agreed. "And don't forget . . . hot."

"Oh yeah. And he's the Slagel with more hair on his head than chest." Jenny grinned. "I didn't want to mention that, being he's like your brother."

"Hal's a great guy." Ellen said. "He really is. A little arrogant but I think it makes him sexy."

"Would it bother you?" Jenny asked. "If it will I won't proceed any . . ."

"No." Ellen stopped her. "No, not at all. In fact." Laying her arm around Jenny's shoulder Ellen guided them in their walk. "I'm seeing Hal tonight. I'll make the suggestion."

"Will you build me up?" Jenny question with slight giddiness.

"Without a doubt." Ellen replied.

"Will you make sure Robbie doesn't say anything negative?"

"Absolutely." Ellen knew she was being overly nice. But it wasn't a front. It was genuine. It was her thank you to Jenny for a moment of relief. For giving her the first conversation of the day where Dean's name and the pregnancy did not come up once.

^^^

There was that slight ‘peeping’ Tom feel that Jess has just before he entered Robbie’s bedroom. He took a quick look at Robbie who was standing in his boxers before his mirror, then Jess tossed at him a pair of tan pants. “Here.”

The clothes smacked off of Robbie’s chest and Robbie grinned. “Thanks.” He stepped into them. “Hey Jess?”

Jess stopped in his turn from the door. “Yeah?”

“Don’t let it get around that I was in your pants.”

Jess closed his eyes and smiled at Robbie’s bad humor. “I’ll make you a deal.”

“Sure.” Robbie grabbed the black shirt he was going to wear. “What’s that?”

“I won’t let it get around that you were . . . in my pants. If you do your hair differently tonight.”

“What?” Robbie buttoned his shirt. “Jess, man. My hair is my best asset.” He walked to the mirror.

“Robbie, you have other better assets. Trust me.”

“I didn’t know you didn’t like my hair.”

“I do like your hair. But I think you should make it look different.”

“Why?” Robbie asked innocently looking at his wet head in the mirror.

“What did you say when you asked to borrow my pants.”

“I sad I wanted a different look, so El can see me differently.”

“Exactly. Do your hair differently.”

“Jess. I love my hair. It’s easy . . .”

“Robbie.” Jess snickered. “I saw the picture your dad has of you four boys when you were young. You had the same hair.”

“True.” Robbie held up a finger as he put a comb through his hair. “But, that wasn’t on purpose, I just hated coming my hair in the morning.”

“So now you comb it, then make it stick up like you never combed it.”

“Yes. Makes me look young.”

“Yes. I would think that you would want Ellen to see you differently then the little boy with messed up hair.”

“Jess look.” Robbie pulled open his shirt. “Hair. No little boy. I’d uh . . .” Robbie closed his shirt. “Show you more but, I don’t want to get you worked up.”

“You’re an ass.” Jess shook his head with a smile.

“Did I tell you I trimmed my arm pit hair.”

“No.” Laughed Jess. “Why?”

“I don’t know.” Robbie grabbed the Hair Hold and placed it on his fingers.

Jess watched. “You’re really going to place that stuff in your nice combed hair and pull till it stands on ends.”

“Jess, it’s an acquired look. I have cowlicks.”

Though Jess cringed watching Robbie deliberately make his hair look messy, he moved off the hair subject. “Seriously, Robbie can I ask you something.”

“Shoot.”

“Are you having expectations about this date tonight.”

“Well yeah.” Robbie shrugged. “I plan on having a good time.”

“She’s on the rebound.”

“Jess.” Robbie moved to the door and laid his hands on Jess’ arms as he

walked by. He paused to give him a joking jolt. "El's been on the rebound between Dean and Frank for so long. She probably feels like a tennis ball."

Jess laughed. "That was funny. Do you want me to be out of the house tonight?"

"For?" Robbie asked as he headed down the steps.

"Just . . . just incase."

"No." Robbie stopped mid stairs. "It won't get there. El won't let it. She's really upset about Dean." So serious, Robbie moved the rest of the way down the steps. "And you know what? I won't let it. That's not what this night is about. I want to take her mind off of things. It's about her. Not me." Robbie grabbed his coat. "Even if she takes off every stitch of clothes and begs me, I won't do it. This night is not about sex and I won't let it get there." He reached for the door.

"Robbie. That's really nice to say. Do you really mean that one part?"

"Which part? The part about taking her mind off of things and this night is for her? Yeah I meant that why . . ."

"Not that part. The part about her being naked and begging and you not giving in. Because Robbie she needs emotional support right now, not physical. You meant that right?"

"Hell no." Robbie opened up the door. "If she even suggests sex . . . I'm on it." He stepped out, then back in with a wide grin. "Kidding."

When the door closed, Jess tossed up his hands and rolled his eyes.

^^^

Trish smiled pleasantly the entire time. She nodded her head, giving Danny Hoi her complete attention. He stopped by her house for fifteen minutes of her time to discuss some trial points. But the minute, the exact minute Danny surpassed his requested fifteen, the smile on Trish face became tense and forced.

"You O.K.?" Danny stopped mid sentence when he noticed the almost Joker-from *Batman* smile on her face.

"Yes. Well. No. I'm not."

"What's wrong?"

"I'm busy."

"Doing what?" Danny asked.

"Danny don't you do anything else around Beginnings except work and plan."

"I go to the social hall."

"When?"

"At nights." Danny replied.

"It's almost night. You should go to the social hall."

"Are you trying to get rid of me Trish?" Danny asked.

"Yes." Trish stood up. "I have things to do. I have a life outside of my work in Beginnings. I sit at that history office, dealing with people in and out all day . . . what? What's so funny?"

Danny wiped the grin from his face. "Nothing. Sorry, go on complain."

"You have me working for your paper on top of that. And now the legal

eagle thing. Have you not noticed my personal life is in shambles as well. My husband, soon to be ex, has no face and today he lost his new lips.”

Danny blinked. “I’m uh . . . sorry to hear that. But back to this . . .”

“Bye.” Trish stood up.

“Trish, can I talk while you do what you have to do. And what do you have to do.”

“I have to get my appetizer ready for the woman’s meeting tonight. Then . . .” Trish moved toward her kitchen. “I have to shower, shave my legs, do my hair, put my make up on, All that stuff.”

“For a meeting.”

Trish huffed out and walked into her kitchen. “Yes.” She opened the fridge and pulled out a small bowl. She set it on the counter.

“What’s this?” Danny asked.

“Dip.”

“What do you dip in it?”

“Crunchy bread.”

“Crunchy bread?”

Another annoyed sigh and Trish showed him the plate.

“They look like failed crackers.” Danny snickered.

“Crunchy bread.” She smacked his hand when he reached for one. “No.”

“Come on.”

“Danny they are geometrically arranged.”

“Just one.”

“All right. And finish up what you want to tell me.”

“Thanks.” Danny took a small chunk of crunchy bread. “I want to start with Andrea. All over again, I know we questioned her, but I’ve got another line to go with.” He lifted the cover from the small bowl. “This is red.”

“Yes.”

“What kind of dip is it?”

“Ketchup.”

“Just ketchup.”

Trish gasped. “Do you think I would put a bowl of ketchup on the table to have people dip their crunchy bread into. No. It has little veggies in there.”

“Oh.” Danny dipped. “I see.” He placed it in his mouth. His enthusiastic chew slowed down. “Tastes like ketchup.”

“It should.”

“But you said . . .”

“Danny. Get on with it.”

“I have never known you to be so pushy. I like it.” He reached for another piece of bread and nearly shrieked at the smack on the hand. “All right. All right. Andrea.”

“Thank you.”

“We need to start questioning her all over again.”

“You said that.”

“Only this time we need to start questioning her for answers as to why Rev. Bob would want to set her up.”

“Perhaps possibly she offended him.”

“Could be.” Danny shrugged. “Maybe she knows something that she promised she wouldn’t tell, and Rev. Bob is afraid.”

“But wouldn’t that be his identity? And that’s already out.”

“True.”

“I still think we should start looking at mishaps here in Beginnings.”

“We have.” Danny said.

“No, new ones. Things that haven’t gone right. Even the tiniest little thing.” Trish suggested. “Supposedly, now think about it, supposedly all of George’s people are either dead or . . . in Rev. Bob’s case, in holding. Except for the alleged George worker Andrea. Now if Andrea is the front for the real person remaining in Beginnings, obviously this real person has work to complete. We just have to find out what it is. If we come across mishaps or events that we can, even in our mind, associate with things that work in George’s favor, then maybe we can find the real person.”

“Maybe the little mishaps are like stones on road. Paving the way to the big picture.”

“Exactly.”

“Find the stones. Find the road. Find the road, find the real George insider.”

“Exactly.” Trish gave a pat to Danny on the cheek and walked from her kitchen.

“Hey where you going?”

“To get ready.” Trish moved to her steps.

“I’m not done talking.”

“I am.” She waved. “Bye.”

Danny started to lift his hand in a wave but Trish had darted up the stairs quickly. Shrugging he looked at his watch. “I have nothing to do. I’ll wait.” Looking once more to the stairs, hearing Trish’s footsteps above him. Danny plopped down on her sofa.

^^^

Baby Nick had learned to laugh and it was a nice change of pace from his usual whining. He shrieked loudly in laughter following the bang of his walker into the wall. It reminded Ellen of the laughter that Brian used to make and she paused in her route to the kitchen to linger in memory. The days without Brian dragged on. The only consolation was that she knew she would see , hear and hold him again.

Rubbing her hand over Nick’s hair, Ellen stepped over the walker. “Alex, please don’t push him too hard into the wall, he still isn’t stable in the walker yet.”

“O.K.” Alex pulled Nick back and pushed him again.

Bang.

Ellen paused and looked over her shoulder.

Billy shook his head. “She shouldn’t push him at all.”

“Billy.” Ellen said his name.

“Where’s my father?” Billy asked as he sat on the couch reading.

“Very engrossed in a special project.” Ellen answered.

“Where’s Uncle Frank?” Billy then questioned.

"He too is . . . uh, very engrossed in a special project."

"There is a bright side." Billy turned a page.

Ellen had to scratch her head in thought. She wondered if Billy was actually going to be seven. Then she remembered what William had always told her about Dean. Billy was a miniature Dean. "Why don't you like Frank?"

"I like him."

"It doesn't sound like it."

Billy shrugged and turned a page.

"I'll get Dinner. Where's Joey?" Ellen looked around. "Joey!"

"Mom please." Billy closed off one ear. "He's with Josh."

Ellen slightly rolled her eyes, decided she wasn't letting the little Dean copy bother her, and she moved to the kitchen. Just as she passed the door, there was a knock. She backed up a step, opened it.

Frank stood in the doorway. "I'm here."

"For?"

"The kids." Frank stepped inside.

"Frank." Ellen checked out the time. "You're two hours early."

"Yeah, so."

"So. You're two hours early."

"Am I not allowed?"

"Well actually Frank." Ellen folded her arms. "I asked you out of this house."

"Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't think it meant I couldn't come over. My apologies."

"Huh?"

"I'll leave and come back." Frank walked to the door.

"Wait."

"What?"

"You can stay. Just don't bother me."

"I understand."

"Because I'm really pissed at you." Ellen told him. "I don't think in all the years I've known you, I don't think I've ever been this pissed."

"Come now El."

Ellen mouthed the words 'come now' with question.

"Don't you think you may be over exaggerating." Frank raised one eyebrow to her.

"I'll have you know Frank!" Ellen's voice raised "I . . ."

"El." Frank shook his head. "If we're going to argue I'll leave. I don't want to upset the kids. They're going through enough."

Something was up. Ellen knew it. Bodily and vocally she conveyed it. "All right." Ellen said, hands on hips.

"All right what?"

"All right, Enough."

"All right enough of what?" Frank asked.

"All right enough of this phoney Frank debonair act."

Frank grinned. "I'm being debonair? Thanks El for the compliment."

Ellen grunted in frustration.

"Problem?"

"You."

“What am I doing.” Frank asked calm.

“Pissing me off more.”

“Well tell me how I’m doing that and I’ll stop. Am I being mean.”

“Frank.”

“What?”

“Fuck you.” Ellen stormed off to the kitchen.

Frank grinned a smile she didn’t see and followed her. He turned serious when he turned into the kitchen. “El.”

“What!”

“O.K.” Frank held up his hand. “Let’s discuss this maturely.”

“You are on my last nerve. You and this new swearless Frank.”

“I’m hurt.”

“You’re an asshole.”

“Yes I am.”

Ellen screamed. “Stop it!”

“What?”

Ellen let out a breath of relief when the doorbell rang.

“El? Are we expecting company?”

“I hate you.” She brushed partially by him not hearing his laugh. By the time she stepped to the living room, Robbie had entered. Ellen froze. “Oh my God. Robbie?” So handsome Robbie looked to her, all dressed up and clean. “Look at you.”

“Hey El.”

“Robbie?” Frank spoke shocked when he walked in behind Ellen. “What the F . . . F . . . F . . . heck are you dressed like that for?”

“I told you Frank.” Robbie answered. “Me and El are going out.”

“Yes Frank.” Ellen smiled. “We have a date.”

“A date?” Frank stepped closer.

Ellen moved closer to Robbie. The sound of her smelling was heard. “You smell really good.”

“I used cologne.” Robbie pulled his shirt out a little. “I trimmed my armpit hair too. I don’t know why.”

Ellen sniffed him again. “You look so great. We’re going to have a good time.” She looked back at Frank. “What do you think Frank?”

“I think . . . I think . . .” Frank smiled. “I think it’s a great idea you to going out. Go. Enjoy. Go now if you want. I’m here. Of course I have to leave at seven-o-six, but Josh can hang until I get back in fifteen minutes. El, you deserve this night out.”

Ellen’s mouth dropped opened. She closed her eyes and shook her head. “I’m getting Joey for his dinner.” Smiling at Robbie then glaring at Frank, she walked from the livingroom.

Robbie watched Frank. A wide peaceful smile was on Frank’s face. “Frank. I am so glad you’re good with this.”

The peaceful smile went snide. Frank stepped to Robbie with a graveled voice.. “Touch her. Touch her once. If anything slightly, slightly little brother f . . . f . . . f . . . Happens. You’re a dead man. You’ll be walking f . . . f . . . rounds at night. Setting traps in the F . . . F . . . killer baby region.”

Robbie’s eyes shifted. “Ellen’s in the room.”

Frank turned his head. Ellen wasn’t there.

Robbie snickered. "Made you look."

"As . . . As . . . jerk." Frank shoved Robbie.

"Got a little stutter going there." Robbie laughed. "Jerk? Jerk?"

"Robbie." Frank shook his head.

"Don't I look hot Frank." Robbie grinned arrogantly. "Date night. Big, big date night."

"Robbie."

"Man . . . in New Bowman too. It's so cool to be getting out of . . ."

"Robbie."

"What?" Robbie acted innocent. "I am merely saying how it will be nice to go out, and go out of Beginnings to do so."

"Remember what I said."

"That nothing better F . . . F . . . F . . ." Robbie laughed louder.

Frank gave another brotherly shove. "Knock it off."

"So, what's happening at seven-o-six."

"Can't tell you."

"Is it something that can't happen at seven-o-five or even possible seven-o-seven?" Robbie joked. "Come on Frank. I see it. You want to swear. Do it. I won't tell."

"You know what this is like?"

"Lent."

"You got it." Frank nodded. "Every F . . . F . . . year. Dad used to make me give up swearing."

Ellen's voice interrupted in her pass through the livingroom to the kitchen. "And every year you failed."

"I made it."

"Ha." Ellen laughed. "Till Friday two days later."

"Still." Frank watched Ellen leave and he tossed his hand in a fling-off wave to her. "Anyhow, remember when we were kids Dad would tell us what we had to do for lent."

"You had to give up swearing."

"You had to take a bath every day."

"Jimmy had to stop complaining."

"Hal had to . . ." Frank paused. "Hal had to . . . what did Hal have to do?"

"Oh, Hal had to . . ." Robbie blinked in thought. "Hal had to . . . *Did* Hal have to do anything?"

"Probably not. Dad probably thought he was fine."

"I thought deeds of lent were a personal decision."

"Like meat on Fridays?" Frank laughed. "Dad had the authority to determine what personally was meat on Fridays. Remember when Dad would say, 'Ok, chicken today is not meat'."

"But if *we* ate meat, we were dead."

"We had to go to Saturday mass. Remember?"

"God." Robbie closed his eyes and chuckled at the memory. "And confession. Oh. Frank. Do you remember . . ."

"Oh my God." Frank started to laugh. "Yes." Frank shook his head.

"Are we thinking about . . ."

"We have to be. What else could there be."

Robbie nodded. "Frank there's a lot."

“But this one time.”

“True.”

“Hal.” Frank grumbled.

“Hal.”

Just about the point in her eavesdropping where Ellen was about to go back into the livingroom to tell them to stop speaking in code and speak up about this so-called funny experience, Frank and Robbie reminisced . . .

The organist and soloist played badly in St. Mary’s. Saturday practice was their excuse for the wincing mistakes. Joe cringed and slid down in the pew with each sour note.

“Christ.” He complained in a whisper.

Hal pulled at his buttoned up shirt. “Why do we have to get dressed up for confession. No one sees us.”

“Because. You do.” Joe pulled Hal’s hand away from his shirt. “And stop that.”

“I hope none of my friends see me looking like a dork. I’m thirteen looking forty.” Hal complained.

“No.” Jimmy snickered. “Frank’s seventeen looking forty.”

“Shut up.” Frank snapped from the other end of the Slagel line.

“Boys.” Joe ran his hand over his face.

“You shut up.” Jimmy griped.

“Boys.”

“Nerd” Frank insulted Jimmy.

“Jerk.”

“Boys.”

“Asshole.”

“Frank!” Joe raised his voice slightly, it echoed some. “Christ, we’re in church.”

Robbie giggled. His hard shoes kept hitting the pew in front of him.

“Robert. Stop.” Joe grabbed Robbie’s legs to stop them from swinging.

Hal took on a nasal tone. “Yeah Robbie. God, you’re bad.”

“Dad?” Robbie looked up to Joe. “Am I.”

“Sometimes.” Joe ran his hand through Robbie’s messy hair.

Robbie looked up to Joe. “What’s taking so long?”

Hal nudged Robbie and whispered. “Did you see who walked in both sides of the confessional.”

Robbie nodded. “An old lady went in on one side, an old man on the other.”

“Yep.” Hal instigated. “Old people have a ton of sins. Good thing we’re not after dad.”

“Hal.” Joe grumbled. “Enough.”

“Robbie.” Hal whispered. “I hate following old people. They get the priest all mad. And then the priest yells at who ever’s next.”

Robbie’s eyes widened. “No.”

“Yeah. And don’t forget your Act of Contrition.” Hal instigated. “You’ll be paying big time.”

Robbie swallowed. “I’m forgetting it.”

“See.” Hal grinned. “You’re lucky I’m your favorite big brother.” Hal reached into the front pocket of his pants and pulled out a chewing gum wrapper. “Have one of my cheat sheets.”

Robbie looked at the confessional prayer written on the paper. “Thanks Hal.”

Joe rubbed his own eyes. “I really hope you boys confess this shit when you go in there.”

“Say, uh Dad?” Hal called out. “What happens if we don’t confess it all.”

“What did you do Hal?” Joe asked.

“Who me?” Hal shook his head innocently. “Nothing. I’m talking about the sins of Frank.”

“What do I do?” Frank questioned.

“Ha. Ha. Ha.” Hal faked laughed. “The question should be, what *don’t* you do.”

Frank bit his bottom lip and snarled at Hal.

Hal shivered dramatically. “Dad, Frank’s threatening me.”

“Frank.” Joe said aggravated, “And in answer to your question Hal. If you don’t confess it all, God will be pissed. And . . . the next time you take communion . . . it’ll burn.”

“No way.” Hal laughed in disbelief. “The last time it didn’t . . .” Hal cleared his throat. “I’ll remember that.”

Joe looked up when he heard the click of the confessional. “Hal. Go.”

“Me? Why?”

“You’re the angel.” Joe said sarcastic. “You shouldn’t have much to say.”

“O.K.” Hal slid from the pew, annoyingly knocking into Frank’s legs.

Robbie sat hands folded watching Hal go in. He saw the other side open. “Dad can I go next. That man didn’t take long so the priest won’t get mad.”

“Go on.”

Hurrying, Robbie jumped over Frank and Jimmy and scurried into the dark confessional. His heart pounded. It as dark and he feared being unable to read Hal’s cheat sheet. His mind was so engrossed in that, until he hear Hal’s confession.

“Forgive me father for I have sinned.” Hal said. “It has been uh . . . three weeks since my last confession.”

Robbie nearly died. They hadn’t been to confession in a year.

“Good boy.” The priest said. “Go on.”

“Well, Father, you know.” Hal continued. “It’s only been three weeks and really I didn’t do much. I haven’t missed mass.”

“Good.”

Robbie’s eyes widened. They didn’t go for three weeks when their dad was out of town. They told their dad they did, but they didn’t.

“And well, Ok, here’s a sin. I fight with my brothers.”

“Sometimes child, controlling our anger with our siblings is difficult.”

“True. Especially with a brother like Frank. He pulled my hair until I stole him a pack of gum from the drugstore.”

“He did?”

“Yes. But that was nothing compared to the time he made me sell girl scout cookies for more money than they were. Father, I swear I didn’t even know. I’m so ashamed.”

“My son. We get misled.”

“Yes I do. And here’s another sin. I didn’t put money in the collection basket.”

“Sometimes we don’t have it.”

“Oh we had it. My father was out of town and he left the envelope with a donation. A hefty one if I may add, my father is very generous to the church. Anyway,. Frank took the money and spent it. And here’s another one”

Joe looked at his watch. “What in Christ’s name is taking Hal so long.” No sooner did Joe say that and Hal stepped out of the confessional.

A huge smile across his cute face, he paused by the pew. “Ah.” Hal exhaled. “I feel purged.”

Joe cringed. “Hal. Go.” Joe pointed to the altar. “Say your penance. Frank. Next.”

“Why me?” Frank asked.

“Go.”

“All right.” Frank in a slouching walk entered the confessional. He knelt down causing the kneeler to squeak loudly and then Frank tapped his hands on the prayer rail. His heart fluttered some when the window door slid open. Frank blessed himself. “Forgive me father for I have sinned. It’s uh been a year and a half since my last confession.”

“Why so long?” The priest asked.

“I don’t know. Anyhow . . . My sins. I fight with my brothers. I missed mass.”

“I see. Have you ever . . . Skipped mass because you’re father was out of town?”

“Hey that’s pretty good. Yeah. Can I continue?”

The priest grumbled.

Robbie’s eyes shifted from Joe who kept staring at his watch to Frank who knelt up at the altar. How long? How long had they been there? All the Slagels made a unison sigh of relief when Frank walked to them from the altar. They all stood up.

Joe peered at his watch as they began to walk from the church. As soon as they were all outside, Joe paused on the steps. “Forty-five minutes Frank. We have been sitting here for forty-five minutes watching you pray at the altar.”

“Sorry.”

“Why did it take you forty-five minutes.”

“I kept losing count.” Frank said.

“What?” This surprised Joe because it was penance, a simple prayer punishment for sins was all Frank had to do. “How in the hell did you lose count.”

“Dad.” Frank’s eyes widened. “You wouldn’t believe what he gave me.”

“Tell me.”

“Am I allowed?” Frank asked.

“No. But tell me anyhow, I’m your father. I don’t count.”

“O.K.” Frank let out a breath. “I had to say one hundred Hail Mary’s. One hundred Our Father’s. Seventy-five Glory Be’s. And . . . ten of those Act of Contrition prayers.”

“Holy shit Frank.” Joe nearly blasted. “What did you confess?”

Frank was bewildered. He scratched his head. “My stock confession.”

“Your stock confession?” Joe questioned.

“Yeah. I say it all the time. Missed mass twice, fought with my brothers and lied to you. Standard.”

“And he gave you all that?” Joe was stunned.

“Yeah.”

“I wonder . . .” Joe stopped talking when he heard the flutter of laughter come from Hal. He shifted his eyes angrily to his son who was all red from containing laughter. “Hal.”

“What?” Hal tossed his hands up. “Can I get in the car?”

Frank took a deep breath. “Hal. What did you do?”

“Frank.” Hal acted appalled. “Do? I resent that. I’m sinless. I am . . .”

“Dead.” Frank finished his sentence

Hal looked at his big brother’s red face. “Dad, Frank’s gonna beat me up. Can I get to the car?”

“No.” Joe looked at Frank. “Frank . . .” Joe twitched his head at Hal. “Get him.”

A slight shriek came from Hal just before he took a large jump off the steps of the church and took off running. Frank, not far behind, and catching was on an angry pursuit.

Robbie tugged on Joe’s sleeve. “Are we waiting for them.”

“Nah.” Joe placed his hand on Robbie’s back and started to walk with him and Jimmy. “We’ll see if we pass them on the way home. If not, they’ll get there eventually.”

Taking one more look at his brothers who got further and further from his sight, Robbie walked to the car with his father and brother.

CHAPTER THIRTY

She couldn't believe she fell asleep, and Bev, waking up so late, had to rush. It was one of those times she wished she had a roommate. But then again, friends were few if not non-existent for her and a roommate was hard to find. She was just so grateful, Dean hadn't showed up on time.

Rushing about, Bev didn't even have time to put anything away. She planed on a long walk around the community. Flying across her livingroom she flung open the door, bolted out and ran into Dean.

"Going somewhere?" Dean asked.

"Um . . . to . . . uh your house?"

"I don't have a house." Dean said. "I'm a little late. Sorry."

"That's O.K."

"I'll come in. Thanks." Through the opened door Dean walked. "Quiet."

"Yes." Bev nervously stepped inside. "I live alone."

"Hopefully not for long." Dean winked. "Let's see how this night goes. Gonna jar some memories Bev."

Bev gave a nervous chuckle.

"I don't smell it."

"Smell what?"

"Dinner." Dean said. "You did make me dinner, didn't you."

"You wanted dinner."

"Bev." Dean stepped to her. "Did you think I would just want . . . sex." He whispered in her ear. "I'm sure you can throw something together right?"

"Right."

Dean walked to behind her. "Then again . . ." He brought his left arm around the front of her and moved his lips by her ear. "We can forego all the formals." Lifting his right hand he brought his fingers to her cheek. "And get right to it." he grazed his fingers down her cheek, stopping softly at her lips. From his semi-cupped hand, he rolled the paint pellet shell to his fingers. "What do you say?" Dean took a deep breath and held it.

"I think . . ."

Snap. The sound was light, barely heard. Dean rolled the just-broke pellet under Bev's nose. Within three seconds, her legs gave out and she collapsed.

Dropping the plastic shell, Dean hurried grabbed her under her arms to stop her from falling to the floor.. The weight of Bev was lot as he tried to drag her, he couldn't, so Dean gently put her down on the floor, stepped over her and walked to the door. After opening it he stuck his head out, "O.K., you can come in."

"Thank God." Frank griped and stepped inside. "I was dying out there with Henry."

Henry followed in next. "I can't help it Frank. My stomach is nervous. It happens and . . ." Henry saw Bev on the floor. "Oh my God Dean, Did you kill her?"

"No!" Dean snapped. "I knocked her out. If I was going to kill her I'd be more creative."

"Ha." Frank scoffed.

“What?” Dean asked. “I killed you creatively didn’t I?”

“Yes, But . . .” Frank quipped. “You poisoned me, therefore it wasn’t creative. It could have been traced back to you.”

“Who would do your autopsy Frank, you moron.” Dean snapped. “Besides. I’m smarter than that. I used an insulin based poison of my own. It would have made you look like you took a heart attack.”

“No way.” Frank was impressed.

Henry shook his head above Bev. “I can not believe you used physical violence on a woman carrying your child.”

“She is not carrying my child.” Dean argued. “And I used an ether based drug. One short whiff out like a light.”

“Will it harm your baby?” Henry asked.

“It’s not my baby. And she’s only going to be out a half an hour so if we want to search the house.” Dean started to bend down to her. “I need help. She’s too big, I can’t lift her. Frank?”

“Nope.”

“Nope? Why?”

“I’m not touching her.” Frank held up his hands.

“Just carry her to the . . .”

“No.” Frank said adamantly, “I’ve never touched her. And if El ever asks I can still say without lying I never touched. I’m not starting now.”

“I’ll move her.” Henry, so chivalrous, stepped forward and swept his arms under her motionless body. He grunted in lifting her and stumbled some. “She doesn’t . . . look . . . this . . . heavy.” He struggled with his balance carrying her to the couch. He laid her down and exhaled loudly.

Dean looked around. “Now, where do we start.”

“Upstairs?” Frank suggested. “Her room.”

“You take that.” Dean said. “Henry take in here. I’ll look in the diningroom.”

Frank and Henry agreed.

Dean moved to the diningroom at the same time Frank moved to the steps. “Whoa.”

Frank stopped. “What?”

“She has a lap top.” Dean moved to it.

Henry and Frank hurried in.

Dean looked at it, “What is she doing with a lap top.”

“Danny-sance.” Frank explained. “Everyone gets one.”

“But how did she.” Dean reached and booted it up. “This is perfect. I can’t believe Danny gave her one.

Henry snickered. “Maybe she performed a sexual favor for him.”

Frank laughed. “No way. Danny’s gay.” He saw the immediate looks Dean and Henry gave him. “What?”

Henry shook his head. “Danny is not gay.”

“He is too. Gay. I’m telling you. I know.”

“You don’t know.” Henry argued. “Danny is not gay.”

“I have to agree with Henry, Frank.” Dean watched the lap top boot up. “He’s not gay.”

“And you’re both F . . . F . . . F . . . wrong. Gay. I know every man that’s gay in Beginnings. Trust me.”

Henry took on a snide look. "You do not."

"Do too." Frank said back. "You're the one who doesn't."

"I know men who are gay that you don't." Henry argued.

Dean rolled his eyes. "Can we stop and get to this?"

"Name one." Frank said. "Bet me I know."

"O.K." Henry stepped closer to Frank. "Jess."

"Who?"

"Jess. Robbie's roommate."

"Oh, you're nuts. Jess?" Frank ridiculed. "Jess is not gay. He may cook, but he's not gay. I know. I have gaydar and it hasn't once gone off with him."

Dean looked up suddenly. "Gaydar?"

"He doesn't know anything." Henry stated. "Let's just check this out. Oh! Dean! Start with the drives."

"Good idea." Dean smiled.

Johnny knew Bev wouldn't be stuck with her big date with Dean. Though he wished she would. He could hear her complaining about having to be with him. She used to find him attractive until she realized how much older than her he was. So with Bev gone, Johnny needed the bedroom disk of Dean and Ellen. Certain the house was empty, he walked to the door and turned the knob.

Dean, Henry and Frank all looked up from the lap top at the same time when they heard the front door open.

With a quiet 'shoot' not 'shit'. Frank grabbed Dean's arm and Henry's and pulled them in the kitchen. "In here." He mouthed the words pointed to the food pantry. "Hurry." He opened it and shoved Dean and Henry in. Then into the three-foot by three-foot closet with Henry and Dean, Frank stepped. He pulled the door closed at the same time Dean and Henry grunted.

Had he not seen it on the floor, Johnny wouldn't have looked for Bev. A paint pellet shell, broken. Bending down, he picked it up. He smelled the strong smell of it without even bringing it close to his nose. He winced his head to the side and dropped the pellet. When he opened his eyes he saw Bev on the couch. He knew Dean had to still be there. Where? What was he up to?

Back pressed against the shelf, face smashed to Frank's back, Henry whimpered. Frank's wide eyed 'shut up.' expression couldn't be seen by either Henry or Dean.

"I'm dying." Henry complained in a whisper "I can't breathe."

"Shut up." Frank told him.

"You're squashing me."

"Henry!" Frank thought he whispered softly. "Shut up."

If Dean's nose didn't hurt bad enough, it was pressed flush against the door. How all three of them were fitting in the closet he didn't know.

"Dean." Frank whispered. "You hear anything?"

“No.”

“I got Henry F . . . F . . . F . . . whimpering in my . . .” Frank sniffed. “Oh my God.”

“Sorry.” Henry spoke. “I have nervous stomach.”

“Oh my God.” Frank rolled his eyes.

Dean would barely breathe let alone move. “Could you guys just shut . . . Frank, please tell me that’s your gun.”

“It’s not my gun.”

“Oh shit.” Dean’s eyes widened.

“It’s my knife And don’t flatter yourself. Henry, knock it off.” Frank snapped in a quiet whisper.

“I’m sorry Frank. I’m nervous.”

It took Johnny everything he had not to make a noise in his laughter, Did those three grown men actually think they could fit in the pantry and not be heard? Leaning against the kitchen doorway Johnny took a moment to enjoy their bickering and loud whispers, then he did what he came to do. Johnny walked to the lap top already on and he took a quick moment to erase the viewer program. Shifting his eyes to the kitchen he still could hear the whispers. Then smiling he removed the disk. He paused to look at Bev, passed out on the sofa. He shook his head, walked to the door, opened and stepped out. In his leaving, as a nice gesture he slammed the door loudly.

Dean opened the pantry door and nearly fell to the floor from the releasing weight of Frank and Henry behind him. “God, remind me never to be stuck in a pantry again with you two.”

Frank held his hand out to Henry. “What I tell you? It wouldn’t be long before you came out of the closet.”

“Shut up Frank.” Henry took a gasping breath. “Thank God I can breathe now.”

“Yeah, well I’m not gonna be able to smell anything for a week.” Frank complained. “You clogged up my nostrils.”

“You are so rude.” Henry shook his head. “I can not believe how rude you are. Like you have never had a nervous stomach that responded badly.”

“Not in a closet with two other grown men. Now that’s f . . . f . . . rude.”

“I couldn’t help it Frank.”

“Guys!” Dean had enough. “Stop. Let’s just do our search before Bev gets up.” He led the way into the diningroom and stopped cold. “Shit.”

“What?” Frank looked over Dean’s head.

“We had something.” Dean moved to the computer. The drawer to the disk was open and empty. “Now whoever was here, has it.”

“Sh . . . sh . . . shoot.” Frank bolted to the front door flung it open and raced out side. He stopped in the street looking up and down. “F . . . F . . . foey.” He cut his hand through the air and heard Henry’s snicker. “What!”

“Foey?” Henry laughed. “You sound real tough Frank. Remind me not to . . .” Henry stepped back when Frank, red faced and angry, stepped in and glared closely at him. “Not to . . . not . . . make fun of you.”

Frank smiled. "Whoever was here is long gone. You know they heard us." Frank shut the door.

"So they know we're still here." Dean ran his fingers through his hair. "All right. Let's just look to see what we find. And do it fast, I don't know how much longer she'll stay out."

"Hey Dean?" Henry called with a smile holding up a Teddy Bear with 'Daddy's Girl' Embroidered on it's chest. "Look."

"Quit fooling around." Dean said. "Henry check out the computer see if you can determine what she looked at last."

"Got it." As Dean searched the livingroom, and Frank went upstairs, Henry set down the Teddy Bear and thought no more about it. But had Henry just turned over the yellowing gift tag, and read the handwritten note to Bev from her father, Henry would have seen the tiny presidential seal in the corner. He didn't. And the bear was not touched for the rest of the search.

New Bowman, Montana

Hal looked so proud sitting at his diningroom table with Robbie, Ellen and Elliott. "Triple letter, double word. Thirty-four points, Elliott."

Elliott wrote it down. "Good one Captain."

"Robbie. Your turn." Hal stated as he reached in the scrabble box for replacement tiles.

Robbie slumped in his chair. "I don't have much." He reached up and laid down his tiles. "Six points."

Hal's one eyebrow raised. "That's it. You added a 'T' and an 'A' to the 'H'. That's the best you can do?"

"Well, yeah, see." Robbie turned his tile holder.

"No. Don't show me." Hal faced it away from him.

"Hey, Hal." Robbie grabbed two tiles. "Me and Frank were talking. Remember when Dad used to make us do things for lent."

"Yes." Hal watched Elliott in debate. "He used to make you bathe."

Elliott looked up. "Bathing was Robbie's lenten obligation?"

"Robbie never bathed." Hal stated.

"Hated it." Robbie added "I used to turn on the water and sit in the bathroom, pretending. Anyhow, Frank and me couldn't remember what it was that dad used to make you do."

"Nothing." Hal answered.

"Nothing? Oh sure he had to."

"Nope." Hal shook his head. "Robbie, really do you ever remember me getting into any trouble growing up?"

"No." Robbie shook his head.

"There you have it." Hal held out his hand. "Dad felt the need to not make me do anything. He used to pull me aside and say, 'Hal, you know the routine. Don't tell the other boys that I think you're a great kid'."

Ellen laughed loudly. "Robbie, don't believe him. Joe never bought Hal's innocent act."

"Yeah he did, El." Robbie said.

"No." Ellen shook her head. "Remember I'm older than you two. I remember things differently. Joe never bought the innocent act. He just pretended to, to piss all of you guys off."

"Ellen Please." Hal pretended to be insulted "I shined in my father's eyes."

"I'm sure." Ellen reached across and patted his hand. "And speaking of shining in someone's eyes." Ellen grinned. "You have an admirer."

"Me?" Hal was shocked.

"Yep." Ellen nodded. "There is a woman very interested in getting together with you. She said you are . . . hot. Sexy. Nice and a gentleman."

Hal grinned. "Ellen." He fronted a blush. "You don't need to mask your feelings. If you want me, just let me know." He waited, shifted his eyes and saw Robbie's expression. "Joking." He nudged Robbie. "So, who?"

"Oh." Ellen smiled. "Jenny Matoose."

"She's married." Hal reviewed his tiles.

"He's comatose." Ellen replied.

"Besides," Robbie intervened. "That doesn't matter in Beginnings. Woman are rare. Men share. We told you that."

"So what do you think?" Ellen asked. "Do you think that you could go out with her?"

"No." Hal answered very calmly. "She's much too young for me and . . ."

"Hal." Robbie laughed. "She's a woman."

"Would you be with her?" Hal asked.

"No, but . . ."

"But what?" Hal asked.

"But you're not me. You should be with her."

"Why?" Hal folded his hands. "I'm curious. Why? Because you think it would be funny."

"Well, yeah." Robbie grinned. "It would be. You and Jenny Matoose."

"Hal?" Ellen called his attention. "Is her age the reason you won't go out with her?"

"Yes and no." Hal tried to think of his next word.

"Captain." Elliott interjected "I've met this woman. She's seems very nice."

"I'll pass."

"Cool." Robbie started to lay down tiles.

"Not my turn." Hal grumbled.

"You said you pass." Robbie said innocently.

"About Jenny Matoose." Hal began to lay down letters.

"You suck." Robbie griped.

"You're jealous."

"No, I'm thirsty." Robbie stood up. "El?"

"Nothing for me."

Hal stood up as well. "I'm thirsty too. And hungry. Let's see what I have."

Ellen, hands folded before her watched Hal walk behind Robbie to the kitchen. She turned her head and smiled softly at Elliott.

Elliott returned the smile. "You've been quiet tonight."

"So have you."

"Well, The captain and his brother have been bickering quite a bit."

"It's funny though."

“Enjoyable.”

Ellen faced Elliott more. “Elliott, how are you feeling?”

“Good. Very good. You?”

“I’m doing good. Thanks for asking.”

“You’re welcome.” Elliott exhaled. “I wanted to tell you that I think it’s a very good idea you getting out and trying to forget about your problems for an evening.”

“Not that it ever mattered to me. But . . . do you think it’s too soon?”

“Too soon, for what?” Elliott asked then looked up when he heard a shriek of laughter from the kitchen.

“Just too soon. I’m not talking appearances, I’m talking emotional.”

“It really depends on why you’re out, don’t you think? If you were out with Robbie to try to replace what you had with Dean, then it may be too soon. You’re what was that term.”

“On the rebound.”

Elliott snapped his finger. “That’s it. It’s just been a while since that term is used in this world. But if you’re out with Robbie, to take your mind off of things, to have a good time, then it’s not too soon. Besides, it’s not like Dean died. Sorry. I didn’t mean to sound so cold. Actually Ellen, Dean he . . . he pretty much dogged you, and you’re hurt. And you really don’t deserve that.”

Ellen lowered her head some.

“So why mope.” Elliott said. “Why feel sorry for yourself. He had a good thing, He let it go. His fault, not yours. And one of the last things you should let him see is that he got to you. That he stopped you from living.”

“Thank you. That was really nice.”

“No. Thank you for asking for my opinion.”

“You’re my friend.”

Elliott smiled. “I appreciate that. I’m glad. And . . . I hope to see you here in New Bowman going out more. Not just in the doctor capacity. Here for enjoyment. Dates.”

“So you think I should . . . date?” Ellen asked.

“Most definitely.”

“Good. Because Elliott, if you would ever like to ask me on a date, just know that I would say ‘yes’.” Ellen stared at Elliott, He looked immediately pale. “Elliott?”

Elliott’s lips moved some.

“Elliott?”

“Um, will you excuse me.” Elliott sprang up suddenly and hurried from the table to the kitchen.

“O.K.” Ellen spoke softly sitting alone. “That certainly was a boast to my self confidence.” Tilting her head with a silent whistle, Ellen then noticed how alone she was. Then she noticed how far behind she was in the Scrabble score. And doing a skill and tactical maneuver she learned long before from Frank, Ellen took advantage of being alone in that room and picked better letters from the pile.

Like a small child waking from her nap, Bev rolled onto her back, eyes closed and stretched with a loud yawn and big smile. She snuggled then woke with jolt when she opened her eyes and saw Johnny standing above her.

“Good morning sleepy head.”

Half awake, Bev smiled then sprang up. “Oh my God. What time is it?”

“Nine . . . at night.”

Bev tried to stand but fell back down. “Oh my head.” She closed her eyes. “What happened.”

“Dean knocked you out.”

“He what?”

“Knocked you out.”

“What for. I thought he wanted to seduce me.”

Johnny laughed. “I can’t believe you bought that. Now it’s even more clear what he wanted. He wanted a chance to search out your place.”

Bev’s eyes widened. “Oh no.”

“Oh yeah. And had I not come in, the whole thing would have been ruined. The viewer was loaded on your lap top Bev and the disk was in the drive.”

“Johnny, I am so sorry.”

“Well, you’re lucky I got the disk. And Dean, that shit, he’s gonna pay for this one. Him, my dad and Henry. All of them were in here.”

“Doing what?”

Johnny sat down on the couch next to Bev. “My guess, searching your place with Dean.”

“Did they find anything.”

Johnny shook his head. “Near as I can tell and I’ve been looking around. Nothing’s missing. They didn’t get anything from your house.”

^^^

“I feel like I’m cheating on a diet.” Henry shoved a piece of cake in his mouth. “Was this right.”

“Absolutely.” Frank said, sitting in a chair, he reached down to the coffee table and grabbed a cookie.

“But Josephine makes this stuff for pregnant women.” Henry said.

“Empty calories.” Dean stated, sitting next to Henry. He grabbed for a cookie too. “Pregnant women do not need empty calories. So we did Bev a big favor by stealing her junk food.”

“Well what about that Journey tape Frank stole.”

Frank scoffed. “Henry please. She’s too young to appreciate that anyhow. I did her a favor by taking it. Now she won’t be confused on who they are when she listens to them.”

“And the Newsweek?” Henry questioned lifting it up.

Dean grabbed the magazine. “Newsweek is for the intelligent. Another favor, we stopped her from feeling dumb when she read it.” He began to flip through the pages.

“Why would she have a Newsweek magazine.” Henry wondered out loud.

Frank shrugged. “Why does Ellen keep a condom in her memorabilia box.

Who knows what could trigger good memories.”

“All this stuff.” Henry’s hand motioned out. “Candy, cakes, chips, magazine, tapes. None of this was what we went there for. We went there to see if we could find anything that would prove she was setting up Dean or that she has a connection to George. None of this does that.”

Dean’s voice spoke up soft and dazed. “Wrong. Or at least I think. We may have a first step or small one.”

“Why?” Frank asked. “What do you have.”

“Nothing.” Dean smiled.

Frank tossed his hands up. “All right that’s exactly what we were looking for.”

“No Frank.” Dean said. “Nothing is good in this case. Because nothing proves she may have a connection to George.”

Frank scratched his head. “Henry is Dean confusing or is it just me and my temporary mental disability which Dean has yet to F . . . F . . . F . . .tell me I’m over.”

“It’s not you Frank.” Henry commented. “If it is I’m temporarily mentally disabled as well.”

“See Dean.” Frank held up his hand. “See what you do to us.”

“No, Frank, it’s see *this* Frank and Henry.” Dean handed the Newsweek Magazine to Frank.

“O.K.” Frank looked at it and started to hand it back.

“Read it.”

“I did.”

“You didn’t not.” Dean argued. “Because you didn’t say anything.” Dean snatched the magazine from Frank and gave it to Henry. “Read it.”

Henry did. “Senator Hadly visits Yosemite prior to conference. Dean?” Henry snickered “George was big news, always has been. Why is this a link?”

“Look again.” Dean pointed. “Both of you overlooked it. What’s missing.”

Henry, seemingly annoyed shifted his eyes over the page. “Oh my God, why would she do that.”

“What?” Frank asked.

“Now she may not have.” Dean stated. “But she could have.”

“What?”

“If she did, why?” Again, Henry asked and held up the magazine.”The big question is Why would she take the picture of George.” Henry poked his fingers through the cut out spot of the magazine.

“No.” Frank shook his head. “The big question is, is she using it for personal pleasure.”

Henry gasped in disgust. “That is not the big question Frank.”

“Yeah Frank.” Dean mocked.

“Yeah.” Henry tossed the magazine at him. “Asshole.”

Frank ducked from the throw, stuffed a cookie in his mouth, and laughed.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Beginnings, Montana

October 18

There was a middle of the night feel to Joe's office. Robbie alone, sat there in what he called the 'visitor' chair waiting on his father. The office light was on, the sun of the day barely shining. Waiting, still wearing his coat, his index finger played with the moisture that formed on the rim of his tin cup. His mind elsewhere, Robbie's eye stayed fixed on the steam of his coffee. From the visions of what he saw not two hours earlier, Robbie's mind jumped from his thought when he heard the distant coughing of his father growing closer. But not for long. The sound of Joe's coughing became the sound of other's. Coughing and choking he heard as he ran with his heart through the thick black smoke of the burning colony.

He saw it in the distance and Robbie knew. The colony in Manitoba sent a signal. They didn't speak over the radio system, perhaps they tried and couldn't. At three in the morning communications picked it up. A steady, pattern of beeps. Morse Code.

SOS. Longitude. Latitude. SOS.

