

Phases of War

By
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SAVAGE WARS

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Beginnings, Montana
October 24

Jason, holding his notes, stood in Joe's office. The awaited news. The weather forecast. And for the first time since planting, it meant something. "I don't think the severity of the after effects is something to worry about. Dean?"

Dean looked up from his own notes. "I don't believe so either. Even though George reported mild to moderate cases of radiation poisoning, it should dissipate before it reaches us."

"And the cloud will reach us." Jason continued. "Predicated tomorrow, late afternoon early evening."

"Remaining crops?" Joe asked.

Jason shook his head. "Minimal radiation. Although we're talking a nice size warhead that exploded. Dean and believe that for the day and a half it's in the area we're O.K., just . . . any pregnant women or those who suspect pregnancy should stay indoors."

Joe nodded. "Robert. Scouts."

"Nothing yet." Robbie answered. "We didn't think we would. Nothing from George's men either. However I guess we'll get something in a day or two. Latest next week."

"Let's please not forget . . ." Frank interjected. "Even if we find the remaining base or bases. We aren't finding the remaining savages. Just the ones who organized. There's no way we're locating all the ones in the States gone bad."

Jason held up a pencil. "I have to agree with Frank. I did some of my own calculations based on the Dawson apocalyptic survival theory and I came up with estimated numbers in the States alone, not including Mexico or Canada, around one hundred and ninety-two thousand. Accounted for are about ninety. Where's the rest of the population."

"Yeah what he said." Frank added. "And . . . that just supports my theory even more."

"Christ Frank." Joe shook his head. "We gassed a major camp. They nuked George in retaliation. Something they had set up all along. A contingency."

"Don't stay strictly on that Dad. I'm telling you. Anyone breaching our radio communications like Hal used to do, could have seized the opportunity to hide their strike behind the savages." Frank replied. "Now I'm not ruling out that the fuckin savages didn't have one intelligent suicidal man who would set it off. And granted, Norfolk is big, they wouldn't have noticed him. Unlike here in Beginnings or New Bowman where we're small and we'll see someone sneaking in with let's say a ten megaton nuclear warhead. But . . . it could have come from anywhere. We got that signal, that could have been the radio signal of the nuke coming in."

"We took out the capabilities of most of the silos." Joe argued. "And, you're forgetting. That was Norfolk. And also we have a landmine of available nuclear weapons just laying around the United States."

"True." Frank said. "But we didn't hit the rest of the world. Cuba, Canada,

overseas. You name it. Available. Like I said, they could have been listening to us. Masking their attack. Perfect opportunity. A nuclear weapon is not the brain function nor the style of the savages.”

Joe held up his hand to silence the moans that erupted in the room. Moans of aggravation stemming from an argument Frank was insistent upon all morning. Joe, like everyone else, was getting fed up with Frank who seemed to be headed into fighting a war that existed only in his mind. “So what are you suggesting Frank. Forget the savages? They aren’t a threat?”

“No.” Frank lifted his finger. “Fuck the savages. Still take them out. We don’t need them. They are threat. Not a nuclear threat. When they retaliate, they will retaliate by ground and big, not by air or massive explosion. I’m just saying keep our eyes open. After we get this savage situation and their barbaric linked up civilizations out of the way. We should start looking elsewhere.”

“So the savages and George aren’t enough in this screwed up world.” Joe asked with a hint of sarcasm. “We’re looking for a new enemy?”

“Maybe not.”

Another eruption of moans and Joe threw up his hands. “Maybe not?”

“Maybe not an enemy.” Frank stated.

Joe laughed and looked around the faces of the room. “No. I’m game. I wanna hear this. If the savages don’t have the nukes and aren’t using them, and someone else is, how are they not the enemy.”

“Easy. If they listened to our transmissions, then they’ve listened for a while. They know what’s going on. Us. The Society Wars. UWA. So on. And if they waited for a masked retaliation moment, they waited until we took out the big savage camp. If they heard about that drop, then they know we, Beginnings did it. If they know that . . .” Frank grinned. “Why did they hit George?”

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“I’m free!” Richie screamed joyfully as he bolted from the containment door.

Ellen’s shriek was not far behind as she chased him. “Richie!” she yelled then saw Johnny coming out of the clinic. “Johnny! Grab him, he escaped!”

After a chuckle and seeing Richie making it far from containment, Johnny, much bigger than Richie, intercepted the little man’s run. He grabbed hold of him trying to stop him. “Can’t escape Rich. Rules.”

“No. No. See I’m not . . .” In the midst of his struggle, Richie’s head turned to the right. “Hey.” He pointed at Bev. “I know her.”

“You what?” Johnny laughed nervously.

“Why is she allowed to live here?”

“What . . . what do you mean?”

“Her.” Richie said. “Man, she must be trusted. Because isn’t that . . .”

“Ow!” Johnny yelled out.

“Huh?” Richie looked confused, but before he could say anything . . . *Whap.* Johnny nailed him. Knees buckling, Richie started to drop to the ground. Before he fell, Johnny hoisted him up over his shoulder and carried him back to containment.

“Oh my God.” Ellen rushed their way. “What happened.”

"El. Your brother. He . . . he . . . kneed me in the nuts."

"Shit" Ellen's eyes widened and she hurried to containment. "He attacked you."

"Afraid so."

She opened the door. "Bring him in. Wow. Maybe I had like a psychic premonition or something about him."

"I think you did. He worked for the society. Did anyone check him for a microchip."

"No." Ellen buzzed them through to the main portion of containment. "Put him in a bunk. Do you think we should."

"Check for a chip?" Johnny dropped Richie on a bunk. "Yeah, if he has one and he's not being reprogrammed, he can get dangerous. Like now." Johnny hoped Ellen didn't know he was lying. "But first, I think we should sedate him until we find out."

Ellen stared at her unconscious brother. "I feel really bad."

"Better we find this out now than later when he's babysitting one of the kids and turns on him."

In shock Ellen gasped. "I'll run to the clinic and get the sedative."

"You know what? I'll do it." Johnny laid his hand on her cheek. "Stay here." Widening his eyes after he turned from Ellen, Johnny left the men's quarters then eventually containment. All the way to the clinic he had to think of something to do. Richie never said who he thought Bev was, but if there was even an inkling in Richie's mind, Johnny couldn't take a chance. Since it would be an easy way to get busted, killing Richie in containment was not an option. Johnny had to find another way,

In the empty lab, Johnny grabbed a syringe. He had to move quickly, get what he needed. He hurried to the medication fridge, opened it and reached for the second shelf. He saw the vial he sought. He took it.

"Whoa!" The squeak of stopping tennis shoes then Dean's hand, halted Johnny as he readied to plunge the syringe into the vial. "What are you doing?"

"I have an um, irritated patient. One of the new guys. I wanted a sedative."

Dean whistled. "Johnny. Have a lot on your mind?"

"Yeah why?"

"Look at that vial."

"Huh?" Johnny played dumb.

"Drexocel. Not Darvoline. You saw the 'D' you grabbed." Dean chuckled. "This is that experimental Ritalin med we've been trying out." Dean took the vial from Johnny's hand. "You give the guy this without attention disorder, his mind may never work right again."

"Oh my God." Johnny faked dramatic shock. "I . . . I . . ."

"Easy mistake." Dean replaced the vial and handed Johnny the sedative. "Don't fret about. We're just lucky we caught it. O.K.?"

"I'm sorry Dr. Dean." Johnny added a tearful sadness to his voice. "I'm so sorry."

"Johnny. It's O.K." Dean gave a wink, grabbed his requisitions and raced from the lab.

"Asshole." Johnny whispered and flipped off a leaving Dean. Cocky, he smiled, put the sedative back in the fridge, removed the Drexocel and filled the

syringe with it. Then Johnny went back to containment.

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"He looks dead." Jenny sat on the edge of John's bed just looking into his eyes that blankly stared out.

Dean raised his glance from the chart. "Just be careful what you say. He hears everything."

"How do you know?" Jenny asked.

"I just do." Dean closed the chart and started to leave. "And not too long, Jenny, he needs his rest."

"His eyes aren't closed. How can he rest. If he can hear surely he can see."

Dean walked to the bed and closed John's eyes. "There. See ya."

"Dean?" Jenny called, still staring at John.

"Yes."

"Did you figure out what's wrong with him yet?"

"No."

"So it's not a stroke like Andrea said?"

Why that made Dean completely freeze he didn't know. He did recall her diagnosis being the same with Joe when he was hit with the Salicain. "Did . . . Did Andrea tell you it was a stroke?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"This morning."

"I see." Dean nodded. "We don't know for sure, but we aren't ruling anything out at this point."

"Is he close to dying?"

"Jenny, I really have to get back to my . . ."

"Dean. Don't be a dick. Is he?"

"Right now? I don't think." Dean tried to leave again.

"So it's all right if I go out on my date with Hal? He's not gonna die while I'm out. I'd feel very guilty."

"Go out Jenny. Have a good time." Giving a quick raise of his eyebrows and thinking 'typically female', Dean left the room.

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"At least Dean thinks I'm sane. I think." Frank said. "I'll ask him when I talk to him."

"Not that everyone thinks you're a crack pot Frank." Joe explained as they neared the clinic.

"I know."

"But this theory . . ."

"I know."

"And prancing around naked in your backyard two nights in a row didn't . . ."

"Dad." Frank stopped him. "I know. And I don't prance. Fuck." He reached for the clinic doors.

"We'll discuss this tonight. Maybe sit down. I'll check with you on shift."

Frank paused in his opening. "I have a date. I won't be around."

"What do you mean you won't be around?"

"I plan on staying in New Bowman with El. You and Andrea are watching the kids."

"All night?" Joe asked.

"Yes."

"No."

"Why?"

"Get your ass back to Beginnings Frank. You're head of security. Who's running it while you're off prancing . . ."

"Dad! I don't prance. And Robbie's filling in."

"Robbie has services in the morning. He can't work all night. He's bad enough as it is without being tired."

"Dad, it's my night off." Frank argued.

"You don't need a night off. You had four nights off in a row."

"I was shot."

"I don't care." Joe argued. "I expect you on shift. Now is not the time to have you not available."

"Man." Frank opened the door. "You're tough." he walked through the doors and stopped with a clueless look on his face.

It was after Joe passed him that he noticed Frank was no longer with him. "Frank?" Joe turned back. "What's wrong?"

"I forgot why I came here. Fuck. I hate when that happens." Frank looked around as if something in that one sector of the hall was going to clue him in. "Fuck." He opened the door back up.

"Where you going?"

"Back to your office."

"What for?"

"Start all over again."

Joe opened his mouth to call out as Frank left. He could have easily reminded Frank why they were at the clinic, but he found it more amusing to let Frank figure it out on his own.

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Quantico Marine Headquarters

George was so tired of drinking out of straws he wanted to scream. But lifting the large glass of tea was useless, especially since it always seemed to clank against the metal of the contraption that held his head up.

"George?" Johnny spoke on the phone to him. "You still there."

With a long slurp, George finished of his drink. "Yeah. And, that's impossible."

"He had this look in his eye."

"Johnny." George said with a hint of a laugh. "Do you know how preposterous that notion is. If Joe Slagel hasn't any idea who she is, how is Richie Martin gonna know."

"True."

"True. But just in case. Do what you can to keep him quiet."

"George." Johnny spoke soft. "I feel like everything is coming down on me. Everyday, it seems more and more like someone is gonna catch on. Maybe . . . Maybe it's time I just bolted."

"I'd say fine. But you can't. Not now. I can't take a chance of something happening to you when you try to make it back. Especially with this savage war thing happening."

"What if they find me out. Then they'll kill me."

"Johnny. That will never happen." George assured him. "You're a Slagel. That will never happen. We have the back up if need be. We'll use it. If you still want to leave. Then after Andrea's trial is over, you'll have safe passage back with her and Bob."

"What if they find her innocent. They picked jury. They're really being fair about it."

"Doesn't matter how fair the trial is." George stated. "The evidence is against her my boy. Trust me, she'll be found guilty."

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Frank felt as if he were nearing injury, possible tennis neck, the way he was watching Dean whip around, back and forth in the lab. "You're mad."

"I'm not mad." Dean stated.

"You are."

"Frank.

"Dean. You said . . ."

"I know what I said."

"So why are you being like this?" Frank asked.

"It's not fair."

"What do you want me to do Dean." Frank tossed his hands up. "I have to draw a line."

"Well how about this . . ." Dean turned around and walked to Frank. "How about . . ."

"No deals."

"All right. All right. I was gonna offer to do all the cooking."

"I don't want to lose the weight."

"Funny." Dean shook his head. "All right. No more passing it off on you. I'll do my own laundry."

"Thank you." Frank said with an end-of-argument breath. "People will start to talk if they found out I was doing your underwear."

"I run the sweeper."

"Badly."

Dean chuckled. "You would think, by looking at us, if we were going to be the Odd Couple, you'd be Oscar, not Felix." Dean went back to doing his work. "So tonight's the night, huh?"

"Yeah." Frank said softly. "How are you with it."

"Good. Thank you for asking. I mean that."

Frank nodded.

"Wanna know why it's not bothering me?" Dean asked. "Because for the first time in a long time Frank, I trust you. I really trust your word."

"And you got it. You know my date with El is just about spending time with her."

"I know."

"You guys will work it out. I feel this thing coming to an end. I do."

"I hope. Because it's starting to make me physically ill."

"You've been looking bad." Snickering at Dean's grumble, Frank looked at his watch. "I have to head out. I have dinner to start. See ya later." He started to leave.

"You're making dinner?" Dean asked. "That's nice and I thought you were eating at Hal's."

"I am. It's a joint thing. Jenny's bringing one half, me the other."

"Maybe you should hook up with Jenny."

Frank stopped cold in the door way and glared back. "And I was gonna leave you some." Ending it on his sarcastic comment, Frank moved into the hall nearly bumping into Ellen. "Whoa. Sorry."

"Hey." Ellen smiled. "Where you going?"

"Getting ready for tonight. El, we can't stay out real late. I have to work."

"Oh." Ellen nodded. "That's all right. We'll have fun. I'm looking forward to it."

"Thanks. See you then." Frank smiled and moved down the hall.

Ellen tilted her head in wonder. She told Frank she was looking forward to their date. Where was his 'me too'? Shrugging, she went into the lab. "Did you say something to Frank about him and I going out."

"No." Dean said as he worked. "What are you doing here?"

"Finishing for the day." She held up requisitions then set them in the bin. "I have to get ready and I want to see the kids before I ship them off to Joe and Andrea's." she took off her lab coat and brought it to the coat tree.

Dean only sadly nodded.

"What are *you* doing tonight."

"Me? After I finish dictation? Oh I have a big night planned. I'm doing nothing." He flashed a fake grin and gathered up his work. "My roommate is going out with my wife and I'm sitting home."

"O.K." Ellen walked to the door and stopped. "Dean? If you want, I'll tell Joe and Andrea it's all right if you pick up the kids and keep them. If you want."

Dean immediately looked up. "El? Wait. What's that all about? The court order."

"Like you've paid attention to it?"

"Well, I . . ."

"Dean. You live with Frank. He has the kids half the time. I'm not him. I'm not dumb."

Dean's head lowered in a blush.

"You aren't well Dean." Ellen said seriously. "I'm starting to get worried about you. You've had headaches for days. You won't let me take a look at you. You're pale. The stress is getting to you. You don't need the stress of not seeing your kids on top of that. All right?"

"So is this because you know you're gonna win on Monday?"

"That remark was uncalled for. Considering my attitude with you right now. No Dean. I'm not winning in our case on Monday. There is no more case."

"Ellen." Dean lifted the headset to his dictation. "Thank you. I really mean

that.”

Saying no more, Ellen nodded then walked out and straight into Johnny. “God. This is run into a towering Slagel day.”

“Hey, El.” Johnny peeked into the lab. “Is Dean in the . . .” Johnny halted, and hid his snicker when he looked in.

“What?” Ellen went to look.

“El. He’s . . .” Johnny tried to stop her from peeking in. He cringed when she did.

Dean was at the counter. Headset on, stare forward, not moving, hands in mid air reaching for his notes. Ellen shrugged. “Wow, he must really be shocked over what I told him. See you.” She started to walk then stopped. “Oh, Johnny. I have a favor. I’m going to be out tonight and I’m concerned about Richie. Any chance I can get you to keep checking on him?”

“Oh, El, sure. You can count on me.” Johnny winked. “And I’ll even run some tests if you want. You know, to check on that bad microchip.”

“Oh could you. That is so great of you. But, please don’t tell anyone. He’s my brother and I don’t want this getting around that he’s really a SUT. I’m surprised no one knows already.”

“The secret is safe with me. I’ll take care of it.”

“I can always count on you, Johnny.” Ellen smiled in relief then walked away.

Like his father, Johnny responded, “Always,” but without the same meaning.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

New Bowman, Montana

“And I cut my hair for tonight.” Jenny rambled as she lifted up the bottom of her hair. “Bet you can’t tell. It was just the ends. They needed it. They split.” She flashed smile to Hal who returned one in politeness. “Bentley did it. I heard Bentley is cutting hair here on Fridays. Is that true?”

Hal didn’t know whether to nodded or shake his head. Every movement he made was slow and with thought. Being so careful not to agree to something he didn’t want to.

“Wonder what’s taking Ellen and Frank so long with the dinner.” Jenny quickly looked over her shoulder then back to Hal. “Oh, well. Anyhow, Boy, you UWA men are so nice. An polished. How do you get your buttons so shiny. And I’ve been meaning to ask you. Do you make the men polish their swords. If so, what do you use on them? Good job.”

Hal slowly nodded with a forced smile thinking the entire time how much he was killing Frank.

Ellen let out a quiet snicker as she peeked around the bend from the kitchen. “I think they’re getting along great.” She whispered, feeling Frank right behind her.

“Yeah.”

“Hal looks happy.”

“Oh, he looks very happy.” Frank laughed inside.

“I can’t believe he confessed his feelings to you.”

“And he wasn’t even drunk.”

Smiling, and wanting to take advantage of the closeness, Ellen hurried and turned around so as to be face to face with Frank. “We really . . . should let them spend a few minutes more alone.” So close Frank was. His chest, oddly sporting a black tee shirt, blaring her in the face. Slowly Ellen laid her hands on his waist. “I really am glad we went out tonight.”

“We’re still out.”

“Yeah, but this date. I’m happy about it.”

Frank felt her hands moved to his stomach. “Um, why?”

Ellen giggled. “It’s you.”

“Thanks.”

“Thanks?”

“Yeah.”

“So.” Ellen inched her hands up his chest. “What do you say we take advantage of this time alone together in the kitchen.”

“I say, good idea.” Frank removed her hands and stepped back. “Together we can get the dinner on the table a whole lot faster.” Flashing a grin Frank hurried and moved to the stove.

Ellen stood stunned.

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Beginnings, Montana

"Ow." Jess felt the hot edge of the baking pan seep through the pot handler and touch against the palm of his hand. Reaction caused him to drop the pan with a 'slam' on top of the stove. "Shit."

"You O.K.?" Robbie asked from the kitchen doorway.

"Yeah." Jess shut the oven with his leg then took a double take when he saw Robbie putting on his leather coat. "Where you going? Dinner's done."

"Jess. I'm sorry. I didn't tell you, did I?"

"No. What's up?"

"I told Andrea I'd have dinner there. We're working on my sermon for tomorrow."

"Oh." Jess nodded.

"Why don't you come?" Robbie pointed back with his thumb.

"Nah." Jess stared at his oven creation. "I'm in the mood for quiche."

Chuckling, Robbie backed up. "Save me some."

"You coming back after?" Jess followed him out.

"No. I think I'll hang at my Dad's then head to the shift. If you're bored, go to the hall."

Jess shook his head. "I kind of felt like just hanging at the house. I borrowed Henry's VCR and a couple movies from Ellen and I . . ." He stopped when Robbie laughed. "What?"

"Such the homebody you're turning into. Movies every night."

"That's just me. I've always been one to prefer staying home and watching a movie to going out. Besides, have you seen Ellen's collection?"

"Oh yeah." Robbie smiled. "I even helped build her collection. God, every time we went out on a run she gave us a list."

"That's funny."

"Don't stay in alone. Hey . . ." Robbie moved toward the door. "If you feel like it stop at the hall later. We'll hang."

"You're going to the hall later?"

"Yeah."

"I thought you were filling in for Frank tonight?"

"Check this out." Robbie grinned. "My Dad ordered him back early. He has a curfew. I'll be done."

"So . . . Frank and Ellen are ending their date early?"

"Yep." Robbie reached for the door.

"What time do you think he'll bring her home. Do you think it will be too . . ."

"Jess." Robbie saw the look on his face. "You . . . you have to get over this."

"What do you mean?" Jess asked clueless.

"I know this staying in the house, cooking dinner and hanging out, is you."

"It is."

"I know that's what you're looking for."

"I am."

Robbie nodded again then nervously ran his hand over the top of his own

hair. "Jess, you're my friend. Can I be totally blunt with you."

"Please."

"I see it. O.K.? I've been there. You're liking this 'playing house' thing you have going with Ellen, pretending she's the female version of Len."

"Robbie . . ."

"No. Hear me out please." Robbie held up his hand. "This training course. It's just that. A training course to help you find someone that can do that with you everyday. Ellen . . . she's not the one, man. She's making the time because right now, she has the time. But, for your own sake, because I know, get over it and don't get used to it. Especially after tonight. She's out with Frank. I know what that means. And I hope you've had enough lessons, because I wouldn't put it passed my brother to stop it all together."

Jess slowly nodded. "You're right."

Robbie cringed. "I hope I'm not. Really I do. Because since Henry, no one sits around with El, watching her old movies, talking and such, like you do. I know she likes it, but Frank . . ."

"He won't."

Robbie shook his head. "My brother is very possessive with her. I've been hurt and burned more times than you know."

"But, you and El are different. You're in love with her Robbie. You have a physical past. Her and I, we're friends."

"Sucks." Robbie stated. "Her time will be Frank's time. Always."

"I see."

"I'm sorry."

"No." Jess shook his head, playing it off. "No. I'm glad you gave me a dose of reality before I settled into our little practice platonic Donna Reed life."

Robbie chuckled. "You O.K.?"

"Yeah." Jess waved his hand. "You'd better head over to Andrea's, I know how she is."

"You sure, you're O.K.?"

"Me. Yeah. Hey, I was alone for eight years. Losing a budding friendship isn't gonna wilt me."

Robbie opened the door. "Look at the bright side. I'm the lonely guy too. You still have me to hang around the hall with."

"Yep." Jess nodded. "That I do." He watched Robbie wave and close the door as he left. Then Jess, shaking his head, walked heavily to the kitchen.

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New Bowman, Montana

All that kept going through Ellen's mind--aside from what was up with Frank--was how well Danny did on New Bowman's own, 'Hoi, Hoi-on-the Range' Danny's own version of a cowboy style saloon. Complete with barrels and straw about the floor. A bartender who looked miserable and very, very few women. It had the modern touch. Music. But the place was loud, even with the refined UWA soldiers who hung about playing cards, darts, pool and talking. Ellen attributed the noise to the Beginnings people who discovered the watering hole.

"Here." Frank handed her a beer. "And slow down on that."

"Sorry." Ellen took a drink and smiled in pleasure of the taste. "God! I haven't had beer forever. It tastes so good." She took another long drink. Dribbling some, Ellen slowly and seductively removed it from her bottom lip.

"I wish you wouldn't do that."

"You mean with the beer?"

"Yeah."

"Why is it . . . turning you on?"

"No it's driving me crazy."

"Really?" Ellen trucked her hair behind her ears. "Why?"

"El." Frank scoffed. "I'm a fuckin recovering alcoholic, why do you think?"

Ellen's eyes widen. "Shit. I'm sorry. You wanna leave?"

"Nah. I have fortitude of steel." Frank sniffed arrogantly then mumbled. "On some things."

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

"Want me to stop drinking?"

"Yeah. But . . ." Frank shook his head. "Not because of my problem. Because of yours."

"Huh?"

"Yep. A few more of those and I'll be fending you off."

"Why would you fend me off?"

"You'll be attacking me. Hands all over me. Out of control. Man."

Ellen laughed. "Would that be so bad. I mean . . ." she stepped to him. "It's because I find you incredibly sexy."

"It's because you're lonely and you haven't had it in a while."

Ellen gasped. "Frank."

"El," Frank closed her mouth that dropped open. "I know you. Besides." He cleared his throat. "I'm being good. That's not what this night's about. It's about spending time with you." Frank leaned close to her and whispered. "Like these U fuckin WA soldiers you keep bragging about. I'm gonna be a perfect gentleman." He winked.

"Then I like this side of you Frank. The softer side. Makes me realize why I love . . ."

"Oh, a juke box!" Frank snapped his finger. "Look El, I wondered where the music came from. I'll be right back. Don't move."

So dumbfounded Ellen was, she didn't hear Jenny behind her.

"Did you?" Jenny asked.

"Huh?" Ellen turned around. "I'm sorry. What was that?"

"I can't help but notice how happy Frank is. Did you? He is glowing over this date."

"Oh, yeah." Ellen rolled her eyes. "He wants to be here."

"Yes." Jenny smiled, "I wondered why the women have been taking the Dan-Tram here on Saturday's. Now I know why. I love this place and the men . . . not one is hitting on you like a dog. All gentlemen."

Ellen's eyes went to Frank at the jukebox.

"Hal is the best." Jenny exhaled. "The epitome of the UWA. I see now why you like Elliott so much. And speaking of Elliott."

Ellen quickly looked up. "Elliott's here?"

"At the bar. Been here." Jenny leaned closer. "Pretending he's not . . . Watching you. But he is."

Ellen smiled and handed Jenny her beer. "How do I look?"

"Good, but what about . . ." Jenny watched Ellen hurry to Elliott. "Frank." Shrugging, Jenny took a sip of Ellen's beer and sat at their table.

"Hey." Ellen snuck up behind Elliott who leaned into the bar. "Surprised to see me."

"Ellen?" Elliott turned around with a shocked look. "Did you just come in?"

"No. We've been here for a while."

"I didn't see you." Elliott didn't want to look to the close deep clearing throat near him. He knew it came from Hal. "Who are you uh. . . here with?"

"Frank." Ellen indicated across the room.

"I see." Elliott ignored Hal's instigating snickers. "A . . . um, date?"

"You could say that."

"Must mean a lot to you. Because you look . . . you look very beautiful tonight."

A warmth feeling of 'good' swept across Ellen's face. She couldn't even say 'thank you' because all that emerged from her mouth was an 'in-awe' "Oh."

Elliott smiled.

"Elliott." Hal snuck his face around. "What brings you here?"

"Me?"

"Yes. You don't drink." Hal stated.

"Um . . ."

Ellen giggled. "To see me?"

"Um . . ." Elliott stuttered. "Actually. I have . . . a . . . date. I'm meeting her here."

Ellen's expression dropped. "Oh. Then I'll let you go. Have a good time. Hal. Jenny's waiting. Bye Elliott." So fake was Ellen's smile she flashed, as she awkwardly and hurriedly turned and went back to their table.

Elliott saw Hal watching him. "Jenny is waiting sir."

Hal grabbed the beers. "A date?"

"Yes."

"Liar."

"Sir."

"Elliott. I can't believe you said you had a date. First off with who? Second, why did you say that."

"Sir." Elliott blushed. "It just slipped out. And . . . I couldn't let her know that I was here . . ."

"To see her?"

"Yes."

"Elliott, you like her don't you?" Hal asked.

"Yes, sir, very much."

"Guess what?" Hal asked.

"What's that sir?"

Arrogantly and with such Slagel style, Hal grinned. "You just blew it with her. Frank thanks you." Shifting both beers to one hand, Hal gave a swift pat to

Elliott whose entire expression dropped into a major wince. Still laughing in enjoyment over Elliott's blunder, Hal walked over to his dreaded double date, feeling a little more 'up'.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

"And this . . ." Trish held up a blue container. ". . . little number is the flavor savor favorite. You can earn this as a free hostess gift if you book in November. With two fifty in sales and two bookings you also qualify to earn the picnic packet." She smiled to look at Bev who sat alone on Trish's sofa. The only one in attendance. "Well." Trish looked at her watch. "I think we've waited long enough. Let's play a game. Everyone . . ." Trish mocked looking around an empty livingroom. "Turn your order forms over and we'll . . ."

The doorbell not only interrupted Trish, but made her grin. "More guests. Hold on." She darted around the couch. "Grab some punch." She hurried to the front door and flung it open. "Oh look it's Danny Hoi." Trish dropped her voice to a jaw clenching whisper. "I hate you Danny." She looked over her shoulder at Bev who walked to the refreshment table.

"Am I late?" Danny questioned.

"Oh! No! You're! Not! Late!" Again Trish dropped her voice. "An hour, asshole."

Danny faked gasped. "Trish. Attitude. Can I come in."

Trish opened the door wider. "Please do." She moved to behind Danny. "You'll pay." Walking around him she went into the livingroom. "Danny, I believe you know Bev. Good." Trish clapped her hands. "It's a party. Sit down."

Bev sat down. "Are we going to play games."

"Yes." Trish answered then saw Danny going to the refreshment table. "Danny. Sit."

"I want . . ."

"Sit."

"But I just . . ."

"SIT!!!" Trish's voice gurgled in the yell, then she took a high pitched calming breath. "I have the old new line of all-in-one meal deals I'm anxious to show."

Shuffling sideways, nervously and with a hint of a smile, Danny sat on the couch. And for the first time in his life he could actually say he was pretty close to being deathly afraid of a Tupperware lady.

^^^

It wasn't where Jess wanted to go, but it was where he ended up. It was better than spending the night at home alone. He went there sooner than he thought, and started drinking more than he wanted to. The social hall.

He would have been perfectly content to stay at home, had someone stopped by, or Danny Hoi and Trish continued their argument a little longer. Jess found that entertaining, especially how the yelling about Danny

mismatching the lids carried the entire two streets over along with Trish's screaming baby competing for who could be louder.

Jess had to admit to himself he did feel a little slighted when he found out Trish had a Tupperware party and didn't invite him. But when he discovered Bev showed up, he realized out of loyalty to Ellen, he wouldn't have gone anyway.

In the hall, a little afraid to sit, Jess stood, leaning elbows on the bar into his forth whiskey and water. He sipped that one, because he could feel the effects of the other three. They made his head swoozy, eyes glossy and mouth dry. But then Jess oddly, felt something else. The touch of someone seemingly and daintily grabbing his rear-end. He looked up from his drink, then over his shoulder.

Jenny giggled. "Sorry." She stood beside him. "It was just sticking out. So cute. Firm looking. I had to check."

The corner of Jess' mouth raised. "Jenny." He stood up straight and looked down at his watch. "You're back."

"Wow." Jenny grinned. "You're happy to see me."

"How did the date with Hal go?"

"Oh." Jenny grabbed her chest. "Hal is such a gentleman. He tried nothing. And get this, he . . . he shook my hand goodnight."

"Really."

"I swear if it wasn't an insanitary, notion I would never wash it again." She held up her right hand.

"I'm shocked you guys are so early. How did Ellen and Frank's half of the date go?"

"Good. Ellen, she's a little, well . . ." Jenny whispered. "They have beer in New Bowman. She drank just a little too much."

Jess lifted his glass and tilted his head. He sipped. "Maybe I'll run over and . . ."

"She's still with Frank." Jenny saw it on Jess' face. Especially when he took an immediate drink, and set the glass down. She watched his sculptured jaws tense up. "Jess? What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Jess shook his head and leaned back into the bar. "Just a little bored."

The accent was long gone, but the dialect remained in Hector's voice. "I can help. I can use a partner for darts." He moved to the other side of Jess.

Jenny smiled. "See how nice Hector is." She patted Jess on the back. "He's probably bored too. Be the pair to beat." Happily and still on a 'high' from her date, Jenny walked away.

"We can be the pair to beat. What do you say?" Hector leaned closer holding up the darts. "Some say I'm pretty good."

Jess looked at him. The effects of the alcohol didn't mask what Hector was doing or what he looked like. Strong, not real tall. Hair prematurely greyed at the temples for his thirty years. His darker Mexican complexion held some lines of hardened years, but not too many lines to mask the handsome face he had. After finishing his drink, Jess swiped the darts from Hector's hand. "Let's play."

Frank snickered at the hiccup Ellen released and he shook his head as they sat in the parked truck not far from the living section of town. "This is nice."

"Reminds me of when we were kids." Ellen kicked her legs up on the dashboard. She looked behind her to the back seat of the truck. "Of course it's a bigger vehicle. But just like years ago."

"Riding around."

"Talking."

"Parking." Ellen quickly looked at Frank. "But I won't ask. I know."

"You're drunk."

"I know."

"I'm not the same Frank . . ." Frank took a deep breath. "I wouldn't take advantage of your vulnerable state."

"That's nice of you. I'm having a good time despite the amount of times you turned me down."

"El, please." Frank held up his hand. "I didn't want to. O.K.? I can't stress or repeat to you why. I want tonight to be about spending tome together. Quality time. Nothing physical. That's not what tonight's about."

Whap!

Frank's hand smacked against the back cab window, sliding down against the steamed up surface as if he were in a scene from the movie *Titanic*. He tried to adjust his big body in the small area where the back seat was. Getting comfortable, holding onto Ellen.

His mouth moved wide against hers, fast and hard, trying to hold every part of her body against his as she straddle over his lap.

Ellen moaned at the groping touch of his hands pressing so hard on her body trying to feel her through her clothes. Savagely, Frank lifted Ellen's shirt from her, over her head and tossing it. It fell--like the bra he wasted no time removing--behind the back seat of that truck.

His hands clenched hard to her rib cage. Gliding up with a force, lifting her breasts with the edges of his hands and lowering his mouth to them.

Ellen's hands ran through his hair, feeling his searching mouth all over her. She tossed her head back when Frank's biting kisses went to her neck. He removed his lips momentarily to take off his tee shirt. And when he did, Ellen tackled him backwards, pressing her mouth to his chest and running her lips up. "Tell me Frank. Tell me this is it." She kissed him. "Let's forget about everything. Tell me we're getting back together."

Frank's hand moved to her face and his mouth parted.

^^^

"Your win." Hector said to Jess at the pool table walking around from behind him.

It wasn't Jess' imagination, he felt the slight brush of him.

Hector set down his pool stick. "You call it." He stepped closer to Jess. "My roommate is on night shift. What do you say we go back and just . . . hang

out.”

The chalking up of his cue stick stopped when Jess looked at Hector with thought over the suggestion.

^^^

“You son of a bitch!” Ellen’s strong bellowing screamed blasted in the cab of the truck as she kicked back off of Frank. “Where’s my shirt.”

“Behind the seat.” Frank tossed his shirt on then saw her trying to reach down into the long narrow space. “El.”

“I can’t reach it.”

“El, I have to talk to you.”

Ellen smacked his reaching arm away. “Fuck you.”

“You aren’t listening.”

“I heard enough. I’m getting out of the truck.” She started to crawl over the seat and Frank locked on to the back of her jeans pulling her back.

“El, it’s not that I don’t . . .”

“I don’t want to hear it!” Ellen shouted.

“I gave the man my word! I can’t break it!”

“Bullshit!”

“Listen to me!” Frank argued getting angrier.

“You won’t sleep with me or get back with me because of Dean. Dean! That’s all I need to hear. Go home and fuck Dean, Frank. Because you will never, never get another chance with me. Ever!”

“You’re being ridiculous!”

Ellen just gasped and quickly lunged over the front seat swinging out her legs missing Frank. She grabbed her jean jacket, rolled over the seat and opened the door.

“El.” Frank grunted, then climbed awkwardly over, squeezing out. “El!”

Placing on her jean jacket over her bare chest, Ellen started to walk. “Leave me alone.”

“What about your . . . you know what! Fine!” Frank shouted. “Walk!”

“I will!”

“It’s fuckin thirty degrees El!”

“I don’t care.” Ellen looked up to the immediate roll of thunder that sent the ice cold rain down. “Swell.”

“Freeze for all I care!” He debated shortly in following her, then Frank decided against it. In his frustration spin around, he slammed his hand hard on the hood of the truck then got back in. He started it up, sped it from his parking space and drove, slowing down only to wave with instigation to a walking Ellen.

^^^

A sense of fluttering hit Jess’ stomach when Hector opened the front door and he stepped into the home first. It wasn’t nervousness, it was . . . fear. A situation Jess hadn’t been faced with in forever was presented to him. And in Jess’ recollection, he could never recall really going home with someone out of the blue.

The house looked like everyone else’s. The furniture was original, not

redone like a lot of people had their couches recovered. Or like the sofa's he heard that Joe sent Henry and Robbie out to get, to make the women happy.

"Drink?" Hector asked, taking off his coat.

"Um." Jess had to take an instant to feel how much the alcohol had already gotten to him. "Maybe a little. I've had enough tonight."

Hector smiled, pouring from a ready bottle. A bottle that sat there with two glasses as if he was expecting the company. He brought both glasses with him as he walked to Jess who stood behind the couch. "Here." He set the drinks down on the sofa table.

Jess took off his jacket. "So." He tossed it over the couch.

"So." Hector moved closer.

"We just gonna hang, talk. What do you wanna do?" Jess asked innocently enough.

Hector didn't answer. He just walked behind Jess and directly against him. His hands went immediately to Jess' hips.

Jess swallowed, feeling what he did and what he hadn't felt in a really long time. "Hector." More beating of his heart came with the lack of words spoken by Hector, only actions. The strong rugged hands, worker's hands, undid the buttons of Jess' denim shirt until he opened it completely. Jess eyed his drink. How much he wanted to get just one more taste. He felt the air of the room hit against his bare chest, then Hector's hands slide down his abdomen to the waist of his jeans at the same time lips slightly touched his neck. Jess' throat tensed up. His stomach jittered and knotted at the sensation of hands upon him. And then Jess grabbed on to Hector's wrist. "Stop." He lifted the hands from him. "I'm sorry." Jess stepped away and grabbed his coat. "It's not you. It's me. And this . . . this is not me. Not what I'm about. I'm sorry." Jess, without saying anything more or taking time to button his shirt, walked to the door. He didn't hesitate in opening it, he walked right outside.

The rain hit him hard and he looked up. "Shit." Slipping on his coat he stepped down the first step of the small porch and froze. Not from the rain or temperature, but from the shock seeing Ellen who obviously saw him come out of the house. "El."

"Jess." Ellen's eyes widened. "Were you with . . ."

"No." Jess looked back to Hector's house. "Yes, but no."

Ellen grumbled into a laugh as she spun in the street. "Oh my God! All my hard work!" She joked, slapping her wet hand at his exposed chest.

Jess looked down. "Shit. El. It's not what you think."

"Neither is this." She opened her jean jacket in a flash of her own bare chest.

Jess, shrieking, grabbed the edges of her jacket, closing it as he stepped to her as if to block anyone on the empty street from seeing. "What . . . what are you doing?"

"Oh." Ellen whined out. "Probably wallowing in embarrassment brought on by too much drinking."

Jess chuckled. "Can I join you in that?"

Like he held her jacket closed, Ellen reached out and pulled Jess' coat closed. "Walk me home. We'll wallow together."

"And it summed it all up right then and there." Jess tossed his coat and

shirt on the chair then sat on Ellen's couch. "I never viewed it as anything until tonight." He ran his fingers rapidly through his wet hair like a comb.

"And?" Ellen asked coming from the kitchen with two glasses, still wearing only her jean jacket. She handed one to Jess.

Jess sniffled before he took it "Thanks."

Ellen sat down.

"Sex." Jess sipped and gasped. "Should we be drinking more?"

"It's to warm us." Ellen held up her glass and clinked it to Jess'.

"Simply a game. That's it." He set his glass down. "Everything was set up like a little skit, you know. Something he has rehearsed a million times. Fined tune. Who to pick. When to pick them. When to make the move. And it told me. This is it. The men who want physical contact, that's all it is. It's not who they're with, it's just an act of sex. And they make it into a game. "

"I wanted sex tonight."

"No you didn't."

"Yeah, I did Jess. I wanted sex."

"El, you wanted closeness with Frank. Big difference. Yeah, it could have been sex. It could have been as raw or as tender as the moment took it and still it would have been more." Jess turned his body to face her. "Don't you see? There's a closeness between you two. An underlying friendship. That can't be taken away. So therefore, with intimacy will always be more. That's . . . that's what it's about."

"Some one you can slam with one second and read with the next?"

"Yes."

Ellen laughed. "Are you drunk?"

"Very much."

"I thought so. You're rambling."

Jess watched as Ellen reached down to put her glass on the table. As she did, her coat opened. "Should you get dressed."

"Nah, I'm fine."

"O.K."

"Oh, God Jess." Ellen closed her eyes and leaned back to the arm of the sofa. "What was I like tonight?"

"You? What about me?"

"You're not as bad as me, trust me." Ellen opened her eyes.

"No. I'm worse." Jess held up his hand. "I wanted physical contact so bad."

"Tell me about it."

"Real bad."

"Tell me about it."

"But look what I did." Jess said. "I went against everything I believed in my whole life. Against everything I felt being close was about. I go home with some guy, who, even in a small community like this, I barely know. A guy who makes it a pastime to . . ." Jess held his fingers up in quotes. "To attach. And I almost slipped into it. I like that feeling. I let him touch my body."

"Well, in his defense." Ellen leaned up. "It's a great body."

"You think?"

"Yeah." Ellen nodded. "At least someone wants to touch you. Me?" Ellen fluttered her lips. "The only physical touching I get anymore is from a gay man

who wants to learn what it's like but gets nothing out of it. Real ego boost there."

"Ellen . . ."

"No. Understandable." She held up her hand. "I agreed to play doctor. But . . . but, I throw myself at Elliott. Turns me down. Throw myself at Frank. Frank. Turns me down. And to make matters worse. I flirt with Elliott on a night he has a date." Ellen grunted loudly.

"Still. Nothing. Nothing you did or do can be as embarrassing or as bad as when I hit on Robbie."

Ellen stared in seriousness then burst into laughter. "O.K., you're right. That was bad."

"Thanks."

"No. You kissed . . ." Ellen snickered. "You kissed him. He didn't see it coming."

"I thought he was gay."

Ellen laughed harder. "Man, Jess." She leaned back again on the arm of the sofa. "Look at us."

"Soaking wet."

"Half naked." Ellen opened her coat a little.

"Worked up."

"Horny."

"True," Jess nodded. "Drunk."

"Very."

"Pathetic."

"The pits."

"Ellen. Don't laugh." Jess said calmly.

"Why?"

"You always do. So this time don't."

"O.K." She shrugged. "Why?"

Without saying anything, Jess leaned down to her, slipped his hand on her neck and kissed her. His lips moved tenderly, kissing her with small movements of his mouth that widened with each passing second. His hand touched softly to her cheek.

Ellen didn't laugh.

Hesitantly, Jess brought his body to hers more. The opening of Ellen's jacket was enough for Jess to feel her skin against his. Letting out a heavy breath, Jess slipped his hand inside the coat, opened it more, clenched onto her back and arched Ellen up to meet his chest in a pressing manner.

"Jess." Ellen swallowed and whispered. She stared at him. "You know . . . I don't know if you do. But for the first time in all of our training . . ." She drew up a quirky smile. "I believe you can physically drive that car."

"I believe for the first time in all our training, you're not laughing." Not giving her a chance to say anything else, Jess kissed her again.

^^^

"Where's the kids?" Frank asked as soon as he stepped into the livingroom.

"Huh?" Dean asked confused as he sat up on the couch.

"They in bed."

"What?"

"Were you sleeping?"

"Um, I don't know." Dean sounded hazy.

"Dean? What do you mean you don't know if you were sleeping. Are you all right?"

Dean rubbed his eyes. "Yeah. I was sleeping. I'm sorry. Just groggy."

Frank plopped down in the chair. "You look bad."

"Thanks."

"Pale."

"Frank. What are you doing here? I thought you had to work."

"Two things." Frank said. "One to see the kids. Are they in bed?"

"Why would they be here. I'm not allowed to have them."

"Yeah, you are"

"Says who?" Dean asked.

"Ellen."

"Ellen has a court order on me."

"Dean." Frank reached out and snapped his finger. "Ellen told me, she told you today she was dropping that and that you could have the kids."

"She didn't tell me that Frank, or I would have gotten them."

"Maybe she mentioned that she was gonna tell you. I don't know." Frank scratched his head. "Oh, well. Surprise. Guess what El is gonna do?"

"Is she really?"

"Yep." Frank nodded.

Dean close his eyes in relief. "Thank God. I'll have to thank her. And the other?"

"Other what?"

"Other reason you came home."

"Oh." Frank snapped his fingers. "I have to apologize. I'm feeling really horrible."

"Shit. You slept with her."

"Who?"

"Ellen."

"No." Frank shook his head.

"Then why do you feel horrible."

"I . . . I almost slept with her Dean." Frank folded his hands. "I gave you my word I wouldn't take advantage of it and . . . I got real close."

"But you didn't?"

"No. She stopped it." Frank stared at his hands.

"Ellen?" Dean asked shocked. "Ellen stopped it?"

"Yeah."

"She wouldn't have stopped it. You're lying."

"No I'm not. She stopped it."

"Why?"

"She uh . . . she started her period. Yeah, that's it."

"Frank Ellen doesn't get . . . get . . ." Dean remembered, Frank wasn't supposed to know. "Get like that. I know you're lying. You stopped it. Why?"

"Why am I lying or why did I stop it."

"Both."

"I couldn't do it. I mean . . ." Frank cleared his throat. "I could. But I gave you my word. I know it seems like I break my word. That's only because I really never give it. When I give it. I keep it. She's your wife." Frank stood up. "Even though things are bad, they are bad because someone decided to screw around with your lives. Not because you guys went bad. And even though you fucked me over and married her when you shouldn't have . . . I have to respect your marriage. I never did. And I never respected Ellen's marriage to Pete. Yet, when she was married to me, I expected people to respect that. Why?"

"You're selfish."

"True." Frank paced.

"So why the change in attitude?"

"I don't know. Maybe I grew up. Maybe not." Frank shrugged. "Don't think wrong. I love her Dean. I love her with everything I am and I would give anything to have her back in my life. And I could have her, you know, without stealing her from you. Because it's acceptable if . . . if it's gone about the right way. I want her the right way. And sneaking an affair or breaking my word to you is not the right way. It's basically stabbing you in the back. And I think . . ." Frank closed one eye in a wince. "I hate to say this. I think I've known you too long and consider you too much of a friend to ever stab you in the back again. So . . ." Frank clapped his hands. "On that pathetic mushy note, I'm heading out. Maybe I'll stop and see El on the way to work."

Dean stood up as Frank moved to the door. "You're really not going to pursue stealing her. Really?"

"Sounds stupid huh? But no. To be honest, if it ends up that you'll never get back. Yeah, I'm pursuing. But if she takes your little ass back. I'll wait until she leaves you." Frank reached for the door. "That's the only way I'll get her."

"Or if I give you an understanding."

"Which will never happen. You made it abundantly clear that *I* am not the Slagel you'll have an understanding with."

"Then . . . I was wrong."

Frank stopped leaving.

"Look whether we want to admit it or not, for over seven years, it has been, always ends up, you, me, Ellen. And we fight Frank." Dean closed his eyes with a clenched fist. "We have gone toe to toe. Ripped each other apart. Cut throat. Over something we can't change. It's not right." Dean let out a breath. "We, you and I, have come a long way. I don't want to stop bickering and fighting with you, I enjoy it, but I don't want to fight anymore over Ellen. We're too old and life's too short. So I say if our sorry, old, lonely asses ever get another shot at the love of our life, I say . . . we do it right. Together, the right way, with respect for one another and as friends. Let's end this long war between us once and for all. End it." Dean extended his hand. "What do you say?"

After only a moment's hesitation, Frank reached down and firmly gripped his hand. "Ended."

Dean smiled.

"But, we have a fight." Frank opened the door. "Right now, we've been replaced."

"By who?"

"Elliott and Jess."

Dean laughed. "No way. They're company to her. That's all."

"Dean, I'm telling you."

"No, Frank, I'm telling you. Elliott has no interest, he told her. You saw him shoot her down."

"True."

"And Jess . . . gay."

"No he's not."

"Yes he is. Very, all his life, always has been . . . gay. Ask Robbie."

"No., I don't . . ."

"Frank." Dean cleared his throat. "He made . . . he made quiche tonight."

"Oh my God!" Frank gasped. "Jess is gay?"

"Yep." Dean nodded and watched as Frank started to leave.

Frank chuckled. "And here I thought he was a threat."

"Nope. Gay. Jess is no threat."

^^^

Ellen's bedroom door rattled slightly on its cemented hinges as Jess and Ellen bumped into it in their bodily intertwined, blind lead to the bedroom. Holding Ellen up by her legs that wrapped around his waist, Jess, kissing Ellen, stumbled some, then dropped to the bed with her.

Laying on their sides, Jess ran his hand awkwardly up her leg. "I . . . I don't know what to do with my hands." His mouth opened and grabbed onto hers in a pull.

Using the weight of her body, Ellen rolled on top of Jess. "It's not your hands I'm interested in."

Jess breathed heavily. "Still."

"Remember the lessons." Ellen spoke through their kisses. "Piece . . . them together."

In a holding grip, Jess, locked with Ellen, rolled back on her. "Like the Karate kid."

"Wax on." Ellen rolled on top.

"Wax off."

"Not tonight he doesn't."

After a pause, Jess got it, he laughed, he couldn't help it. Then, rolling them, he took the domineering position. "I can't believe . . ." His lips and waist both pressed with the same intensity. "I can't believe I hit this point."

"Physically?"

"Yeah. But what if I . . ."

"Can't?" Ellen rolled Jess on to his back. Her lips slid down his neck. "How about this. How about . . ." Ellen lifted her head and flipped her hair out of the way. "As friends, knowing what we need. We make a pact for the act."

Jess snickered then tried to steal a kiss. "What kind of pact." He spoke through his heavy breathing.

"If you can't . . . do the act." Ellen brought her lips to his ear, nibbling before speaking. "We take care of each other. I hook you up,. You hook me up."

"Friendship tension release?"

"Yeah. Deal?"

"Oh, yeah. Deal." Jess nodded and felt the shift of Ellen's body. Her mouth and hands moved to his chest. Gripping. Feeling. Kissing. The rise and fall from

his breathing seemed to move in perfect synch with her touches.

"Bear with me." She whispered.

"What . . . what do you mean?"

Ellen glided her lips down his chest to his stomach. "It's a rare performance . . . I don't do it well."

Zip.

Jess' eyes rolled back. "Oh my God." His neck arched, his head dug into the mattress and his hands clenched the bedspread pulling at it. "Well enough."

^^^^

Frank was starting to feel really bad about his night with Ellen. Leading her on, possibly turning her on then literally sending her into a cold shower. And after his talk with Dean, he felt even more compelled to talk to Ellen.

Going out of his way to see her, Frank walked to the end of the living section where the modular homes were. Frank stopped the moment he put his foot on the first step. The lights were off all but the one in the kitchen above the sink. Figuring she probably passed out drunk anyhow, and even if she wasn't, he wasn't in the mood to fight., Frank decided to wait until morning.

He walked away.

^^^^

The call and response grunting and moaning that emanated from Ellen's bedroom was intermittently decorated with the sound of the slow shifting bed hitting against the wall.

Ellen wanted to congratulate Jess. She couldn't ever, in her life, remember producing perspiration during the act. The moment Jess, hand under her back, lifted her in an arch to bring her more across his lap, she swore she felt it roll from her neck. A single, small bead of moisture that trickled past her breast only to be caught by Jess in his move of his lips up her chest to her neck.

Ellen moaned at that and so did Jess. She felt the tenseness of his body when they met chest to chest.

Hands running though his hair, Ellen brought her lips to his ear. "Don't."

"I have to."

Ellen whined thorough her kisses. "Don't. Don't. It's too good."

"That's why."

"Jess."

"El."

"No."

"Yes."

"Don't. Just . . ."

Jess silenced her with a kiss, a long one, holding tight to her until he pulled away. Head back, lips slightly parted, eyes closed, a quiet moan escaped him.

Humor laced Ellen short shrieking yell at him. "You did. Shit."

"Sorry." Jess chuckled, then grinned. "But . . ." He raised one eyebrow. "I did. Yes." Holding tight, he dropped backwards with Ellen.

“O.K. Here’s the deal.” Ellen, wearing a long tee shirt, straightened the bed on one side while Jess straightened it on the other. “No one is to know.”

“Hating to agree. You’re right. Even though it was innocent. . . .” He saw Ellen lift an eyebrow. “O.K., maybe not. Still you’re married to Dean. He’s whacked anymore. He’ll kill me.”

“Not to mention Frank.”

“And this will crush Robbie.”

“Plus you have a reputation at stake. You’re gay.”

“True. Am I? yeah.” Jess nodded, dressed in his jeans, and sat on the bed.

Ellen sat on the other. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“I hate that this question even exists afterwards, but . . . seeing how this is your first heterosexual sexual experience. How . . . how was it?”

“Seeing how this was your first experience with a gay man, how was it for you?”

“I asked you first.” Ellen turned and held up a finger.

Jess swiped it away, and grabbed on to her hand. “It was I . . . couldn’t you tell? I mean . . . I did.”

“Couldn’t you tell I enjoyed it?”

“I thought. I don’t know. I’m not sure. Did you?”

Ornery, Ellen gripped, shifting her hand to hold onto his as well. “I had a blast.”

Biting his bottom lip, Jess stared at her, leaned closer and whispered. “Me too.”

^^^

Joe could have sworn his dream was something out of the pages of a Stephen King novel. It made no sense and irritated him. The sound of church music, *What a friend we have in Jesus*, mixed with deep demonic groaning and huffing. And he was truly grateful for the loud bang that woke him up.

Springing up to a sitting position, and after quickly looking at the time of three a.m., Joe peered around his bedroom. “What the hell was that.”

Andrea stopped humming, and pointed backwards.

Joe began to push down his hair, but stopped and shifted his eyes to a humming Andrea when reality replaced the grogginess. She brightly sang her religious tunes and the sounds of the demonic grunting weren’t produced in his dream, they were seeping from outside into his walls. “What in God’s name is that noise.”

Andrea flipped a page in her bible. “Go back to sleep Joe.”

“Oh my God, how can you read with that racket.”

“I’m used to it. They’ve been at it for hours.”

“Hours?”

“Joe.” Andrea tsked. “I believe our Dean and Ellen are working things out right now.”

“They’re working things out all right. Christ, remind me to bitch at Danny

Hoi for putting our bedroom wall so close to hers.” Grumbling, Joe grabbed a pillow, laid back down and covered his head.

Andrea smiled, turned a page and hummed some more.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

October 25
Beginnings, Montana

Never was it part of Joe's morning routine to light his cigarette before his coffee was even done brewing, but he needed one. It dangled from his mouth as he shuffled in his pajamas to the kitchen. He moved gruff and felt gruff. Usually Andrea started the coffee, but Joe didn't think it was fair to her that she had to deal with his mood. So he offered to make it.

It was near five-thirty, and Joe felt as if he hadn't slept much at all. Reunion or not, he was going to read Dean and Ellen the riot act for disrupting his sleep. He had to wonder what happened to the days when people went at it without alerting every house in the neighborhood.

Grabbing the pot, Joe took it to the sink. He took the cigarette from his mouth and laid it in the ashtray then turned on the sink and peered out his kitchen window into the barely lit day.

He felt the heaviness of the filling pot. Just as he looked down, he heard the slam of Ellen's screen door. "What the hell?" Joe looked back out the window.

Crash!

The pot slipped from his hand, fell into the sink and shattered.

"Joe?" Andrea flew into the kitchen. "Are you all right?"

Joe said nothing, he just stared out the window. "Oh my God. It . . . wasn't Dean."

Andrea looked over Joe's shoulder to see Jess stepping into his shoe. "Oh, Joe, of course it was Dean. Jess probably stopped by to say hi."

"At five in the morning."

"Yes."

At that second Ellen's door open again. Ellen popped her head out and handed Jess his coat with a short kiss.

"Oh." Andrea giggled. "Maybe not." She tapped Joe and looked at the broken pot. "I guess we're having tea."

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Dean held the basket to the coffee maker in one hand, the coffee scoop in the other. His eyes shifted with confusion to the jar of grinds. How much coffee was he making? Two, four cups? How many scoops. It felt as difficult at that moment to Dean as curing the plague. Forgoing the coffee and figuring Ellen would make it when she got up, he stumbled back out of the kitchen.

He couldn't believe the headache that pounded at him and it made him wonder if he got drunk, especially since his diningroom area looked so different. Where were all the pictures of the kids. Ellen's useless Home interior's centerpiece she prided herself for keeping. And although it was only a little after eight, why was everyone sleeping so late? Dean decided to take advantage of the quiet, it wasn't going to be long before the twins got up for their bottles.



Resting his head back against the sofa, Dean sat back up when his front door opened. Turning around to see who walked in, he filled with anger. "Frank!"

"What!" Frank

"What the hell are you doing here."

"Um, stopping by to shave before church?" Frank moved to the steps.

"Stop." Dean flew from the couch.

"Why?"

"Where in the hell do you get off just coming into my home like this?"

"Um Dean?" Frank waved his hand in front of Dean's face. "I . . . live . . ." Bending down he peered into Dean's eyes. "Man, are your eyes bloodshot. Are you all right?"

"Get out of my house."

"Huh?" Frank asked confused. "Can I shave first." He started up the steps. "My Dad will have a fit."

"Shave?" Dean laughed. "What's the next excuse for you to stop by and see Ellen? Use my bathroom, peek in my room."

"Ellen?"

"Yes."

"Ellen's not here."

"Yes she is. She's in bed."

"Up there." Frank pointed.

"Yeah."

Frank smiled. "She came back. Yes." Hurrying, despite Dean's yell, Frank bolted up the stairs. He stopped at the bedroom door and looked at the empty made bed.

"Satisfied? Now leave her alone." Dean crossed his arms.

"She must have left." Frank pointed.

Dean looked in the room. "Oh."

"But, this is great. When did she come by. After I left?" Frank walked to the bathroom. "No wonder the lights were out in her house."

"What are you talking about?"

"Never mind."

"Where are you going."

"To shave." Frank indicated to the bathroom.

"No! What the hell are you up to?"

"Dean, I just want to shave. My dad will bitch."

"Shave at your own house!" Dean yelled.

"I am!"

"Now!" Dean tugged on Frank's arm. "Out."

"All right. All right." Frank shook his head. "I won't shave. Fuck." He went to the steps. "God, when did you become the un-morning person? See you at church." Not wanting to argue because he was too tired, and figuring Dean acquired that lack of being happy in the morning from living with Ellen, Frank just left.

Dean shook his head when he heard the door shut. "The nerve. Wanting to shave. At least his big mouth didn't wake the babies." Chuckling some in disbelief, Dean went into the bathroom.

^^^

Robbie looked at his watch with a smile, then shaking his head knocked on Jess' bedroom door. "Jess. Jess."

A simple groan came from the room.

"Jess it's almost ten." Robbie pushed open the door and immediately laughed.

Jess laid diagonal on the bed. On his stomach, no shirt, one shoe on, the other by the door. He looked as if he just fell there.

"Jess. Don't you want to go to my service." Robbie walked in and set a cup of coffee on the night stand. "Look how nice I am. Get up."

Jess lifted his head with a moan. "Thanks."

"You didn't come home last night."

Jess' eyes closed tight. He swallowed in nervousness.

"I uh, heard . . ." Robbie cleared his throat. "You left the hall with Hector."

"Shit."

Robbie snickered.

"I did. But . . ." Grunting, Jess rolled over. He stopped cold and his face froze.

"What's wrong?"

"My back." Jess heard Robbie laugh. "No. Nothing happened." Slowly, Jess rolled to his side then into a sitting position. "The man. He's a player." Jess reached for the coffee and held it up. "Thanks again."

"So where were you then? Jenny said you were pretty drunk."

"I was." Jess rubbed his eyes. "I spent the night at Ellen's . . . um, on her floor."

"Hence the bad back."

"Yeah."

Robbie walked to the door. "Well, hurry up, get showered, you have twenty minutes. I have this really cool sermon planned, plus some ace tunes." He pulled the door closed.

Moaning, Jess set down his cup then buried his face. "Oh God." Sliding his hands over his face, Jess thought how much of a good idea a shower was. He was tired, a little hung over and moving around, along with the hot water, would help the stiffness in his back. Grateful that was the only thing that hurt him, Jess stood up. As soon as he did, he felt as if someone snuck in and stole the bones from his legs. They went like rubber, buckling from under him, and unexpectedly and fast, Jess dropped hard to the floor.

^^^

## New Bowman, Montana

The recorded organ music played into the street as Fr. O'Brien staggered out of the corner church first and waited for the congregation to follow.

Hal walked down the aisle of the church behind the UWA soldiers who were in attendance, and with Elliott. "I dread walking out."

"Maybe the others will be speaking to him, sir." Elliott said.

"Hopefully." Hal dipped his finger in the holy water, blessed himself and walked from the church, into the foyer and outside. "At least he made it through the consecration without slurring."

"And let's not forget he didn't stumble." Elliott contained his snicker.

"Cap . . . Cap . . . Captain." Fr. O'Brien hiccuped. "Glad to see you this week."

"Excellent service as usual Father." Hal shook his hand.

"How's that brother of yours doing with the cloth life?"

"Splendid. I must go. Have a good . . . holy day." Hal flashed a smile and hurried from the grouping of men who all seemed to fight to get away from talking to Fr. O'Brien. He waited for Elliott. "If I wasn't such a devout Catholic my entire life, I'd never attend mass here again."

"You exaggerate." Elliott smiled. "Um, Captain, are you still going to Beginnings today?"

"Yes." Hal replied. "Dinner with my family. Can't come Elliott, need you here."

"No. No. I just was wondering if . . ." Elliott paused to think of a way to phrase it.

"Yes?"

"Will you be seeing Ellen?"

"Probably. Why?" Hal asked.

"Well, they left new Bowman early last night and I tried to call her . . ."

"Maybe she was with Frank."

Elliott held up a finger. "I believe your brother was working at the time I placed the call."

"So you checked."

"Perhaps I couldn't help but overhear him on the radio. And I tried this morning as well. No answer."

"Did you try at home?"

"Of course."

"Clinic?"

"Yes."

"Containment." Hal asked. "My father's?"

"Yes. Yes."

"Then she's probably avoiding you." Hal grinned and took a step away.

"Then should I assume that she won't be coming to our date tomorrow night?"

Hal stopped walking. "Um . . ." He held his finger on his lip as he stepped back to Elliott. "Knowing how much you've been looking forward to this. I'll uh . . . see to it that she comes."

"I don't want to force her."

"Oh, I don't think it would be forcing. In fact, my sister is probably anxious seeing how she knows you have had some practice since your other . . . date last night."

"Are you being sarcastic or serious?"

Hal hesitated. "Oh, serious. Very."

"So it wasn't a mistake lying about that?"

"Not at all. No. In fact I think you should brag about the date. Let her

know how comfortable you are becoming with women.”

“Why am I not believing you?” Elliott questioned.

Hal tossed his hands up as he stepped back. “You should. If you don’t. I’m your captain. I’m ordering you to.”

Watching Hal walk away left Elliott, once again, wondering if he should take stock in what Hal told him. It seemed to Elliott--despite what Hal said and how much he argued the point--the more Hal was around his long lost bothers, the more the honorable captain showed his true colors of the ornery teenage boy all the Slagel’s said he used to be.

^^^

### Beginnings, Montana

“Christ.” Joe grumbled as he stepped out of the chapel with Frank. Robbie’s short sermon was still on his mind. It was at least longer than the previous week’s. Then again, Robbie didn’t give much of a sermon. Just a basic breakdown of the prayer, *Our Father*, and what Robbie thought it meant. Joe didn’t mind that. He did mind all the music. Who was his son kidding? Joe knew Robbie only used his pulpit as a forum to try out his new songs he and Paul wrote. A captured audience before them and to pass them off as church tunes, they substituted Jesus or God for any female or other reference. They weren’t fooling Joe. They could get away with the song re-titled, *Jesus, take me home*. Or even *Rock me Over God*. But the second Robbie broke into, *God chewed me up and puked out my heart*, Joe knew he’d hear that one on Country night at the social hall.

“Wasn’t that bad.” Frank said. “I still have time to do things and not lose any of my sleep time.”

“Glad you liked the mass. We need a reverend.”

“We have one. Robbie.”

Joe stopped walking. “Whatever Frank. Anyhow, are you going to do your ridiculous fax to George.”

“Dad. Please.” Frank scoffed. “You’ll be praising my brains when you find out I’m right. This will work.”

“And I can’t believe I’m giving in to this. Do you realize how much time we’re wasting.”

“But lives we’re saving.” Frank held up his finger. “Besides, I’m right. I know I’m right.”

“That remains to be seen. And . . .” Joe stopped talking when he saw Ellen headed into town. “Well she wakes.”

Frank looked. “Why is she limping. Did she get hurt?”

“I wouldn’t doubt it.” Joe said. “I wanna talk to her. Get that fax out and make sure you tell him to respond ASAP.”

“Got it.”

“And don’t forget dinner tonight. Hal’s coming in.”

“Got it.” Frank stepped backwards.

“And don’t forget to shave.”

“Fuckin Dean.” Shaking his head Frank walked off.

Turning in the direction of Ellen, Joe called out. “Hey. Hold up.” He trotted up to a slow moving Ellen knowing she’d be easy to catch.

"Hey Joe."

"Hey, Ellen. How are you?"

"Fine."

"Why are you limping?"

Ellen stopped walking. "I'm limping? I'm not limping. Maybe your looking sideways."

"Ha. Ha. Ha. What did you do last night."

"Why?" Ellen asked, walking again.

"Curious."

"I went out with Frank. You know that. And if you'll excuse me I have lots of work to do before I go to New Bowman to . . ."

"Ellen, I'm talking to you. What did you do after your date?"

"Went home."

"Alone?"

Ellen tsked. "Of course."

"You didn't have company?"

"Jess stopped by to talk."

"Talk?"

"Joe." Ellen snickered. "What's with all the questions"

"Because I'm trying to figure out why I didn't sleep. See . . . I heard this . . . moaning."

Ellen's reach for containment's door stopped. "Really."

"And banging, and grunting and loud, really loud, screaming."

"Oh my God. How revolting."

"Yes. Any idea who it was?"

"Haven't a clue." Ellen tossed her hands up. "Why?"

"Just want to tell them to . . ." Joe raised his voice. "Keep it down so people can sleep!"

"O.K. if I find out who it is I'll tell them. See ya." Hurrying before Joe realized it was her that made all the racket, Ellen ran into containment.

^^^

Timing was everything, and Frank wanted to time it just right. He knew if he went to sleep, noise wouldn't bother him. But if the noise was there when he tried to sleep, he basically would be screwed. He had a lot to do before allowing himself to rest, and getting the kids was one of them. Especially since Ellen had to work in order to get things ready before leaving, Frank wanted to try to convince Dean to handle the kid part. Get things situated and in order so he could enjoy the few hours of sleep he was allotted.

He didn't see Dean when he stepped into the clinic lab. He heard him moving about. But after a few moments of peering around, he saw him. Dean looked under the main center counter. Walking over to him, Frank knocked on the counter top. "Hey. What are you doing?"

With spring action, Dean stood. "Hello."

"Hello."

"Can I help you?"

"Yeah, thanks. I want to know if you can grab the kids from Andrea so I can finish my work and sleep."

"Whose kids?"

"Mine. Yours. Ours."

Dean chuckled. "There has to be a mistake. I don't have any kids."

"Oh. I get it. Little man sarcasm. All right." Frank nodded. "I'll send El's ass over here to personally tell you she's withdrawing that order. Will that work?"

"I guess."

"Thanks." Frank started to leave. "Glad you're in a better mood."

"Soldier."

Frank stopped. He looked around.

"Soldier."

Frank stepped in the hall and peeked up and down. Slowly he looked back at Dean. "You talking to me?"

"Yes." Dean walked from the counter toward him. "Did you bring in my things yet, because I can't find them."

"Was I supposed to?"

"Weren't you?"

"I don't know." Frank shrugged. "You're the one that asked."

"Maybe not." Dean stepped back. "I'll wait for them."

"O.K., see ya later." Frank turned and walked from the lab. He paused only briefly to wonder what 'things' Dean was talking about, then he proceeded to leave again, getting the rest of his day in finalized order.

^^^

Thinking, 'Be tense, not too relaxed, act strange', Jess knocked on Ellen's containment office door.

"Come in."

Jess opened up the door. "Hi."

"Hi." Ellen smiled and leaned back. As soon as she did she felt wrong for feeling comfortable. She immediately snapped her chair forward and acted strained. She didn't want Jess to think she forgot about what happened. "What uh, brings you uh, here?"

"Can you talk?" Jess shut the door. "Do you have a minute?"

"Yes."

"Thanks." He walked over, pausing in pain, holding his own thighs before sitting. "I feel like I did a three mile dash."

"Legs sore?"

"A little. They're better now. Man, I thought my body was good too."

"Yeah." Ellen smiled quirky, then quickly released the grin. "I mean, it appears to be in great shape."

"Ellen." Jess rolled the chair close to the desk. "About last night. I need to talk to you."

"I think I need to talk to you too." Ellen leaned into her desk.

Jess dropped his voice to a whisper. "Can I be honest?"

"Nothing less."

"I didn't want to say anything. But I feel . . . I feel . . ."

"Bad."

"No."

"Guilty?"

"No. Yes. I mean, a little. Robbie's sake. You know."

"I know."

"No. I feel . . . I feel. Don't laugh." Jess took a breath. "I feel perfectly fine with it. And that bothers me."

"You too?"

"You?"

"Yeah." Ellen excitedly stood up, groaning briefly and darted around to the desk to sit on it in front of Jess. "I expected to feel weird."

"Oh me too." Jess grabbed on to his chest. "I was so scared to face you."

"Why?"

"I was afraid you were thinking I was taking eight years of not having sexual contact with anyone, out on you."

"I was afraid you were thinking I was taking advantage of your long sexless span."

Jess laughed. "El, we were in some pretty compromising positions last night."

"That we were. I was scared too. I was like, what if he wonders why I'm so comfortable. We shouldn't be."

"Thinking about it. Yeah, we should. I mean, why not? We have gotten really close over these past couple weeks."

"We have." Ellen smiled.

"El." Jess reached up and grabbed her hand. "I didn't think I'd ever feel that comfortable sexually with anyone. Especially after spending years with . . ." Jess didn't say his name, he gave an awkward twitch of his head. "And I know there were times last night, there were a lot of times, that I showed my inexperience with a woman."

"Are you kidding me?" Ellen flung out her hand. "I wouldn't have known."

"Really?"

"Well, a couple times I would have had to wondered. There were a few things you did. But! They turned *me* on."

"I never realized how flexible straight sex was. I mean, I'm used to limitations."

"I'm glad there are no regrets on your part. There could have been."

"No." Jess swayed his head and spoke softly. "None at all." He stood up. "I'll let you work. I know you have a ton to catch up here and get ready for tomorrow."

"And pack. I hate doing that."

"There's an art to packing that makes it less of a chore. I'll show you sometime."

"Something you can teach me?" Ellen smiled.

"I'd like that. And . . . I have to go." Jess leaned down and kissed her softly on the cheek. "Hating to sound cliché, but, thanks. Thanks for last night."

"You're welcome for last night." Ellen watched him move to the door as she grabbed papers from her desk. "You did well. Think of it as the graduation ceremony. Lesson complete."

Jess stopped walking and stopped reaching for the door.

Ellen saw it. "Jess? What's wrong?"

"You're . . . we're . . . is it done?"

"Isn't that what you wanted?" Ellen asked innocently. "Someone to help you learn. Maybe I took it to extremes . . ."

"I took it there too."

"Still, Jess, didn't you just want to get the jest of it and move on?"

"Well . . ." Jess flubbed his words and mumbled as he searched for what to say. "I, e , well, yeah, But . . ."

"Besides, why do you want to hang around with old me for? When here are a couple of young beautiful . . ."

"Stop that. I like hanging around with you."

Ellen smiled peacefully at him. "Thank you. I like hanging around with you. But your whole point of it was, to be able to get out there."

"I know. And I know I do good with hanging around. Kicking back with you and well, um, attempts at other thing. But." Jess spoke nervously and fast. "Just because I finally got behind the wheel of the car doesn't mean I can take it out on the highway."

"Your not comfortable yet?" Ellen asked.

"No." Jess answered quickly.

"You um . . ." Ellen walked to him. "You think you need more practice."

"God. Yes. Definitely. Self confidence is part of it too you know. I don't think I have that. I'll fold. I know I'll fold."

"O.K.." Ellen nodded and folded her arms "We'll work some more." She tried with everything she had to keep in control the grin that crept upon her face.

So did Jess. His lip actually twitched in his attempt to conceal it. "I better go. I'll stop by later." Another quick kiss to her cheek and a fast glance, then Jess darted out the door.

^^^

### Quantico Marine Headquarters

"I swear to God, if this doesn't work, I'm gonna get pissed. And probably shoot your ass." George griped to Dr. Walker. "I have a flickering eye, a sloped face, a decrepit hand, and I want to at least hold my head up high!"

"I'm a genetics specialist, I'm working on those virus after effects. But . . . Orthopedics is not my specialty." Dr. Walker began to remove the halo brace around George. "I can't believe of all the fields that the society cryogenically froze to start over the world, I can not believe they failed to preserve a bone specialist."

"They did." George winced in pain.

"Where is he or she, or did they die in the Cleveland incident."

George rolled his eyes. "The Cleveland people were cryo experts. No, he uh didn't die. He's probably packing up the harvest in Beginnings. They call him field worker two."

"Ready?"

There was a knock at the door.

George looked up. "Come in. I'm ready Walker."

Steward walked in, saw what was happening, and started to back out.

"Wait!" George called out and felt Dr. Walker back up. "Not you. Him."



He pointed to Steward. "Stew I know you have info."

"Yes. But maybe this isn't a good time. I know how . . ."

"Stew! Doc. Do it."

"Fine." Dr. Walker, really hoping George's neck would finally work, lifted the brace.

Steward cringed.

Dr. Walker mumbled through the hand that covered his mouth. "You, uh, know the routine. Back, forth, side by side." He stepped back closer to Steward. "Oh boy."

Steward held in the wince that shuddered within him. Watching George go through the motions and waiting for the inevitable moment when his head went somewhere out of control. And then . . . it didn't happen. George's eyes widened in delight. And then, at the same time he tossed his head back as if he were a stripper doing a dramatic flair, Steward and Dr. Walker gave each other a double high five.

"Yes." George graveled in excitement standing up, pulling his clenched fist into him and doing a little jig. He cleared his throat and sat back down. "All right. Business at hand. Good job Dr. Walker."

So proud Dr. Walker looked. "Thank you Mr. President. While you're still in a good mood, I'll leave you two to your business. Excuse me." Backing up he nodded to George and accepted the thumbs up given to him by Steward.

After the door had closed, Steward walked to George's desk. "From Beginnings sir. Their Danny Hoi scanned and enhanced the skin-maps. He handed George the folder. "They didn't fax very good, but you can see they are much better than just the ones copied and fax."

George picked up his glasses and placed them on. "We still don't know where the hell the beasts are drawing. Make a copy of these and forward them around to the men. Maybe someone recognizes the settings."

"Will do." Steward took them back. "Information sheet on Beginnings thoughts." He handed another papers to George. "Like us, they believe the maps, though many, are of only two camps."

"What does Clark think about this. Him and his estimates."

"He's liking it." Steward replied. "Considering, the jet video scan estimated a body count of thirty-seven hundred. Times three that would be in his ballfield of what he theorized as savages. Now Godrichson estimates higher number of savages but doesn't believe them all to be part of this link up."

"So we're all in agreement, that we're only looking at two more sites?" George asked.

"Appears that way."

"Good. Get me Joe Slagel on the phone . . ." He saw Steward shaking his head. "No. Why?"

"Fax number three."

"Oh, brother these had to be sent by Frank."

Steward looked at the signature on the letter. "Yes. Mr. Slagel, security Slagel that is, states due to the possibility of security breach, and interception of radio and telephone communications, all strategic planning must be done via messenger or fax." He started to hand it to George but took it back. "But he states sir, you can feel free to call if you want to say 'what's up.' He gave the paper with a snicker, to a grumbling George. "Not that my opinion matters. But

he has a point.”

George scanned through the letter. “Frank always has a point, whether it makes sense is what remains to be seen. All right.” He set down the letter. “Draw up a correspondence in response and let them know we will oblige by this. Just on the outside chance the knucklehead is right. Also let them know we’ll move into a higher security regarding action. Not that I think any of our people are communicating with the savages, but just on the slim chance they are, we’ll keep attack and scout plans to a minimal knowledge.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll get on that now.”

“Thank you.”

Steward stopped in the oddity of George’s verbal gratefulness. “Thank you for saying thank you.”

Rolling his eyes, George sat back and wiggled his fingers in a ‘go on get moving’ fashion. Once Steward was gone, George tapped his fingers on his desk. Slowly he moved his head side by side then stood. He walked over to his office door, carefully opened it, and peeked his head out to see if anyone was approaching. When he saw all was clear, he shut the door and his presidential demeanor changed. George grinned wide in excitement, started thrashing his head front to back and singing in a rock style to his own melody, “*I can move my head.*”

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### Beginnings, Montana

The predominantly protruding bottom lip and the way his mouth hung was probably one of the main things that made Richie Martin not look like his old-self. Of course, he had a few new mannerisms to go with his new appearance. The ‘Stevie wonder’ style slow swaying of his head that always ended with Richie rubbing his chin against his shoulder right before he did a quick twitch and smacked himself on top of his head to flatten his already flattened hair.

“Man Dan.” Richie spoke, not slow, but more dopey with a far off gaze in his eyes. “She’s beautiful. Isn’t she beautiful.” Richie did his routine head thing. “Aw, so beautiful. I love her Dan. Love her. Beautiful.”

Danny sat there, hands folded mouth hanging open almost as much as Richie. His lips formed the letter ‘W’ over and over without a sound coming out.

“J . . . J . . . just beautiful.” Richie rocked back and forth and smacked himself on the head. “Don’t you think, Dan. Huh? Huh? Huh? Huh?”

Again. The ‘W’ formed, only Danny held up a ‘wait’ finger, stood and walked from the skills room. He saw Ellen walking down the hall. “W . . . W . . .” His voice squeaked as his arm swung out in a point behind him. “What the fuck happened to my legal eagle assistant number two?”

“Who?” Ellen asked.

“Your brother!”

Ellen hunched and covered his mouth with her hand. “Come here.”

Danny looked back once more and followed Ellen into her office. “Ellen . . .”

“Don’t” Ellen whispered. “Don’t let anyone hear you.”

Danny reached back and shut the door. “They don’t need to hear me Ellen,

they can see Richie for himself.”

“He’s having some problems.”

“Problems!” Danny spun around once dramatically. “The man is gone. Left. Isn’t to be found. He was fine yesterday.”

“That’s when he snapped.” Ellen said calmly. “Just snapped. Very common you know.”

“How is just snapping into the true meaning of mentally deficient, common.” Hands on hips Danny leaned to her.

“Danny, please. Be PC, I’m very upset about this.”

“Yeah, El, you look it. What happened to him.”

“Danny, I don’t want this to get around O.K., they’ll kick him out and . . . he is my brother.”

“You caused this.” Danny pointed. “You wouldn’t let him out.”

Ellen’s mouth dropped open in a gasp. “I did not cause this. I saved the community from his violent tendencies. It was my keen psychic foresight you know.”

“And they wouldn’t kick him out.”

“Ya-ha.” Ellen nodded. “He’s a SUT, that’s what’s wrong. I have to figure out how to fix him.”

“What do you mean he’s a SUT? Richie is not a SUT.”

“Yes he is. J . . . J . . . I ran some tests and saw the microchip myself. He needs reprogrammed and then he’ll be fine. Like a maintenance tune up on a car, if SUTs don’t get them, they breakdown.”

“I didn’t know that about the chips.”

“Sure you did.” Ellen said. “If I knew it, surely you knew it, maybe you forgot.”

“Who told you this?”

“Henry.” Ellen answered. “It was his theory and you guys proved it. I think. I’m sure you know about this reprogramming contingency on a chip.”

“I probably do. Well . . .” Danny exhaled. “Is the flubbed maintenance schedule the only problem?”

“Yes.”

“So he’s not mentally incapable.”

“No, just brain damaged sort of. His chip is out of whack.”

Danny shook his head and flung out his hand. “I can fix that.”

“You can?”

“Sure. I’ll just download all the bad junk out of the chip. Empty it out and reprogram him. Good as new.”

“Will he be the same.”

“I have to create the program. I don’t have a working behavioral modification program that triggers actually memories. But I can do it.”

“Oh could you?”

“Yeah. But, with the trial starting Tuesday, I maybe a little strapped for time. Would you mind him being like that for a little bit. Maybe a week.”

“Oh, no, take your time. He’s fine. He’s harmless . . . and amusing.”

“Yeah he is. Sort of.” Danny opened the door. “O.K., I’ll start the thinking phase of it though.”

“I appreciate it. And Danny? Could you not mention this to anyone. I’d rather them believe he’s just a mental case instead of a SUT gone bad, at least

until we get him fixed.”

“Not a problem. Our secret.” Danny smiled and left Ellen’s office. No more than a few feet down the hall, Danny was accosted, bodily, by Richie.