Robbie was on night shift, well rested after his single night off. In the dark of the late night, early morning, Robbie raced to New Bowman, gassed up the jet and took off. Missiles ready, firing power in hand, a part of Robbie knew as soon as he took off there was nothing he was going to be able to do.

"Everything's burning Frank." Robbie's voice spoke over the radio. "I don't need inferred."

"Do you see them?"

"Oh God they're so many"

"Take them out."

"How? What if there's survivors down there."

"Are the savages centralized?"

"Center colony."

"Then do not lay fire. You hear me." Frank ordered. "Do not scatter them. Drop a Dean-two-tip."

"No."

"Robbie, drop it."

"Frank, I see people." Robbie flew passed preparing to make another turn back.

"As cold as this sounds little brother, they are already dead. You are one man. There is nothing you can do. Drop the smaller tip. Anyone not center town at least has a chance."

"Then I'm landing."

"Do not land."

"I'm setting down after I drop it."

"Robbie, listen to me." Frank spoke strong. "I am telling you . . ."

Robbie's hand shut off the radio.

Missile dropped.

Gas released.

Robbie's eyes closed tighter in his memory.

Tromp-tromp-tromp-tromp. Robbie's boots seemed so loud on the cracked concrete of the road. Moans of the dying savages who could barely breath grew louder the closer Robbie got to the center of the colony. The smoke was thick and black, seeping Robbie's way in his run. The eye piece of the gas mask he wore rippled the vision along with the heat of the smoke. M-16 in hand, Robbie kept up a steady fast pace. It was like a video game. Black smoke. Black smoke. Savage. Bang.

The coughing slowed down. Multitudes of chokes, a few, then scattered they coughed. Robbie still didn't take off his gas mask. The crackling of the fires snapped and popped and Robbie grew sicker with each wave of smoke that, every so often, cleared enough to give him a peep of not only the massacre the savages created, but he was well.

The Dean-tip missile. Each tip and color had a different concentration of carbon monoxide. How much saturated the oxygen in how big of a radius. Robbie had the highly concentrated tip that saturated a mile, consuming every ounce of air, killing with in thirty seconds. And Robbie had the smaller tip. The radius was small, about a half a city block. In that block, death was horrible, choking, sickening. The headaches were severe, death was imminent, but death did not come for four to five minutes. The victims of the Dean tip were easy to spot. White, pasty white faces, vomit that trickled from their mouths, eyes that bulged nearly from the sockets.

It was evident as Robbie, heart racing, made it through the center colony. Evident of the deaths that the savages caused. The Manitoba residents laid everywhere. Some naked, dismembered, skinned, burning, ravaged. But the sight of those victims didn't bother him as much as the obvious colonist that died from the drop of his missile. They were still breathing when Robbie made the drop. Their bodies showed that. It didn't matter to Robbie that there were only a few. One would have been too many. To Robbie at that moment he was no better than the savages. He had killed innocents.

And then his one salvation. A cry. A child's cry that made Robbie's heart pound from his chest. Where was it. Where did it come from? Robbie's perception was off. He made his way through the smoke, trying to follow the cry. Closer and closer Robbie heard it. He begged in his mind for it not to stop. The smoke thinned out as Robbie made it from the center of the massacre and the cry was within reach. It came from one of the few remaining bubble tents the colonist lived in. Large tents, like igloos and Robbie walked into the one the cry seeped out of. Where was the child. Taking off his gas mask, Robbie wiped the soot from his forehead that dripped with his sweat into his eyes. Shifting his views around he saw the cedar chest. Anticipation heaved his breathing and he raced to the corner of the tent and flung open the lid to the chest.

The big brown eyes and tear-streaked dirty face for the little girl no older than two peered up so helplessly to Robbie. He lifted her out of there and her little legs clung to him, her arms wrapped tight round his neck. And Robbie took time to comfort that child, hold her and try to soothe her breaking heart as much as he tried to soothe his own.

“Robert.” Joe’s call snapped him out.

“Oh, hey.” Robbie said, blinked then lifted his mug.

Joe slid his hand over Robbie’s back as he walked around to his desk. He gave Robbie a closed, father smile and sat down. “Andrea said the little girl is fine. Unscathed. No injuries at all. Very frightened, but hopefully she will not remember anything.”

“Any guesses on how old she is?” Robbie asked.

“Andrea is saying around two and a half. Hard to tell, she’s not talking much. But that could be the trauma. They have her sedated.” Joe leaned back in his chair. “You did good.”

“No, Dad, I didn’t. I killed ten innocent people today.”

A simple nod precluded anything Joe stated. “I understand how you feel.”

“I know.” Robbie sipped his coffee and set it down.

“Robbie, I know what the service trained you to do, and I know what you’ve become. Where the world has made a lot of us hard, it’s given you back a soft spot you lost in your youth. I’m not talking about the enemy in this world, hell, you’re as sick as Frank when it comes to that . . . well maybe not. But, with people you have compassion. I know, it was tough what you did. But you have to look at it this way. You stopped the savages. How many were there, over a hundred. What would they have done to that child? Do you think a single one of those adults wouldn’t have given their life anyhow to save that child from the death of a savage. They were fighting them, they would have lost anyhow. But had you not did what you did, the child would have lost as well. And the efforts of those ten people who were still alive fighting would have been in vain.”

Robbie swallowed. “I gotta go.” Robbie stood up abruptly.

“Robert.” Joe called out stopping him as he reached for the door.

Robbie wouldn’t turn around.

“What is this?” Joe held up an envelope.

“It’s a formal request.”

“Formal request. What are you? Hal now?” Joe ripped open the envelope. He pulled out the letter and his eyes skimmed. “Absolutely not. Formally denied.” Joe set down the letter.

Robbie turned around. “But Dad, why?”

“Because I need you here in Beginnings.”

“You put me in charge of the brigades going out.”

“I gave you command of the central op. That will be here in Beginnings.”

“What good am I going to do in here when my men are out there?”

Joe laughed. “What good are you going to do if they need you in the air and you are out there in a tent. Absolutely not.”

“Then put someone else in charge and let me go out. That’s what I do best. That’s what I want to do.”

“No it isn’t.” Joe said as he stood up and walked to Robbie. “Robert, I am not saying this because you are my son. You know I’m too honest to bullshit you. But you and Frank are the top dogs here. I don’t trust the security of our communities to anyone else but you two. Got that. I need you here as well.”

Robbie nodded.

“Robbie, I know today was hard for you. And as cold as this sounds son, put it behind you. Put it behind you now. If you need help. Go see that little girl

you brought in.” Joe laid his hand on Robbie’s shoulder.

Robbie gave a sad smile. “Maybe I will. Thanks dad.”

“You’re welcome. I love you.”

Robbie snickered. “I love you.”

Joe rubbed his and over Robbie’s hair. “See you at competition today.” Joe winked. “Kick Frank’s ass.”

“I’ll see you before that.” Robbie opened the door.

“You will.”

“Yes. Services, right? Today is my first Sunday service as Rev. Robbie. See you at nine.” Robbie smiled and walked out.

Joe immediately filled with panic. “Oh my God.”



The larger note reading, ‘El, do you mind? Dean’ left in Ellen’s workstation by the small dictation tape, irritated Ellen. She wanted to shout ‘Yeah, I do mind!’ really loud when she found it, but she didn’t. She had to remember it was part of her task, things she had always did and would continue to do in the lab. Dean’s notes.

Taking the tape with attitude to the dictation machine, Ellen sat down before the computer already waiting for her typing. She placed the tape in the machine and pressed play.

“October eighteenth.” Dean spoke on the tape.

Ellen found her typing spot.

“It seems like forever since I lost you. And it seems with each day that goes by, getting you back slips more and more from my hopes.”

Ellen reached to shut off the tape, but didn’t.

“I don’t know what to do. Just let me tell you that I love you. I love you ,El. Everything we had, I waited for. I wouldn’t screw it up. I know things look so bad for me. I know it seems I have no defense. But I do. In my heart, my word is my defense. And if you would just take my word that I didn’t betray or lie to you, then I will prove it. I will do whatever it takes to prove that to you. Please. Give me another chance, El. Please.”

Silence.

Ellen slowly reached for the ‘stop’ button on the machine and as her finger depressed it, She saw Dean’s hand. It laid across her wrist and gripped gently. Shifting her eyes to the right, Ellen saw Dean. He reached up and slid the headphones from her.

“Dean.”

“El. No. I’m sorry to do that to you. I am. But you won’t talk to me. You won’t listen to me. El, come on. It’s me.” He leaned closer to her. “Yesterday I didn’t see you. Not for one minute. You came back from New Bowman, were never far from me and I still didn’t see you. I don’t want that. I . . .”

“Dr. Dean.” Johnny called out as he walked in the lab.

Dean kept his eyes on Ellen’s, hand on her wrist. “Not right now Johnny.”

“I’m really sorry Dr. Dean, but Melissa needs to see you. She said it’s

important and will only take a minute.”

Dean breathed out.

“Go on.” Ellen said.

“El, can you wait here for me?” Dean asked. “Please so I can finish talking to you.” Dean waited for an answer. “Please?”

“I’ll . . . I’ll wait.” Ellen nodded slowly.

Laying his hand on Ellen’s face, Dean smiled at her and mouthed the word ‘thank you’. He gently slid his hand from, her trailing his fingers across her cheek as he did so. He stepped back. “I won’t be long.”

Johnny watched Dean back up further, turn and walk from the room. Loudly Johnny huffed and shook his head.

Ellen saw it, just like Johnny wanted. “Johnny?”

“Huh?” Johnny acted surprised.

“What was that about?”

“What?”

“What is this ‘what’. You’re not your father. What was the look for.”

“El.” Johnny dramatically sighed and drew up his most troubled look. He peered at her and shook his head. “Nothing.”

“What?”

“It’s just . . . it’s just . . . you aren’t buying that are you?”

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing. Forget I said anything.” Johnny tried to return to work.

“Johnny what? Buying what?” Ellen walked to him.

“I heard a little of what he said.”

“And?”

“And . . . El, promise me you didn’t hear this from me. Swear on my dad you didn’t hear this from me.”

“I swear.”

Johnny made sure he produced a gulping sound when he swallowed. “Before you listen and believe Dean, maybe you should ask him where he’s been living. I saw him going into, . . . into Bev’s house the other night.”

Ellen moistened her dry lips in nervousness. She raised her eyebrows once quickly. “Thank you. I didn’t hear that from you.” Walking back to the dictation machine, Ellen reached in, pulled the small tape out and immediately ripped the tape from the cassette. She moved with haste across the lab and nearly collided fill force with Dean who was rushing in.

“El.” He grabbed her arms. “Where are you going?”

Ellen slammed the tape into his chest. “Let’s just say I changed my mind.”

The long dangling strand of tape draped over Dean’s fingers as the cassette fell to his palm. He turned in shock watching Ellen leave, never seeing the gloating smile Johnny had on his face behind him.

^^^

Hal looked for a moment at Frank’s closed office door, and then Hal knocked.

“Yeah.” Frank barked out.

Hal rolled his eyes, changed his expression to a pleasant one and opened

the door. "Morning."

"Halbert." Frank tossed a clipboard to his desk and rocked in his chair.

O.K. Hal thought, he wasn't going to retaliate. "Francis." He shut the door and stepped inside.

"Look at you." Frank had a shitty grin to him.

"What about me?" Hal asked.

"What's up with the full fledged uniform?"

"Well, today is . . ."

"Going down to the plantation?"

"Frank."

"Searching out Scarlet."

"Frank . . ."

"Wait." Frank snapped. "You did polish your sword didn't you? Never know when you may have to be General Custard. No, wait, Captain Custard no one gets higher than a . . ."

"Frank."

"What!"

"Shut up!"

"Hal!"

"What?"

"Don't fuckin yell at me in my office."

"You are absolutely right." Hal stated, not believing what he said.

"Thank you. I am."

Hal was tested, and he was bound to pass. He sat down across from Frank.

"How are you?"

"Why?"

"I want to know." Hal said.

"Why?"

"I'm concerned."

"Why?"

"Frank!"

"What!"

"God!" Hal clenched his jaws. "Why do you have to be such a dick."

"Because . . . I'm Frank."

"You know . . ."

"No, really I don't. Tell me."

Hal grunted.

Frank laughed.

"Frank."

"What?"

"Forget it."

"O.K."

Snarling, Hal's hands slammed against the arm of the chair. "I come here to make amends with you and . . ."

"Nope."

"Nope?"

"Nope. There's no fuckin way you're getting out of the praise me bet. No-no little brother you still have a couple more hours left . . ."

"Frank."

“I won.”

“Frank.”

“I didn’t swear. Did you write that announcement for my entrance into the Neville . . .”

“Frank!” Hal shouted as he stood up. “Forget I came. You really piss me off.” Turning, Hal bumped into the desk and it knocked the small picture frame on the corner over.

“See,” Frank instigated. “Knocking my stuff over.” As his fingers reached to straighten the frame, Hal grabbed it. “I got it.”

“No I . . .” Hal looked at the picture. “Oh my God.”

“Give it back.”

“No.” Hal stepped back from Frank’s reach, grinning at the picture. “I remember when this was taken.” Hal peered at the picture of a very young Frank and Ellen. “I remember this.”

“Thanksgiving, my freshman year.” Frank stood up and walked around the desk.

“Why this picture?”

“I love that picture.” Frank looked over Hal’s shoulder at it. “I look at this and I know, I know how many years me and El have behind us and I know . . . I hope, it tells me how many more we have to go.”

Peacefully Hal handed the picture back. “That’s really nice.”

“Shut up.”

“No, I’m not joking I’m serious.” Hal said. “So if you feel this way, what the hell are you doing?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why aren’t you with her?”

“Right now? Well, right now she’s at the clinic and . . .”

“No. Now, meaning this point in time in life. Why aren’t you with her.”

“I will eventually, but right now, her and Dean have to work out their problems and I don’t want to get in the way of that.”

“Dean did her wrong.”

Frank shook his head. “I’m not getting into this with you.” He set the photo back on his desk. “I want to be with her. I . . . I miss her Hal. But I gave Dean my word.”

“Oh that is such bullshit Frank. He’s making you feel guilty. He can’t have her, and he doesn’t want you to.”

“You sound like you want me to take advantage of their breakup.”

“Yeah.”

“No. That’s what I gave him my word about. I said I wouldn’t take advantage of their breakup. Besides, I don’t want El that way. I want her to come to me.”

“And what have you done lately that would make her say she wants to turn to you.”

Frank took a moment to think. He peered up to the ceiling.

“Frank?”

“What, I’m thinking.” He closed his eyes. “I . . . nah. I went . . . nah. Nothing.” He looked at Hal.

“See. She’s not going to come to you. You have to go to her.”

“I can’t. I don’t want to do that. I do and I don’t.”

“Dean?”

“What about him?” Frank asked.

“So it’s all because of Dean that you don’t want to pursue Ellen.”

“It depends on what you mean. If you mean because I have a special interest in Dean then . . .”

“No.” Hal snapped. “It’s because you gave him your word.”

“Yes.”

“You can’t break it.”

“No.” Frank walked around his desk and sat down. “I don’t want to.”

“Then don’t.” Hal suggested. “Talk to him. Tell him you need to have her in your life and you know you promised him you wouldn’t take advantage of their break up. You aren’t. It’s just that you can’t give up time with her all together, Ask him under . . . Frank?”

“Huh?” Frank had walked around his desk. He glanced up at Hal. “What?”

“What are you doing?”

“Writing this down.” Frank grabbed a pencil. “Now go on. What did you say to tell Dean?”

Hal tossed up his hands, shook his head with a smile, then pulled up a chair to help his brother out.

^^^

Robbie couldn’t help it. No matter how hard he tried, no matter how hard he tried to focus in on what Elliott was saying, he kept wondering how Elliott got the buttons on his calvary style uniform so shiny.

“So?” Elliott questioned, waiting for an answer.

“Huh?” Robbie snapped to.

“You weren’t listening. I laid out logic to you and you weren’t listening.”

“I was listening.” Robbie glanced at the people who passed him on the way to the chapel. “I just can’t figure out why you’re coming to me.”

“I respect you.” Elliott said.

“Cool.”

“You’re the captain’s brother and . . . I don’t want to step on your toes. I’m really nervous about this and it’s your go ahead I need.”

“Sure.” Robbie gave him a swat on the arm.

“And I promise you Robbie, my intentions are good. I’m not doing this for anything physical. I know the way you feel and . . .”

“Elliott.” Robbie stopped him. “It’s fine. Wanna know why? I’m secure in what I have with Ellen, because no matter who she’s with, no matter what. What her and I have, will always be the same. No more, no less. So . . .” Robbie stepped back. “Ask away.”

“Thank you.” Elliott nodded with a smile watching Robbie back up. “Thank you and watch . . .”

Robbie grunted as he slammed into Frank in his walk to the chapel.

Elliott hunched in a cringe when the papers Frank was holding flew up. Chuckling, Elliott walked away.

“Fuck.” Frank bent down and picked up the papers.

“Sorry. I didn’t see you.” Robbie bent down to help.

“I’m six foot fuckin three how can you not see me.”

“You looked smaller today, Frank.”

“Oh.”

Robbie lifted a sheet of paper. His eyes cased it. “Shit, Frank, you aren’t still reading this are you?”

“Yeah. Actually that’s a new chapter. I threatened Danny for it. I can’t believe I’m reading.” Frank stood up with the papers.

“Porno.”

“No. A graphic love story.” Frank rolled the sheets up and put them in his back pocket. “Besides, this Helen and Bobby story is getting good. Not to ruin anything for you but . . .” Frank dropped his voice to a whisper as if someone would hear, “There’s a brother involved.” Frank winked.

Robbie swallowed. “You uh, don’t say.”

“Yeah and this Helen person is having an affair with . . .”

Fear struck Robbie when he saw the far off look hit Frank. *Did it suddenly dawn on Frank? Did Frank finally realize who Helen and Bobby were?* Robbie got ready to take off in a run for the sanctuary of the chapel. “Frank?”

“What’s up with Jenny? She looks like she’s trying to flirt wit Hal.”

First Robbie sighed a silent breath of relief, then he looked over his shoulder to where Frank was watching. Jenny puppy dogged behind Hal, talking. Hal kept moving. Robbie snickered. “She probably *is* flirting. She likes him. El’s trying to fix them up.”

“That would be so fuckin funny.”

Robbie laughed. “Yeah. Hey, gotta go. See ya at the competition.”

“No way. I’ll see you in the chapel.”

Robbie stopped cold in his walking. “You’re uh, coming to church.”

“Yeah. If for nothing else, but to ridicule you.”

“You’re gonna heckle me in church?”

“Sure why not.”

Robbie blinked a few times and started walking. “Thanks.”

“Sure.” Frank looked away from Robbie back to Jenny and Hal. Jenny had stopped him. Frank grinned. He had an idea.

“And Andrea is the noodle queen.” Jenny rambled blocking Hal from going anywhere. “With the noodles she makes, the long flat ones, I make a wonderful lasagna. Have you had lasagna in a while?”

“Can’t say that I have.” Hal seemed on edge.

“What a shame.” Jenny took a deep breath raising her big bosoms--which poked through her cleavage--with it. “So.”

“So. I think services are . . .”

“We have a few minutes. I was making a chicken tonight. And . . .” Jenny smiled and shifted her eyes when she saw Frank, not-so-subtly, sneaking their way. “And I was wondering if . . .” Closer Frank got. “If you would like to join me for dinner tonight.”

Hal opened his mouth to respond, but nothing came out. In irritation he turned his head to the hyena type laughing that came from Frank who inched his way to him. “Frank!”

“Hey.” Frank cleared his throat. “I couldn’t help but notice how cute of a couple you two make.”

Jenny perked up and smiled. "Thank you."

Hal clenched his jaws. "Excuse me." He took a step away. "Jenny, thank you for the invitation, but I can't. Thank you again."

Like a lost little girl, Jenny, with such disappointment on her face, watched Hal walk away.

"Man." Frank shook his head. "Can you believe that?"

"He turned me down." Jenny spoke so upset.

"And a dinner invitation. What the hell? Did you uh, tell him you'd have sex with him."

"No."

"There you have it. You should have . . ."

"Frank!" Jenny snapped as she turned to face him. "See. See. This is why I want a Bowman man. They aren't dogs like Beginnings men."

"No, their fuckin pansies in sissy uniforms."

Jenny gasped. "I'm telling."

"Who."

"Hal."

Frank fluttered his lips. "Go on. He'll tell you I'm right. He'll say, 'Frank's cool. He's right and . . . whoa.'" Frank reached out and snatched Jenny by the arm when she started to walk away. "There is a reason I came over here."

"To scare Hal away? To sound so, so . . . Frank."

"Yeah."

"What?" Jenny folded her arms.

"O.K., I have an idea. You and El are close right?"

"We've bonded, yes."

"Oh yeah?" Frank snickered. "Like the women at the house of Lesbians?"

Jenny held back her disgust. "Yes Frank just like that. We share intimate the moments on a regular basis."

"Oh wow."

"Frank."

"What?"

"What did you want?"

"When?"

Jenny growled. "This is why Ellen wants no parts of . . ."

"That's it!" Frank snapped his finger and darted before Jenny to stop her. "O.K. I happen to know that my brother Hal has . . ." Frank cleared his throat. "He uh, has um this interest in you. Yeah. And he said it the other night."

"Really?"

"Yeah. He told me he uh, finds you real cute in a um, healthy sort of way. That's it and wanted to get to know you a little more."

Jenny smiled. "Why did he turn me down."

"He wants me to be there with him on like a double-date thing. Yep. It's been a while for him. Needs me for confidence. And uh, since I'm the master." Frank nodded impressed with himself on how well he could come up with a bold lie right off the top of his head. And so convincing too.

"Frank. I'm not fixing you up with any women. No. Aside from the fact that they find you revolting . . ."

"Hey!"

"I wouldn't do that to Ellen." Jenny turned.

“Unless it *is* Ellen.”

Jenny stopped and turned back around. “You want me to fix you up with Ellen?”

“Well, yeah. Sort of.” Frank stepped to her. “I know she is trying to fix you and Hal up. I just want to use you to get to her.”

“And I get to go out with Hal?”

“Yes.”

“O.K. let me know when. I’ll even subtly put in a good word.”

“Thanks.” Frank nodded and smiled as she walked away. “Now I just have to make sure Dean doesn’t mind.” Starting in his own walk to the chapel, Frank stopped cold. “Whoa. Did I just say that?” Scratching his head he looked to the church. He nodded knowingly, assumed it was the ‘God’ thing he was about to embark on that made him think unselfishly, and moved on.

^^^

Ellen stopped to tie her shoe in her race to get to the chapel. Even though she knew services would be a little late due to the number of Dan-Trams expected in for the Neville competition. She wanted to get a good seat, after all Robbie was officially Rev. Robbie.

Grinning at that thought, Ellen stood up in her shoe tying excursion a few feet from the chapel doors. As she did, she felt the brush of Jenny who was racing toward the chapel.

“Sorry.” Jenny grabbed her arm to steady a wobbling, stunned Ellen. She nearly skid to a stop and spun around snapping her finger, “Andrea is fussing with Alex’s hair, they aren’t in there yet.” Jenny spoke fast.

“O.K.”

“They’ll be here shortly. She wants you to wait out here.”

“O.K.”

“And you should really consider getting back together with Frank. Bye.”

Before Ellen could say anything, Jenny ran into the chapel.

“A thought that’s probably crossed your mind.” Dean’s whispering voice spoke directly behind her.

Ellen drew up an arrogant look and turned to face him. “To say the least. Getting back with Frank. Sleeping with Frank. All if which is on my mind . . . constantly.”

“Thanks.”

“You started it.”

“I did.” Dean held up his hand. “But right now, I need to speak to you on a medical level.”

“Go on.” Ellen folded her arms.

“Where is it?”

“What?” Ellen asked.

“Elliott . . . I mean, Sgt. Ryder’s blood work.”

“Oh.”

“Oh?” Dean stepped to her. “Did you forget?”

“No.”

“Did you do it?” Dean questioned.

“No.”

“Why?”

“We were busy.” Ellen answered.

“You were busy last time you were in New Bowman. How long does it take you. A minute.”

“Dean. I’ll get to them.” Ellen said.

“When?”

“I don’t know.”

“Today?” Dean asked.

“Dean!” Ellen moved back. “Why are you badgering me about this. Stop it. Just stop. It’s none of your business.”

“The hell it isn’t. We’re a team in the medical community. This is important.”

“I’ll get to it. All right.” Ellen looked away. “I’ll get to it when I can. What difference does it make.”

Dean was nearly aghast. “Because I want to run those test as soon as possible.”

“Then what?” Ellen snapped. “Huh?”

“Excuse me?”

“Then what? Run the test, find out, then what?”

“Deal with it.”

“How Dean?” Ellen spoke emotionally. “How. You tell me how, then I will get those samples and run those test, until . . .”

“Whoa.” Dean halted her. “Even in the old world Ellen, things were incurable, un-treatable, but that still did not stop us from finding out. Get the samples.”

“He’s my patient.”

“We’re talking about a man’s health.”

“We’re talking about my friend.”

“Ellen.” Dean held up his hand. “Look. Do you want me to pull rank on you.”

Ellen laughed. “Like this is the military. Pull rank who do you think . . .”

“In the clinic.” Dean spoke stern. “I am over you. Pull the test or I pull you.” With a warning pont Dean turned from her.

“Fuck you.”

Dean only looked over his shoulder at her. “The tests.” As he returned to facing forward a huge grin crossed his face when he saw Alexandra, Billy and Joey running his way.

“Daddy!” Alex called out excitedly.

“Hey!” Dean held out his arms.

Ellen rushed to him. “Don’t touch them Dean. You aren’t allowed.”

“What are you gonna do, El?” Dean snapped. “Arrest me. Have me pulled away. Yeah, nice thing to do to their father.” Regaining his smile, Dean swept up Alexandra into his arms the second she reached him. “Hey.” He kissed her and held her. “I love you.”

“I love you.” She grabbed his cheeks and kissed him.

The deep voice of the miniature Frank bellowed out. “Hey Dad.”

“Hey Joey.” Dean, holding Alexandra, bent down and kissed Joey, he leaned forward and kissed Billy as well. “Hey, Bill.”

Billy looked as if he were having his usually bad day. “When you coming home?”

“Soon.” Dean answered and stood up straight. “Soon.”

Ellen folded her arms tighter and rolled her eyes. “Why don’t you guys go into church. I’ll be right in.”

Dean set Alexandra down. “Me too. We’ll all sit together. O.K.”

Alexandra smiled and nodded.

Ellen walked directly behind Dean, whispering in his ear. “Dick. Make me look like the bad guy.”

Dean grinned.

“Daddy.” Alex tugged on his jeans. “Can we sleep over your house again tonight.”

Dean’s eyes bulged. “Um . . .”

“It was fun.” Alexandra continued. “Make sure you have all kinds of Bev cookies again.”

Dean cringed, he didn’t need to turn around to see the daggers Ellen was visually tossing him. “Alex, go in church. I’ll be right there.” Feeling the heat of Ellen’s breath hit against his neck, Dean waited until he was in an all clear scope of his children and he turned around to Ellen. “Don’t hit me.” He jumped back.

“I’ll just get Hal to bust your nose again.” Ellen stepped to him. “You took my kids. My kids . . .”

“El, it’s not like it sounds.”

“Really?” Ellen tilted her head. “Not only did you violate a court order, but you proceeded to bring my kids to your little Dean and Bev love nest.”

Dean laughed. “Sorry.” He held up his hand. “Love nest. Yeah. I live in a love nest.” he laughed again. “I don’t live with Bev, Ellen, I live with Frank.”

“Yeah, right, you expect me to believe that.” Ellen tried to get by him.

Dean blocked her. “Ask him.”

“No.”

“Yes. Ask Frank.”

“Ask me what?” Frank intruded.

Dean stepped back from Ellen with a pointing hand to Frank. “Ask him.”

Ellen looked at Frank. “Does Dean live with you?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Frank!” Dean snapped.

“Liar!” Ellen yelled at Dean. “God.”

“No. No!” Dean pulled her back.

Frank cleared his throat with a twitch of his head. “Dean, Judge Grace. Abuse.”

Dean quickly removed his hand. “El, I’m not lying. Frank is.”

“What?” Frank was clueless. “What am I lying about?”

“Living with me.” Dean said. “Please, tell Ellen we live together.”

“Oh!” Ellen scoffed. “Go on bait him into helping you cover up the fact that you live with Bev.”

Dean nodded to Frank, “In a love nest none-the-less.”

“How do you like that.” Frank said.

“Frank!” Dean blasted. “You aren’t helping. She thinks I live with Bev.”

“He doesn’t.” Frank answered.

“Really?” Ellen had questioned to her. “Then where does he live?”

“Um, I don’t know. Dean?” Frank asked. “Where do you live?”

“With you, asshole.”

“Since when?”

“Frank!” Dean yelled.

“What! Fuck! Don’t yell at me before church.” Frank rubbed his temple. “I’m trying here. We agreed. She wasn’t supposed to know we live in the same house.”

Dean’s hand dropped in relief. “Thank you. And El, ask any of the kids. How do you think I got them. Frank.”

Ellen glared at Frank. “You helped break a court order.”

“Absolutely.” Frank replied. “Because that order was wrong. Wrong El. And so are you. I’m going to church now.” He backed up. “Notice the Christian in me coming out already?” Frank winked as he walked backwards. “How calm I am. Ah!” exhaling loudly, Frank turned around and walked into the chapel.

Dean and Ellen stood alone on the street. The bells began to ring.

Ellen walked by him.

Dean stopped her. “El. I don’t live with Bev. I don’t. As weird as this is, Frank and I live together.”

“Then how did Alex eat Bev cookies?”

“We . . . we stole them.”

Ellen was getting ready to walk away, but couldn’t. “Why would you steal cookies from Bev?”

Dean shrugged. “We were there.”

“We? Where?”

“Me, Frank and Henry. At Bev’s.”

“One big party.”

Dean laughed. “No. Remember the other day when Hal broke my nose? He overheard me with Bev. Well yeah, I was setting-up going to her house, but setting up so I could get in there and search it.”

“For?” Ellen asked.

“Anything.” Dean said so desperate. “Anything to prove that she’s setting me up. Anything that would tell me how. Who she’s working with. I got a few ideas. We all do, but nothing concrete.”

Ellen nodded slowly and started to walk away. She paused. “Did you find anything?” She questioned not looking back at Dean.

“No. We had something. We had our hands on it, we think, but then someone, we don’t know who, came into the house and we had to run into the closet. When we came out, it was gone. So it had to be something. We have our heads together and were working on a bunch of things. I won’t say what. I don’t want you to think I’m looking for excuses. I’m just looking for answers.”

So slightly, Ellen peered over her shoulder. “The three of you were in a closet?”

Dean snickered as he moved closer to her and Ellen resumed looking forward. “Yeah, how about that. Get me, Frank and Henry working on something and there’s mayhem. A pantry El.”

Ellen’s head lowered in a slight laugh.

“Big Frank in the middle. My nose smashed against the door. Henry and his expulsion of his nervous stomach gases . . .”

Shaking her head, Ellen chuckled. “Must have been a sight. How did you

get Bev out of the house?”

“We didn’t. She was there. Sleeping. I uh . . . I knocked her out with an ether based pellet.” Dean’s moved to a hover over her shoulders wanting so bad just to touch her.

Ellen laughed. “You really knocked her out?”

“Yeah.”

“Thanks.” She walked to the church door and reached for it.

“El. You believe me.”

“Yeah.”

“Thank you.” Dean said. “And . . . I won’t sit with you in church. I’m sorry to put you in that position with the . . .”

“Dean.” Ellen hesitated. Opening the door her head tilted but her views not on Dean. “It’s fine. Sit with your family.” she walked inside.

Dean stared at the door as it closed. When it did, he clenched his fist, drew it with excitement to his chest, let out a quiet ‘yes’ with a tiny jump. Then Dean regained his composure, cleared his throat and walked in the chapel.

^^^

Johnny saw them walk in at nearly the same time, but he didn’t think too much of it until Dean slipped into the same pew as Ellen and the kids. He perked up from his slouch in the pew, but not too obviously.

They didn’t look angry and that bothered Johnny. But not too much, He knew he had things set in motion, a chain of events, if one link failed, the others were surely strong enough to carry the heavy load.

Johnny was confident.

A guitar draped across the back wasn’t the normal attire for a minister of the cloth. But Robbie swore it was not just an instrument of music, but an instrument of confidence, because he couldn’t appear before an audience without it.

It did come in handy when he and Paul ripped into the rocked up opening hymn of ‘Walking with Jesus’. Everybody tried to sing the song they were ill familiar with. Andrea hummed and added her typical ‘Sweet Jesus’. Things were off to a good start. A new start in the new ‘Rev. Robbie’ Church of Beginnings. Then Robbie took the pulpit.

“Morning.” Robbie grinned his boyish smile at the packed chapel.

“Morning Reverend.” They all chanted in unison.

Robbie snickered. “Cool. O.K.” He nodded to the people. So impressed at everyone who came to see him. So many didn’t have a seat it was like one of those Christmas masses where people came out of the wood work.

After getting a proud look from Andrea , Jess and Hal, then an embarrassed look from Joe. Robbie smiled again. “Let us pray.” He lowered his head as did everyone in the chapel. “God . . . thank you for you know, everything. Help us to uh, be nice and do good things. And you know, guide us this week. Amen.”

The congregation responded with a strong ‘amen’.

Robbie looked up. “Church is ended. Don’t forget to pray. Have a good day. Paul?” Robbie stepped back, looked at Paul, nodded his head in a four count and they broke into a religious tune.

Andrea gasped loudly in pride as her hand laid firm on her chest. Her eyes glossed over and tears formed in the corner of her eyes as she listened to Robbie and Paul. “Sweet Jesus, how strong he was up there. Mm-mm-mm.” She tossed her head in a rhythmic manner back to forth. “The good Lord blessed him with the Good word. Aren’t you proud of our boy Joe?”

Joe covered his eyes. “Christ.”

Hal tilted his head. “I think he did well for his first time up. Frank?” Hal leaned forward to peer around Andrea and Joe. “What do you think?”

“I love it.” Frank nodded. “Man, I’m coming to church every week. I can be like a real church going guy with Robbie as pastor. Fuck . . .”

“Frank.” Joe grumbled.

Frank ignored him “I can start earning brownie points with God.” He stood up when Andrea and Joe did. “Oh yeah, Frank Slagel. Christian man.”

Hal slipped into the aisle. “Until you kill someone.”

“That doesn’t make me less Christian. Huh Andrea?” Frank tapped her on the shoulder.

“You are protecting God’s children, Frank.” Andrea nodded. “You aren’t sinning.”

“See.” Frank pointed at Hal. “Our Mom says I’m not a sinner.”

“But you’re sadistic Frank. Andrea, he’s sadistic.” Hal argued. “How can you say he doesn’t sin when he enjoys the kill. Do you know how he diced up the savages with the perimeter beams. Leading them there, making them chase him.”

“Sweet Jesus Hal.” Andrea halted him. “You know your brother was only trying to find a quicker painless way to stop those who tried to harm us.”

“Yeah.” Frank agreed.

Hal shook his head. “Just what the world needs, a sensitive killer.”

NEVILLE COMPETITION
Top Ten Tally Sheet

1.	Frank	Slagel
	1,372	
2.	Sgt. Elliott	Ryder
	1,050	
3.	Robbie	Slagel
	955	
4.	Hal	Slagel
	950	
5.	Ben from	Fabrics
	901	
6.	Dan	
	900	
7.	Jess	Boyens
	890	
8.	Corporal	Tom
	Pallet	
	775	
9.	Sgt. Michael	
	Watson	
	725	
10.	Dr. Dean	Hayes
	700	

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

After taking a look around the area, Joe swung his hand down with a 'good job' handshake to Danny.

Danny smiled. "Yeah, everyone worked hard, Joe."

Joe shook his head in amazement. The Neville Field, a half mile long obstacle course was set just beyond the growing security area. But what impressed Joe wasn't the apocalyptic looking course, it was how it set down in the grade more, and bleacher style seating was erected for viewing pleasure. "You did good."

"Thanks. Jenny got a food booth set up. We have some mini Neville games for the kids." A grin crossed Danny's face. "And football season's starting. We're getting the sign ups done today."

"You've earned the title 'Social Master'."

"Wow. Thanks." Danny started walking, tugging Joe's arm. "Come on, I'll show you where you'll stand and the clips."

"How many men will be competing today?"

"Well, we guess fifty. Hope your arms in good shape. But some of these men . . ." Danny shook his head. "It's the top guns we're gearing to either knock out or secure."

"So I take it this isn't the final competition?"

"Hell no, Joe." He spoke as he walked. "This is a real morale booster. And with the savages getting killed left and right and attacking, there are ample opportunities for points. We added four new Neville committee members."

"Bet they're going nuts every time there's an outbreak of savage attacks."

"Yep. Of course, they don't keep track, you know. It's up to the men themselves to file their forms for the kills. Elliott, he would have missed out on a hundred and fifty points had Ellen not filed his papers for the lone-kills he made in that tunnel incident. And Frank, he miscounted on that last slice and dice savage episode. He lost thirty-seven points."

Joe stopped walking. "Thirty-seven? I thought they got twenty-five for each kill."

Danny snickered. "Sorry. He said he couldn't find a leg and an arm, we were kidding and said he'd only get half credit. He bought it."

"Serves him right." Joe shook his head with a chuckle and moved onward to the gun table with Danny.

Grace held her wide brim, flowered hat that blew in the slightly cool fall breeze as she led a group of six women toward the bleacher area. She stopped before the seating, exhaling and smiling so pleased while she glanced around at the competition scene.

It didn't take much for Jenny Matoose to see the reflection of Grace and her crew in the coffee urn. After checking her own appearance, Jenny left the coffee stand to go and meet the small group of women who acted and looked so feminine.

"Jenny." Jenny smiled brightly and extended her hand to Grace. "Judge Hawthorn right?"

“Yes, I am.” Grace shook her hand. “Jenny Matoose? The young woman who I spoke with on the phone. The petitioner.”

“One and only.”

“How are those signatures coming?”

“Good.” Jenny nodded. “I’ll stop by tomorrow. I just wanted to introduce myself now.”

“Will you be watching the sporting event?” Grace asked.

“I will. But from my booth.”

“They have you on display?”

“No.” Jenny giggled. “Serving coffee and refreshments to . . .” Jenny stopped when she heard Grace’s gasp. “What’s wrong?”

“Why do they have you doing such a menial job, when obviously you are a woman of stature here in Beginnings.”

“I don’t know. They asked.”

“They asked.” Grace shook her head so sternly. “I suggest you go to the, probably, man, who asked you and tell him he should have a man serve the coffee. After all not only are you a minority here, you are much more than a waitress. You are a leader.”

“I am.” Jenny raised her head high. “I will.”

“Good.”

“They can’t take advantage of me like that.”

“They certainly can not.” Grace said. “Didn’t you tell me on the phone you organize the women here.”

“I do.”

“And they still have you serving coffee. Are any men doing jobs like that.”

“No.”

“Chauvinist.” Grace stated.

“Bastards.” Jenny commented.

“You must speak up young woman. You deserve something with more prestige.”

“I do.” Jenny nodded. “Thank you Judge Grace. I’ll be seeing you tomorrow. Right now I have a wiry Asian man to contend with.” Arms folded tight, Jenny stormed her way over to Danny. “Danny.”

“Oh hey Jen.” Danny was eating a cookie at her booth. “You look pissed.”

“I am.” Jenny sounded cross. “You know, I’m a little angry Danny. Why did you ask me to serve coffee? When there are plenty of men who could do it. After all, I am a woman of stature in this community. I deserve much better than being a waitress. There are only eighteen women. Eighteen. And I serve coffee. It’s degrading.”

“Oh.” Danny nodded. “Thought you wanted to be a part of the event.”

“I wanted to help. But to be a coffee boy?”

“You are absolutely right. You go watch the event with the other women.” Danny laid his hands firm on her arms. “Todd from Fabrics wanted this job anyhow. You know, since Hal Slagel’s like the big coffee drinker, and Hal asked, since he’ll be busy with his men, if we minded bring the coffee to him every once and a while. I think Todd . . .”

“Hal wants personal service?” Jenny asked.

“Yeah, but that would be degrading . . .”

“No!” Jenny silenced him. “No. I don’t mind that.” she sighed

dramatically. "Someone has to do it and not Todd. Hal hates him. I think he may want some now. Don't you think?"

"He may."

Jenny smiled, rushed inside her booth, filled a cup of coffee from the urn. Coffee that wasn't even finished and just as fast, she ran by Danny, flashed a grin and headed to Hal trying not to spill anything.

"Yep." Danny spoke to himself and took a bite of his cookie. "Helps to eavesdrop in Beginnings." Another bite Danny took and he swallowed. "Get to know just what buttons to push." As he turned he saw Josephine standing there.

Josephine grinned widely with a wink. "You can push my buttons anytime Danny Hoi."

"Uh . . ." Danny chuckled. "Thanks. I'll keep that in mind." Turning to make an escape, Danny squeaked a short shriek when Josephine pinched his backside. He smiled awkwardly to her and hurried away.

Quantico Marine Headquarters

The metal from the head and neck brace George wore, clanked once as he sat back in his chair at his desk. He looked to Steward, who was seated across and then to a very serious Dr. Walker who stood before them.

"And you were asking?" George motioned his hand.

"Is it one of our chips?" Dr. Walker questioned.

"We believe so, yes."

"Well, then the first time, the desired effects will be given."

"And it won't overload it?" George asked.

"Not if it's one of our chips." Dr. Walker answered. "See they aren't designed to override Data and replace it. In order to get rid of the data stored in the micro chip you need to erase it and begin again. Any data, even the same will just be stored in the chip, as well, duplicates. The effect you desire will not change but eventually it will overload and death will occur, probably a brain hemorrhage."

"I see." George tapped his fingers on the desk. "Thank you Dr. Walker. That will be all."

Dr. Walker moved to the door.

"Wait." George called out.

"Yes, Mr. President." Dr. Walker turned around.

"Your colleague made this special delivery tape. Is the program correct?"

"Yes. It was a very simple program. Nothing major."

"How many times would you say that program needs to be loaded to start to, you know overload?"

"Five six times. If they're using our chip."

George smiled slightly. "Thank you."

After Dr. Walker left, Steward watched the peaceful expression on George's face. "You contemplating?"

"I am."

"I thought you wanted to see how today affected everything."

"I do. But it's genuinely sadistic."

"Why does Dr. Walker keep stressing 'if it's one of our chips'?" Steward

asked.

“Oh.” George gave a fling-off wave, “He knows that Squeak and Geek invented another microchip. He’s concerned. He’s looking at it from a doctor’s point of view.”

“Are they using ours?”

“Who cares.” George tossed up his hands. “How much different can it be.”

“So you’re going to go ahead with adding the program anyhow, despite today.”

“Yes.” George tried to nod, but couldn’t. He made a valiant attempt. “And slowly we’ll over load it. Slowly.” George zoned off in the pleasantness of that thought.

“What if, what if he dies. I didn’t think that was our original intentions. I thought it was to break him mentally or get him on our side.”

“Breaking him mentally goes along with this. And Dr. Hayes will never work for us without trying to screw us. So in order for us to be one up on them in the scientific field. We’re just going to have to kill him.”

“Then if that’s the final decision, why not just, say . . . kill him.”

“What are you nuts?” George snapped. “Look at me. Oh, no. If he dies. He dies suffering. A long torturous death.” George leaned back and grinned. “Something, you know, fun to watch.”

Beginnings, Montana

Just as Joe reached for the paint pellet filled clip, he jumped at the slight scream that came from Hal not far away. Chuckling, Joe looked to Danny who stood with him. “Three?”

“Nah. Two. She missed the first time.”

After hearing a few of Hal’s ‘no, that quite all rights’ Joe returned to listening to Danny explain.

“So just be careful when you . . .”

“Excuse me.” Jenny sang as she made it by Joe and Danny. “Joe, Hal is so understanding.”

“Yeah, he’s a pip.”

“I just can’t believe how bad my hands shake.” she walked into the booth and poured another cup of coffee.

“Jenny, why don’t you just hand it to him instead of giving it to him on a tray.” Joe suggested.

“Would he mind.”

Simply closing his mouth, Joe shook his head.

“Good idea. Maybe I’ll blow on the coffee so it isn’t so hot. What do you think?” Jenny spoke with rapidity.

Joe just winked and nodded. “Danny. Clips.”

Danny snapped out of the daze of humor he found in Jenny and tried again to give Joe the explanation. “As I was saying . . .”

“What . . .” A thin female finger came in and touched upon the row of clips laying on the refreshment booth counter. “Are these?” Ellen poked her head between them with a grin. “They don’t look like our normal clips.”

“Ellen.” Joe said her name with irritation. “Does this concern you.”

"No, but Oh!" Ellen said perky.

Joe cringed. "Stop that."

"I just saw the light on the pot was on. Coffee's done."

"Christ." Joe shook his head perturbed. "Get a cup and leave us alone. Danny. Explain."

"Do you think I can."

Seeing that Ellen was occupied with the coffee urn, and Jenny was gone, Joe exhaled. "I believe so. Go on."

"Now each clip can be refilled with pellets if none get broke inside and clog. These bad boys." Danny pulled out a pellet. "Can break very . . ."

"Oh!" Ellen interjected excitedly. "This is good. New bowman has great beans." She saw them looking at her. "And warm. Coffee's warm,." She giggled and moved out of the booth. "Bye."

Danny closed his eyes as the red paint rolled down his hands when his two fingers holding the pellet, squeezed together tightly with Ellen's scream. "Thanks."

Joe snickered at Danny's covered hand. "You were saying about how easily they break."

"Funny." Danny grabbed a napkin and wiped off his hand. He picked up another pellet. "Now hopefully I can . . ."

The pellet popped, squirting paint everywhere when Hal's sudden shriek carried over.

After looking over to see Hal flinging off the coffee Jenny spilled on him, Danny, again, closed his eyes. "I give up."

It was a view of Ellen, Dean didn't want to stop. The way she laughed as her mouth hovered the rim of her coffee cup. Ellen was smiling, and to Dean that was a good sign, even if it was at Hal's expense.

There was nervousness in his approaching Ellen. How could there not be?

"Hey." He spoke softly as he neared her.

Ellen stopped mid sip and turned around. "Hey. Did you see Jenny and . . ."

"Yeah." Dean scratched his head. "About this morning in church."

"What about it."

"Thanks."