“Dan. Dan. You leaving me Dan? You can’t leave Dan. I have to tell you about her. She’s, She’s, She’s, she’s . . .”

“Richie.” Danny pulled away and stayed calm. “I have to leave. I’ll stop back. O.K.?”

“O . . . O . . . O . . .” Richie twitched his hand and flattened his hair. “K.”

“Go color.” Danny stepped back.

“O.K. Bye Dan.” Richie waved. “What a nice . . . nice . . . what a nice man.” Twitching his head. “Gosh.” He turned around, hand on his head, pushing down his hair and he saw Ellen. “Hey Ellen. She’s beautiful, isn’t she.”

“No she sucks!” Ellen laughed at Richie’s loud whine. Totally amused at herself for upsetting Richie, Ellen moved on not having a clue who Richie was talking about.

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Andrea’s eyes fluttered in relief when Frank came through the main doors of the clinic. “Thank God.”

“What’s wrong?” Frank rushed to her.

“Frank, I didn’t know . . . You’re the only one . . . I . . .”

“Andrea. You’re not making sense.”

“Sweet Jesus I’m frazzled. Here.” Grabbing Frank’s sleeve she pulled him to the lab.

“O.K.” Frank looked at the closed door.

“He’s locked himself in there.”

“Maybe he’s busy.”

“No. Frank.” Andrea breathed out. “Something’s wrong. Look.”

Frank peered through the glass of the door, Dean moved about fanatically. “Maybe he’s in a hurry too.”

“Please go in there.”

“All right.” Shrugging, Frank punched his code in the security keypad. The door buzzed and he walked in. “Hey Dean what’s . . . Uh!” Frank ducked when sailing across the room and crashing into the wall was a large glass beaker. “Fuck, Dean.”

“Get out of here!”

“Dean.”

“Now!” Dean screamed.

“Dean.” Frank stayed firm. “Are you mad about something?”

“Who the hell do you think you are coming in here and intruding like this.” Dean raged to Frank. “And who the hell are you anyhow.”

“Frank.”

“This has got to be the most barbaric set up I have ever been in. Where are my things!”

“Did you lose them?”

“I told you to get out!” Dean picked up a clipboard and wailed it across the counter. “Now! I will call security if you don’t leave!”

“I am security asshole.”

"How dare you take that tone with me."

"Dean, get out of the mood all right? I'm tired and I'm not dealing with this bullshit. Fuck it. Andrea!" Frank stormed to the door. "Don't bother him he's busy."

"Couldn't you tell?" Andrea asked.

"Tell what?"

"Something is wrong with him."

"Yeah. He's pissed and can't find his things."

"No Frank." Andrea physically turned Frank to look back into the lab. "Watch his hands."

Frank looked at Dean, who like a mad scientist, tried to lift things but kept dropping them. His hands and arms shook out of control and Dean stared and peered around as if in utter confusion. His lips moved as if he were speaking to himself.

"Frank, there's something wrong with him.. Really wrong with him. I can't get him out of that lab. And I won't go back in there."

Frank took a deep breath as he watched Dean some more.

^^^

Ellen moaned feeling the strong hands on her shoulders as she sat in her chair in her office. "Only one man touches me like that."

Robbie grinned, walked from behind her chair and sat on her desk before her. "You look tired."

"Not really. Dreading the long day not over." Ellen rocked in her chair smiling at Robbie. "This is a surprise. You've been so busy lately with this Savage war."

"I know. But, before I get into anything else today I had to stop by." Robbie pulled a small folded paper from his chest pocket. "Look what I found in my slot this morning. "He opened it and read it out loud. "*I am so proud of you. I love you, El.*" Robbie grinned. "What's . . ."

"I am proud of you. You're like Mr. Field with this operation. And I feel like I've been neglecting you. I just wanted to let you know, you're in my thoughts. Always."

"I feel like I've been neglecting you too. We'll get together as soon as this mess is over with. But hey, at least Jess has been filling in. Huh?"

"Oh yeah."

"Is he driving you nuts? I mean he can be a little . . ."

"No. No." Ellen shook her head. "I like Jess. I'm enjoying this time I'm spending teaching him."

"Good. He's liking it too. And, I really have to go. I just wanted to stop and see you." Robbie kissed her quickly and slid from the desk.

"Robbie." Ellen called. "Can I ask you something hypothetically."

"Sure. About what?"

"Well, I'm not liking this single life . . ."

Robbie laughed. "Why not? It's the first time in your life you've been completely unattached."

"Yeah, I know. And I hate it. I mean, being one of very few women in a men's world is great at first. But then it becomes annoying. No one is scared of

Frank. Men are paying attention to me and I know why. I like stability, I always have. So, you can say I'm fishing."

"Catching anything?"

"No. But I was thinking of a situation, that's my hypothetical question."

"Shoot."

"If you were to be my primary. How would you feel about having the understanding with Jess. I mean, with him being your roommate and . . ."

"El." Robbie chuckled. "Jess is gay."

"I know. But . . ."

"What about Elliott?" Robbie asked.

"Elliott is not interested in me."

"He's nuts about you. I'd have an understanding with him. Besides, you aren't picking me as primary."

"It's a hypothetical situation. And why wouldn't I pick you as primary?"

"I'm Robbie." He tossed his hands up. "I'm the fill in guy, your buddy, remember?"

"Would you with Jess."

"El." Robbie cleared his throat in seriousness. "You and Jess have to sit down and talk. Both of you are getting too used to this teacher pupil thing. I'm sure you're getting close but . . ."

"But what if something ended up happening physically."

"Jess is . . ."

"Yeah, I know. But what if. I'm trying to teach him, what if we get close."

Robbie took a second to ponder his answer. "Then it's the moment. El, I know you're teaching Jess this straight thing. And I know Jess is really wanting to try to be straight. But the truth remains, he is not." Softness took over his tone. "As much as he wants to try, as close as he will get spending time with you or any woman, eventually, what's in him will take over. You know as well as I do, it's not acquired in life. He's not like these men who are with other men but would give their right arm for a woman. Jess was born that way. It will eat at him. He'll not just want, but need, something else."

Ellen slowly nodded. "So my teaching will be in vain? In your opinion."

"Short term?" Robbie shook his head. "No. It will work short term for Jess. In the long run, it won't." He reached for the door. "But hypothetically speaking, yes. I would have an understanding with Jess if he miraculously turned straight. Any man for that matter but Frank, I wouldn't have an understanding with Frank. I could hear him bitch about me satisfying you more."

Ellen laughed. "Thanks."

"Thanks for thinking of me." Robbie snapped his finger before stepping out. "But, you do know." He flashed an ornery grin. "If it was you, me and Jess. It probably would be the only understanding in Beginnings where the three of us could go at it all at once. It would make for some really kinky sex." Robbie took a step. "Hmm. That's not a bad thought. See ya."

Shaking her head with a chuckle, Ellen looked up seriously when she heard Frank's voice blasting so close.

"What the fuck are you discussing kinky sex with El for?"

"It's our new pastime." Robbie responded, his voice fading down the hall.

"El!" Frank barreled in the office.

"He's lying Frank." Ellen sat down. "Shit." She stood up. It was the first time she saw Frank since her 'Jess' experience, and she feared the man who could see right through her. Why she cared if he found out about Jess, Ellen didn't understand. But she did and she didn't want Frank to know. "Frank."

"What."

"Frank."

"What."

"Um . . . nothing." She nervously sat back down. "I just . . ." She reached for a pencil and knocked the holder over. "Was just surprised to see you." She started picking up the pencils.

"I know since our fight last night."

Crash! The pencil holder dropped again and the contents rolled to the floor. "Shit. Last night. Forget about it."

"Really?"

"Yeah." Ellen bent down to the floor.

"You're not mad."

"No." She answered from under the desk.

"I actually, this is pretty funny, I was afraid . . . I was afraid you'd turn to someone else."

Bang.

"Ow." Ellen shrieked when she hit her head on the desk getting up.

"You all right? I'm not accusing you. It was a brief thought."

"I uh . . . know." She rubbed her head. "I'm just . . . so!" Holding the pencils, she tried to fold her hands and they fumbled from her. She reached for them again and stopped. "So. What brings you here."

"Oh." Frank snapped his finger. "I need you at the clinic. Something's wrong with Dean."

Ellen didn't want her rushing stride to stop. But it was halted the moment her hand tried to turn the knob on the clinic lab door. Immediately, trying to hurry, she punched in her code. Nothing. "Frank." She turned the knob again. "My code won't work. Why is this secured."

The smack against the lab window made Ellen jump back and she watched the splattered blood from the busted tube slide down.

"That's why." Frank pointed. "He's doing *The Shining* in there."

"Sweet Jesus." Andrea gasped. "He's gone mad."

"Andrea go get Jason." Ellen told her.

Andrea nodded in shock and backed up.

"Frank open the door." Ellen told him.

"Get the tranquilizer first. Where are they."

Ellen pointed to the lab.

"Fuck."

"Open the door. Now."

"Fine." Frank punched in his code. "I hate to resort to knocking him physically out. But you have ten seconds to get to the tranquilizers. After that, you don't have it, I deck him."

"You're being ridiculous." Upon the buzzing, Ellen pushed the door open.

"Where the hell are they!" Dean screamed as he turned around.

"Duck." Frank ordered.

Ellen did, just in time to feel the empty blood tray whizz by her head. When she stood up she looked about the lab in total disarray. "Oh my God."

"El. The sedative." Frank said.

Ellen ignored him and walked cautiously to Dean who shuffled through a stack of papers at the counter. "Dean."

"I . . . I . . ." Dean ran his hands through his hair. "Didn't see you. Sorry."

"That's all right." Ellen spoke with compassion. "What . . . what can't you find?"

"I can't believe they aren't here. They aren't here." Dean tossed papers back and forth. "What is this?"

"Dean." Ellen laid her hand on his and he quickly withdrew it. "What are you looking for. Tell me."

"Who . . . who are you?" He squinted as he looked at her. "Are you my assistant?"

Ellen swallowed. "Yes."

"Then you haven't been doing your job!" Dean blasted. "You can not be reorganizing my things at a time like this. This is why I never keep an assistant. They change things. Organize. Move. Move them." Dean's hands scurried through the files on the counter.

"Tell me what you're looking for. I'll get them." Ellen said calmly.

"My virus notes." Frazzled, Dean spoke. "Do you not understand the urgency of the situation. There is a plague wiping us out into extinction and I . . ."

Frank's long whistle rang out as he turned his head to the side and murmured. "Some one's fuckin' gone."

"Frank." Ellen snapped with a glare over her shoulder to him.

"What! Dean! That was eight years ago! Snap to it."

"Frank!" Ellen yelled.

"Who . . ." Dean peered around Ellen in agitation. "Who is this man. Soldier who is your C.O. he will hear about your attitude."

"Um uh, General Joe Slagel. Go on give him a call." Frank instigated. "And while you're at it. Blow me."

"Frank." Ellen warned.

"What?" Frank acted clueless. "This is why I hate fuckin' officers, always threatening to go over your head."

Ellen rolled her eyes in a grunt. "Dean." She faced Dean who was glaring at Frank. "Dean look at me."

"I'm running out of time." Dean turned back to his notes. "Do you know where they are?"

"Dean . . ."

"I have to find them. God." Dean's hand slammed hard on the counter. "Why can't I find them Why . . . why can't I think. I know I'm . . ." He turned back around and faced Ellen. "I'm confused. God, why am I confused?"

Gently Ellen laid her hands on Dean's cheeks and lifted his face. "Look at me."

Dean blinked in his strained focus of Ellen. Then helplessly he called. "El. Where are . . . where are we? I can't . . ." Dean's words went breathy. "I can't

see . . . I can't . . .” Drastically, Dean’s eyes rolled behind his head and without warning, he fell forward into Ellen. The weight of his body drove into her stumbling her back in the counter at the same time Frank lunged their way.

“I got him.” Frank said, grabbing onto Dean. “Let go, El.”

Ellen in shock, released Dean and watched Frank lift him into his arms. Reaching out she ran her hand down Dean’s face to his neck. Fingers trembling she felt for a pulse and breathed out in relief. “Take him to room two.”

“What happened to him, El?”

Ellen just shook her head.

Unconscious and dangling in Frank’s arms, Dean was carried from the lab.

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### Quantico Marine Headquarters

George found it hard to believe. The experts he had view them, his top scouting coordinators, they found nothing. But Sgt. Doyle, a gunnery drill sergeant, after only having them not even an hour, figured them out.

“I believe so.” Sgt. Doyle said.

“Tell me how.” George requested, willing to hear. Any lead would be better than none, but he wasn’t getting his hopes up.

“I went basic.” Sgt. Doyle laid down the faxes that Beginnings sent of the savage maps. “I viewed them like I did when I was a child. I mean . . . remember we all wanted to find a buried treasure as children.”

“Nope.” George shook his head. He could. “I never did.”

“Well I did. A game we used to play as children was to draw the treasure map just like the pirates and see if our friends could find what we hid. Never thinking all that had to do was look for the fresh mound of dirt where . . .”

“Sergeant.”

“Sorry. Anyway, they looked familiar to me when I first saw them. These areas here.” Sgt. Doyle smoothed his hand over the paper. “The filled in areas are water. One big body of water to the east, multitudes to the west. They live near the multitudes. The triangles are homes. The corn here is their field.”

George nodded. “I see. We know this. But *where* is the big question. Thank you any . . .”

“I know where.” Sgt. Doyle interrupted. “See, instead of looking on the map for where this water, land scenario can be found, we have to look at the name of the place.”

“There is no name written son.”

“Yes there is.” Sgt. Doyle’s finger laid upon the map.

“Four stars.”

“Yes.”

“There is no city named four stars. We checked.”

“It’s not the name, what do four stars mean?”

“Restaurant. Hotel.” George looked up. “General.”

Sgt. Doyle nodded. “Hence the square object with the fan next to it.”

“A motor.” George slowly rose up.

“Exactly. Lakes to the west. Body of water to the east. General . . .

Motors.”

George grinned widely. “Detroit.” He gripped the map as he stood up. “Let’s get a hold of Beginnings.”

^^^

### Beginnings, Montana

Dean’s grip wasn’t firm, but he clung to Ellen’s hand “El, I’m sorry.” Dean whispered. “I don’t know . . .”

“No. Let’s let Jason talk .” Ellen silenced him and looked up to Jason then to Frank who stood in the corner of the room. “And no smart comments from you Frank.”

“I’m being good.” Frank said in his own defense. “We have a plague to worry a . . .”

“Frank!” Ellen yelled. “Go on Jason.”

“As I was saying. The microchip was buried beneath the edema.” Jason explained. “We went in and relieved that pressure. That’s why you’re out of the fog now. Second CAT scan shows the swelling isn’t returning, but of course, the chip may be useless.”

“That’s why I can’t see.” Dean said. “Any damage?”

“No.” Jason replied. “None that we can see. But we don’t know, another day and no swelling will confirm a positive outlook. We think the chip went bad, causing some sort of reaction in the area.”

“It had to have been happening for a while.” Dean stated. “My headaches.”

“And moods.” Ellen added.

Frank interjected. “Not to mention memory lapses where you forgot say . . . eight years.”

“Frank.” Ellen snapped.

“What are you talking about?” Dean asked.

“Today.” Frank replied. “When you were tearing apart your lab . . .”

“I tore apart my lab?”

“Oh, yeah. But El checked. No damage. Anyhow, can I tell this.” Frank held out his hand. “You were rambling about curing the plague and how you were running out of time. And then, then Dean, you went on to say you’re the world’s only hope. How you’re the only brilliant . . .”

“Frank.” Ellen stopped him. “He did not.”

“Yeah he did El, remember?” Frank winked drastically at her to get her to go along with him. “Remember. Ask Jason.”

Jason snickered. “I think I heard that.”

“Both of you are screwed up.” Ellen shook her head. “Dean, you did think you were fighting the plague again . . . Frank stop laughing. But you didn’t praise yourself.”

“I don’t remember.” Dean said. “I thought Frank just left me to go to work. That’s the last thing I remember and it was night.”

Ellen, stroking Dean’s hand, leaned closer. “When’s the last time your chip had a maintenance check up?”

“Huh?” Dean was confused. “They don’t need maintenance.”

“There you have it.” Ellen sat back. “Yeah they do Dean. Henry and

Danny said so. If they don't, they get all screwy, like yours, and if effects your mental capacity. Look what happened today."

"Wow." Dean spoke in awe. "All the work I did and I don't recall hearing that."

"Neither do I." Jason spoke up.

"Fuckin Henry and Danny." Frank snapped. "They probably forgot to tell us all and now they're pretending they told us."

"No, I remember knowing." Ellen said. "I think. But . . . let's get Danny over here with the stuff to check. It won't hurt. Have him run a diagnostics maybe he can fix it without having to remove it." Ellen stood up. "Jason? What do you think?"

"I really don't think they need maintenance." Jason stated. "But anything is worth a shot of trying to avoid surgery again."

"Good. Let's go get him." Ellen leaned down to Dean. "I'll be back. Just rest." she spoke softly then walked from the room with Jason.

Frank waited for a second. "Don't do anything gross, because I'm still in here."

"I figured as much. Hopefully this will work and I'll get my sight back."

"Dean, you fool." Frank rushed over to the bed. "Man, I would like play the blindness part some more."

"Frank . . ."

"No. Really. Tell them you want your brain to heal or something. You got El, right now, wrapped. You could easily play the pity role and get her right back like that." Frank snapped.

"Frank, that is low. Not to mention so wrong to . . ." Dean paused and smiled sneaky. "Really?"

Frank nodded, forgetting Dean couldn't see him.

^^^

It fed through at a pretty good speed, which was favorable for Joe who grew antsy. He couldn't recall ever moving so fast to his office. One phone call from George's right hand man saying merely, '*sending something. George says grab Robbie.*' told Joe it had to do with going somewhere. Robbie meant flight. Joe had to read the fax twice. It couldn't have been that simple that even the best of minds missed it. Joe could have kicked himself for not seeing it, and for Frank and his simple mind for not figuring it out first.

"Dad." Robbie said, walking into Joe's office. "What's up?"

"This." Joe walked to Robbie and handed him it. "Feel like hitting the air."

Robbie read the words. "Oh, wow, yeah."

"That's a good fifteen hundred miles."

"Not long." Robbie stated.. "I'll work on a flight plan. Can you get a hold of Hal or Elliott while I do and tell him to send a man with the tanker down to one of our reserve pools. There's still a few pretty stocked on Route fifty-nine."

"All three tankers in New Bowman are out?"

Robbie nodded. "I've been flying a lot."

"All right. How many more flights do we have before we're going to have to make a tanker run? I hate doing it with the Savage crisis."

"We're good for a while. I'll give ample warning." Handing back the

sheer, Robbie moved to the door. "You may wanna fax George back tell him, some way, that I'll be in the air in about . . ." Robbie looked at his watch with a bobbed head. "An hour."

"Answer in three?"

"You got it." he opened the door. "Dad save me dinner."

"You got it." Joe nodded as Robbie left and then he looked back down to the fax. "Come on." He beckoned in a whisper. "With all that's going on. Let this be right."

## CHAPTER FIFTY

### Beginnings, Montana

The sound of the sweeper had to be the reason Ellen didn't hear him knock, Henry thought. That struck him as odd but not as much as the smell of sauce that filled Ellen's home. "El?" Henry called out as he stepped inside. "El?" He moved to the sound of the vacuum then heard it stop. "Jess?" Henry stopped at the end of the hall when he saw Jess wrapping up the chord by the bedroom.

"Hey Henry. This is a surprise."

"Um, yeah." Henry scratched his head. "I stopped by to see if El was here. Danny is ready for her at the clinic."

"She was at the cryo lab feeding Bub."

"I didn't look there."

Jess pushed the vacuum and placed it in the hall closet.

"So what are you doing. Are you helping El."

"Sort of." Jess smiled. "You can say Frank too. Robbie and I barely used any of our meat rations this month." Jess walked to the kitchen. "I wanted to cook it off. So . . . I figured. El's gonna be hungry after working all day and Frank could use the leftovers for the kids tomorrow when he has them."

"How, uh nice." Henry stepped to him. "Jess?" A crooked, suspicious grin hit Henry. "What are you doing?"

"I just told you." Jess opened the oven and took out the pan.

"You know, if you want to make enemies, this is the way to do it. It's a good thing you're not straight."

Confused, Jess turned around and faced Henry. "What do you mean, make enemies."

"This thing you're doing with El. I mean, Robbie's your roommate. I thought we were becoming friends. If I'd didn't know better, I'd be pissed that you're trying to make move on what someone else, maybe has the first chance to.

"First chance. I'm not understanding, like a game, a lottery? Who has first chance to what?"

"Me, Frank, Robbie. To El."

"I see. And why . . . just explain to me Henry." Jess stayed calm. "Why you guys have 'first chance'?"

"Because we were with her first."

"So Elliott has to wait his turn?" Jess questioned.

"You can say that."

"You know what really kills me Henry? The mentality of the men in Beginnings toward women. It's almost like the men don't give them a choice. The women . . ." Jess shrugged. "What they want doesn't matter. Dean wants Ellen, he'll only have an understanding with Robbie. But if Ellen wants to have the understanding Frank, then she's out of luck. Ellen would be stuck being with Robbie when she really wants to be with Frank. That doesn't make sense."

"Yeah it does." Henry said. "Dean will be sleeping with El, why would he want her sleeping with someone he hates."

"Who says Ellen has to sleep with Frank. For example, why couldn't Dean say he'll give Frank the understanding and allot him time with Ellen, but they can't sleep together."

Henry snickered. "Never would happen. In any understanding. That's what an understanding is. A second, possible third physical, relationship for the woman."

"Then it's wrong."

"What? It's wrong to want sex in the understanding?" Henry had an argumentative smile to him. "Jess, what's wrong with that. Women are rare. If you have the chance to be with a woman why not . . ."

"Embrace the time instead of using her as just a body. Women *are* rare. So why do the men not treat them like that. Women here are treated as possessions men should have. And the men of Beginnings wonder why their women are looking at the Bowman men."

"You're not realizing that understandings are not bad. They started for the good of the community, *by* the women. You weren't around. Too many men, not enough women made for a tense situation. Men started sharing, when the women gave their O.K.," Henry stated the facts. "You've got two, sometimes three men, with one woman getting what they need regularly. And the rest, well." Henry shrugged. "Jenny's network takes care of them on occasion. Everyone's happy. No one is tense. No bitterness. No rape."

"New Bowman doesn't have rape either."

"Their women are locked up in a house turning into lesbians." Henry laughed.

"Not anymore they aren't."

"Hal has sever consequences."

"So does Joe." Jess argued.

"They're afraid of their women. So they treat them like that."

"It's called respect Henry. That's how they treat their women. And ours for that matter. They aren't afraid of ours."

"Jess." Henry chuckled. "You are way to uptight about this. You're taking this too personally and really, if you think about it, it doesn't matter or affect you."

"Why not?"

Henry widened his eyes. "Think about it and . . ." He checked out the time. "I have to go, Joe bitches if I don't show up on time for my son. I didn't come here to argue with you, although . . ." Henry moved to the door. "I found it great trial practice and enjoyed it. Thanks for the conversation."

Jess stood speechless on the other side of the breakfast counter, watching as Henry left. He tilted his head in wonder. "Why did I even bother?"

^^^

Danny placed the small earpiece inside Dean's ear. "All hooked up." He backed up to the lap top near the bed.

"I was thinking." Dean said. "Maybe I should give my brain a couple of days to heal before we reload the chip. Jason? What do you think?"

"I don't think you have to worry about causing anymore damage. If this

works, it should be fine.” Jason answered.

“Dean.” Ellen tapped his hand. “I’m telling you it’s not your brain, it’s the chip. Right Danny.”

“Absolutely.” Danny worked on the computer. “Dean, you never came in for maintenance.”

“You never told me I had to.” Dean stated.

“I’m sure I did.” Danny said. “Because I know if the chips are not maintained they can cause problems, shoot out shock waves affecting the area surrounding it. O.K.” Danny set back. “I’m ready. This should take a second. We’ll down load what’s on the chip, wipe it out and reload. About two seconds.” Danny pressed the button.

Ellen counted in her mind. “Seems like a long two seconds.”

“Whoa.” Danny leaned close to the screen. “What the hell?”

“What’s wrong?” Jason asked.

“The optical program Henry and I designed is small. I’m downloading a ton from your chip.”

Ellen shook her head confused. “I don’t understand. What’s that mean?”

“It means.” Danny twitched his head watching as the chip still downloaded. “Dean really needed a tune up, from the size of this file he must have picked up data from every and all sources. Dean, man, your chip is a vat.”

Jason looked curiously at Danny. “Is that . . . still downloading.”

“Oh, yeah, it’s only at fifty-three no, six, percent.”

“How big is the optical program?” Jason inquired.

“Barley under a meg. Done.” Danny moved the mouse. “Oh shit, Dean, no wonder you cracked up. I downloaded two hundred and seventy-five megs from that tiny chip.”

Jason tossed his hands up. “There you have it. All that information in that chip was trying to be sent out to somewhere, it sent you into a tailspin. You should be fine now.”

“Sounds good to me.” Danny said.

“Me too.” Ellen commented. “Are you gonna make him see now Danny?”

“Yep. I’m getting that program ready. Let me delete this download first.”

“Danny?” Dean questioned. “You said I had a ton of data, what is the data?”

Before Danny clicked to delete the information downloaded from Dean, he stopped. “I don’t know.” He moved again to delete, but instead, decided not to, saved the file under a different name, then proceeded to get ready to give Dean back his sight.

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New Bowman, Montana

The sound of starting jet engines always filled Robbie with excitement. And he looked forward to flying, especially like he was just about to, at night. He flipped the switch to his controls and set the computer in order. Helmet on, he adjusted the mouthpiece to the radio. “This is Eagle One. Ready for . . . wait.” Robbie reached into his chest pocket, pulled out Ellen’s note. With a grin, he pinned it on the overhead of his plane. “O.K., this is Eagle One. *Now* I’m,

ready for take off.”

Robbie closed the shield to his helmet.

^^^

Box before her in the clinic lab, flaps open, Ellen spoke on the phone to Jess as she placed things in the box. “Where are you now?” She let out a gasp. “Why?” She heard the sound of a release heavy breath and it didn’t come from the phone, she turned around and walked to the lab door. “I mean you did all that for me.” At the door, Ellen flashed a smile to Frank who stood there, then using her foot, she closed it. “Don’t stay home alone.” Ellen turned around when she heard the buzz. “Shit. No not you. Frank again. What do you mean wear out your . . . hold on, Jess.” Huffing, phone braced between her ear and shoulder, Ellen shut the door on Frank again. “Sorry. Wear out your welcome. No way. I’m leaving in a couple . . .shit!” The door buzzed again and that time, Frank just walked right in. “I’m not taking no for an answer Jess. I’m leaving in a minute. I’ll see you there? Good bye.” With a beep Ellen hung up the phone. “What Frank?”

“I’m walking you home.”

“I don’t need an escort.” Ellen checked out the box.

“So you were talking to Jess.” Frank snickered. “Setting up a little romantic date tonight?”

“If I was, it’s really none of your business.” Ellen closed the flaps on the box and took off her lab coat in her walk to the door.

Frank followed, still snickering. “Kind of barking up the wrong tree, aren’t you?” He drew a quick serious face when Ellen took a fast look at him before she walked out of the lab. “That’s O.K. with me. To me, Jess is safe.” Frank trotted to not only catch her, but pass her in the hall, and he did. He opened the clinic doors for her.

“Frank, why are you following me?”

“Because I have the opportunity of a lifetime for you.”

Ellen stopped walking. “This should be good. Go on.”

“Me.”

Ellen laughed.

“No, I’m serious. I know it sounds too good to be true, El. But I’m gonna give you another shot at a date with me.”

“I have news or you Frank. I don’t want another date. You blew it pal, you blew it big time with me. Choosing your new buddy over me. In fact. I’m done with you. You and Dean.” She started to walk again. “I moved on.”

“To who?” Frank laughed. “Jess and Elliott?”

“What if I have.”

“Oh, good choice. I’d go as far as to say that you chose them because no other man can compare to me sexually and you don’t want to be disappointed.”

Ellen’s mouth dropped open and she spun to Frank. “What? Do you and Dean sit around and discuss the arrogant things you can say?”

“No.”

Ellen grunted. “Frank, for your information, sex isn’t everything to Jess and Elliott. You could learn a thing or two off of them about being a gentlemen.

Do you know . . .” Ellen began her walk again. “Elliott is perfectly content talking to me, walking with me, holding my hand. He doesn’t need anymore from me. A gentleman.”

“Yeah, until he goes home and jerks off to the thought of you.”

“Frank!”

“What! He doesn’t even like you anyhow.”

“Frank, go away. Leave me alone.” Ellen picked up her pace.

“El . . . El . . . El . . . El.”

“What!” Ellen blasted.

“You’re crushing me El. El, you’re crushing me. I love you. El, respond. I love . . .”

“Frank leave me alone, all right! God!” Ellen tossed her hands up and then nearly ran away from him.

Frank stood, one hand on his hip watching Ellen move further away. He smiled. “Oh yeah, progress made.” Biting his bottom lip with a sneaky grin, he pulled up a very rolled up collection of papers from his back pocket. “Chapter seven. Helen and Bobby.” He tilted his head as he walked in a different direction from where Ellen went. Happy his pestering got him the next installment, Frank, actually contemplated, if, after he got back with Ellen, how upset would she be with him if he gave her a few chapters so she could learn some pointers from the ‘Helen’ person.

^^^

Hand upon her tiny tummy, Bev giggled. “Johnny you should . . .” She was silenced when Johnny held up a quieting hand to her while he was on the phone. Enjoying the feel of her kicking child immensely, Bev turned to Johnny’s baby who sat on the couch propped up next to her. “Wanna feel?” She grabbed the little girl’s tiny hand and laid it on her stomach. “Oh. Did you feel that.”

Johnny rolled his eyes as he hung up the phone. “She’s eight months old, she’s doesn’t know what you’re doing.” Johnny lifted his baby. “And I told you leave her in the walker.” He put her down in her walking chair.

“Johnny, children need to feel love and affection or else they turn out cold.”

“My father showed my no love or affection growing up. Look at me.”

“Point proven. My father was very affectionate when I wasn’t in boarding school. Speaking of fathers what did mine say?”

“Oh.” Johnny plopped on the couch next to Bev. “He said not to worry about it. So we failed. It wasn’t the first and it wouldn’t be the last.”

“Did he say anything about the info on the chip.”

“Danny deleted it, I asked him. But your dad said even if he didn’t, he wouldn’t be able to make heads or tails out of the info without viewer. Which reminds me, I have to reload it on your lap top. You have two weeks worth of El bedroom disks to review, not too mention the one I’m gonna try to get this week before it gets too full.”

Bev groaned. “God nothing happens. They’re boring. The most excitement was when Dean decked Jess in Ellen’s bedroom. The rest, she talks on the phone in there. And with her kids.”

“You have to listen to what she says. You never know what can be picked

up or used. Like the Dean info. How valuable that was when we implemented the baby issue. People talk in their bedrooms. That's why they are called bedroom secrets."

"Ellen has no bedroom secrets." Bev said. "She doesn't even have a man now."

"Poor baby." Johnny patted Bev on her knee. "Missing out on your visual vibrator?"

Bev cringed, "You're disgusting. What's the point."

"Ellen is pretty centered." Johnny explained. "More people talk to her than anyone. She talks on the phone, we find things out that only she's supposed to know. You know what your dad says. We need another group of insiders. Play upon people's vulnerabilities. Get them to work for us."

"Blackmail?" Bev asked. "Will it work?"

"Oh, yeah. Especially if we hold the cards to something they don't want anyone to know. Look how easy it was to get Cindy on our side."

"Cindy's dead now." Bev said.

"Still. I overheard her talk about taking a little more from distribution. We played on that and played it up. Next thing you know. She's meeting the society at the back gate to pick up info."

"Johnny." She dropped her voice. "Did my dad say when we get to leave here?"

Johnny nodded. "Yeah. As soon as we put together a new team. But he did say if things get tight, damage done or not, new team or not. He'll pull us."

Bev looked perky about that. "Johnny. He said he'll put us up in a really nice house. Let's take your baby and be a family."

"Fuck Bev." Johnny snickered. "She has a mother. Denice." He looked at his daughter in the walker who started to fuss. Johnny winced.

"I don't like Denice. She's mean to me. I want to raise your baby."

"Denice will raise the baby. It's her's and Curt's by law anyhow. And besides, *everyone* is mean to you."

"Not Trish. She's my new friend. I'm going to earn a wonderful hostess gift by having a Tupperware party. Will you come?"

Johnny grumbled and stood from the couch, his eyes twitching in annoyance over his daughter's growing loud cries.

"She's also gonna give me motherhood tips."

"Good." Johnny reached down and picked his baby up from the walker. "Start now. Do something with her." He handed the baby to Bev and walked from the livingroom.

~~~~~

Ellen lifted the covers up to Alexandra's chest. With a giggling smile she brought her nose down, and rubbed it against the tiny button one of Alexandra's before kissing her daughter. "Sleep."

"I don't feel very good. Maybe I should stay home from school and go to Uncle Hal's city with you."

"I'd love for you to go, but I'm gonna be very busy there. I want to try to get all my work in so I can be home Tuesday."

"But I like it there."

"I know. But you can't go. And Uncle Frank and Daddy will be upset if they don't get to spend tomorrow with you." Kissing her daughter once more, Ellen stood up and walked across the room. "Goodnight."

"Night Mommy. You're the best."

Ellen smiled reaching for the light switch. She watched her daughter roll on to her side, then Ellen turned off the light and walked from the room. She would have headed straight to the livingroom had she not caught glimpse of Jess in her bedroom, moving around. Folding her arms, she walked there and leaned against the archway. "Hey."

Jess looked up with a smile. A small open suitcase was on Ellen's bed and items were set up around it. "All settled in?"

"Yeah." Ellen stepped in the bedroom. "What are you doing?"

"Oh. I'm sorry. You're mad, huh." Jess set down the shirt he was holding. "You had your things all scattered about. I thought I'd help out and finish packing for you."

"That's really nice. Thank you." Ellen sat on the bed.

"You missed a few items. I tossed them in."

"You are never going to fit all my stuff in that little suitcase. At least without wrinkling everything."

"Watch." Jess winked. "But I do want you to take one item out as soon as you get to Hal's."

"What item's that?"

"One of the items you forgot to pack." Jess walked to the closet. Hanging on the door was a little, simple black dress. "I took the liberty of picking this out for your date tomorrow night. It's very . . . sexy in a plain sort of way."

Ellen chuckled some. "First. I'm not going out on a date with Elliott tomorrow. Second I wouldn't wear a dress."

"Ellen." Jess hung up the dress again and walked to the bed. "You are going out with Elliott. He is really looking forward to this date. You would know this if you returned his calls and didn't have me screen them. Second . . ." He held his finger over her lips. "No. No. And look dressed up. Treat this as special. Elliott's really nice and I think he's cute."

"Elliott is cute." Ellen swung her legs up on the bed and laid on her side watching Jess pack.

"I think you should wear your hair up some too. It looks good."

"Frank hates my hair up."

"I'm not Frank and neither is Elliott. And I think it's good that you're looking at someone new and not someone who . . ." Jess sounded bitter. "Assumes you should be with them."

"Oh. Ouch, I felt that. You're pissed."

"Well, yeah. Henry. Frank. Dean. They just assume you belong to them. Take turns and such. I think you should venture out and get away from them, at least for a while."

"Someone new." Ellen propped her head on her hand. "Like you? Oh, wait. Do you count?"

Jess slowed down in placing the last item in the suitcase. "No." He said softly. "I don't count." He went over and grabbed the dress, then laid it on top of the packed suitcase. "Remember, take this out as soon as you get to Hal's. You can close it in the morning."

"You can close it in the morning if you want. What time do you start shift?"

"Five. But I'll stop by if you . . ."

"No silly. Stay. I'm saying stay. Robbie's flying. He'll never know you didn't come home."

"Really?" Jess smiled. "You want me to stay? You're not sick of me. I've been around you a lot."

"Are you kidding me?" Ellen laughed. She swung her legs around the bed and stood up. "Please. You and I still have the rest of *Gone with the Wind* to watch. And, you spoil me. Why do I want to not have that. Cook, clean, pack."

"I believe when you're with someone. Not that we're with each other. But I believe in spoiling. I love doing little surprises to see the other person's expression. But sometimes I can be a bit much. So tell me if I am."

"Are you kidding. Practice all you want on me."

Jess gave a short uncomfortable chuckle. "Practice. Yes." His voice almost mumbled. "That's what this is a leaning experience." With a breath he hurried and changed his demeanor. "So."

"So. You'll continue practicing the relationship thing and stay?"

"Actually." Jess softened his voice. "I was hoping you'd ask."

"Why's that?" Ellen felt him move behind her.

"Aside from the fact that I want to watch the rest of the movie." He laid his hands gently on her shoulders. "I wanted to try bedroom acquisitions again."

"Jess." Ellen snickered, feeling his hands move so slow up and down her arms, as he pressed into her. "We're in the bedroom already. Battle won."

"O.K. then seduction acquisitions."

"Oh." Ellen closed her eyes.

Jess brushed his nose against her ear whispering. "It doesn't have to lead anywhere. I don't have to end up . . . driving the car. That's not important. I want to see if, don't laugh."

His hands that barely touched her in a slow sweep down her front, took her breath away. "I'm not laughing."

"When you're with someone a long time, years, you always are trying new seductions. I want to see if they'll work on . . ." Jess lifted his hands when Ellen started laughing. "You said you wouldn't laugh."

"Sorry." Ellen grabbed his hands and put them in a hover over her again. "Finish up. I was just thinking, any long term practice you had may be moot with me. I'm missing parts."

"I'll make the adjustment." Jess hand's slid to her thighs.

With a moan, Ellen found herself moving back into Jess with his touch. Then she stopped. "Shit."

"What."

"Any seduction at all may be moot without privacy." She motioned her head at the open door.

Kissing her on the cheek Jess walked around her. "Remember I said I love to give surprises because I love to see the other person's expression?"

"Yes."

"New hinges." Talking a step back and using his foot, Jess closed the door. Ellen's mouth opened, her eyes lit up and she let out an excited shriek.

"There's the expression." Jess pointed at her then reached back and locked

the door.

^^^

### New Bowman, Montana

Radio silence was broken by Robbie in the form of one word. One word that made no sense to anyone, and that heightened the anticipation of Robbie's return.

Hal stood with Elliott on the old highway used as a runway watching his little brother disembark from the jet.

"He always looks so happy when he flies, sir." Elliott commented.

"That's because my brother says it gives him erections."

Elliott's eyes widened and he turned his head embarrassed.

"Shame is something my little brother doesn't have." Hal said as looked upon Robbie securing the jet then to Elliott. "You look tired, Elliott."

"I am sir, I wanted to wait for the news. Then I'll hit the hay. I'm having to be up to finish my duties before Ellen arrives. Do you . . . Do you know what time that is?"

"Haven't a clue. Don't you?" Hal saw Elliott shake his head. "You mean you haven't talked to her? She's still blowing you off? My God, Elliott you must have really offended her."

Elliott's mouth opened, his finger pointed to question Hal but he didn't get a chance to speak.

"Robert." Hal approached Robbie. "Well?"

Robbie lit a cigarette. "Well. You got my message."

"One word Robbie that told us nothing."

"No. It told you it all."

"One word?" Hal asked. "Then you'd better call Dad ASAP, because he is baffled."

Robbie grinned.

^^^

### Beginnings, Montana

Joe didn't want to do it, but he couldn't wait anymore. Despite what his tired mind and body wanted to deal with, he couldn't figure it out on his own. It had to be too simple.

"You wanted to see me?" Frank didn't knock on Joe's door, he just walked in.

From his seat on the sofa, Joe looked up. "What the hell happened to your eye?"

Frank wiped the blood that dribbled from the corner of his eyebrow. "Fuckin killer baby training."

"Killer baby training?"

"Yeah. Dean let's me borrow them an hour or so, so I can train them for

my plan.”

“Killer baby training. They attacked you?”

“The one. I straightened him out.”

“Good.” Joe nodded in shock.

“Training’s going well.”

“That’s uh, good to hear.”

“Cattle prod’s working . . .”

“Frank.” Joe halted his son. “Listen. I want to ask you what this word means to you. ready?” He waited for a nod. “Meatloaf.”

“What about it.”

“What does it mean to you.”

“Is this a trick question?”

“No! Frank you idiot!”

“Dad!” Frank snapped. “You asked me. Fuck. Meatloaf. I thought you knew. It’s a long loaf made out of meat.”

“Frank . . .”

“Pretty good. Why? Do you wanna make it?”

“No. Frank! Asshole.” Joe calmed himself. “Robbie broke radio silence. He only said ‘Meatloaf’.”

Frank’s eyes raised and he grinned. “Oh yeah. Yes!” He smiled arrogantly and pointed to his own temple. “I see why you came to me. I’m smart.”

“I’m sure you are.”

“Meatloaf. I love meatloaf. Robbie knows I love meatloaf. Always have.”

“Frank. That still doesn’t explain to me what it meant.”

“Sure it does.” Frank stated as if Joe should have known. “I love Meatloaf. One of my favorite singers. Next to Journey of course. And one of my favorite songs is . . .”

Joe tossed his head back with a groan. “Christ. I can’t believe I missed it.”

“No, that’s not one of my favorite songs he does. That doesn’t make sense. I don’t think Meatloaf does a song called, Christ I the can’t believe I . . .”

“Frank.”

“Maybe it’s on one of his obscure albums.”

“Frank! No. ‘*Two out of Three Ain’t Bad*’. That’s the song. Two out of three. George’s man was right.” Joe grinned at the thought. “Robbie found the camp.”

## CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

October 26  
Beginnings, Montana

Frank's long, tired, snuffle rang out in the predawn. His boots moved with a tromping stomp against the hard ground, and so did Robbie's as they walked together.

They stopped the jeep somewhere about a half a mile past Jason's quantum lab in the field that ran south of the living section toward the woods, and walked to one of the metal tool sheds randomly erected in Beginnings.

"Today's the day." Frank said a bag, big and green, tossed over his shoulder. "Excited?"

"Yeah." Robbie smiled.

"You better get some sleep, it's not that long from now."

"You too."

"I'll wait." Frank jingled the keys. "I'm too hyped." The moment he brought the keys to the padlock, he and Robbie heard the multitude of shuffling and clanking chains from inside. "Sound agitated."

"I'm ready." Robbie swung around his M-16.

"Kind of has that 'Night of the Living Dead' feel don't it." Frank moved to the door's side while Robbie took an aiming stand. "On three. One . . ." Frank turned the knob. "Two."

Robbie pumped the chamber and aimed.

"Three." When Frank flung open the door, screams entailed, Robbie raised his weapon, Frank tossed in the sack and quickly slammed the door shut again. Hurrying, he latched the lock back on as the door moved in consent banging. Lock on, Frank smiled and turned away. "Went well."

"We have it down to a science." Robbie said.

"That we do."

Both brothers, together, walked from that shed.

^^^

### Quantico Marine Headquarter's

"Confirmation received. The men in the field await your order." Steward spoke to George..

George, stayed peering out his office window. "Pathetic."

"What is?"

"This view. How long to our refurbishing team is scheduled for D.C.?"

"Um . . . D.C. is a big project, you don't have them there until spring, sir."

"Send a message after they finish in Lauderdale, I want them up here. I want to go back to the white house. A man in my position shouldn't be living in a frame house a half a block from Quantico's main street."

"O.K." Steward stepped closer. "The order sir?"

"Yes." George turned around. "Is the surveillance team picked?"

"Yes."

“Good. Tell the C.O. in the field to ship them out. All of them except that team and send them south. Due south.”

“Yes, sir.” Steward walked to the door.

“And let me know as soon as you hear from Beginnings.”

“Yes sir.” Steward left.

George returned to his window and his ‘deep thinking’ presidential stare out. “Pathetic view.”

^^^

### New Bowman, Montana

“Ellen.” Hal extended his arms in a welcoming manner as she stepped inside New Bowman’s small hospital.

“Hey, Hal.” She warmly embraced him. “Blue ready?”

“Getting the day situated for you now.” He placed his arm around her. “Where are your things?”

“Dan is taking them to your place for me before he heads back.”

“Good. I can not believe you are wanting to undertake this all in one day.”

“I know it’s a lot of physicals.” Ellen turned the corridor, and slowed down, UWA soldiers sat patiently in the hall. “Whoa.”

“You said a hundred. Half haven’t arrived yet.” Hal, still walking with his arm around Ellen whispered in her ear. “Good thing you and Blue aren’t doing prostate exams as well.”

Ellen’s eyes closed as she silently chuckled.

“Ah, Elliott.”

Ellen opened her eyes as they stopped by the examining room.

Elliott smiled. “Ellen, how are you.”

Hal spoke before Ellen could answer. “El, I thought, with examining all the men, for safety sake, and as customary precaution, a guard is in order. Sgt. Ryder volunteered to be that guard.”

“Swell. Excuse me.” Ellen opened the door and went inside.

Elliott shocked, stared at the closed door. “Captain?”

So dramatic and so instigating, Hal shook his head as he walked away.

“My God, Elliott I’m beginning to think she hates you. What did you do?”

Elliott was at a loss.

^^^

### Beginnings, Montana

The slam of Jenny’s hand onto Trish’s desk left behind a piece of paper.

Trish looked up from her date book. “What’s this.”

“Read.” Jenny folded her arms.

Trish skimmed over the letter. “What?”

“It’s all there.”

“But . . .”

“Because I run the organization, you are hereby . . . kicked out of any and all women’s group functions and meetings.”



"But . . ."

"Traitor." Jenny tossed back her hair, stuck her nose in the air and walked out.

The moment the door slammed, Trish growled loudly, crumbled the paper and picked up the phone. "Hello Scott. I have a favor."

There was a sound of blowing, then tapping that come over the horn speakers that seemed to ring out in every corner of Beginnings. Following that, Scott's voice came barreling through. "Attention, Danny Hoi. You are summoned to history immediately. And man, I'd be scared."

With a sugarcoated 'aw', Andrea stopped on the clinic steps just as Danny--who was working on the door--looked up to his calling. "How sweet. You've been paged.," Andrea tapped him on the back and went inside.

^^^

"Courtesy of Dino." Frank said as he handed Joe the plastic covering. "Dad, come on."

"Christ." Joe took it then looked around him. "Do you people know how silly this is. Frank, why am I putting this on."

"Have to. The demonstration is messy."

Grumbling, Joe stood and placed the bright yellow plastic raincoat on. He looked at everyone. Robbie, standing off to the side wearing his. Jason and Henry sitting in two of the three audience chairs, wearing theirs. They all looked silly. Draped in the rain coat, hood up and zipper pulled all the way to the chin. But they didn't look as ridiculous as Frank. He was the biggest '*Morton's Salt*' girl Joe had ever seen in his life. "Frank, you look retarded."

"Zip up." Frank instructed then reached to help Joe.

"I got it." Joe smacked him away. "But I am not putting up this goddamn hood. This better be good." He sat down. "Go on."

"Thank you." Frank cleared his throat. "We invited council here today to demonstrate the labor of our hard work. A new weapon is in the works in Beginnings. We call it, the 'Attack Child.'"

Joe rolled his eyes.

Frank walked to the truck parked a few feet away. "Robbie take you position." Waiting for Robbie to stand off near council, Frank opened the box from the back. He grabbed a long leash style stick. He lifted from the box, a killer baby and attached the leash to its collar.. "Meet Marv. We named him Marv in memory of the first casualty in Beginnings. Marv." Frank lowered his head.

"Marv." Robbie lowered his.

"Marv." Henry joined. "Ow." He looked up when Joe hit him.

"Anyhow, we've been working with Marv and his siblings. Once a deadly beast who attacked at the smell of human blood. Watch." Holding a squirming Marv who gurgled, Frank set him down. Leash in one hand, Frank showed the cattle prod. "Just in case." He nodded. "Robbie. Come and get him"

Joe cringed as he watched Robbie walk to Marv and Frank released the leash. Marv didn't budge, he didn't attack, he stayed put. "Hey that's pretty

good.”

Robbie patted Marv on the head. “He knows me.”

“Volunteer?” Frank asked, attaching the leash again. “He’s safe.”

“I’ll do it.” Henry stood up. “You won’t let me get killed will you.”

“Nah, Marv’s harmless.” Frank told him. “Stand a good fifteen feet in front of him.”

Henry felt uncomfortable as he walked by Marv and heard the growl. Being assured he was safe and covered in bright yellow plastic, Henry took a stand fifteen feet before Marv. “O.K.”

“Watch.” Frank whispered to Marv. “Easy.” Marv jumped like an attack dog.

Henry saw this. “Frank, maybe it’s not a good idea to . . .” Henry shrieked when Frank released the leash and before Frank could step back, Marv had lunged out top speed at a screaming Henry. Racing across the distance, Marv leaped up at Henry knocking him back and then Marv opened his mouth and . . . licked him.

Henry gagged. “Frank.” Another gag.

Laughing, Frank walked over and retrieved Marv. He helped Henry up. “See.”

Joe, impressed, nodded. “So you broke the killer instinct in them.”

“Not completely. We trained them.” Frank held Marv. “Robbie. Demo two.”

Robbie walked to the truck not five feet from council. “Now, don’t be mad. When they were living by us. Frank, me and Jess, we took a couple trips and stole a few. Kept them at the old south shed. This one’s chained up.”

Joe was confused. He looked at Henry who had resumed his seat and at Jason who sat, raincoat and all, legs crossed smoking with an enjoyment look on his face. “What are you talking about Robbie?”

Robbie opened the truck door. Leaping out, still in chains, screaming like a wild man was a savage.

The moment Joe, Jason and Henry all stood up was the moment from Frank’s arm, Marv seared. Fifty-five miles an hour, shooting in the air, growling vengeance Marv blasted to the savage.

The force of Marv sent the savage banging into the truck and with the sound of a wolf devouring it’s pray, Marv dug into the savage.

Frank lowered his goggles and chuckled in amusement while Joe, Henry, and Jason grunted in disgust and held up their arms in a shield when blood and guts shot up and out like a volcanic eruption. Hence, finally giving the explanation--visually--for the raincoats.

^^^

It set within the wallpaper border just above the master bedroom’s bathroom door. A simple chair enabled Johnny to open the phoney section of wall and remove the imagery video camera from inside. Miniature, compact and its lense smaller than a dime, Johnny opened the back and removed the tiny black round disk. He placed the disk in his shirt pocket being careful not to scratch it, then from the small case inside the section of wall, Johnny took a stored disk, put it in the camera and inserted the camera back in it’s place. It fit

perfectly and when Johnny placed the section of wall back over it, the small bud of the flower was the opening that allowed for the camera's eye, and sonar receptive microphone, to see all and hear all in Ellen's bedroom.

Blowing off the excess plaster, Johnny stepped from the chair in the bedroom. He wanted to hurry out. Ellen's home was grand central station day and night, and Johnny couldn't take the chance of being caught in there.

^^^^

Gruff, grumbling and moving with a storming stride, Joe, covered in drying blood walked through center town toward the living section.

Even the cigarette he had didn't taste good he was so aggravated.. He just wanted to go home, shower and get ready for the meeting where he would probably get aggravated all over again.

"Pap?" Johnny called his name with a hint of a snicker. "What . . ."

"Don't ask." Joe stopped walking two rows into the living section. "Your father."

Johnny shook his head. "Like you need this with tomorrow and all."

Joe raised his eyebrows. "True. At least I have high hopes for you."

"For me?"

"Yeah, hopefully you'll be the only Slagel, aside from myself who this world didn't whack out."

"What about Uncle Hal?" Johnny asked. "He's good."

"Your Uncle Hal runs around in a civil war uniform, uses a sword and gives secret awards to whichever of his men, in battle, pops the head of the enemy the farthest. He's whacked as well. Where did I go wrong with them."

"Ya didn't Pap." Johnny smiled.

Joe took a step to walk but stopped. "Johnny?" He turned around.

"Yeah, Pap?"

"We don't see you much anymore. Running here and doing this for Dean. Working security. Your daughter. If you get a chance, tonight, especially tonight with Andrea's trial starting. Can you stop by. Maybe have some dinner. Visit. We'd like it."

Peacefully, Johnny smiled. "I will."

"Good." Joe put his hands in his pockets. "And . . ." He snapped his finger just as Johnny started to walk away. "Another thing. After . . . after this savage thing is over with. I was thinking, clear some time. Put Henry in charge and take off for Peck Lake for a day and do some fishing. What do you think about making some time to do that with your old Pap."

"I think that's a great idea. I'd like it. Thanks Pap. And maybe you should go shower soon, you're starting to . . ."

"Smell like rotting flesh." Joe grumbled. "I'm killing your father." Lifting his hand in a wave, Joe, just as miserable moved on.

^^^^

New Bowman, Montana

Ellen laughed, arms folded, as she listened to the man who sat on the

examining table.

Brad put on his shirt as he talked. His chest scarred some from battles fought. He wasn't bulky but he wasn't a thin man. His hair shoulder length, was the perfect match of dark blonde as Jess'.

"God I remember that place." Ellen spoke with such reminiscing.

"Frightened me." Brad slid from the table.

"I bet. I was the same age when I first saw it. You think, Liberty Avenue, probably a historical place." Ellen chuckled. "So where in Pittsburgh, did you go to school?"

"Art Institute." Brad buttoned his shirt.

"You must have just graduated when the plague hit. You're what . . ." Ellen peeked at his chart. "Twenty-nine."

"Actually, I was still in school. I remember leaving classes on Friday and there wasn't a world on Monday."

Ellen let out a breath following him to the door. "When did you venture out of Pittsburgh? My husband and I stopped there for supplies in late June."

"After helping out at Mercy Hospital, I got out and went to Akron where my parents live. Then I just . . . You know, moved on like everyone else."

Ellen opened the door. "We'll have to sit down, you me and Frank. Frank and I lived there there for a while."

"We'll do that. Thank you Doctor." Brad stepped out the door. "Afternoon Sgt. Ryder."

Ellen walked across the room. "Yes, Elliott."

Elliott froze in his walk in. "May I speak to you?" He closed the door.

"I'm busy. And I'd like to take a break."

"Are you getting something to eat. You haven't . . ."

"Yes." Ellen wrote in a chart speaking very emotionless.

"Can I escort you to the mess. Maybe we can . . ."

"No."

Elliott took a moment to think of what he would say next. "Tonight. I was thinking of coming to the Captain's and picking you up at . . ."

"I'll come to your house."

"But I . . ."

"No." Ellen grabbed another chart. "When you bring me back to Beginnings tomorrow, Dean has a few test to run on you. So don't dart out." Before she could open the chart, Elliott's hand laid on hers. She looked up to him.

"What did I do?"

"Nothing." Ellen opened the chart.

"We've not seen each other in a while. Usually we talk and . . ."

"I am really, really busy." Ellen tucked the chart under her arm. "O.K.?" She waited for his nod. "O.K. I need a break and some food. Bye." She walked to the door, opened it in her stride and stopped the second she stepped out into the hall. Slowly she turned around and looked back in the room, Elliott stood there looking lost and confused. "Are you gonna walk me or what?"

"I thought you said no."

"Elliott. I'm a woman. I can change my mind without warning. You're gonna have to learn that if you're going to be the apocalyptic world Casanova," On her last word she walked back out.

Confused by her comment, Elliott just followed her. He wasn't going to question. He just figured 'Casanova' probably was a repercussion stemming from the very long list of nasty rumors, the Slagel men took great pleasure in starting about him.

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### Beginnings. Montana

"Oh." Frank spewed out sarcastically. "He arrives." Holding papers in his hand, Frank clapped when Joe stepped inside his office.

The sneer on Joe's face was seen by Robbie, Jason and Henry. But not by Frank. "Here." Joe grabbed his hand and laid a small marble size object in the palm.

"What's this?" Frank rolled it around in his fingers.

"It was stuck in my hair, Frank. Finally I had to cut it out." Joe snuck a look over his shoulder to Henry who let out a disgusted moan.

"Still." Frank looked at the pink object. "What is it?"

"I think it's a piece of an eyeball." Joe said then walked to his desk.

Frank stared at it and nodded. "Whose?"

Joe and everyone grunted.

"What!" Frank acted clueless.

"Frank. Join the meeting." Joe said.

"Did you want me to keep it?" Frank asked.

"Frank . . ."

"Here." Frank walked over and laid it on Joe's desk. "For as proud as I am of my 'Attack Children' I don't need a souvenir. Besides, I don't want my fingers to smudge my Helen and Bobby story." Frank looked down to Robbie who whined. He snickered. "Jealousy will get you no where. I have connections. I got it first."

"Put it away Frank and sit down." Joe instructed. "We have a meeting to discuss." Eyeballing that 'eyeball' piece, Joe realized he didn't want it on his desk. With a sneaky look, he flicked it from the desktop, and chuckled when it landed on Henry's lap. "Don't." Joe warned to Henry who was about to add whining to his shudder. "All right. Meeting." Joe pulled a fax before him. "As I told each of you. George is sending all troops south. Frank, he agrees. Right Frank?"

"Huh?" Frank looked up. "Oh yeah. As discussing with commanding op, Robbie. I reviewed all the UWA attack sites, recent Beginnings scout and supply runs. And in my opinion, if the final camp is as big as the Washington one and Detroit one, it has been a year in the building. They are definitely somewhere we haven't been. South. Very south. I'm saying Texas, possibly Mexico, but I would look for them near the Gulf. Fishing, good land, great weather."

Joe nodded. "Robbie. Opinions?"

"I'm following Frank's advice. It sounds good. We've got a hundred men out there so we'll planning a full force trip to Texas spanning west to New Mexico."

"Good. How are supplies holding up?" Joe asked.

"So far so good. A lot of the preserved food is not being used, they're

finding their own.”

“What about . . .” Joe held up his hand as a pre-defense to the reaction he would get. “What about heading straight down to east Texas, designate a meeting and starting point and linking up with the three thousand Society soldiers and doing a comb across.” He looked to Frank.

“Robbie and I could work on that. Strategically place troops and give them a day by day scouting agenda. Run that by George.” Frank suggested.

“Will do.” Joe said. “Now, very vital. We planned a synchronized hit when the two camps are found. Find them, monitor them, pick a day, wipe them out. If this second camp is this far south. There is gonna be a few hours span between dropping the Dean-ami on one and then the other. We’re gonna stand a chance of retaliation.” He saw Frank shaking his head. “No, why?”

“It’s not the savages who are retaliating.” Frank continued despite the moans. “I’m telling you. It’s the ones breaking in and listening to our . . .”

“Frank.” Joe stopped him. “We’re going to assume it is the savages. OK? Anyone have suggestions.”

Henry, like he had the answer, spoke up. “Two jets.”

Robbie snickered. “I can only fly one.”

Henry, so offended scoffed. “You’re not Wonder Boy. You’re not the only one who can fly. Frank can fly.”

“Yeah.” Frank spoke up. “But, uh not jets. None of us fly jets. I can try. Maybe Robbie can . . .” Frank shut up when the entire room shouted ‘no!’. “O.K., O.K., who else?” Frank sunk down in his chair in thought.

Jason raised his hand slightly. “If I may? A synchronized attack is vital. Same day. Same time, same second, drop. You’re gonna need an experienced fighter pilot to make the bomb drop at the precise coordinates. Anyone we train right now, no matter how good, stands a chance of failing due to inexperience. I know one pilot. Very good. Expert. Metal winning. His heroism in war was very instrumental in his presidential campaign.”

“Christ.” Joe closed his eyes.

“Who?” Frank asked.

Joe continued. “Not only do we have to communicate with him, but we have to work side by side with him.”

“Who?” Frank asked again.

Joe ignored Frank. “Robbie will you have a problem with that.”

“Who?” Frank asked, yet, once more.

“No.” Robbie stated.

“Who?” Frank spoke up louder.

“George!” Joe yelled at Frank. “You asshole!”

“Thank you! Fuck!” Frank tossed his hand out. “Have to ask a million and one fuckin times to get an answer.

Joe grumbled. “You’ll actually have to communicate with him, at least on a written level to coordinate this Robbie.”

“Oh!” Frank shouted out and sat up. “Oh shit!”

“What?” Joe looked at him.

“Oh my God!”

“What!” Joe blasted. “Did you think of something.”

“Yes I did.” Frank stood up and reached behind him to his back pocket. “Oh . . . my God.”

"What!" Joe screamed at the top of his lungs.

"Dad. Oh." Frank tossed his head back. "Are you ready for this? You're not gonna believe this but . . . Helen and Bobby. I figured it out. Helen and Bobby are Ellen and Robbie."

Jason snickered.

Henry moaned.

Joe grumbled. "Frank . . ."

"No Dad. Listen to this. Fuck." He smacked himself in the forehead. "I can't believe we missed this. Wait. It makes perfect sense."

"Frank, we're not discussing . . ."

"Helen. Ellen." Frank tilted his head. "See? Bobby. Robbie. Do you hear the similarities."

Joe's head dropped to the desk.

"I know you find this hard to believe. But . . . Oh my God. What if this gets out?" Frank turned dramatically. "It's all just snapping to me now. It's coming together. Letters eight through sixteen when Bobby was stationed in the antarctic. Dad, Robbie was stationed in the antarctic. And that town in Connecticut. Bet me it's Ashtonville. This Helen person's husband Pete."

Joe interjected. "Is actually Ellen's husband Pete?"

"Yes," Frank's eyes lit up. "Oh shit."

Jason had his own instigation to add. "See, Frank but where's the connection with the Joe that's mentioned in the letters."

Joe glared at Jason. "Will you stop."

Frank fluttered his lips. "Ha!" Frank pointed to his own temple. "Joe. Ready?" He pointed to his father so factually. "Joe."

Amongst Henry's snickering, Joe leaned far back on his chair and covered his face. "A Frank revelation."

"Amazing." Jason said.

"Oh! Oh! Uh!":Frank shrieked. "Dad. The brother Frank . . . that's, that's me!"

It probably was the loudest groan Joe ever made that rang out.

"Dad. It's true. Ask . . ." Frank looked around the room. Robbie's chair was empty and the door was open. "Fuck." with a biting bottom lip glare Frank pointed at his father. "I'm killing him."

"Frank!" Joe called out, but before anymore was said, Frank had taken off. "Henry, get on the radio and warn Robbie to hide out for a little bit. Christ." Joe shook his head and slammed his hands on the desk. "Was this a typical goddamn meeting or what?"

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### Pine Springs, Texas

The sound ran down a line. Pumping chambers and clicking hammers rang out as the man in the black hood pushed his motorcycle through a break in the woods in the Guadalupe Mountains. He couldn't see the weapons pointed at him. But he could feel the steady aims. He had followed the smell of civilization once again. Food. Warmth. Fire. People. His heart beat strong. His hands

trembled. "I come in peace!" he shouted out with his young voice. "Please. I come in peace. I just need a safe place to rest. Fuel for my bike. I . . . I have my own food." he reached for his pack strapped to his bike. His hand came not even within a foot of it when a warning shot hit into the dirt by his feet.

"Stap 'way freem the bi." An older voice called out. His accent was one of not a southern draw, though it had that hint. It was more of a heavy drawn out dialect of someone that forgot how to speak properly.. "Hans sup."

The man in the hood did as instructed. Slowly, hands raised, he moved away from his motorcycle.

From the trees six men emerged. They were led by a thin man with long stringy grey hair. His face horrendously scarred with slash marks. Teeth missing. He was clean, like the other six and none of them were tattered.

"Wa sit yew wan?" The gray haired man asked.

"I . . . I told you. Just a safe place. A few hours. I'll be on my way. I need to rest in safety. Then I'll leave, please."

The man lowered his weapon. He looked over the hooded person before him. Not a spot of skin showing. "Why sit yew hi yew sell?"

It took a moment but the hooded man comprehended the question. "I have to."

"For we le yew ins. Shoe yew sell." He pointed the gun to the hood.

"I . . . I can't. Not yet. Please." He peered up to the sky and to the bright sun. "I'll die."



## CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

### New Bowman, Montana

The crotch shot was something Ellen didn't expect to see when she opened her eyes to the clearing of the throat. Sideways, on her back on Hal's bed, head hanging over the side, Ellen viewed an upside down Hal.

"Pathetic." Hal stood, hands on his hips. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing." Ellen answered.

"You are expected at Elliott's house in twenty minutes. Are you blowing him off?"

"Still in the debate phase."

"There is no debate, El. You go."

"But Hal." Ellen rolled on to her stomach then sat up. "I feel really funny. Especially with the way I heard he is."

"I heard the rumors myself. I can't confirm or deny, that's not my place. Elliott is my right-hand man. But . . ." Hal sat on the bed next to her. "Instead of blowing off Elliott, why don't you go and open up. Really give him a piece of your mind by reading him the riot act."

"Yeah." Ellen's face lit up.

"Add insult to injury. Look really good when you deliver it. Put that little black dress on that . . ." Hal paused to snicker. "Jess picked out for you."

"You know what." Ellen stood up. "I think I will."

"Good." Hal watched Ellen waltz to the closet and grabbed the dress that hung on the door.

"Thanks Hal."

Giving a sloppy salute, Hal waited until the bathroom door closed and he hurried from the bedroom. The first thing he did was grab the phone and dialed. Smiling, he spoke. "Frank? You're gonna love this."

^^^

### Beginnings, Montana

"Whereabouts." Danny Hoi stated sitting on the floor across from Trish.

"Two unknown." Trish answered. "October second when the freezer case was broken into and . . . The break in at the mobile lab."

Danny cringed. "That's the one I worry about. Hopefully, Henry won't play upon them. But . . . the mobile lab is bad. Especially with John's testimony out of the picture."

"And did you read Dean's . . . ow, deposition given to Stan."

"I hate Stan the Bowman man. I wish Judge Grace wouldn't have aligned him to help Henry."

"But if she didn't. Ow. It wouldn't look fair."

"Who cares." Danny shuffled through the notes. "Line of defense?"

"She was home. Dean's testimony is ow, really bad."

"Why is Dean testifying against Andrea? They're colleagues."

"Not that he's testifying against her. Just that he states, ow, that he believes

...” Trish read off the deposition. “. . . an unknown source, close to the Salicain, was found in John’s blood. A drug not made in Beginnings. A society drug.”

“So, if the drug is in John’s, blood someone working for the society hit him. Hence, Andrea’s freedom to move about.”

“What about the match up, ow, on the similar diagnosis for Joe and John and also Andrea’s rounds location.”

“You know what? If that comes up I’m going to dance around and change the subject.”

“Oh, good ow, idea.” Trish huffed, swung around and smacked Richie with the papers. “Stop pulling my hair.”

“Bug.” Richie reached down to her hair again.

“There are no bugs in my hair! Stop!” She smacked him again.

“Ow.” Richie rubbed his chin on his shoulder. “Ow. Dan. Hurt. She hurt me Dan. Ow, Trish hurt me.”

“Trish.” Danny waved a scolding finger. “This is why you have no more friends in Beginnings.”

“No. You are why I have no more friends in Beginnings. Because you make me hang out with Bev.”

“Bev.” Richie stated. “Bev. Bev. Bev.” He reached for Trish’s hair.

“And?” Trish complained. “Why do we have to work in here anyhow . . . ow!” She smacked Richie again.

Richie whimpered, then snickered and reached again, leaning over Trish.

“Because.” Danny explained. “I don’t want Richie to feel left out and I’m hoping that we can snap him out of this.”

“I doubt it. Let’s just review . . .” Trish looked down to the ‘pat’ noise she heard and saw the small wet spot on her paper. “Great. Just great. Now he’s drooling.”

“Bev.” Richie smiled and pulled Trish’s hair. “Let’s go see Bev. Bev.”

“Off!” Trish struck her arm out, missing Richie, then frustrated stood up. “Danny, when you’re ready to work in peace, then find me. Until then. I’m going home to my baby.”

“Trish wait!” Danny called out as she suddenly stormed from the skills room. “We have to find the connection to ‘George’ theory.”

“Bev. Bev.” Richie reached for the papers. “Bev.”

“Not now Rich. And that wasn’t Bev, that was Trish.” Danny gathered up his things.

“Trish.” Richie repeated.

“Yes.” Danny frustrated, stood up with all his work. “And as much as I wanted to have you part of this, I have to find Trish. We have work. See ya.”

Richie stood alone in the skills room. “Trish.” He spoke to himself then did a quick twitching ‘no’ shake of his head. “Bev. Bev. Beverly Hadly.” He took a moment to run his chin on his shoulder. “Ah, she’ beautiful, just . . . just beautiful.”

^^^

Though the little round black disk that was tucked away safely in Johnny’s

home was supposed to be viewed by Bev at that moment, Johnny opted to make her wait for the boredom. He had other things to do.

With his daughter in arms, and the smell of food hitting him, he knocked once and stepped inside Joe's home.

"Oh!" Andrea shrieked out pleasantly. "Look who's here." She hurried across the livingroom, towel in hand. "Joe!" She reached out and took the baby from Johnny. "Come to great grandma. Yes." She held her up. "Look at you. Oh, just look." Andrea plastered the baby with kisses then cuddled her and kissed Johnny. "Two nights in a row you got this little one. We're proud of you."

"Thanks. How are you doing Andrea?"

"Me?" Andrea smiled. "Oh I'm just fine. Why?"

"With tomorrow and all."

"Oh, I don't worry about tomorrow or the next day with this trial. It's a minor thing." She kissed the baby and handed her back to Johnny. "The Good Lord will decide my fate. I have to get supper done. You hungry?"

Johnny nodded as an upbeat Andrea darted from the livingroom.

"Well." Joe walked in from the hall. "You stopped by. And . . ." He took the baby. "You brought my granddaughter. Thank you."

Johnny smiled. "Pap? Andrea, she's, she's doing really good. Is that a front."

Joe peered the kitchen's way. "No. She's very optimistic. She really believes something's gonna happen and the real person for George will be found out. There's not a lot of time for that to happen." Joe bounced the baby with a little sadness. "And I'll tell you Johnny, I hope she's right. Things don't look good. And, I don't know what I'm gonna do. She's the first person in thirty years who puts up with me."

Johnny didn't know how to respond. The feeling of guilt was not one he expected to feel as he listened to his grandfather then watched him change his demeanor to a happier one as he played with the baby.

^^^

## New Bowman, Montana

Ellen was late.

Elliott expected that. From what he remembered of women, they always ran late. But it still didn't stop him from worrying or pacing about before his front door. Even though he knew she would knock when she got there, the sound of the knock went through Elliott causing even more nervousness. He reached for the door, stopped, took a breath, counted to five then flung open the door with a smile. "El . . . Len."

Ellen raised her eyes. Expecting to see Elliott in his, uniform she was shocked when he stood before her dressed in faded jeans and a high necked black turtleneck style shirt. "Elliott."

"You look . . . you look stunning." Elliott wisped out as he opened the door more. "Come in."

Slowly Ellen stepped inside. "Sorry I'm late."

"You're late?" Elliott looked at his watch. "Just a few minutes. That won't

be a problem. Would you like something to drink?"

"No."

"Sit down?"

"No." Ellen shook her head.

"Dinner's done. I thought we'd eat, have time for coffee and head to the theater to catch . . ."

"Elliott."

"Yes?"

"This . . . this isn't going to work. O.K.?"

Awkwardly and nervously, Elliott smiled. "What do you mean?"

"I mean . . . and you looking so handsome is not making this easy." She took a breath. "I mean, I'm not going to do what I had planned. I was going to read you the riot act and give you a piece of my mind, but . . . I'll just leave instead. Thanks." She walked to the door.

Elliott's heart dropped. "You don't have to tell me. But may I at least ask why?"

Ellen stopped before the door.

"I mean, I obviously have done something these past few days. Something that caused you to want to read me the riot act. Did I offend you?"

"No."

"Have I handled our situation badly. I am so out of practice that . . ."

"No." Ellen answered.

Believing he was still being given more guesses, Elliott did. "Were you expecting me to do something I didn't do? Did I not call you enough. Perhaps you didn't get my messages. I placed . . ."

"Elliott. I got your calls." Ellen said softly. "That's not it. See . . . I wanted to go out on this date with you. Even if I misinterpreted how you felt, I still liked you. But, let me explain something to you. As you know, there are not that many women in the world. We are becoming extinct. There are plenty of men. Sort of an unwritten rule between us is, we don't step on each other's toes. If a woman has interest in a man first, you don't touch that. The field is too big for a woman to trample on another woman's territory. Understand?"

"I think so. There's no reason for two women to share a man."

"Exactly. There are too many choices for us as women. So . . . I won't step on her toes. I don't feel right doing it."

"Whose toes?" Elliott asked.

"The woman here in Bowman that you date."

Elliott's eyes closed. "Oh my God. Is this . . . is this the reason for the coldness and distance. You think I am dating someone else here in New Bowman."

"You said . . ."

"I lied." Elliott shook his head in nervousness. "It slipped out. I don't know why I said it, it just slipped out like a blundering fool because I didn't want you to know I was there to see you."

"Really?"

"Yes." Elliott nodded. "Ellen I am so taken with you, that even if the choice of women were plentiful, I wouldn't want to get to know anyone else. Not on that level. And though it is not like that, I must tell you. I take it as a great honor, that in this world, where there are so many of us men, that you

would even show interest in me.”

“Oh wow.” Ellen was taken by his words.

“I’ll understand if you want to go.”

“No.” Ellen answered quickly. “Misunderstanding cleared up. I’m sorry.”

“No. I’m sorry. I should have told you but the . . .” Elliott closed his eyes with a barely heard whine. “The captain.” He huffed. “I’ll pay him back. One day.”

“You’re not the only one. He got me too.” Ellen smiled. “All right. We’re back on track. Let’s have our date.”

“I’d like that.” Elliott held his hand out to the way of the diningroom. “Are you hungry?”

“Very.” Ellen walked ahead of Elliott into the diningroom and stopped cold when she spotted the well set up table. Complete with lit candles. “Oh.” She stepped closer. “Maybe I was wrong?”

“About?” Elliott moved to her.

“Us. Elliott. This . . . this looks so romantic.”

His eyes went wide. “Romantic?”

“The wine, table set. Oh the candles. It looks like you really are . . .” Ellen shut up when she watched Elliott hurry and blow out the candles. “Maybe not.” She pulled out a seat at the table and sat down.

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### Beginnings, Montana

Sniveling.

If playing the old television show, *Password* Henry was sure that would be the one word he would use to get his opponent to simply say ‘Stan’.

Stan Lit-a-something-or-other, the New Bowman man appointed by Judge Grace to be Henry’s legal assistant was becoming Henry’s nightmare. When did he start to take the assignment so serious, Henry had to wonder. And though Henry argued, and called Frank rude at fist over it, he had to admit, Frank’s initial pictorial description was right on the nose. To Frank, three thing best described Stan. One, he was someone everyone picked on in school. Two, he was the person everyone picked on in school because he told on everyone. And three, he looked like he would have been Dean’s best buddy.

Stan.

“Henry. Henry.”

With slightly parted lips and a turn of his head, Henry looked at Stan. “Do you always speak so nasal or are you getting sick. Maybe if you’re getting sick you should . . .”

“No. I’m not ill. A little fall nasal drainage.”

“Does . . . Does Hal actually put you into battle?”

“Who?”

“I’m telling.” Henry smiled.

“About?”

“Not knowing who Hal is. I’m telling. Hal is Captain Slagel.”

“See now, that’s the reason I wouldn’t know him by Hal. I wouldn’t dare call a man I hold so much respect for, by his first name. He is Captain Slagel.”

"I see." Henry nodded slowly. "So does he put you into battle at all?"

"Heaven's no. I'm much too small. I'm the map man. Now Henry . . ."

"Really, we should end for tonight." Henry faked a yawn. "Boy, oh, boy am I tired."

"But Henry. Your opening statement lacks fact."

"Work on it." Henry smiled and stood up.

"O.K., but don't you think that you should learn it first?"

"Um . . . nah, I'll just read it."

"It won't sound right."

"I'm a great actor. Sure it will." Henry closed his folders.

"What about these argumentative points as regarding . . ."

"You, you can handle that." Henry winked. "I'm heading home. Just review. That's it. We'll be fine tomorrow." Henry walked to the door of library where they were working. "Night."

"Night." Stan slumped his thin body back in the chair, mumbling as he did. "That Henry." He flipped through a folder. "He has no initiative what-so-ever. Let's see." A turn of a page brought a bright smile to Stan's face. "Now see." He held up a document. "This isn't even mentioned., Bet he missed this. That Henry." Stan began to furiously write.

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The opening of Dean's front door brought to him the vision of a drastically swaying Robbie.

"Is . . ." Robbie held up an unsteady finger. His eyes bloodshot and beady, his speech borderline slurred. "Is F . . . F . . . F . . ."

"Frank?" Dean asked.

"That's it. Is he here."

"Um. Yeah." Dean opened the door wider, turning into his home and calling out. "Frank. For you."

Attaching his shoulder harness, Frank came down the stairs and picked up speed with anger when he saw his brother. "Robbie."

Robbie, in a stammer, approached Frank. "Hey."

"Fuck." Frank waved his hand in front of his nose. "Good thing you're off tonight."

"Yep." Robbie walked to the couch. "I love you Frank. You know that? You're like the best brother in the whole world."

"You just don't want me to beat the hell out of you right now."

"No, that's why I got drunk. See. I wouldn't be a challenge." Robbie winked and plopped down. "Whoa This is soft." His hand smoothed over the cushion.

Dean hid his snicker as he stepped into the livingroom. "Robbie can I get you anything."

"No." Robbie shook his head once, it seemed to move out of control.

Frank disgusted, placed his revolver in the harness. "What do you want. I'm going to work."

"I have to apologize." Robbie started to stand but fell back down. "Apologize. I'm sorry Frank. I am so sorry."

"No you're not."

"No, I'm not. But I'm sorry anyhow." Robbie squinted. "Does that make sense."

"No."

"O.K., try this." Robbie held up his hand and drummed up a drastic thinking look. "I'm sorry I electronically had sex with Ellen."

Dean laughed.

Frank didn't. "Robbie!"

"What?"

Frank walked to the couch. "Did you read those letters."

Dean moved closer. "Frank, I believe Robbie wrote those letters."

"Shut the fuck up Dean." Frank snapped. "Did *you* read those letters?"

"Nope." Dean shook his head. "And even if I did. I can't get mad at Ellen for something that happened before us. Or I wouldn't get mad at her for doing something while I was married to someone else."

Frank quickly looked at Dean. "I didn't know you were married to someone else."

Robbie looked up. "Neither did I. Dean, you dog, you hid it all these years."

"I was never . . . I was using that as an . . . forget it." Dean waved both Slagel's off and walked from the room. "I'm going in the kitchen."

Robbie, holding the couch as a major support, stood up. "It was just all in fun. It passed the time Frank. That's all."

"Robbie. I read those letters. You made it seem like . . . You made it out as if whenever you read what El wrote you, Well you . . ."

"Jerked off?"

"Yes."

"I did."

"Uh!"

"Sometimes."

Dean's laughter carried into the livingroom.

"Dean!" Frank yelled.

"So did El." Robbie said.

"Robbie!"

"She what?" Dean flew from the kitchen. "She didn't."

"Dean!" Frank snapped.

"Yeah." Robbie nodded. "I think."

"Robbie!"