"You're . . . you're welcome." Ellen shifted her eyes with a giggle to Hal who tried to dry of his pants. "Wonder where Elliott is."

After rolling his eyes, Dean answered. "I heard he was off with Frank somewhere."

"You're kidding?" Ellen fully faced Dean. "Why is he with Frank? That's a scary thought. Elliott's a nice man."

"Yeah. El, listen. About Elliott."

"I'm not arguing with you. You made your point. You're pulling me if I don't pull those tests. I'll do the test."

"I'm sorry I took that stance." Dean said.

"You had your reasons."

"And you had yours. We'll run the test, see the results and then you and I.

You and I, El, will discuss the next step. O.K.?"

Ellen nodded. "You don't suppose Frank's tying him up somewhere because Elliott's so close to him in the competition."

"I don't think Frank would stoop . . ."

"I wonder what they're doing," Ellen looked around.

"Ellen." Dean stated her name firm. "What is it about Elliott?"

"He's my friend."

"Since when do you continuously evolve the conversation around your friends."

"Why are you getting defensive about Elliott?" Ellen asked. "You brought him up."

"You brought him up."

"I beg to differ. You did."

"El, no, you did. Staring at Hal, you asked where he was."

"Yeah." Ellen took a second to think. "I did." she shrugged. "Problem with that?"

Dean slowly nodded. "No. No problem. I hope you find your friend soon. Sounds to me like you can't get through a day without him."

"Come to think of it, I probably couldn't." Ellen gave Dean a shitty grin.

"Thanks." Dean backed up.

"Such fear you have of being replaced."

"No, Ellen, I have no fear of being replaced. That would be pointless. Considering the fact that everyone knows every man in your life can easily be replaced." shaking his head Dean turned and walked away.

Ellen, shrugging it off, went back to watching Hal, waiting for the next round.

"Dean." Henry hurried to catch him as he started to leave the area. "Where you going?"

"Anywhere but here."

Henry snickered.

Dean stopped. "What is so funny."

"You being all mad."

"I am."

"You shouldn't be." Henry saw on Dean's face that he anxiously awaited his reasoning. "I mean, El made you mad. I saw that. But did you actually think because she let you sit with her in church for like ten seconds all was well and games were done?"

"Yes."

Henry laughed. "And you're supposed to be the brilliant scientist."

Dean started to walk away.

"Dean wait." Henry caught him. "You can't leave. Aside from the fact you have to compete. I have something that will cheer you up. In fact make you smile."

"If you can make me smile Henry, I'll stay."

Henry reached into his back pocket and pulled out a paint pellet clip. He held it up. "Empty and waiting."

Dean grinned. "Is this the one."

"It will be. I'll put it on the bottom of the pile."

"Yes!" Dean said excitedly and snatched up the clip. "I'll win again."

"Come on. I have everything ready. Let's set this up." Henry started walking with Dean. "I can't wait to see the look on Frank's face."

"Neither can I." A bit more 'up' Dean moved on with Henry.

Not to far from them, Johnny stood. He listened to what they said, he heard the details he needed to hear and then, Johnny smiled. He opened his hand and looked down to it, it was physically empty, but appearances were deceiving. Johnny knew things were perfectly falling right into his hands.

"Why do you suppose that is?" Jess asked Robbie as they headed to the area.

"Well, think about it. Beside Josephine, there are two women totally unattached. And only a handful of the eighteen are only juggling two men. Ellen, though married to Dean still, really is now, unattached. And what the shame is, is that I love her, she's a great person to me, but number one reason. She's a woman. Plain and simple. A woman."

"Do you consider it degrading?"

"Not really. The women are smarter than that.." Robbie answered. "But El's been attached her entire life. I think, I think she's just gonna have fun with the attention."

"Maybe that's what she needs. Fun."

"So like what's with this talk?"

"Well, I'm a little bothered so many men have been talking to me about her. That's all. Concern."

"Not jealousy?" Robbie asked.

"Over Ellen? No. The dating thing . . . yeah." Jess shrugged. "I've actually been contemplating going for it."

"With Ellen?"

"No. With a woman."

Robbie stopped cold in his walking. "Jess? A woman? They're rare. And you're thinking *now* about going straight."

"I'll never be straight. But no men are well, interested, really. And I've had three offers from women. Women, Robbie and I'm gay in a world full of men. Does that make sense. And . . ." Jess' tone dropped. "I'm lonely."

"I told you I could fix you up. I know a few men who would . . ."

"No." Jess shook his head. "I want companionship. A closeness. Not just laid. These women are offering that. But I don't know if I, I don't know of I can do the physical part. I dreamt I could. But I don't think."

Robbie laughed. "Jess, man, sure you can.."

"Could you? If you needed it, really needed it. And a you know a guy . . ."

"Wait, you aren't doing the Jess subtle hitting on me are you?"

"No."

"O.K. just checking, go on. I have to watch my answers when you do that."

"Robbie . . ."

"Kidding." Robbie grinned. "Go on. Could I what?"

"If a guy was offering you the companionship, intimacies you needed . . ."

Would you?”

Robbie looked very serious at Jess. Such deep thought across his face. He opened his mouth to answer, shut it, smiled, then opened it again. “No.” He gave a quick swat to Jess on the arm. “See ya.”

Jess tossed his hands up. “Thanks.” Shaking his head he caught the wave and sweet smile of Denice. Jess returned the wave, awkwardly. He took a moment to look at her wishing with all his heart he could find some interest in the young woman who so much as offered him the chance to see if they could click. Click enough to start the type of relationship Jess needed in his life, but the type he truly needed with someone she wasn’t. Taking a deep breath and turning his head, Jess saw what could be his answer, Ellen. Smiling a thinking smile, he made his way to her.

A serious, curious face and a simple sniff infiltrated Ellen’s watching of her children playing with Josh in the kid’s Neville course. “Jess?” She looked over her shoulder.

“How . . . how did you know it was me?” Jess asked, walking up to behind her.

“Two men smell really nice in the community on a regular basis. You and Danny.” Ellen chuckled as Alexandra tried the mini obstacle course. “Maybe it’s a gay thing.”

“Danny’s gay?”

“No, but Frank thinks he is. So what’s up? Why are you sneaking?”

“I’m not sneaking.” Jess stood beside her, looked down, smiled then out to where Ellen watched. “I wanted to share my dream with you.”

“A better life type dream?”

“No.” Jess shook his head with a smile. “Dream. A night one. I dreamt you and I were in highschool together. Actually we were supposed to be teenagers in this dream.”

“Now you can tell it’s a dream.”

“Check this out . . .” Jess peered up and out with a hint of a blush. “We were in the back seat of my father’s car . . . making out.”

Ellen immediately looked at Jess. “You and me?”

“Yeah.” Jess cleared his throat.

“Was I female or male?”

“Ellen.”

“Sorry.” Ellen smiled. “What was I?”

“You were female.”

“That’s funny. Did you like it?”

“In my dream I did.” Jess shrugged.

“Did you wake up excited?”

Embarrassed-like, Jess laughed. “No. Well . . .”

“You did!”

“Ellen, I’m a guy, I wake up excited no matter what.”

“So are you all ready for the competition? My money’s on you.”

“Really?” Jess asked surprised

“No, I’m kidding. Frank’s gonna win.”

Jess scoffed. “Maybe the competition, but you know that ‘kill me’ thing him and Dean have going.?”

“Yeah.”

“Dean’s putting a blue paint pellet in Frank’s clip. If Joe hits Frank with the blue one, Dean’s gonna claim a victory.”

Ellen laughed. “Oh, no shit? You mean like when he called Frank and said he poisoned him, but he didn’t?”

“Exactly. He’s gonna tell Frank that blue pellet signified . . .”

“A real bullet.” Ellen nodded impressed. After taking a look at her kids she looked oddly at Jess who almost stared. “Are you all right?”

“No.”

“No? Wanna talk about it.”

“Ellen.” Jess took a breath. “I have a huge favor. And . . . you’re my only female friend.”

“No. Absolutely not. You won’t fit into my clothes.” Ellen shook her head.

A slight roll hit Jess’ eyes as he tossed his head back. “Oh God, why do you have to be the one to know I’m gay.”

“Henry knows. So does Robbie and Joe and . . .”

“No one else. Which brings me to my favor.” Jess laid his hand on her shoulder and turned Ellen to face him. “I want you to help me to act straight.”

“You do.”

“I mean in a different way.”

Ellen was lost. “I don’t understand.”

“Remember when we kissed. We did that little experiment?”

“Yes.”

“I want to continue that experiment. I want you to help me El, or at least help me to see if I can be . . . if I can be with a woman.”

Totally taken aback was Ellen. She didn’t know how to react. “Jess . . . Jess why?”

“Because I have gotten offers from women. I need that closeness, El. Emotionally and physically. I need that. Three women have offered it to me.”

“It’s not gonna fulfill you, Jess.”

“My concern lies with that. Yes.” Jess agreed. “They aren’t men.”

“No. They aren’t Robbie.”

Jess closed his eyes. “You got me.”

“So you think that being with a woman will help you forget Robbie?” Ellen had a chuckle to her. “It won’t happen. What about . . .”: Ellen dropped her voice. “What about with a man. Go after a man. Maybe you can find someone who will give that to you, take your mind off of Robbie, and, Jess, fulfil you. A woman isn’t going to do it.”

“I know.” Jess said disappointed. “But what man? Any man who admittedly is gay in this community had already come out and is openly involved. The others that have gay sex, have just that. Gay sex.”

“You need more. I can relate.” Ellen nodded. “So, the offers are there. Physical contact, emotional attachment, companionship semi-regularly. All the things you want. Wrapped up in the wrong package.”

Jess snickered.

“Sort of like when your Dad tells you he’s gonna finally by you a car and he hands you the keys to Uncle Ralph’s clunker.”

Cringing crossed Jess’ face. “I don’t want to compare the women in this community to clunkers.”

“But you’ll drive the car if that’s your only choice.”

“And since we’re speaking metaphorically.” Jess raised his eyebrows. “I’ll drive the car if someone teaches me how to drive.”

Ellen bit her bottom lip. “Me?”

“Too much to ask? I trust you. You can tell me no if . . .”

“You want to practice having sex?” Ellen asked and Jess’ hand quickly covered her mouth.

“No.” He looked around to make sure no one heard. “No. I wouldn’t ask that of you. I want to practice the companionship thing. You know, hanging out, sitting close, talking. I want to practice . . .” Jess inched his way to her and whispered. “The back seat. I figure if I . . . sit in the back seat with you, maybe it might stir up the feelings enough to tell me if I can . . .”

“Drive the car.”

Jess snapped. “Exactly.”

“I don’t understand why you’re asking me to do this. You had the offers, just practice on them. If it doesn’t work, tell them you’re not interested.”

“Ellen, I don’t know what to do.”

“Guess at it.”

“You don’t want to help.” Jess closed his eyes. “I understand. I’m probably not only insulting you, but taking advantage of our friendship. Not too mention . . .”

“Jess. No.” Ellen laid her hand on his chest. “That’s not it. I just don’t understand what it is that makes me different than them.”

“You’re my friend. I don’t view you as female or male. I view you as my friend. And as my friend, I can certainly have you tell me what I’m doing wrong or right. And I can tell you if I don’t like where my hand is . . . can I put it somewhere else.”

“O.K.” Ellen turned from him and returned to watching the kids.

“O.K.? You’ll do this?”

“Yes. Just tell me when we start our mock relationship. Because that’s what it is. A mock relationship. We’re gonna do all the things couples do, within limits.”

“Yes.”

“And I’m taking it without anyone knowing what we’re doing.”

“Would that bother you?” Jess asked.

“Not at all. I like being secretive. Just let me know when you want to start.”

“Whenever you start telling me what to do.”

Ellen nodded slowly and with a snide grin. “Start now.”

“Now.” Jess was shocked.

“Yeah. Flirt. That’s something many Beginnings men forgot how to do. Flirt. It is the basis of great sexual tension.”

“Flirting.” Jess nodded with a thinking look. “Got it. Flirting.”

Hal was grateful for the warm full cup of coffee that actually stayed in his cup. He had to remind himself to thank that nice Todd from fabrics for stepping in. Hal brought the cup to his lips, watching as Danny took the group through

the obstacle course on some sort of Danny-tour.

“Captain.” Elliott spoke.

Taking a sip, Hal shifted his eyes and nearly choked. The hot beverage sprayed forth and dribbled down his shirt. “Elliott?”

“What?”

“What the hell happened to your uniform.” Hal asked shocked, seeing Elliott in a white tee shirt and green military pants. “My God, I said it before. You look like a younger version of my brother.”

Elliott ran his hand down his own chest. “Feels more like the old days wearing this. Frank said since we’re so close in the competition, every aspect of our competing has to be the same, down to the weight of garments that we wear.”

“Isn’t that fair of Frank.” Hal said sarcastically. “What is he up to dressing you like a Beginnings soldier?”

A slight, heavy, raspy whisper in Hal’s ear from Frank himself, answered that. “Because he’s gonna be a Beginnings soldier.” Frank stepped away and grinned.

“You think?” Hal asked cocky.

“He has sadistic qualities.” Frank winked.

“Where?” Hal tossed his hands up.

Frank pointed to his own temple. “I just have to bring them out.” He turned around, stopped and shook his head. “Fuckin kick Jess’ ass for flirting with Ellen. Man, what is with the men in this community. Dogs.” Frank’s complaining voice faded as he moved toward Dean.

Elliott peered over Ellen and Jess’ way. “I think I need to speak to Ellen.”

“Now?” Hal questioned snidely. “Right now?”

“Before the competition starts. Right? I may not get a moment to speak to her. She’s my friend, it would only be polite.”

“True.” Hal raised his coffee cup. “You go on. Go over and speak to Ellen right now while Jess appears to be nibbling by her ear.” Hal chuckled when Elliott stopped walking. “Oh, Elliott. Jealousy is not becoming of you.”

Elliott hurried and turned around, rushing back to Hal. “I’m not jealous.”

“O.K.”

“But since you say it looks like I am. Tell me what I’m doing so I don’t anymore.”

Hal smiled and looked as if he were going to speak. After taking a sip of his coffee, he pointed a finger at Elliott, shook his head arrogantly and walked away.

“Captain.” Elliott took a deep breath of frustration, turned around and looked at Ellen and Jess. It took everything in Elliott’s power not to whine when he realized his lack of knowledge on how to appear.

“Well?” Jess asked.

“The playful nudging.” Ellen gave a thumbs up. “Kudos. But, as far as the flirting whispering.”

“You mean . . .” Jess, behind her, brought his lips near her ear. “Like this?”

“Yeah. Doesn’t work.”

“Why?”

"You're too rigid and not in the right places."

"What?" Jess laughed.

"You can tell it's not natural and it doesn't come off like flirting. If someone saw you standing here like this with me. Bet me they don't think you're flirting."

"I bet they do."

"No way." Ellen argued.

"How could they . . ." A hard 'pat' noise was heard only an instant before Jess yelped in pain and grabbed his head. He stepped back and looked behind him to Frank who still held his fingers in a flicking stance. "Frank. Why . . ."

"Quit fuckin' flirting with her. Now." Frank took a step back, stopped, leaned forward, flicked Jess again, smiled and walked away.

Jess looked at Ellen. "You were saying."

"I stand corrected."

"And I must go get ready for competition. See ya later." Jess smiling walked away still rubbing his head from the after effects of Frank's flicks.

Ellen grew anxious waiting for the Neville events to begin. She feared they would end up going well into the evening if they didn't start. And she wanted the kids to see Dean compete in the top ten. Turning in a ready mode to seek out Danny and gripe that things hadn't begun, Ellen saw Elliott. "Oh my God. Elliott?"

Elliott shifted his eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Look how handsome you look in Beginnings attire." Ellen reached out and touched his chest. "I almost didn't recognize you."

"Handsome?"

"Yeah." Ellen winked.

Elliott's head lowered in a blush.

"You ready for today, Mr. Second place?" Ellen asked.

"It's a little unnerving competing with Frank."

"It should be. Frank's unbeatable."

Elliott blinked. "Thanks. I saw you with Jess. I didn't know you two were uh . . . that close."

"We've become friends. I'm helping him with something."

"Really? Can I ask. You don't need to tell me."

"Who you?" Ellen laughed. "Elliott, you're the only person I can tell." Ellen stepped closer to Elliott to speak in a secret telling mode.

Eyes glued on Elliott and Ellen in irritation, Dean started walking wanting not to look anymore. But he couldn't help it. All he wanted to do was have something take his mind off the Ellen flirtatious distractions he seemed to be getting bombarded with. He was at least happy that one of the men she flirted with was a hundred percent gay.

"Dean." The close call of his name by Frank made Dean stop.

Irritating, but the distraction Dean needed. "What?" Dean turned around.

"Whoa. Attitude." Frank held his hands up in defense adding just a hint of a snicker.

"Yeah. Do you blame me." Dean pointed out his hand toward Ellen and Elliott. "She's still my goddamn wife, Frank." Dean ran his fingers through his

hair. "What's up?"

"I want to talk to you about Ellen."

Dean, still holding on to his hair, raised his eyes.

"And me."

A long blink precluded the enraged look on Dean's face. "I knew it!" His hand cut through the air. "The 'I give you my word' shit was just that. Shit. I knew you couldn't wait very long before you moved right . . ."

"Dean! Shut the fuck up!"

"No!"

"Yes. This isn't about stealing Ellen." Frank blasted. "It's just about stealing time."

"Time?"

"Yeah." Frank shrugged. "I know things are bad between you. And I know, being me, I could easily slip right in there, say the right things and you are little-man-history forever."

Dean rolled his eyes.

"But I'm not. I'm playing fair."

"Thank you."

"Yeah. I'm a Christian now. And I'm waiting until you two are all right, then I'm slipping right in there and taking her."

"You're an asshole Frank."

"True. But aside from that." Frank stepped closer. "I need my time with her Dean. She's been in my life for most of my life. I don't want to avoid her. I want to spend time with her."

"Not to steal her?"

"No. Just to be with her. Like we used to do. And I still give you my word nothing will happen."

Dean held out his hand to Frank. "Finish the sentence."

Frank smirked. "Nothing will happen until you two resolve things."

Dean nodded. "Why are you asking me if your intentions are just honorable."

"Because like you said. Even though you got her under false pretenses. You got her. She's still your . . . what did you say, goddamn wife. So I wanted permission."

Dean hesitated, but only briefly. In his hesitation to answer Frank with a big 'no' he saw Ellen laughing with Elliott. Slowly he swayed his head Frank's way. "You'll spend quality friendship time with her?"

"Yes."

"You won't try to get her into bed?"

"Not yet."

"O.K."

"Thanks."

"On one condition." Dean said.

"What's that?"

"Get her away from that . . ." Dean pointed to Elliott. "Asshole." With a raise of his eyebrows Dean walked away.

"Not a problem." Frank nodded and headed over Ellen's way.

“And . . .” Elliott nervously fought for the right word. “And remember the other night when we played scrabble.”

Ellen bit her bottom lip. She remembered vividly. Elliott knew. Elliott finally realized she cheated to make that seven letter, triple word, fifty bonus point word. “Yes.” Ellen swallowed her fear.

“Well you . . . forgive me it’s been a while since I approached someone over matters like this.”

“I understand.”

Running his hand over the top of his head, Elliott took a breath. “You can tell me no. But I was wondering perhaps you would like . . .”

“El.” Frank stepped right in between them back to Elliott, facing Ellen.

“God Frank.” Ellen snapped, “Are you rude. We’re talking.”

“So, I need to talk to you. Now.” He looked at Elliott. “Do you mind.”

“No.” Elliott said.

“Yes.” Ellen came back.

“Elliott.” Frank said his name with a requesting tone.

“I’ll . . . uh.” Elliott pointed back. “I’ll give you a moment.”

“Elliott don’t . . .” Ellen threw up her hands. “Thank you Frank very much.”

“Oh, you’re welcome. If you needed him to get lost, you should have said something sooner. That was easy.”

“If I needed him to . . . what do you want.”

“Wanna go out with me?”

“No.” Ellen started to walk away.

“UH!” Frank shrieked out and grabbed his chest. “You’re killing me!”

Ellen stopped cold and turned around. “What is wrong with you?”

“You turned me down flat.”

“Yes.”

“You can’t.”

“Oh this ought to be good.” Ellen made her way to him. “Why?”

“I’m nice.”

“You are not.”

“O.K., maybe not. But I’m a Christian now.”

Ellen laughed.

“I need to spend time with you El.”

“Frank, I . . .”

“Besides.” Frank moved to her. “We won’t even call it a date if you don’t want to. We’ll call it uh . . . match maker thing. Yeah, that’s it.”

“A match maker thing.”

“Yeah. See. It seems my brother, Hal has this thing for Jenny.”

Ellen laughed scoffingly. “He does not!”

“Ya-ha.” Frank nodded. “Told me so himself. And . . . He’s like not knowing how to be alone or on a date thing with a woman. See, and he uh, asked if I would go. I said, not unless I had a date.”

Ellen folded her arms, nodding and listening to Frank and a ‘oh really’ manner.

“Hal then couldn’t believe that I, Frank Slagel, the master, would have such a hard time getting a date. I explained to him I didn’t. That the women,

even the attached ones, find me studly and . . .”

“Frank.”

“I’m not done.” Frank held up his hand. “But I couldn’t be with them because I only wanna be with you..” A bright look hit Frank’s face. “Hey, great tune.”

Before he could proceed to sing, Ellen halted him. “Fine. Yes. I’ll go.”

“O.K.” Frank nodded. “It’s a date. You tell Jenny, I’ll tell Hal, and we’ll shoot for next weekend because we ship the brigades out this week and I can’t really . . .”

“Frank. All right.”

“Man, are you rude. Just when we got back together too.” He kissed her quickly on the cheek. “Thanks. See ya.”

Ellen, open mouthed, held up a finger, but Frank arrogantly walked away. Tossing out her hand, Ellen decided to find her seat in the bleachers, especially when she saw Danny take the microphone.

^^^

It was a long, muddled version of, *The Star Spangled Banner*, but everyone, at Danny’s request made it through. Barely and with a melody line that veered drastically of course at times.

“And each man starts with two hundred points.” Danny explained. “Whether you’re top dog or bottom of the Neville rank. Oh, yeah, and for everyone’s convenience, Trish here has typed up little score cards, so make sure you grab one and thank Trish.” Danny pointed to Trish.

Trish stood up from her seat in the bleachers waving her hand with a bright smile making sure everyone knew who she was.

Danny continued. “Joe will have eight shots at each man. For every hit you take, that will be twenty-five points taken off of your two hundred. If Andrea deems that you are not dead, then for finishing the course you get a hundred points. So every single man has a chance to achieve three hundred right off the bat. The winner of the Neville course will not be determined by who took the least hits. It will be determined by which ‘alive’ competitor finished the course the fastest. Everyone understand?” Danny looked to the crowd who seemed to mumble in a ‘yeah-yeah’ manner. “Man,” Danny shook his head. “You people are making me feel like Dean. And speaking of Dean . . .” Danny grinned at a less-enthused Dean. “Let the game begin.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

“Son of a bitch!” Joe shook his head. “Danny!” Lowering his gun, he peeked over to the commentator’s table. “Do something.”

Leaning into the microphone, Danny spoke. “The crowd would like to officially request that Dr. Hayes, move it on the course.”

Joe checked out his watch. “He’s been out there fifteen minutes. Christ I can’t even see him to hit him. Everyone else finished the course in five, six minutes.”

Danny shrugged. “Dean!”

“I’m almost done!” Dean shouted.

Joe resumed holding his pistol ready. He waited aiming and then the crowd cheered when Dean crossed the finish line arms held high.

“A whopping fifteen minutes, thirty, point eight seconds. Dean emerges unscathed and get three hundred points jumping him to third place.” Danny said.

So arrogant Joe thought Dean looked, smug because he was small enough to crawl the course without ever emerging enough to get hit.

“Sorry, Joe.” Dean shrugged as he passed him. “Nice try though.”

Joe nodded once and watched the next participant get ready to take the field. He looked at the paint pallet gun then turned around. “Hey Dean!”

“Yeah?” Dean stopped walking and looked.

Joe smiled at him, held up the gun and unloaded the entire paint pellet clip at Dean. “Thanks.”

Dean closed his eyes and looked at his red soaked shirt. “They’re all alike.”

“Oh!” Frank cringed loudly and dramatically then nudged Hal. “Looks like your man took another hit.”

Hal shook his head. “Low hit., Still not fatal.”

“His time sucks.”

“What is it that you want Frank.”

“Oh!” Frank shook his head and laughed. “Another hit. Dad’s nailing him.”

“Frank!”

“What!”

“You said you had a favor. Do you actually think acting like this is gonna make me help you.”

“No. It’s just fun. Anyway . . . Oh!”

“Frank.”

“All right. El said she’d go out with me.”

Hal smiled. “That’s great.”

“Yeah, but she doesn’t, you know, trust herself alone with me yet. So she wants to know if you’ll do a chaperone bit. I know it sounds immature but, you’re an honorable . . . OH!” Frank shouted. “Another . . .”

“Frank.”

Frank cleared his throat. “Guy.”

“I would love to chaperone. Thank you. I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks.” Frank pointed as Hal’s man emerged from the course. “And your guy sucked.” He shook his head and walked away.

Danny’s voice held enthusiasm. “And Dr. Winter says . . .”

Andrea shook her head as she stood before the UWA soldier.

“No!” Danny shouted. “He’s dead. Out of there and Sgt. Michael Watson plummets to seventeenth place. Next up . . .”

^^^

From, oldest to youngest they stood. Frank, Hal, Robbie. And in their line across, they showed how much of brothers they were. Eyes all peering with concentration. Left arm draped across their waist, right hand to their mouths as all three but their nails.

Frank shook his head and spit out his nail. “Dad’s hit him a lot.”

Hal nipped his nail. “All minuscule hits.”

“He’s moving really fast.” Robbie commented.

“Fuck.” Frank stated.

“Shit.” Hal remarked.

“Trip.” Robbie wished.

Jess emerged. The crowd cheered.

Danny made the announcement. “He took all eight bullets. We await word from Dr. Winters. Nothing looks serious . . .”

In synch all three Slagel brothers spit out a particle of nail.

Andrea gave a thumbs up and a smile.

“Yes!” Danny commentated. “Hit but not deadly and Jess Boyens emerges with a whopping time of four minutes thirteen point six tenths. What a score to beat and he slips into second place.”

“Shit.” Hal shook his head.

“Man.” Robbie complained.

“Ouch.”

Hal and Robbie both looked at Frank.

Frank held up his finger. “I bit down too far. Blood. See?”

In separate directions, Hal and Robbie walked away from him.

^^^

“Next up.” Danny announced. “Ben from Fabrics.”

Daintily, Ben walked to the starting line. He nodded that he was ready.

Joe raised the gun,. “On your mark, get set . . .” Danny said. “Go!”

Ben took a step.

Bang-bang-bang-bang-bang-bang-bang-bang. Joe put the gun down with a smile.

Ben, chest covered in red paint, walked back off the course.

^^^

Hal stomped like a baby when he finished the course with three non-fatal hits but with a speed of four minutes forty-eight seconds. No where near Jess' time. And Robbie, with only two hits, knew he didn't beat Jess either, when he didn't come close with a four minute forty-eight time as well. Robbie acted polite though, telling Jess how really good he did and saving the calling of Jess a 'dick' for when he was out of ear range.

But the popping off of Joe's gun and the sound of empty hits became the tension of the day as Elliott moved through the course.

Ellen, along with everyone else, watched nervously as he dodged every pellet Joe gave him and he did it with, what seemed to be, as much speed as Jess.

Jess appeared calm, eyes glued..

Speaking like he was announcing golf, Danny spoke. "Not a hit taken. The tension mounts. Sgt. Ryder nears the end of the course with speed. The score to beat is four minutes thirteen, point six . . ."

Joe's firing gun silenced Danny.

Elliott stood straight up.

"Fuck." Frank flinched biting his bottom lip.

"Oh yes, Joe Slagel fired his last shot and he missed." Danny bellowed. "Sgt. Ryder darts to the end of the course. If he beats the Boyens time he will certainly knock Frank out and give him a run . . ."

"Danny!" Frank screamed. "Shut the fuck up!"

Elliott rolled through the finish line. No cheers. A hush took over the entire area.

"Unscathed." Danny commented. "Not hits. And a remarkable fast time of . . ." Danny paused dramatically to build tension. "Four minutes thirteen and . . . nine tenths. Sorry Sgt. Ryder."

Amongst the disappointed 'ohs' Frank was heard.

"Yes. Yes. Oh, yes." He marched to take his place with a point to Elliott. "Too bad. Watch the master." Swinging his point to Danny, Frank grinned. "Give the mike to my brother. Thanks."

Hal, reluctant, moped his way over to the table.

"With enthusiasm please!" Frank shouted.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Hal spoke in the microphone. "The most electrifying warrior in the post apocalyptic world. A hero . . . a Neville . . ."

"Do the echo!" Frank shouted.

"Frank-ank-ank-ank. Slagel-gal-gal."

Frank held his hands up high as the crowd golf clapped. He pointed to his watch like Babe Ruth to the stands. "Four minutes flat. If I stop to take a breather."

A rush of moans came from the spectators.

"Ready!" Danny shouted. "Aim."

Joe clicked back the hammer.

Danny covered the microphone and inched his way to Joe. "You'll have to get him right away."

"I know." Joe nodded. "He's in my scope."

Danny removed his hand and opened his mouth, readying to nod with his order. "Go!"

Joe fired.

Frank went down.

No sounds.

Danny shifted his eyes. "Is he pulling a Dean?"

Joe shook his head. "He's too big to. Is he even moving?"

"What's he up to?"

"Give me the goddamn mike." Joe took the microphone. "Frank! Frank! Get up! Enough of this arrogant shit." Joe peered out. "Frank goddamn it, I'm ruling you out."

From her seat Ellen slowly, focused and nearly in a daze, made it down to the grass and to Dean. "Something not right."

"He playing around." Dean said.

"No." Ellen shook her head. "I feel it, something's not right." Without warning, Ellen took off. She ran past the commentator's table despite the calls out to her, rushed through the brush and straight on to the course. Her single, panicked, scream, "Dean!" Shot through the air,

With speed Dean flew that way, leaping his way through everyone and onto the course. He stopped out of breath and dropped down to the ground. "Oh my God, Get A jeep! Hurry!" His views shifted in confusion to Ellen.

Eyes glossed over with fear and worry, Ellen peered up. "Dean." Trembling her views went back down and her hands cradled Frank's head which rested on her lap. Blood poured from his neck and Frank didn't move.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

"I'm gonna need at least three units. At least . . ." Dean pounded out orders to Jason, Johnny and Andrea. "Keep the bag free flowing. Andrea clamp him. Jason in my lab, Get me the P.C.R.S. Just incase stat . . . and somebody . . . get her out of here!"

Dean last word still echoed in Ellen's mind as she sat on the couch in the waiting room. The redness of his face, the blood that covered Dean, Frank's blood. And the wide swinging point at her that covered the vision of Frank on the operating table. That was the last vision she had seen that afternoon.

Hours had passed.

Joe had finally stopped verbally blaming himself. He stared with the worry of a father through the waiting room doorway waiting for answers that were taking so long to come. Looking as if he himself took a beating. Quiet. So quiet.

Robbie paced and Robbie rambled. Anger laced his every word as he barked out orders, and vowed to head an investigation despite his having to send scouting troops out. He, Robbie, took on the role unexpressedly asked of him. He slipped in charge. He chose an evidence team to comb the area. He picked three men to question everyone. And even though fingers were pointing Dean's way from so many people, Robbie knew that wasn't where his answer was. Despite the Dean and Frank ongoing feud, Frank was not only Dean's one and only ally, he was Dean's one and only real friend. Dean was not responsible.

Robbie, like he did with the mobile lab a year before, would find the truth even if he had to collect every single speck of paper and hair. Because he knew the answer would not only tell him who shot Frank, it would tell him who Rev. Bob was protecting and using Andrea as the 'George' cover up.

Ellen was proud of Robbie, but she felt bad for Hal. So concerned over Frank Hal was, that Ellen feared the 'Hal' repercussions when he realized Robbie pulled Beginnings' rank over him. Robbie telling Hal that even though he would run security, he needed someone to fill Frank's shoes, to pull the protection and perimeters. And with Hal running Bowman, only one other man could do that. Elliott Ryder. Robbie factually stated 'we have to have him'. Hal, lifted a gracious hand, didn't say a word and nodded.

Ellen could feel the antsiness of Hal's heavy breathing as it moved the couch.

Hands folded as his elbow draped across his knees, Hal looked the worst.

Sitting next to him, Ellen reached over and laid her hand over his. Immediately Hal took her hand., slipping his fingers in between Ellen's then bringing her hand to his mouth.

Eyes tightly closed, Hal brought his lips to Ellen's hand.

The blood. The dried blood that covered Hal's hands could have been gloves. Lacing his skin, cracking from his tightly clenched fist.

She heard his cry out in her mind and she could still see him rushing into the obstacle course area.

"No!" Hal dropped to his knees by Frank. "Where's the jeep? Where's the fuckin jeep?"

The jeep screeched to a halt as close as it could get to Frank. But still far enough away that Frank, injured, had to be moved.

Hal slid his arms under Frank's huge frame and with a strong grunt that caused the vein in his neck to bulge, Hal lifted Frank.

It still was so much of a blur to Ellen. She remembered how strong her heart beat in her ears as she rushed to the jeep to ride with Frank. And clearly she could see Hal supporting Frank's body as they rode to town. Hal's hand over Frank's wound, holding it with pressure. And Frank's pulsating blood that seeped through Hal's fingertips with every beat of his heart.

The tight grip Hal held on Ellen's hand released and Ellen knew. She looked up. Dean and Andrea were walking into the waiting room. Ellen, like Hal, Robbie and Joe, charged forward.

Andrea did that doctor thing, holding up her hand to stop any questions from being thrown at her before she had a chance to speak. After a deep breath, she spoke. "Frank's fine."

Her words were the shot of relief everyone needed. In unison they gasped. Hal lifted Ellen in an embrace, and when she was set down, Ellen kissed Joe then laid her hand on Robbie's back.

Robbie folded his arms tightly and nodded.

"We had . . ." Andrea explained. "A lot of damage to repair. That's what took so long. Fortunately we got Frank in here, stopped the bleeding and operated. He lost a lot of blood and we'll have to keep him down for a few days. The bullet made a clear anterior entrance on an angle, which worked in his favor." Andrea pointed to her own neck. "Had the bullet gone straight it, would have severed the brain stem and Frank wouldn't be with us. It did however do two major damages. One was to the jugular vein, which we repaired, the other . . ." She exhaled. "The vocal chords, which we hope we repaired. There is a chance . . ." Andrea spoke to all those who listed so intently. "There's a chance that Frank may never talk again."

The shifting of the eyes to one another was a unison thing. It was like no one wanted to make a comment about that. So Joe moved the subject on.

"Can we see him?" Joe asked.

"No." Andrea answered. "He's heavily sedated. But . . . it's still early yet. Why don't you go home, get some food, do whatever and come back later this evening. He should be awake by then." She got an agreement from everyone and as they stepped back she reached for Joe. "Joseph. How are you?"

"I've been better." Joe placed his hands in his pockets. "I shot my kid, Andrea. My flesh and blood."

Andrea reached a soothing hand to his face. "You know Joe, it wasn't your fault. Even though it was you who pulled the trigger, and the bullet came from the gun you . . ."

"Andrea." Joe stopped her. "If you're trying to make me feel better. You're sucking at it right now."

"Oh." Andrea retracted her hand. "I'm just . . ."

"I know." Joe moved back a step. "I . . . I'm going home."

Cleaned up and in a pretty 'O.K.' mood, Johnny strolled at an upbeat pace down the hall. He stopped when he saw his grandfather, head lowered walking

slumped from the clinic. Johnny stared at him, any urge to whistle had left him and when Joe had gone, Johnny returned to walking. A little less upbeat and a little less arrogant.

^^^

Hand blocking out the wind, Robbie hovered the lighter and lit his cigarette. He took a long inhale, blew out the smoke then opened the door to Frank's office. His head was still spinning from his conversation he had with Henry and Danny. They didn't realize that where one of them left off in talking, the other finished. They complained to Robbie about not being the investigative team and how it wasn't nice not to share information. Robbie finally, head pounding gave in. He just wanted to go get things ready for Elliott and head to Ellen's for food.

Robbie would do a little better in the morning explaining things more clear to Elliott. But his primary goal was to get things out, schedules and reports, and let Dan give him a run down on what he had to do. Elliott would spend his night in tracking, learning it and how it worked. Or at least the basis of it for his fill in for Frank.

Mid getting his reports laid out, the phone rang. Reaching across the desk, Robbie answered it. "Yeah." He quickly looked at his watch. "I'll be right down, can you hold it for five minutes, El. Thanks." He reached over again to hang up.

"Knowing . . ." Jess spoke snidely. "That your mood is better, and Frank is fine, I'm gonna be crude. Love that position."

"Sick." Robbie shook his head. "Of course." He turned around. "If I were gay, I'd find my rear irresistible as well. What's up?"

Jess carried a box. "All bagged." He set it on the desk. "You want me to start the finger printing?"

"Nah." Robbie reached into the box and lifted the covered clip that was in the gun when Joe fired it.

"Here." Jess reached into his back pocket and pulled out a glove. "Examine it."

Robbie took the glove and placed it on. "I'm taking it you did."

"Oh, yeah. Before you touch that clip. Feel this." Jess handed Robbie an identical clip. "Feel the weight of the two."

Like a scale Robbie felt them, each in one hand. "Not much difference."

"No. Not much that your father would notice when he lifted it. The reason why is, Henry's blood mixture is thick so it splatters with the force of the minuscule gun powder used. Now, check out that clip."

Robbie set down the one Jess had just given to him and looked at the other.

"Check out the last shell."

Shock hit Robbie's face as he peered in the end.

"I only saw that, I'm guessing . . ."

A single tap and the bullets rolled out. They weren't pellets at all. Not a single one. "Shit."

“My thoughts exactly.” Jess stepped to him. “It wasn’t just a single bullet. Someone didn’t steal the clip and take a pellet out and add a real one to the end. Someone switched the entire clip.”

Robbie glanced up from the bullets that lay in his palm. “That someone wasn’t fuckin around. They wanted my brother dead.”

^^^

Johnny just wanted to slam his hand into something, but he was afraid his outrage would be heard through the thin walls of his home.

Bev held back her cringe, waiting for Johnny to explode.

“I can’t . . .” Johnny held back screaming. “Believe he’s not dead. God. And I had to help save him. You don’t know how bad I wanted to give him the wrong blood. But that was easily traced. And then my other attempt failed.”

“Your other attempt?”

“Yeah.” Johnny shook his head in disgust.

“Dr. Dean, we’re low up here in the clinic.” Johnny brought a unit of blood into the operating room.

Dean’s hands worked with Andrea’s on Frank. “No we’re not. We needed the lab freezer space for the more immediate. We moved it to the morgue. Second freezer next to the old specimen storage.”

“So why didn’t you?” Bev asked.

Johnny drew up another look of disgust and thought back.

Thick, deep red was the bag of blood Johnny held in his hand and his eyes moved to the huge stand up specimen fridge. A gleam of delight hit him as he peered at the large bio-hazard sticker on the door and he opened it. On the second shelf, the eight inch steel box, covered in a warning label screamed at him. The words ‘human immunodeficiency virus’ screamed at him and he reached for the case.

“Fuckin Melissa.” Johnny twitched his head. “She came in for some plasma for the killer baby they’re trying to save.”

“I’m sorry.” Bev tried to be comforting.

“Imagine how great that would have been. And . . . it would have been better than seeing that look on my grandfather’s face. I feel really bad about that.” He looked up when he heard Bev snicker. “What!”

“You feel bad?”

“About my grandfather.”

“Right.”

“Bev, shut the fuck up.”

“Don’t talk to me like that you’ll upset Dean’s baby.”

Johnny rolled his eyes. “Yeah right.”

“Speaking of Dean’s baby . . .”

“Bev!” Johnny shouted. “I’m depressed here. I’m wanting to keep the conversation about me.”

“I just want to know what happened to the amnio fluid taken from me.”

So perturbed Johnny looked at her. “It’s gone. All right. Gone. All that’s left is the frozen specimen that’s been tested a million times. Dean’s baby. Now can we not be so selfish and stop thinking about you. Everything is always about you.”

“Sorry. But I am telling my father about the way you speak to me.”

Cutting his hand through the air, Johnny lost it. “There it is again. You. I. Me. Fuck Bev!”

Bev closed her eyes. “I don’t want to fight. You’re stressed.” She watched Johnny pace with huffs of breath. “Tell me how I can help.”

Johnny stopped pacing, and with an irritated look he walked to the sofa and plopped down.. “Fine. A blow job will work.” He tapped his had on the arm of the couch. “Bev. I’m waiting.”

Bev scurried to him.

^^^

“Andrea says a week.” Ellen sat on the floor of her livingroom. Her mouth opened as she held the spoon to Nick hoping he would eat the rice she tried to give him.

Hal sat on the couch with his dinner. “I guess I’ll have to spare him for a week.”

“You have no choice.” Robbie stated.

Ellen immediately looked up, waiting for tension to happen. She cleared her throat. “So. How’s Elliott feel about . . . *Filling in.*”

Robbie shrugged. “He hasn’t said much. I think he’s worried about being overwhelmed. But I’ll be handling as much as I can, in between getting my guys ready to go out.”

Hal lifted his fork as he question. “Will that interfere with your work in Containment as well?”

Robbie shook his head. “No. El does that well enough. We have others that fill in now. Basically, the survivors go in and out. The residents are . . .”

“Robbie.” Ellen said his name with warning.

A chuckle escaped Hal. “I’ve been in containment. It seems like the post-apocalyptic world equivalent to a . . .”

“Mental hospital.” Robbie finished. “Yes. They aren’t functioning enough to survive out there. They aren’t harmful and we’ve warmed up some, enough to let them stay.”

“They hold value.” Ellen said as she fed Nick. She saw the glances she got. “Um, human life value.”

Hal nodded with agreement despite Robbie’s rolling eyes. He looked at Nick whose hair, thick and black stood straight up. “Shave that child’s head Ellen.”

Ellen giggled. “I want to. But Henry would have a fit.”

“Henry does not raise that child.” Hal stated. “My brother does. And speaking of which.” Hal paused to take another bite of his food. “I hear you agreed to the date.”

Robbie immediately looked up. “I bet Elliott was speechless.” He started to laugh. “Man, does he get nervous?”

Ellen looked oddly at Robbie. “Why would Elliott be speechless?”

“Since you agreed to go out with him.” Robbie answered.

“I never said I’d go out with Elliott.” Ellen said. “He never asked.”

Robbie tilted his head. “He didn’t? He was supposed to.”

“Really?” Ellen smiled. “I bet that’s what he was getting ready to do when Frank . . .” She grunted. “Frank.” She shoved the spoon in Nick’s mouth. The food came right back out, but Ellen paid no mind. “I’ll have to get Elliott even more nervous and bring it up to him.”

Sadistically, Robbie snickered. “Fluster him.”

Hal interjected. “You won’t go out with him, will you?”

“Sure. Why not.” Ellen answered. “Elliott is a very nice man. Handsome. A gentleman.”

“But you can’t.” Hal stated. “He’s . . .”

“Why can’t she go out with him?” Robbie asked. “Do you know something we don’t?”

“It’s just that . . .”

“Hal, my brother. He’s your right hand man. I would think you would be rooting for him.” Robbie instigated. “What’s wrong. Tell us. Come on. He’s a psycho isn’t he.”

“Robbie.” Ellen shook her head. “Nothing is wrong with Elliott. I bet he’s always been that sweet.” She looked at Hal. “Oh! You knew him before the plague. What was he like.”

“Elliott?” Hal answered. “Elliott was pretty much the same . . .” He paused. “Kind of . . . asshole.” Hal grinned. “That my brother can be when he’s at his worst.”

Ellen was shocked. “Elliott?”

“Dog.” Hal stated assured. “Complete dog. To women, children. Everyone. And . . .”

“A drunk?” Robbie guessed a suggestion Hal’s way.

“Exactly.” Hal pointed his fork.

“Man.” Robbie dramatically asked shocked. “I’ll bet he even was sent to the brig.”

“Dozens of times.” Hal stated. “He should have been a captain. But . . . he kept screwing up. Never could keep a woman. Had dozens of them. And I couldn’t tell you how many times he . . .”

“Was checked for venereal disease?” Robbie asked.

“Yes. Absolutely.” Hal nodded.

Ellen was suspended in a limbo of believing or not believing. “Really. You’re serious?”

“Absolutely.” Hal stated. “So you see, you shouldn’t get involved with him.”

Robbie took his turn. “Once they snap back to the way they are, they’re worse.”

“Absolutely.” Hal continued. “And in all that, did I mention he was a cross dresser.”

Robbie gasped. “And I thought it was my imagination when I saw him in a dress.”

Ellen stood up and walked from the room.

^^^

They bombarded outside of Frank’s room. Andrea held the door closed as if she was his very own sentry guard. She looked at the clan. The entire Slagel brood. Jess and Dean joined and Andrea supposed Henry and Danny were there more to gawk than show concern.

“Now.” Andrea spoke softly. “Just go in. Don’t stay long. Smile, and tell him your glad he’s fine. He’s wore out and we all know Frank. H won’t own up to it. Five minutes.” She turned the knob and opened the door.

They all fought to go inside.

Frank actually almost looked fearful the way the rushed him like a stage.

Ellen made her way in first and flew to the bed. “Frank. Oh God, I was so worried about you.” She kissed him.

Frank smiled.

“Dad.” Johnny said. “I’m glad . . .”

“Even me Frank.” Dean added. “I was . . .”

“Frank.” Joe tried to talk. “We were really . . .”

“Frank.” Gaspd Robbie. “We thought you were a . . .”

“Man did you bleed.” Danny stated. “The scream that . . .”

“I almost died.” Hal interjected. “You had me really worried big . . .”

“He looks sick.” Henry commented.

“Henry!” Joe snapped. “He’s been shot for crying out loud. How do you expect the man to look.”

“Don’t yell at me Joe.” Henry defended. “You shot him.”

“Henry. Get out.” Joe pointed.

“No.”

“Everyone.” Ellen yelled out holding Frank’s hand watching him shift his eyes to everyone like he was watching a tennis match. “We’re here to see Frank. Frank.” She kissed his hand. “We were all so worried. How are you.”

Frank opened his mouth.

‘Squeak.’