Dean grinned. "No way."

"Dean!" Frank's voice squeaked.

"That's what she said." Robbie stated.

"Robbie!"

"Frank!" Dean yelled. "We're talking."

"You're being fuckin perverted." Frank scolded.

Robbie laughed a loud 'Ha' "And this is coming from Mr. Glass Window."

Dean quickly looked at Frank. "What's he talking about."

"Nothing." Frank answered.

"Ha!" Robbie laughed.

"Frank?" Dean questioned.

"Nothing." Frank said.

"Robbie." Dean looked to him.

"O.K." Robbie held up his hands. "Just picture. Ellen in the mobile lab on one side of the glass. Frank on the other." Robbie tried to wink. "Unconventional sex."

Dean's eyes widened. "Oh my God. No."

"Yep."

A sneer took over Frank's face. "Robbie."

"At least I . . ." Robbie pointed to his own chest. "Was in the privacy of my own home. You Frank, hey . . . it was cold that night. Didn't you freeze?"

Dean nearly choked in shock. "I think I heard enough."

"I'm going to work." Frank walked to the door grabbing his coat. He stopped as he opened the door and pointed to Robbie. "I'll deal with you tomorrow."

"O.K." Robbie wobbled and swayed in his look at Dean. "Can I stay?"

"Sure."

"I'm not making it home." Robbie dropped to the couch.

"Robbie, after you sober up, you may not make it to Thursday."

A simple and sloppy 'oh boy' preluded Robbie quick departure into the land of drunken slumber.

^^^^

"If we were in New Bowman . . ." Hector spoke softly as he walked up to beside Jess at the social hall bar.

Jess only raised his eyes above his glass.

"I'd offer to by you a drink. Danny dollars you know."

Jess smiled.

Hector leaned into the bar and dropped his voice with seriousness. "Discretion. Discretion is so important. Especially when you work side by side with a lot of men."

"I know." Jess stated.

"The other night." Hector nervously fiddled with his drink. "I'm sorry things turned out like that. I thought you knew and I just want to make sure you don't . . ."

"Say anything?" Jess shook his head. "I won't. And I knew what I was getting into. Any man would. They know the ropes. They know the secrecy. I just thought I was ready. I wasn't."

"Maybe another time?"

Just as Jess began to shake his head to turn Hector down, he felt the slap of a hand on his back.

"I need a drink." Henry reached between them. "Hey Hector, Jess."

Jess stood up grabbing his coat off the bar stool next to him. "Hey Henry. Take mine. I just poured it. I'm really beat."

"Thanks." Henry took it. "Leaving?"

"Yeah." Jess put on his coat. "Night, Henry, Hector."

Sipping his drink, Henry looked at Hector who stayed where Jess left him. "I didn't know you guys hung out."

"Me and Jess?" Hector cleared his throat. "We started to, I thought. The other night we shot pool, threw darts and got pretty drunk together. We were



gonna go have some fun, I thought, you know, but he left. I wanted to see if he wanted to try it again.”

“Well if he doesn’t let me know.” Henry said. “With this trial. I may need a night to let loose and take my mind off of everything. I’m always up for an evening like that. And I won’t leave, get me going, ask anyone, you don’t get rid of me.”

Hector was shocked. “Really.”

“Oh, yeah.” Henry drank some. “A lot of people think I’m so serious and straight. Really, get a few drinks in me, I’m not.”

“I never knew that about you.”

“Hidden secrets.” Henry finished Jess’ drink. “See?” He held up the glass. “Of course I have to ease into it, it’s been awhile.”

“I understand. Hey . . .” Hector laid down darts on the bar. “Wanna start easing into tonight?”

“Yeah.” Henry took the darts, smiled and reached for the bottle and poured another drink. “But make sure you stop me tonight. I can’t go all out. Tomorrow is a big day.”

“I totally understand. One step at a time. It’s been a while for you. Can I ask when the last time you went all out was, do you mind?”

“Oh no, not at all.” Henry walked toward the dart board. “God, it was over a year ago, it was with Frank. He was in that ‘I want her back’ stupor after him and El broke up when she cheated on him with Dean. Man, the next day I paid.”

“I bet. I mean you’re talking Frank.”

“Tell me about it. He’s hard to keep up with.” Henry took his line position to throw.

“I never knew that about Frank either.”

“Yeah, he had a real problem with it for a while. Always doing it.”

“Oh my God, that surprises me.”

“I saw it coming though, you know, his addiction. He doesn’t anymore. But don’t let it get out. O.K.?”

“Promise. I’m always quiet about it. Don’t worry.”

“Good.” Henry took his stance. “Enough about Frank. That was a night I want to put out of my mind. You at least strike me as someone who won’t let me get out of control.”

“No, I won’t. I just like to have fun.”

“Me too.” Henry smiled. “Wow, this might work, huh?”

“Yeah.” Hector grinned. “It might.” Folding his arms, he watched Henry throw.

^^^

### New Bowman, Montana

“So I didn’t bore you?” Elliott asked in his very slow walk down the night street with Ellen.

“No. I had a really good time.” Ellen saw they drew closer to Hal’s. “The night flew by. I really didn’t want it to end.”

“Neither do I.”

Ellen stopped walking, let go of his arm and stood before him. “It doesn’t

have to.”

“What do you mean?”

“We can turn around and go back to your house and just . . .” Ellen saw the completely horrified look Elliott tried to conceal. “Maybe not. Bad suggestion.” She began to walk again.

“Actually it’s a really great suggestion . . .” Elliott felt Ellen slow down. “For someone else to be given.” He cleared his throat and they resumed their pace. “I make no sense.”

“Not at all.” Ellen said. “But I understand.”

“You do?”

“Yeah.” In front of Hal’s door they stopped. “You enjoy the company and conversation.”

“I do.” Elliott stood before her.

“But as far as having a man-woman type relationship, you’re not interested.”

“Do I give that impression.”

With a flutter of her lips in laughing sarcasm, Ellen answered. “Yes.”

“I’m sorry.” Elliott spoke softly. “I probably am trying so hard to hide the fact that I haven’t a clue on what the hell to do, or how to act that I come off not having any interest in you.”

“Do you?”

“Oh, without a doubt. But realistically, who am I to ask for your interest in return. I just want to take what you give me already and enjoy it. And not ask for more.”

“You could have more.”

“I’m going home.” Elliot stepped back. “Goodnight.”

As Ellen watched him turn and walk away she stomped and whined. “Elliott.”

Elliott stopped walking. He turned back around. “Yes?”

“Why won’t you touch me?”

“I did. I held your hand. And did we not embrace last week.”

Ellen closed her eyes and hid her laugh. “My son holds my hand and hugs me.”

“Ellen.” Elliott spoke with passion as he walked back. “I’m doing the best I can. I don’t believe I even know where to begin.”

“I’m not telling you to have sex with . . .”

“Please.” Elliott silenced her. “You have not been without affection. I have. For almost eight years. Myself, the Captain, many of us have acquired a skill in learning to live without it. I don’t believe I know how to try to live *with* it anymore.” He saw the reach of her hand and he wanted to run away. But Elliott didn’t. He felt the palm of her hand lay upon his cheek in a soft feeling motion, fingers spread and Elliott rolled his face into her hand to enjoy the softness of her touch.

“Kiss me, Elliott.” Ellen whispered.

“I can’t.” Elliott stood straight up. “It won’t be very good. I’m nervous, I’m flustered . . .”

“I don’t care. Follow your instincts, that’s all. Follow your heart. Take it slow. It doesn’t have to be a ‘Gone with the Wind’ kiss. Just a simple kiss.” In the darkness of Hal’s doorway Ellen felt the presence of Elliott move closer to

her. The more he drew into her, the more her breath became shallow. Like a school girl awaiting her first kiss, Ellen saw Elliott lean down to her and she closed her eyes awaiting.

"Look who's . . ." Hal spoke as his door flung open. ". . . here. Wow." He smiled and nodded as the two of them sprang back. "Sgt. Ryder, don't you have an early call before you take Ellen back to . . ."

"Hal." Ellen raised her eyes. "Go inside. Bye." She waved.

Hal looked at Elliott.

"I'd better go." Elliott stepped from the doorway. "I'll see you in the morning. Night Ellen." With his signature nod, Elliott pivoted and walked away.

Hal tilted his head after looking at Ellen. "What a shame. Did I . . . Did I interrupt something?"

"Hal!" Ellen's fist playfully smacked into his chest with her scold. "You asshole."

Laughing, Hal grabbed her arm and tugged her inside.

^^^

### Pine Springs, Texas

Carlton was a stout little guy with balding gray hair who limped as he carried a glass of water to the hooded man. He set the cloudy water down next to the lantern on the table by where the man sat. "You haven't drank or ate much."

"I'm not hungry. But thank you." Hands still wearing gloves he lifted the glass of water. "And thank you for not making me reveal."

"I suppose there's reason you're not wanting to. I'll let you go. Sorry about Hoss pushing it." Carlton pulled up a chair. "He is a little hostile. But it's a fine skill acquired for guarding our entrance. He used to be one of those Wild-men that ravage. He broke and ran to us. Hostile is where he gets the name Hoss from. Not Bonanza."

"Excuse me?" He was lost.

"Don't know what I'm talking about huh? Must be young. What's your age?"

"I was eleven years and three months sir when the world was cleansed. Plus however long it's been."

A moment of math and Carlton whispered. "Eighteen." He nodded. "I see. Where you journeying to? Have a destination?"

"Oh, yes." The hooded man set the glass down and spoke enthused. "I am hoping to find a cure for myself. I know where I'm searching. See, I draw." He reached down to his bag and pulled out tattered papers laying them about. "It's a place I know of. I don't know where it's at. But from what I heard, this is what I think it looks like. I used what I read in books to help."

Carlton looked down to the drawings. Green trees distortedly drawn, glass buildings. Domes, people dressed in bright colored jumpsuit. "Son, I've been living in this world a long time. So have you. There is no place like this."

"Oh, yeah. I'm sure. I am very sure."

"I hope you find it. But you're welcome to stay. Who . . . who are you. What's your name boy?"

"My name?" he paused. "My name is . . . I call myself Christopher. Where

I come from they say I am now a fugitive, but I say I am an explorer.”

Carlton slid the pictures back. “And like so many, you’re searching for Utopia.”

## CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

October 27  
Beginnings, Montana

Joe stared in thought, as asked, to the thin gold chain with the crucifix and the small beads of off white pearls that laid on the dresser.

"See." Andrea spoke soft. "Both go with this outfit. Ben made it, isn't it nice."

"Yeah." Joe nodded looking at the tailored blue suit she wore. "Either one will work."

"The jury judges you. If I wear the pearls will I look too flashy. Then if I wear the cross, will I look as if I'm trying to play the religious woman who wouldn't hurt a soul."

"There's no playing that woman, Andrea. You are that woman."

"Oh Joe." Andrea breathed out as she faced him. "I didn't think I'd be nervous on this day. I am. And we know it won't be long before the trial is over. Sweet Jesus, what happened to the long drawn out days of O.J. Simpson."

Joe brought forth a comforting smile as he grabbed her hand. "I know these words don't mean much at a time like this. But know, everything will work out. You have the love, support and belief of your family behind you."

"And if they find me guilty?"

"They won't."

"Joseph. I'm a wise old woman. I know things don't look good." Her head lowered. "What then? We have not sat down and discussed that possibility."

Joe took a deep breath. "You may not see it, but me and the boys, Frank, Robbie, Hal, our minds are constantly turning to divert that situation. We'll come up with something. We'll get you out of this mess, kid. I promise. One way or another . . ." Joe took her into a warm embrace. "We'll get you out."

^^^

New Bowman, Montana

It was pretty early for a summons, Hal thought, but he knew it had to be important. The sun had barely risen and he found himself in Grace's judicial chambers with a woman who looked as nervous as everyone else.

"I apologize captain for this early meeting." Grace spoke behind her desk. "But I needed to speak to you before all of this goes underway."

"I guess, I needed to speak to you too."

"Really." Grace leaned back in her chair. "Why?"

"I just need you to tell me how this is all going to go down."

"It's a historical day. The first criminal trial in the new alliance." Crossing her legs, Grace pulled her chair into her desk and folded her hands. "I spoke with both sides, defense and prosecution. They are aware that this will not be a circus. Things will move quickly. Facts presented. Witness shared. They also know new laws will be established. They know I will not fool around with things that do not pertain. The jury is not only deciding the guilt or innocence of

a well respected woman. Their decision effects the health of the communities, the residence of this woman, within our sanctity or out. So they can't be boggled down."

"I realize that."

"Which brings *me* to why I asked you here. The jury of men will be boggled down enough with facts, witnesses and the burden of decision. The can't be boggled down with the worry that they will no longer shine in their Captain's eyes. A man they highly respect. A man whose stepmother is standing trial. Do you get where I'm going?"

Hal nodded. "I think so."

"I need you sir to speak to these men. I need your word Captain that you will not try to influence them. And . . . that no matter what decision they reach, you must assure them they will not be punished or thought of any less."

"Has this been brought to your attention."

"Since the selection, on more than one occasion."

"I see." Hal let out a breath. "Then I will speak to the jury. It's the least I can do."

^^^

### Beginnings, Montana

The day was going to be long enough, and Jess was grateful he at least got a seven a.m. start to it. Late enough for him to make breakfast for him and Robbie and straighten up the house that he swore was in good order when he went to bed. At first he wondered how it happened, but the moment he saw Robbie laying on the bottom of the steps, where he seemingly passed right out, Jess could only guess.

"Robbie." Jess crouched down by him, laughing as he looked at Robbie's reaching hand just laying on the third step. "Get up."

Robbie moaned.

Jess looked to Frank, who stood right by them. "He's out."

Frank held up a finger and whispered. "Let me try." He squatted down close to Robbie's head. "ROBBIE! GET UP!"

"Uh!" Robbie sprang to his hands and knees then whined and lowered his head.

"Pathetic." Frank nudged him with his foot. "Go get showered. We have to go to New Bowman for the trial. Move it."

"I am." Robbie grumbled.

"Move it!" Frank blasted like the drill sergeant he used to be.

"Frank! All right! fuck!" Another moan brought Robbie to a crawl. And slowly, but still moving, hands and knees, he went up those steps.

"Thanks for radioing." Frank told Jess.

"I've been trying for an hour. He wouldn't move."

"He was fuckin blasted last night."

"He was scared to death of you." Jess walked to the kitchen

"He should be. I'm still not done with him. Like I needed that." Frank followed. "Learning the letter shit on the same day El went out with Sgt. Fuckin Ryder. I wonder how that went."

"Well." Jess answered. "Nothing happened between them if that's . . ."  
Jess saw the odd look Frank gave him. "That's . . . what?"

Frank looked at his watch. "It's six-thirty. When did you speak to El about her date."

"Last night."

"I see. Why?"

"She called me."

"I see. Why?"

"To tell me."

"I see . . ."

"Frank." Jess laughed. "We're friends."

"That's right like girlfriends. I get it." Frank winked. "I forgot. O.K."

"Forgot what?" Jess asked.

"You know."

"No. I don't."

"That you aren't a threat. I forgot about it."

Jess could assume he knew what Frank was talking about. But he'd rather not take that chance. One never could tell where Frank's mind was at. That was dangerous. "What did you forget?"

"You know." Frank winked again, held up his hand, flickered his little finger and pointed at Jess.

"Oh my God." Jess turned, and hurried into the kitchen wishing he would have stuck with assuming.

"Hey, Jess, got a new nick name for ya." Arrogantly, as usual, Frank snickered and followed. "Tinker . . . bell."

^^^

"Now that's a frightening prospect." Ellen chuckled as she made idle conversation with Elliott in the truck.

"It will be short term, I've been assured." Elliott saw the tunnel of Beginnings up ahead. He began to slow down for the guard.

"Dean running the community." She laughed. "He can't even run his own life."

"It'll only be while Dr. Godrichson testifies. Mr. Slagel says . . ." Elliott looked oddly at Ellen when she laughed. "Why do you do that?"

"Laugh when you call Joe, Mr. Slagel?"

"Yes." Elliott, lowered the window, checked in with the guard and proceeded through the tunnel.

"I don't know." Ellen shrugged. "I can't believe I'm almost home. Boy that eight miles went fast. You'll say goodbye before you leave, right?"

"Yes. That's why I wanted to get my testing done first. I'll check in with Dr. Godrichson, meet you at the clinic, finish up what I need and return to say goodbye."

"Good."

"Ellen. I'm . . ." Elliott lifted his foot from the gas. "Nothing is wrong. But I'm stopping the truck."

"O.K. why?"

Elliott stopped the truck and put it in park. He stared forward through the windshield with a look of fright upon his face. His hands seemed to grip the

wheel for dear life, only occasionally releasing and tensing back up. "The tunnel, it, uh . . . it's a case of neither here nor there."

"Huh?" Ellen turned in her seat with a confused look. "Elliott, what's wrong?"

He tried to speak, but no words emerged, so he cleared his throat. "Here or there. New Bowman or Beginnings. I know this is officially Beginnings, but we aren't in town yet."

"Is something wrong?"

"No." Elliott tried to heave out the breath that was stuck in his chest. "No one can open a door, or barge in the room. Frank's in New Bowman so he can't rush in because he thinks something is wrong." Elliott looked over his shoulder at Ellen, still holding the wheel. "Do you understand?"

"Absolutely not. No." Ellen shook her head.

"Oh boy." Elliott's lips parted with the breath he blew out. He appeared to mumble.

"Elliott, I really want to try not to laugh. But you're acting really funny. Is there something you want to say?"

"No."

"No?"

"Something, I want to do." Elliott released the wheel and slowly turned his body to face Ellen. "I think you won't get mad. If I'm out of line, let me know."

"Oh my God."

"What?" Elliott asked.

"You're gonna kiss me."

Elliott winced and moved back. "Why . . . why did you do that?"

"You're gonna stop now."

A moment, only a moment Elliott looked away, then back to Ellen. "No." He moved closer to her. So much silence filled the cab of the truck that Elliott feared his nervous breaths would ring out. Reaching out, he placed his hand so gently, barely touching on Ellen's back. He guided her to him as he leaned slowly down.

To Ellen, every inch distance between them seemed to take a lifetime to disappear. Her heart beat strong, ricocheting from her chest to her ears watching with anticipation as Elliott drew into her. She closed her eyes. And then . . . the kiss. The first feel of his soft lips touching hers filled Ellen with emotional newness that made her seep the tiniest of gasps.

A toiling of touching. Elliott's nervousness kept his lips from parting fully. He allowed for them to almost roll against Ellen's, guiding the slight separation of their mouths with the flutters of his insides. Maintaining control so as to enjoy each second, feel and taste. And never once would Elliott let the intensity increase. He didn't want a single moment of that kiss to project anything else but what his heart was feeling.

Ellen's 'oh' was breathy and quiet as Elliott pulled back.

A fast blink and a brief stare came from Elliott. "Thank you." Then without saying anymore, he turned, faced forward, put the truck in gear and continued to drive.

Ellen, speechless, plopped back to her passengers seat and said nothing either.





Dean was filled with certain amount of tense 'under the microscope' feeling as he reached under the counter in the lab. "It'll only take a moment."

"I'm in no hurry." Bev stated. "It's not bad now. But at night."

"Prop up on pillows." Dean said and stood up walking around.

"Is it normal. This heartburn." Bev touched her chest.

"Kind of early for it to be bad. But, yeah, it's normal." Dean handed her the bottle. "One spoon full as needed. Don't go overboard or you'll get . . ."

"Oh." Bev's eyes fluttered and her body shuddered.

"What's wrong."

Hand on her stomach, from looking down, Bev raised her eyes. "That was the strongest he kicked. Here . . ." She reached for Dean's hand.

"No. I . . ."

"Here." Forcefully, Bev grabbed Dean's hand and laid it on her stomach.

Dean tried to get away then he felt the 'tap' against the palm of his hand.

Bev giggled. "Did you feel that? Did you feel your son."

"He's not my son, Bev."

Bev still held his hand to her stomach. "Yes, he is Dean. And this could very well be the last child you have. Don't you want him? Feel that." Bev smiled at another kick.

Barely was Ellen out of the truck and waving to Elliott that she had her cell phone out dialing as she walked into the clinic. "Jess. Hey, yeah." She giggled opening the door. "Oh Jess. Wait until you hear this. You're gonna say I'm silly." Ellen walked down the corridor. "But I had to tell you. I felt like I was sixteen again. How often do we . . ." Cold Ellen stopped in the lab door. "I'll call you back." She knew Jess said something but she didn't know what it was. Her focus was too much on the fact that Dean stood with Bev in the lab. His hand was on her stomach. Bev was smiling and so was Dean.

Was she actually seeing what she thought? Was this the same man who pled contempt for a woman who was setting him up. A woman who falsely claimed a pregnancy to him. Yet, Dean was a sucker, and Ellen knew it, for feeling a child kick. But Ellen could recall, in all the stomach's Dean would feel, only seeing his face light up when he was feeling his own child.

No words. No announcement. Ellen walked into the lab.

Dean saw her immediately and his hand moved from Bev. "El."

"Morning." Ellen just walked to get her things for Elliott's testing.

With a fake 'awkward smile, Bev side stepped from Dean. "Thanks for the medication." She grabbed the bottle and moved to the door. "And thanks Dean." She aired out her words in awe. "Thank you for sharing that moment." Wanting to stay and watch the fireworks, Bev knew she couldn't, she just left.

Ellen kept her composure. "What dosage of the triathorazon are we going with this week. I know the Radadine will still be the same. Elliott will be . . ."

"Ellen." Dean walked to her. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" Ellen grabbed her things laying them on the counter. "Should we use exam room two?"

"For what you saw. That was wrong. That . . ." Dean closed his eyes. "That was so wrong of me."

"Feeling your own child?" Ellen tossed the items in a tray.

"Feeling Bev's stomach. With all she has done to us."

"Stop." Ellen held up her hand. "What *she* has done? I said 'your child' Dean. Where's the denial."

"Ellen."

"No. Since the beginning of this you have denied that baby as yours. What, all of the sudden a simple fetal kick sends you into a paternal frenzy? All of the sudden that other baby you wanted, the baby I can't give you is real?" Ellen snatched up the tray. "I saw the look on your face Dean. I've seen it before."

Dean reached out and stopped her. "I am not lying when I said I never touched her or slept with her. There is no way sexually I conceived that child with that girl. But . . . But . . ." Dean released her arm. "You and I both know what those test results read. She and this other person either rigged the results, or she found some way to get a hold of my sperm. Those results say 'Hayes'. As much as I despise her for what she has done. I'm sorry, but the second the baby is born, and I personally handle those results, if that child still spells 'Hayes' whether it's mine or my father's like I suspect." Dean paused. "I'm raising that child as my own. I won't turn my back on him. I can't. You'll have to accept that. I hope that you'll accept it, with me, and we'll . . ."

"We'll!" Ellen laughed emotionally. "What are you crazy. Fuck you, We'll. We'll what? Raise that baby together.? Raise it with Bev. You slept with her."

"I did not sleep with her!" Dean raged to Ellen. "Come on El, you know me. And if by some obscure theft of science this child is mine."

"It still part Bev's!" Ellen yelled back then calmed down. "It's still Bev's. Give up Dean. I won't raise that baby with you, fuck you for asking. And . . . give up on anything that puts us together. I have moved on."

"I don't believe it."

"I have." Ellen moved to the door.

"I love you. You love me. You don't move on from that so easily." Dean followed her. "Look, I know you're hurt . . ."

"Hurt?" Ellen backed up almost chuckling. "I think you forgot what hurt is? Let me refresh your memory Dean what hurt is." She dropped her voice to a mean whisper. "Feel it. I've moved on. It's over. I'm already sleeping with somebody else. I've had sex with him, made love with him. In our house . . . in our bed." Ellen spun once in coldness and stormed out.

Every single word Ellen spoke to Dean, crushed him. He literally couldn't breathe or move.

^^^

### New Bowman, Montana

"All rise." Judge Grace's court officer spoke as she walked in front of the bench and to her place.

The courtroom sporadically seated stood up. Andrea was at the defense table with Danny and Trish. Henry was with Stan.

"Afternoon." Grace took her seat behind the bench. "Today's case, October twenty-seventh. The state of Beginnings of the United Western Alliance versus Andrea Winters-Slagel in the matter of treason. Both counselors know my stance. No circus. Now showmanship. Simple facts, witness and arguments. Mr Kusakari, you may proceed."

Henry stood nervously and took the paper that Stan handed him. "Henry Kusakari for the prosecution." Henry looked down to his scripted opening stated. "When we . . . we. . .shit."

Grace slammed her gavel. "Mr. Kusakari."

Henry ignored her and spun to Stan. "What the hell is this."

"Your opening statement."

"Mr. Kusakari!" Grace called out. "Are we starting yet?"

"This . . ." Henry held up the paper. "Wait." He went into his folder. "Where is it asshole?" He whispered to Stan.

"What?"

"My original opening statement."

"At home."

Before Grace could yell at him again, Henry turned around with a forced smile. "Seems, I can't find my opening statement. Can I have a continuance?"

"No." Grace answered. "Go on."

"Shit."

*Slam.*

"Sorry." Henry grabbed the paper and read monotone and very fast. "When we are faced with injustice or resentment many of us do nothing about it that is not the case with Andrea Winters." Henry took a breath. "She did not merely sit back like the rest of us and perhaps complain about what she didn't like she struck out against the very community she started plotting and planning to help the other side bring us down witnesses letters tapes video testimony will show that Ms. Winters knew exactly what she was doing and who she was doing it to bringing about the loss of more lives that can be counted and in more ways than one she participated in acts of violence by way of plague murder kidnapping you name it masterminding it all conspiracy is her middle name and we the prosecution plan on showing you evidence that we are certain will bring about your verdict of guilty." With a long deep wheeze of a breath, Henry sat down.

The courtroom went quiet.

"Well." Grace cleared her throat. "Thank you. Mr. Hoi."

"Thank you, your Honor." Danny stood up. "Daniel Jefferson Hoi for the defense." He straightened his tie and walked over to the jury box. "Afternoon gentlemen." Silence, complete silence surrounded Danny as he took a few steps before them, hands behind him. He stopped, faced the jury and held his hands up in a marquee fashion. "Three words. Victim of circumstance." He motioned out to Andrea. "Andrea Winters. Victim of circumstance. A traitor? No. A murderer? No. A victim of circumstance." Danny nodded. "Is this frail woman a plotter or planner. No. She is a victim of . . . circumstance." A few mumbles of his words joined him. "God fearing, Christian, mother, woman, wife. This . . . this is not a woman who deliberately set out to hurt a community that she is the founding father of. She is merely . . . a victim of circumstance." The jury joined him in the soft chant. "Yes." Danny paced some more. "To know her, is to love her. During these proceedings you will get to know her. And I ask you, the jury

to keep one thing in your minds as you listen to the evidence. One thing. Three words.” Danny paused and a few more voices joined him. “Victim of circumstance. And you’ll see that everything that the prosecution shows you, can be argued. If what they plan to show were a form of concrete this building was laid upon. Right now we would sink into the earth. Listen to your hearts, your minds and you common sense. Get to know this woman. See who she is. See that she would not commit these vial acts that she is accused of.” Danny gripped the railing. “When you see and know her, you will have no choice but to deliver a verdict of not guilty. Because not only is she, like you and I, a victim of a world taken from us. She is . . .” Danny nodded as the entire court room softly spoke with him. “A victim of circumstance.” With dramatic flare he lifted his head and stepped back. “Thank you.”

Andrea applauded so proud until the gavel dropped. The trial was underway.

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Andrews Air Force Base

So happy George looked as he walked--head held up high--tool box in hand and a knapsack carrying other items he would need, across the air field, Concrete cracked, weeds almost as high as tress buried the fighter planes that still spewed about in their parking spots.

“Get a clean up crew out here.” George ordered to the man who walked with him. “I can’t work in a jungle.” He wandered aimlessly trying to find the perfect protected plane. All of them showed the wear of non-attention. Center airfield he spotted it. “Here.” He told the man who was with him and the man set down a ladder next to the plane. “Thanks.” George climbed up. “Now let’s take a look at how much work I have to do to get her back in shape.” Smiling, George opened the engine hood of the plane. “Shit.” George looked at the wires, corroded and laying about a rusted engine. “I guess more work than I thought.” George climbed down and continued on. He’d find the perfect plane that was easiest to get running. If not, he’d be like Dr. Frankenstein, take a piece from here and there to make the perfect engine.

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#### Beginnings, Montana

Chart in hand, Ellen raised up her fist to examining room two and knocked. “I’m coming in.” She opened the door.

Elliott, placing on his shirt, immediately turned for his back to face her.

Ellen giggled. “Why are you embarrassed. I’ve seen you naked, you know.”

His hands stopped buttoning and Elliott looked up.

“Oh, yeah.” Ellen said upbeat walking around to the table. “When you needed surgery. You also needed this little thing called a catheter. Guess who uh, inserted that tiny tube into your . . .” Ellen motioned her head downward, then looked back up with a flash of grin.

“Oh my God.” Elliott graced himself with what was becoming his stock

horrified look.

"Kidding."

"Thank you." Elliott breathed out.

"No I'm not."

"Ellen."

"Kidding." She smiled and nudged him. "Initial results are in. Want them now, or do you want to wait until a few days when we have them all."

"I would like to know now. If you want to tell me." Elliott finished buttoning his shirt. "I can tell by your face it's not good news."

Ellen hesitated. "No change."

Elliott smiled. "Then it is good news."

"What?"

"Am I worse?"

"No."

"Then I'm happy for that."

"Elliott?" Ellen's hands smoothed across the chart in nervousness. "Can I talk to you about something else. It's not medical. Do you have a minute?"

"Yes." Elliott finished tucking in his shirt. "What is it?"

"I am . . . I am really going out on a limb here. I mean really going out. So try to think before you say anything and try not to make me feel embarrassed or bad."

The corner of Elliott's mouth raised in a smile of confusion. "Go on." Like Ellen, he leaned against the examining table talking to her.

"First. I loved our kiss today."

"I wish I could say the same."

Ellen's eyes closed and she gasped. "See, now . . ."

"Let me finish. I was much too nervous to enjoy it like I wanted to. Too nervous. I hope we can try it again."

"Good." Ellen smiled. "That helps my reason. O.K., Elliott? Do you know what it means when someone in Beginnings uses the term 'understanding'. As in, I'm having an 'understanding'?"

"I think." Elliott said.

"All right. Let me briefly. Within Ellen realm of brief, explain it to you. Just so there are no doubts about what it is. An understanding. There are too many men. Not enough women. That makes for a lot of tension when one man has and another doesn't. We could have that in Beginnings, with the exception of Frank and Dean, we don't." Ellen nervously chuckled. "A man and woman has a relationship. Stable. Steady. From that there is always one more, in a lot of cases two. They're called understandings because the men understand three things. One, they share. Two, the primary or main is always the one who calls the shots. Three, there can be no jealousy, competing, fighting and such." Ellen cleared her throat at Elliott's attentiveness. "Sometimes, like Jenny or other women, a few, Melissa and such. They don't have more than one understanding. They freelance."

"Freelance?"

"Yes. For example. The head of a division may spot a man who has increasingly becoming hostile. Let's use Hal for example. Say he notices problems with you. He would go to Jenny, or maybe even you would go to Jenny. Jenny checks her records, and yes, she keeps records. Then either

herself, or one of the ‘freelancers’ would make time for you and . . . hook you up.”

“Hook me . . . oh, my God.” Elliott’s eyes widened. “If that’s what you think. Tell Jenny . . .”

“No.” Ellen laughed. “I wanted to let you know our deviate mentality on male-female relationships and how they work. Just so there are no miscommunications. Do you?”

“Understand understandings. Yes.”

“How do you feel about the way the system works.”

Elliott chuckled.

“What?”

He lifted his hand in a ‘don’t worry’ manner.

“Elliott? What?”

“Well. It seems to me to be a lot better than the way our women work it. Our women have a once a month lottery, or used to and they would . . . hook a man up. But the man better meet expectations.. Now they are more open about who they are and what they prefer.”

“Each other.”

“Unfortunately. But . . .” Elliott smiled. “I hear three of our twelve have been trying something similar to understandings.”

“Good. Now that we are all in the clear. Everything is understood. My reason.” Ellen stepped closer. “I’m in New Bowman all the time.” She softened her voice. “I . . . I like you Elliott. And the primary usually calls this shot. Not this time. I was just wondering if maybe you would like to be my understanding relationship.”

Elliott’s mouth opened in shock.

Dean’s voice emerged. “If that’s not the biggest violation of a patient doctor relationship, I don’t know what is.”

Both Elliott and Ellen turned toward the door. Dean was walking in.

“I can remember Sgt. Ryder, you telling me your intentions were honorable with my wife.”

“Dean.” Ellen tried to stop him.

Dean continued. “How honorable is it to sleep with another man’s wife.”

“Dean!” Ellen yelled.

“No!” Dean stepped closer to Elliott. “He gets an understanding. He sleeps with you. Honorable Sgt. Ryder will probably . . .”

“Dean, stop it.” Ellen told him.

“Dr. Hayes.” Elliott remained in control. “There must be some mistake. I am not sleeping with Ellen.”

“Oh don’t give me . . .”

“Dean!” Again, Ellen made a vain attempt.

Dean’s word slowed as he looked at Ellen. “That.” His eyes had revelation. “It not him.” He watched Ellen close her eyes and Dean laughed with instigation. “Then maybe you should know.” He looked at Elliott. “If she’s not sleeping with you, she definitely is sleeping with someone. So if you got it in your delusional honorable mind she’s saving herself for you, get it out. She openly told me she’s been having a blast in Beginnings. Then again, that’s just Ellen.”

“Dean.” Ellen moved to him whispering, never seeing Elliott’s stone cold

look on Dean. "Please stop this."

Eyes glued to Sgt. Ryder, Dean spoke. "Ellen does what she wants with who she wants. Faithful has never been a word in her vocabulary. She cheats. She cheated on Pete, me, Frank and she'll cheat on you. The UWA soldiers, you, pride yourself on honor. Let me tell you something, when it comes to Ellen and men she has no . . ."

"Elliott!" Ellen shrieked when she saw his emotionless face never flinch as he raised his fist and readied to strike Dean. She dove her body into him pushing him back. "No."

Transfixed in his glare, Elliott's fist became an angry point. His top lip twitched with the outrage he felt. His body nearly shuddered. Then after a moment of a heated stare, he retracted his hand. "Words cut. They create wounds that even the best of doctors can not heal. You open your mouth so many times without the knowledge behind what you say. We believe . . ." Elliott took a moment to breathe in. ". . . in our UWA that a man earns his sword, not by the might for which he can carry it, but by the wisdom and integrity for which he shows. In our book Dr. Hayes, you aren't even fit to carry a knife." The stare-down between the two men was great, but Elliott lost his focus when he heard the release of a heavy breath and saw the blur of Ellen racing from the room. Swiping his red bandana and sword from the table he followed her. "Ellen." He called out.

Back to him, Ellen stopped in the hall. "I need to take a walk."

"I made you angry."

"No Elliott, you made me see. And . . . so did Dean for that matter." With a long sniff, Ellen ran the back of her hand under her nose as she turned around.

It stumbled Elliott back. Was Ellen crying? His hand started to reach but Ellen moved back. "Let's go off and talk."

"No." Ellen shook her head. "You have so much to do before you head back. And a time table. So, you do that." She cleared her emotional throat. "I have to work some things out and get back to my day." She turned and began to walk. Ellen heard the call of her name from Elliott. She only raised her hand and picked up her pace.

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### New Bowman, Montana

"Rev. Robert Heron, rather Hadly." Rev. Bob sat calmly on the stand. Henry stood at the table.

"And how long were you a resident of Beginnings?" Henry asked.

"Six years."

"You say Andrea knew of your true identity."

Rev. Bob nodded.

"How is this?" Henry asked.

"She told me."

"Volunteered this information, walked up and said I know who you are. I know you are related to George?"

"Yes."

"Oh." Henry fumbled through his notes. "And we are to just believe she knew your true identity. Take your word?"

"Take hers." Rev. Bob said. "Didn't she admit to it?"

"Oh." Henry looked down as Stan arrogantly pointed to Andrea's testimony. "No more . . . what?" Henry whispered a snap at Stan. "No. No."

Grace slammed her gavel. "Mr. Kusakari?"

"No more . . ." Henry slapped Stan's hand away. "Questions. Your witness Danny."

"Thank you." Slowly, hands in his pockets, Danny walked to the witness stand. "Rev. Bob, Rev. Bob, Rev. Bob." Danny flung himself at the railing. "You're a liar."

"Danny!" Andrea stood up.

*Slam*, went the gavel. "Mr. Hoi. Ms. Slagel sit."

Andrea sat.

Danny held up his hand. "Sorry." He leaned so Perry Mason like against the witness stand. "How long would you say Andrea knew your true identity?"

"The whole time."

"The whole time. She blurted it out in idle conversation over say, tea?" Before Rev. Bob could answer, Danny continued. "Isn't it true that she discovered your true identity *after* the George episodes, and when she approached you with it, you cried?"

"No."

"You cried like a big baby and begged her, begged her not to tell."

"No."

"Yes." Danny stood up straight. "You used your position as a man of the cloth to get her to keep the secret."

"No."

*Slam*. Grace leaned into her bench. "Mr. Hoi, you're repeating the line of questioning and going no where. Get to the point."

"The point." Danny held up a finger. "The point is . . . how would you describe Andrea Winters-Slagel?" Danny breathed in and walked slowly from the stand.

"I would say she was a sweet wonderful woman who turned cold, heartless and vindictive, fooling everyone."

"Oh Boloney!"

*Slam*. "Mr. Hoi."

Dramatically, Danny spun and rushed to the bench, speaking rapidly to get it all in. "Isn't it true you are attracted to Andrea?"

"No."

"Wasn't it true you make sexual advances . . ."

"Danny!" Andrea stood up.

*Slam!* "Mr. Hoi."

"Did you!" Danny pointed. "Grab her breast in the chapel . . ."

"Danny Hoi!" Andrea shouted.

"No." Rev. Bob shook his head.

"Ms. Slagel sit!" Grace yelled and slammed her gavel. "Mr. Hoi you are badgering this witness."

Danny went on. "And when she threatened to turn you in you threatened to say she knew about George?"



"No!" Rev. bob shouted.

"Isn't it true that this whole thing is a cover up for someone else, that you Rev. Bob are a liar, cheat . . ."

"Danny!"

*Slam!* "Mr. Hoi I urge you . . ."

"Drunken, stinking, perverted, bible thumper wannabe who would give his right arm, sell his soul to the devil just . . ."

"Mr. Hoi!" Grace screamed. "Enough."

"Just to get out of trouble. No further questions." Danny backed up to the table holding in the snicker as he watched Rev. Bob wipe the sweat from his brow. Breathing out he sat down at the table.

Trish widened her eyes in a whisper. "What in the world was all that about."

Danny lifted his hands slightly and leaned to her. "Episode ten. The jury always, no matter what, remembers the last thing you say."

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### Beginnings, Montana

Johnny's daughter, Amber giggled as Ellen brushed her nose against her nose. "You're so sweet. Yes you are. Just what I needed today."

"So she's fine?" Denice asked in the lab.

"Oh, yeah. Her ears look good." Ellen bounced the baby. "Thank you for bringing her by. I needed to cheer up."

"She wanted to see her grandmother."

Ellen's eyes moved with her facial cringe. "Denice. Please." She handed Amber back. "Frank may love being a Pap. Me? Never grandmother."

Denice laughed. "Actually, I'm glad it's you that took a look at her. I wanted to talk to you."

"About?"

"Well, I have room for another understanding. And, this, this is about . . . Jess."

"What about him?"

"I know you guys have been hanging about a lot. I wanted to hook up with him, but if there's something going on between you and Jess."

Jess was just about to enter the lab but stopped when he heard his name. He didn't know why. Maybe it was the 'head of security' position he had that made him want to listen like Frank lurking in the hall, but he did.

"Oh. No." Ellen stated cheerfully. "Jess and I. We're just friends. Go for it."

Jess rolled his eyes along with his head and leaned back disappointed against the wall.

"But then again." Ellen continued. "It really surprises me you would want to go after someone as . . . old as Jess. I mean, he's thirty-seven. You're twenty-three."

"I didn't know Jess was that old."

"Oh, yeah, maybe even older. Gosh, he maybe forty-something." Ellen said.

Jess silently laughed as he listened.

"He doesn't look it." Denice commented.

"Not from the neck up. No." Ellen told her. "But the other night, he spilled something on himself. He took off his short. Everything sags. Drops with gravity. Pitiful, especially with as handsome as he is. But that shouldn't matter. Right?"

"Right." Denice said with confusion.

Jess heard enough. Acting as if he listened to nothing, he strutted into the lab. "Hey El." He slowed down and grinned widely. "Hi Denice. Wow, what a surprise to see you."

"You too." Denice cuddled her baby. "I really should be . . ." She walked up to Jess, extended her hand and touched his chest. She tilted her head. "It doesn't feel . . . never mind." She smiled. "Jess if you're not doing anything later. Call me."

"O.K." Jess waved. "Thanks. I might." He turned around to Ellen who immediately pretended to be working.

"That's nice of her. Are you going to take her up on it?"

"I might. I'm in practice now so . . ."

"I heard she falls asleep by eight. Johnny used to gripe about that, so keep that in mind. Kind of boring."

"I will." Jess moved to her.

"How come you stopped by?"

"Curiosity." Jess said. "You told me last night you were going to talk to Elliott about an understanding. And . . . who's the other?"

"Other what?"

"Other man you may be interested in?"

"I've really been thinking about that. I've gotten offers. But . . . you know, none from the . . . anyhow. Doesn't matter. Things went array today."

Concerned, Jess stood from his lean. "What happened?"

"God. Jess. If what I am could have been thrown anymore in my face today." Holding back her bangs Ellen paced. "Dean was being a vengeful Dean. In one of those moods, if 'I can't have her, I'll ruin it for someone else'. Dean and I have this problem, always have. We . . . we say things to each other when we fight, we can't take back. Still. And Elliott . . ." Ellen looked up and lowered her hand. "Elliott." She whispered.

Jess looked over his shoulder, Elliott stood at the door.

Taking off his bandana, Elliott stepped inside, "Jess, I hate to interrupt, but could I have a moment alone with Ellen."

"Sure." Jess stepped back. "I have rounds to finish. El, tonight?"

Ellen nodded.

In gratitude Elliott smiled to Jess when he walked out. "So." He stepped to Ellen.

"So, are you here to say goodbye?"

"Actually. Dr. Godrichson has gone ahead. I felt this more important. See . . ." He took a deep breath. "We were interrupted this afternoon and I never got to give you a response."

"Oh, Elliott." Ellen closed her eyes and shook her head. "Forget it. Forget I

asked. It was a stupid request. I feel foolish.”

“Was I that bad?”

“You?” Ellen chuckled. “No. Me. God. Honor this. Honor that. Dean is so right. I have no honor. Now don’t get me wrong, I’ve felt cheap about myself for the way I am. But I always justified it. But never, never have I felt too cheap to be with anyone. I feel that way about being with you. You deserve more than what I am and more than I can give. I just wished this world had it to offer you.”

“I see. So you’re rescinding your offer.”

“Yeah. You’re off the hook. Friends?” She extended her hand.

“I guess.” Elliott shook her hand. “I just wish . . .” Before he let it go he brought it to his mouth and kissed it. “Ellen I am disappointed. I can’t believe you would offer me something so good and take it away. But I guess it’s your right to change your mind. I shouldn’t have . . .”

“Elliott? You’re wanting to do it? What about the way I am?”

“The way you are?” Elliott shook his head. “There’s nothing wrong with the way you are. Me, now. There’s a different story. I don’t know where to begin. Actually maybe it’s for the best because I was going to ask if the physical part of our relationship could be eased into but . . .”

“We could.” Ellen spoke upbeat. “Ease. I wouldn’t push. I just really like being with you.”

“I really like . . . no, I love being with you.”

Ellen smiled with a blush and lowered her head.

“So.” Elliott clapped and leaned against the counter next to her. “How does this work? This is great. Will you stay with the captain or with me . . . my home is open to you when you come to New Bowman.”

“Yes. I mean, however you feel comfortable working it.”

“To be honest. I would love for you to stay at my house. Just to have you there in the evening.” He smiled peacefully. “The company alone . . . Ellen, thank you so much. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me.”

“I have to.” He faced her. “Who . . . who is the man who is having the understanding with me. Maybe I should thank him.”

“Um, no one yet. Nothing finalized. I’ll let you know as soon as I do. He’s from here though.” Ellen said. “I think it’ll work really great. Here will be my relationship with him. In New Bowman, I’m all yours.”

“No, Ellen. You’ve got that wrong.” Elliott spoke softly bringing his lips to her forehead. He kissed her and pulled back. “In New Bowman. I’m all yours.”

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New Bowman, Montana

“State your name and occupation for the record.” The court officer said.

Jason shifted in his chair. “Dr. Jason Godrichson. Resident and physician in Beginnings. I also serve on council.”

Henry slowly stood up, turned a sheet of paper and smiled at Jason. “No questions.” He sat back down.

Grace looked oddly at Jason. “Mr. Kusakari. I will warn you only once, if you deliberately avoid asking questions again you will be removed.”

"Really. I don't have any questions." Henry said.

"All right." Grace sat back. "Mr. Hoi."

"Thank you." Danny stood up. "Dr. Godrichson." Danny moved to the witness stand. "I was reading over your deposition. You stated Andrea gave you letters to mail."

"Yes."

"What letters are these?"

"I believe Stan showed the court."

Danny walked to the evidence table and held up two letters. "States exhibit 'd'. Letters found in George's possessions warning of the plague and doom. By Ms. Slagel's own admission, she said she typed those letters. Do you know when?"

"I believe about a year ago maybe less."

Danny chuckled some. "And so, she had a little bit of menopause psychosis and warned of a plague and doom that already happened. I don't see a crime in that. Do you?"

"No." Jason cleared his throat. "But test show that those letters are nine years old."

"But you said she typed them a year ago."

"Yes."

"I'm not understanding Doctor, perhaps you can clear it up. How, did Andrea type letters in Beginnings a year ago. In a world created post plague. But test show the letters are nine years old. Are your tests incorrect?"

"No." Jason shook his head. "We believe that George was given the letters nine years ago, Mailed to him, by me."

"So you sent the letters."

"I mailed them."

"When?"

"A little under a year ago, but I didn't know what was in the envelope. I didn't know she was sending herself a letter to forward."

"I'm confused." Danny scratched his head. "How did you mail, without a postal service, a letter a year ago to Georg nine years ago?"

"My Regressionator."

"You're what?" Danny asked.

"My Regressionator. Time machine."

"Time Machine?"

"Yes."

"H.G. Wells, go back and forth time machine?"

"Yes."

Danny tilted his head far back and mimicked a laugh. "A time machine?"

"Yes." Jason stated.

"No further questions."

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Elliott actually held the corners of his eyes to stop the tears from forming

in his laughter. "The Captain did that?" He leaned, elbows on counter directly beside Ellen.

"Yep."

"And you two . . ."

"No. So get it out of your mind. Hal set that up. Posed me and everything to make his men think we . . . well. But we didn't. Never have. He's like a brother and . . . not too mention he looks way too much like Joe. I remember Joe at Hal's age, or close to it. Exactly alike."

"I can see that." With a long breath Elliott stood up. "Speaking of the captain. I have to return."

Ellen looked at her watch. "It's pretty late. I have to be getting the kids. Thanks for staying."

"Thanks for the opportunity. I promise not to abuse it." Elliott grabbed her hand. "I just really like the idea of knowing, when you come to New Bowman, I don't have to find a reason to spend time with you. I'll have that already." He released her hand. "May I call you later?"

"Please. And be careful."

"I will."

Ellen watched him leave and turned to the counter to finish up her work so she could get out and pick the kids up at school.

"El," Dean softly called out.

Ellen looked up, stacked her work then turned around. "I'm on my way out." She walked to the door.

"El, please." Dean stopped her. "I'm sorry."

Ellen didn't walk any further. "Dean . . ."

"No. Hear me out. All right. I'm sorry. I don't know why I do it. I think, sometimes I think it's a sick game between us. When we fight we see who can hurt who the most."

"Yeah we do that." Ellen said softly. "I don't know why I do it either."

"I remember when I was going blind." Dean had an emotional chuckle to him. "All the nasty blind digs you used . . ."

"Dean I don't want to talk about us. Or our past. I have to go."

"I don't believe you've given up on what we have." Dean gently took hold of her arm. "I love you El. I love you so much. You love me. Come on, you know this. If you can tell me you don't love me anymore then I'll back off."

From his fingers that held onto her, to Dean's eyes, Ellen's views went. "I don't love you anymore."

"I don't believe you."

Ellen tossed her head back. "Then why did you tell me to tell you that?"

"I don't know." Dean released her. "Call me a masochist. El, it's not Sgt. Ryder. It's not Frank. You lied right? You aren't with someone else already. Right?"

"Dean." Ellen swallowed. "I wasn't lying. I've been with someone else."

"Who?" Dean asked emotionally.

"Does it matter? No." Ellen told him. "I'm with him. With him, Dean."

"Then it's over. Really over? You moved on."

"Yes."

Last ditch chance, Dean thought. Pull at the heart strings. "Then I guess." He lifted his hand, stared at his wedding band then gripped it. "I guess I'll let

you go.” Dean swore he felt his heart sink as he removed the wedding band. “It’s over.” Taking Ellen’s hand, he laid the ring in her palm.

Ellen stared down to the ring then back to Dean. She rolled her fingers into her hand around the ring. “Thanks. I uh . . .” She placed her hand in her pocket. “I appreciate it.” Saying no more, Ellen turned around and left the lab.

Dean’s hand went slowly to his face. The finalization he didn’t want was more painful than anything that transpired between them.

“Dean.” Frank walked into the lab. “What’s up with El, she blew right by me when I . . .” He moved to Dean. “Are you all right.”

Hand sliding down his face, Dean peered up to Frank then quickly left the lab.

“I guess not.” Frank said as he stood alone. “Maybe it’s me.” He raised his arm and sniffed under. “Nah.” shaking his head, he left as well.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

Robbie couldn't place the smell when he walked out of the bathroom from his shower. He wanted to say he smelled nothing. But that wouldn't be right, it was nearing dinner time and Jess always cooked. It had to be some obscure non-aroma type of food.

Damp, running his fingers through his hair, Robbie went to his bedroom. He took off his towel and flung it across the room in his walk in. Straight to his dresser he went and opened the top drawer, bouncing to keep warm while he dug out his boxers. Which wasn't too difficult, he only had two pair in there. Oddly he looked, but shook his head, put them on, and as if the little article of clothing did it, Robbie felt warmer.

Socks.

None.

"Huh?" Robbie scratched his head, and shrugged. The socks were probably with his underwear. Somewhere. From his bottom drawer he pulled out a pair of jeans and put them on. He opened the middle drawer for a tee shirt and . . . empty. "What the fuck." Really confused by the lack of packed drawers he went to his closet. The shirts weren't hanging up. Nothing but a white button down dress shirt was in there and Robbie swore that off. He wasn't his father. "Jess." He called and walked from the bedroom. "Jess?"

No response.

"Hello!" Knowing Jess had to be home, Robbie trotted downstairs. "Jess. Do you know . . ." He stopped cold. The first floor was empty. And he realized the reason he didn't smell food. There wasn't any cooking. Rushing to the kitchen to see not a single thing prepared, Robbie gasped in offense.

He raced back up stairs and without hesitation flung open the hall closet where the hamper was. "Uh!" He stepped back as if the overflowing mound of clothes were a dead body. "No, this can't be happening. Fuck!" He spun around and saw Jess' bedroom door was open. Thinking, *I wonder* . . . Robbie walked in Jess' room. He opened the closet, never drawers, Jess hung almost everything up. "Oh now this just isn't right." Robbie stated as he looked in side.

^^^

"I hate him." Henry complained then crinkled up his face while eating an apple. "He's always doing this." He crinkled more to Danny.

"I know. We just have to be smarter than Stan." Danny kicked back in Mechanics. "We scripted, we didn't plan for improv. We have to plan now for his interruptions."

"O.K., but he's really throwing us through a loop. Good thing you're such a good actor."

"I shined."

"You did."

"Did my hair look all right."

"Always. I was so jealous." He took a bit of his apple. "We might as well get to work."

"Hey." Danny snapped his chair forward. "Let's lay back first. Go to the

place and work on the contingency.”

Henry smiled. “That’s fun.”

“It’s tedious.”

“It’s still fun.”

“Yeah.” Danny grinned. “Let’s go.” He stood up and Henry followed.

Scott, who sat off in the corner making batteries just shook his head. He didn’t want to know.

^^^

Meow

Jess laughed as he lifted the hand size kitten from the spread out table cloth on the floor. He handed it to Alex. “As much as we like furball, he can’t eat with us.”

“Yeah.” Ellen bit her sandwich. “Who knows what type of germs his mouth has. Especially since he was a savage farm animal.”

So confused Alexandra looked as she pet her kitten. “I don’t know what that means.”

In a Dean fashion, Billy rolled his eyes. “It means they bread and ate the cats stupid.” He stood up. “Can I be excused from the floor.”

“Yes.” Ellen smiled. “But why? Aren’t you having fun?”

“No. I have something fun to do in my room. Daddy gave me equations.”

Jess took a long blink as he looked at Ellen. “Equations?”

Ellen shook her head. “Dean has it in his mind Billy is a six year old Dean prodigy. Go on Billy.”

Joey hurried and stood up, speaking loudly with his deep voice. “Can I help?”

Billy’s tsk rang out as he moved down the hall. “Yeah, right. You can’t even count.”

“Can too. Uncle Frank taught me. One, four, three five, six. There.”

“There.”

After listening to the fading miniature Dean and Frank, Jess looked at Ellen. “As I was saying. You really should consider which man is gonna be realistic with you. I mean, don’t get someone that truly believes you are never getting back with Frank or Dean.”

“I’m not.”

“You will.” Jess ate his sandwich.

“I’m not leaving Elliott. I can’t.”

“I don’t think you will. There’s a lot that underlines that relationship. But, Frank or Dean. Yeah.”

“What about Henry. He would understand.”

“No.” Jess answered fast. “He’ll believe you guys are together for ever. There’s really only one man that . . .”

“Uncle Robbie!” Alexandra jumped up and ran to Robbie who just walked in.

“Hey Robbie.” Ellen looked up and smiled.

"Oh, great. Just great." Robbie set Alexandra down. "What are you guys doing? Having a fall picnic?"

Jess looked at the food. "Yeah."

"Nice of you to invite everyone." Robbie said with edge.

Ellen snickered at Jess.

Pulling at his shirt, Robbie looked down. "Recognize this tee shirt jess?"

"No. It's a white shirt."

"Yeah. Yours. Wanna know why I'm wearing your shirt, not to mention socks." Holding up a finger, Robbie walked to the door. He opened it, reached out and came back with a large canvass bag. Which he dropped right before Ellen and Jess. "Now, I'm not mad. Wait. Yeah I am. I come to expect a few things. You don't have to do my laundry Jess, but if you aren't, you have to let me know. I have nothing to wear. Don't make me take this to my mom's she's in a trial."

Ellen laughed. "Robbie."

"No, and food. I bet El's fed, her house is clean. I bet her laundry is done. What about me?"

Jess contained any laughter that escaped him.

"Robbie." Ellen spoke softly. "Go take that in my room and I'll make sure it gets done. The come back and eat with us."

Almost pouting Robbie lifted his bag. "Thank you El. But you know, if you're gonna steal him from me, I would really appreciate you actually considering that understanding situation."

Jess oddly watched Robbie walk away. "Understanding?"

Ellen stopped laughing, but still smiled. "I told him a great combination would be him as primary and you as secondary."

Robbie walked back in the room. "But obviously under the same roof. Someone has to take care of me." He continued walking in the kitchen.

"Man." Jess shook his head. "He's funny. All for clean clothes."

"Someone's always taken care of Robbie. Always."

"So uh . . ." Jess leaned a little into Ellen. "What *about* this understanding?"

"I don't know." Ellen joked. "You better be up for some kinky sex."

Jess stared as if the thought of that transpired in his mind. He flickered a raise of his eyebrow. "I could do that." He sat back grabbed his sandwich, picked a bit and tilted his head. "I could do that."



The small black case, like the two others she had, was placed in Bev's hand. Bev raised her eyes to Johnny. "Why do I get the feeling you aren't staying."

"I'm not. So make sure you put that away. When I stopped by yesterday the cases were laying about."

"Johnny, so what. If anyone broke in here and snooped, they wouldn't have a clue. And Danny thinks they are video games from my youth."

"Still." Johnny, coat on, moved back to her door.

"Do I have to watch this. Nothing's happened."

"Yeah. Just scan through. Look for her on the phone or anyone that she may talk to. We need a team. Don't you want to get out of here?"

"Yeah. Did I tell you I caused a fight between Dean and Ellen."

Johnny paused to applauded with sarcasm.

"Did I tell you I may have a couple team members."

"Yes." Johnny tried to leave.

"A new one is Todd from Fabrics. I overheard him saying on all Jenny's new clothes he made the seams loose."

Johnny laughed. "No. Don't get Todd. He'll tell on us before we even get to the point of why we need him. And that's a stupid blackmail. Let me decide what is valuable and what is not. I don't want you running to the wrong person on your own. You can screw it all up." Johnny opened the door and peeked out. "Watch the disk."

"Where are you going?"

"Dinner at my Pap's. Trial went O.K., but Andrea's down. I'm concerned for my Pap. I want to show my support."

"Support?" Bev chuckled. "Johnny, you're behind all this. You wanna show support and concern. Turn yourself in."

"Yeah right." Scoffing verbally, Johnny walked out.

^^^^

New Bowman, Montana

"Elliott!" Hal called out frantic in his rush to Elliott's home. "Elliott."

"Up here." Elliott's voice came from upstairs.

With a charge, Hal took the steps and out of breath he stopped when he saw Elliott come out of the other bedroom wearing beat up jeans and a beat up shirt. His hair messy, the smell of paint predominant. "My God it's true."

"What?" Elliott asked.

"What's going through your mind." Hal asked approaching him. "Someone shared concern that you were remodeling. The last time Elliott you drew up housecleaning energy was when you contemplated doing that suicide bombing mission into the secluded society camp. I hope you aren't thinking of taking that Dean missel into the savage camp."

"Me? No. Not his time. No." Elliott shook his head. "Come here." He went into the smaller bedroom. "I'm painting the guestroom, or rather second bedroom."

"For?" Hal asked. "Are you taking a roommate?"

"You could say that. Well, no. I mean, well, you'll find out eventually. I'm going to tell you so please do not say anything discouraging." Elliott smiled. "Captain. Ellen and I, we, she and I are going to, well, start a relationship. She calls it an understanding."

"And she's the reason your getting the second bedroom ready."

"Yes."

"What for?"

"For when she comes to New Bowman." Elliott explained. "I hope you don't get angry. She'll be staying with me."

"In the . . . second bedroom?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"So she can have a room. Have privacy."

"I see." Hal calmly nodded and looked around. He then spun to Elliott. "What! You fill in for Frank and all of the sudden you become stupid like him!"

"Captain did you ever notice how much you look like your father. And sound like him. Why are you yelling at me?"

"A relationship, Elliott. Relationship. Did it ever occur to you that perhaps she doesn't want her own bed she wants to share yours."

"Sir." Elliott stepped back. "That is not what this is about. Granted . . ." Elliott dropped his voice with a hint of embarrassment. "If we reach intimacy it will be after a gradual process. I don't want this to be about what every understanding is about."

"Valid point. You can't afford that."

"Sir?"

"You certainly are a man of heroics Elliott. I commend your bravery." Hal placed his hands behind his own back. "I for one would not undertake a relationship."

"Why?"

"Well, it would have its perks, yes. The hand holding. Companionship. And cuddling. I could do cuddling. But what would frighten me is, Ellen is coming off a long standing relationship. Intimate with a man who is quite used to being intimate."

"I don't understand."

Hal stepped closer to Elliott. "You my friend have not been with a woman since before the plague. Eight years. At least eight . . . long years. Preparations,. Preliminary actions. Won't matter. I know I would be scared to death the instant we made love." Dropping his voice to a whisper Hal leaned into Elliott. "And that is exactly what it would be Elliott. Don't kid yourself. An instant." Hal snapped his finger, made Elliott jump, then Hal, flashed a grin and stepped back. "Yep." He heaved out a breath. "The guestroom may not be a bad idea after all."

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

There was something overly funny to Frank and Dean about the sight of Henry and Danny. Totally saturated with a red substance. They seemed to sneak toward town as if they couldn't be spotted. It made them laugh, really hard. Probably harder than they should. And it bred 'odd' looks from Danny and Henry who couldn't figure them out.

Frank and Dean walked.

It was an anger walk that made from their frustration, took them from their home on a long journey of discussion around Beginnings.

They smoked. Both of them.

Dean held his cigarette awkwardly between his two tense fingers. Frank like he normally did. Index finger arched, making a mustache as he brought the butt to his lips. They had wandered so far in their conversation they nearly hit

the utility buildings.

"Still." Frank blew out his smoke. "She's lying."

"I don't think so." Dean shook his head. "God. It gnaws at me."

"I know that feeling."

"You feel it too."

"About her sleeping with someone in Beginnings? The sex part doesn't but not knowing who it is, does. No. I remember when she was married to Pete. When I would suspect they slept together, man, it would gnaw at me." He took another hit. "And I was out of town."

"I remember Ellen telling me that when Kelly got pregnant with the last baby. She really was down about that."

"Now see." Frank held out his homemade cigarette. "Why didn't she tell me. How do you know this?"

"She tells me everything."

"Me too."

"Apparently not."

"Dean. I know more than you know."

"Bet I know more stuff that you think you should . . . know. I don't know." A large cloud of smoke came from Dean's mouth and he coughed.

Frank chuckled. "Man. But back to this 'I have a lover in your bed, Dean' thing. It doesn't bother me if she is. I'm not really with her." Frank shrugged. "And I'm pretty much used to Ellen antics. What pisses me off is, who. And . . . why she's going out of her circle."

"Yeah."

"Yeah. But it should bother you. She's like rubbing it in. We should . . . spy."

"Want to."

Frank shrugged. "All right."

Robbie coughed loudly, coming around from the side of the utility building where he did his rounds. "Fuck." He waved his hands. "What the fuck!" He screamed.

"What?" Frank asked.

Dean looked confused and tossed his cigarette.

"You . . . what . . ." Robbie was frazzled. He sniffed loudly. "You two are getting high."

"Huh?" Frank looked at the last of the homemade cigarette. "Yeah. We were sulking. Paul made us."

"Yes." Dean
agreed. "Peer
pressure."

"Fuckin Paul." Frank tossed the joint. "He gave us instructions on how to do it right."

Robbie was flabbergasted. "I can not believe you two old men . . ."

"Hey!" Frank yelled.

"No." Robbie sounded so parental. "You two are getting high. You two! Mr. Scientist and Mr. security. Straight and narrow."

"So." Frank sounded smug. "We're trying something new. Neither of us ever did." Reaching into his pocket Frank pulled out another joint. He showed it to Dean. "Want your other one?" When Dean shook his head, Frank placed it in

his mouth.,

Robbie snatched it up. "You ass. They aren't like cigarettes. You won't be able to handle them."

Frank tried to flutter his lips. He couldn't. He tried again. "Man." He smacked his lips together. "Man."

Robbie shook his head. "Dad is going to be so pissed off. You know that."

"Oh!" Frank pointed. "Dean." He pointed at Robbie. "Robbie! Him! Bet!"

"You think?" Dean asked.

"Has to be." Frank stepped to Robbie. "Are you sleeping with Ellen?"

"No." Robbie stepped back.

"Yes you are." Frank insisted. "Someone is. In Dean's house."

"In my bed." Dean said then laughed.

"God." Robbie said disgusted. "You two are pathetic. Ellen isn't sleeping with anyone. I would know. And I can tell you it's not me. If it was I . . . probably wouldn't tell you, but it isn't."

"Oh yeah?" Frank lifted his chin. "Stick out your tongue." When Robbie did, Frank nodded. "O.K., no 'L'."

Dean laughed, high and squealing, turning his body away and laughing harder.

Frank started to laugh as well.

Robbie, again shook his head. "You don't take this as a set back Frank?"

"To?" Frank asked.

"Your problem with alcohol."

A burst of laughter preluded Frank's response. "Robbie it's not alcohol."

"But it's a feel good mechanism. You don't think that's gonna make your body want that escape again." Robbie looked to Dean. "And you're letting him."

Dean looked in thought. "I didn't think of that."

"Dean.!" Frank snapped. "Make me fall off the fuckin wagon. Thank you very much." Frank began to look around. "Where is my other little cigarette."

"Go home." Robbie directed. "And Frank, what happens if we have an attack."

"No savages in sight." Frank winked. "Checked."

"But you never know." Robbie said. "What then."

"I fuckin take them all out." Frank spoke drastically. "All of them."

Dean nudged him. "I'll go with you."

"Yeah." Frank smiled. "You and me Dean."

"Oh my God." Robbie breathed out. "Go home. Good thing Jess is filling in tomorrow for you."

"Jess!" Frank spun to Dean. "Jess!"

"Jess?" Dean questioned. "You think?"

"Maybe. Robbie?" Frank asked. "Jess. Is Tinkerbelle . . ." He laughed. "Maybe he's disguising himself as a homosexual when actually he isn't. What great cover. Maybe, maybe it's him." Frank looked at Dean then Robbie.

A moment of silence entailed and then right after, all three of them, simultaneously shook their heads with a assured 'nah.'

^^^

"Until then, who knows." Jess read from the paperback he held in his hand.

Pillows propping him up in a sitting position on the bed. He and Ellen laid on top of the covers, him fully dressed with the exception of shoes, Ellen in her night clothes. *"Right now we'll just keep going. That's all we can do. Tomorrow's another day. I know that sounds cliché but . . ."* Jess went to turn the page. He noticed Ellen hadn't moved or said anything in the form of a complaint about his story choice. And he saw the reason why. Sound asleep on his chest she was. Grabbing his bookmark from a few pages before hand, Jess marked the spot and laid it on the night stand.

He checked out the clock and the lateness of the hour. It was time for him to slip out and go home. Just as he started to do that, he changed his mind. Comfortable and settled he was and figuring, where was the harm, Jess pulled the quilt over him and Ellen more, slid down, reached up and turned out the light.



Bev had put it off long enough. She actually read six chapters of the 'Helen and Bobby story' just to avoid watching something so drab as the disk image of Ellen's bedroom boredom. At her desk, before her laptop, half asleep, Bev sipped her tea and watched the fast forward images of nothing. Occasionally watching the whizzing images of Ellen darting in and out. The kids running in. She only hoped that the last bit of the disk didn't have anything important. It would be her luck that something would transpire and then the auto-protect would kick in erasing the last section to preserve the identity of Johnny going in and out of the bedroom.

Bringing a sip of the extra sweet steaming beverage into her mouth, Bev began to sulk, watching and wondering if she would even take notes. Just at the point when she was about to swallow, ejecting from her mouth came the beverage spraying on the screen.

Bev shrieked. "Oh my God." She literally stumbled in shock from her chair, stopped the playing disk and raced to the phone.

Her fingers shook as she bounced with excitement. "Johnny. Johnny get over here. No, don't yell. This . . . this is good." Hanging up the phone, focus on the wet laptop, Bev moved back to her desk. She viewed the frozen image on the screen. "This is too good."

Johnny was just as shocked as Bev was to see the image of Ellen and Jess on the lap top. He didn't know how well if at all they could use it. But it was worth placing a phone call to George.

"What was his name again?" George asked. "I'm sorry, it's just late here."

"Jess Boyens. Canadian." Johnny answered. "Big tall. Older, special forces in the old world. I don't know. Fills in occasionally here for my Dad. He could be valuable for us but I don't know if this is good enough." Johnny waved his hand in annoyance to Bev who was whispering something. "Yeah, and he was a defector. But everyone knows that."

"Jess Boyens. Jess . . . Boyens." George paused. "Shit."

"What?" Johnny asked.

"I'm not sure. But if I'm right, this could absolutely work in our favor." George said,

"I don't think blackmailing his affair with Ellen is big enough." Johnny stated. "I don't."

"Not alone." George responded. "But if I'm right. Trust me, he'll work for us before he wants this to get out. Now let's just hope . . . I'm right."

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Henry's hair stuck up on all edges. Not from only pulling it, but from being literally dragged from bed during a sound sleep. He couldn't figure out what was so important that Frank and Dean had to come to his house, and he also couldn't figure out when he got so funny. Everything he said and bitched about cracked the unlikely allies up. Not too mention, Henry grew increasingly annoyed with how they began to consume everything in his house.

Frank shoved another rice cake in his mouth. "I never knew these were so good."

"I never liked them before." Dean ate one. "Henry. These are good."

"Yeah, yeah." Henry propped his face in his hand. "Guys when are you leaving. It's two in the morning."

"We have to know Henry." Frank said. "Consider this an official interrogation."

"I told you I don't know." Henry snapped and grabbed the remaining rice cakes from them. "Leave,"

"No." Frank insisted. "Who. You know you know. Tell us."

Henry frustrated, leaned back. "All right. I promised I would say anything. If I say will you leave?"

"Yes." Dean answered.

"Fuckin knew he was holding out. Who." Frank asked.

Not that Henry had anything against him. In fact Henry liked him. But seeing how Frank was his friend and he was deserving years of payback, Henry grinned. "Hal."

Frank shrieked. "Uh! I knew it."

"Hal?" Dean asked.

"Hal." Henry stated. "Any chance they get. El and Hal sleep together."

"Fuckin Hal." Frank stood up. "Let's go Dean."

"Where?" Dean questioned.

"New Bowman." Frank moved from the table.

"Frank." Henry called out. "Robbie's in charge. He won't issue a jeep."

"We'll walk. Right Dean?"

"Right." Dean agreed standing up. He started to leave, stopped and grabbed the rice cakes from Henry's hand. "Snacks."

"Good idea." Frank opened the door. "Because . . ." After a brief chuckle Frank began to sing. "The road is long."

Dean followed behind him. "With many a winding roads."

Henry hurried from the table, flew to the door, slammed it shut and locked it. He could hear them going off in the distance, their voice fading as they made up their own words to *'He ain't heavy He's my Brother.'* He debated on calling Hal to warn him, but opted against it. It was late, New Bowman was a good eight miles and there was no way Frank and Dean would attempt to really make

it there. So Henry shut out his lights and went back to bed.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

October 28
New Bowman, Montana

Clean, shaven and surprisingly wide awake, Hal spoke on the phone even before the sound of revelry rang out in New Bowman. "And nothing Dad?"

"No." Joe answered, complaining. "Totally denying it. But I wouldn't put it passed Robbie to help, just to have the problem out of his hands."

"What should I do?" Hal asked.

"Let them be. They both have to be there anyhow to testify for the trial. I'll bring fresh clothes. Christ." Joe grumbled.

"And what are you going to do about reprimendation?" Hal asked. "I mean, their little speed trip to New Bowman, waking me up and harassing me is one thing. But Dad, they had drugs on them. They were under the influence of marijuana. Even had to more of those rolled cigarettes, I don't even know what they're called, I never dabbled in the stuff."

"I'll handle it. We don't . . . we don't have any rules concerning drugs. They aren't a problem. But, Frank's dumb enough, I'll pretend we do and he just forgot."

"Good idea."

"I'm sorry about this Hal. I don't know what possessed them to go there."

"Drugs Dad. Drugs make you do things. Which would explain their recent behavior. Hell, they may have had the problem for sometime and now the masquerade is up."

"Yeah, that's all I need. A couple of middle aged Beavis and Buttheads. All right. Go do what you have to do. And again, I'm sorry."

"Not a problem. I'm not even angry." Hal peered down to his floor to where Frank and Dean laid sleeping. He hung up the phone. "But eventual and unexpected Hal Slagel payback is a real bitch." Biting his bottom lip with a grin, Hal stepped over the oblivious two and headed to the mess hall for an early cup of coffee.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

'All ready for you. Just heat. Jess' was the note placed by the coffee pot, right beside that a covered dish. Jess poured a cup of coffee to take with him for his long day as 'fill-in' for Frank. Grabbing his tee shirt, he placed it on. He slowed down as it went over his head to the odd sound of the extremely early opening of Ellen's door. He peeked out the kitchen

Just as his mind thought 'shit' Robbie's expression made him want to scream 'fuck'.

"Jess?" Robbie tilted his head. He immediately smelled the coffee and food. "It's not even six yet."

"I know." Jess set his coffee on the counter. He was frozen and not having a clue on what to say.

"What . . . what are you doing here this early."

"Robbie . . ."

"Your hair . . ." Robbie stepped to him and touched his hair. Wet. His eyes shifted to the coffee cup, then he spotted food on the counter. He walked in the kitchen and to the cabinet. "I came to get El up,. She has . . ." Before pouring, Robbie turned around. "Did you spend the night here last night?"

Jess swallowed and his head instinctively dropped. "Robbie. Yeah. Yeah I did." Jess said somber. "I spent the night with Ellen." He waited. Backlash. Anything.

"Oh Good." Robbie smiled. He turned his back to Jess and continued to pour his coffee. "Because Frank and Dean are convinced she started a new relationship with someone. And if you're here, he's not."

Jess' eyes closed.

"And whoever 'he' is, kind of pisses me off, you know." Robbie opened the fridge and grabbed the milk. "Not that I'm with El. I have been mind you. But it's like . . . it's unfair to say, but there's like this circle. And El's gone outside this circle. I'm not talking about Elliott." Robbie took the milk back to the fridge. "He's a secondary. I'm talking about the guy from here. He has to know, right?"

"Right."

"And he has to get along with me. The only one I don't get along with is Henry. I guess it just bothers me because this guy has to know how I feel about her, and he moved right in. Then again . . ." Robbie shrugged as he sipped his coffee. "It could all be a big ploy of El's to get Dean mad. Then if she is with someone it can't mean all that much. She didn't come to me. Maybe it's just for the sex. What do you think?"

"I think I'd better go." Jess grabbed his coffee. "Robbie, I'm sorry."

"For?"

"Just know, I don't think . . . I'm really sorry." Before he said anymore Jess hurried and left.

Robbie just stared for a moment holding on to his creamed coffee then he decided to swipe up some of the eggs Jess made before Ellen and her crew ate them all.

^^^

New Bowman, Montana

The quick, painless but audible 'slap' made Hal snicker, but Frank looked clueless and annoyed up to his father.

"What?"

"What the hell's the matter with you?" Joe scolded. "You got to be out of your goddamn mind, getting high like that."

"What?" Frank stood up from the couch. "I'm not a kid dad don't treat me like one."

"Don't act like one!" Joe yelled glad at least Dean said nothing. "Do you realize Frank you committed an offense punishable by Beginnings law."

"No way." Frank scoffed.

"Yes way." Joe followed a pacing Frank. "Article 112398BI-F67. Huh?"

Remember? Huh?"

"No."

"Well let me refresh it. Any abuse of the substance called marijuana is punishable by hard labor for a period of up to three months."

Frank looked in thought. Debating thought. "Why don't I remember that law?"

"When's the last time you got stoned?"

"Never."

"There you have it." Joe held out his hand. "When Paul first brought the shit to Beginnings, I said, I'd allow it. As long as it was used for recreation, in moderation and no one got out of hand and say, got *stoned*. I don't need a bunch of people seeking something better when the marijuana doesn't cut it. Got it?"

"I guess." Frank scratched his head. "So what's that have to do with me."

"You violated the law, you idiot. Now, I could make it totally illegal in which the men who indulge occasional without abuse would probably jump your big ass for say . . . getting stoned. But I'm not. I'm just handing down a hard labor punishment to you and Dean."

Dean had enough. He stood up. "Frank there isn't any law about that."

Joe spun around. "You wanna test it Dean? You want me to let your kids know that their forty year old father is running around with a six-foot-three imbecilic man, getting stoned and abusing innocent leaders of neighboring communities."

"Joe." Dean chuckled. "You make it sound so exaggerated."

Slowly Joe walked to him. "Think about what you did. Think about. Now that you aren't under the influence, think about."

Dean tilted his head and sat back down.

"Now. The hard labor . . ." Joe continued. "Because Hal was a victim, the punishment will be at . . . Hal's decision."

Both Frank and Dean looked at Hal.

Hal looked almost embarrassed to have been given that responsibility. He took a deep nostril breath. "It's a big task. A burden dad. But . . ." he gasped out his breath. "I'll be fair." He nodded to Frank and Dean. "I'll be fair."

"Good." Joe patted Hal on the back. "You always have been my sensible son. Now, let's head over to Sgt. Ryder's to get Andrea for trial while these two get ready."

"Let's." Hal said, walked to the door and opened it. "And Dad, wait until you see what he's done with his home for when Ellen is in town staying with him." When Joe walked out, so did Hal. But not without pulling the door closed, waiting a split second, opening it back up and popping in his head with an arrogant, shitty grin to Frank and Dean.

^^^

Former Washington, D.C.

The horse's head seemed to stick out like a flag amongst the mound of regurgitated unviable horse remains that laid in the concrete pen. One Genetically Enhanced baby still picked at the horse trying to find a good piece or two.

"That . . ." George's finger tapped on the window. "Is disgusting."

"Feeding time." Dr. Stevenson moved with a clipboard. "So Mr. President what brings you here? Problem with the neck?"

"No. No. It's fine. How are the other levels of genetic reproduction going. I see the uh, Ogre are flourishing."

"Well they are the only ones who if they have a problem during the gene sequence in their growth, we really can't tell."

"Well, the weapon of the future."

"Barbaric weapon. With huge appetites. Control is a problem."

"Like I said before Beginnings and their little mutant Marcus proves they can be trained. Patience."

Dr. Stevenson stared for a moment at George. "Risking sounding very sarcastic sir, but it's hard to have patience training something that can devour a large animal in less than forty-five seconds."

George had a hint of snicker at that sick thought. "Sorry. The others?"

"The others, the mentally superior, still aborting, the ten coming to term are pretty much showing signs, again, of abomination. We are not copying the original splicing right. The Norms, we still have one overdue, but the care takers are saying they show no signs of being anything other than normal children."

"Good. Now, the reason for my visit. Aside from showing my genuine concern over these children."

Dr. Stevenson grumbled.

"I'm going to say a name to you. Something is telling me you know this name. Perhaps you can make mention to Harold and the other assistants. Boyens."

Dr. Stevenson thought for a minute. "Boyens? First name."

"Jess Boyens. It rings a major bell to me and I can't place it. Something is leading me here."

Dr. Stevenson shook his head. "Let me check records and ask the team that works with the hibernators. I'll get back to you."

"Thanks." George started to leave the observing section of 'the zoo.' "Today."

"Yes."

"Real time today, not scientist time."

"Yes." Dr. Stevenson slipped into thought as George slipped out. Familiarity, even slight engulfed the name he was given. He knew he had to figure it out. And like he had done with any puzzle he set out to solve, Dr. Stevenson set out to solve the question of why he knew Jess Boyens.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Crinkling her nose, Jenny held her arms close to her body as she leaned over Jeff's hospital bed watching Ellen. "They look really good."

Ellen raised her eyes with a smile. "Thanks. Dean and I are proud of these lips. We worked hard on them."

"Did you plan the shape or was that the way they turned out. So full and sexy." Jenny winked at Jeff who stared at her with his one good eye.

"Actually we had several successful pair. I liked these."

"Good choice. What are you doing to them?"

"A form of electrolysis for the fur that keeps coming back. At least it's only sporadic unlike before. That's why we haven't put the skin on his face yet. We have to perfect it."

Index finger swirling, Jenny indicated to Jeff's 'sort of nose. Merely where a bare cavity was, set almost a building bridge. "How much longer till the nose is done."

"It's a slow process." Ellen explained. "We're trimming bone from different sections of his body and building. Actually." Ellen stood up straight and moved the tray with her supplies. "Dean and I had a wonderful talk with Jeff. Right Jeff?"

Jeff nodded.

"We figured, Jeff won't look the same, so since this whole thing is experimental, we let Jeff decide who he wanted us to try to make him resemble."

"And?" Jenny asked.

"Do you remember an actor called Tom Cruise."

Jenny's eyes lit up. "Oh. Yes. Excellent choice Jeff. Maybe perhaps the new looks will make up for the fact that you broke Trish's heart so badly. Of course, I don't care now, she's friends with she-devil."

Ellen chuckled. "She's up to something with Bev. Bet me. I don't buy it."

Robbie's emerging voice into the room, took them by surprise. "You would be surprised what people buy." He smiled "Hey, El. Jen."

Ellen was shocked to see him. "What are you doing here in the middle of the day."

"To talk to you. Can you walk?"

"Sure." Ellen moved to the door. "Jenny, you visiting with Jeff."

"Yes. Then John." Jenny said. "It's my invalid day."

Robbie's paused with a hidden snicker in his exit with Ellen. "O.K." He raised his eyebrows.

"What's up?"

"Heard anything. Did they call during the break in the trial?"

"Joe called. They reviewed the video tape of testimonies of those seven working for George. He said he could judge by the juries face, but what do you think?"

"The video is pretty damaging to Andrea. Let me know if you hear anything. I'll be down in the communications room waiting for or troops to check in. They're supposed to be meeting up with the society at anytime now."

Ellen revealed a nervous breath. "That's scary. You don't think they'll . . ."

"They better not. We're in a cease fire. But I'll be in the tunnels."

"So will I. Lunch?" Ellen asked.

"Love it. I have a question." Robbie stopped walking when they reached the lab. He leaned against the wall. "I'm gonna get serious with you."

"Sure." Ellen folded her arms facing him.

"All right. You kind of . . . you kind of teased me." Robbie showed an embarrassed smile. "About having an understanding with me, well, rather making me your primary. I want you to consider that. And I'm perfectly fine with having the arrangement include Jess."

"Robbie. I can't divide between three men. Elliott is a definite."

"But, El, come on." Robbie twitched his head. "It's not like you'll have three men. Just dealing with us. You said yourself, sleeping with Elliott, if it comes, will take a while. And, it's not like, I don't know, you'll be sleeping with . . . Jess."

Ellen looked up.

"Actually, if you think about, the three of us under the same roof would be perfect. I would be the most liberal primary you would ever have. You and Jess would get that companionship thing you seek . . ."

"You would always have clean clothes, food and such."

"Well." Robbie smiled.

"And of course I'd be sleeping with you. What about Jess?" Ellen asked. "Huh?"

"El, I can't sleep with Jess." Robbie said.

"No." Ellen chuckled. "I'm talking about how convenient he is for you. Robbie if Jess were a woman you'd be in love with him the way he spoils you. But . . . you let him spoil you. You have come to expect that without expecting to give him anything in return. Jess can't go on spoiling both of us forever. He's eventually got to get into something for him."

"Doesn't, you know, he get that emotional fulfillment from you? Jess always says . . . sex . . . is not important."

"Robbie. Jess is learning from me, that's all. He's expressed no interest in staying with me. And I believe he's not getting that fulfillment from me. He'll move on. You and I know this, soon too. He has other female options. And we also know, eventually . . ."

"He'll move on from them to what he needs." Robbie said.

"Exactly. So, sorry. No kinky three way."

"You won't consider it. I mean, I really am thinking of Jess this time. I think he'd like it. It could work."

"No." Ellen shook her head. "Jess, it's just about time he moves on. I feel that. I'm getting ready for it, and considering this new 'first ever' relationship in Beginnings isn't a good idea. People can get hurt."

"What about . . ." Robbie softened his voice. "Considering me."

Ellen whined, walked around him and into the lab. "Robbie."

"What?" Robbie followed.

"I can't believe you just asked me that. Not you. You've never asked me that. You know how I am with you. You're nearly impossible for me to say 'no' to."

"I know. But I'm not playing on that." Robbie said. "I'm truly asking. I know Frank will hate me. And I know with his brand new best friend thing with Dean, those two are gonna make any relationship impossible for you. In that aspect, you know I won't fold." He watched her just stare at him. "El."

Ellen stopped as she grabbed for a stack of requisitions. She opened her mouth.

"Don't answer." Robbie grinned. "Don't. I don't want an answer. Think about it . . ." Sneaky like, he backed from the lab. "Mull over it. Fantasize . . ." He chuckled with Ellen. "And come to me if you decide. All right." He reached the door. "See you at lunch." He darted out.

Ellen dropped the requisitions with a heavy sigh.

^^^

New Bowman, Montana

Henry sulked as he watched Stan try to be an impressive prosecutor. So upset Henry was, he couldn't believe Grace would not allow him to question Frank. He just wished she believed he really didn't have any questions for Frank.

"Since the start." Frank spoke unlike himself, soft and not overbearing. And his attire was not one of Frank's either. Black pants, white shirt, maroon red tie. "Dispersment of troops, scheduling of security personal, investigation. I'm in charge of security."

"What is your relationship with Mrs. Slagel."

"She's my stepmother."

"There are several areas in the medical field that are extremely classified and entry is limited. What areas are these?"

"Cryo-lab, all the back rooms to the cryo-lab, um, clinic lab. And Mobile."

"Aside from council, and Daniel Hoi in Mechanics, who has access?" Stan asked.

"Security, top personnel."

"They are?"

"Myself, Robbie Slagel. And now recently we've entrusted two others. Sgt. F . . . F . . . Elliott Ryder and Jess Boyens."

"Out of four doctors and one intern, how many have access to these regions?"

"Three." Frank answered.

"And they are?" Stan questioned.

"Drs. Dean and Ellen Hayes and Andrea Winters-Slagel."

"Our records state Mr. Slagel, that you reopened an internal investigation into the 'mobile lab' incident. An incident now known connected to George Hadly."

"Yes."

"Now, I have a list of evidence from that box." Stan walked to the table. He picked up a long thin plastic tube. "States exhibit '2-D'. Tell us Mr. Slagel about this."

"We have a plastics division that makes those tubing for the medical field, amongst other articles."

"Do you know what this is used for?"

"Objection." Danny stood up. "Mr. Slagel is not a medical expert."

"Overruled." Graced stated.

Frank cleared his throat. "I believe that is intravenous tubing."

"Tell us about it." Stan held the two foot piece of tubing. "Why was it in the box?"

"Robbie, my brother, found that about five yards behind the mobile lab."

"He collected it, tagged it and marked it as unviable evidence?"

"That's correct."

"Explain what that means."

"It means he didn't think it was pertinent to the case."

"He did nothing with the tube. But you did. Why is that Mr. Slagel?" Stan asked.

"My brother was not informed of some things as I was. Had he been informed he would have. I was told by Dr. Dean Hayes that he recalled being strangled when he was laying on the floor of the lab half unconscious. That's when the thought of the tubing came into mind as a possible means to a weapon."

"So what did you do?"

"I ran a fingerprint check on it."

"Did you find fingerprints?" Stan asked.

Nervously, Frank cleared his throat. "Yes."

"How many sets?"

"One."

"This wasn't brought to the attention of the council. Why?"

After a moment of thought, Frank answered. "Several reasons. I could have screwed them up. We're talking an old checking system and a thin surface. It made no sense that the person doing the strangling would be so sloppy as to leave their fingerprints."

"So you buried the results?"

"I didn't bury them, I just filed them."

"Whose fingerprints were these?"

Frank stared at his folded hands then lifted his dark eyes. "Andrea's."

"No further questions." Stan turned from the stand, flashed arrogance at Henry and sat down at the table.

Dropping his pencil slowly, Danny stood up. "Hey Frank." He walked around the table leaning against the front. "Sorry to put you in this position."

Frank reached up trying to get some room between the tie he wore and his tense neck.

"It's possible that you made a mistake in the fingerprint testing, is it not?"

"Yes."

"In fact, these security codes that only certain people have, it's possible that you may have been lax, possibly not on top of things and someone could have gotten access to them. Correct?"

"I really would have had to been oblivious, pre occupied." Frank nodded.

"Drunk?"

"Objection." Henry stood up. "Danny, come on."

Danny ignored him. "Isn't it true, Frank you had a substance abuse problem with alcohol so bad you're own son shot himself because you irresponsibly left your weapon laying around while you were drinking . . ."

"Objection." Henry raised his voice. "Mr. Slagel's personal life is not on trial."

"The integrity of his judgement is." Danny argued.

"I'll allow. Overruled."

"Shit." Henry sat.

Grace slammed her gavel.

Danny continued. "Frank? Isn't it true?"

Frank swallowed predominantly, following it with a few blinks trying to hide his uncomfortableness. "Yes."

"So it's safe to say from the time period . . ." Danny reviewed his notes.

"Of November last year to August this year when you went into Detox, that your judgement, responsibility and perception weren't a hundred percent?"

"It's uh, safe to say, yes."

"No more questions." Danny walked around the table to his chair.

Frank stared sadly down waiting to be excused.

^^^

Denning, Texas

UWA Corporal Henricks, rubbed his reddish goatee as he looked across what he would describe as a river of land separating his men and the Society soldiers who were setting up.

"Sir. Robbie Slagel is on the line."

A short chuckle, hands behind his back, Corp. Henricks, walked to the table and grabbed the mobile phone. "Sir."

"How's it looking?" Robbie asked.

"Good."

"Any confrontations?"

"Um . . ." Corp. Henricks snickered. "You can say they're pretty much keeping their distance."

"How many?"

"Predicted amount. I'd say three hundred. Haven't spoke to their CO on whether the other troops headed back to base or dispersed in a search of their own."

"All right." Robbie said. "Keep me posted, let me know if anything happens. Rest up and set out to follow the search agenda starting tomorrow."

"Will do, Sir." Corp. Henricks handed back the mobile phone to his man. He turned back around, paced a few yards forward and took a position--as if it was his task--watching the society soldiers finish up the campsite.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

"And I really haven't any idea what they're gonna ask me on the stand tomorrow." Johnny stated as he helped Ellen clean up in the cryo lab. "Did you feed Bub today?"

"Yes." Ellen reached to the file holder. "Didn't you give a deposition."

"Yeah, but it was stupid. I don't really know anything for either side."

"Danny has some reason for putting you . . . I really wish Dean would not collect all these folders down here. See, he's never around to re file them when the . . ." As Ellen reached to pull folders out, one of them fell and its contents spilled. "Shit. How did that happen."

"Maybe it was stuck." Johnny moved to help her. Their hands met picking up the papers and Johnny noticed Ellen's bewildered look. "What is it?"

A blue piece of paper clipped, was in her hand. "Andrea's handwriting."

"What's it say?"

Ellen read. *"Against my better judgement, as you requested. And Dean,*

you did not get this from me."

Johnny laughed. "Sounds ominous. What is it?"

Shrugging, Ellen removed the clip. Her entire expression dropped along with the note when she saw behind it was an ultra sound picture. The name and date indicated it was recently taken of Bev's baby. "I guess he's slowly forgetting about the set up he claims she did to him."

"Odd."

"What?" Ellen tucked it back in the folder.

"As far as I knew, Dean wasn't even aware of the sonogram."

"Then you knew wrong. Here." Ellen handed him the stack of folders. "File."

Johnny grumbled and laughed when Bub, the lobotomized savage mimicked him.