Silence hit the room and everyone looked around.

Again Frank tried to talk. He opened his mouth. “Squeak.” Confused he closed it and tried again. “Squeak.”

After nudging a snickering Robbie, Joe clapped his hands together. “And who says there’s never a bright side to someone getting shot.”

Tired, exhausted and determined, Frank inhaled, opened his mouth and . . .
“Squeak.”

MOTIVE WARS

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Beginnings, Montana
October 19

Debate and deep thought crossed Joe's face as he stared at the clip on his desk. He looked up to Robbie who stood with Jess. "When are you checking fingerprints?"

"Today." Robbie answered. "The kit is really out of date . . ."

Joe glanced up. "Everything's out of date."

"No." Robbie shook his head with a smile. "Old fashion. I may need your help. I'm not real good with matching them. That's your field."

"I'll do what I can." Joe looked at Jess. "So, you don't think someone stole one of the clips?"

"No." Jess answered. "Every single one of those clips were accounted for when me and Henry prepped them."

"With the exception of the one Henry gave Dean." Robbie interjected.

"True." Jess said holding up a finger. "But we found that in the throw away pile. Still filled. We'll check that for prints as well. I'm staying with the theory that it happened during the intermission."

Joe nodded. "I have to agree. And . . . Todd was being such the neat freak. He kept swooping up the empties and stuffing them in that box under the counter. With all the excitement someone could have stolen a clip, filled it and laid it in the pile."

"Right on the bottom." Robbie added. "Frank was last."

"And speaking of Frank." Joe stood up. "I'm heading down to see him. I think I'll save the Elliott-replacement-thing, until he can really verbally bitch. Whenever that is." Joe slightly snickered. "I'll check back in a bit. I have to do a walk through of my own with Elliott." Joe moved to the door and stopped. "And since we're doing 'speaking of's'. Robert perhaps you can enlighten me on why Ellen has expressed her concerns over Elliott's cross dressing and history of venereal disease?"

Jess laughed and turned his back.

Robbie fluttered in his answer. "She uh . . . Why?" Robbie scratched his head. "She um needs to show concern."

"Really?" Joe asked. "Funny. I would think if you and Hal are gonna try to scare her off from him, you would come up with something less creative." Joe started to leave. "I set her straight." He walked out, but before he closed the door he peeked back at Robbie. "And one more thing. Little pay back." Joe reached into his back pocket and pulled out rolled up paper. He showed Robbie.

"What's that?" Robbie asked.

"Chapter five of the Helen and Bobby story. Yep." Joe put them back in his pocket. "A little present from Danny to Frank. You know, something for him to enjoy while he's recuperating. I hear, now don't take my word for it, but I hear this Helen person actually mentions this so-called-brother of Bobby's by name. See ya." Joe closed the door.

Robbie's mouth dropped open. "Fuck."



The needle slipped into the skin of Elliott's arm with ease and Ellen smiled as she did it. She inserted the first tube and allowed it to fill. "How are you feeling. Tired at all?"

"No. Not really." Elliott watched the tube fill, then Ellen switched it for another. "I'm surprised considering I was up all night. Why . . . are you taking so much blood?"

"Tests."

"You said. I didn't question, but . . ." Elliott raised his eyes to her. "What kind of tests. What are you testing me for?"

"Well, the last time you graced our illustrious clinic you were arrowed. Your white blood count was 'up' meaning usually infection. We just needed to check."

"But why are you taking all this . . ." He watched her switch and place in yet another tube. "Blood."

"Dean."

"Dean?"

"Yeah. That's why we have to do it." She released the tourniquet. "The last time we tested your blood we were lucky to scrape by. Dean's been clumsy. He's been spilling, dropping, you name it."

"Really."

"Oh, yeah. Poor Hap passed out from all the blood I had to take. I don't know why Dean touches it. Done." She pulled out the tube and smiled again. She placed a piece of cotton on the bubble of blood that formed. "Don't bend. Just hold."

"Got it. Will you give me the results?"

"Yes. And I'll give you back the blood we don't use." She waited and saw the lost look on Elliott's face. "Kidding. So . . . you going to go get some sleep."

"No. Mr. Slagel has some things he wants to go over with me, then he needs me to try them."

"But you haven't slept."

"I'll be fine."

"Elliott." Ellen sounded serious. "You need to sleep."

"I'll be fine. Of course, I was actually going to see if the clinic could give me a bed. It's pretty quiet here even in the day and I . . ."

"You don't have a place to stay?" Ellen asked.

"No. And Frank's office is way too busy to try to catch a few hours during the day. I was going to ask Robbie if . . ."

"Nonsense." Ellen picked up his tubes of blood and began to write on them. "You can stay with me."

"I couldn't."

"You don't want to?"

"No that's not it."

"The kids huh? Well if you do the schedule like Frank did, you'll sleep most for the time they're out of the houses. And I'll keep them quiet until you get up."

"Ellen. That is a great offer." Elliott said. "I can't put you out."

"You certainly can't do a lot Elliott. You can't stay at my house. You can't

put me out. You can't . . . ask me out." She placed the tubes in a rack and shifted to her right to the refrigerator.

Elliott nearly choked. "Excuse me?"

"Are you going to stay at my house?"

"Um . . . yes. Thank you I will."

"Are you going to ever finish asking me out?"

"Ellen." Elliott stood up and walked over to her. "Where did you hear that?"

Ellen closed the fridge. "Shit. I'm wrong. Oh, God. I'm sorry. Now I'm . . ."

"No." Elliott gently laid his hand over her mouth to silence her. "I was. I chickened out. I did have my nerve up then Frank came over and I lost it."

"Ask me." Ellen folded her arms.

"I'm not very good."

"Ask me. Go on."

Elliott stood a bit straighter. "Ellen . . . would you, would you do me the honors of accompanying me on an evening out."

"On a date?"

Elliott snickered. "Yes."

"Sorry I can't. But thanks for asking."

Elliott's mouth dropped open.

"Kidding. Yes, I will."

"Thank you."

"What do you have in mind?" Ellen asked. "Will it be a 'Hal' date or will it be a 'Hal' free date. He seems to be on every date I have had in New Bowman and will have."

"Definitely Captain free. Unless you want him to be . . ."

"No." Ellen shook her head. "This will be fun. And you aren't one of my stock Beginnings men."

"I hope there isn't a rule about that."

"Oh, yeah there is. Joe set segregation rules last week. Where were you? But he's my father, I'll speak to him."

"Kidding again?"

"Yes."

"This is why I want to go out with you. I like you." Elliott smiled. "I thought I'd make dinner and we catch one of those movies Danny shows, then if you aren't tired of me, just hang out and talk."

"Talk?"

"Why?" Elliott shifted his eyes. "You don't want to end the evening with talking?"

Ellen took a breath before she spoke with sincerity. "I really believe that's where your mind is." Again, Ellen saw his lost look. "Yes, I would love to end the evening talking."

Dean's sarcastic laughter entered the lab at the same time as he did. "And I can't believe you're buying this." He stepped further in. "Didn't see me standing there, did you?"

Ellen rolled her eyes. "What's Frank say, That's because you're only four feet tall?"

"Funny. Stop that." Dean moved closer. "Sgt. Ryder I can't believe you

have to nerve to ask her out in my lab.”

“Our lab.” Ellen corrected strongly.

“My lab.” Dean stated loud then pointed to Ellen. “My wife!” Another step he took to Elliott. “Or did you conveniently forget she is still married to me?”

“No.” Sgt. Ryder answered calmly.

“So what makes you think you can do this? It’s wrong. You’re not even part of Beginnings. You’re not . . . you don’t even qualify for an understanding . . .”

“Dean.” Ellen snapped. “Stop it.”

“No. I am still the primary . . .”

“You are not my owner!” Ellen yelled.

“I am your husband. And this man is wrong for trying to step over boundaries he was not given permission to come close to.”

Elliott closed his eyes. “Dr. Hayes . . .” He swallowed. “I’m sorry.”

Dean nodded. “Thank you.”

Ellen’s mouth dropped open. “Fine.” She started to leave.

“But . . .” Elliott continued. “I will not rescind my invitation to Ellen.”

Ellen stopped walking. She grinned with arrogance to Dean.

“You what?” Dean asked.

“I will not. Married or not, you do not live with her.” Elliott stepped forward. “And if you wanna play by the marriage rules, perhaps you should start by looking at who *wasn’t* playing by the rules. I’ve crossed no boundaries I wasn’t allowed to. And my intentions have and are honorable as far as spending an evening with her. If I say I want to end it talking, that is how I want to end it.” Elliott’s voice took on a firmer stance. “Because I really enjoy her company. I’m sorry you can’t accept that. I must be going. Good day sir.” Elliott walked across the lab. He stopped before Ellen. “Ellen.” He nodded once and walked out.

Ellen pivoted slowly as he walked out. “Bye.” she whispered.

“This is such bullshit.”

Ellen spun her body to face Dean. “Why? Why is that the Dean stock phrase. Why is this bullshit?”

“I thought we were making progress.”

“Where. When? How?”

“Yesterday.” Dean followed her as she moved to the far counter. “You started to believe me.”

“Bev is still pregnant with your child. You are still denying the affair.”

Dean grunted.

“Don’t!” Ellen strongly pointed “Don’t growl or grunt at me. The evidence is against you.”

“I’m trying to disapprove that.”

“Until you do . . .”

“Then what?” Dean snapped walking to her. “Then what? You’re gonna throw it in my face how easily you move on! We were doing great El! We were.”

“You blew it!”

“I did no such thing!” Dean was frantic. “I was set up! And you’re gonna feel like shit when you see that. Not too mention you may be fuckin around too much for me to even want you back.”

Ellen glared. "Excuse me? Fuckin around? Well if I *Fuck* around too much for you to want me back, then Dr. Hayes, it's your loss."

"No El, it's your loss. Because I am the best man to ever come into your life."

Ellen laughed. "A little arrogant aren't we?" She started to sift through paper work.

"At least I'm not a cross dresser who has a long history of venereal diseases."

Ellen's mouth opened. "What?"

"Elliott."

"Oh, none of that's true, Joe told me."

"What does Joe know?"

Ellen nodded. "I'm telling Joe you're talking shit about him."

Dean nearly gasped. "I done. I'm not arguing."

"Good." Ellen sang the word and worked.

"Just know. Sgt. Ryder. I hate that man."

"What!" Ellen slammed her work. "What in the world did Elliott Ryder . . ." She spun around. "Ever . . ." She turned her head from left to right. "Dean?" Dean was gone. Shrugging Ellen went back to work.

Dean knocked once on the doorway of the patient room. "Hey." He stepped inside.

Frank in a laying-sitting position lifted his hand in a wave.

"Boy." Dean dropped a chart on the foot of Frank's bed. "What a day. How are you feeling?"

Frank opened his mouth.

"Don't." Dean held up his hand. "Don't try. That squeak you make tells me you'll eventually be able to talk. But if you push it before it's healed. You may not. O.K.?"

Frustrated, Frank nodded.

"O.K. well." Dean pulled up a chair. "Your blood count is up. That's good. I'm looking at letting you out in a day or two if you show no signs of infection. Which I don't think you will. The throat looks good. Tomorrow, we'll try swallowing liquids. All right?"

Frank nodded.

"Does it hurt to swallow now?"

Frank's head bobbed from side to side.

"We let you out, you can't work. Nothing that's going to make you talk. Joe says he has visual work. Maps and videos to look at for surveillance or something. Do you know what he's talking about?"

Frank nodded.

"I like this 'Frank'. So quiet you are." Dean smiled.

Frank glared.

"Anyhow. Don't have to worry about protecting the community. Yes, Robbie is heading security for you. But then Robbie has training and scouting parties to send out. So . . ." Dean stood up. "It seems that, how do you call him? Sgt. Fuckin Ryder is being . . ." Dean smiled again, "You."

Frank opened his mouth.

“No.” Dean stopped him. “I guess he proved himself in the Neville competition. He was the only one who didn’t take a bullet. Jess won. Did anyone tell you.”

Frank shook his head.

“And Sgt. Ryder is only like fifty points below you or is it twenty-five . Not sure. But I am sure that one savage attack while you’re out and he jumps into first place. They are expecting him to assume the hero role while you’re . . .” Dean jolted at the slam of Frank’s hand on the bed. “Out.” Dean started to pace. “But that’s not all. Get this.” Dean sat on the edge of the bed. “I walk into the lab. Seems our Sgt. Ryder . . . is asking Ellen out.”

Frank’s eyes widened.

“On a date. Yep.” Dean nodded. “And Ellen accepted.” Dean saw the ‘F’ formation beginning on Frank’s lips. “No talking. And . . . this gets better and you’ll see why I’m mad. Not only had he asked her out and is going out with her, and taken your job. Guess where he’s living?”

Frank sneered.

“By the look on your face. You got it. With Ellen and our kids.” Dean shook his head and exhaled. “I’m glad I could talk to you. I better run. I’ll stop in later.” Dean moved to the door. “No talking.”

Frank was so frustrated he wanted to scream, but he didn’t want to take a chance on doing damage or hear that squeak that emerged. So he did the best he could when Dean left. He merely moved his mouth and pretended to swear over and over again.



The little girl who was so close to still being a baby was cleaned up. She looked different, appearance wise, than when Robbie had found her the day before. But she still looked traumatized. Her big brown eyes stared out. She breathed heavily and her head tossed back and forth as Andrea tried to feed her.

“How is she?” Robbie asked as he stepped into the room.

Andrea set down the bowl. “I was hoping to get her to eat, but I guess we’re going to have to still depend on intravenous. She’s very violent Robbie.”

“You’re kidding.”

Andrea shook her head and walked to Robbie, leading him out. “You wouldn’t know it, but right now, she’s on a mild sedative. She bit Patrick pretty bad this morning.”

Robbie closed his eyes. “Where we gonna put her.”

“Melissa has offered to take her as well as the killer baby that’s recovering.”

“Melissa? Why?”

Andrea shrugged. “I guess she used to wild things. Likes the challenge. Have you seen Frank?”

“In my way there now.” Robbie answered. “I just wanted to see how she was doing?”

“She’ll come around. I can remember, so can you, how many other

children were like this when we brought them in. We just can't put them in containment."

"No we can't." Robbie stated. "Not since most of them are loons."

"Who would have thought Ellen's brother would be like that."

"Who would have thought. Hopefully with therapy."

"And strong prayers." Andrea patted Robbie on the cheek. "Right . . . Reverend."

"Right."

"Any news on what happened with Frank?"

"Nothing yet." Robbie started to walk. "We're investigating."

"Robert. Just be straight with me. O.K.? Are fingers pointing at me?" Andrea questioned.

Robbie hesitated before answering, then he smiled peacefully. "Andrea, fingers are pointing at everyone."

Slowly Andrea nodded as Robbie walked on. She turned sadly and returned to her patients.

^^^

Right leg crossed over left, both Jenny Matoose and Todd from fabrics sat. Chairs side by side in the back office of the chapel.

Folding her hands, Jenny looked around in the silence. Too quiet they were and she decided to break the tension. "How's things going with Ben?"

"Why?" Todd asked snidely.

"I heard you had problems."

"Neb nose."

Jenny's mouth dropped open. "Fine. Just know I hope you two work things out. Again."

"You would, wouldn't you."

Jenny lifted her hand. She was already in a bad mood, premenstrual and tired of waiting on Danny and Henry. She glanced at her watch.

"Seven minutes late." Todd said.

"Thank you for that."

"You're welcome for that."

"Wonder what they want us for."

Todd dusted a piece of lint off his pant leg. "Probably something you did yesterday."

"Me?" Jenny nearly laughed. "What could I have done."

"Spilled all over the place."

"Now how does that warrant getting in trouble."

"You don't see it." Todd said arrogantly. "The whole community does. Danny worked really hard on that event. You were Miss klutz. And Henry wants to speak to you for wasting commodities."

"I wasted nothing and Frank ruined the Neville event by getting shot."

"O.K., I agree with you there."

Danny's upbeat entrance warmed the chill in the room. "Sorry we're late."

"Sorry." Henry followed in.

"Her." Todd pointed. "It's all her fault."

"Yes we know." Danny said and leaned on the edge of the desk in the back office. "We won't keep you long."

"Not at all." Henry continued. "Or at least as long as you waited. We won't do that will we?"

"No." Danny answered. "Ready?" He looked at Todd and Jenny. "We just have a question and we need you to think about it. You two worked the refreshment booth yesterday,"

"I worked." Todd stated. "She spilled."

"And we all felt the embarrassment." Danny said sympathetic. "But. Todd. You remember you were constantly picking up the empty clips."

"Yes." Todd nodded. "And I stored them in the box."

"That was where?" Danny asked.

"Behind the counter in the refreshment booth."

Henry nodded. "That's what we thought. Jenny, you were there quite a bit. Do you recall seeing anyone go near that box at anytime?"

"No." Jenny answered. "Actually my mind was going a million miles an hour. Getting things ready. Hal was so demanding that . . ." She turned her head to Todd's gasp. "That he kept me running. So I really didn't see anyone."

"O.K." Danny wrote down. "Thanks."

"That's it?" Jenny questioned. "Gees. " She stood up. "If you have anymore questions. You know where to find me."

"We'll remember that." Danny pointed to her with the pencil. "Todd?"

Todd kept staring at a leaving Jenny.

"Todd?" Danny tried again.

"Bitch."

Henry snickered. "Todd!"

"Oh! Yes. Sorry." Todd cleared his throat.

"Do you recall?" Danny asked him.

"Seeing anyone near that box?" Todd looked up to the ceiling. "Let me think." He shook his head. "No I don't really recall . . ." As he lowered his head to look at Danny and Henry, Todd's mind flash backed to the day before.

Chuckling, with a shaking head, Todd walked behind the counter of the refreshment booth. He stared down at the blue flat shoes that protruded from under the counter. He tapped his fingers and smiled. "Lose something."

"Oh." Andrea scurried out from under the counter. "An earring." She held it up as she stood. Then using her foot she kicked the clip box back out of sight.

"Did it fall in that box?" Todd asked.

Andrea smiled. "Yes. How do you like that?" She placed the earring in her ear.

Todd snapped out of that memory and looked at Danny and Henry. "I don't recall seeing anyone near that box." Todd's hands slapped down to this legs. "Is that it?"

Henry looked oddly at him. "Um, yeah."

"Thanks." Nervously Todd stood up. "Sorry I couldn't help."

"No problem." Danny said then watched Todd leave. After he was gone, Danny turned his views to Henry. "What do you think?"

"About?" Henry asked.

“Todd. I think he’s covering up. Did you see how nervous he got?”

“Yeah.” Henry looked at the door. “It makes perfect sense doesn’t it?”

“Yes it does.”

“Ben’s in the competition. Frank’s the biggest threat, Todd wants Ben back, Get Frank . . .”

“Henry.” Danny halted him. “Where is your mind. I’m not saying Todd switched the clip.”

“You’re not?”

“No. I’m saying Todd . . .” Danny pointed to the door. “Knows who was in that box.”

After submerging into thought while staring where Danny pointed, Henry slowly nodded. “Yeah . . . yeah. That’ll work.” Henry moved to the door. “But . . . I like my theory better.”

^^^

“And usually . . .” Joe was in the explaining mode as he walked the cryo tunnels with Elliott. “Security checks every two hours on them if they’re working down here. Frank, he stops in on his night shift. You don’t have to. He does it for Bub. You know feed him and such.”

“Bub?” Elliott questioned.

“The Lobotomized savage Ellen and Dean have.” Joe reached for the cryo lab door. “Here we are. This was once used to house our cryogenically frozen scientists, but now it’s the demented domain of the Hayes’. Where they do their vial, sick, experiments I don’t want to know about. Not too mention it smells.” Joe punched in his code. The door buzzed.

Elliott halted him as he pushed it open. “The male Dr. Hayes isn’t in here, is he?”

“No. Why?”

“I’m not on his favorite person list today. I’d rather avoid another confrontation.”

“I see. Though I avoid speaking to Dean at all anymore, I’ll set him straight concerning those rumors about you.” Joe tried again to open the door.

“Rumors?” Elliott stopped him. “What rumors?”

“That’s not why he’s mad at you?”

“No. I asked Ellen out on a date and . . .”

Joe snickered. “Sorry.”

“What rumors.”

“Well, the one where you were a drunk in the old world.”

“Oh my God . . .”

“Wait. Gets better. You were a womanizer. Had just about every venereal disease there was and the best is, you were and still are a cross dresser.” Joe walked in the lab. “Ellen look who I brought.” He waved to Bub across the room.

Ellen smiled at first when she looked up to Elliott, then she saw how horrified he looked. “Elliott? What’s wrong?”

“There are rumors about me going around.” Elliott stepped to the counter.

“Have you heard them?”

“Yes.” Ellen shook her head. “People do that around here. It’s a form of entertainment. And speaking of entertainment, don’t mind me while I work.”

The bloody gloves were one thing, but the closer Joe drew to the counter, he had to whine at the sliced open rabbit. “What the hell are you doing?”

“A bunny hysterectomy.” Ellen smiled.

“Why?” Joe asked.

“Oh, Dean and his ideas.” Ellen worked. “He wants to try to create a false body that will sustain a healthy uterus so we can try to bring the hidden frozen embryos to term without endangering anyone. But . . . I think it has to do more with his cloning thoughts.” She slid a petri dish near her.

“Cloning?” Joe raised his eyebrow

“Yeah.” Ellen snickered, “How about that? Can Dean get far fetched or what. Oh, look how healthy.” Ellen lifted the rabbit uterus and laid it in the dish. “I’ll just sew her up.”

Elliott peered closer. “She’s not dead?”

“Oh, no that would be cruel.” Ellen stated. “Just spayed now.” she grabbed the sutures. “She’ll bunny-thank me later when she realizes she can get laid with out multitudes of reproduction repercussions later.”

“Christ.” Joe shook his head then peered at Elliott. “Holy shit, Elliott, does that hurt.”

“What?” Elliott looked confused.

“That bruise on your arm.” Joe walked closer and lifted up the tee shirt sleeve. “You should have that arm x-rayed.”

“Doesn’t hurt.” Elliott shrugged then looked quickly to the clank Ellen made when she dropped her instrument. “Ellen?”

“Sorry.” Nervously she picked the tweezers back up. “Maybe you bumped yourself on the course yesterday.”

“Maybe.” Elliott looked at the bruise. “I didn’t even notice it.”

“What smells down here?” Joe asked. “It’s bad.”

“Bub.” Ellen answered. “Frank fed him something yesterday. He has gas.”

“Swell.” Joe walked over to a calm Bub. “Hey Bub. Look what I got.” Joe reached into his back pocket and pulled out something that looked like a pale beef jerky. “Wanna some imitation beef?” He waved it and Bub took it. “I know they . . .” Joe grabbed Bub’s arm. He looked at the healing wound. “He’s missing a chunk of his arm Ellen.”

“Yes. You wouldn’t let us give him can . . .” she cleared her throat. “A malignancy. So we removed a portion and infected that. No luck though. Cells are multiplying, depressively rapid.”

“Too bad.” Joe walked away. “I thought you were trying to use his skin for Jeff’s face.”

Elliott blinked noticeably. “A face?”

“We’re growing one for him. Or trying.” Ellen answered. “Done.” she walked to the sink. “And we did remove skin for Jeff. Off Bub’s butt. Check out the tank Joe. Lips.”

Motioning his head to Elliott, Joe led the way across the lab to a tank where the water bubbled around what seemed to be four sets of lips. “Quite the variety?”

“We’re trying.” Ellen dried off her hands and joined them at the tank. “We

can't decide which ones to try on Jeff next. Personally I like the fuller, Brad Pitt lips. And look Joe, three days and no fur yet."

"Well we've seen enough." Joe stepped back from the tank. "I just wanted to bring Elliott down here and brace him a head of time."

"That's always best." Ellen winked at Joe.

"This." Elliott pointed to the tank as he started to leave. "Is very impressive."

"Thank you/" Ellen smiled widely.

"Such faith people must have, and rightfully so. My God, with all your trying down here. I bet there's nothing you can't beat." Elliott gave a nod and a smile then walked away with Joe.

It was forced, the smile Ellen kept on her face, until the moment Elliott and Joe were gone. Then Ellen's smile dropped and her eyes closed with worry.

^^^

Heber, Arizona

The dried brush that scattered the ground of the forest sprayed upward when his knees slammed to the earth. He grunted and the huffing breaths of fear bellowed from him. A thin man, almost too thin, grabbed the ground with his black gloved hands and pulled himself to his feet. Starting to run, he felt the pain of the spear that grazed the skin on the back of his neck tearing the thin, tight ski-mask-style hood he wore. Every ounce of his body was covered. His clothing was dark, jeans and a turtleneck. His speed increased trying to make it through the trees.

Not far ahead of him he saw the road. A road he had left to go into the woods to seek food. On that road, an old motorcycle, one he powered with alcohol. Close to his view it drew and louder the savage screams were as well.

His heart raced with the victory of his run. End of the woods. The road. The bike. His salvation . . . savages.

Down from the trees two savages leaped. The first one struck him hard against the face with the side of a spear knocking him back and on to the ground. The six that chased him lunged forward like excited animals for the downed man. They had him. Their prey and they were about to devour him in more ways than one.

The man fought. Legs kicking, arms throwing, body flinging as four fought to hold him down. One savage stood above him, end of the spear pointing down, the other reached for his head.

Hand gripping to the hood with a sadistic look upon his face, the savage attempted to lift the man by the hair and the hood slipped off.

Silence.

The savage attack stopped and after a moment of staring at the frightened man, the eight savages took off running, screaming as they did.

Chest raising up and down in the heaviness of his breathing, the man grabbed his hood, and placed it almost painful back over his head. He grabbed the sunglasses that flew from him and put them on as well as he stood up. Only looking back once more, the man ran forward, made it to the road, snatched up

his gear, jumped on the bike and quickly sped off.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Quantico Marine Headquarters

George kept his index finger on his eyelid to stop the annoying twitching that not only seemed out of control but seemed to take over the entire half of his face. It go on his nerves and made total concentration of his strategy paperwork hard.

“Sir.” Steward knocked once on George’s office door then stepped in side. “I just . . .” He stopped speaking and stared.

“What?”

“Did you know your eye is twitching.”“ Steward pointed to his own eye.

George so annoyed looked up his left eye blinking distorted and rapid. “Thank you for telling me. Now what is it.”

“Well, I faxed our scouting route to Beginnings yesterday . . .”

“Yes I know, I got theirs.”

“And they sent ours back.” Steward laid a folder on his desk. “Seems, they corrected it.”

“Corrected it?” George opened the folder. He saw handwritten notes, in Joe’s and Frank’s handwriting.

“Basically Frank is saying we’re headed to far east in our search. Judging by the depth and angle of tire tracks and . . .”

“Footprints of their video.” George reviewed the bad pictures. “We should change our course.”

“Do you think they’re setting us up for a trap sir.”

George leaned back in his chair only hesitating when his head brace clanked. He lifted the folder and read it. “No. No trap.” He traced his index finger over his lip. “Give these to Sgt. Doyle.” George tossed the folder. “Tell him to prep the scouts to take this course.”

“Begging your pardon sir.” Steward took the folder, subconsciously fearing his own eye would twitch if he stayed in the office much longer. “Why are we changing our scouting route based on this?”

“They want to eliminate the savages as much as we do. And Frank worked on that. He may be a moron ninety-percent of his life, but in shit like this. No. Change routes.”

“Yes sir.” Tucking the folder under his arm, Steward walked from the office. Outside he closed the door and laid his hand over half his face. “Damn it.” He shook his head. “I’m twitching.”

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

A little less than twenty-four hours in the clinic and Frank was ready to leave or call for a guard to keep everyone out. If he could speak. A injury that could have been fatal, in Frank’s mind should have generated sympathy in people rather than the bad humor. He was losing it and there was nothing he

could do about it. He couldn't scream, yell at them, tell them to leave or get threatening. After all, how threatening was someone that only squeaked.

If it could be done to him, it was. Dean worked his last nerve stopping in constantly to gripe or tell Frank things that would cause him to get mad. Robbie and his instigating about totally redoing Frank's security regiment. Danny dropping off that extra cell phone and telling Frank to call him if he needed to talk. And if Frank heard his father say 'what's that Frank I can't hear you?' one more time, squeak or not, he was going to scream.

To Frank, he couldn't believe the audacity everyone had. He himself would not have been so rude had he known someone in a similar situation.

Ellen was his bright spot, so he thought. When she finally stopped in, Frank believed his day would get better, until Ellen continued to stay.

"And . . . hold still." Ellen told him. "Last stroke." she lifted the razor. "Done."

Frank mouthed the words 'thank you.'

"You're welcome. You needed it. Oh, I'm so glad we can talk." she took the basin of water and moved it across the room. "What am I going to do about Dean and his attitude?"

Frank closed his eyes. He knew enough about Dean's attitude.

"He hates Elliott and for no reason. This is so out of character for him. Really, don't you agree." Ellen went back to his bed. "Good. Elliott has given him no reason to hate him. Do you suppose it's because he's such a nice man. Of course you do. Thank you." Ellen sat on the edge of the bed. "He asked me out on a date. A non-sexual date. Can you believe that?"

Frank shook his head.

"It's true, don't you think he'd ask me out."

Just wanting to tell her he'd really rather not hear about Elliott, Frank came up with a communication brainstorm, Pen and paper. Smiling he tapped Ellen's hand then pretended to write in the air.

"Oh, good idea. I'll write him a thank you. What should it say?"

Frank shook his head 'no' then wrote in the air again.

"You don't want me to write Elliott a letter."

Frank nodded.

"You do."

A shake of Frank's head.

"You don't. Which is it. Do?"

Frank shook his head.

"O.K., you don't want me to write Elliott a letter. Then who."

Frank violently shook his head, pretended to write again then pointed to his chest.

"You? All right. I'll write you a letter."

Frank's head went back to his pillow. Ellen began to ramble. He heard her but what specifics she gave was beyond Frank. He knew she talked about dinner, and how long she would be at the lab. She told him stories of gossip and answered questions for him. Just at the point when Frank thought all he needed was for Henry to walk in, Henry walked in.

"Hey Frank. Hey El."

"Hey Henry." Ellen snickered and deepened her voice "Hey Henry."

A quick mean, shift of Frank's eyes went to Ellen.

Henry laughed. "I brought you a present, Frank."

A smile crossed Frank's face.

"Yeah since you can't talk. Which by the way I heard the bad news."

Frank perked up with concern.

"Yes." Slowly Henry shook his head. "I hear you won't be able to sing again."

Ellen laughed loudly. "Good one."

"Thanks." Henry grinned.

Frank rolled his eyes.

"Part one of the present." Henry held up a finger. "Since I know you so well Frank. Until you can talk, if I'm around, I'll be your mute interpreter."

"Oh Henry!" Ellen said with excitement. "Are you gonna read his mind or lips?"

"Both I hope. Frank." Henry faced him. "Try it. Say something. Move your lips." Henry watched with intent.

Frank had his moment. If by chance Henry could read his lips he wanted to mouth something that meant something. So Frank did. He moved his lips to the sentence 'I wish you both would let me have peace.'

Rubbing his own chin, Henry nodded after staring at Frank. With certainty he faced Ellen. "Frank said, he wants us both to look at his pee."

"Really? Why? Is it not looking right?"

Henry looked at Frank. "Something wrong Frank?"

Frank tried to grunt. He couldn't. He just moved his lips slowly and with annunciation. 'get out.'

"O.K." Henry nodded. "El, he said get a towel."

Shrugging Ellen retrieved one and handed it to Frank. "Here you go Frank. Isn't this easier with Henry interpreting."

'*Yeah real fuckin easy.*' Frank thought.

"Other present." Henry said. "Ready?" Without waiting for a nod of agreement from Frank, he raced out of the room and returned hands behind his back. "All right. I made these for you. When you're mad and want to scream." From behind his back Henry brought forth a small sign on a stick. It simply said, in plain black letters 'Fuck'.

Frank nodded impressed and took the sign.

"But . . . when you're really, really, really mad." Henry brought another sign out from behind him. The letters big and bold with plenty of exclamation marks. 'FUCK!!!!'

Frank grinned and snatched that one right up.

"Henry, how ingenious of you." Ellen complimented.

"Thanks. I had to do something it just isn't Frank if he's not saying fuck."

Mouth closed tight, Frank had to agree.

"Hi-de ho!" Jenny be-bopped into the room.

Frank held up the milder swear sign.

Jenny giggled. "Just wanted to see how Frank was. How are you Frank? Good." Jenny tapped him on the leg and stood behind Henry who sat on the bed talking with Ellen. "Ellen, I heard from Joe you're going out on a date with Elliott."

"I am."

"When?"

Ellen shrugged. "I guess when he gets some time off."

"You know what we should do." Jenny suggested. "Him and Hal are close. Since Frank is laid up why don't the for of us do a double date."

What they didn't see was Frank shaking his head.

"Good idea." Ellen snapped her finger. "I don't see the difference."

"Me either."

Frank still shook his head, waving, trying to get their attention.

"After all." Ellen continued. "Hal is just uncomfortable with dating right?"

"Right." Jenny said.

Grunting was useless, Frank kept shaking his head 'no'. All while Henry listened to Ellen and Jenny.

"So Elliott may even be better."

"They are close." Jenny commented.

"That they are." Ellen agreed.

"It'll be fun."

"I'll call Hal and talk to him about . . ."

Whap!

"Ow!" Henry screamed and grabbed his head. He looked to Frank who held the sign up. "Did you hit me with that Frank?"

Frank nodded and pointed to his own chest.

"Oh!" Henry grew excited. "Frank wants to say something? What?"

Frank pointed to Ellen, pretended to hold a phone with the other hand and adamantly shook his head 'no.'

"You don't want Ellen to call?" Henry asked.

Frank gave a thumbs up.

"Oh! I'm good. Call Hal?" Henry wanted to be sure.

Another thumbs up by Frank.

Ellen was confused. "Why?"

Henry turned around to Frank repeating the question as if Frank couldn't understand as well. "She wants to know why?"

Thinking, *I'll call. I have to.* Frank moved his mouth to those exact words.

"Oh." Henry tapped his on lip with his finger. "Frank that isn't very nice." He moved his views to Ellen. "Frank's says he'll call. Hal hates you."

Frank's hand slammed on the bed.

Ellen snickered. "Hal, doesn't hate me. Frank's joking. How cute. Even without being vocal he kids around." Ellen winked at him.

Frank held up the mild swear sign.

"It's good that you have your sprits up." Henry told Frank. "Unlike Todd today with Jenny." Henry whistled. "Boy, what did you do to him."

Jenny grunted and folded her arms. "Absolutely nothing. He was such a bitch to me today."

"Men." Ellen commented. "What is it about the men in this community. So mean. Nasty and possessive. You should have heard Dean."

Frank covered his eyes and fake cried.

"Really?" Jenny seemed surprised. "That bad."

"The worst." Ellen flung out her hand. "At least Henry's not bad. Or Frank. His spirits are up."

Jenny tilted her head in debate. "I uh, don't know about that. I think something's bothering him today." Jenny snuck out a snicker. "He's being

quiet.”

In the midst of the corny loud laughter that erupted at Frank’s expense, Frank held up the big swear sign.

^^^

New Bowman, Montana

Cigarette dangling from his mouth, playing-cards in hands, Hal supported the telephone between his shoulder and ear. He smiled arrogantly at Robbie and laid down a card.

Robbie gave him the arrogance back, he took the card and tossed another away.

“I’m sorry.” Hal took the cigarette from his mouth. “What was that Elliott?”

“I was complaining about the rumors going on about me Captain.” Elliott said. “How could something like this happen?”

“You are over reacting. They’re rumors. And I personally have to apologize.” Hal winked at Robbie when Robbie gave him a quickly questionable look. “Frank was joking around and saying that shit. I told him, Frank, you never know who will hear you and now look . . . gin.” Hal tossed down his cards.

“So Frank really meant no harm?” Elliott asked.

“None. O.K.” Hal nodded for Robbie to shuffle and deal. “Talk to you tomorrow.” He hung up the phone.

Robbie laughed. “You’re still doing it.”

“Yeah. Gonna play again?”

“Nah. I really have to get back. I’m gonna try to catch a few hours sleep. I’m starting at three in the morning.”

Hal whistled and watched Robbie finished the contents of his glass. “You didn’t tell me. What do you think of Danny-Wiser? Only available in New Bowman.”

Robbie tilted his head. “Not bad. It’s been a awhile since we had beer. He may have captured it.”

“Good cold.” Hal sipped his.

“Yeah, but you know what.” Robbie nodded. “It doesn’t give you that icky bloated feel.”

“No.” Hal rubbed his gut. “It doesn’t. You miss that.”

“And you can’t get those good beer burps.” Robbie made a straining face and belched. “They’re there, but still.”

“True. Dad and Frank will be the real test.”

“Dad yeah. Frank no. He can’t drink since he was the town drunk last summer.”

“That’s right.” Hal nodded and saw Robbie standing. “You’re leaving me.”

“Have to.”

“Thanks for the company.”

Robbie grabbed his cigarettes. “Anytime.”

“Robbie.” Hal called out stopping him. “Not to start trouble or anything.”

“Yeah right.” Robbie snickered. “What’s up?”

“Jess, Jess is your roommate and friend. Surely he knows about your crush on Ellen . . .”

“Crush.” Robbie laughed. “O.K., yeah, Jess knows.”

“So what’s going on. I saw him flirting with her.”

“Oh.” Robbie nodded. “Yeah. He wants to get involved with a woman. Not out of need, out of availability. Seems he can’t find the right . . . man. And women have offered themselves to him. So, Ellen’s giving him helpful hints. That’s all. Like a class on being straight.”

Hal nearly choked. “Jess is gay?”

“Very, very much so.” Robbie reached for the door. “He’s not gonna be able to be with a woman, that’s how gay he is. Why? You interested?”

Hal grunted and rolled his eyes. “No. I was just fearful . . . no offense.” Hal held up his hand. “Fearful he was getting in the way of Frank and Ellen. Our brother wants her back. I want to see them together.”

“No offence taken and no reason to fear.” Robbie opened the door. “Jess is not a threat. Elliott Ryder . . . there’s your worry. Night.”

Hal watched the door close and he slowly shook his head. “Elliott.” Hal took a deep nostril breath and walked back into his apartment.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

“And then Gerald . . .” Jess shook his head and set down his coffee cup on the table. “He is impossible at times to work with.” Bringing his leg up on the sofa, he faced Ellen more, his arm resting on the back of the couch. “I don’t know how Frank handles him.”

“He’s Frank.”

Jess rolled his eyes.

“No, I’m serious. He has this way of scaring people.” Ellen said. “Gerald isn’t the most skilled individual but Frank classifies him as . . .”

“A grunt.” Jess finished her sentence. “He’s borderline psychotic. And speaking of psychotic.”

“Richie’s coming along. Slowly. Yesterday he didn’t quite think he was Napoleon.”

“That’s a shame. I’m sure you’ll get him through the mental crisis.” Jess reached for his coffee again. “How was your day.”

Ellen smiled slightly. “Thanks. Um . . . Not too eventful. Elliott asked me out.”

“Oh, good. You said yes?”

“Oh, yeah. But then Dean came in and . . . Jess, he’s so out of control about Elliott. Really.”

“What Dean needs to do is remember the wrongs he committed.” He took a drink of his coffee. “And I think he is just searching for a reason not to like the man because he sees him as a threat.”

“Elliott is a threat.”

A quirky smile hit Jess. “Really? I didn’t think you felt that way about

him.”

“It’s not . . . the feelings that you think. Elliott is so nice and genuine. I like him.”

“All those Bowman men are genuine.”

“Maybe you could find a nice one.” Ellen patted his knee.

“From New Bowman?” Jess laughed. “Right. They’re so prim and proper I bet they don’t even master . . .” He cleared his throat. “Anything else happen today.”

Through her giggle, Ellen thought. “Yeah, we got another batch of those new guys Frank brought in, for digestive problems. It’s been like three weeks and still . . .”

“They’re eating too much. They should stick mainly with roughage. I did, for a month and I was fine.”

“I’ll pass that on to Andrea.” Ellen tilted her head back in thought. “Oh, did I tell you. Ben and Todd broke up again. Both of them are . . .”

“Stop.” Jess held up his hand. “I won’t touch that.”

Ellen looked puzzled. “Why?”

“Ellen, they are really . . . really . . . feminine. Too much for me. And besides, they were together before the plague and they both survived, that tells me they are meant to be together.”

“I never thought of it that way.”

“You of all people should have.” Jess inched his way to her. “Where about in this winding down, end of the day, relaxing conversation would I be allowed to kiss you.”

“Are you gonna do it right?” Ellen asked.

“What?” Jess laughed and sounded appalled at the same time. “What do you mean.”

“When we just tried it again, you were too passive. You can’t be passive Jess. You’re the man.”

“Even when you initiate?”

“Even then. Always you will be the kissing aggressor.”

“O.K.” Slipping his hand behind her neck, Jess leaned to her and parted his lips.

“Stop.”

“What?”

“Are you getting anything out of this. I know we just started this ‘I wanna be a straight me’ but I’m curious.” Ellen questioned.

“Honestly?”

“Yes.”

Jess hem-hawed a bit. “Well.”

“You’re not.”

“I’m trying.”

“Don’t try.” Ellen instructed. “Just do it. Unless it doesn’t feel right then stop And we’ll try again. O.K.?”

“O.K.” Again Jess leaned in, but this time *he* stopped. “I do have to tell you, I like the just sitting here and talking thing though.”

“Good. And . . .” Ellen moved the hair from the side of her neck. “I liked that tender-neck-searching thing you did earlier, so go on and practice that.”

A slight smile crossed Jess’ face and he kissed Ellen softly grazing his lips

from her mouth, to her cheek very slowly. He spoke between the kisses. “There is one definite perk to doing this to a women.” Jess’ lips met her neck.

“What’s that?”

“No rough skin razor stubble. Always a pet peeve of mine.”

Ellen burst into laughter and pulled back.

Locking his fingers tighter into her hair, Jess didn’t let Ellen get away too far, and despite her continuous snickering, he resumed his sensual search of her neck.

^^^

Bowman, North Dakota

UWA soldier, Sebastian Marker had just about a full grown beard as he walked along side his weakened horse. He held tight to the reigns as he moved along with Anthony, another UWA soldier who looked as worn and scraggily as he did.

Scratching his beard, Sebastian slowed in his walk. “Something is not right.”

“No lights.” Anthony indicated.

“We’ve been gone awhile.”

“That long though? Would the captain have given us up for dead?”

Sebastian took a deep breath as he kept moving into Bowman. “I don’t know. But at least . . . we’ve made it home.”

“True. But where is everybody else?” Anthony stopped walking when the moon lit enough of Bowman for him to see the extensive damage done by the savages when they hit. “Dear God what happened to our home?”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

October 20
Beginnings, Montana

Like a little girl, Ellen stood before the counter in the cryo-lab. Note in hand, finger to her mouth and a smirk across her face. She snickered as she read.

At the point where Dean, so miserable, couldn't take the happiness, he walked behind her with all intentions of distracting her enough to see what she was reading. "We do have work."

"I'm getting there."

"We're supposed to do that lip trans . . ." Dean looked over her shoulder. "Plant."

Ellen brought the note close to her chest. "Why are you trying to see Frank's letter?"

"Frank?" Dean let out a breath of relief. "The letter is from Frank?"

"Yes."

"Good. I mean. . . I don't mean anything." Dean walked to the other side of the counter and began to gather up his notes. "Frank's not that funny. Why are you laughing at that note so bad?"

"Oh, he was just telling me some of the things he said and what Henry interpreted them as. That's all." She looked up to see him placing folders in his arms. "What are you doing?"

"I have a few other things to do upstairs."

"The lips aren't done prepping."

"I know, but I have to get them done. Can you bring them up when they're ready?"

"Sure. But you better be ready, the transplant has to happen right away."

Opening his mouth totally shocked that Ellen would suggest that he didn't know that, Dean resisted argument. "Thanks. I'll be ready."

Ellen watched him start to leave. "Dean, one thing."

"What's that?" Dean asked as he moved backwards.

"Elliott's blood. Did you . . . did you get a chance to test it?"

Dean knew any awkward hesitation in answering would send warning sirens off to Ellen that he had. "No. Not yet. I will though. Promise."

"You were so adamant about getting that sample and . . ."

"I'm sorry. I almost got to it. I will."

"All right. I'll get those lips ready. Brad Pitt?"

"Um, sure, whatever." Dean hurriedly turned around and made a hastened exit before Ellen could ask him any other questions. Outside the lab, he took a moment to gather his bearings and justify his less-than-honest answers, and then Dean moved on.

^^^

The small black cassette tape rolled through Johnny's fingers as he played with it. He grinned at Bev.

"You're really doing it today?" Bev asked.

“Gonna try. If not, tomorrow. He never goes two days without dictating.”

“You better be careful nothing happens to that.” Bev pointed. “My father’s team worked hard.”

“You think I’m stupid. God Bev.” Johnny stuck the tape in his pocket. “I made a copy. It’s put away too. With the shit that get’s moved and the way Dean accidentally sticks the tapes in the ‘out’ drawer. I can’t take a chance on something happening to this. I already thought of it.”

“What if someone listens to it?” Bev asked.

“It’ll sound like a bad tape.” Johnny rolled his eyes so irritated at her. “What do you think. They can’t decode it. It’s just the memories getting fed into his chip.”

Bev smiled. “I remember those. It was fun. And now Dean will too.”

“Well . . .” Johnny tilted his head in debate. “He’s not missing any of his brain. So there’s nothing for this information to replace. Like when they give memories to the CME’s. That brain portion is gone, so they only have what is fed to them.”

“So it won’t be ‘real’ memories to Dean.”

“Nah. He’ll be able to distinguish they aren’t memories. They’ll be images. Images . . .” Johnny grinned snidely. “. . . that will make him nuts. Literally.”

^^^

Quantico Marine Headquarters

The numbing solution added to his temples didn’t help the irritating pinching George felt as Dr. Walker worked on unscrewing the head brace.

“Sgt. Doyle’s projected . . .” Steward’s speaking introduction into the office stopped. “I’m sorry President Hadly. I’ll come back.”

“No. No.” George waved him in. “Ow. Come inside. What do you have.”

“Sgt. Doyle’s projected scouting expeditions. Revised per Frank Slagel’s suggestions.” Steward gave George the folder. “What is he . . .”

“Freeing me.” George answered. “Dr. Walker thinks I may be strong enough to hold my head up on my own.” George began to review the documents. He peeked up at the squealing turning screws. “Ow, easy. Now I won’t look like a goddamn alien or something.” He flipped a page. “Good. Tell Sgt. Doyle Good. Are we still synchronizing with a Beginnings scouts on Friday.”

“Looks good for that.” Steward took the folder back. “Sir, this is gonna be like looking for a needle in the haystack. This is a big country.”

“We have the entire eastern seaboard eliminated though,”

“Still.” Steward shrugged. “It can be over with in a matter of minutes if you just tell Beginnings about . . .”

“No. Absolutely not.” George was adamant. “If it means taking the long route now, we will. We have to preserve that knowledge. If Beginnings even learns about that satellite, Christ, when we go back into war, they’ll see us coming. No. That information and connection will be made when we get Beginnings back.”

“I see. What about the set up at the old White house.”

George tried to shake his head, he felt the scrape of a screw. “No. It automatically disconnected for the satellite one month after the survivor program was initiated. That was done for easier link up at Garfield.”

“Just trying to find an easier way to eliminate these savages so we can move forward. We’re in a stale mate and stalled until then.”

George’s hand tapped on the desk. “I know this. And as easy as it would be to reveal this knowledge, it works against us. Ow Doc.”

Dr. Walker contained his snicker. “Dismantled. Ready to try?”

“Of course. Steward you want to watch the unveiling.”

Steward didn’t answer he only nodded.

“Now.” Dr. Walker braced the head bracket. “We’ve had this on for a couple weeks. It’s my hope that your neck gained enough strength to support your head. I mean, after all you’re walking pretty good.”

“I am.” George said proudly ready to shed the metal. “Take it off. Free me.”

Hands holding the circular crown that haloed above George head, Dr. Walker jiggled it. The braces lifted from George’s shoulders and then carefully, Dr. Walker lifted the entire contraption.

George exhaled. “Light.” He smiled.

“Go on.” Dr. Walker set down the brace and stepped back. “Try slowly shaking and nodding your head.”

Steward watched. “Dr. Walker, you think he’s better?”

“I believe he’s strong.”

George prepared, took a breath then shook his head slowly. Left. Right. Left. Right. Back. Forward. *BANG.*

Dr. Walker cleared his throat and whispered. “Maybe not.”

Fallen forward, face smashed to the desk, George, muffled, called out. “Can somebody help me.”

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

“Beautiful.” Dean whispered with a smile as he watched the gene sequences emerge on the computer screen. On the left, the DNA sequence read ‘William Hayes’. The right was Dean’s. Smug, Dean compared them and pressed print. “Need a bit more work.” He leaned into the computer. “Now . . .” His fingers clicked a few times. “Bev’s baby.” After hitting the final strike, Dean leaned back. He jolted just a tad at the knock on the lab door. Eyes still on the screen, Dean watched the sequence come up. “Come in!”

“Dr. Hayes.” Elliott stepped into the lab. “I’m sorry. Is this a bad time.”

“No.” Dean kept watching. “Yes.” He moved into the computer with excitement.

“Then I should leave?”

“No.” Not wanting to stop looking at the screen, Dean checked out his watch. “Shit. Sgt. Ryder, I’m sorry.”

“We can do this another time.”

“No. No.” Again Dean looked at his watch. “I’m supposed to meet Ellen in

a patient room anyhow. Exam room two is right down the hall. Can you . . .”

Elliott nodded. “I’ll head there now. This won’t take long will it? I’m kind of tired.”

“Not at all thanks.” Dean stood up as Elliott left. He walked over to the counter where he had his supplies for both procedures he had planned. Grabbing them, he move to the door. He stopped, took a run back to the computer, reached to shut it off, hesitated, ejected the disk and returned to leaving the lab.

He arrived at exam room two and placed the disk in his lab pocket before opening the door. Elliott was just standing in the room. “If you could sit on the table.”

“Sure.” Elliott hopped up.

“Long night?” Dean asked as he pulled out his supplies then took them over to the table.

“Yes.” Elliott cleared his throat and stared forward.

“About this morning. I was on edge.”

“I understand.” Elliott’s hands gripped the table. “What exactly are you doing to me Dr. Hayes, and why?”

“Well. I uh, I started a donor program, for tissue and blood and stuff and it’s becoming mandatory to be screened.” Dean prepared his instruments.

“Really?” Elliott nodded. “So you know if I’m a match to anyone?”

“Exactly.” Dean opened a sealed packet and pulled out what looked like gauze. “This is gonna be cold.” Hand on Elliott’s cheek, Dean tilted Elliott’s head to the side. With his fingers, he probed the area under Elliott’s jaw then wiped it off with the gauze.

“From my neck?”

“Yes.” It was long, and it looked like a hollow syringe. It laid next to a test tube on the table. Dean took the syringe and place the point to where he just wiped. “It will be a pinch and will make no less than an eighth of an inch mark.” Reaching around, Dean grabbed a long thin needle and inserted it in the anchor. “Again, just a pinch.” He watched for a flinch on Elliott’s face. Dean removed the needle and grabbed another tool. “One more pinch.” Serious and focused Dean performed his test. “Done.” He removed the small scissor-resembling object then the anchor and laid cotton over Elliott’s neck. “Hold this.” Dean grabbed the test tube, uncapped it and put the thin instrument in. “It looks like your growing a goatee.”

“Robbie said I had to look intimidating. He suggested it.” Elliott tilted his head while Dean added a small bandage.

“You’re not trying to be like Frank to get Ellen are you?” Dean asked.

Elliott laughed.

“That’s funny?”

“Yes.” Elliott contained his snickering. “Frank isn’t with Ellen anymore. Why would I wanna be like someone she gave up?” Elliott slid from the table. “Is that all?”

“Um, yeah.” Dean began to clean up. “Thanks.”

“Then I’m heading home . . .” He saw Dean suddenly look at him. “I mean to the house to get some sleep.” He moved to the door.

“Elliott.” Dean called out. “What time are you supposed to be back on shift?”

"Ten." Elliott answered. "But we have a big training exercise tomorrow so I'll probably start early."

"It's . . . it's not even noon yet, try to get eight hours of sleep."

"Eight hours!" Elliott shook his head with a smile. "No. You and Ellen have this obsession about sleeping more. Dr. Hayes, I have lived off of three to four hours sleep a night since I realized how much time I spent doing it. Life's too short to spend a third of it sleeping." Elliott opened the door and walked out.

Whispering, Dean picked up the test tube and looked at it. "You are absolutely right Elliott. Life's too short."

^^^

Johnny didn't want to be late for work, but he was tense. He figured it would be in everyone's best interest if he loosened up. And even though it was Bev, the quickie helped.

He strutted into the lab expecting to get told about it from Dean or Ellen, but was delightfully surprised when it was empty.

"Yes. I can kick back." Johnny spoke out loud. Making his way to the blood work requisition box, Johnny's eyes glanced over the computer screen. The vision caused him to stop cold. "No." He back tracked. "Never does he leave these up like this. I am too lucky." Doing his signature holding out his hand, Johnny looked to the ceiling, mouthed the words, 'thank you' and sat before the program.

William Hayes. Johnny thought. *Let's see. Sequence number two? How about we make him sequence fourteen and sequence fourteen can be . . .*

"Johnny?" Ellen spoke with curiosity. "What are you doing?"

Shit! Trying to get rid of the shocked 'nervous' that hit him, Johnny lifted his hand from the keyboard and turned around. Ellen was behind him. "Um, Dr. Dean left these up. He never does. He's the only one with access to this . . ."

"Oh my God." Ellen all but rolled Johnny from the screen's way.

"That's what I thought." Johnny stood up, making a snarling face behind her back. He quickly flashed a fake smile when Ellen looked over her shoulder at him.

"You saw this?"

"I wasn't sure if I was looking right." Johnny said. When Ellen turned back to the screen Johnny curled his lip in disgust and turned his head. He saw it in the printer, the readout. Walking quietly backwards he reached for the paper.

"William's. Bev's baby. Now let's see Dean's . . . Shit." Ellen shook her head. "He took the disk. I can't pull up Dean's sequence." She turned around just as Johnny lifted the paper. "What's that."

"Um . . . wow!" Johnny faked happiness. "Look! Dr. Dean's sequence. How lucky."

"He must have been working on this." Ellen took the paper, looked at it and stuck it in her lab coat. "I'll talk to him. We're working on Jeff. This is . . . this is good." she backed up and started to leave the lab. "Oh!" She raced back to the computer, grabbed the mouse and exited the program. "Even though it's you. This shouldn't be up. See ya!"

Johnny's enthusiasm was the extreme opposite of Ellen's. "Yeah. Bye." He waved then dropped his hand when she left. "Fuck."

^^^

Frank held the paper close to his eyes, reading it for the tenth time as he sat on the bed. Slowly he lowered it and handed it to Robbie.

“Those were my results.” Robbie folded the paper. “Jason and Jess are working on them now and we’ll tell dad later what we found.”

Frank just shook his head.

“I know. Not good. But . . . we’re amateurs’s right?”

Frank gave a thumbs up.

“How you feeling?”

Closed mouth, Frank nodded.

“Wanna talk huh?” Robbie nudged him. “Go on. Talk. Go on.” He winked. “I won’t tell.”

‘Yeah right, you just wanna hear me fuckin squeak’

“Come on Frank. It’s been two days. Bet you can. Try it.”

I really haven’t. Frank opened his mouth, then shut it. He shook his head.

Nah

“Baby.” Robbie tossed his hand at him. “I was hoping to hear that squeak.”

Frank held up his built in swear-sign. He shot Robbie the finger.

“Thanks. O.K. I’m out of here. I’ll be back later to go over the finals with you and Elliott about this training tomorrow.”

Frank nodded.

“Good plan.” Robbie walked to the door. He stopped in seriousness. “All kidding aside, I miss hearing you bitch big brother. Hurry up and get well.” Giving a ‘Robbie’ smile, he walked out pulling the door close.

Frank felt slightly touched. He swung his legs up on the bed to lay down and get comfortable.

The door opened again and Robbie popped his head in. “I do however really love that squeak.”

Rolling his eyes Frank plopped backwards again.

^^^

The bandage was pulled backwards as Dean and Ellen both, close, peered over Jeff. Jeff’s eyes shifted back and forth between the two of them as they examined his newly attached lips.

“They’re big,” Ellen commented, shifting in her stance.

“Swelled.” Dean said as his finger hovered them. “I do like the lip choice you made.”

“I think it will make Jeff look more distinguished with a pouty look.”

“As long as he doesn’t grow fur.” Dean snickered then noticed Ellen moving about in her one place. “El, What is up with you. You’re antsy. Go to the bathroom.”

“No. I don’t have to go. I want to talk to you and I didn’t want to do it during the procedure.”

“What’s up.” Dean reached for bandage.

“I saw.” Ellen leaned even closer. “I saw the DNA sequences. William’s. Bev’s baby.”

Dean raised his eyes, Ellen was right there. "I left them up?"

"Yes. And Dean, I know where you're going with it."

"And?" Dean feared her answer.

Ellen exhaled. "I can't believe I didn't think of it. Well, of course I didn't. We got rid of those samples. But not before she could have touched them. It falls in the time frame. How did you think of it?"

Dean held back his smile. "I didn't. Frank did."

"Frank. How did he . . ."

"El." Dean reached up his hand to her face so close. "You believe me?"

"I'm starting to. I really am. I needed something so badly to grab on to and I think this is it. I really think . . ." Ellen was silenced when Dean slipped his hand further behind her neck, pulled her into him and kissed her.

Dean slowly pulled away, keeping his lips near hers, his hands on her face.

Jeff looked up with his shifting eyes.

"Dean." Ellen whispered. "Please understand how hard it is to believe you weren't or aren't with her."

"I'm not El. I swear to you."

"This . . . this could prove she set you . . ." Another kiss silenced Ellen until Dean pulled away. "Up."

"I'm trying to prove that."

Through heavy breaths Ellen looked at Dean.

"El. I miss you."

"I miss you."

Jeff saw them drawing closer again. His eyes kept shifting as they hovered over him.

"If you can just . . ." Dean kissed her lightly. "Give me one more chance. I swear to you I'll prove I never did or don't have anything to do with her."

"Dean . . ."

"I love you, El."

Ellen let out a slight whimper as she reached across the bed for Dean, grabbing onto him and kissing him. Dean released long enough from the kiss only to catch his breath and he grabbed on to her as well.

Not that Jeff minded a happy reunion, but over his bed? He wanted to speak but his new lips were sewn closed. So . . . he hummed his words. He was ignored.

Dean's hands rapidly felt every inch of Ellen's face. "Oh, God, did I miss you."

"I miss you." Ellen spoke through her kisses. "We should sneak out of here."

The noise Jeff made was supposed to be the words 'yes please go.' But they were just noises.

"I don't know if I'll make it home." Hurriedly Dean backed up and raced around the bed. He bodily met into Ellen pushing her back and onto the bed next to Jeff, pulling the partition curtain closed as he did. Kissing her with passion, Dean scooted them both on the bed. His body on hers. His hands moving up her leg securing it around his waist.

"Dean." Ellen whispered. "We can't."

"Yeah we can." Dean kept his lips in contact with Ellen's. Only pausing, both of them, to release slight moans and catch simple breaths of air. Ignoring--

in their heat of passion--the vocal noisy pleas of Jeff to convey his uncomfortableness with them in the room.

Ellen's head went back. "We shouldn't."

Dean lifted his head and laid an index finger over her lips. He shook his head and brought his lips to her neck. And then Dean stopped. He stopped kissing, moving and touching.

"Dean? Dean what's wrong? Why'd you stop?"

Something that vocally resembled "Thank God" rang out from Jeff.

Dean slid from Ellen, dropping her hair he held. "I thought you outgrew sucker bites."

"Huh?" Ellen sat up. "I don't have a . . . shit!" She sprang from the bed and raced over to the mirror in the room. She lifted her hair and tilted her head. "Shit." The smaller purple mark looked like a sucker bite. But it wasn't. It was actually a bite. Given to Ellen from Jess when she playfully insulted his seduction techniques. When she turned around Dean was walking out. "Dean." She chased him not seeing Jeff happily wave goodbye.

Dean moved down the hall.

"Dean. Wait." Ellen caught him. She grabbed his arm with a giggle. "You're gonna laugh. Check this out. I know this looks . . ."

"I didn't think you'd be with someone else so soon." Dean turned around. "But then again, it's you."

Ellen let go of his arm. "What's that supposed to mean."

"Exactly what it sounds like. It's you. You move on. You did move on. Screw anything we had. You probably never wanted to believe me in the first place."

"I can't believe I even let you touch me. What was I thinking? You've got a problem."

"I've been dogged El. Big time and I lost the support of the woman I love."

"And you think taking this 'done wrong' attitude is gonna help?"

"Done wrong? I have been done wrong, El! And you're benefitting from it."

"I can't . . . forget it." Ellen grunted then with anger she pushed into Dean and stormed by him. "Fuck you Dean."

"You don't really need to, do you?"

Ellen froze in her tracks. Her head slowly peered over her shoulder and she shot a fast glare at Dean before she spun around totally, and marched straight up to him. Toe to toe she stood with Dean. "You may have just lost any chance you ever had of getting back with me." She said coldly then stepped back, talking as she walked backwards. "And just so you feel stupid. Just so you feel like a real asshole for not letting me explain, Jess bit my neck playing around. A joke. Jess, Dean." With a single nod Ellen turned around. "Jess." She continued her stride down the corridor and around the bend. "Oh!" Ellen's voice echoed his way. "Ask him!"

"Ask him?" Dean tossed up his hands. As they lowered, he saw Jess turn the bend of the corridor. "Fine., I'll ask him." Dean walked up to Jess. "Did you bite Ellen's neck last night."

Jess choked out a shocked laugh. "Hello to you too, Dean."

"Did you?"

"Yeah. I bit her. Sorry. Is it bad. I didn't mean to . . ."

“You’re gay.”

“Yes I am.” Jess smiled. “It was a joke. See ya.” He patted Dean on the arm and kept walking. “Frank in his room alone?” Jess pointed down the hall as he moved.

Dean only nodded his response to the ‘Frank’ question, then he turned, leaned head first into the wall and whined. He was only there a second when he heard Jess again.

“Frank’s sleeping.” Jess said. “Hey.” He laid a hand on Dean’s back. “You O.K.?”

Dean nodded and turned his head to watch Jess walk away, and then Dean stood straight, walked the opposite way down the hall and into Frank’s room. He slammed the door upon his entrance causing Frank to jump. “Frank.” Dean ran his fingers through his own hair. “I fucked up again.”

Frank almost grunted.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

New Bowman, Montana

Hal's finger grazed across his stubbled top lip. "I think this is the best fifty men to send." He pushed forward a sheet across his desk to Corporal Lewis.

"I'm having to agree." The corporal said. "We have fax capabilities, have you sent this to Sgt. Ryder. There are a few post men he may argue with you on."

"Who?" Hal asked.

"Stanford and James."

Hal nodded as he reviewed the list. "But good post men aren't as important here since we are radar protected. Just good soldiers. And less these fifty, leave us four hundred and seventy-two soldiers. We're good. They go. Beginnings has offered to launder any extra uniforms these men will need. Can you get that together."

"Right away sir."

"Good then we can ship these men to Beginnings tomorrow for their . . ." Hal looked up to the knock on his door. "Come in."

Grace entered. Both Hal and the corporal stood. "Please." Grace lowered her hand for them to sit. "Captain, may I bother you a moment."

"Certainly. Do you need Corporal Lewis to leave."

"No. No. First, how is Francis?"

"Better thank you." Hal responded. "He still can't talk."

Grace contained her smile. "Glad he's making progress. Second thing, Fr. O'Brien. Monica went to speak to him about baptizing the baby and . . . he's intoxicated sir. Again."

"I'll handle that."

"And last . . ." Grace exhaled. "I need a jury pool. About fifty men. None of our women want to participate because we're dealing with a conviction of a woman. However, discovery is Thursday and I want to set a trial date. Can you pool some men."

Hal looked to corporal Lewis. "The Corporal and I can draw up a lottery. Will that work."

"Yes. Thank you. I'll leave you be." Grace with grace, smiled and moved to the door. She paused before leaving. "Captain, just another little thing. I wanted to pass along to you how happy I am that you found the woman of your dreams."

Hal kept a forced smile upon his face. "Thank you." He kept the smile there until Grace had left.

"Captain?" Corporal Lewis questioned. "The woman of your dreams."

"Haven't any idea what she's talking about. As long as she is not bitching, I'll nod and say thank you." Hal resumed his work, truly and utterly clueless.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

A long grunt came from Richie just before he reached across the table in the skills room and smacked Sammy on the hand. "No!"

Sammy whimpered and held his hand. He leaned drastically to the right and one side of his hair was longer than the other. It wasn't from a bad hair cut, it was from Sammy's continuous pulling of his own hair on one side of his head.

"Mine." Richie collected the dominos. "Asshole. You wonder why I don't like you."

"I . . . I . . ." Sammy spoke slowly. "I . . ."

"You what?" Richie lost patience.

"Like you."

"Oh, who cares." Richie snapped. "You knocked over my damn dominoes after I was setting them up for an hour."

"Fun."

"Right. Bye."

Jason shook his head as he entered into the skills room. "Hostility Richie."

"Bite me." Richie looked over his shoulder and saw it was Jason. "I mean . . ."

"This ought to be good. What did you mean?"

"I'm pissed."

"And why are we pissed today?" Jason asked in a pacifying manner,

"Sammy knocked over my dominoes."

"Sammy." Jason said in a soft scold. "That isn't nice. Richie are we ready?"

"This is dumb."

"I'm sure you believe that."

"I'm going nuts in here." Richie stood up. "How much longer?"

"Until we see you're fit." Jason led him to Ellen's office.

"I was perfectly fine before you people locked me in the mental zoo."

Jason calmly sat behind Ellen's desk. "Have a seat."

"Where's my sister."

"Your sister is a bit frightened to deal with you."

Richie laughed. "She just doesn't want to deal with me because she knows she's keeping me in here for no reason."

"You don't think she has a reason."

"I know what her reason is." Richie stated a little hyper.

"And what would that be?"

"Because I owe her money."

Folding his hands, Jason came off such the mental expert. "Money hasn't any value here."

"I know that. You know that. She doesn't know that. I'm paying her back all right. With my mind." Richie fidgeted in his seat adding some hostility to his tone. "I can not believe she is doing this to me. I was fine. Perfectly fine. She's turning me unto a loon."

"Have you always had this much anger toward Ellen?"

"No!" Richie said defensively. "Well, yeah, she has always pissed me off. Irritating me in the big sister way. Now this. I'm killing her."

Jason slowly looked up at Richie. "You're what?"

“Killing her.”

Nodding Jason looked down to his folded hands. “It’s terroristic threats like that Richie that keep you in containment.”

“No.” Richie corrected. “It’s a vengeful, little big mouth woman named Ellen. *That’s* what keeps me in containment.”

^^^

To Elliott, Bowman and New Bowman had ‘home’ qualities, warmth that made them places he wanted to live. Beginnings was on the colder side, despite the attempts people made at putting tiny gardens in their two by two patches of grass outside their town homes.

But there was one thing he did find a definite perk, to not only living, but working for Beginnings’ security. He got to wear the headset radio.

“Yep. I’m awake.” Elliott spoke as he walked from the living section. “So I’ll be available if you need me.”

“You don’t start shift for a while.” Dan conversed over the airwaves with him. “Why are you making yourself available.”

“Frank says I have to be, at all times when I’m awake. And . . . I’m bored. No one’s at the house. I’m heading to that distribution place for milk.”

“Shopping?”

“You can say that. Talk to you later.” Elliott grinned thinking about how crazy eh looked talking to himself as he walked. He moved into center town and tried to remember which of the look-alike buildings was the ‘everyday’ distribution. Peering around he heard the sound of ‘live’ music seeping into the street. He turned to his right, smiling pleasantly at the sound and Elliott followed to where it came from. The social hall.

With nothing else to do, he figured he’d see Robbie and his band play. He chuckled some at Robbie’s attempt to sound country. He opened the door just as the song ended. A light clapping came from the empty social hall. Then Elliott looked and saw Ellen by the stage standing and watching. He walked over that way. “Hello.” He nudged Ellen softly.

Ellen grinned when she saw him. “Hey. What are you doing up?”

“I went to sleep earlier.” He folded his hands behind his back. “I woke up, I looked at the time. It was after four and there was silence in the house. No Josh, twins, Joey, nick. Where are they?”

“Masochist Andrea has them. Yep.” Ellen exhaled. “Give me that break I need as a single mother.” her head swayed as Robbie and the Starters began to play.

Elliott chuckled. “So you’re listening to them rehearse.”

“Every once and a while I like to. They’re practicing for country night.”

Elliott looked up at the stage. “They do well.”

“Yes. Hey!” Ellen turned to face him. “I like this song. Dance with me.”

Elliott shook his head. “No.” He nearly blushed. “I haven’t dance since before the plague. No.”

“Come on.” Ellen tugged a little on his arm. “Dance.”

“Ellen. No.” Elliott stared forward again.

“O.K.” Ellen crossed her arms.

Through the corner of his eye he saw the pout. He whined first, took a step forward, laid his hand on her arm and without saying anything, led Ellen to the dance floor. “Be nice. Like many things, it’s been awhile.”

A quirky smile hit Ellen. “That almost sounds like you were referencing sex as well.”

Elliott’s eyes widened as he took hold of her hand. “No.” He laid his hand on her back and moved Ellen into him, “That . . . I wasn’t . . .no.”

“Elliott. Relax.”

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

“This . . . closeness, being close.” His fingers released and gripped over and over in nervousness.

“Elliott.” Ellen looked at the good eight inches that separated them. “We aren’t even touching.”

“Yes. I know.” Elliott danced well, slow and swaying but he didn’t look at Ellen.

“Closeness?”

“For me. Yes.”

“What the hell would you do if I pressed up against you?” Ellen asked.

“Run.” Elliott said seriously.

“You can’t be . . .” Ellen looked up at him. “You’re not kidding.”

“No. Give me savages, society soldiers, animals. I’m fine. They’re daily occurrences. But a woman . . .”

“I’m not a daily occurrence?” Ellen questioned.

“Not like this, you aren’t.”

Ellen had to laugh. “Elliott, if you can’t dance close to me, how are you going to kiss me at the end of our date?”

Elliott stopped moving. Panicked, he looked down at her. “I . . . um, I . . .”

“You weren’t planning on it, were you?”

“No.” Elliott started dancing again. He had to ponder if the song was just long or Robbie noticed his uncomfortableness and continued to play just to get him.

“And you’ll really run away if I touch up against you?”

Clearing his throat, Elliott looked down to her. “Most likely. Yes.” His one eye closed when he felt the sneaky move of her hand on his neck. “Ellen.”

The right side of her mouth lifted in an ornery grin, then Ellen moved right against Elliott. “Try to run now.”

Elliott’s body shuddered in his slight-fake-cry-whine as Ellen giggled. But he retained his stature, and to ensure he wouldn’t get more nervous or lost in what was happening, Elliott continued to dance, pretending he danced with . . . Grace.

Ellen had worked all day and Dean knew she didn’t have the kids until later on that evening. He needed to talk to her. About what transpired on the bed in Jeff’s room and why they stopped. It was heavy on his mind and he knew he couldn’t proceed with the important test he had planned for the evening without speaking to her. So Dean sought her out.

Someone said they saw her heading into the social hall. Dean could hear Robbie's band playing as he went there, knowing for certain that was probably where she was. Even though he debated on using Frank's advice of claiming testosterone induced brain blunders, Dean opted for honesty. He was going to be blunt, apologize and ask Ellen to grab something to eat with him so they could talk.

Opening the door to the social hall Dean didn't even have to step inside to see the plans he had set in his mind had gone array. The moment he spotted Ellen and Elliott dancing close on the floor, Dean only stared for a moment, then head down, walked back out of the hall.

^^^

Bowman, North Dakota

Less his beard, Sebastian tightened his gold bandana and peered up to the sky before sitting in front of the small campfire. It was set up in the center of main street Bowman, and Sebastian lifted his sword and began to polish it.

"Found two more M.R.E.s." Anthony said dropping the dark green sealed packs by the fire. "Another two days food for us. I think one is Chicken ala King."

"Were you able to scrounge up any more oats for the horses?"

"No." Anthony sat down on the ground across from Sebastian. "Hopefully taking it slow, keeping them watered, they'll make it the hundred miles to Beginnings."

"Maybe after a goodnight's rest as well." Sebastian, while polishing looked up to the sky again. "It's getting dark. We'll leave first light. Take the most open route to Beginnings and hopefully see any wildcats if they approach us."

"Wildcats." Anthony let out a long breath. "Who would have thought . . ."

Sebastian looked around and worked intensely on his sword. He wanted to look good for their approach of Beginnings. "Certainly not our men. My question is how did they get way down here?"

"Sebastian? Maybe they didn't. Maybe they're closer than we assume from our knowledge."

Sebastian shook his head. "Impossible." He was certain. "More than what we seen?" Again he shook his head. "Impossible."

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

The last of his coffee was not only cold it was bitter as well, matching ironically the way Dean felt. The lab was quiet, dark and lit only by the small fluorescent bulb that hung above the sink. Dean had leaned so tight into the counter that it began to cut into him, but he held his stance firm. Hair messed from the numerous times he had run his fingers through it. Face drawn, one hand laying on a thick open folder, the other to a pocket tape recorder.

Looking up momentarily, Dean depressed the button. “And, readings actually have worsened since the last sample. Signifying . . . Signifying rapidity.” His voice rasped. “Right now, and for hours, I’ve been under contemplation. How . . . how do I do this, tell this. In this lab there are no answers to be found . . .” Dean voice trailed off as he stopped recording. “In this lab. No.” He opened the drawer and tossed in the recorder, closed the folder, tucked it under his arm and walked out.

Thinking, ‘*Oh yeah*’ Frank snickered as he read the words in the chapter that Danny had given him.

‘. . . *And reading your letter Bobby stopped me from leaving this chair. I was glued with lust . . .*’

Frank nodded as he read. ‘*Oh yeah*’

‘. . . *My entire lower half of my body tingled from the words you wrote. My mind wandering. When Frank . . .*’

‘*Perfect. I can pretend it’s me*’. Frank smiled.

‘*When Frank came by to say hello I wanted so badly just to take that chance and be with him. Imagining he was you . . .*’

‘*Fuck*’, Frank paused, shrugged, then continued reading.

‘. . . *Touching his body as if it were your well toned god temple. And even if only in my mind, calling out your name in desire as he plunged deep inside. Your letter did that to me. It sent me on a sexual mind-travel fantasy, that when I returned, I found my hand . . .*’

“Frank.” Dean called out.

‘*Fuck Dean*’ After doing a quick peek at himself, Frank set down the chapters.

“What are you reading?” Dean picked up the paper. “The Helen and Bobby story. Doesn’t this bother you?”

Frank looked clueless.

“I mean it’s . . . it’s about . . .” Dean still saw the lost look as if Frank was asking him what he was talking about. “It’s about sex.”

Frank rolled his eyes.

“O.K., though I know you truly want to be graced with my presence, I do have a reason for being here. I have a problem Frank.” Dean handed him a tablet and pen. “It’s big. And I need you to help me figure out how to handle it. O.K.?”

Frank nodded.

Dean pulled up a chair and sat down. “Just please write legibly. I don’t want to misinterpret.” After getting a scouring face from Frank, Dean proceeded to talk.

^^^

“Well?” Ellen asked Jess as she leaned against the arm of the sofa.

“Well . . .” Jess looked in debate. “Are you?”

“Not really.”

Jess rolled his eyes. “Am I doing it wrong?”

“You’re not supposed to be doing it right. Right now you’re supposed to be doing it for you. Nothing?”

“Now am I supposed to get the same thing out of this?”

“Why do you act so dumb?” Ellen asked.

“Twenty years is a really long time, Ellen.” Jess stated. “I know what I get, what he gets from this. I just want to be sure it works the same with this situation.”

Ellen had to close her eyes in thought. “It depends. If it’s your thing, for a lot of guys, it is. For me, personally, it never really worked. I found it annoying if he lingered there too long. Perhaps because I kept thinking, ‘there isn’t that much there. What the hell are you doing?’”

Jess laughed. “Not that it isn’t firm. But there’s a softness that men don’t have.”

“Do you like the feel?”

Taking a deep breath, Jess closed his eyes. He sat nearly between Ellen’s legs on the couch, leaning against her leg, his hand up under her shirt. “It can be addicting. It has that molding quality. Like play dough. You know, once you start playing with it, you kind of get addicted to staying there. Your fingers just keep . . . molding it?”

“Play dough?” Ellen chuckled.

“What am I doing wrong? What works for a woman?”

“Softer.”

“I’m moving my hand soft.”

“You’re not feeling a pec here, Jess.” Ellen told him. “Smooth your hand as you feel.”

“Like this?” Jess asked as he turned.

“Yeah. That feels right.”

“You don’t seem like you like it.”

“I told you, it’s not my game. I’m not a foreplay gal.”

“Can I see?”

Ellen shrugged. “Yeah sure. Just don’t look at the other one, it’s messed up.”

“O.K.” Jess lifted her shirt up above his hand. He watched as he moved his hand as instructed by Ellen. “With a normal woman . . .”

“Gee thanks.”

“Seriously. With a woman that liked this sort of thing, would this work?”

“Yeah. That and kissing it.”

“The whole breast or just the nipple?”

Ellen had to chuckle. “I have news for you Jess, the ability to kiss the entire breast in one mouth sweep would probably work only with me. But . . . basically men pretend they’re infants again and go at the nipple.”

Jess tilted his head then took on a fake cocky tone. “Well, you know.” He cleared his throat. “I’ve been told I am the nipple master.”

Ellen sputtered in laughter. “Master? How can one earn that title.”

“I used to drive my partners insane. They said I had a technique. I wonder if it would work on a woman.”

“You can try. I’ll tell you if it works. But, you might find it . . . for lack of a better word . . . distasteful. Seeing where your gender preference lies.”

“Ha-ha-ha.. If I’m gonna try to do this with a woman I better get over the

gagging phase.”

“And we’re only talking a nipple here . . .” Ellen chuckled. “I hate to think of what would happen if you . . .” She cleared her throat. “Do the master thing.”

Cracking a slightly crooked grin, Jess parted his lips and lowered his head. Before his mouth met, there was a knock at the door and he sat up.

Ellen looked around oddly. “Who is it?” She called out.

“Dean. I need to talk to you.”

“Shit.” Ellen whispered. “One second.” She lowered her shirt as she brought her leg from behind Jess’ back. Jess moved back allowing room for Ellen to get off the couch, and when she stood, she realized her leg was fast asleep and her knees buckled sending her to the floor with a loud bang.

“El?” Dean tried the locked knob.

Jess widened his eyes helping her up. “You all right.”

“God.” Ellen half laughed through her pain. “Yeah.” Standing sloppily, Ellen moved to the door with a limp. She looked back at Jess. “Good thing for you, you aren’t able to drive the car yet.”

After briefly deciphering what she meant. It hit Jess. Though positive he wasn’t in the driver’s seat, he looked down, just in case.

“Dean.” Ellen breathed out his name as she opened the door. “What uh, what are you doing here?”

“I need to talk to you. Were you sleeping?” Dean motioned his head at her.

“Huh?”

Dean pointed to her hair that was messed up on one side.

“Oh. No. Talking.” Ellen flattened her hair. “Come on in.”

“Talking?” Dean stepped inside. “To . . .” He hesitated when he saw Jess. “Who?”

“Hey Dean.” Jess lifted his hand.

“Hey Jess.” Dean turned to face Ellen then did a fast look back at Jess who straightened his hair. “Were you . . .” Dean’s mouth stayed open, but he closed it. “Nah.” He shook his head. “El. I really need to talk to you seriously.” Holding the folder out he aimed it in the direction of the diningroom table. “Can we sit?”

Jess stood up. “Do you want me to leave.”

Dean looked at Ellen. “It’s up to Ellen. It’s about . . . Elliott.”

“No. Stay Jess.” Ellen said. “Just keep confidential anything you hear. O.K.?”

Jess nodded and walked over to the table with Dean and Ellen.

Ellen saw it on Dean’s face, she looked at his hands as they played with the edges of the folder. “Dean?”

“I . . . I don’t know how to say this.” slowly Dean slid his hand over his face then opened the folder. “I ran them over and over. The counts. I isolated the cells. I even, don’t ask how, performed a biopsy today.”

Ellen was afraid to ask. “And?”

Dean hesitated and looked sadly at Ellen. “Leukosarcoma. His blood has gone leukemic.”

Ellen closed her eyes.

“The count is higher than when he was in the clinic last. The cells show it. The tissue biopsy I got, I didn’t think was much, but it confirmed. I took a sample from the submandibular. It’s there. Early stages. But present.”

“Oh. My God.” Ellen brought the folder to her. “It’s hit his glands.”

“I’m sorry El.” Dean spoke soft.

“Excuse me for a minute.” Ellen gathered the folder, and in a daze-like movement, she stood up and walked from the room toward the bedrooms.

Jess’ eyes went from Ellen’s leaving to Dean. “What . . . what does all this mean. I’m lost.”

“It means . . .” Dean looked to make sure Ellen was gone. “Elliott Ryder is dying.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

October 21

Lester grunted hard as he fell flat to his face on the hard fall ground. Robbie grabbed his legs, flipped him over and proceed to drive a stick at his throat right to the point of entry, then he stopped.

“Dead!” Elliott called out during the training exercise. “Robbie is only one man.” He walked to the eight Beginnings men who stood up from the ground. He waved his hand to the others who sat around, trying to draw them in closer to the wooded area to speak to them. “What is going to happen when a pack comes after you. They travel eight in a pack.”

Lester brushed himself off. “Savages aren’t quiet. Robbie was quiet.”

Robbie disagreed. “I did the war call.”

Lester scoffed. “A spilt second before you hit us. That’s not right. Savages . . .”

“How do you know.” Elliott corrected. “How do you know that’s what they are going to do?”

Lester shrugged. “They always do.”

“But the next time they may not. Be ready, see them coming, don’t wait for their warning cry. All right?” Elliott nodded then spoke up. “Bowman UWA you are our scouts. Beginnings UWA, our savages this time. Let’s have a war. Robbie and I will ref.” Elliott waited for Robbie. “Good job.”

“Thanks. Ground or air ref.” Robbie stated.

“You take air. I’ll do the ground.”

“Cool.” Robbie trotted off to a tree, leaped up and grabbed the branch to climb.

Elliott lowered the headset microphone. “Tracking come in.” He waited. “Tracking. Mark.” He called again. “Mark.”

“Sorry.” Mark answered. “What’s up?”

“We’re doing a full blown attack, so we may drive you crazy.”

“I’m ready. I’ll ignore the beeps.”

“Good.” Elliott disconnected the call and looked around to his men who had taken their position deep in the woods some. “I want to see eight dead savages!” Elliott called out. “Begin!”

^^^

The folder slammed hard on the clinic counter then Dean followed it with a hard point. “Ellen, you’re wrong!”

She clenched her jaws tight, hiding her shaking. “It’s my call.”

“It’s . . . wrong.” Dean leaned into the counter. “Listen to you.”

“What options do we have? Huh Dean? What options?”

“We have the . . .”

“Will it work on this?” Ellen asked. “No. It’s a form of radiation. Big fuckin deal! He needs more. We can’t give him more. We can’t give him hope, so why give him despair.”

“Ellen.” Dean softened his voice. “It’s not right.”

“I know.” Ellen nodded. “Oh, God, do I know. But look at it from my point of view, Dean. If your test are right . . .”

“Why do you do that?” Dean snapped. “Say ‘if’. Why do you question me.”

“Stop it, this isn’t about you. All right!” Ellen held up her hand. “If those test are accurate. Which I believe they are. Then he has progressed so far Dean. But look at him. Just take a look at Elliott. Where’s the weight loss. Where’s the fatigue. The illness. The fevers, infection, Where? I’ll tell you where. In here.” Ellen touched her temple. “Locked away because his mind hasn’t been given the key to release them. We can not give him the key. This is a classic case of mind over matter Dean and you know it. You know it. Seriously answer me this. How bad should he be?”

Dean took a slow breath. “Bad.”

“He’s not because he doesn’t know. In your opinion, how long does he have.”

“Ellen we can’t determine . . .”

“Dean.” Ellen snapped. “How long?”

“By the progression of the cancer, three months. Six tops.”

Ellen closed her eyes.

“But who knows. You’re theory may prove right.”

Ellen opened her eyes. “Are you agreeing with me.”

“Absolutely not. He has to be told. When, is the question. I need to seriously sit down and discuss this with you. As a co worker and doctor, El. But I can’t do it when you’re this emotional. There are options.”

“There are none.”

“You’re not looking.” Dean told her. “I’m sorry we are now faced with our first case. I’m sorry it has to be your patient. But why in God’s name you are wanting to pretend it doesn’t exist is beyond me. When have we ever stopped fighting. We have options. We just . . . we just have to find them.” Dean slowly moved to the lab door.

“He’s my friend Dean.”

Hand reaching for the door, Dean stopped. He looked over his shoulder at Ellen who stood by the counter. Her hands flat on the surface, body leaning into the edge, and her head down. Dean didn’t open the door, he locked it. Swallowing hard he walked back to Ellen and stood behind her. “El.”

“He’s my friend.” Her voice quivered. “What am I going to do?”

Closer Dean stepped into her. His hand brushed down the back of her hair before he placed his lips there. Against her he moved.

“He’s dying Dean. He’s dying. We have to help him.”

So heavy was the breath Dean let out that it actually moved Ellen’s hair. His hands laid upon her shoulders, then he slowly grazed them down her arms and rested on her hands. Ellen spread her fingers and Dean slipped his inside, Tightly their hands clenched at that moment. And with his body totally against Ellen’s, fingers locked with hers, Dean crossed his arms around her.

Ellen sunk, bodily and emotionally into his hold. Dean didn’t let go, he held on. And though Ellen made not a sound, not a movement, Dean knew she was crying.

He just knew.



“Man, you suck!” Robbie laughed out, watching from the tree branch.

Elliott joined in his laughter seeing Jimmy, one of Beginnings men roll into the high weeds. Practice was winding down. Sixteen men remained for the final drills. The sixteen that weren’t doing as well. Shaking his head and folding his arms Elliott readied to call out, but stopped. His head turned drastically to his right and his eyes zoomed outward for the sound he heard at the same time Robbie saw it. He backed up.

“Elliott.” Robbie summoned.

“Did you hear that?” Elliott called up to him.

“I see it.” Standing up some, Robbie peered out into the wooded area. “There’s movement. I can’t make out what it is.”

“Shit.” Elliott moved the microphone to his mouth. Just as he began to speak, he felt the hard slam hit into his legs and he looked down to the ground and to Jimmy’s head that laid there. From the decapitation, wide eyed, twitching neck, Elliott looked up to his unsuspecting men. “Pull in! Pull in now! We have in coming! Watch your backs!” He rushed to the tree by Robbie. “How many!”

“Can’t see.”

“Raise your weapon and pick them off.” Elliott jumped up and grabbed the limb to the tree lifting himself to a higher ground to see. He pulled out his revolver. “I’ll take east. You take west.” A shift of his eyes and he caught in his focus his men backing up into the clearing. “We’re sitting ducks.” He could hear and see the rustle of the trees and bush. He watched Robbie wait for a clear shot. “Tracking. Tracking.”

Mark looked perturbed holding the phone close to his ear. “No. Melissa, I’m listening to you. How can I not be. God, I’m working at least give me . . .”

A hiss brought Elliott’s voice. “Tracking!”

“Hold on Melissa.” Mark turned his chair and as he did he saw the fast blinking lights on the screen. “Fuck.” He slammed down the phone and rolled his chair close to the computer. His fingers clicked. “I’m here.” He spoke in the radio.

“How many?” Elliott asked.

“Packs of eight.” Mark answered fast. “Positioned . . . two to the north, one to the east and two to the west of you.” Mark, antsy waited for the numbers. “Forty. Positive.”

“Damn it. They seem on us..”

“They are . . .” Mark swallowed. “They’re right there. Right with you.” Mark closed his eyes when he didn’t hear anything from Elliott. After a hesitation, he picked up the phone and dialed. “Joe. We’re under attack.”

“All-lee fuckin in free. Come on.” Robbie said, braced in the tree, trying to get a shot. They moved low and toward the clearing where the Beginnings men stood in a ready stance. As ready as they could be, the blood of Jimmy not far

from their feet. Robbie wanted them to make a charge so he could take them down. And then it happened. A single unison savage cry and out from the trees they leaped. Robbie began to fire.

The fifteen Beginnings men stood in the clearing. Backs to each other the battle began. They fought off the spears, arrows and eventually the savages that tried for them. Gun fire rang out, and more hand to hand combat than shooting, entailed.

“Robbie!” Elliott called out and took a shot at a savage, knocking him back. “This isn’t going to work. Too close. We’re chancing our own men.”

“I’m with you.” Robbie pulled back his gun. He heard the whistle of it first, high and fast and then he felt the searing sharp pain as the arrow landed in the right side of his chest. The shock of the hit and force, sent Robbie stumbling. The gun fell to the ground then Robbie, backwards, crashed down from the tree. His side hit into the first branch, breaking it and he felt the air of his sail to the ground. Weakened Robbie reached out, gripped on with the strength of his fingertips to halt his hard fall. His feet dangled and swayed, then Robbie dropped.

Elliott saw it happening as he climbed down. Some of the forty savages changed their focus. They came forth in an attack mode for Robbie, and for him. Swinging down, Elliott hung onto the branch. Getting ready to lower himself, he was closely charged. The savage tossed his spear fast and Elliott’s way. A pivot of his body, still holding on, the spear missed. Elliott felt it as it grazed so close to his gut it could have nipped off the hairs on his stomach. His body swivelled around forward again and the savage was right before him. Rushing the weight of his body back, Elliott swung out hard, gripped the savage with his legs, locked his ankles, twisted his body and broke the savage’s neck. Dropping the savage, he let go of the branch and landed on his feet. As he stood, he pulled his sword, plunged it outward deep into the chest of another oncoming savage, retracted it and barreled Robbie’s way.

Robbie stumbled to his feet holding onto the arrow that protruded from his chest. He raised his eyes to the face of a savage then the head of a spear. Before he could react, he watched the savage’s head pop up in the air and fly backwards allowing the body to shudder and dance blindly around. A simple kick from Robbie dropped the body and exposed Elliott holding his sword.

Reaching out to Robbie’s chest, Elliott snapped the arrow at the head, and bent down for Robbie’s gun. “Can you?” He asked standing up.

Robbie took the gun and caught his breath. “Yeah. Shit. Watch out.” Quickly he reached out, laid his hand on Elliott’s head, pushed him down, extended his arm and fired. The force of the forehead blast, sent the savage flying back into his own explosion of blood.

“Thanks.” Elliott swung out his hand in a pat to Robbie. “Let’s finish this fight.” He rushed off to fight with the men.

Like a dog, Robbie twitched his head fast, checked out how bad he bled, shrugged it off and he too ran into the engaging battle between his men and the savages. A bloody battle, loud and strong, that the Bowman and Beginnings soldiers were not about to lose.

^^^

Frank caught the tossed tee shirt just as he stood from putting on his pants. He looked at his father who placed his boots on the bed. Tossing the shirt over his head, Frank ripped off his bandage, tucked the shirt in his pants and moved to the bed while fastening.

“Tracking says they all confined. Tower can’t spot them. They’re in area nineteen. Training. Too deep to see.”

Frank stomped into his boots. He held question on his face and opened his mouth.

“Forty.” Joe said. “Tracking didn’t see them coming. Yeah, I know. How’s that. Right?”

Frank tied his boots and nodded.

“Danny’s on his way up to check it out. Henry’s at armory getting . . .” Joe watched Frank hold up, one finger, then two, then three. “Yes. Those squads. Let’s hope Robbie and the Frank prodigy are handling it.”

Frank’s mouth began to form the word ‘Elliott’

“I know he worked all night. But he’s tough. He shouldn’t tire.”

Frank couldn’t help it, his eyes closed and a sick feeling hit him.

“Frank? What’s wrong?”

Frank shook his head and grabbed his shoulder harness. He tossed his revolver to his father as he fastened the harness and they both walked from the room.

“Jeep’s outside we’ll head you . . .” Joe’s phone rang and without hesitation he answered it. “Yeah.” Joe’s head dropped. “Thank God. Robbie? Are you all right? Good. Good. What about . . . shit. We’re on our way.” Joe beeped the phone off and turned to Frank who was waiting. “Situation’s over. But not without casualties. Let’s go.” Joe and Frank moved down the corridor.