~~~~~

### New Bowman, Montana

"Salicain is a drug." Dean explained on the stand. "One identified through the vials in the cryo lab. A case that was stored away there. We didn't invent it, it's not ours."

"So you learned to identify the drug from similar drugs you had on hand?" Danny asked.

"Trial and error testing." Dean said. "We can't unlock the files in the computer system that tell us what each vial is. The computer is rigged."

"I see." Danny paced. "And you said that the drug must be administered in intermittent doses so it doesn't wear off?"

"Yes. It's basic designed as far as I can tell was for a replacement anesthesia."

"In your opinion, does it take a medical expert to administer this drug?"

"No."

"So anyone could have done this?"

"Yes."

"Hospital records indicate that prior to John Matoose's suspected injection of a sister drug to Salicain, Andrea Winters-Slagel was in the next room doing rounds."

"Yes. And she was the last person to check on John."

"How much time was there before the rounds Andrea made and the discovery of John's condition?"

"Hours." Dean shrugged. "Not sure."

"Enough time for anyone, non medical, to slip in."

"Yes." Dean answered.

"Jenny Matoose. You testified that she was given the original strain of the new virus. What brought you to that conclusion."

"There were three strains present in the patients. Predominantly strain two, and sequentially those they infected, with Strain three. Strain one, the original virus we had the antidote to."

"How do you know the difference in the strains?" Danny quizzed.

Dean looked arrogantly up.

Grace drew attention with a slight tap to her gavel. "Mr. Hoi please don't insinuate this man doesn't know his field. We've established he's an expert witness."

"I'm sorry." Danny held up his hand. "Do we know for a fact that Jenny had the original strain?"

"Yes, retests on the blood concluded it. There was a mix up during all the virus confusion and we initially had inaccurate results of her blood."

"How do you know she didn't catch it?"

"In laymen's terms." Dean said. "She was the only one with that strain. She was a later victim. Virus' mutate. At the time frame when she turned ill, had she not been intentionally given the virus, she would have exhibited a mutated strain."

"In your opinion does a person need medical knowledge to administer the virus."

"No." Dean said.

"How about in the situation with the tampered notes? Medical knowledge?"

"Core knowledge no. They would have had to do some studying to make the formula look good. But they would have to have access to the computer password to get into the system."

"A password you created?" Danny questioned.

"Yes."

"Is it possible that you gave it to someone?"

"That would be highly irresponsible of me."

"What about messing up your own formulas. Would that be irresponsible of you?"

"Sloppy and yes, irresponsible for not paying attention."

"And you aren't irresponsible?" Danny asked.

"Never."

"Never really?" Danny instigated.

"Never."

"You are known for lying, are you not Dr. Hayes?"

"What?" Dean laughed. "I don't lie."

"Sure you do. You fib a little to get out of trouble. For example, slipping out that password, or possible giving the code out to the cryo lab, messing up your formulas, mislabeling Jenny's Matoose's blood. If you were responsible. You'd see no harm in lying to cover up."

"I don't lie."

"You just did."

"When?" Dean asked.

"When you said you're never irresponsible."

"That wasn't a lie. I am never irresponsible." Dean stated adamantly. "Never."

"So you weren't running around stoned last night, attacking Captain Slagel. Or would you consider that responsible adult behavior." When Danny saw he had Dean speechless, he grinned arrogantly. "No more questions."

^^^

Former Washington, D.C.

It was a pleasant reminiscing experience he wanted to have before hitting Andrew's Air Force base to work on the plane. With partial power up and running to the structure, George visited the white house.

Dusty, dirty, partially destroyed, George sat in the oval office, swiveling in the chair that squeaked as he laughed watching the television set and a video tape he had found.

"Having fun, Sir?" Steward asked when he sought him out.

"Yes." George nodded. "Look at the video I found. Isn't this hysterically entertaining?"

Thinking it was an old episode of '*I love Lucy*' Steward was surprisingly speechless when he saw it was the 'Goodbye to the world' speech delivered by George right before the world ended. "Um, uh . . . yes. Sir, I have some news for you."

George stood up and walked to the television turning off his address to the nation. "Remind me to take this with me. What's the news?"

Steward only motioned his hand to the door and Dr. Stevenson walked in.

George smiled. "You have some news."

"Some yes. The start." Dr. Stevenson handed him a folder. "Harold recalled the name. But not Jess Boyens, David Boyens. You need to read the notes. You'll know where it's going."

"David Boyens." George looked at the name on the file. "Then it's not the same man."

"Yes it is. The buck *starts* with me, it ends, we believe, with Colonel Kirkpatrick in Military strategy. We're checking on that now for you to get a confirmation." Dr. Stevenson stated. "Jess Boyens was the brother of David. The Boyens family was remarkable in the sense that all the male members survived the plague. Wiped out in an attack, All but Jess and David. We brought them originally here for testing and then David joined the society."

"But it's Jess Boyens, not David that we're interested in. So why am I holding a folder with David's name on it?"

"We think, we aren't sure, that Jess and David are one in the same. See, David was with us for a while. Two weeks after their arrival, mid-testing, Jess Boyens . . . killed himself."

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Beginnings, Montana

Though Jason didn't find it overly tedious to fill in for Joe as leader of the community, he used that as his excuse to take a short break.

Relaxation was what he needed and Jason always found it in his life's work. The Quantum lab. He had enough of reviewing faxes by George's people about the progress of the fuel system of the plane. Really all Jason wanted to know was when the plane was going to be complete so they would be ready for an immediate drop when they found the remaining savage camp. The completion date was always avoided.

Chuckling at the thought of how George's world prided it self on being so sophisticated yet they couldn't fix a plane, Jason approached his work bench. He

reached around to power up the Regressionator's computer system and halted. In the cold lab, heat radiated at him from the three computers. Hovering his hand over them Jason followed the heat. It oddly lingered in the air above the computers and extended almost to the Regressionator doorway.

Just as he was about to really question the heat in his mind, he realized how mistaken he had to be. Not to mention silly. The blind on the window behind the computers was lifted and the sun burst heavily through. Snickering at his own silly thought, Jason logically deducted *that* was where the heat came from. It had to be, otherwise the only other explanation for the bellowing warmth would be if the time machine had been used. And with not only with the lab locked up, but the computers rigged as well, Jason knew that was a near impossibility.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

"Dr. Dean." Johnny said surprised as he walked into the lab. "What are you doing here? It's eight o'clock."

"Oh, a case of no where to go." Dean worked. "I wanted to catch up on some things after spending a long day in court."

"How did it go?" Johnny asked. "What do I have to look forward to tomorrow?"

"It went well, and look for Danny to tear you apart on the stand."

"Even if I'm his witness?"

"Oh. Then . . ." Dean grinned. "You'll be lucky."

"So he's tearing apart everything the prosecution throws at the jury?"

"Yes. But . . ." Dean shrugged. "I don't know how good of a job his dramatics are going to end up being. If I didn't know better, I'd think Andrea was guilty as well. No amount of smooth talking and downplaying can erase the physical evidence."

"And you don't believe Andrea's guilty?"

"No. I know her. Unless I have physical proof she did something to undermine me, I won't buy it."

"That's really cool of you." Johnny started to leave. "Oh, yeah one more thing. Be prepared."

"For?" Dean asked.

"Ellen found that sonogram picture you asked for of Bev's baby."

Dean chuckled. "Why would I request a picture of Bev's baby?"

"You must have, Andrea left it for you."

"What are you talking about?" Dean continued his snickering in confusion.

"Here." Johnny walked across the lab and to the stack of folders "I didn't file these yet. Got them from the lab. "He opened the folder and picked out the picture. "This was taken, it says last week."

"And you got those folders from the cryo lab."

"Yep."

"Funny. I haven't taken any folders down there in awhile. Let me see."

Johnny handed him the note and picture. "See, Andrea wrote you the note."

"Yeah I see Andrea's note and Andrea's handwriting." Dean said with edge. "But what I don't see is why she would do this. I never requested this picture."

^^^

A dozen or so, that was all Jess needed. He found the photographs he wanted to take, then wearing his coat and ready to leave he picked up the remaining pictures, and tossed them in a box. Hurrying he took the box to the curio, placed it inside, and in his stride, swiped up his selections. Just as he turned to leave, Robbie walked in from the livingroom.

"Going out, Jess?" Robbie asked.

"Yeah."

"You have pictures."

"Um, yeah." Jess held them up. "I have to go."

Robbie turned as Jess passed him. "I'm not stupid."

Jess stopped cold.

"I'm not, you know." Robbie walked to him. "So don't think I am."

"Robbie, I don't know . . ." Jess lowered his head. "I'm sorry."

"You said that this morning." Robbie held up a finger. "Are you?"

"Yes."

"Then why didn't you say anything?" Robbie asked with a cutting emotional edge. "Why? I thought you were gay. I thought you were just learning. I thought you were my friend I thought . . . you knew how I felt about El."

"I never meant for it to get that far. It wasn't supposed to happen." Jess explained. "Then I got afraid to say anything. Because I didn't want to see you hurt."

"It's not the hurt over you with Ellen. It's the hurt of you not being honest with me." Robbie explained. "That's what's bothering me. I can handle the other part."

"Really?"

"Yeah." Robbie nodded. "You should have just let me know that this teacher student thing went further than you expected. But I'll tell you, you better not let Frank or Dean know. They'll kill it. Trust me, I have been there."

"I don't think it will last much longer. I just want to enjoy it while it does."

"What do you mean?" Robbie asked. "El could seriously consider the two of us if you tell her you want it that way. She doesn't think you want it that way."

"I'd love that. I mean I'd step back from anything physical at all if I could keep the other aspects of our relationship intact. Does she want that?"

"I think so, you have to tell her though."

"I will." Jess smiled. "And speaking of Ellen I have to . . ."

"Go." Robbie waved. "And Jess, when you bring up that little arrangement. Really push for it." Robbie winked.

"I will." Jess moved to the door.

"And Jess, one more thing." Robbie waited until Jess stopped. "This you being able to be with a woman. It's my fault isn't it?"

Jess chuckled. "What do you mean?"

"I ruined you for all other men."

At first Jess thought Robbie was serious and soulfully searched for a response, then after realizing it was a joke, Jess just groaned and walked out. But Robbie's little joke told Jess one thing. Everything would be all right with Robbie.

^^^

There was something about dart night at the social hall Bev really liked. She found it entertaining. Not the competition of throwing darts but the fact that she could annoy so many people into having bad games. Especially Hector, who to Bev was on her 'dislike' list. She knew he was only following Joe's orders making her work times at the greenhouse when the least amount of people were around. But Hector took it on his own accord to make her be the only one

scheduled to pick tomatoes on a Sunday. Bev was sure she'd scream out, flash a breast or do something when he was ready to throw that all important dart.

But even as much as she hated Beginnings and wanted to leave, there were always things about the community that warmed her heart. The way the open their arms to any pitiful soul. She smiled when she saw Tom. A society defector who was shot in his escape only to be left crippled. Cute young and a lifetime invalid, Tom didn't look as if he seemed to mind. Grasping all the attention from Melissa who seemed to pine motherly over him, trying to get him to walk, sitting with him in the social hall. Being a woman, and looking at Tom, Bev knew, Melissa wasn't helping Tom out of the goodness of her heart. Melissa, forty, was setting up a pervertedly strange, paraplegic pedophilic sexual experience with Tom.

Giggling, and whispering to Melissa about having a 'Jocasta complex' Bev moved to the jukebox.

In her own world, scanning through the selections trying to find a song that would really irk Hector, she felt a presence behind her.

"Don't turn around." Johnny whispered. "Wait a few seconds and leave. Come to the house."

"Why?" Bev asked as she chose a 'Village People' song.

"The Jess situation. We may have found something we can use. And Bev . . . it's big."

^^^

"I can't believe this is Peter." Jess held a picture as he and Ellen laid on the floor. "God, he was handsome."

"Yeah he was. Until he hit the final stages of the plague. Did I ever tell you . . ." Ellen waited as Jess grabbed his glass and took a drink. Through the lips, into the mouth. "Joe shot him in the head."

Chuckling, liquid seeped out of Jess' mouth.

Ellen giggled.

"He did not."

"Yeah. Like a horse with a broken leg. Bang." Ellen took the picture from Jess. "Of course, I don't know who's better looking, Pete or Len."

"We have good taste in men."

"Yes we do. Because we both like . . ."

"Robbie." Jess smiled. "What's he like?"

Quirky was Ellen's smile and she rolled from her side to her stomach. "You mean?"

"Yes."

"You can't get jealous."

"I swear."

"Robbie is . . . Robbie is intense." Ellen stated. "Focused. There's no laughing or giggling when you get started with Robbie."

"Kissing?"

"To be honest." Ellen inched closer. "Don't tell him, but you could blindfold me and I would swear that I wouldn't know who was kissing me, Frank or Robbie."

"You're kidding. They kiss that much alike."

"Remarkably alike. Both hard, wide kissers. God, I can't believe I'm telling you this." Ellen played with the photos between them.

"Speaking of Robbie." Jess, on his belly inched even closer. "I've been thinking. Maybe you should consider giving him a relationship."

"Why would you say that?"

"Because I think it's the right choice. And . . . I think, I think I'm ready to move on with a true female relationship." Tilting his head to the side with cuteness, Jess brought his lips closer to Ellen's. She didn't respond. "El?"

"You're ready to move on?"

"Yep. You taught me well." He tried to kiss her again, but this time Ellen pulled back.

"You're right. You are absolutely right. And it's time you did that. I knew this moment would happen." Ellen smiled. "I'm proud of you." She brought herself to her knees.

Jess, confused, sat up. "This moment."

"Jess, I want to stay your friend. I do. But . . . this physical stuff, touching, and intimate things like the pictures. It has to stop."

Smile gone from Jess. "I don't understand."

"I've been your teacher. You've been my student. You have prospects waiting out there. This situation between us will cause problems if the woman you end up with finds out. And, not to mention, how am I supposed to get involved with anyone if I'm still spending time teaching you something you already know. Understand?"

"Yeah. I graduated."

"Yes." Ellen faked smiled in his comprehension.

"Classes ended. You don't want me around."

"You have to . . . you have to get out there and try it for real."

"For real. I get it." Nodding, Jess swiped up his stack of pictures and stood. "I'll let you go. I'm sorry to bother you."

"Jess?" Ellen stood up and chased him to the door. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he picked his coat up off the back of the chair and put it on.

"You're leaving. Why?"

"I think it's best, you know." Jess walked to the door. "If I'm going to move on, you're right, I shouldn't be hanging around here. I'm sorry I took up so much of your time, El. I am." Jess said sadly. "I took advantage of the learning experience. That was wrong. I'm sorry." He opened up the door and walked out.

"Jess?"