^^^

All it took was one comforting squeeze of Dean’s hand and the shaking of Ellen’s hand stopped. She peered up to him as she worked with gratefulness, giving a soft smile. And before he backed up to finish his work he ran his hand down the back of her head.

Across the lab, Johnny filled with genuine disgust. His left eye fluttered as he fought to control his rolling eyes. And he knew it was time. “Dr. Dean.” Johnny lifted the Dictaphone headset. “Something’s not right about this tape.”

“What’s wrong?” Dean asked.

“Sounds weird.” Johnny shrugged. “Maybe it’s me. Did you do something to it?”

“I doubt it.” Dean walked over to the Dictaphone and placed on the headphones. He pressed played. From the digital data enhanced tape through the wires of the headset to Dean’s ears it blasted. The high squealing sound knocked into Dean with such a shock, he instinctively flung off the headphones with a painful grunt. His face winced up as he nearly doubled over into the counter. His shaking hand still held onto the headset.

“Dean.” Ellen rushed to him.

“Dr. Dean.” Johnny showed concern.

Dean stared out dazed. What had happened? Why was he feeling like that? Uncontrollable he felt the tremble build in his body.

“Dean?” Ellen called him.

Ellen’s voice had a reverberation to it. Distant in Dean’s head. He blinked hard and when he did he saw Bev.

“*Dean.*” Bev spoke his name in a moan flinging her head back showing clearly she was nude.

“Dean.” Ellen called again.

Dean turned to face her. “Bev.”

Ellen’s face curled in disgust. “Fuck you.”

Johnny tried not to laugh, he knew it would be seen. He cleared his throat.

“Dr. Dean, that’s uh . . . Ellen.”

“Huh?” Dean was confused. “What?”

“That’s Ellen.” Johnny pointed to Ellen across the lab.

“No kidding.” Dean shook his head.

“The tape?” Johnny asked.

“Something must be wrong with it.” Dean ejected the lid to the Dictaphone. “What’s the . . .”

“Dr. Dean.” Johnny called his name in a wince as Dean pulled out the tape.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

Dean shook his head. “Probably was yesterday’s dictation. Something was wrong with the player.” Dean walked across to the center of the lab. “I’ll redo them.” He opened the drawer at the counter.

“Dr. Dean what are you doing?”

“I’ll send it with the other tapes for Danny to erase and clean.” Dean shut the drawer and walked over to Ellen. “Something wrong?”

Ellen only glared at him.

“El?” Dean looked confused. “You look mad. Did I do . . .”

Andrea’s barrel into the lab stopped Dean’s question and caught all three of their attention. “Need all hands. On the double.” Andrea ordered. “We have incoming wounded. Savage attack on the hill.” Andrea flew back out.

“Shit. Elliott.” Ellen raced by Dean.

“Come on John.” Dean called to him as he too raced out.

“Behind ya.” Johnny said moving to the drawer where Dean had tossed the tape. He opened it.

“John?” Dean popped his head back in. “Let’s go.” He stood there waiting.

Nervously Johnny walked to him and together they left.

Denny held his hand high in an unnoticed wave watching as everyone flew from the lab. “No one waved back.”

Josh shrugged. “Maybe they didn’t see you. They looked in a hurry.”

“Yeah.”

“So like should we wait.” Josh asked.

“No. I know where they are.” Denny walked into the lab.

“We’re gonna get in trouble.”

“No we aren’t.” Denny scoffed. “Dr. Dean said I could have two.”

“But he’s not here to give them to you.” Josh said.

“But he said where they are.”

“Still.” Josh followed Denny to the counter. “How do you know you’re allowed.”

“If I wasn’t allowed how would I know where they are.”

“How do you know you know where they are.”

“Watch.” Denny opened a drawer. “See?” he pointed to a box containing small cassette tapes. “Duh.” Denny rolled his eyes. “Now we can be real recording artists.”

“Cool.”

“Yeah.” Taking three tapes, Denny closed the drawer and he and Josh left the lab.

^^^

“Robbie.” Joe whispered his name in relief as he and Frank pulled up in the jeep at the back gate. “Christ.” Joe spotted the red all over Robbie’s shirt. “He’s hurt.”

Frank jumped from the jeep at the same time, rushing to Robbie as he and the others made their way in.

“Hey.” Robbie grinned. “We kicked ass.”

“Robert.” Joe could see a portion of the arrow in his chest. “You’re injured.”

“Yeah.” Robbie looked at it. “Bonus Neville points.”

“In all seriousness. You all right?” Joe asked laying his hand on Robbie’s shoulder.

“Yes.” Robbie nodded. “We lost three men, we have seven injured. Not including me. I want to get a hold of Jess and have him survey by air. Check on our savage camp seventy-three miles north.”

“Didn’t we do that today?” Joe asked.

“We were going to after the training.” Robbie stated then saw Frank looking around. “Who you looking for?”

Frank mouthed the name ‘Elliott.’

“Oh.” Robbie nodded. “He’s gone.”

“Christ.” Joe exclaimed.

Frank covered his eyes.

“Yeah.” Robbie said. “He didn’t look too happy either.”

“I would think not.” Joe commented.

“Not at all. Had this look on his face I didn’t think Elliot could make. I think it was anger.” Robbie stated nonchalantly. “Immediately too.” He snapped his finger. “I told him, ‘Elliott, can’t you wait’. Not him. He didn’t answer, he just went.”

“Robert.” Joe had a scold to him. “Can you be a little more companionate.”

“What for?”

“Elliott.” Joe answered. “The man’s dead.”

Robbie laughed. “Dead? No he’s not. He’s gone. Sped off to tracking. And I need stitches. So . . . see ya.” Robbie flashed a grin and moved by Joe and Frank.

“There is something wrong with him.” Joe pointed at Robbie. “All right. Do what you have to do to regroup your staff. I’m heading up to tracking. I’m

curious myself.” Joe started to walk. “Get a hold of Jess. I want him in the air now.”

Frank nodded.

“And Frank. Good to have you out of the clinic.”

Thinking ‘did I even have a choice’ Frank moved on toward his incoming injured men.

^^^

Elliott raised his hand to knock on the closed tracking door, but didn’t. Merely placing himself into a calm state of inquiring, he walked in.

Danny was there with Mark, both looked up.

“Gentlemen,” Elliott greeted them and shut the door. “Mark. I need to know what happened.”

Mark nervously looked at Danny then back to Elliott.

“Did tracking fail us? Did it not show them? Were they to well hidden?” Elliott waited for a response. “Am I asking too many questions.”

“No.” Mark answered. “Tracking didn’t work.”

“I see.” Elliott looked to Danny. “What was it. Did they take it out. Perhaps we should get . . .” Elliott saw the expression on Danny’s face. Confused, nervous. “Danny?”

“Everything is fine now.” Danny stated.

“Now. I’m getting a feeling I’m not being told everything.” Elliott said. “Am I?” He watched both men look at each other. “Danny. *Did* tracking fail?” Elliott waited for an answer. “I can check history myself, I’d prefer not to. Did tracking fail.”

Danny shook his head. “No.”

Elliott nearly lost his breath. “No? So they were seen coming. When and where?” The silence and lack of response burned Elliott. “Mark? When and where?”

“I don’t know.” Mark answered.

“Danny?” Elliott questioned. “I’m assuming you pulled a history. When and where?”

“Tracking picked them up coming into the region at a fast grouping and steady pace.”

“When?” Elliott asked. “How long before we spotted them?”

Danny swallowed. “Eight minutes.”

“Eight minutes!” Elliott’s cool was limited and strained. “Eight minutes they were in scope and we were not warned at all? How could this happen? Mark?”

“I wasn’t paying attention.”

“You weren’t . . .” Elliott tried to regain his composure. “Three men are dead. Many are injured. It is your job to watch . . .”

“It’s not your job to correct me!” Mark stood enraged and faced off Elliott. “Who the hell do you think you are coming in here and getting . . .”

“Sit your ass down!!” Elliott blasted, silencing Mark. “Don’t stand off to me again! Is that clear! It is my job to ensure my men are safe. It is my job to ensure the safety of this community. It is *your* job to aid in those tasks. *If* you

can not do your job, then you sir, should not have this job. Do not for one second question the words and actions of others when you . . . you had the warning at your fingertips and you failed to deliver it. Three men are dead. That is three too many.” After another glare, Elliott turned around to see Joe standing in the open doorway. He took a breath, gave a quick snap to attention, then walked by Joe out the door.

“Elliott.” Joe called out as he stepped from tracking and closed the door. “Wait.”

Elliott stopped and turned around and stood nearly at attention. “Mr. Slagel, sir.”

“About what happened in there.”

Elliott nodded. “Perhaps my words were strong, but their meaning . . .”

“No.” Joe stopped him and walked to him. “I’m not questioning your word. I hear dit all. I want to know your recommendation for punishment.”

“None, sir.”

“None?” Joe questioned. “He screwed up. He didn’t pay attention. You told him three men are dead.”

“Exactly.” Elliott stated. “He’ll have that on his mind. Any reprimandation we give will pale in comparison to the burden he will carry over that.”

“Good enough. Thank you.” Joe nodded then saw Elliott just standing there, as if waiting. Just as Joe was about to question, he realized who he was dealing with. “That . . . that will be all son.”

“Thank you, sir.” Elliott gave a nod of acknowledgment, pivoted a turn and walked off.

“Christ.” Joe tossed his head side by side and went into tracking for answers of his own.

^^^

Johnny checked the hallway to make sure no one was coming that could see him. He snuck back into exam room one where Bev sat. “I only have a minute. Dr. Dean will get back to the lab soon.”

“So it didn’t work?”

“Not completely. I don’t think.” Johnny shrugged. “I called George, he said his people told him it has to be on him at least ten seconds. Dean fuckin flung it off in one.”

“Damn it.” Bev shook her head.

“Yeah. But I have a plan. I’ll get his little ass. This little attack is perfect too. It’ll work for us.”

“What is it?”

“I’ll let you know later, right now . . .” Johnny backed up to the door. “I have to take care of that tape. Stay put for a minute then leave.”

“O.K.” Bev waved with a giggle.

Johnny, slightly rolling his eyes, walked out of the examining room, turned left and quickly headed to the lab. As soon as he entered he closed the door, figuring he’d hear someone enter. He raced to the drawer where Dean tossed the tape, and opened it. Johnny saw the box of cassette tapes. But he didn’t see the unlabeled one, his. “Shit.” Johnny rummaged through the drawer “Where the fuck’s my tape.” Not seeing it, he slammed the drawer shut. “Fuckin Danny he’s

got to jump on every job.” Johnny held up his hands and calmed himself. “All right. Not a problem. I have another.” Knowing his time was limited and it was stupid to waste it on that tape. A tape that if anyone listened to wouldn’t comprehend anyhow, he hurried, while the lab was empty, and gathered what he needed for his ‘Dean’ plan--part two.

^^^

“Empty.” Robbie stated as he tossed a clipboard onto Joe’s desk “Jess said the camp is cleaned out.”

Frank threw his hands in the air.

“I know.” Joe told Frank, then looked at Robbie. “They were there yesterday. Didn’t you estimate a hundred.”

“Yep.” Robbie said. “Always a hundred. No matter how many hit us, no matter how many we take out, always a hundred. Continuously fed from their base. But, that was yesterday at six in the evening. Today. Gone.”

“So they left in the night.” Joe stated. “Typical. So the next step is . . .”

“Done.” Robbie stated. “Page two. Jess’ coordinates. He scaled around. Nothing.”

“That’s a large moving camp.” Joe shook his head as he viewed the readout on the clipboard. “They’d move slow. So . . . where the hell did they go and why can’t we spot them?”

^^^

“All work and no play . . .” Jess said softly entering the lab where Ellen worked at the far counter. “Makes Ellen . . .”

Ellen turned around. “A dull girl?”

“Miserable.” Jess moved to her.

“Thanks.” Ellen grumbled. “You look tired.

“I am. A little.”

“What brings you here?”

“Thought I’d walk you home.” Jess suggested.

“I can’t. I have four patients that I want to monitor for a while.”

“Who has the kids? Dean?” Jess asked.

“No. He’s working too. Josh is holding the fort. No.” Ellen held up a finger. “Don’t cringe. He’ll do fine. Him and Denny are writing songs. They’re fine. But thanks for stopping to see if I wanted an escort.”

“Actually I had an ulterior motive.”

“Which is?”

“I know it was heavy on your mind. How did things go with Elliott today and the news?”

Ellen immediately turned her back and resumed working.

“Ellen?” Jess moved closer. “Please tell me you told him.”

Ellen pretended she wasn’t asked anything.

“Ellen. He has to know. He has the right to know.”

“We can’t . . .” Ellen’s voice cracked. “We can’t do anything for him. So

why?”

“Why? He just should . . . know. You better tell Elliott before someone else does.”

“Tell me what?” Elliott interrupted with curiosity as he walked in the lab.

Ellen snarled at Jess. “Asshole.” She clenched her jaws.

Mouthing the words, ‘tell him’. Jess laid his hand on her cheek and backed up. “I heard you did good today Elliott.”

“Thanks.” Elliott nodded.

“I’ll leave you two to talk.” Jess moved to the door. “El, should I shut this.”

Folding her arms, Ellen nodded. She forced a smile. “So, uh, what are you doing here? I thought you’d be sleeping.”

“I’m on my way to.” Elliott answered. “I wanted to tell you I’d be at Robbie’s. The children are all home now and . . . you don’t mind do you?”

“No. No. I understand. Please get some rest in peace . . .” Ellen’s eyes widened. “I mean. Sleep in peace.”

Elliott chuckled. “You seem nervous. What did you want to tell me.”

“Um . . . I heard you did an excellent job today. I’m very proud of you.”

“Thanks. I just did my job. But that’s not it. Is it?”

“No.”

Elliott waited. “You’re wanting to break our date.”

“God, I wish that was it. I mean. No!” She shook her head. “I don’t want to break our date and I don’t wish that was what I had to tell you. I wish what I had to tell you was so minuscule.”

“Bad news.” Elliott nodded.

“Do you want to go somewhere else and talk?”

“No. Here will be fine.”

“Maybe now is not a good time, you know with you going to get some sleep and . . .”

“Ellen. Talk.”

Ellen took a deep breath. “Come in the back, we have a little table and chairs back there.” Ellen led him to the back room, stopped hurried to the center counter, grabbed a folder and proceeded into the back room. “Have a seat.” She pointed to a chair. When Elliott sat down so did she.

Elliott rubbed his hands together. “What’s going on.”

Ellen closed her eyes and scratched her head. She looked at the folder, Elliott’s folder then to Elliott. “O.K.” She spoke calm. “The human body is very complex. It’s made up of multitudes of different organisms, each with a different job to make our bodies function.” Ellen paused to inhale deeply. “We all have red blood cells and white blood cells. The white blood cells, their primary job is to fight off infection. White blood cells increase at infection time causing the production of more white blood cells. Sometimes infection doesn’t have to be there for the cells to increase. Are you following me?”

“Yes.”

“Whatever the case, when there’s a large increase, the body can’t always keep up with this production. It starts spitting out immature cells called, blasts. They therefore begin to take over. Therefore increasing the number of white blood cells we can count. Therefore becoming . . .”

“Leukemic.” Elliott said.

“Yes.”

A small swallow preceded Elliott’s calm look. “I’m taking it that you aren’t giving me a medical lesson because you feel I would be a good doctor.”

“No.” Ellen shook her head.

“Then tell me.”

“Elliott.”

“Ellen, tell me.”

“Your blood has become leukemic. We believe it began in the clavicle lymph node region . . .”

“Hodgkin’s.”

“Yes.”

Elliott nodded. “And where is the progress of the illness now?”

“In the blood.”

“Glands?”

“Starting.”

Elliott nodded.

“We are so limited with an illness of this nature. This is the first case we . . .”

“The test Dean ran yesterday. That wasn’t for a donor program was it?”

“No.” Ellen shook her head. “It was a small tissue biopsy. The gland he took from first, usually would tell us the progression if any in the glands. The more progressed it is there, chances are it has spread throughout the glands. The less . . . the better. Your readings say the infection of the glands just began.”

“How long have you known?” Elliott asked.

“Dean confirmed it last night. We have suspected for a little while.”

“We had coffee this morning. Why didn’t you tell me?” Elliott waited for an answer. “Jess was telling you that you had to tell me. Ellen? Were you not going to tell me?”

Ellen just shook her head.

“Excuse me.” Elliott stood up.

“Elliott.” Ellen reached for his arm. “I’m sorry. I . . .”

“What?” Elliott asked with a snap. “You were going to withhold this valuable information from me. This is my body. My life. I placed my trust in you Ellen as a doctor and as my friend. Do you know how difficult that is to do? You’re a woman. I’ve not found a woman I can trust since before the plague. I thought you were different.”

“I am.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me.”

“You have to understand I didn’t know what we could do for you.”

Elliott nearly gasped. “And you took it upon yourself to give up my fight for me?”

“Elliott you weren’t sick. You weren’t showing any symptoms.”

“And you thought if I knew I would immediately start to show these symptoms?” He shook his head. “I have news for you Ellen, I still won’t show these symptoms. Knowledge or not. I don’t go down easy and I certainly will not go down without a fight. But I need to know I am fighting. And I will fight this. I cannot believe you, you of all people would take this approach. You say I am the first case of this kind? Why in the world would you want to bury it instead of using it to stop it from happening to someone else?”

“Elliott.” Ellen pleaded his name.

“I have to go. Excuse me.” Elliott turned and walked from the back room.

“Elliott wait.” Ellen raced after him. “Please.” Emotional, she grabbed for his arm, “Elliott.”

“Ellen.” He stopped walking and said her name sternly as he turned around. “I have to leave.”

“But . . .”

“I don’t want to talk right now. Please don’t chase me or beckon me to talk to you. You’re better than that and it’s degrading. I don’t want to see you degraded at my expense or anger. Please.” He stared for a moment at her then turned with an edge and walked to the door. As he flung it open Dean was getting ready to walk in.

Aside from feeling the hostility of the opening door, Dean almost felt the force of Elliott’s body. “Whoa. Elliott.”

“Dr. Hayes.” Elliott stopped and took on an official tone. “The other Dr. Hayes . . .”

Dean’s eyes shifted into the lab when Elliott called her that. And just as he thought, Ellen’s head dropped.

“ . . . has told me of my illness. I would like you sir, to take what ever liberties with me as you see fit in fighting this illness. Test, medications, treatments. Whatever. I will be as much help as you need. Perhaps together, we can benefit others.”

“Elliott listen we’re basically starting from scratch. We . . .”

Elliott smiled gently. “If you sir can beat the plague that wiped out the world, surely you can control this illness. I put my faith in you.” Giving a firm squeeze to Dean’s arm, Elliott turned and walked off.

‘Ellen had told him’ was the only thing that barreled through Dean’s mind as he walked slowly into the lab. Elliott was the one battling a life threatening illness and Ellen looked as if she were the one who was told she was dying. “El.” He called her name softly. “Did you want to talk?”

“What’s there to talk about? Elliott?” Ellen shook her head. “I blew it. As a doctor and as a friend, I blew it, Dean. And right now, I can’t handle it. Excuse me.” She sniffed once, short and hard, grasped up the folders off the counter and whisked past Dean.

CHAPTER FORTY

“El.” Dean walked into the lab. “I’m heading home. Wanna walk with me?”

Ellen shook her head as she sat at the counter. “I’m monitoring the infection of one of my patients. I just want to be here if I need to change their medication.”

“O.K. If you need me.”

“Thanks.” Ellen said then watched Dean walk away. “Dean?”

“Yeah?” He stopped at the door.

“Your work.” She pointed to a stack of folders.

“Shit. Thanks.” Dean hurried back, grabbed the stack, swept them up in his stride and walked out. He didn’t notice the test results that fell on the floor.

“He’s coming.” Johnny whispered as he flew around from the side of the clinic.

Bev stood by the glass doors as Johnny backed up against the wall. “What if someone sees you.”

“Who? We’ll claim he’s drunk and the guard’s way back in the living section now so . . .”

“Here he comes.” Bev smiled as the glass door opened.

Dean walked straight down the steps. “Excuse me.”

Bev blocked his way. “Hi Dean. I wanted to talk to you.”

“Bev I really don’t want to talk . . .” Dean shuddered. He felt the sharp pain hit the back of his neck in the form of a pinch, but before he could turn around everything spun. His arms dropped and so did his folders. Then Dean began to fall forward into Bev.

Getting up to get something to drink, Ellen saw the results laying on the floor. “Dean.” she lifted them. “Maybe I can catch him.” She hurried from the lab.

Bev strained as Dean leaned into her tall body, head against her. “I’m pregnant. I . . . can’t hold . . . him up.”

Johnny was hunched by the wall out of sight collecting all the papers Dean dropped. “I have to pick these up. One more second.”

Rolling her eyes, Bev secured her arms around a passed out Dean.

In her stride down the main corridor to the front door Ellen stopped. Though they were still a small distance from her, Ellen could clearly see Dean in Bev’s arms. Shaking her head in disgust and forgetting about giving him those results, she returned to the lab.

^^^

“Christ.” Joe cringed in the darkness as he followed behind Frank. “Having Robbie go, Frank, I understand. Dan. Iffy. Jess should be here, so I understand you not wanting to put a man who’s worked all day up there. Johnny . . .”

Frank stopped walking. He pointed to his watch and drastically looked around.

“Yeah, he’s coming. He said he had to do something. He should be here. Besides, he still has time. Lift off isn’t for a half hour.”

Frank nodded and moved on.

“But you.” Joe saw the hanger getting closer. “You’re not talking Frank. We can’t chance radio silence if something happens.”

Again, Frank stopped. He turned around with a grin and pointed to his temple.

“You have a bright idea about that?”

Frank nodded.

“Tell me.”

“Hey Joe!” Henry called out as he walked from the hanger.

Frank pointed to Henry.

“Henry is your bright idea?” Joe laughed.

Henry scoffed. “Joe. I’m gonna be Frank’s radio communication.”

Joe laughed. “Henry. You’re going up in the air with Frank?”

“Yes.”

“At night.”

“Yes.” Henry stated.

Again, Joe laughed. “You do know he doesn’t fly well as it is.”

“Joe.” Henry snickered. “I find that hard to believe. He’s Frank. He can fly.”

“Ask him.” Joe indicated to Frank.

“You can fly good.” Henry asked wanting reassurance even though he firmly believed in Frank’s ability to do it all. “Right Frank?”

At first it was an innocent thinking look that hit Frank. Then he just shook his head and went into the hanger.

“Oh my God.” Henry looked panicked.

“Nice knowing you.” Joe gave a swat on the arm to Henry and walked into the hanger.

^^^

It was a stand still stretch that Ellen took after booting down the computers in the lab. A long evening had come to the end for her and she couldn’t wait to get out. After shutting off the lab lights, she moved to the sink to turn on the signature night light. Turning around, she froze. Elliott stood in the doorway.

She could feel her heart jump in nervousness. She knew he had slept. Things were probably on his mind and he knew what he wanted to say. Taking a breath, Ellen walked across the lab.

“Can we talk?” Elliott asked as he stepped in.

“Sure.” Ellen said coming off more cold than the nervous she was. She leaned against the counter and waited for him.

"Ellen, about today."

"Stop." Ellen held up her hand. "I know . . . I know what I did was wrong. And I just want you to know, so you have a piece of mind, I'm giving Dean all your information. He'll take over as your doctor from now on."

"What? No." Elliott shook his head. "Where is this coming from."

"You said you don't trust me."

"No. I will correct you there. I said I placed my trust in you. I never once said I didn't trust you anymore."

"Do you?"

"Trust you?" Elliott nodded. "Yes. I don't want to not trust you."

"But you're mad at me."

"Not anymore. I was irritable earlier and tired. Maybe I came off a little more hostile than . . ."

"Elliott." Ellen gasped out his name.

"What?"

"Your reaction had nothing to do with you. It was me. All me. All right? Don't even go there blaming yourself for getting mad at me. I was wrong."

"And I would rather not be angry or bitter with you. Not you. You made a choice. I believe you would have changed your mind on that eventually . . ." He glanced at Ellen who looked the other way. "I'll just uh . . ." He brought his lips close to her ear to whisper. "Believe that."

Ellen's stomach fluttered at the feel of his redemption of her. She shifted her eyes to his face so close and whispered almost inaudibly. "Thank you."

Elliott smiled staying close to her for a moment longer before pulling back and standing straight. "O.K." he cleared his throat. "I just need to know who all knows."

"You and me, of course. Dean. Jess because he was there and . . . and Frank because of some stupid new bonding thing him and Dean have. The 'ex mess'."

"Can we not have anyone else know?"

"Absolutely." Ellen nodded. "I'll speak to everyone personally and have them not say anything."

"Good. I want no preconception of the way I'll work because I'm sick. I won't let it effect me. Frank, he won't change any responsibilities for me when I'm in Beginnings will he?"

"Frank?" Ellen chuckled. "Frank has this way of working people so they don't feel sorry for themselves. He helped Dean out when he was blind."

"Frank was blind?"

"No Dean."

"Dean was blind?" Elliott was shocked.

"Yeah, then Danny fixed him. Danny and Henry."

"Danny and Henry aren't doctors."

"No. They created the microchip in Dean's brain."

Elliott looked so confused. "Dean has a microchip in his brain."

"Yeah, he's a SUT."

"A SUT."

"Stupid uniformed target,. But he isn't stupid and definitely doesn't wear a uniform. He could be a target. You know us little people."

"I'm lost." Elliott dropped to a lean on the counter.

"I'd expect no less." Ellen watched Elliott's head lower as he laughed. "I like you Elliott. I like you lot."

Elliott lifted his head slowly. "Really?"

"Really."

He stood up again. "Yet another reason to be here. I like you too." He winked. "And I've been told I have a free evening tomorrow. A break in the 'Be-a-Frank' training."

Ellen chuckled.

"So . . . I was wondering if maybe, even just for a short while, if you and I could . . . I know I've already asked you on a date. I don't want to be pushy. I just, you know. Want some time. No that doesn't sound right. I want to know . . ."

"Yes."

"Yes? Really? I didn't ask."

"I know where you're going. Yes, I'll spend the evening with you. We'll go to the hall, play some pool, hang out."

"I'd like that."

"I would too." Ellen lowered her head in blush. "Thank you for not staying mad at me."

"It wouldn't be right to do. We're friends."

"Yeah we are." Unexpectedly, Ellen stepped into Elliott and placed her arms around his neck.

"Ellen." Elliott swallowed. "I asked you once to warn me that you were going to do this. I don't want to miss it."

"You won't miss it Elliott. Because I'm not letting go until *you* do." Ellen clung tighter to him.

More than he wanted to admit, Elliott needed that comfort he felt coming from Ellen's arms. He ran his hand gently on her back, then pressed in a firm feeling motion. It was real, she was real, he just had to be sure. Wrapping his arms around her, Elliott closed his eyes. It had been so long since he had anyone in his arms, a body so close, touching his. A tight embrace. And even though he felt a little guilty for liking it, as if taking advantage of his friends generosity, Elliott held on to Ellen.

^^^

A glare of damnation was on Johnny's face as he braced the phone between his shoulder and ear. His right eye rolled way behind his head as his hands worked to place the headphone on Dean's head.

Bev stood nervously by the bed in her house biting her nails and waving Johnny to hurry up.

Johnny gave a quick snap of a glare at Bev then dropped the headset, flung his head back and stomped once. "Henry. Henry. Stop. All right? I know my Dad isn't yelling at me like this. Put my Pap on." He held up a finger to Bev. "Pap."

"Johnny where the hell are you?" Joe asked. "We want to go in five minutes."

"I'm on my way."

"Now." Joe told him.

"Sorry Pap. I was working on a uh surprise for my father. I thought I'd have it finished for this flight. You know."

"That's nice of you. However . . ."

"I know. I know. Get my ass up there. See ya in a minute." Straightening his neck, Johnny let the phone drop. It clunked hard when it beamed Dean in the head. "Whoops."

Bev gasped. "That's not right." She took the phone, turned it off, and brushed Dean's head so daintily with her fingertips as if he were diseased. "No blood."

"Good." Johnny secured the headset on him.

"He won't wake up. Right?"

"Hell no. I smacked him with enough Bunny Thorazine to keep him out until way into tomorrow." Johnny snickered as he started the tape. "Feeding data."

"Tomorrow morning?"

"Yeah. Won't it be fun for him to wake up and find out he's here." Johnny gave a 'he-he' type snicker. "Almost done."

"What am I supposed to do. I don't want to be here with him. What if he wakes up and wants to have sex."

"God Bev." Johnny shook his head in disgust. "You're fat."

"I'm pregnant."

"Same difference. Done." Johnny shut off the player and took the headphones. "I'll keep this with me so it doesn't just hang around. I have to go."

"Johnny."

"Bev. George says I have to do this one. It benefits him as well."

"But what about . . ." Bev twitched her head back. "Him. I don't want to be here all night."

"O.K., go to my house."

Bev grinned wide.

Johnny shook his head in irritation and left the bed room. "And no. I'm not having sex with you."

Bev's mouth dropped open in shock and then she chased after him.

Dean let out a simple moan, rolled onto his side, smiled and snuggled the pillow.

^^^

Ellen could smell the silence as she drew closer to her home. But it didn't stop her from fearing what she'd see when she went inside. Josh and Denny babysat. Which meant, food on the floor, carpet, couch. Dishes, Ellen didn't even know she had, stacked up in the sink. Not to mention the free for all the bedrooms probably turned into. She only hoped that her exhaustion would hold off for just a little while because she hated going to sleep in a messy house.

Taking that 'I'm ready' breath, Ellen opened the door and nearly fell over. It not only looked clean, it smelled clean. "Oh my God."

"Hey." Jess peeked out the opening between the kitchen and diningroom.

“Jess?” Ellen shut the door, stepped inside and kicked off her shoes. “What are you doing here?”

“Hope you don’t mind.”

“No.” Ellen walked to the kitchen. The minute she stepped inside, Jess handed her a cup of tea. “Oh shit.” She smiled. “You’re spoiling me.”

“Andrea called and said you were finally on your way home. Hungry?”

“Yeah.”

“Good.” Jess opened the fridge. “I made us some sandwiches., thought we could . . .”

“Jess. What’s going on?”

“You’re mad. I’m sorry.”

“No.” Ellen sipped her tea. “I’m surprised you’re here.”

“I wanted to stop back at the clinic. I felt kind of bad abandoning you in your talk to Elliott. But then, when I came by to check on how Josh and Denny were handling the twins and Joey and Nick. Man . . .”

“What?” Ellen looked horrified.

“This place looked like a tornado hit it. So I stayed and me and Alex got the place under control. The last of the tribe zonked out about twenty minutes ago.”

“Billy.”

“Billy.” Jess nodded and continued in the fridge. He pulled out a plate. “And . . . I was kind of hoping you wanted the company.”

“Love it.”

“I went through your tapes.”

“Oh God.” Ellen smiled “You aren’t gonna bitch about my movie choices are you?”

“No. I saw this great Barbara Stanwick movie.”

“I love Barbara.”

“Oh, me too.” Jess said. “Len and I never missed a Barbara movie when it was on. Feel like just hanging, eating and watching.”

“Lead the way.”

Grabbing some towels, plate in hand, Jess moved from the kitchen.

Ellen looked at how upbeat he was, sitting on the couch, sandwiches on the coffee table, getting ready to settle in. “You’re . . . you’re not minding this companionship thing.” Ellen smiled at him impressed “I have a feeling you’re gonna end up doing better than you thought.”

“You think.”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe with you.” Jess laid a napkin down on both sides of the plate. “I can be, really be who I am in front of you. Nothing false. Thank you for that.”

“You’re welcome for that.” Ellen sat down on the couch next to him and saw the box of the movie he picked out. Her expression dropped.

“What’s wrong?” Jess asked.

“I love this movie. But . . . I’m gonna cry.”

“Oh, Good. Me too.”

Ellen giggled, grabbed her sandwich and sat back on the couch, a little closer with Jess, to watch the movie. “This is great. And to think, Robbie passed on this.”



There was a tinny, wet sound to it as Henry, head deeply emerged, threw up in Joe's waste paper basket.

Joe tapped his fingers on his desk. Not only annoyed with Henry's upheavals, but Robbie's snickering at him as well. "Done?" Joe asked Henry.

After one more nonproductive gag, Henry set down the can. "Yes. Sorry. Your son, Joe."

"I warned you."

"But I didn't think it would be true." Henry defended. "He's Frank."

Joe saw Frank nod arrogantly. "Yeah, let's just feed his ego, Henry. Anyhow. Who found them?"

Robbie raised his hand. "Me of course."

"Of course." Joe rolled his eyes. "And?"

"Night vision shows, like usual, about a hundred." Robbie answered. "Now a hundred and twenty miles northwest of us."

Joe leaned far back in his chair. He rocked in his thoughts. "That's like really in an odd direction. They're retreating. Makes no sense. Where in the hell are they going."

Frank held up a finger, grabbed a pen from Joe, a tablet from the desk and happily wrote quickly. He held up his sign as if he were on a game show.

Joe read it out loud. "*We follow them . . .*"

Frank turned the page of the tablet and wrote more. He held that up as well.

"*We got them.*" Joe nodded in his reading of Frank's note.

Frank wrote again.

"*A lot more than a hundred.*" Joe read.

A flip of the page and Frank moved the pen rapidly. He held up the sheet that only said "*Because they're going. . .*" Frank began to write dramatically slow.

"Christ Frank. Get on with it." Joe snapped. "If we follow them, we got them, a lot more because . . . because they're going where?"

Frank grinned and held up the tablet. "*Home.*"

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

October 21
Beginnings, Montana

It was one of those silly dreams that Ellen was having. And almost every aspect of it--in the dream state--made perfect sense. Even though when Ellen awoke she would baffle over it all day. It was Josephine's wedding, and Ellen even produced tears in her dream watching the blessed event. Josephine looking so in love, her hair not gray, but red. Her gown stunning as she married Henry. And Henry glowed as well. How happy Ellen was for them in her dream, wondering if the toaster was an appropriate gift or should she have given cash. Wishing she was dressed as nicely as Jenny Matoose who wore a purple polka dot bathing suit and a bright orange rubber duck around her waist.

The only thing Ellen couldn't figure out was that pounding against her head. That continuous pounding that caused her to ask Joe in the dream, 'what's hitting my head?' And Joe telling her. "The sky is falling." A steady pounding that carried through the ceremony into the reception blocking out the sound of *The Brady Bunch* as they performed the music. Greg Brady was quite the flirtatious guy with Ellen in his Johnny Bravo outfit, and Florence Henderson didn't like it one bit. Giving Ellen the evil eye telling her she'd better wake up.

And then Ellen did.

Frank.

Ellen shuddered as she saw the tip of Frank's finger getting ready to poke her in the head again. "Stop!" She sprang up. "God." she rubbed her head. "Were you doing that?"

Frank nodded and handed her a cup of coffee.

"Thanks. Wait." Ellen swung her legs over the bed. "Why are you here. You have a home."

Frank smiled, gave a 'yeah, I know' look then indicated to his rear end.

"But? But what?" Ellen asked.

It was the Frank sequence of rapid pointing. Eye, head, eye, then night stand.

"You thought you would what?"

Grinning Frank, gave Ellen a thumbs up, so impressed at her charade skills with him. Then he laid his index finger on his eyes before pointing forward and motioning his hand about.

"See everyone?"

Another thumbs up was given by Frank.

"That's nice." Ellen sipped her coffee. "Gosh, you come here . . ."

Frank nodded.

"I know you'll get the kids up, ready and off to school for me."

He nodded as if to say 'Absolutely'

"You make me coffee . . ."

Frank smiled.

"Breakfast."

The smile dropped from Frank's face.

"Clean my house . . ."

Frank held up his hand.

“Man are the men in the community spoiling me. Did you know that?”

Hands on hips, Frank rolled his eyes.

“Did I tell you I’m going out with Elliott tonight.”

Wide went Frank’s eyes.

“Pre-date. You know. You don’t mind do you?”

Frank opened his mouth.

“Didn’t think so.” Ellen stood up. “I just love how agreeable you are anymore.” she moved to the bathroom and stopped. “Oh, I’ll have my eggs scrambled.”

Frank’s jaw shifted from side to side, uselessly biting his tongue from saying anything. He tossed his hands up and left the bedroom for the housekeeper task he unspokenly agreed to, when all he wanted to do was just stop by and wave ‘hi’.

^^^

To look at the bed, the left side had always been Dean’s. And even not living with Ellen, he was still in the habit of sleeping on that side and rolling to his left just before he woke up. Empty bed or not. And pulling from the deep slumber, Dean rolled to his left.

Bang

The fall was short and the floor he landed on was hard. It jolted the headache that slumbered right long with him and as if he were hung over. Dean’s head daggered in pain.

“Oh, God.” Dean squinted, hands feeling the carpeting and when things came into focus he focused on the two dark beaded eyes of a stuffed animal. With a shriek and a throb to his head, Dean sprung up. He stumbled to a stand, and nausea hit him along with something else.

A vision.

“Dean” Bev’s voice moaned as she flung her head back. It was as if he were looking up to her in the image he had. Naked, straddling, groping her own breasts. “Dean, oh.”

Dean grunted in confusion as the image left his mind in a blink of static, and was replaced with another.

Music. Soft. Moaning. Bev below him, her eyes raising up.

Static.

Image gone.

Pain.

Louder Dean groaned, digging the palms of his hand into his eye-sockets feeling as if his eyes were going to fall from his head. He rubbed his eyelids hard and ran his hands down his face as he raised up his view. “What?” Dean spoke out loud not recognizing the bedroom he was in. “Where?” He spun around looking. The bed was made, messed up from where he laid on top. The room was feminine. Dean was dressed, all but his shoes and socks.

Where was he?

Each step to get out of the bedroom hurt. Each hard pat his bare feet made against the floor went straight to his head. As he reached for the bedroom door, he saw it on the dresser. The ‘Daddy’s Girl’ Teddy bear. He recognized it well.

Henry was playing with it when they searched . . . Bev's house.

"Shit!"

Dean flung opened the door, and pain or not, he flew as fast as he could to the steps. Lunging for that first step, Dean's foot came down upon a woman's flat shoe. His ankle twisted, his foot slid on to its side, then Dean lost his balance, and head over heels, tumbled down the stairs.

^^^

Coffee mug in hand, Ellen walked off her porch still chuckling at the thought of her well arranged breakfast plate. Frank cooked for her all right, but he was making sure she understood exactly what he wanted to reiterate to her. So eggs arranged, the food item spelled out '*Date. Us. Sat.*'

"Ellen." Elliott called out in the distance.

Ellen stopped walking toward town and turned around. Elliott was coming in from the underdeveloped section. "Hey." she walked his way.

"Heading to the clinic?" Elliott asked, carrying a clipboard.

"Yep. Early too. Look at me. Frank's at the house getting the kids up."

"I thought he would be sleeping. He's still injured."

"Frank's fine." Ellen flung her hand.

"He . . . he still can't speak." Elliott said confused.

"Yeah." Ellen nodded with a fast smile then a laugh. "And do you know what he did? He took the eggs and made them . . . made them . . ."

"What?" Elliott tilted his head.

"Scrambled."

"Oh. That was uh, nice."

"Wanna walk with me?" Ellen asked. "Are you headed that way?"

"To Frank's office."

"Good." Just as Ellen turned to walk with Elliott, she heard the banging of a closing screen door. At first she thought it was hers, and then she saw Joe walking from his house next door. "Hey Joe."

"Morning." Joe had that early sound to his voice as he stepped off his porch.

"Walk with us?" Ellen asked.

"Why not." Joe reached into his pocket and grabbed a cigarette. "Everything go well last night Elliott?"

"Yes, Mr. Slagel. Very well."

Joe shifted his eyes at Ellen's snicker. "What?"

Another snicker escaped Ellen. "Mr. Slagel." She shook her head and sipped her coffee.

"So, Elliott." Joe said. "I hear we're losing you."

A choke, then a spray of coffee come from Ellen.

"What in Christ name is wrong with you?" Joe snapped at her.

Elliott patted her on the back. "Yes, I return . . . I return to New Bowman tomorrow. I'll assist in rounds, helping Frank out like he asked. Then do some training with Robbie and the men going out."

"And this is all before you escort Danny and Henry into New Bowman for that pre trial shit. By eight thirty?"

"Yes." Elliott answered. "We're starting at four."

Ellen slowed in her walking as they hit the main living section. “Elliott if you have to get up early tomorrow we can cancel if . . .”

“Absolutely not.” Elliott shook his head.

The odd sound of another banging screen door echoing in the early morning, made all three of them stop. Henry came from Josephine’s with his toolbox.

Ellen laughed.

Joe was inquisitive. “Henry, what in Christ’s name are you doing coming out of Josephine’s at six in the morning.”

“Oh!” Ellen snapped her finger. “I dreamt this. Oh, my God, what if I’m psychic. I dreamt you married Josephine, Henry and . . .”

“Ellen.” Joe shut her up. “We don’t want to hear that.” With a cringe he started to walk again. Henry joined them.

“Oh my God Ellen.” Henry was aghast. “I can’t believe you would dream I married Josephine.”

“You came from her house.” Ellen defended. “What were you doing there.”

“Fixing her duct wok.” Henry closed his mouth tightly when Ellen laughed. “You are so disgusting. She’s old. That’s not nice. She wanted to clean the dust from on top of it in the basement and knocked it all down. God, get your mind out of the gutter.”

“Sorry.” Ellen tried to drink her coffee. “So she didn’t hit on you?”

Mumbling, Henry spoke something that sounded, like ‘E ab a ut.’

“What?”

Ellen
tugged
on her
ear.

“What
was
that.”

“She kept grabbing my butt! All right! And you need to talk to her Joe!” Henry scolded. “I am not a sex object for a ninety year old lady.”

Joe winced. “Do we need to hear this? No. I’ll talk to her. And no more laughing Ellen.” Joe shook his head as he walked with them He was at least glad Elliott didn’t say much.

It was a rumbling moan that rattled from Dean’s chest as he lifted himself to a sitting position on the floor. He leaned against the wall by the base of the steps grabbing his head. “God, I knocked myself out.” If his head didn’t hurt before, Dean was experiencing a pain that he knew there was no escape. Hand bracing the bottom step, Dean lifted to stand.

He screamed.

His knee. His elbow. His legs. His back and head, all blasted him in pain the second the weight of his body shifted. Trying to gain his balance Dean spotted his shoes and socks by the door.

Agony be damned, Dean was getting out there. Moving like a decrepit old

man, Dean scurried from the stairs, picked up his belongings, flung open the front and made his early morning escape from the house.

Not caring that the screen door banged, Dean dropped his shoes right there on Bev's small stoop, and foregoing his socks, Dean fought the aches to slip into his shoes. And then . . . Dean looked up. He cringed. He closed his eyes and then he whimpered.

Joe cleared his throat as he, Ellen, Elliott and Henry all stopped cold in front of Bev's home. "Morning Dean." Joe said, then without hesitation, moved on.

Dean saw the look on Ellen's face. Her brief closing of her eyes, the sway of her head and the cold walk away she made with Elliott's hand resting firm on her back. Opening his mouth to stop her, Dean lifted his arm and all that emerged was a soft moan of pain. "*This isn't happening to me.*" He thought, as the four of them kept walking. The only one that even looked back was Henry. And that was to snicker and point in a 'ha-ha you're in trouble' taunt.

Not even going to bother trying at that point, shoes finally on, Dean pathetically limped away from Bev's home.

^^^

Quantico Marine Headquarters

The news was not good for George, as if his day wasn't starting out bad enough finding out from Dr. Walker, that not only would the neck brace have to stay on at least another week, but the population of malfunctioning Genetically enhanced embryos, weren't able to be shipped out.

Giving the order to 'gas' the mutants and concentrate more on the intelligent species that were near birth, George wanted to move on to the immediate problems at hand.

George at one end of the table, Steward at the other, they were joined by the minds that thought they helped George in his decisions.

"Sgt. Doyle?" George had questions.

"Seventeen of the hundred and fifty we sent out to eliminate them, returned." Sgt. Doyle said.

"How in the hell are they wiping us out? We have conventional weapons."

Sgt. Doyle looked lost. "I'm training them. But we're getting hit before we lay fire or set the explosives. Arrows, spears, traps. You name it. Two of our returning men reported seeing the corpses raped, sir."

George closed his eyes. "That's not a detail that needed to be shared, But thank you Sgt. Doyle."

"You're welcome."

"Steward?" George questioned.

"Begging you pardon." Steward said. "But maybe we should do what Beginnings is. Watch them. Just watch the little camps that are popping up. Beginnings is . . ." Steward flipped a page in his reports. "Reporting movement Sir. Mr. Slagel radioed to say they were following them to see where they were headed. They believe back to their main base. Or one of them."

George ran his finger over his top lip. "That's not an option. Beginnings

has pilots. And they aren't really watching all the small camps just the one. Our flight capabilities fall way too short and even with the means to fly, we don't have the means to enough conventional fuel. No, I think our best choice right now is to be ready for attack. Increase security around our industry. How . . . how many is Beginnings saying attacked yesterday."

"Forty." Steward answered. "And estimate hundred were heading north west."

"Goddamn, that's a lot. Figures." George tried to turn to Clark Davidson, a mathematician, "What's the estimated totals of savages thus far?"

Clark, a wiry older gentleman reviewed his notes. "Giving what Beginnings said attacked so far, and escaped, along with what we have experienced . . . Total savages accounted for, estimating that ten percent are repeats, Five hundred and fifty killed, with approximately two hundred of them sir, alive and moving about. East and West."

With a few squeaks, George shook his head. "That's close to a thousand. Does anyone but me, find this number ridiculously high?"

"It's ridiculously *higher*. My team has worked on this." Clark interjected. "Think about it. Really think about it. What are savages? A vile product of the world gone bad. Estimation shows that nine tenths of one percent of the world's population survived the plague. That's roughly, three million eight hundred thousand people in the US alone. Now do the math. Giving all scientific theories, twenty percent would die of this, twenty of that . . ." Clark rambled about. "Half of those who survived the plague would have died in the first five years."

Steward, who literally did the math looked up. "That still leaves one million, none hundred thousand in the US."

"Exactly." Clark said. "Beginnings and their calvary wannabe's has what, twelve hundred, We, have a male population in the Eastern Caceres Society of roughly seventy-six thousand. Add the pre -plague females and children, together with Beginning, only, *only* seventy-nine thousand of the remaining US population is accounted for. We're still searching out the rest, this is a big country. But, suppose, just suppose a mere one percent of the remaining population became savages . . ."

"Fuck." Steward looked up. "Excuse me, I mean. Shit."

"What?" George asked. "What did you come up with?"

"A hell of a war." Steward dropped his pencil and looked at a smug Clark. "If his *mere* one percent is right, we're looking at approximately . . . eighteen thousand, two hundred savages."

^^^

Even though to Dean it was like watching a television on mute, Frank still was laughing and laughing hard. Face red, eyes watering, wide grin, mouth moving in a silent laugh.

"Are you done?" Dean asked as he sat at the diningroom table at Ellen's.

Frank shook his head, still chuckling at a totally banged up Dean. A small bump graced his forehead along with rug burn on his cheek from his stair fall. They were only minor facial injuries. Dean's held a wet cloth to his elbow that was not only bleeding but swollen as well.

“And I have a small lump on the back of my head to . . . Frank. Please. Stop laughing. And remind me to do an ultra sound on you to see if you can try to talk.”

Frank was thrown a little by the sudden change of subjects. Though he liked the idea of checking to see if he healed, he wanted to stay on the subject of Dean’s mess. Grabbing his pen, Frank wrote on the tablet that sat between them. “*And you’re sure?*”

“Positive.” Dean answered. “You’ve healed a few days. It could be safe.”

Dramatically Frank shook his head. ‘No-no-no’. Tapping the pen hard to the tablet, Frank underlined the question ‘*Are you sure*’, then wrote ‘*no sex*’.

“Oh, my God, Yes. I mean, no. I mean I’m positive.” Dean ran his hand through his hair flustered. “No sex happened. Aside from the fact the bed wasn’t touched and I was still dressed. The tell tale signs weren’t there. I’m sure. Now how do I explain this to Ellen.” Dean leaned forward as Frank wrote. “What?” Dean asked confused. “What do you mean, ‘I don’t’. I have to. The woman knocked me out somehow. Her and her accompis whoever that is and . . .”

Frank snapped his finger trying to get Dean to read what he wrote.

Dean just glanced at the words, ‘*There is no explaining. Find the proof*’. “I’m trying here Frank. I am, and I appreciate the help. But it seems every corner I take, every advance I make I get thwarted. My body aches, my head is pounding, my wife hates me. I leave the clinic last night. Minding my own business.” He sounded lost. “I need some answers Frank. Do you have any ideas or suggestions . . . how I can . . . deal . . . with.” A widening hit Dean’s eyes. “That Bitch!” Dean stood up outraged and flung the tablet. “Knocks my ass out! This is fuckin shit! She thinks I’m that dumb!” Dean screamed at the top of his lungs, face piercing red. “What the fuck’s she up to huh! What! What! What!” With a spinning hunch of his body and a loud grunt of pain, Dean’s hands sprung to his eyes.

Frank stood immediately from the table, still confused over Dean’s sudden, unexpected outburst. He knocked on the surface of the table to get Dean’s attention.

Demeanor totally changed, Dean turned around, stood up straight and calmly faced Frank. “Deal with this? Any?”

Closing his mouth tightly, and thinking ‘O.K.’ Frank shifted his eyes and looked around the empty livingroom waiting for the kids to wake up and fly in from Dean’s yelling. He didn’t have an answer, nor did he have a clue on what to say. Grateful at that moment he couldn’t verbally convey anything, Frank turned, and whistled soundless as he went to the kitchen to start breakfast for the kids.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

“So what do you make of it?” Joe questioned Jason in the quantum lab.

Jason, sitting on a stool, flipped what he felt was the one hundredth sheet. “Hell of a ‘cause and effect’ theory they have here to substantiate their survivor numbers.”

“I don’t think they needed to send the whole theory, do you?”

“Yes. Most certainly. If they just tossed a number out at me and said, here, believe this, I wouldn’t. I myself, probably could have sat down and came up with the same numbers give or take thousand. Like here . . .” Jason moved the sheets to Joe. “They estimate deaths via unpurified water to be at twenty-five percent. I don’t believe that to be true. I believe most people are smart enough to figure the water went bad. My estimate would be lower.”

“So you think what? Ten percent?”

“Twenty-three.” Jason stated not seeing Joe’s rolled eyes. “However, I like Davidson’s break down of percentages.”

“You know this guy?”

“Brilliant Mathematician. Bet me he had to be frozen earlier than the rest of us though.”

“Why do you say that?”

Jason shrugged. “He supposedly died five years before the plague. Which . . . explains why, when he did his figuring, he leaned toward the Stakowski apocalyptic survival theory done in 1974. Which is based on psychological case studies of different sociological groups. Had Davidson been around another two years then he would have encountered the Dawson apocalyptic survival theory which is based on, not only psychological case studies, profiles, and such, but . . . actual demented experiments. Then again, he wouldn’t have had to use the Stakowski apocalyptic survival theory had he gotten a chance to meet Dawson, who was . . . from reading the Cryo sheets, frozen as well. Unfortunately, the brilliant apocalyptic theologian Dawson, was Garfield Cryogenics subject number eighteen, instead of say, seventeen and now Dawson is brain dysfunctional fieldworker number four.” He raised his eyes from his sheets and rambling to a stunned Joe. “Did I lose you.”

“Yes, In boredom, five minutes ago, Christ, I just want to know your opinion about the theorized number of savages. Plausible?” Joe sat back hoping he didn’t get another long winded explanation, but he expected one.

“Yes.” Jason handed the sheets back. “And we’d better head up to that meeting.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Joe watched Jason boot down his computers. “Playing again?”

“Well.” Jason dusted off his hands. “Powering up. You know, getting the quantum juices running. But . . . nothing to send. No where to go, no reason to. And it’s a pain in an ass task to get her to run a trip since I reconfigured it to stop time thieves.”

Joe chuckled. “Time thieves?”

“Yep. The person who kept breaking in my lab and taking a little ripple cruise. A time thief. Should be shot.” Jason shook his head and moved to the

door. "Ready?"

"Ready." Joe followed and pulled the door.

The moment the door closed, and not one instant after the bolt went into the latch, a small surge of electricity hummed, causing a dull blue-white light to illuminate in the lab. Weakly and brief it flickered, very briefly, then it stopped.

^^^

Melissa's sobs and vocal shudders of sadness drowned out any whisper Dean made into Ellen's ear. "Fifty milligrams of Aubergine. Send her home."

Ellen nodded and left the patient room. She returned only a minute later. Melissa was still huddled into the corner, arms folded tight to her, Patrick trying to give her comfort. Ellen headed straight to them motioning her head to Patrick. "Hey." Ellen spoke softly. "You need to clam down, All right? This will help." She held up the syringe. "Then I want you to go. Grab Marcus from school and go spend the day with him."

Melissa couldn't speak she only nodded then lifted her sleeve for Ellen.

Dean blinked rapidly then covered the lost battle. The killer baby Frank had found burnt at the perimeter, suddenly passed away. It's little claws reaching up, eyes open. Dean sadly peered to Patrick. "Take him to morgue. I want to do an autopsy."

"Right away." Patrick secured the blanket tighter around the baby, and readied to lift it.

"Thanks." Dean turned around to leave the room, he saw Ellen standing at the door, staring. "What's wrong?"

"Can you see all right?" Ellen asked then followed him from the room.

"Why?"

"You're blinking quite a bit."

"I have a headache." Dean said coldly.

"But still you . . ."

"Ellen." Dean snapped her name. "I'm fine. I'm not blinking."

"Oh screw you. Listen to *you* giving *me* attitude, Mr. 'I spent the night with Bev'."

"Just proves how much you know. And screw you for not believing me."

Ellen gave a scoffing laugh. "Believing you. Did I not see you coming from her house?"

"What does that mean?" Dean asked. "How do you know what you really saw."

"How about I ask Joe, or Henry or Elliott."

"How about you drop it." Dean argued.

"How about you . . ." Ellen grinned widely. "Hal! Hey! Oh my God." She waved high in the air and hurried to Hal who was making his way up the main hall.

Dean mocked as he walked the other direction. "Hal. Oh my God."

A big embrace and a partial swing around was how Hal greeted Ellen. "Surprised?"

"Very. I didn't expect to see you until I came in on Friday."

“Well.” Hal set her down. “We needed a few emergency items from distribution so I thought I’d make the trip. It’s been a few days.”

“Who’s holding down the fort?”

“Who?” Hal stumbled for an answer “E . . . Uh, my third council member.”

“Oh. Good. I’m glad you’re here. Frank’s doing better. Elliott’s now winning the Neville comp . . . speaking of Elliott.” Ellen pointed behind Hal.

Smiling, Hal turned around. As soon as he did the smile dropped when he saw Elliott. White tee shirt, shoulder harness, green military pants and growing goatee. A heaving breath came from Hal before his shocked squeaking words. “What!” Hal pointed out “What have they done to my man!” He stepped to Elliott. “What . . . what have they done to you.”

Ellen snickered behind him. “What’s wrong?”

“Look at Elliott.”

Ellen did and shrugged. “Looks cute.”

Smiling, Elliott looked in question to Hal. “Captain?”

“F . . . F . . . Frank.” Hal grumbled. “Excuse me.” He stormed by Elliott.

Ellen still smiling, called out as Hal left. “He’s heading up to your dad’s office.” She watched the glass doors closed. “So, Elliot. What brings you here.”

“I heard the Captain was in town. I wanted to greet him.” Elliott shook his head. “Why is he upset with the way I look. Frank and Robbie told me this is the head of security ‘look’.”

“I got news for you.” Ellen crossed her arms, tipped toed a bit and whispered. “Frank and Robbie? They lie.”

^^^

“Feel like hanging tonight?” Robbie asked Jess, then tossed his cigarette as they approached Joe’s office.

“When tonight?”

“I don’t have to start shift until late.” Robbie answered. “Hang at the hall?”

“Well, if I can meet up later.” Jess said reaching for Joe’s door. “I was hoping to watch the first part of *Gone With the Wind* with Ellen tonight.”

“You being the third on her date with Elliott?”

Jess stopped reaching for the door. “She has a date with Elliott?”

“Uh-oh, someone’s jealous.” Robbie reached around Jess and opened the door.

“Not jealous, disappointed. I was looking forward to it and we’re supposed to start the lesson called, get this, Bedroom acquisitions.” Jess stepped inside. “Where’s Joe?”

“We’re a little early,” Robbie closed the door. “Bedroom acquisitions. Don’t tell me she’s treating this project like a social skills class.”

“That’s what she told me.” Jess sat down in one of the already set up chairs.

“Man. No wonder it’s not working.” Robbie sat down.

“It sort of is. At least the companionship part.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. We get along great. I really like hanging out with Ellen. She reminds me of . . . she reminds me a lot of Len.”

"I'm telling."

"She knows." Jess said.

"Maybe you'll luck out and get hooked up with a woman who only wants that?"

"I wish. But, I think the physical part is gonna have to come into play. Even if she would say it doesn't, I should at least be prepared."

"So no luck at all?" Robbie asked.

Jess let out a heavy breath. "Nothing. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that all we do is laugh when we do the mock run throughs."

"Maybe uh, it has to do with the fact that Ellen's a woman and you, my man, are gay."

"Could be."

"You know what you should try." Robbie leaned sideways dropping his voice as if he was going to be heard. "The next time you hit up the old land of porcelain erotica . . ." Robbie paused when he heard what sounded like a soft gasping sound of disgust. He looked around. "Did you hear that?"

"Probably outside. You were saying."

"The next time you know . . . you know, you should try thinking of being with a woman."

"You think it would work?"

"It might. Ask Ellen. She may recommend it as part of her training exercise." Robbie shifted his eyes to the gasping sound again. He shrugged. "Anyhow. A suggestion."

"I don't know. Would it work for you?" Jess asked.

"It does."

"I mean, if it was reversed, if you would think of a man. Would it work?"

"I never thought of that. How about I try . . ." Robbie peered around for the repeat noise. "What the fuck?"

"Beats me."

Robbie snickered.

"Man." Jess shook his head. "Your mind. But, at least I'm getting fulfilled one way."

"The companionship thing is really working?"

Jess tilted his head in thought for a second. "You know what. Yeah. For the first time in a while, I feel less lonely."

"Jess, I'm starting to get a little jealous here."

"Robbie. You have my heart."

"Ah. Thanks." Robbie grinned and reached into his pocket for a cigarette. He stopped when he heard that sound, yet again. Mouthing the word 'fuck.' he slowly and quietly rose up from his chair, looked around, sat down and looked under Joe's desk. Putting the cigarette in his mouth, Robbie pointed down to the floor then winked. "So, uh, Jess. If you think you can get it together in that department, what do you say, I stop by one night while you two are working on it and . . . join."

At first Jess was lost then he quickly caught on. "You know, El's expressed that as her deep fantasy already. Which role are you playing?"

"The sex slave to both of you."

Bang.

"Ow." Henry shouted out and stood up rubbing his head. "God, you two

are disgusting.”

“Henry.” Robbie snapped. “What the fuck are you doing eavesdropping.”

“I’m not eavesdropping, I was hooking up a communications computer line for Joe so he can monitor the scouts with you.. You two walked in and started talking.”

“You could have made your presence known.” Robbie stated half laughing.

“And you could have refrained from talking about masturbation. And . . . and . . . you’re not very nice with way you flirt with Jess, Robbie. You lead him on.”

Robbie winked. “Blow me Henry.”

“You wish.” Henry snapped back.

“I do.” Jess shrugged.

Robbie laughed.

Henry let out that stock gasp he had been doing. He pulled out Joe’s chair and sat down. “Where is everyone.”

The door closed and Frank stepped in. He raised up his hands as his from of self announcement.

“Frank says he’s here.” Henry rocked in Joe’s chair.

Robbie snickered sarcastically. “What are you, Frank’s interpreter.”

“Yeah.”

“Oh brother.” Joe stated as he walked in with Jason. “And Henry get the hell out of my chair.” Joe walked to behind his desk when Henry sprang up. “And Frank why do you need Henry to talk for you.”

Frank opened his mouth and pointed to Henry.

“He wants to be verbal.” Henry said. “So since I know what he would say by just watching his expression, I’m the one he asked. For example.” Henry turned to Robbie. “You’re brother thinks you’re a pervert. Along with everyone else in the community.”

“Oh yeah.” Robbie said snide. “I wasn’t the one sneaking out of old lady Josephine’s house at six in the morning, claiming to be fixing her duct work.”

“Boys.” Joe warned. “Can we just . . .”

“Frank!” Hal’s voice blasted the same time the door to the office flung open. “Hey dad.”

“Hal.”

“Frank.” Hal stormed to Frank. “What the hell are you up to?”

Frank gave a nudge to Henry.

Henry answered for Frank. “What?”

Hal took a double take at Henry.

Robbie decided to clarify. “Henry’s interpreting and speaking for Frank.”

Hal nodded and looked back to Frank. “Then in that case. You know exactly what I’m talking about. What are you up to?”

Henry got his cue nudge. “With?”

“Elliott.” Hal stated.

“What about him?” Henry asked for Frank.

“Oh, don’t play dumb with me Frank.”

“Christ.” Joe plopped his head forward.

Hal continued in his scolding. “Are you trying to take my man.”

“Oh my God!” Henry exclaimed. “You and Elliott are lovers.”

“What?” Hal blasted. “Henry stay out of this.”

"You are." Henry stepped back. "I would have never known."

"Henry." Hal warned. "This is not about me being Lovers with Elliott. Frank is trying to steal him."

"He is not." Henry defended. "Frank's not gay. Huh Frank."

Frank nodded then shook his head, then nodded. He didn't know what the best non verbal action answer was.

Hal grunted. "Henry, you're making it worse. Just stay out of this. I'm warning you."

"If you're warning me, then you're warning Frank. And that isn't very smart. Frank can kick your ass."

"And I can kick yours." Hal said.

"Joe." Henry tattled. "Hal's picking on me."

"Christ. Boys can you . . ."

"Henry." Robbie instigated. "You're such a moron. I think speaking for Frank is effecting you. Elliott isn't gay, he has a date with Ellen."

Hal quickly looked. "Elliott has a date with Ellen."

"Doesn't mean anything." Henry still argued with Robbie. "Jess is practicing sex with Ellen."

The loud 'What!' Hal blasted was spoken enough for him and Frank.

"O.K." Jess stood up. "I think I should exit the meeting right now."

"Jess." Joe spoke up. "Sit."

Turning back to his chair Jess saw the red face and pointing finger of Frank. "Frank I swear. I'm not sleeping with Ellen."

"Oh, yeah that's right." Henry said sarcastically. "You won't sleep with her unless Robbie joins in and is the third."

"Henry!" Robbie shouted. "What the . . ."

Joe slammed his hand hard on the desk. "Enough!"

"Robbie?" Hal asked with stern question.

"I was kidding." Robbie defended. "Henry is starting trouble."

Hal glared at Henry. "I told you to stay out of this." Doing an acquired Slagel skill, Hal reached out with his forefinger and thumb and flicked Henry hard on the forehead.

"Ow Joe!" Henry rubbed his head. "Your sons are . . ."

"Son of a bitch!" Joe blasted. "Can we just proceed with this short meeting so I can get on with my day? Or would anyone else like to careen way off the goddamn subject of savages."

The proverb 'ask and you shall receive' held true.

Frank snapped his finger, snuck through Henry and Robbie, reached to Joe's desk and grabbed paper. He turned Henry around, used his back as a hard surface and quickly wrote, handing the note to Hal.

Hal took it and read. He bobbed his head in thought. "O.K., Saturday's good. What do you want to do?"

A long grumble came from Joe as he leaned as far back as he could in his chair and covered his face with his hands. "Christ."

^^^

Dean finished taking what he believed to be the fourth dose of pain medication for his headache and it wasn't even noon. If that dose didn't work,

Dean's next step was a sedative, because he knew he was having the worse tension headache of his life.

Holding the back of his neck Dean lifted a folder from the counter.

"You O.K. Dr. Dean?" Johnny asked.

"Yeah." Dean moved to the computer. "I'm just gonna try to finish off some of this dictation from yesterday." He placed the folder down, then sat before the blank screen on the computer. He put on the Dictaphone headset and pressed play.

Johnny watched. Dean position his hands on the keyboard and look up to the screen. And then Johnny watched Dean . . . stop.

Hands frozen, eyes forward, Dean didn't blink or move.

"Dr. Dean?" Johnny walked over to him. "Dr. Dean?"

Dean still stared, like a zombie, at the computer.

"Um . . ." Johnny reached around the front of Dean and snapped. "Dr. Dean?"

No response.

Johnny snickered. "Oh, Fuck. This is great." he giggled like a girl then waved his hand in front of Dean. Still nothing. "Let's see how you feel about typing . . .this." Johnny awkwardly reached around Dean and started to type. Not far into his message he could hear Ellen's voice out in the hall. "Shit." Johnny nearly dove away from Dean and raced to the door placing on his most disgusted face.

"Hey Johnny." Ellen stepped inside. "What's wrong?"

Johnny paused dramatically in the lab doorway. He let out a long breath. "He's an asshole." Johnny pointed to a non-moving Dean.

"What did he . . ." Before Ellen could finish her sentence, Johnny stormed out, "Dean?" Ellen walked to him. "Dean?" she grew more and more irritated when she didn't get an answer. Then as she stepped behind him she saw the wire from the headphone. Just as she reached out to tap Dean on the shoulder she saw what was written on the screen.

'Bev, last night was incredible. I can't stop thinking about it. I could live with nights like that for the rest of my life. I only hope . . .'

The words stopped, But Ellen's anger didn't. She extended her hand, and shut off the tape player.

Dean shuddered, twitched his head and looked to his right at a glaring Ellen. "Hey."

"Asshole."

"What? What did I . . ." Dean spun on his stool as Ellen barreled out of the lab. "I give up." Turning back around he saw the words on the screen. With a long whine of defeat, Dean grasped the computer and fell forehead first into it.

^^^

Frank was doing the last of what he liked to call his 'cake' rounds. Check and go spots that didn't take much time or thought. And they were perfectly boring enough to get him prepped for the sleep he had to get for his night shift.

Checking on the doors of one of the cheesy erected tool sheds south of town, Frank heard the peeping, almost infant sound of it.

“Meow.”

It made Frank stop and look around

“Meow.”

Where was the sound coming from? Frank thought it sounded like a cat.

“Meow.”

It made the same sound a cat did.

“Meow.”

But Frank knew better. He hadn't seen a cat since before the plague, or at least an alive one.

“Meow.”

Frank had to check it out. He started to wonder if perhaps the killer babies had a new attack technique.

“Meow.”

Tucking the clipboard under his arm, Frank stepped away from the building.

“Me . . .” The calm, babyish animal call turned into a shrill painful scream.

Shit. Frank looked down. The tip of his combat boot rested upon the white furry tail. *Oh my God.* Frank bent down to the whimpering white fluff of fur. He grabbed the animal by the scruff and lifted what looked to be a kitten up to his view. It's little paws kicked outward, it's mouth opened. The tiny fangs tried to nip him as it whined. The animal was no bigger than Frank's palm. Grinning in thought, Frank opened his leather jacket, stuffed the wiry animal in the inside pocket, zipped up and hurried toward town. Not only was he excited about his new find, but after eliminating that it wasn't carrying any deadly viruses into Beginnings, Frank wanted Dean to scientifically confirmed what it was. It looked, sounded and acted like a cat, but Frank was well aware that the feline species was rendered extinct by the plague.

^^^

Dean looked up annoyed at the arpeggio tapping Frank did with his fingers on the lab counter. “Frank, please.”

Frank knocked.

“And try to talk. I told you that you can.”

Frank opened his mouth and tried . . .

“Meow.”

Frank's mouth immediately closed and he looked horrified.

Dean chuckled and laid the kitten on the counter in front of Frank. “Clean. She isn't carrying any foreign illnesses that I can see. She's safe.”

Frank snatched it up with a smile and stuffed it back in his coat pocket.

“What are you doing with it?”

Pointing to his temple, Frank smiled.

“You have an idea. Oh, Boy.”

Frank started to leave, but stopped, He hurried back to the counter and to the paper and pencil he had been writing on to communicate with Dean. He scribbled some words and turned it Dean's way.

Dean read the note. “Yes Frank. What the hell's the matter with you. Of course it's a cat.”

Another nod and smile came from Frank and he quickly turned and darted to the door.

“But where did . . .” Dean raised his hand and dropped it when Frank kept moving. “Did you find the cat. That’s what I want to know.” Shaking his head, Dean made his way back to his work. He paused in thought mid-stride and scratched his head. “A kitten?”

^^^

Ellen felt the cold blast of fall air seep into the kitchen before she heard her front door close. Turning down the burner on the stove, Ellen with curiosity walked from the kitchen to the livingroom. “Frank?” She called out in question as he appeared to be searching. Lifting couch cushion, looking behind the sofa, under the table, in the playpen. “What are you looking for?”

Frank held his hand in a measurement to his thigh.

“One of the kids?”

Frank nodded.

“Which one?”

Smiling wide, Frank poked in his cheeks making dimples.

“Alex?”

Frank nodded.

“In her room. Why?”

Grabbing Ellen’s hand, Frank tugged her right along with him as he moved excitedly to Alexandra’s room. He knocked on the open door.

Alexandra sat on her floor amongst a plie of papers she drew on. She looked up. “Hi.”

Frank, pulling Ellen with him, crouched down by Alexandra and took her coloring stick. He turned over one of her pictures and wrote.

Ellen peered at the words. “Frank has something for you.”

Alexandra rolled her eyes and spoke in her slight ‘R’ deficiency way. “Mommy, I can weed. What?” she smiled.

The smile was so genuine on Frank’s face. Unzipping his coat pocket he reached inside and pulled out the kitten, extending it to Alexandra.

A slight shriek of surprise came from Ellen as she joined them on the floor. “Oh shit, Frank, it’s a kitten. Where did you get it.”

Frank pointed backwards and watched Alexandra in such awe reach out and take the tiny kitten.

It squirmed as she tried to hold it in her arms, cuddling it with the brightest of smiles. “Oh wow.” Alexandra rubbed her cheek against the fur. “Wow. For me?”

Frank nodded and pointed at her.

Hugging it tight, Alexandra giggled when the kitten screamed. She released a little from the strangle hold and stared at her new pet.

Ellen touched it in awe. “You have to name it Alex.”

Thinking for a second, Alexandra grinned. “Foe-ball.”

“There you have it Frank. Fur-ball.” Ellen said. “Alex, what do you say to Frank.”

Alexandra didn’t say anything, kitten tight in her hands she moved to Frank and tossed her arms tight around his neck. And despite the squirming ,

shrill screaming kitten who was squashed between them, Alexandra still held on. Her little lips kissing Frank's big cheeks over and over. Frank's eyes closed with a peacefulness.

Ellen knew by seeing Frank, what the rush was. Why Frank was filled with so much excitement over the kitten. It wasn't because he was about to give Alexandra something no one else in Beginnings had, it was because Alexandra was going to give him a moment that no one else ever could. And Frank, like such a father, basked in it.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

The bar at the social hall was double whammied with ashes when a drinking Joe and Jason both flicked the cigarettes and missed the ashtray.

Joe blew the ashes then apologized to 'Sam' for hitting him. "Risking a long Jason explanation. Where?"

Jason snickered intoxicated. "As Frank put it, by the tool sheds."

Joe laughed. "God. And he ran to Dean to find out if it was a cat."

Shaking his head, Jason took a drink. "He's your son."

"That he is. Anyhow, I thought cats went extinct."

"So did I. They must not have. I look for them to have come from the savages."

"The savages?" Joe snickered.

"Yeah. Part of their food." Jason said. "Remember these things are all over the country. They stand a chance of finding a cat more than we do here in Beginnings all secured. They probably breed them like we do cattle."

"And the kitten is small enough to slip through the beam."

"Exactly. I heard Alexandra was ecstatic."

"To say the least." Joe said then looked behind him when he felt the hand on his back. "Robert."

Robbie grinned ornery. "Warms my heart to know that two old guys like yourselves can still hang out at a bar and discuss . . ."

"Don't." Joe warned. "Don't even think about being so crude as to say the word pussy to your father."

Horrified was the immediate look that hit Robbie's face when his father and Jason started to laugh. "Oh my God." He stepped back and cringed. "Oh my God. I can't believe you just said that."

Joe shook his head as Robbie walked away. "I think I . . . how do you put it. Grossed him out."

Sitting down at the other end of the bar waiting for his turn at the dart board, Jess noticed Robbie's open mouth look of disgust. "Robbie? What?"

"My Dad just used the word pussy."

"My God and you're still standing?" Jess laughed.

"Funny." Robbie reached for a bottle and as he did he saw Henry walk over. "Hey Henry."

Henry grabbed a drink, still holding his darts. "Look at them two."

Robbie looked over at the pool table where Ellen and Elliott played. "O.K."

"He's all over her." Henry griped.

"He is not Henry, they're playing pool." Robbie said.

"Then you missed them early. He's not even from Beginnings, and . . . he's taking one of our women. He should just go shopping at his own House of Lesbians."

Jess snickered and shook his head. "They way the men are about women in this community. I'm surprised there's harmony."

"Some of us learned to share. And besides." Robbie looked at Henry. "I don't know what you're worried about. It's not like Elliott will ever sleep with her."

"Why wouldn't he?" Henry asked.

"He doesn't have any sex organs," Robbie answered. "Eunuch."

It took everything Jess had not to spit out his drink when he choked.

Henry's mouth when crooked in disbelief. "Oh he does too have . . ."

"No." Robbie said seriously. "Hal told me. In battle not long ago. Elliott lost." Robbie shook his head. "He almost died too. But he made it through and now he just . . . goes on. Yep. Didn't it ever occur to you why he's so mild mannered."

"Yeah." Henry stated.

"Just like any animal." Robbie continued. "Like when you spay or neuter them, calms them. Take all spunk from them. Has the same effect on humans. Look at Elliott."

"Oh my God." Henry set down his drink and looked at Elliott. "That poor guy." He took a deep breath. Oh well. I have to throw." He held up his darts and went to the board.

Jess shook his head. "You're bad."

"What do you mean?" Robbie asked innocently.

"Lying to Henry."

"I'm not lying. It's all true."

Jess immediately looked back at Elliott. "Oh shit."

"Oh hey." Robbie nudged Jess. "Some one asked about you today. I mean asked about you."

"Who?" Jess asked.

"Not a woman." Robbie nodded. "Hector."

"Who?"

"Hector. He runs the green houses. He's about thirty, dark hair . . ."

"Real ethnic looking guy? More than Elliott?"

"That's the one." Robbie pointed and poured more moonshine. "Asked me because he knows we're friends. Wants to know if you attach."

"What?" Jess asked through his laughing. "What's 'attach'?"

"That's the PC term used when two men here meet up."

"Oh." Jess nodded. "So Hector isn't gay?"

"No. He just like to occasionally . . ."

"Attach?" Jess asked and saw Robbie nod.

"Hey Jess!" Henry called over. "Your game. Have to play me."

Jess started to stand. "Robbie, you have to stop trying to hook me up on one night stands.. That's not my thing. I'm . . . doing fine."

Robbie watched Jess finish his drink then look over to Ellen and Elliott. "Jess, man, all the good old movies in the world aren't gonna do it for you. That's not what you need. You have the opportunity to get what us straight and narrows don't. You can get what you need. I'm just trying to help you be less lonely."

"I appreciate it." Jess laid his hand on Robbie's back. "But attaching isn't what I need either. Excuse me."

Robbie felt bad. He had done it again, unsuccessfully playing cupid. He had to wonder if he subconsciously kept trying to hook Jess up because he knew

the way Jess felt about him. And thinking that's what he was doing, made Robbie feel worse.

^^^

Elliott took a sneak second to look at his and Ellen's locked hands. He looked ahead as she walked, smiling a smile that was hard to see in the darkness. "And I feel really bad."

"No. Don't." Ellen told him. "I feel bad. You have to get up early, you're tired. Besides I promised Frank I would work on his talking with him before he started his shift. I hope you don't mind the walk."

"I enjoyed it."

"Even though we took the long way back to my house?"

"The very long way." Elliott chuckled, then felt a sense of disappointment as Ellen let go of his hand. Before he could figure out what to do with his just dangling hand, Ellen grabbed hold of his arm leaning into him.

"You don't mind do you?"

"Walking like this?" Elliott shook his head. "Not at all. I enjoy it. I enjoy the company."

"I enjoyed our date. Are we still on for our other one. Or does this replace it."

"No, I would still like to spend an entire evening with you. Can I invite you to dinner the next overnight you spend in Bowman?"

"You certainly may." Ellen said. "And I accept. Monday. Is that good?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"Now we just have to get you to relax."

"I . . . I can't." Elliott gasped out.

"Is it me?"

"You can say that."

"Can I help?"

"I doubt it. I just . . ." Elliott cleared his throat and pointed with his head at Ellen's house.

"Dreading dropping me off at my door?" Ellen approached her porch.

"Not dreading. Don't say that."

"Scared I'm gonna ask for a kiss goodnight." Ellen saw his panicked expression as she stepped up the first step.

"Well . . ."

"I'm not gonna ask."

"Thank you. Because I'm a little . . ."

"I'm just gonna try." Ellen slid her hands up his arms to his neck and standing on the step, nearly Elliott's height, she leaned to him. Parting her lips she brought them close to his mouth and waited.

And waited.

"Elliott?"

Elliott swallowed harsh, especially as he felt her warm breath hit against his lips. He looked into her eyes so close, then shifted his views to case her face and mouth. Nervously he smiled, reached up, took her hands from his neck and stepped back. He gave a firm squeeze to her hands. "Thank you for the evening. Goodnight Ellen." Giving a soft nod, Elliott smiled, turned and walked away.

Ellen's mouth dropped open. She lifted her hand and Elliott kept walking. "Shit." she whispered. Shaking her head she walked the rest of the way up to the porch and stepped in the house. The second she shut the door and kicked off her shoes was when she noticed Frank standing there doing that 'soundless' laugh. "What?" She asked irritated.

Frank pointed out his index finger and proceeded to mock shooting a gun.

"Oh, I was not shot down. And you shouldn't have been spying."

Frank grinned then mimicked his finger gun again.

"God, grow up. He's just . . . nervous. He doesn't . . ." Ellen looked back to the door. "He shot me down."

Frank nodded arrogantly.

"Here's some sign language for you goof mute." Ellen flipped him off and headed to the kitchen.

Laughing, Frank reached out and grabbed her arm.

"What?"

Frank pulled on her.

"This, 'you not talking shit' is really wearing thin. What are you showing me?"

Frank just kept leading her to the hallway and down to Alexandra's room. He pushed open the door to expose a sleeping Alexandra. Her kitten snuggled by her.

Ellen looked at the smile on Frank's face. "You're just loving that aren't you. Reaching idolization status."

Frank nodded.

"Talk."

Frank shook his head.

"Frank. I have never known you to be afraid to do anything. Dean, the dick, says you can do it. Do it. Say something anything. I won't laugh."

Frank gave her a non-believing look.

"Please." Ellen whispered. "I miss hearing your voice so much. Please."

Taking a deep breath through his nostrils, Frank stared at her. His mouth opened slightly. There was a hesitation and then a deep, raspy, sandy voice emerged. "I love you."

Ellen's eyes widened. "Oh, My God."

Frank stood straight and clenched his fist. "Oh, yeah. I can talk."

"Very sexy like." She smiled at him. "It turned me on. And . . . I love you too."

Frank grinned and kissed her quickly. "Yes. This is so great."

"Frank." Ellen folded her arms and drew up a sneaky look. "The kids are asleep. It's been a really long time since I have . . ." Ellen was silenced with Frank's hand that covered her mouth then pulled away. "What?"

He held up his finger then nodded and smiled. "Fuck."

"What?"

"Fuck."

"What?"

"I can swear again."

"God Frank." Ellen huffed out. "Weren't you listening to me. I was hitting on you."

"You were?"

“Yes.”

“Thanks.” Frank kissed her on the cheek and stepped back.

“Where are you going?”

“I can talk.” Frank happily and quickly walked toward the livingroom. “Oh, yeah.”

“Frank.” Ellen started to follow him but stopped when she heard the front door close. Confused, she crossed her arms and tilted her head. “Was that just . . . the second time I was shot down tonight?” Gasping in agitation, Ellen shook her head and started walking again.

Frank’s stride from Ellen’s house toward the living section was filled with exuberance and determination. So happy he was that he could speak, not only did he want to share the news with everyone, but he had a few other things on his mind as well. Passing the second to last row of houses, Frank stopped. There was someone he had to share the news with.

Picking up his pace to a trot, Frank hurried three houses down and went straight inside. “Dean.” He called out as he entered. “D . . .” Stepping further into the livingroom, Frank saw the back of Dean’s head as he sat on the couch. “Hey.” Frank walked around the sofa. “Check this . . .” Frank stopped talking, not because he couldn’t, but because of Dean.

Sitting there, straight up, eyes forward, hands on his knees, wearing the headset, Dean didn’t blink or move.

“Dean?” Frank snapped his finger in front of him. “Hey.” He flicked Dean on the head and immediately, without changing his sitting position, Dean plopped sideways, his legs still bent and moving that way with him. “Dean?” Checking for a pulse, Frank reached down to Dean’s neck and found one. “Fuckin weird.” shrugging, Frank walked away leaving Dean to sleep and he left the house.

He moved quickly to town, knowing it was Wednesday and that signified a crowded social hall with it being dart night. Frank, with the ability to be vocal had a few things to say. A lot was on his mind the way people treated him in his days of silence. Acting not only like Frank was mute, but shouting at him as if he were deaf as well. But that didn’t bother Frank as much as the ‘Can’t talk’ jokes that they threw at him. What? Did they think he was dumb?

A bombardment of noise blasted out the second Frank opened the social hall door. He kept his mouth closed and walked inside.

“Frank.” Joe waved then nudged Jason. “There goes our conversation. With Frank around we’ll never get a word in edgewise.”

Frank opened his mouth with a silent ‘ha-ha-ha.’ And kept moving.

“Hey big brother.” Robbie waved. “Are you here to get me for work? No? I can have the night of? Thanks.”

Giving a fake grin that matched the snide one Robbie gave, Frank tapped his brother on the cheek and headed straight to the stage where the equipment was set up.

He stepped up, looking around, then found the mixing board and amp. Pushing the volume level on the microphones all the way up, Frank proceeded to

turn the small PA speakers inward to the stage then he bent over to the amp. The flick of the power switch not only booted up the PA, but blasted the social hall with a loud, ear piercing ring of feedback.

The moans and complaints bellowed at Frank.

He grinned, adjusted the volume and stepped to the microphone. He tapped and taped until the hall went silent and then he brought his lips close to the mike.

It graveled some, but it was boisterous, "Listen up. All you people that fucked with me when I couldn't talk. Watch out." Frank smiled. "I'm back."

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

October 22

New Bowman, Montana

Even though Hal did paper work, Elliott just knew he not only eavesdropped, but peered up occasionally to watch as he spoke on the phone. Scrutinized by the Captain as if a micro organism Dean looked at under a microscope. “Yes.” Elliott said with little emotions then cleared his throat trying to clear away his nervousness.

“Thanks.” Ellen said on the other line. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s me.”

“No.”

“I didn’t say what it was yet.”

“I’m sorry, go on.” Elliott felt the stares. He shifted his eyes down to Hal who sat behind the desk. Hal sifted through paper.

“Are we still on for Monday?” Ellen asked.

“Yes. Why?”

“I just got . . . I got a feeling . . . Elliott? Why wouldn’t you kiss me last night.”

Elliott closed his eyes and brought the phone away from his ear. He covered the receiver, bit his lip, bobbed his head in thought, then brought the phone back up.

“Elliott?”

“I’m still here.”

“Why? Didn’t you want to?”

Again, Elliott slid the phone away, only this time he turned his body in a nonverbal, whining sway. After a moment of dramatics, he lifted the receiver again. “It’s not a question of wanting to or not. It’s a matter of what is appropriate or not. Understand?”

“Kissing me was not appropriate?”

“At the . . .”

“Did I come on too strong?” Ellen asked.

“Yes. No. I mean . . .”

“It was just a little kiss. It wasn’t like I was asking you to have sex with . . .”

Hal quickly looked up when he heard the bang of the phone that fell from Elliott’s hand. He shook his head with a snicker at Elliott’s nervousness to regain the phone.

“Elliott?” Ellen called out. “What happened?”

“I . . . Ellen I must go. The Captain is summoning me.”

“All right then.” Ellen stated calmly. “Just tell me something, O.K.? Am I looking at this ‘you and me’ thing all wrong?”

“You and me?”

Ellen let out a breath of understanding when she heard his words. “I get it. O.K., I’ll uh see you tomorrow then.”

“Yes. Thank you. Tomorrow.” Briefly closing his eyes Elliott hung up the phone and exhaled loudly.

“What is the problem?” Hal asked with Slagel edge. “What is the matter with you. If you were riding out into battle right now, you’d die.”

"I don't know how to answer her."

"On?"

"Why I wouldn't kiss her goodnight."

Hal nodded and leaned back in the chair. "Why didn't you?"

"Captain, sir, aside from the fact that I don't even know if I remember how, I really don't even want to think about that."

Hal looked in curiosity at him. "I don't understand."

"I'm sure you do." Elliott rattled out his thoughts. "We've lived so long without affection or touching. Even entertaining the thought can be detrimental to the emotional walls we have built in protection of ourselves to live without it. They would start to crumble. What if I thought about it and started to want it. And ended up not being able to get it, imagine the insanity I . . ."

"Elliott." Hal leaned forward and folded his hands on his desk.

"Yes, Captain?"

"Forget I asked."

"Yes, Captain." Elliott regained his composure, sat down, and as if he were never interrupted with a phone call, he returned to working.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

A quick glaring shift of his eyes was the warning from Dean to Robbie for Robbie to stop laughing. "Pay attention." Dean told him just before the field perimeter as he handed him what looked like a remote control.

"Yeah!" Frank yelled in the distance. "BE on fuckin top. My life depends on this."

Robbie looked at the contraption in his hand then to Frank who looked as if he were wearing a heavily padded fencing outfit. "Dean." Robbie whispered. "This isn't going to work."

"Yeah it is." Dean said assuredly. "Danny and Henry made it."

"Then maybe we should wait until Danny and Henry are here." Robbie suggested in a low voice.

"I need them now. Or at least one. You'll do fine. Just pay attention and press the button."

"O.K." Robbie shrugged and walked to the fence.

Picking up the roll of duct tape and the sack from the ground, Dean walked to Frank. "O.K., now is as good a time as any."

"This sucks Dean." Frank complained. "Why do I have to do this?"

"Because, it has to be done."

"So."

"It was your idea to capture them and train them like dogs."

"So, I never agreed to be walking bait."

"Frank." Dean chuckled. "Not bait. Bait gets eaten. You'll only be nibbled on. The moment they touch you, Robbie will zap them. The jolt will be enough to knock them out. You duct tape their mouths and put them in the sack."

"How many?" Frank asked, taking the sack and tape from Dean.

"Whatever you can get. Tracking is picking them up out there."

Frank grumbled. "I still think we should have gotten one of the field workers to do this."

"They need . . . They need brains Frank."

Frank bobbed his head. He did have those.

"And . . ." Dean continued. "You're the only one who can do this. What is it you say? You're Frank."

"True. O.K." Frank reached for the gate. "Now are you sure I'm not gonna feel the charge?"

"Positive." Dean said. "Danny and Henry assured me the suit is insulated."

"They tested it."

"Um, yeah." Dean nodded.

"You're sure? Cause we're dealing not only with fuckin killer babies with fangs of death, we're dealing with a two-twenty charge."

"You'll be fine." Dean gave Frank a pat on the back. "Now get my subjects. Thanks."

"Dean." Frank started to walk through the gate. "I get to train them when you're done."

"Absolutely."

"Here we go." Frank took a breath and moved straight out.

First Dean looked to Robbie, waited for him to join him, then they walked out of the gate as well. Staying close enough to be able to make a mad dash in if need be.

They watched Frank. A giant, awkwardly moving, human, padded trap.

"Mark." Dean called in the radio, "You got Frank in the scope?"

"Got him on the screen." Mark answered "The killer babies too. Really near."

"Good." Dean put down the radio. "Robbie . . . Be ready."

Robbie nodded, hand on remote, finger on button.

"Hit them as soon as they get Frank. They could rip the suit."

"He won't feel it?"

"No."

"O.K." Robbie waited. And then, Frank, no more than twenty five feet away, high weeds coming to his thighs, was hit.

The gurgling sound was first, followed by the whipping rustling sound, and then fast from the brush shot, six killer babies at Frank. Lunging, attacking and covering him like locusts.

"Now!" Dean ordered.

Robbie pressed the button. A crackling surge of electricity was heard and the six killer babies ejected off of Frank. They flew back high and fast before dropping like flies to the ground.. They also squealed loudly from the charge, but not as loud as Frank, who dropped to the ground right along with them.

^^^

Shocked and staring forward through the windshield of the car, Henry put down the antenna to the phone with his chin. "They used the suit." He shifted his eyes to Danny.

"What!" Danny swerved the car.

“Watch out.”

Danny swerved back. “What do you mean they used the suit. It’s not fully insulated.”

“Dean thought it was.”

“Shit.” Danny shook his head. “Did it work on the babies though?”

“Yeah.” Henry nodded.

“What about uh . . .”

“Frank’s fine. Out. And they said he’s sparking, but fine.”

“Oh shit.” Danny laughed. “What if Frank died and the charge brought him back to life.”

“But all weirded out.” Henry added.

“And stronger.”

“Deformed.”

“Like Super Shredder in Ninja Turtles.” Danny chuckled then looked into the rearview mirror when he heard that click of annoyance come from Trish. “What’s wrong.”

“You’re silly. You nearly kill a man . . .”

“Oh, no.” Henry shook his head. “Dean did.”

“And can we not discuss your inventions gone bad.” Trish said. “We’re supposed to use the car time to talk about this hearing.”

Danny peered in the mirror to Trish who was reading in the back. “Should we though. You know, with Henry on the opposing side. Is that ethical.”

Henry’s mouth dropped open. “Who cares. It’s not like I’m going full barreled after Andrea. I’m merely presenting the facts. Which, I left a lot to my legal eagle Assistant Stan in New Bowman.”

“He’s not real bright.” Danny stated.

“Yeah.” Henry grinned.

“I’m getting car sick.” Trish said,

“Quit reading.” Danny told her. “And what are you reading?”

“Obscure situations.. I thought maybe we could all put our heads together.”

Danny looked at Henry. “Sounds kinky. I like it.”

Trish gasped in disgust. “I’m gonna pretend that didn’t come from your mouth Danny Rather Hoi. O.K. here, what I’ve been working on.”

“See.” Danny nodded to Henry. “This is why she’s on my team. She does all the thinking.”

“Not too mention all the work.” Henry added.

“Can we? Thank you.” Trish held out the papers. “I took the original suspect list you gave us Henry, and I was using the theory, what if Andrea is being used as a cover up for the real person working for George. So . . . Thinking that the real person working for George would be up to something, I started looking at events, minor ones in Beginnings that are out of the norm.”

“But you can’t limit yourself strictly to that suspect list.” Henry told her.

“No. I’m not.” Trish flipped a page. “For example. Mark and tracking. That is highly unusual for him to mess up like that. That’s a cake job, everyone wants it, why screw up.”

“Good point.” Henry nodded. “I’ll talk to him. Maybe get him drunk and see what his subconscious mind has to say.”

“I’ll help.” Danny said.

“Cool.”

Trish rolled her eyes. "And John Matoose's notes on suspects. Danny, you know what my thoughts are on that."

"Yeah I do." Danny stated. "And Andrea said he was more alert today. I'll drop by and talk to him."

"Who else?" Henry asked.

"Bev." Trish answered.

"Oh, I hate her." Henry said.

Danny shook his head. "She's a little girl. She has absolutely no connection to George."

"We've looked for one too." Henry added. "If she has a connection, she has it hidden. And she didn't come to Beginnings until two months before George escaped. She was in containment most of that time. Believe me we looked for it."

"O.K." Danny held up his hand. "If she's in it at all, she's not the main man. She can't be. She's not intelligent enough. Besides, what has she done? Aside from getting pregnant to Dean."

"I hate her." Henry reiterated.

"Exactly." Trish said.

Danny was confused. "O.K., Henry hates her. So does Henry's hate meter also have a psychic link that indicates who is bad and who is good? No. It isn't making sense."

"Yes. Yes it does." Trish argued. "I'm not saying she's the main one. I agree she's not smart enough. But . . . I'm telling you she knows something. Her getting pregnant to Dean proves that."

Even though Henry liked the direction Trish's mind was going, he didn't understand her logic. "Trish . . ."

"Hear me out. First of all, Dean sleeps with Bev. O.K., mistakes happen he wasn't with Ellen. But he wouldn't repeat that mistake, and he certainly wouldn't keep doing it, over and over."

Danny shook his head. "He was seen coming out of her house yesterday morning."

Henry tossed his hands up. "He claims he was knocked out and put there."

Danny snickered and rolled his eyes. "Dean's a liar. He wants to have his cake and eat it to. Classic case of a man his age. Not owning up, so he covers up and . . . ow." Danny jerked away his arm when Trish smacked him. "Why did you hit me?"

"Don't pick on Dean."

"Why not. The man screwed up." Danny stated. "I'm not gonna lie and say I haven't lost respect for him. I have. There are no women and he has two. Fuck . . . ow! Stop." Danny rubbed his arm after being hit again.

"Listen to what I'm saying." Trish spoke, "Moving off of Dean . . ."

"Thank God." Danny said.

Trish tsked. "Anyhow. Bev, she would haven't have slept with him a second time. I know her likes from the moon lodge meetings. Dean may be cute, but to Bev he's old. Second, She chased Henry, Henry was power. Dean has no power. Why does she want to be with someone in a powerful position. Not for the prestige. If that was her game she certainly wouldn't be making everyone hate her. This community is too small to be a hated person. Yet, she keep doing things that make people hate her. No, she wants to be with someone in power so

she can be where George's person can get the most access. I say find out who Bev is being the stooge for . . . find George's other person." Trish sat back with a release of a long argumentative breath. "There."

So impressed Danny nodded. "That's actually not a bad route to look into." Trish smiled. "Thanks."

"We tried." Henry said.

"We'll try again." Determination laced Danny's words. "She's the most hated person in Beginnings. Well, then little Bevie needs a friend. A pal."

Henry grinned. "A confidant."

"Someone . . ." Danny sang his words, "She can look up to."

"Confide in." Henry added.

"Trust." Danny looked in the mirror. "Do you agree Trish."

"Oh Absolutely, Good plan."

"Good. Then I expect for you to start working on being Bev's best friend, ASAP." Danny saw in the mirror Trish's mouth drop open in argument. "Henry, hey, where's that old Garth Brooks tape. Let's listen to that bar song."

"Yeah." Henry dug up the tape from the box. "Here. It can get us in the mood to interrogate a drunk Mark."

Danny put the tape in the player, and even though the speaker system was really bad in the car, he turned up the music loud to drown out Trish's complaining.



A loud hiss emerged with the steam from the sterilizer Ellen unlocked. Standing by it in the cryo lab, she waited a safety margin of time, then opened the hatch and pulled out a plastic bag. Happily she walked from the main lab and into the back room.

"Done?" Jenny asked, sitting on the floor by the freezer case. A small crate was set up like a table, plates and all.

"All warm." Ellen held up the plastic bag containing noodles. "Sesame noddles. Henry's speciality. You'll love it." She joined her on the floor.

"How clever of you to use the sterilizer."

"Dean and I always do." Ellen snipped open the bag,. "The plastic plastics makes is great. Seals the flavor right in. These sandwiches look good."

"Fresh Apple jam." Jenny smiled.

"I love jam sandwiches."

"Me too." Jenny situated herself for lunch. "So how was the date with Elliott?"

"He hates me."

"What?" Jenny laughed.

"Well, he has no interest in me romantically, that's for sure. He made that clear today. Which is why it strikes me as odd that he still wants to do dinner on Monday."

"The company. He likes the company."

"True." Ellen took a bite of her sandwich. "But he's a man." She dropped her voice. "I tried to kiss him and he backed up."

"Oh my God!" Jenny gasped. "Even if he isn't interested in something

romantic, my God he turned down affection.”

“Yep.”

Closing her eyes, Jenny peacefully basked. “What a gentlemen.”

“Yes he is. He’s from New Bowman.”

“And I get my shot at Hal on Saturday.”

“Isn’t that exciting.” Ellen said. “Jenny . . . aside from having our weekly Brian and Caroline lunch. I have a favor to ask you.”

Jenny noticed the seriousness in Ellen’s voice. “Sure.”

“I want you to get one of the women to have . . . to have an understanding or some sort of relationship with Elliott. They’d have to be able to make it steady, stable and want to commute to New Bowman to do it.”

“I’m not understanding this.” Jenny tucked her hair behind her ears. “Did Elliott ask you to find . . .”

“No.” Ellen shook her head. “I want someone to be in Elliott’s life. I want him to come home, at least a couple days a week, and not walk into an empty house. I really, really can’t stress enough how much I don’t want him to be alone. Ever. He needs that.” Ellen exhaled.

“What’s going on?”

At first Ellen peered up at Jenny, then after taking a bite of her sandwich, she spoke soft. “I’m gonna tell Elliott I broke his trust again and told you. But I need you to swear, swear Jenny on the life of Caroline, nothing that is said, will leave this room.”

“I swear.” Jenny held up her hands and crossed her legs Indian style.

“Elliott . . . Elliott is dying.”

Jenny closed her eyes.

“He doesn’t want anyone to know. He had Leukosarcoma. Which means his blood is cancerous. He’s not symptomatic and is doing really great. But there’s gonna come a time when he will give way.” Ellen paused to catch her composure. “So you see . . .”

“He’s lived so long alone, he deserves to have that gift right now. Support. Friendship. Companionship.”

“Love.” Ellen added. “Just everything that’s lost in this world that’s meant to be had in life, I want him to have.”

“You like him.”

“Very much so.” Ellen said. “He’s so nice and kind. Genuine.”

“IF I can’t find a woman who can make the time . . .” Jenny played with her sandwich. “I’ll do it.”

Ellen smiled. “Thank you.”

“You don’t want to?”

“Me? I would. I would offer Elliott the understanding in a heartbeat. And not because he’s dying. I was thinking about it before I found out. Especially with this shit with Dean, I was just gonna find two new men in my life. I wanted Elliott to be one of them. And then the illness rose, and I knew I was suppose to do that.”

“But you aren’t.”

Ellen shook her head. “He doesn’t look at me that way.”

“Maybe because you’re branded.” Jenny said.

“What?” Ellen chuckled. “Branded.”

“Absolutely.” Jenny nodded. “Dean and Frank’s. Always. Even if you are

without a doubt moved on, people will always perceive you as their's. Maybe he just doesn't want to get close to you for fear he thinks, no matter what you say, it will end back up that way. You, Dean, Frank. Even though I highly doubt, after this Bev thing, Dean is an option."

"He isn't. And . . . I don't think that's what it is." Ellen spoke down. "It's me. I'm certain of it."

"Well, I've seen some activity happening between you and Jess."

Ellen's head went back as she laughed. "Jess is my friend. He'll . . . he'll move on. Trust me, you can say I'm just filling in for companionship until he finds . . . until he finds the right one. Jess doesn't see me that way. Besides look at him and look at me." Ellen exhaled with a hint of sadness. "I believe it's me. I'm getting older, set in my ways. I'm not very nice at times, and attractive? Jenny I have so many scars spewed across this face I give Frank a run for his money in the looking apocalyptically worn department."

Ellen's words made Jenny feel really bad. But she didn't want to show it, Jenny tried to stay upbeat. She reached over and patted Ellen on the knee. "Someone suffering a little in the low self esteem department? I think you need an ego boost. And . . . you're going out with Frank on Saturday. He loves you, if anything, he makes you feel good."

"True." Ellen tilted her head and picked at her sandwich.

"And it's not you. Not at all. Women are very envious of you." Jenny saw the disbelief look Ellen gave her. "They are. You're smart. Thin. And those scars add character. You're so pretty Ellen, I always wanted to be you since I was a little girl. It's your choice of men." Jenny stated matter-of-fact. "I'm telling you. Try someone else." She snapped her finger. "A heartbeat they'd take you. Henry? Robbie? Danny Hoi? Jess, he may be hot, but I heard rumors that he's gay . . ."

"Jenny. That's not true. He's . . ."

"No, I heard. And Elliott. Perhaps he does like you but is just afraid he doesn't measure up because he has no sex organs."

Ellen coughed her bread up when Jenny said that. "What?"

"That's another thing I heard."

Wiping her mouth, Ellen put down her sandwich. "Elliott does too have sex organs, I'm his doctor, I should know. I've seen his penis."

Jenny went quiet, then a sneaky smile hit her. "And?"

At first Ellen opened her mouth in debate, then she closed it briefly, smiled and leaned into Jenny. "I'll tell you. Elliott . . ." She stopped talking when she heard the buzz of the cryo lab door. "Shit. Dean."

"How do you know?"

"Listen." Ellen motioned her head. "The scuffing feet, add that hint of tennis shoe squeak and you have . . ."

"Dean." Jenny pointed to the door. Dean stood there. "Looking typically irrate." Jenny giggled and so did Ellen.

Dean huffed. "I wish you two would stop having your linoleum picnics in my lab."

"Our lab." Ellen corrected.

A grumble came from Dean. "This is not the twelve o'clock lunch room. All right?" Dean backed up, stopped, turned around, waltzed in the back room, and snatched up a jam sandwich before storming back out.



“No.” Danny held up his hand in defense as he sat down in a chair next to John Matoose’s bed. “No pulling out tubes. I’m just here to talk to you.”

In the small room, curtain partially closed around John’s bed. John shifted his eyes with a hint of panic.

“See, you should consider yourself fortunate.” Danny stated.

“Why?” John asked deep sounding and with a gurgling effect.

“Well, some people consider me their bright spot. So . . . how’ve you been?”

“Same.”

“Anything moving yet? Toes? Fingers? Hands? Anything?”

“Danny.”

“Sorry. Just asking. And, I have other things to ask you.”

“I told . . . you . . . I . . . would . . .”

“John?” Danny stopped him. “You don’t have to talk. Not yet. It make me nervous. So right now, I just want you to listen to me. O.K.?”

“Yes. But . . . I told . . . you . . . I . . . don’t . . . know . . .”

“John.” Danny shook his head. “The talking thing. No. O.K.? Now I want you to listen to a little bit of the Danny theory on things. Just listen. And then I want you to think about what you’re gonna say on the stand.” Danny saw John’s eyes widen. “Oh, yeah we’re putting you on the stand. Life support and all. And don’t think I won’t badger your crippled ass. My client’s life is at stake. But, that’s neither here nor there, because I believe with great thought. You my Christopher Reeve wanna-be friend, are gonna talk. Now . . .” Danny leaned close to the bed. “You don’t need to be verbal. You don’t need to be anything but able to say ‘yes’. Yes to the person’s picture that is actually working for George. I don’t believe that’s Andrea. And . . . I for one second do not believe you don’t know who the other person is.” Danny began speaking in a nonchalant manner. “You love your wife. You want to protect your wife. And you want to do what’s right for Beginnings. But, you can’t say who the other person is. You can’t because there’s more than one person working for George here. You fear Jenny’s life. Fear something else happening to the people of the community you claim to love. So you John, sit back and think. Man, what can I do.” Danny leaned back in the chair. “And you come up with it. You aren’t trusted. You want that trust back. So you compile a list.” Reaching down to the floor, Danny opened his briefcase and pulled out a folder. “Remember this? I believe out of this list of suspects you gave Joe as possible people working for George. I believe you named the persons. Your way of giving him the truth without . . . giving him the truth. Here’s why I believe you know. And why this keeps escaping everyone’s mind is beyond me. A little preview of your interrogation on the stand when I hit you with my best Perry Mason.”

John just listened.

“There was an incident here in Beginnings before I came here.” Danny reached down and grabbed another folder. “Basically in here is the compacted evidence of that night. There’s boxes of it. Courtesy of Robbie Slagel. Boy did that man go all out. Here’s what we know. We know for a fact that Dean and

Ellen were in that mobile lab. We know for a fact that Dean was shot. And while Ellen was trying to make it back into the mobile lab to secure herself in, she was grabbed and accosted from behind. We know for a fact it wasn't Reverend Thomas, he was bleeding. No blood on Ellen's clothes. That person was you. You grabbed Ellen."

John shook his head.

"John. John. Yeah. Yeah." Danny was insistent. "Dean repeatedly remembers dreaming of seeing you holding up Ellen. Under hypnosis he can claim the same thing. Now I know none of this is admissible in the court of law. But it's no longer the same world and . . . Henry . . ." Danny snickered. "Is the prosecution. Do you think he's gonna object." Danny shook his head. "Now knowing . . . don't argue. Knowing that you were holding Ellen at the door, by the waist, from behind. *You*, like Ellen, could see into the lab. Now Dean, this is really funny, you'll get a kick out of this." Danny rubbed his eyes. "Dean remembers seeing Ellen getting knocked out. O.K., then, Dean remembers getting strangled. And kicked in the head. If he remembers seeing you holding Ellen at the door, and Ellen remembers seeing Dean on the floor. Wouldn't just go without saying that you too saw Dean on the floor, only you John, saw who strangled him." Danny smiled. "Yeah. Makes perfect sense. Think about it."

As Danny stayed for another moment to deliver intimidation stares. He didn't realize, he was seen and everything he said was heard . . . And not just by John Matoose.

^^^

"White blood cell count?" Dean asked standing across the lab counter from Ellen in the cryo lab.

"Still high. Eight hundred thousand." Ellen answered.

"Shit." Dean shook his head. "Presence in the Axillary Node biopsy."

"Negative."

"Excellent. Hematopoietic stem cell proliferation."

"Steady."

"No." Dean looked up. "That can't be right."

"It is."

"Ellen, you had to mess up." Dean insisted.

"Dean, I didn't. No decrease. Your new creation, Radadine didn't work."

"It had to and you had to have made a mistake." Dean reached out and snatched up the results from Ellen's hand. "I had a twenty percent decrease in the rabbits."

Ellen took the results back. "Elliott is not a rabbit, Dean. And your therapy didn't work. O.K., it's new. You're also trying to come up in two testings what therapy would deliver in two weeks."

"It still should have . . ."

"It didn't work."

Dean huffed and slammed down his hand. "I don't believe it."

"Why is it so hard to believe?" Ellen argued. "That you didn't create something magical. Dean, this is our first true case. It's not gonna be easy. Now if you strongly believe in this Radadine . . ."

“I do.”

“Good. Then we can go one of two ways. We can change the dosage, see how it effects the rabbits and then try Elliott’s sample. Or, we can go back, start from scratch, review the Radadine and see . . .”

“Don’t!” Dean’s voice shot through the air as strong as his hand lifted. “Don’t talk down to me like I’m the lowly understudy. Who the hell do you think you are.”

“Oh fuck you Dean.” Ellen slammed down the papers she reviewed. “Get out of the mood. Find me when you do.” She walked around the counter.

“Wait!” Dean moved to the end of the counter blocking her from going anywhere. “We have work.”

“I’ll work with you when you’re more tolerable. If I even work side by side with you at all again.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Ellen gave a ridiculing laugh. “And you don’t want to be treated like a lowly understudy? Wise up. You’re the one giving me attitude.”

“And you don’t think you deserve it?”

“Stop. Stop right there.” Ellen’s hands flew in the air. “I did nothing.”

“Bullshit! You gave up on me!”

“And you didn’t give me reason to?”

“Ellen!” Dean lifted his arms out. “How blind do you have to be! Each time something happens it is more and more . . .” Dean squinted his eyes hard when a sharp pain hit him. “More and more obvious that I’m being set up.”

“You keep saying that Dean, maybe you’ll convince yourself of it.” Ellen tried to get by him and Dean grabbed her arm to stop her. “Get you hands off of me.”

“Oh. That’s right.” Dean released her. “I don’t want to jeopardize my kids by being violent. Because I knew you’ll throw that in my face.”

“For your information . . . Asshole, I was gonna drop that hearing shit. But you know what. I won’t. Screw you. Lose your kids.”

“How can you be so callous.”

“Callous?” Ellen shook her head. “I think I have been better than I should be. I gave you every chance to redeem yourself. All you had to do was . . .”

“What? Confess to an affair I did not have nor am I having? Don’t you think if I did sleep with Bev, don’t you think I want you back bad enough to own up to it? I would. But I didn’t sleep with her and there’s no way in hell you’ll ever get me to say it.” Dean stepped to her. “And while we’re on the subject of owning up. Why don’t you own up to the fact that you’re pushing so hard to have me say it, just so you can avoid admitting you were wrong and get me back.”

Ellen laughed. “Get you back?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t want you back.”

“Right. If that’s the case why are you trying so hard not to move on.”

“I am moving on.” Ellen argued.

“That’s what you’re trying to make it look like. However you certainly are taking the abstract route.”

Though her words, Ellen snickered. “What? How is my route to ‘moving on’ abstract.”

“Well just put it this way. You’re proving the fact that you can’t replace me in your life.”

“Oh this ought to be really good. Go on.”

“First. Grace.” Dean nodded. “You two certainly have been chummy. And she’s the biggest lesbian I know.”

“Are you implying that I’m turning into a lesbian because there’s no man that can replace you in my life.”

“I didn’t say that. You just did.”

Ellen gasped.

“Oh come on Ellen, first off you throw yourself at Jess. A gay man. A gay man. There’s a real big chance there. And Elliott.”

“Don’t talk about . . .”

“Sorry.” Dean held up his hand. “Sgt. Ryder. There’s a big manhood threat. The man probably didn’t lose his sex organs in battle, he probably lost them through one of his numerous venereal diseases.”

“You!” Ellen pointed. “Are cracked. There is something really, really wrong with you. You have lost all ability to think rational and I don’t think you should be in any position where someone’s life depends on you.”

“Are you questioning my ability as a doctor now.”

“Absolutely.” Ellen tried to get by him. Dean blocked her again. “Dean move.”

“No.”

“I’m warning you.”

“Right.”

“Bub.”

“Huh?”

Whap. A slow moving swing out by Bub, the lobotomized savage, knocked Dean over and onto the floor.

“Good Bub.” Ellen walked to him. “Wanna snack. Yeah.” She reached onto her lab coat pocket and pulled out a cookie. Bub opened his mouth and she shoved it inside, patting his head after.

A buzz of the Cryo lab door, brought in Frank. “Hey El.” He stopped and saw Dean on the floor. “Did you kill him?”

“No. Bub hit him.” Ellen nudged Dean with her foot. “Knocked him out. Odd. He didn’t hit him that hard.”

“You sure he’s alive.”

Ellen squatted down. “He looks like he’s breathing. I wonder if he’s all right. Frank, he’s really been weird.”

“Tell me about it.” Frank joined her on the floor. He reached to check for a pulse on Dean. The moment his hand touched Dean’s neck a small blue bolt of static lightening shot from his finger and snapped at Dean.

Dean shrieked and jumped up.

Ellen laughed. “You shocked him.”

“I’m shocking everyone. Watch.” Frank reached out and touched Ellen causing her to squeal. “See. Since Dean electrocuted me.”

“You electrocuted Frank?” Ellen looked down to Dean who rolled to a sitting position. “Yeah. Why am I on the floor?”

“Bub hit you.” Ellen told him.

“Bub hit me? Why?” Dean tried to get up.

Frank reached down to help him and shocked him in the process.

Another shriek came from Dean. "Frank. I can manage." He picked himself up off the floor. "Why did Bub hit me?"

"We were fighting." Ellen said. "You were being mean."

"Fighting?" Dean twitched his head like a dog. "How can we fight I just walked in here and . . . where'd Jenny go, she'll tell you."

Ellen looked at Frank. "Oh my God Frank, you shocked him into amnesia."

"Whoa." Frank stared at his palm. "I'm cool"

"And deadly." Ellen stated. "You'd better go run around naked in the grass to drain some of that static build up you have."

"O.K." Frank shrugged., turned around and walked to the door.

Dean quickly looked at Ellen, then back to a leaving Frank. "Frank? Why did you come down here."

"Oh!" Frank snapped his finger and squeaked when he shocked himself. "What am I supposed to do with those killer babies. They're penned up at the hanger."

"Shit. I forgot." Dean rubbed his head in thought. "Why don't you touch them until you knock them back out and then bring them down."

"O.K." Nodding, Frank walked to the cryo door. "I'll be . . ." *Snap*. "Ow. Back." He grabbed the door and opened it. "Hey El. Will running around naked in the grass really work?"

"Yes." Ellen answered.

"Good." Frank said. "But I'd better make sure it's not wet. I don't want to electrocute myself again." Just as Frank started to leave, he stopped. "Yeah." He reached to adjust his headset. *Snap*. "Ow. What?"

Ellen just shook her head and returned to work.

"Fuck. I'm on my way." Frank looked back into the lab,. He reached for the door to hold it open. *Snap*. "Ow. Hey Dean scratch the killer babies. I have to go. Tracking just reported a breach from the south." slipping out from the lab, Frank released one more 'ow' before he bolted off to tracking.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Snap.

“Ow!” The tracking door opened and Frank walked in. “What do we got?”

Mark turned in his chair to Frank then back to the screen. “Just entered the sector near the front.”

“How far?” Frank moved to behind Mark.

“Two miles and moving at a slow steady pace. ETA . . .” Mark pressed some keys. “Nine minutes. Course is straight, right to the road.”

“Quisenart beam will get them if that’s the case,” Leaning into the chair to peer at the screen, Frank drew closer to Mark. “What’s it saying . . .”

Snap!

“Ow!” Mark screamed and jolted in his chair.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t need the beams with you around. Shit.” He tried to rub his own back. Mark swore he was burned.

“Sorry. Fuckin Dean.” Frank shook his head. “I should be better once I run around naked in the grass.” He stepped away from the chair and reached for his revolver. *Snap.* “Fuck.” Frank shook his head. “I’m heading that way. You direct me on their course. How many?” He moved to the door.

“Computer’s saying four. But . . . two of them are in excess of five hundred pounds.”

“Or three men each.”

“That would make a total of eight. Or a pack.”

“Savage norm. Keep me posted I’ll be there in two minutes.” Frank grabbed the door handle. *Snap.* “Fuck! I’m killing Dean.” He flung it open and charged out.

Despite orders from Joe not to take a look alone, Frank rode out to the road that led directly to New Bowman. He took the bike with little fear on his mind. He had the Quisenart beam to semi protect him, and unless they bombarded him with arrows and spears he was safe. Not to mention there was only eight of them and Frank was up for good target practice.

Stopping his bike a half a mile from the tunnel entrance where it was projected that the invaders were heading, Frank stood on the road facing where they would supposedly appear from, M-16 ready, and radio close to his mouth. “Position?” Frank asked tracking.

“Steady. Closing in. Not picking up speed at all. Direct course.” Mark told him.

“Why are they moving like that. This is odd.” Frank kept his eyes open and his ears listening as well. Then he heard the scuffling of feet against the dry leaves. “Hold on Mark.”

“See them?”

“I think . . . wait.” Frank placed his M-16 behind his back.

“Frank, do you need back up.”

“Right.” Frank scoffed and lifted his binoculars. “Fuck.” He released a

short chuckle.

“Frank.”

Gold. That was the color Frank saw that made him want a closer look in his binoculars. Gold reflecting off the sun from the buttons and swords. The yellow head bands and gloves were almost like flags to Frank. “Mark. Have security down this beam. Get my Dad to call Hal. We have two of his men.” Frank lowered the binoculars. “Man, they must hate working for my brother.”

^^^

“Tupperware?” Bev asked Trish so bewildered as they stood on the street in Beginnings.

“Yes, those plastic storage containers.”

“I know what Tupperware is. But a party?”

“I used to be a Tupperware consultant. Part time you know, what a business boom it used to add to my wedding shop business. I found it rewarding and challenging and was thinking of picking it up again. A part time job. So will you?” Through the corner of her eyes Trish saw Jenny. Smiling Trish waved High. “Hi Jenny.”

Jenny kept walking.

“Hmm.” Trish brought her finger to her mouth. “She must not have seen me.”

“You’re talking to me.” Bev said.

“Oh nonsense, why would she ignore me because I’m talking to you. Just because everyone hates you doesn’t mean they’ll hate me, Right?”

“But . . .”

“So will you come to my Tupperware party?”

“Why are you inviting me?” Bev asked. “No one asks me to come to anything.”

“Exactly.” Trish said. “I feel bad for you and you seem like such a nice girl. Witty. Talented. We have so much in common. So will you. Saturday. What do you say?”

“Oh, O.K.” Bev shrugged. “Shall I dress up.”

“Please do.” Trish told her. “I always find it distasteful when people show up dressed inappropriately. And you don’t need to bring anything. I’ll provide the snack.”

“Thanks.”

“Sure.” Feeling the face muscles on her cheeks starting to really strain from the forced smile, Trish figured she’d better say her goodbye’s before tears of pain streamed down her face. Waving, Trish stepped back and turned around. The moment she did, she released the phoney smile and immediately sought out Jenny Matoose to read her the riot act on being so rude.

^^^

So much like his father, Hal looked and spoke as he and Frank walked to Joe’s office where everyone waited. “Frank.”

"I'm telling you, Hal."

"And I'm telling you. My men did not defect."

"Did too." Frank insisted. "I said not to call you. Dad said you had to come."

"They aren't defectors."

"Hal, I'm telling you they hate you. They said, 'Please don't call the Captain, we hate him.'"

"You're so full of shit, Frank." Hal shook his head as they reached Joe's office. "The two men you have can't be mine. Everyone of my men are accounted for."

"The you counted two twice, because you forgot about these two."

"Impossible." Hal was insistent. "They stole uniforms of ours. I know."

"Bet me."

"I'll bet you."

"You're that sure?" Frank asked.

"I'm that sure." Hal said arrogantly. "There isn't a man for which I am not aware of his whereabouts."

"What the fuck kind of sentence was that?" Frank shook his head. "You sure you want to bet."

"Positive. You name it. Anything."

"Good." Frank held out his hand. "If you forgot about these two men, if they are your men, then Saturday night, we make it a double date and you go out with Jenny Matoose."

Hal laughed. "You're on. What about you?"

"Name it."

"If I'm right, then you Frank, have to stand before your men and tell them they need to learn from my men because I trained my men better."

"Oh, beautiful. It's a bet." Frank reached out his hand. "Shake."

Hal extended his.

Snap.

"Ow." Hal quickly retracted his hand. "Asshole."

Frank laughed and open the door. "The Captain has arrived."

Sebastian and Anthony immediately stood up and saluted Hal, standing at attention.

"Oh my God." Hal's mouth dropped open. Then his shock and happiness at seeing the two men he thought were dead, left him the second he looked at Frank and saw his arrogant gloating smile. With rolling eyes Hal moaned. "Oh my god."

There wasn't a sound in Joe's office when Sebastian and Anthony told of their findings. How they and two others were sent by Hal to find the two lost scouts who had gone northwest. How the other two men with Sebastian and Anthony were killed, and they managed, wearily to make it home.

Joe sat behind his desk staring at the two New Bowman men before him. Robbie, Jason and Henry were there too. All silent. Waiting.

Raising his eyes to Frank who stood antsy behind him, Joe let out a long

breath. “Thousands?”

Sebastian nodded. “Thousands. About two square miles. Set up like an Indian reservation. Fields, everything. Home.”

Frank nodded slowly. “That’s where the other hundred are headed. I told you, Dad. And . . . we can get a good computer count by the camera on the jet.”

Joe agreed. “Is that what you have in mind?”

“Actually,” Frank walked around the desk. “This is one of their bases, or whatever you want to call them. They feed from this place. Feed savages that come here, wipe out anyone else. I say we take them out.”

Joe leaned back. “These men are saying thousands, three perhaps. We don’t have that manpower.”

“Fuck the manpower.” Frank walked around the desk. “Wipe them out. Dean-ami whammy them. Two highly concentrated, one-point-two-eight percent, carbon monoxide Dean-tip one missiles. Take them out, all of them in less than one minute. Gone.”

“Frank.” Joe gasped at the thought. “That’s a lot of human lives vanished in an instant.”

Hands on desk, Frank leaned down to his father and into him. “Fuckin savages mean squat. They’re killers and they are a threat to any means of freedom we will ever have in this country. Give the order. Take them out.”

A long deep breath came from Joe, then a squeak as he leaned somewhat sideways in his chair. He gazed up at Frank. “Do it.”

“Yes.” Frank’s hand slammed on the desk as he backed out and extended a point. “Robbie, take Hal, go back to New Bowman and gas that Jet. Secure her with two Dean tip ones.”

“Got it.” Robbie nodded.

“I’ll get the exact coordinates from these two men. I want a full surveillance, peaceful looking recognizance, pictures and all. Then you find your spot. Drop your missiles.

“Got it.” Robbie replied.

“Hal.” Frank turned to him. “You train your scouts well. Pick me out eight of your best. In fact . . .” He reached for the phone and handed it to Hal. “Call Ryder, tell him to prep the men, ship them on a Dan-tram back here double time, have them ready for a two day trip.”

“They’re yours Frank.”

Frank nodded and moved with a rush to the door. Dad, I’m headed up to the hanger. Get Dan and Johnny up there STAT. We’re getting the birds ready to go. I’m equipping them each with three Dean-tip twos and plenty of fire. They’re gonna fly. Hal’s men go with them. I want to clear the path and take out those hundred that are homeward bound.”

“Frank?” Joe questioned. “What’s with the two day trip.”

“Oh we’re landing. Clear this fuckin sore spot in Washington like Normandy beach, then when we have a safety situation, we drop. If they’re even slightly communicating with other savage camps. We’ll find it there.” Frank opened the door. “Gentlemen. Let’s do this.”

^^^

Quantico Marine Headquarters

"Birds in the air." Steward said as he placed down the phone. "That's the word. They'll keep us posted. Mr. Slagel still wants our scouts to go out first light tomorrow. They are changing some of their courses. Concentrating more north and south. Seeing how this camp is large and on the west."

George had a serious look on his face that he hadn't had since before the world ended and that was the last time he sent planes over to the middle east. Slow breaths, deep breaths, came from George as he stared over the tops of his fingers. "Repeat the number."

"UWA scouts report thousands. Too many to count. Three."

"Video tapes should reveal better numbers." George leaned back into his chair with ease. It was not the time for any clanking noises. "Washington State."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you realize how far that is? Do you realize what this means?"

"Beginnings, or rather Frank Slagel was right." Steward said.

"Yes. They're coming at us from somewhere. And that somewhere." George looked off in thought. "Is not Washington state."

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

"Roger that Big boy, this is Eagle One, giving a big affirmative." Robbie spoke with radio charm, jet noise and all in the background.

"How many you think?" Frank asked.

"Fuckin' ton. I mean. I'm spotting what appears to be a small civilization."

"Any children from what you can see?"

"That's a negative."

"Hold on." Frank looked down to the notes set before him by Joe. "Yes!"

"Repeat Big Boy, I heard an exclamation of joy."

Frank chuckled at Joe over Robbie's words. "Our birds took out the ground movement. They're awaiting your O.K."

"I'm awaiting yours." Robbie said.

"Got your target."

"Affirmative."

There was a moment of silence before Frank spoke deeply. "Drop them."

"Affirmative. Locking in coordinates." He moved the controls. "I'm going into Radio black out." Robbie lowered his sunglasses over his helmet, then tilting the plane onto its side he veered to the left getting ready to make another swoop around.

A small shifting sound and the belly of the jet opened.

The long double whistles precluded the single crack, then puffs of explosions. Robbie rode on.

Within seconds. Without warning. It was over.

Savage camp number one . . . gone.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Beginnings, Montana

"He seems a little agitated." Patrick explained to Melissa. He opened John Matoose's chart at the foot of the bed. "Dean won't confirm orders to give him anything to calm him."

"Did Dean say why?" Melissa asked looking at John who fussed and twitched.

"He just said, see how long we can hold off. I guess addiction could be a problem."

Melissa tilted her head. "We saw it with that one post op. O.K." Melissa took the chart. "I'll keep an eye on him. Did Dean say when we can."

Patrick looked at his watch. "He said he'll stop by first. And I'd better go. I told Jenny I'd stop by and have dinner."

"It's awfully late. For dinner."

"I don't get done until ten. Hey, at least you're taking the night shift for me tonight. Thanks for being early."

"Oh, I don't mind. Marcus has been really bad today, so, I needed to get out. Have a good time."

"Thanks." Patrick moved toward the door.

"Oh, Patrick. Did you ask John if something's wrong.."

"I tried." Patrick shrugged. "He doesn't really make any sense."

Giving a 'hmm', Melissa tucked the chart under her arm. "John? Is something hurting you?"

"No." John answered.

"Is anything bothering you." Melissa asked.

"Help . . . room. In . . . room. Will . . . get . . . me . . . in room. Help."

Compassionately Melissa nodded. "I see. O.K." She dropped her voice to a pacifying whisper. "I'll be back. Let's see what I can do." Going over to the door she joined Patrick in the walk out. "I see exactly what you mean."

John listened to the fading voices and he moaned. He moaned loudly to be heard. But it didn't help. He couldn't turn his head very well, but he did enough to see the curtain open from the other side of the bed. Raising his eyes, he watched the intravenous tubing be grabbed and contents of a syringe being emptied into his drug line.

^^^

Joe had to think of how to handle it. He decided to use Robbie's reporting in as an excuse. After all it wasn't going to be long before that call was received. Hands in pockets, and numerous complaints heavy on his mind--including one from Dean--Joe strolled from the peacefulness of his home to Frank's house.

Not far from where the modular homes were, Frank and Dean were issued a home in one of the last two rows. Which to Joe, was a good thing. Less townhouses around them.

He lit a cigarette in his slow walk, blow out the smoke in a huge cloud, then instead of going into the house where the kids were sleeping. Joe walked directly to the back where rumor had it, Frank was.

In the small back yard no bigger than a livingroom, Frank paced around, pen flashlight in his mouth, the beam shining down on the sheets of paper he read off of.

“Frank.” Joe called out softly.

Frank took the pen from his mouth “Oh, hey Dad.”

“What . . . what are you doing?”

“Reading.” Frank held up the papers. “Helen and Bobby story.”

“That’s not . . .”

“God, it’s a boring chapter. They’re rambling about their lives. Her kids. Her husband. His family. I think this chapter slows the book. No good sex scenes for me to enjoy.”

“Good thing for the neighbors.”

“Huh?” Frank asked confused.

“Frank. I’ve gotten nine calls in the last ten minutes about you out here.”

“Why?” Frank asked. “Am I not allowed to read?”

“I don’t think . . .”

“God, Dad, since when is a man not allowed to read in the back yard of his own home.”

“Frank.” Joe took a hit of his cigarette. “Have you looked around. It’s not a back yard. It’s patch of grass.”

“Still, what am I doing wrong.”

“Frank. You’re a six-foot-three stark naked man pacing around his backyard patch of grass, that’s what you’re doing.”

“Oh.” Frank looked down at his nude self. “Yeah.”

“Why? Why are you walking around your backyard naked.”

“I’m trying to stay on the grass.”

“Good. Why?”

“It’s not wet.”

“Frank!” Joe snapped. “Why are you even doing it in the first place?”

“Doing what?”

Joe grumbled then shouted. “Walking around naked in your goddamn backyard!”

“God, Dad, announce it to everyone, why don’t you.”

“Frank! You asshole! They can see you!”

“Oh.” Frank looked around. “I guess so, huh?” He shrugged. “Well, they’re gonna have to deal with it. I’m trying to drain the excess electricity from my body so I stop shocking everyone. I couldn’t even touch my kids today without making them scream. Then again. I was gonna ask El if she wanted to try to have sex and see what . . .”

“Frank.”

“What?”

“Get dressed.”

“Why?”

At first Joe blinked, just a few times in his stare of Frank. Then Joe, put his cigarette in his mouth, hands in his pockets and walked away.

^^^

Pomeroy, Washington

The glow of the still burning savage body pile lit up the area enough that Robbie barely needed the lantern on the table. Things were still being dumped there and he knew, a lot more was left to be found.

He sifted through them in the camp site he and his men had set up. Slowly, taking in all the information.

“Hey Uncle Robbie, generator’s up enough.” Johnny said as he pulled a chair up to the table. “Have to call home. Anything?”

Robbie lifted an odd shape piece of paper. “Yeah. Maps.” He shrugged. “Of where I don’t know. This one looks like Beginnings.” He held another odd shaped, tan paper up. “Doesn’t it?”

Johnny looked at it. “Yeah, kind of.”

“Also looks like the ink is . . .”

“Blood?” Johnny guessed. “It is. We saw it stored in the ground, natural cooler, watered down it, looked like in containers.”

Robbie cringed. “Remind me not to run my fingers over it again.”

“Why not? You’re holding that paper.”

“What’s wrong with the paper?” Robbie asked.

“You don’t know what it is? Didn’t it strike you as odd.”

“Yeah. What is it?”

“Skin.”

Robbie dropped the map he held.

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Beginnings, Montana

Joe’s head lowered at the same time the communications signal ended with Robbie. He turned from the wall map and speaker to Frank who sat at the console. Walking to him, Joe paused to give a pat on the back to Terry, a security man. “Thanks. Terry. Appreciate you coming down. I needed someone experienced down here tonight.”

“No problem Mr. Slagel.” Terry said. “I never minded working the night shift down here.”

“Good.” Joe nodded. “Frank? What do we have?”

“Well . . .” Frank lifted the sheet on the clipboard and reviewed his notes. “Definitely they’ve been communicating. My guess, old style Pony express.”

“What about the hydro power source?”

“Real old world. Wind mill style from what’s described, used basically to regenerate the car batteries that power the radios.” Frank stated.

“But the radio system Robbie described is really out of date. He’s bringing it with him.”

“We’ll have to check it out. He said it looks like morse code. However,

unlike when George was using it, we aren't picking it up."

"Or our system is not recognizing it as Morse code."

"Possibly." Frank rubbed the bridge of his nose in thought/. "They could have derived their own system of coded communications. They have their own language. Terry?"

"Yeah?" Terry answered.

"While you're down here, why don't you do some random sweeps." Frank suggested. "See if we can pick up anything, anything that seems steady, maybe a signal. Even if you don't think it's anything. Make a note of it and we'll review it in the morning."

"Sure thing, Frank. Any specific areas you want me to concentrate on."

Frank stood up looking at the map on the wall as he did. "That camp was northwest. Society's taken most of eastern seaboard. Random south scan, mid and north east regions." He grabbed the clipboard. "I'm gonna be doing rounds from back gate to the UD. I'm on all night. Find me if you need me."

"Got it."

Frank started to leave. He noticed Joe staying put staring at the board. "Dad?"

"You know what Frank? I have a bad feeling. I think I'll stay down here and work with Terry for a little while. Go on, we'll be in touch." Getting an agreeing nod from Frank who proceeded to leave, Joe walked to the coffee pot to prepare for a long night. He looked back up at the lit map of the United States and mumbled to himself. "A real bad feeling."

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Ellen giggled. "I'm sorry." She covered her mouth. "I just keep thinking about Frank walking around naked in the grass."

Jess slightly rolled his eyes. "Well if you're thinking about a naked Frank, this should work."

Clearing her breath, Ellen portrayed more serious. "Go on."

Jess brushed his hand slowly down the side of her face as they stood in the livingroom. He brought his lips to hers softly. "Why don't we . . . why don't we go to the . . ."

Ellen burst out laughing. "Sorry."

"Ellen."

"No. It's not working. It's fake."

"What am I doing wrong?"

"I don't know. You have to stop making me laugh."

Jess tossed his hands up. "I'm trying. I'm kissing you. I'm touching you. I'm being seductive. Why is this so difficult?"

"Jess. Do you think us women are just gonna give it up so easily. Baby you have to work for it. Sweeping us off to the bedroom is not an easy task."

"You don't think?" Arrogantly, and tired of trying, Jess stepped to Ellen, swooped her up into his arms, and raced down the hall to the bedroom with her.

"Cheating!" Ellen cried out then shrieked as she was tossed down to the bed with a flop. "No. That doesn't count."

"I got you here." Jess grabbed her legs, spreading them slightly.

Ellen snickered. "Go on." she watched him lower down to her. "Bet me when you lay on me again, you over compensate for something that's just not there."

Jess body barely laid on hers and he tensed up. "You don't make this easy."

"Did you think I would."

"You're supposed to get me to want to do it."

"You have to get me to want to do it to get you to want to do it and you aren't."

"Huh?" Jess asked with a laugh.

"Look." Ellen motioned her head down to their hips. "Over compensation." As soon as she said that, the phone rang. She tilted back her head to the phone on the night stand. "Good thing you left me room." Ellen turned herself over to her stomach and extended her arm for the phone.

"Now see." Jess said, still on top of her. "Now we're talking. I can do this."

"Oh, are you sick." Ellen grabbed the phone. "Hello." Trying not to laugh, she flung out her hand to Jess who was bringing his lips to her neck. "Dean?" Phone clenched to her ear, Ellen, demeanor quickly changed, rolled on to her back. "Oh, my God. I'm on my way."

Blank.

That was the look on John Matoose's face.

Dean shined the flashlight across John's eyes as he stood on the other side of the bed from Ellen. "Melissa found him like this. One second fine, the next . . ." Dean put the light away. "Pupillary response is normal. Vitals. Normal. Everything. But look at him."

Swallowing, Ellen's eyes went from John to Dean. "You know what it looks like?"

"I was thinking the same thing."

After only a beat, they both spoke the same word at the same time.

"Salicain."

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The deep buzz of the communications room door, brought in Frank with a rush. "What's going on."

Joe shook his head with a look of worry and stunned across his face. "I wanna see what you make if this." He pointed to the wall map.

"What happened?" Frank asked.

"Monitoring signals. About . . . ten minutes ago, we picked up something that resembled a clicking source. One of those, 'you never knows'. We marked it, registered it into the system and programmed the system to lock in and look for it, just incase it happens again."

"Routine." Frank said.

"Exactly. Then we got this,. Watch the board. Terry. Play it back."

Frank's eyes peered at the board as the light went off and back on as Terry rolled it into the playback mode. When Frank watched, his eyes widened.

“Whoa.” He spoke deeply. “Oh, my God. Play it again.” Frank’s hand slid slowly down his own face as he watched again. The dances of light on the eastern United States were common place since George no longer hid his communications. Those lights signified radio and phone transmissions. Then out of the blue, in the replay, a dance of light grew bright, it grew in circumference before going black with a flicker of static. Frank quickly looked at his father. “Did the system identify that?”

“Nope. I was hoping you’d confirm.”

“Only one thing could cause that. End of power. End of transmission ability. An electrode magnetic pulse.” Frank closed his eyes. “Fuck. Call George.”

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Quantico Marine Headquarters

Dark, so dark was George’s livingroom as he waited in the silence for his answer. The clicking of his mantle clock was the only sound. A sense of torture as it reiterated the minutes that seemed to drag on.

The knock on his front door, jolted through him with the feel of electricity.

“Come in.” George called out as he stood up.

Slow and sad, Steward shut the door and stepped inside.

“Well?” George asked.

Steward hesitated, looking down then back up not wanting to deliver the news. “Confirmed.”

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Beginnings, Montana

The moment Ellen stepped into the lab she hurried to Dean’s side. “Dean?”

Dean caught his balance. His eyes tightly closed. “Shit.”

“What happened?” Ellen steadied him.

“I got dizzy.”

“Here sit.” She pulled up a stool. “No wonder you’ve been bitchy. You probably haven’t slept since . . . since . . .” She cleared her throat. “Your slumber party.”

Dean rubbed his eyes. “I haven’t. And it wasn’t . . .” He grunted.

“Dean?”

“God, my head.”

“Dean do you think . . .”

“No.” Dean stood up. “I thought about that. My vision is fine. The headaches feel the same. It has to be stress, El. And now this. John.”

“Not Salicain?” Ellen asked.

“Close. But no cigar. The antidote . . . useless.”

“Can we derive something from the antidote if what’s in John’s blood is like the Salicain.”

“Feel like trying?” Dean asked.

“Sure. Why not. Now?”

“Who’s with the kids?”

“Jess is staying. I have till morning.” Ellen pulled up a stool. “Dean? If someone hit John with a derivative of Salicain. That someone has to be working for George in order to have something like that.”

“I know.”

“Medical knowledge.”

“I . . . I know.” Dean said. “What are you getting at.”

“I love . . . I love Andrea with my whole heart and soul. O.K.?”

“Ellen.”

“No, hear me out.” Ellen took a deep breath. “If this Bev thing is a whole set up like you insist. She needs medical help to pull it off.”

“Oh My God.” Dean hurriedly looked up. “Did you just . . . did you just say what I think you did.”

“Yeah. But that’s not what I’m talking about. I’m talking about someone with medical knowledge being the insider.”

“We’ve discussed this. Andrea is not the only option.”

“Today she is.” Ellen stated. “Please, no further than this lab.”

“Go on.”

Ellen leaned into Dean. “Danny was here today talking to John. You know, doing that Danny trial intimidation thing. The walls in the rooms are like paper . . .”

“Ellen.”

“No, hear me out.” Ellen pulled two charts closer. “Danny said he left here around twelve fifteen. Gene is in the next room to John with shingles. Look at the time Andrea did her rounds.” Ellen flipped open the chart. “She noted Gene’s vital at . . .”

“Twelve-fifteen.”

“O.K. Now, the I-vac readout from John’s pump.” Ellen pulled out a strip. “Look at the time it was refreshed.”

Dean closed his eyes briefly. “Twelve-eighteen.”

“Knowing these walls, Knowing the time. Andrea . . . heard everything.”

Heavily, Dean breathed out.

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“Joe.” George’s voice came through the speaker in the communications room.

“I’m here.” Joe spoke through heavy words. “What’s going on.”

“First, let me just say.” George’s words echoed in the quiet room where Henry, Jason and Frank also listened. “When you called with the news that there were this many, I found it hard to believe. Then when you called and said they had possible means of communications, I thought you were pushing it.”

“Plausible to you now?” Joe asked.

“Plausible?” George chuckled. “Probable. I’d go as far as to say, definitely now. These things are a lot smarter than we ever in our history of fighting them, ever gave them credit for.”

“I think we’re beginning to see that.” Joe said. “My God, let’s stop and take a moment to realize, they had as long as us to organize.”

George's sigh came through the speaker with a brush of distortion sound. "And they did. And I wanna take the bastards out and take them out all at once. We can not. Can not do anymore one at a time hits. You or I can not afford that. And screw three hundred, I have three thousand scouting out tomorrow first light, north, south east and west. Everywhere. I'm finding them. And finding them soon. I suggest you people move as fast. Because this is more deadlier than we anticipated."

"George, what . . ."

"They got us. They got us good Joe. Just as Frank thought. All the work we did to try to get it started again. Finished. Our shipping. Norfolk. Gone." George took a long sad hesitation. "Nuked."