The door closed.

~~~~~

Denning, Texas

It must have been Corp. Henricks' tenth cigarette as he found himself unofficially pacing the straight between the UWA camp and the society soldiers. Watching, waiting, anticipating the worst with the bred mistrust he had inside of him.

Flame igniting high, Corp. Henricks brought his cigarette down to light

and he saw the rustling across the fifteen foot separation. Clicking the metal lid to the lighter closed, Corp. Henricks inhaled and took a few steps into the clearing. A muffled grunt and moan mixed together with an eeriness alerted Corp. Henricks. He called out, his voice echoing in the dead night. "Gentlemen, everything all right over there."

A squeal, miniature and painful.

"Gentlemen?" He called out once more. When he received no response he secured the cigarette between his lips and grabbed for his spotlight. The beam of the light made it across the dirt of the separation, to the camp not far away. It shined upon the few tents. He saw no movement. Lowering the beam, he caught a glimpse of a figure to the right. "Gentlemen." He moved the light. When he did, the cigarette toppled to the ground when he saw what he illuminated. Almost red was the color of the eyes when the spot light reflected off the face of the savage. With a snarl the savage looked up from the sleeping back he hovered, his body covered in blood. His right hand held a knife, the left the limb of a society soldier the savage obviously was trimming for food.

Stumbling quickly back, Corp Henricks shut off the flashlight and hurried to the communications table.

"Sir, what's wrong." The private asked.

"Get Beginnings on the line. Get them on now." He ordered, then stepped to his sleeping camp. He looked about at the four guards on post and then Corp. Henricks lifted the whistle from around his neck, placed it in his mouth and blew three times. A wake up signal. A warning. An attack was imminent.



### Beginnings, Montana

Working night shift with Frank always bred three things. One, lots of work. Two, hours of stimulating conversation over the radio about subjects Frank pretended to know about. And three, the 'I'm the big brother so do what I say' situation. And Robbie found himself doing what Frank said.

Food. Frank was hungry and Robbie had to admit, so was he. Volunteering to go home and see what Jess had stashed away, Robbie walked into his home. He did not, in the late hour, expect to see what he did.

Jess sat in the chair. His elbows dug deep on top of his thighs as he leaned forward staring down, fingers locked in a clasp behind his head.

"Jess." Robbie questioned as he walked in.

Jess only looked up.

"What's wrong?"

"Did you ever feel really stupid?"

"You don't look like you feel stupid, Jess. You look like you're pretty down."

"I got caught up." Jess returned to staring at the floor. "I got used to it. I thought . . . I thought she liked it. I let myself get into something I thought I never would and . . ."

"She set you free."

Jess raised his sad eyes. "God, am I stupid."

"Jess. I'm sorry. I really . . ."

"Robbie." Frank's voice blasted over the radio.

Robbie grabbed it. "Yeah Frank."

"Get down here now. We have trouble in Texas."

"Shit." Robbie rushed to the door and stopped "Jess . . ."

"No." Jess shook his head. "Go. We'll talk later."

In only an instant, the door remained open and Robbie was gone.

"What's going on?" Robbie burst into the communications room, peering up to the board map where the town of Denning Texas was lit up.

Frank pointed to the speaker phone. "Henricks. Robbie's here."

"Henricks what's happening?" Robbie asked. "The society?"

"No." Henricks answered.

"I'm not hearing anything." Robbie stated. "What's the problem?"

^^^

Corporal Henricks stood before the long line of combination, UWA and Beginnings men. They kneeled, guns and swords in toe, ready for anything, staring beyond the society camp to the crest that seemed to upwardly seep a glow. "We believe the society camp to be wiped out."

"What?" Robbie asked.

"Savages. Only a few. They ran off. Which doesn't sound like them."

"No, it doesn't."

"We're prepared, Sir." Corp. Henricks stared. The glowing grew brighter and brighter.

"Do you see any now?"

"Just a light . . . it's . . ." Corp Henricks' eyes widened when he saw, rising up, a long line of flames. Torches. "Dear God."

As the full focus of the torches came into view so did those who carried them along with the unison war call out. And then a wall, as far as the eye could see emerged over that small grade. A wall of savages, spread long and wide.

^^^

Robbie and Frank heard the all too familiar sound of the savage cry. They heard the order of Corp. Henricks being given to fire at will.

"Henricks." Robbie called out. "How many. I repeat, How many."

"Too many to count. They're nearing. My God, there must be . . . thousands."

Horried, Frank turned off the microphone and looked to Robbie. "Give the order. Do it."

Robbie nodded. "Henricks. Listen up. Retreat."

"What?"

"Give the call, pull back our men, hit them trucks, leave the gear and retreat your asses. Now is not the time to be heroes. Now's the time to be alive. Retreat."

Although willing, like his men, to die in battle, Henricks followed the order given to him. He passed it on, weapons were down and as the savages barreled forth full force, the UWA and Beginnings men . . . retreated to safety.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

October 29  
Beginnings, Montana

"And we haven't heard from them since." Frank explained to Joe who peered at the communications board and the map of 'Denning Texas'. "About zero-three hundred hours they radioed to say they hadn't heard or seen the savages since they stopped following."

"Maybe they're just on they're way home." Joe said.

Frank gave it some thought in the winding down of his night shift. "Actually, they may be doing what I would do. Only in the quiet of the aftermath, I hope they aren't setting themselves up."

"You don't think they're all right?"

"Yeah. Right now." Frank looked at the map. "But I also think . . . they're heading back to Denning."

^^^

Denning, Texas

General consensus. That was what Corp. Henricks received in a early morning survey done of his eighty-three out of a hundred, surviving men. With the average guess of there being close to a thousand or so savages, everyone believed that the missing savage base had to be close to where they had set up. So they returned, to the night before's camp. Moving in silent. Speaking no words.

But not one savage was seen, except those who were dead amongst the mounds of Society soldiers skinned and butchered. Their bodies used as some sort of new Savage meat byproduct. Corp. Henricks knew it could have easily have been him and his men had they taken the east side of the camp.

The east side.

The light bulb clicked. In the very few words spoken to the now dead C.O. of the society,. Corp. Henricks and he, drew up directions to scout out. The UWA/Beginnings men, west and north. The Society east and south. He knew his men scouted a safety range of security, but did the society? It was actually worth looking into. But quietly. By the savage numbers he had seen the night before, He didn't have the man power in his force to take them on.

Returning to his second in command, Corp. Henricks drew up the plan in his mind. Divide into squads. Carefully span out. But first he had to call in all his men. He felt right about what his gut told him. The missing base had to be close. It had to be.

Dusty Helms was always a private person. Even in the ravished world where modesty was nil, Dusty sought out privacy for certain things he had to do. Relieving his bladder was one of them. He had wandered a little off, into the woods, traveling up the grade and out of sight. Not just for privacy sake, but Dusty knew if his fellow soldiers saw him going off to be alone to 'go'. He

would be under constant ribbing, like the last time they busted him doing that.

Letting out the breath of release, Dusty heard the 'fall in' bird call just as the pattering of his moisture hit against the fall, crisp leaves. Thinking, 'damn' and knowing the powerful stream was going to be hard to stop, Dusty tried to bounce up and down as if that would hurry it along.

Hoping not to leave any telltale signs of his lack of full-fledged shaking, Dusty tucked himself back, grabbed hold of his zipper, and zipped as he turned in a rush.

Mistake.

Just as he caught himself painfully. Just as he hunched down, mouth open bellowing out a silent agony scream, his eyes widened as he caught glimpse through the trees of what laid beyond the crest.

His search for modesty may have paid off in an embarrassing injury, but it paid off in another way. The laughter that would generate, and even the incident itself, would be forgotten, not mentioned, and overshadowed by the fact that he had spotted the missing savage base.

^^^^

### Beginnings, Montana

"Robert." Joe warned, then looked back down to the coordinates he had scribbled out.

"Sorry." Robbie's face was red. Squinched up in a futile attempt to hide laughter.

A snort of laughter escaped Frank. "You have to give it to Corp. Henricks, though. Hell of a way to let us know they found it. Man was he so serious about it. Fuckin UWA. How'd he keep a straight tone."

"Frank."

"Sorry." Frank held up his hand.

It was a peep, then a fluttering lip sound that Robbie made. "In his attempt to find relief . . ." Robbie stated strong in a mimic of Henricks, "Private Helms made an important discovery just beyond the crest of our former camp.. However, please advise Pvt. Helms will be in need of medical attention upon his arrival home due to the fact . . ."

"Robert."

Frank continued, because Robbie, laughing, could not. "In his excitement over the find, his genitalia was fastened in his trousers."

"Frank." Joe stated. "Grow up. And can we not let this information get out. My God, the man is embarrassed enough. Here, fax this to George, so we can head to New Bowman for the hearing." He extended the paper to Frank.

Frank, grabbed it, walked to the door and stopped in his reading. He turned to face Joe. "I thought we weren't letting that get out."

Taking advantage of the moment, Joe pretended to be Frank. "What?"

^^^^

After looking at her watch, Ellen took off her lab coat in her rush across the lab. "I should be back by three since Judge Grace convenes court at two

thirty. Dean? You listening.”

“Yes.” Dean worked on a the computer.

“I work until late evening. Jason is doing that esophagus surgery on one of my UWA men so I want to watch for complications.”

“I’ll do a post op for you.”

“Thanks.” Ellen moved toward the door. “If you have anything that needs done, leave it. I hate just hanging about.”

“Oh, El.” Dean stood up. “Any chance when you’re in New Bowman, Can I get you to do a lymph node biopsy. Just a needle biopsy on Elliott. I just wanna double check that it’s not in the inguinal area.”

“Is this a joke?” Ellen asked.

“No. I’m very serious.”

“I’ll try.” Ellen went back into the lab to search out the kit. “He may be too embarrassed, you might have to perform it.”

“Embarrassed?” Dean questioned. “I thought you two were starting an understanding. Why would he be embarrassed about letting you do a biopsy in his groin.” He snickered. “Oh, this is too good.”

“Stop it.” Ellen retrieved the kit. “I’m out of here.”

“One more thing.” Dean walked to her. “Since you will be on duty. Joe radioed. You have a field injury coming in. It’s a delicate situation. And you may not handle it delicately, so call me.”

“What kind of delicate injury is it?”

“A private got his penis caught in his zipper.”

Ellen stopped walking. “What?” She said shocked. “Oh my God.”

“Yeah. He was in the woods, Joe said the message said he was seeking relief and he spotted the savage camp, and when he hurried to zip . . .”

“Oh. Shit. Is it bad?”

Dean shrugged.

“Was he masturbating. Because if he was, when it became flaccid the injury . . .”

“Ellen why would you assume he was masturbating.”

“You said relief.”

“But it doesn’t mean . . .”

“That’s what he get for doing that on duty. Men.” Ellen shook her head and tried to leave again, but as she walked through the door she walked into Robbie. “Whoa.”

“Ready?” Robbie chuckled. “We’re running late.”

“Sorry.” Ellen said. “We were just discussing your man in the field.”

“Which one?” Robbie asked.

“The penis injury.”

Dean interjected. “Robbie was he going to the bathroom or was he masturbating?”

Robbie, in a rare occasion, was shocked. “I don’t um . . . is it important?”

Dean bobbed his head from side to side. “The extent of the injury could be worse if he was engorged at the time of the fastening.”

“Oh fuck.” Robbie started to chuckle then drew up a fake seriousness.. “I’ll have to present that question to Corp. Henricks when we make afternoon radio contact. Let’s go El.” He took hold of her arm and started to leave. He stopped and stuck his head back in the door. “Dean, just so both of you guys know. This

is really embarrassing for this guy, and he did find the savage camp. So, low key on this. Not too many people knowing.”

^^^

#### Quantico Marine Headquarters

George laughed hysterical as he read the fax that he retrieved himself when she stopped at his office before going to the air field. He couldn't even catch his breath.

“Cars waiting sir.” Steward announced as he walked in the room. “Colonel Kirkpatrick should be in town by this afternoon from Lauderdale.”

“Good find me when he arrives.” George wiped the tear from his eye and chuckled again. “The uh, oh, boy.” He let out a breath. “The other savage camp was found. We have to get moving on preparations.” George walked to the door.

So confused, Steward was. “That's great news. Why are you laughing?”

As George left he handed the fax to Steward.

Steward looked down. He read and then Steward . . . laughed.

^^^

#### New Bowman, Montana

So young, nervous, and looking like Frank, Johnny was on the stand. Hands folded, fingers twirling around each other. Hunching in his seat. “Yes.”

Danny nodded and paced. “Blood results switching.”

“Yes.”

“Tampering with the notes on the computer?”

“Yes.”

“Administering the virus to Jenny.”

“Yes.” Johnny answered. “I have the knowledge to do all that. All of us who work at the clinic do. There's a whole list, and you don't have to be a doctor.”

“Would you say aside from yourself being able to perform all these wrong doings. Would, Melissa, Patrick, Glen and Charlie be able to.”

“Yes.” Johnny responded.

“So Andrea isn't the only one?”

“No.”

“In your personal opinion.” Danny said. “Is Andrea capable of committing these acts.”

Johnny shook his head. “I have known Andrea since I was a kid. She's great. She's the most sincere person I know.”

Up from the table Andrea smiled at Johnny with a wink.

“I love her.” Johnny stated. “She would never do anything underhanded.”

“No more questions.” Danny sat back down.

Because it was a defense witness, prosecution went second. Henry stood and saw Grace shaking her head. “What?” He asked.

“No.” She pointed. “This young man is deemed an ‘original’ you Mr. Kusakari are not allowed to cross examine originals.”



Henry whined and sat back down.

Smug, Stan stood up. Just as he opened his mouth he heard Henry's tiny whisper.

"I'm kicking your ass when this is done."

After a souring face, Stan smiled at Johnny. "You mentioned that you and the list of health care workers were all able to pull off these sabotage acts. Correct."

"Yes."

"Do you and all of these health care workers have security access to the places and programs violated."

"No."

"You said you love Andrea. Would you do anything to protect her."

Johnny was quiet.

"Answer the question."

"To be honest. Yes. Yes I would."

"Even withholding vital information to the court that would show evidence of Mrs. Slagel's underhandedness."

"Objection." Danny stood up. "What the hell is he talking about."

"Language." Graces stated with a slam of her gavel. "Stan. What the hell are you talking about."

"Anonymously to this court, evidence was presented this morning." Stan said. "In the form of a ultrasound picture with a note attached. A ploy left out to deliberately start trouble."

"Objection." Danny repeated. "I know of no such note. I have none listed on my list of evidence."

Grace looked at Stan. "What note?"

"It was given to me this morning." Stan lifted the blue note. "I plan on bringing Dr. Dean Hayes back as a reluctant witness, this afternoon to testify he did not request this information. And it was placed in a place where it could cause damaging personal results to him." Stan walked to the bench and Danny approached as well.

"Your honor." Danny leaned into the bench as he looked at the note. "We don't even know if this is Mrs. Slagel's handwriting."

Grace reviewed the note as well. "Stan, where did this information come from?"

"In a form of an anonymous letter left on my porch. I'm believing it was from Dr. Hayes."

Again, Grace looked at the note. "Mr. Hoi, I'll dismiss this evidence if your client tells me, under her fifth amendment right that she doesn't wish to confirm this as her handwriting."

"All right." Danny stepped back to his table.

"Mrs. Slagel." Grace said. "You have an option. This court asks if you would confirm or deny this being your handwriting. Prior to looking at the note, you may exercise your fifth amendment right under the constitution and it will not be held against you."

Andrea looked at Danny's eyes. She knew what he wanted her to do, especially when he held up his hand showing all *five* fingers. She peered back at the bench. "I'll confirm or deny."

Danny slumped with a whine as the court officer handed Andrea the note.

"Mrs. Slagel?" Grace asked. "Is that your handwriting?"

Andrea handed the note to the officer. "Yes."

"Mark it as state's exhibit eighty-two." Grace stated. "Go on Stan."

"One more question." Stan walked to Johnny. "You knew of this note. Tell the court what your first reaction was."

After hesitating, looking at the jury then at Andrea, Johnny stared forward. "What was Andrea up to."

^^^

"Pretty much everything." Robbie did a quick shift in his chair. Dressed unlike everyone else, Robbie was himself. And his casual feel was projected. "Maintenance, mechanics, containment, security. Right now with the Savage war and internal conflicts I'm pretty much a hundred percent security."

"You did the investigation into the shooting of your brother right?" Danny asked.

"Yes."

"Tell us about this." Danny reached to the evidence table and lifted a clip.

"You and Henry, the uh, prosecutor, designed them as disposable clips. Which by the way, did I tell you metals was pissed because of the waste. When they found out they had to melt them back down. Anyhow, designed to hold the paint pellets that were very similar to twenty-two caliber bullets."

"This was the one that contained the bullet that shot Frank. Tell us what you found."

"All the shells were real. No paint pellets at all, which led the investigation to believe that murder was the intention."

"Was there anything in your questioning or investigation that led you to believe Andrea was responsible."

"Nothing."

"Thanks Robbie. No further questions." Danny resumed his seat.

Stan stood up. "You did a fingerprint check on that clip, right?"

"Yes."

"Were Mrs. Slagel's prints on that clip?"

Solemnly, Robbie answered. "Yes."

"No more questions." Stan smiled and sat back down. "Ow."

Grace looked curiously at Stan who was rubbing his arm. "Are you all right."

"He pinched me."

Henry gasped. "I did not."

Grace slammed her gavel. "Enough. Mr. Hoi. Redirect?"

"Yes." Danny rose slightly from his seat. "Robbie whose finger prints were on that clip?"

"Andrea's, my Dad's, Henry's, yours, mine, Hal Slagel's, Dean Hayes, and Todd from Fabrics."

Danny smiled. "Thank you. I'm finished."

Grace looked at Robbie. "You may step down."

^^^

"Hey, Todd." Danny spoke softly with a grin as he leaned against the front of the table. "Wave to the jury."

Todd did then let out a nervous breath.

"Relax."

Todd patted himself on the chest. "I'm just uptight. That swearing on the bible thing." He let out a whew.

"Do you know why you were called to testify on Andrea's behalf?"

"Yes." Todd nodded. "I worked the food booth the day Frank was shot."

"What were your duties?"

"Help Jenny the klutz Matoose with serving refreshments. I also was the one who kept cleaning up the empty paint pellet clips. What a mess."

"And what did you do with them?" Danny asked.

"Collected them and placed them in a box for metals."

"Where was the box?"

"Under the refreshment counter. Always."

"Good." Danny began his arrogant stride back to his seat. "And at anytime, did you see anyone in that box."

After a very short pause and just as Danny was about to rest his rear in the chair, Todd let out a gasping, saddening, 'yes!'

Danny sprang up. "You did? You told me and Trish that . . ."

"I lied!" Todd began to sob., "Oh God, I lied. I saw someone in that box! I lied. I couldn't today. I . . . I just couldn't"

Grace leaned toward the stand. "Do you need a minute to calm down."

With a sniffing breath, Todd held up his hand. "I'm fine."

Fear hit Danny. Dilemma as well. He didn't want to ask who was in the box, but what if he didn't and Todd saw someone aside from Andrea. "Why . . . why did you lie to Trish and I?"

"Love. Out of love."

Danny closed his eyes with a pre-criinge. "Who was it in the box?"

A few sobs emerged first from Todd, then his response. "Andrea."

"Fuck." Danny whispered and dropped to his seat. "No more questions."

Before Stan could, Henry sprang up. "Oh yes! He's not an original I can question him."

Grace rolled her eyes. "Go on."

"Todd." Henry stated strongly. "Todd." It wasn't happening.. That ultimate question that would break down his testimony. "Todd." His head tilted and his mouth opened. "How . . . how do you know it was Andrea?" Knowing it wasn't all that great of a question, it was good enough to stump Todd. After all there were eighteen Beginnings women in attendance. "Maybe you were mistaken. You know, a case of mistaken identity."

"No, I'm sure it was Andrea."

"How can you be sure. There are seventeen other women in the community."

Todd looked very oddly at Henry. "Yes, but she's the only black woman."

Danny's gurgled, frustration-filled 'uh' rang out and was responded with a typical slam.

Henry's mouth hung open a few seconds more before the embarrassed, high toned voice emerged. "No further questions."

^^^

Joe had so much on his mind. The savages. The discovery of the final base. The attack the night before. But to Joe, first and foremost was the trial of his wife. Danny Hoi in the previous days had dazzled. He played games with dramatics leaving the last thing on people's mind, is something that would cause doubt. And doubt was all the jury needed. Danny still dazzled, but the effectiveness seemed to get lost when he had to present first, and even though lacking luster, Stan's final arguments and questions of each witness were the last thing on the jury's mind.

Andrea had to be worried. She breathed heavily occasionally. Sigh. And she read more of the bible--if that were possible--and hummed even more religious songs. But even her calm exterior didn't hide the fact that the trial was winding down and soon her fate would be in the hands of twelve men.

The afternoon break was always good for them as a couple. Going off to Hal's, talking, being alone, relaxing or just saying nothing. It was what they needed. Anything to take their minds off of things, during the trial day and after. Joe knew how helpful cooking, cleaning, and laundry were in going into a mind escape, and that was the reason he never stopped Andrea from doing them. He could have, but that would have lessened up her personal schedule and left her more room to worry, and Joe didn't want to do that.

^^^

"You're limping." Ellen told Elliott in their stroll to his home during the break.

"I'll be fine."

"Dean may have to do it all over again."

"It's a risk I'll take."

Ellen smiled. "I told you Blue didn't know how to do a needle biopsy. You should have let me. I wouldn't have screwed up."

"Risking embarrassment at this moment, it wasn't you I was worried about."

"How cute." Ellen snickered. "Anyhow speaking of that. Did you hear about one of your men getting hurt this morning in the field?"

"Who?" Elliott asked.

"Robbie said, Dusty Helms."

"What happened?"

"He was caught masturbating and he got his penis stuck in his zipper." Ellen stopped walking, she looked behind her. "Elliott?"

"You're joking." Elliott stood behind her ten feet. "Who . . . who caught him."

"The savages. That's how he discovered the other base."

"I thought a scout spotted them. That's what I was told."

"Nope. Dusty. Injured,. He'll be in the clinic tonight." Ellen saw they reached Elliott's home. "Is it open?" She reached for the door.

Still stunned by Ellen's nonchalant attitude, Elliott nodded.

"I can't wait to see the surprise. Thanks for not making me wait until Saturday."

"I thought it would be a nice diversion." Elliott closed the door. "So, you didn't tell me. Did Jess speak to you at all this morning."

"Ouch. Back on that subject. No. He avoided me."

"Risking sounding pessimistic. But you stated your reasons for breaking up were you knew, shortly, he'd move on and you didn't want to get attached or hurt."

"Yes."

"So, why commit to me."

Ellen stared in thought at Elliott. Seriousness graced her face before she answered. "Insurance money." She breathed out, turned and walked to the steps. "Upstairs?"

"Um . . . yes." Elliott shook his head quickly at her response. "I think you'll be pleased." He snuck ahead of her and walked to the second bedroom. He opened the door. "For you."

"Me?" Ellen looked inside the nicely painted and decorated bedroom. "Elliott this is very nice."

"It's your room. For when you're here."

"Oh." Ellen nodded. "And hear I thought I would be sleeping in your bed . . ." seeing the look on Elliott's face made Ellen change her train of thought. "While you slept on the couch. Boy am I glad to know I won't be putting you out."

"Not at all. Even if I didn't have the room ready. I'm glad you like it."

"I do." At his naiveness, Ellen smiled. She had to. It wasn't often that she got to experience that in a world gone bad.

^^^

### Andrew's Air Force Base

The thick folder dropped before George as he wiped off his greasy hands and lowered to the chair. "You're kidding me." He raised his eyes to Col. Kirkpatrick.

"All there. I know I'd locate it when I returned home."

George lifted the folder after he sat, "Thick."

"Had to be. But it's all there. Everything you need."

"Thank you." George said to the colonel then looked at the name 'Allan Boyens'. "Now let's just hope this 'Allan' is our Jess." Opening the folder, George pulled out the top sheet where a photo was. "Now it's even more easier to find out."

^^^

"Yes, I was angry when I saw the note." Dean stated.

"Tell us why." Stan requested.

"Because it was conveniently put where my wife could see it. And I never requested Bev's sonogram picture. I didn't know she was given one."

"Did you check the medical records doctor on who performed it and when."

"Yes. The test was performed last week and it was done by . . . I'm sorry. Andrea." His head lowered a little.

"No further questions."

"Dean." Danny immediately stood up before Stan was even seated. Hostility laced Danny's tone toward Dean. "You didn't ask for the picture?"

"No."

"It's your son."

"That is not conclusive. Until then, I am not allowing myself to get into this baby."

"And asking for a picture of the baby is?"

"Absolutely." Dean said. "It's something I wouldn't do."

"So you have no excitement over this baby's arrival."

"None."

"And asking for the picture would be showing excitement."

"Yes." Dean answered.

"Which you deny being about this baby."

"Again, I'm not excited about it."

"Or into it?" Danny asked.

"No." Dean spoke annoyed.

"So then why did your wife bust you glowing, while your hands were all over Bev's stomach. Sounds like excitement to me., What about you Dr. Hayes?"

After initially thinking '*Danny, you dick.*' Dean just simply answered 'yes.'

^^^

Really hoping her nervous stomach didn't turn into some embarrassing projection of rip roaring gaseous expulsions, Jenny just wanted the interrogation to be over. Even if Danny was being so nice.

"Todd claims you were too occupied to notice." Danny stated.

"Todd is a trouble maker. I don't like him. He's only saying those things about me because of my relationship with Captain Slagel. He's the one that wants the affair with Hal."

Joe at that moment, really wished Frank and Robbie were there. They had missed it. The expression on Hal's face as everyone, including Grace, suddenly turned and looked at him.

"And he's jealous of Andrea." Jenny continued. "Actually I believe he hates all women because he wanted to be one. Some sort of deep seeded thing. Bitter, jealous, arrogant, decrepit little man."

Danny's eyes shifted not expecting that response.

"Mrs. Matoose." Grace said. "Try to keep your answers to fact and off of the personal level."

"I'm sorry your honor." Jenny apologized. "I will. But in my defense I believe it to be fact. Wait until you get to know him. He is so mean to me. He called me a bitch."

"That was totally out of line of him." Grace commented.

"Yes, and wait." Jenny nodded. "My two new outfits, left the seams loose. They fell apart the moment I tried them on. He blamed it on my weight problem."

Grace gasped.

"Imagine that." Jenny took a shivering breath. "Not that your honor is a big woman, but I'm sure you know the embarrassment of how I felt. I can't help it. I can't."

"I know." Grace reached down and patted Jenny on the hand. "I'm going to allow Mrs. Matoose's personal opinion to serve as viable testimonies since it deals with the character of another witness."

Danny grinned. "Thanks. No more questions."

Stan rose from the chair. "I'd like to talk to you Mrs. Matoose about when you were struck with the new virus."

"Objection." Danny stood up.

"On what grounds?" Grace asked.

"On the grounds that . . . that . . . we weren't talking about that. He changed the testimony subject."

Grace stared for a moment at Danny. "For the first time in this trial for you." She hit her gavel. "Overruled."

"Shit." Danny sat down.

Stan paced. "Mrs. Matoose, Dr. Hayes testified that you had the original strain of the virus. The only person in Beginnings. And because this strain is so powerful, had anyone else been infected with it too, it would have taken over their strain two or three as well. Is that your understanding?"

"Yes. That was how they concluded I was infected on purpose."

"Since your daughter, and I am sorry for your loss. Since Caroline had strain two, and never left your sight, Dr. Hayes concluded it was not administered by air. How did he explain to you how you were infected?"

"Injection or ingestion." Jenny answered.

"What was the incubation time frame he gave you?"

Jenny had to think. "I believe he said if I was injected, one hour before I got symptoms. Ingested, three hours."

"Correct." Stan spoke almost pleasantly to her. "Dr. Ellen Hayes believed it to be your husband that infected you, tell us how that was dismissed."

"Because of the time table of incubation. I hadn't seen John all day."

"Do you recall anyone hitting you with a syringe?"

"No." Jenny shook her head.

"Do you recall eating any food prepared by someone other than yourself that day?"

Jenny looked down.

"Mrs. Matoose? Do you?"

"Yes." Jenny answered softly as she raised her head. "Before she fell ill, she brought me a piece of her new recipe over. One slice. I believe the night before."

"When did you eventually eat it?"

"It was around three hours before I started feeling ill."

"Why do you remember the time span?"

"Because my day started out good. I remember eating the apple bread and everything emotionally fell apart with my husband."

"Who gave you the apple bread?"

Jenny closed her eyes. Her lips moved almost as if she silently begged him not to want her to answer. She didn't. Quivering mouth, face growing red, a tear rolled slowly down her cheek.

“Mrs. Matoose. Who gave you the apple bread.”

She sniffled, and swallowed and never opened her eyes or lifted her head.

“Andrea.”



## CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

### Beginnings, Montana

It was going to end up being a classic case of ‘me first’ between Johnny and Bev as they waited in the secret room hidden in Johnny’s pantry.

Anxiously breathing, biting her nails, Bev stared at the fax machine.

And Johnny, like a horse in the starters gate was ready to jump and he did when the machine rang once.

Both of them dove the short distance forward.

“Bev.” Johnny snapped moving her out of the way as the paper started to feed through. “My house. My fax.”

“My father.”

“So what” Johnny bodily blocked her as he watched the paper feed through. “Oh, wow. Oh, wow.”

“What? What? What?”

“Oh, wow.” Johnny lifted the paper as it finished. “Oh wow.”

“Johnny!”

Johnny turned around with a shitty grin and handed the fax to Bev. A simple note that said, ‘call me ASAP about this’ and a picture. Blurred and bad from the electronic trip, but clearly a picture of . . . Jess.

^^^

Purged. That was how Jenny felt. Absolutely purged after speaking to Andrea and getting her forgiveness over her testimony. Jenny would have done anything not have been on that stand. Anything. And she would have done anything not to get Andrea in trouble. She only hoped the loud passing of gas she did when she stepped off the stand made everyone forget what she had said. Danny assured her it might have.

But personally, Jenny felt she had dues to pay for some kind of wrong doing. Turning her back, even inadvertently on a woman who had been like a mother to her. She promised herself to do three acts of kindness.

The first one she completed with ease, telling Todd, according to Robbie’s suggestion, that since things weren’t etched in stone for her and Hal, if he wanted to pursue Hal, to go right ahead. Jenny gnawed with jealousy over that, but felt somewhat better. It was an act of kindness on her part.

She took dinner over to Frank, who was being the single father for the evening. She didn’t expect to have to bathe all five kids while she was there. But she did. She could have considered that another act of kindness, but that was asked of her and it didn’t count.

Third and final sent her to the social hall. The noisy place filled with music and laughter, surprised her. It was Thursday. But the scouting party arrived home triumphantly and the men seemed to gather in the hall. Perhaps a means of celebration, or even tension relief of a savage war that would be over soon.

She spotted Godrichson sitting at the bar alone. Joe, who usually perched beside him, wasn’t there. Squeezing her way through the partying men, Jenny hoped she would be heard over all the noise. Fitting in the space by Jason, Jenny

apologized to Denice for bumping her into Jess, then Jenny smiled pleasantly at Jason. She kept her voice raised and it still was buried beneath the noise. "Hi!"

"Hello."

"I think I have some good news for you! Personal good news."

"Really? What?"

Jenny leaned closer. "I was speaking to someone. She holds a high interest in you and wants to know if you'd be interesting in going out with her after this trial."

"A woman has interest in me?" Jason was shocked.

"She's very nice."

"Who is she?"

"Will you go out with her?" Jenny asked.

"Who?"

Jenny mumbled the name.

"I can't hear you?" Jason tugged on his ear. "Will I go out with who!"

"Judge Grace!"

Silence took over the hall.

There was no way Ellen could have been more self-conscious then at the moment she walked into the hall and dead silence hit. Then, after realizing everyone stared at Jason, she moved to the bar. She paused in her stride when she saw Jess there, next to and talking to, Denice.

Knowing that she was only there to steal some of that new sweet liqueur that was being made, Ellen went behind the bar. She moved in a rush, wanting to get out of there. After saying 'hi' to Sam, she immediately crouched down and looked for the new stuff under the bar. She grabbed the bottle, laid it on top, then as she stood, pulled the unused medicine bottle from her coat. She looked when she heard the giggle from Denice. "What?" Ellen asked.

"That's cute."

Ellen wiggled the bottle. "I just want a couple shots worth. Have you tried it." She smiled. "Taste like something in the old world we used to call Baily's. Anyhow, with it being cream day, I thought, go home, brew some coffee, a hit of this and cream."

"Sounds good." Denice lifted the booze bottle then handed it back to Ellen to pour. She looked to her left to Jess who quietly stared down at his drink. "Are you two fighting?"

"No." Ellen answered quickly. "So, Denice." She carefully poured the liqueur into the small bottle. "I thought you didn't like to go out and leave the baby alone at night."

"Curt's night." Denice replied. "I figured, just because I don't have an understanding . . . yet." She looked at Jess. "I'm still taking the time away as if I do."

"Oh." Ellen nodded and recapped both bottles. "So how is . . ."

Jess interrupted. "Your . . . granddaughter?"

Ellen shot a cold stare Jess' way when she answered. "Yes, my granddaughter. How is she."

"Good." Denice answered bubbly.

"Bring her over more." Ellen commented. "Well, I better go." Sticking the medicine bottle in her coat, she grabbed for the other bottle knocking into it and

sending that into the glass that set before Jess.

He jumped out of the way before it spilled on his lap.

"Sorry." Ellen smiled, put the bottle away and walked around the bar.

Setting his glass straight, Jess watched Ellen. "Excuse me, Denice." He hurried and caught Ellen before she got too far. "Wait."

"What?"

"Was that on purpose?"

"Absolutely not. Was the grandmother remark on purpose?" Ellen asked.

"Yes."

"Why are you pissed at me. You avoid me all day . . ."

"I was busy."

"Too busy to say hi when you saw me a minute ago."

"You didn't." Jess came back.

"I see you are moving onward with your romantic scholastic knowledge."

Ellen peered at Denice. "Don't you feel a little pedophilic?"

"You would think that I would since I *sag* everywhere. But, no." Jess folded his arms. "Actually, the youthful company is refreshing."

Ellen bit her bottom lip. "Yeah it's always good to communicate with someone on your own 'special education' mental level."

"I'm not with her for the conversation." Jess flashed his eyebrows.

"So you're going home with her."

"None of your business."

"You *are* going home with her."

"None of your business."

Just as Ellen was going to say something else, she felt the familiar squeeze of her arm. She smiled when Frank winked as he passed her. "Ah, Frank. Never mind, I think . . . I think I'll chase him down so I can have sex with a . . . real man. Excuse me."

Jess cringed in an 'ouch' and twitched his head as Ellen walked by him.

"Hey Frank." Ellen caught up to him. "What uh, what are you doing here?"

"Me?" Frank smiled. "I have a date with a woman." Before he could laugh, he swore he heard a growl come from Ellen, and he knew she did some sort of anger based noise when she was nothing but a blur moving from him. "El?" He saw the door to the social hall close. He hurried after her. "El."

She stopped in the street. "Go back to your date, Frank."

"El, I'm kidding." He approached her. "Wasn't that what Elliott did to you. I thought I'd do the same. Forget it. It's not funny." He placed his hands on his hips.

Ellen lifted her lowered head with a slight smile. "I guess when you think about . . . no. It's not funny." She walked to him.

"So we're having sex tonight,. Huh?"

"You heard?"

"Hell yeah." Frank chuckled. "And . . . I know now that the so-called lover that you have is imaginary."

"Where do you get that?"

"You told Jess you're gonna have sex with a 'real' man, that means, you've been having sex with a fake man which means . . . oh, man, El, you should have called me to watch."

"Huh?" Ellen got his perverted reference. "Oh. God, Frank."

"And no, El." Frank held up his hands. "As much as I'm the stud and would love to be the real man you have sex with. I can't. It's the Dean word thing. So. Oh!"

"What?"

"That's why I was at the social hall. I was looking for you. I have to go to work, Josh is at your house with the kids."

"O.K., I'll head on home." Ellen started to walk and she stopped. "Frank." Her voice softened as she neared him. "So you know ahead of time. Robbie . . . Robbie is going to be my new primary." Just as she took a step, Frank grabbed her arm.

"Tell me . . ." He spoke with graveled tone. "Tell me I didn't hear you just spurt those words to me as if they meant nothing to me." He saw when her eyes looked up to him, there was seriousness behind them. "Hell of a way to tell me. Hey, Frank, how are you, O.K., I'll head home, oh by the way, I'm going to be fuckin your brother."

"Frank."

"Does my brother know this?"

Ellen thought of what the best answer would be. "No. I'm going to ask him."

"Then let me give you a little advice." Frank lowered his face closer to hers. "Knowing how much I love you, knowing how much I want you in my life, the most fucked up thing you could do to me would be to end up with my brother. Fucked up El. So if you care even remotely about Robbie, don't ask him. I'll make his life a miserable hell if he accepts." Frank finally released her arm. "And that's a promise."

Ellen stood speechless as Frank moved on.

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Joe's hand smoothed across the papers that signified evidence covered. He leaned over them as they were spread out on his coffee table. "So that's it then." He looked to Danny.

Danny nodded, then glanced at Andrea who sat quietly. "That's it. Tomorrow closing arguments and the jury goes out."

Andrea sipped her tea. "Be honest Danny. How do you think it will go?"

"I think . . ." Danny exhaled. "I think we did the best we could and I think that we did well."

Andrea nodded and grabbed Joe's hand. The destiny of her fate was closer than she wanted it to be.

^^^

Going home alone was something Ellen could do, but preferred not to. She had experienced all her options--that she wanted to--for company. Curiosity brought her back to the clinic before going home, but the sight of Dean, moving sadly around his lab as he worked, made her stop there. No matter what had transpired between them, all always seemed to be forgotten every once in a while, when one of them silently, perhaps psychically called out for comfort or help. "It's only me." Ellen announced softly as she walked into the lab.

Surprised, Dean turned around from his work. "What are you doing back?"

"I just wanted to check the penis patient. And no, not look. And . . . I wanted to see if you wanted to come with me. See the kids. Help get them in bed, and maybe we can play some cards. Pick up our ongoing gin game. I still have the score card."

"Seriously?" Dean asked.

"Yes."

"Thanks, but . . . no. Thank you though."

"You're welcome. Just thought I'd ask. Frank had to work, I guess early." she moved to the door and stopped. "Oh, by the way. I want you to know I'm sorry that Danny makes you look so badly on the stand."

"That he does. I can't figure out how he knew about the hand on the belly . . ." He saw Ellen look away. "You told him."

"Well, Dean, . . . It's Andrea's line of defense."

"He tore me apart."

"You're not on Danny's favorite persons list."

Dean chuckled. "If it's a male, I'm not on their favorite person's list. Frank's the only man, and Henry, that talk to me. Joe hasn't spoken to me in weeks, Robbie either. Hal, every time he sees me I think he's contemplating beating me up."

"He is."

"Swell. But . . ." Dean spoke through a breath. "I plan on showing all of you who lost faith in me. Especially you El. Even if I never get you back, I need for you to know I never dogged you."

"Thanks." Ellen said softly and tried to leave.

"El."

Ellen stopped and turned around.

"I'm curious about something. When . . . when do you plan on getting a divorce from me. Not that I want one, I don't. But I want to be prepared for the self destruction pity I know I'll get thrown into."

"When?"

"Yes."

Ellen slowly shook her head. "I'm not." She turned and walked out.

Stunned, Dean was and then he hurried and darted across the lab and into the hall. "El."

Moving toward the door, Ellen turned. "Yeah?"

"You know what. Can you wait? I . . . I think I may just take you up on that card game. Just . . . wait." Dean held up his hand and flew into the lab.

Ellen stood there waiting, and watching as the lights in the lab slowly got dimmer until finally, darkness. Quickly and running to her, Dean came from the lab.

"Ready?" He asked, catching his breath.

"Yes."

"This, even just sitting together and playing cards . . . Is going to be nice. Thanks." Dean held open the door for her.

"You're welcome." Ellen left first then, for the first time in a long time, Dean and Ellen walked home together.

### Quantico Marine Headquarters

George's eyes were starting to burn as badly as the midnight oil. Staring for hours over design plans for airplane engines. Trying to figure out why he couldn't get a reaction out of the left engine. Not a function or reaction, nothing.

He knew it wouldn't be long before everything in one aspect of his plan would come to an end, and another phase would immediately begin. But there was still a chance that everything could blow up and not going accordingly. George did not want that to happen. So aside from trying to determine how to fix that plane engine, George sat trying to determine how to insure the viability of his plan.

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### New Bowman, Montana

It truly surprised Judge Grace being awoken from her dream of being Daisy from the *Dukes of Hazards*. But it surprised her more to find out it was for a phone call of 'extreme importance'. Not knowing and unable to figure out who would be calling her at the late hour of three-something in the morning, Grace placed on her robe and stumbled from her bedroom down the hall. Monica lifted the receiver from the table and handed it to Grace.

"Thanks you." Grace took the phone, covered the mouth piece and cleared her grogginess from her throat. She put the phone to her ear. "This is Judge Grace." Grace's heart thumped, and her eyes grew wide with terror. "Oh, My God."

## CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

October 30  
Beginnings, Montana

Complacent.

Dean was home. Even if only briefly, only short lived, he was back home. And to him there was nothing in the world like it. A part of him wished he hadn't spent the rest of the evening and then the night at the house with El and the kids. It made matters worse. It made him miss them so much more.

He couldn't recall the last time he had an evening like he did the night before. Sitting with the kids, playing, talking to Josh, then with Ellen. It had been long before their break up that, *that* had happened. There wasn't any, 'Honey, watch, daddy's trying to work'. Or, 'El, can you keep the kids from my office please?'. No requests for privacy. No wishing for peace. Dean had participated in something he had so much taken for granted, that it only took one eye-opening night for him to realize how much time he actually spent *not* doing it.

Home. But not for long.

He had to get to work, they were behind at the clinic, especially with Andrea being gone for her trial. Fall colds were setting in, stomach virus were plenty with all the new people that seemed to make it into Beginnings and New Bowman, and Dean did not look forward to the penis surgery he had to do at first light.

Stealing a shower in the quiet morning, Dean contemplated blowing off everything until he got to see his family one more time. Maybe even go through the old hecticness of rushing about, getting them to school and then himself to work. But he couldn't. He had to go.

Still damp, and wearing only his jeans, Dean emerged into the master bedroom. He lifted a tee shirt from the back of the door, placed it on then stared at Ellen sleeping. Had it been that long? Had she changed that much? Oddly, to Dean she laid on top of the covers, not under. And the quilt that covered her, Dean didn't recognize. Nor did he ever remember Ellen falling asleep while reading, let alone a book entitled '*Butterflies in the Field*'. He was sure he was going to ask her when he saw her at the lab. But at that moment, he had to leave.

So badly he wanted to lean over her, kiss her on the cheek, brush her hair and whisper goodbye, attaching the stock 'love ya.'. With everything he was, he wanted to pull an 'old days' and slip up behind her, close his eyes, snuggle and catch a few moments with her, along with a couple extra minutes of sleep. But Dean couldn't. All he could do was be grateful for the evening, the couch he spent the night on, and the eye-opening revelation of a situation he would have to work on to be better at, when, not if, he got his family back.

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Andrew's Air Force Base

Sputter. Sputter. Sputter . . . engines started. George grinned widely and

then . . . sputter. Sputter. Silence.

"Fuck. Shit. Goddamn son of a bitch bastard." George threw his tool. The bases were found. Things had been calm. He couldn't take a chance on waiting for the savages to hit somewhere else again. Yet he couldn't get the plane to work.

Knowing what he had to do, and hating to do it, George folded and gave in.

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Beginnings, Montana

"No." Henry was adamant, folding his arms. "Absolutely not. I'll talk him through it Joe. I'm not going."

Joe, sitting behind his desk, phone call on hold, first glared to a snickering Frank then back to Henry. "We have to solve this problem. Wiping out the two camps simultaneously is a way to insure no retaliation or at least limited. We know there are going to be savages still wandering around. But the bulk are situated and we need that other plane up and running."

"No."

"Henry, you are going to one day be leader . . ."

"Exactly. I can't chance going to the society. No. What if they kill me."

Frank rolled his eyes. "You suck. Baby."

"Easy for you to say. Tell him I'll talk him through it. But I'm not going."

"Going where?" Robbie asked as he walked into Joe's office.

So typically Beginnings that someone waltz's into Joe's office in the middle of a conversation. Joe peered up with irritation. "George can't get the other plane running. He needs Henry. I thought, Trials wrapping up., we'll send him there. One day. That's it."

Robbie shrugged. "I'll go." Amongst the 'nos' of Frank and Joe, and the 'yes' of Henry, he sat down. "Why?" Robbie lifted his hand. "I'm better than Henry to handle myself. I know how to get the jet running. I can leave the Dean missel there, so we'll eliminate the meeting drop off. Fuel is good. Tankers reloaded. Is that him on the phone."

"Yes." Joe said. "But . . ."

"Tell him I'll be there by late afternoon. I don't think he'll try anything funny. This is his problem too. Tell him, Dad." Robbie said serious. "Because I just got back from surveillance. And that's why I'm here. I saw a small stabilized camp about 150 miles south east from here. Computer says four hundred and twenty. That's a lot. That's a building camp and that's . . . not far. Stabilized. We have to take all three out. Soon. Tell him."

Joe stared at the faces in the room after the news of Robbie's recent find. With reluctancy and apprehension, Joe picked up the phone.

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'Because I wouldn't feel right if you didn't know. No, I did not go home with her. Jess.' There was something about that note left on her computer that made Ellen smile as she pulled it off, stared at it briefly and placed it in her lab coat pocket.

"Morning." Dean spoke in his entrance into the lab.

Ellen turned around. "Hey. Morning. How did the penis surgery go?"

Dean paused to snicker. "Fine." He moved closer to Ellen. "How are you?"

"Good."

"El." He stepped even closer. "I can't tell you how much last night meant to me."

"Dean." Ellen chuckled. "You make it sound like we had sex."

"It was better than that. It was bitter free. We talked, and hung out as if we never missed a beat."

"I'm glad you liked it." Ellen tried to get back to work, but Dean grabbed her arm gently. "Dean, what's wrong?"

"Do you think it would be asking too much to have that again sometime. It felt really good."

"Dean." Ellen dropped her head. "I'm trying to . . ."

"Move on. Yeah. But they're my kids."

"I give them to you."

"You're my wife." Dean's raising eyes met hers. "And by what you said, you will always be my wife."

"That's because I'm tired of getting divorced."

"I don't believe that."

"Dean. You got another woman pregnant. You refuse to own up to an affair. You lie. You lie badly."

"I resent that El." Dean said with edge. "I don't. I swear to you I don't lie. I have never slept with Bev and I have nothing to do with her." He softened his voice, reaching up to her cheek, letting his finger graze against her skin. "Believe me. I know in your heart you believe me."

So close he was to her, that if Ellen didn't remind herself that she hated him, she would have kissed him. And they drew closer. Was it unintentional? She felt herself moving into him.

"Dean!" Bev scolded loudly as she stepped into the lab and stopped. She had to keep her scouring face despite the fact she hid the smile that crept upon her from the thought that she couldn't have planned the interruption better. "If you aren't going to come home all night. I *wish* you would let me know." Knowing it was perfect, she folded her arms and walked out.

Ellen stepped away and to her computer.

"El you don't . . ." Dean looked to the door and to Ellen who suddenly turned cold. "Don't tell me you believe . . .oh, forget it." Tossing out his hand in defeat and knowing he couldn't win anyhow, Dean started to work.

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New Bowman, Montana

The silence in the courtroom said as much as the solace expression on Judge Grace's face. Danny Hoi knew something was up and he wished he could speak to Henry about it, because he saw it on Henry's face too. What was the delay. Why was she staring at her hands as if they held the answers to the world. Quietly, in a semi-crowded court that sat with anticipation, waiting for the dramatic closing arguments to a short trial that dealt out more information than a

lot of people wanted to know.

Then she spoke. After a slight clearing of her throat, Grace wiped the beading perspiration from her brow and stared out into the court room. Her hand tapped in nervousness.

"Sorry for keeping you waiting."

This is it, Danny thought, Time for Henry to make his lame argument then mine. Soon this thing will be over. He even started to contemplate in that split second of silence how long the jury would be out for.

Then Grace continued in her speaking. "I believe in the first case, this history breaking case, that we presented a fair trial. Yes, laws were developed, but I think the foundation that our forefathers laid was here with us. The scales of justice were at times unevenly balanced. But we have dramatized things, highlighted them and . . . hid some things as well. A vital witness that we all overlooked, including myself, has come forward. Now I thought all night about this." She spoke heavily. "I thought . . . would his testifying be important. The answer I came up with . . . yes. Another question I pondered was, do I actually want to do this to a fellow Untied Western Alliance citizen . . . my answer . . . no. But we decided that both sides would be presented. And I believe they have. Our council, ill experienced, learned and did their jobs well. But it would be unfair of me to ask them to question this witness. So therefore, I will. Three simple questions will be asked. Simple. I instruct the jury to use your own judgement in determining the validity of what he has to say."

Both Henry and Danny peered at each other with questionable looks. So confused.

Judge Grace nodded her head and the court assistant brought close to the microphone what appeared to be a small speaker phone, the cord extending way behind the bench. The assistant bent the microphone in, adjusted the volume and stepped away.

Judge Grace looked down to the notes. The three important questions she thought about all night. "We will swear you in," She glanced quickly at the speaker phone. "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help you God?"

"I do."

Joe's gasp of shock rang out in the room.

"State your name, and occupation for the record."

"President George Hadly. Eastern Caceres Society leader."

A mumble began to erupt in the court room and before it blew full-fledged, Grace hit her gavel. "Mr. Hadly, you came to me of your own free will to testify at this hearing. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"You understand I have three questions, not including these preliminaries, to ask of you?"

"Yes."

"We'll begin . . . First question . . . Is Andrea Winters-Slagel working in Beginnings as an inside spy for your society?"

"She is."

Andrea shrieked as she stood. "You son of a bitch! Sweet Jesus!"

"Mrs. Slagel." Grace warned. "Mr. Hadly, how did this arrangement come to be?"

"Andrea and I were lovers. On and off, a whirlwind romance. When we realized that we couldn't hide what I was all about, and what I needed Beginnings for, we devised that if I was thrown out or had to leave, she would be 'me' inside those walls. My eyes, my ears, my actions or at least find people to do the 'hands on' work."

Andrea could only close her eyes. So much pain was strewn across her face it was hard to hide it from the jury who kept looking at her for reaction.

Danny grabbed her hand. Joe reached forward laying a comforting grip on her shoulder.

Grace continued. "Last question. What can you tell us, Mr. Hadly, that you know of first hand, are some incidences that Mrs. Slagel played a big role in."

"Convincing incidents?" George questioned. "There are so many. Her husband Miguel's death is one of them. We were sure that Miguel would be asked to go to Colorado with Ellen. He did. It was planned out. I distinctively remember Andrea telling me she did not want him to return. See, we thought after Colorado, Beginnings would be no more. Kind of demented of her, but she would have rather have seen him dead then hurt him with their break up. Another incident that comes to mind is there are these cases that Beginnings has in their possession. I'm going to be honest, their contents are very valuable to us. Andrea has made it her mission to seek those out. She's had the strain to the new virus since it was hand delivered to her at the back gate nearly a year ago when we developed it. You see, John Matoose was wimping out on us, a warning had to be given. Andrea delivered that warning in the form of the virus. I believe she used, apple bread. The only problem was, Joe had eaten the apple bread as well. So when it came down to switching the blood, we were fortunate that our person hadn't gotten ill yet and was able to switch his tubes as well. That was Cindy." There was a pause. "And Dean Hayes. Little worm, sorry. She hates him as much as I do. I got angry with Andrea. I hated when she got her hands dirty, and she took a big risk trying to kill Dean that night in the mobile lab. First, she wasn't strong enough, no matter how little he was. Second, that was Rev. Thomas' project. Of course, Andrea told him about casting stones at Ellen. She always viewed her as the little sinner whore."

It was all so much to Andrea. She couldn't speak. The video testimony hurt her bad enough, George's words made her cry. Head down, the tears flowed.

And George was not finished. "Dean. I say Dean was Andrea's big motivation. She's kind of obsessed now with a situation he has himself into now. I'm not sure of all the facts, but he got someone else pregnant or something like that. I don't know, Andrea rambles about that. And Andrea . . . gets her digs in every chance she can with that. Pushing incidents, causing tension. You people don't know her like I do. Hell Cat. Grew up on the streets. Survival of the fittest and that is what Andrea is."

"Thank . . ." Grace noticed Danny Hoi's hand raised. "Mr. Hoi?"

"Can I please ask one simple question of my own. Just one, I think the jury needs an answer to." Danny said.

Grace, knowing it wouldn't happen, looked at Henry. "Does the prosecution object?"

"Absolutely not." Henry stated.

"Go on, Mr. Hoi." Grace told him.

Danny took a deep breath. "I think everyone in this court knows what you

are George and what you are responsible for. I don't need to brow beat that. So I won't.. Just . . . just tell us what you have to gain, what is your reasoning for coming forward."

"My reasoning? It's not for spite, bitterness or some sick trick. Andrea knows why I am doing this. I know you people won't kill her. I've been asking her for a long time to find a replacement for herself in Beginnings and come to the East. She refused. So what do I have to gain? I'm hoping for Andrea's conviction and ousting because I love her . . ." George's voice softened. "I want her home."

It was almost as if their closing arguments meant nothing. Both Danny and Henry felt it as they delivered them. And they both, like everyone else in the courtroom saw it on the jury's face. A look of true confusion and debate that wasn't there prior to George's testimony. Short, poignant closing arguments. Henry's delivered with a lack of luster. Danny's delivered with passion. But neither would know how much of a baring their points would hold until the verdict was reached. And like everyone, their hearts beat with anticipation and worry. All that could be said, was said. What could be shown was shown and all arguments that could be given were made. The trial was over. The unknown decision was pending . . . The jury was out.

CHAPTER SIXTY

Beginnings, Montana

Once more with the brush was all Jess thought as he hunched down before his bedroom mirror checking his reflection. He didn't want his hair to look too good, after all Ellen had just called out of the blue.

"Are you doing anything?" She asked. "Thought you might like some company . . . Great, be there in a minute."

Their short lived game of who could throw the better digs at who, was about to end. She had to have missed him as much as he missed her. They might not have had the makings of a great love affair or 'movie' romance but they had a good time and a closeness hard to find in Beginnings.

Not wanting to appear to anxious or happy, Jess knew in his mind he would act cool when she arrived. Not cold. Just standoffish enough to make Ellen say she was sorry first. And . . . it worked in Jess' favor that she was coming to his house.

The moment the doorbell rang, Jess was out of his bedroom, down the stairs and at the door. After a deep breath and getting rid of his smile, Jess flung the door open. "Hey." He said to Ellen who stood there.

"You look glad to see me." Ellen said.

"Actually, O.K., I am. When you called about the company, you called at the right time. I could use the company."

"Maybe a . . . date?" Ellen asked.

"A date?" Jess grinned. "Yeah. We can make it a date."

"Jess?"

"Yeah."

"It's uh . . . cold."

"Sorry." He opened the door wider, stepped aside and let Ellen walk in. Just as he went to close the door, she stopped him. "What?"

"Jess." Ellen peeked her head out the door, beckoning. "Come on, he's up for the company."

Jess had to wonder, was it the kids? Henry? Who? Jess stepped further back when, Brad, a UWA soldier stepped inside.

"Jess. Brad. Brad. Jess." Ellen introduced.

"Nice to uh . . ." Jess extended his hand. "Meet you." He shifted his eyes to Ellen. "El?"

"Huh?"

"What uh is . . ." Jess tarted to close the door. "Going . . ."

"Wait." Ellen stopped him and slipped between the two men toward the door. "I'm leaving."

Jess was confused. "I thought you asked me if I wanted company."

"I did." Ellen answered. "You said 'yes' Hence Brad. He's gay too, you know. Have fun." With a flashing smile, and a wiggle of her fingers, Ellen pulled the door closed as she darted out.

Away from the just closed door, Jess faced Brad and showed, probably one of the most uncomfortable smiles he had ever forced out in his life.



"Why do you keep looking at your watch?" Frank asked as he, Ellen and Dean sat at their dining table.

"I'm not," Ellen replied. "Take your turn."

"You are. And it's broken," Frank commented.

"No it's not," Ellen giggled.

"El. It's always been broken." He moved his game piece.

"You owe me rent," Dean spoke up. "And no, Robbie fixed her watch in the one time ripple, remember."

"Oh yeah" Frank nodded and handed monopoly money to Dean.

"What?" Ellen asked confused.

"Your watch isn't broken," Frank commented.

"No, it's not," Ellen said.

"So why do you keep looking at it."

"I have to go," Ellen stood up. "I've been here an hour. Josh doesn't watch the kids longer than that."

"El." Frank stood as well. "Come on. Oh!" he snapped his finger. "Let's pack it up and bring it over your house. Dean?"

"Sounds good to me," Dean started collecting the pieces.

"It doesn't . . . sound good to me," Ellen stated and moved to the door. "I had enough of you two." She reached for the door. "I have to get home. Thanks for letting me wait it out."

"Wait what out?" Frank asked.

"The assurance time."

"Uh." Frank dramatically gasped. "We've been used. She was waiting on . . ." He saw Ellen oddly open then shut the door. "El? What is it?"

"Did you know . . . did you know between Harold's house and Gemma's you can see Bev's?"

Dean grunted.

"Yes. No. I mean, why does it matter. We're not spying.." Frank said.

"Maybe you should ." Ellen commented. "That way you can see who all is going in and out of her house. For example," Ellen pointed. "Johnny. God I hope he's not getting involved with her." Shaking her head, Ellen left.

Dean looked up from the game he was putting away. "Why would Johnny be going into Bev's house?"

Frank shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe it's something medical."

"Medical." Dean's eyes widened. "Shit."

"No."

"Yes."

"It couldn't be."

"I'm telling you, it might."

Frank opened his mouth, paused and extended a finger. "Just so we know we're on the right wave length. Are you meaning . . ."

"She needed help," Dean raised his eyes.

"Not Johnny."

"You never know Frank."

"Stay here," Frank pointed as he stormed to the door. "I'll fuckin find out

myself.” Before Dean could stop him, not like he would, Frank was out the door as well.

^^^

“It sucks.” Danny commented.

“Sucks.” Richie mimicked only in a more demented way.

“Thought you’d want to know.” Danny stood from the couch in the skills room, “I mean, when you were in control of your faculties, you were a help.”

“Help.”

“It just sucks.” Danny swung out his arm.

“Sucks.” Richie swung out his, knocking into Danny.

Danny chuckled. “Cute.” He moved across the skills room. “I’ll let you know when the jury comes in. Not that you’ll understand.”

Richie tilted his head with his new typically confused look.

“I promise as soon as I get my head clear, and this George conspirator thing is over, I’ll fix that microchip of yours. Until then, anything I can get you?”

“Bev.” Richie snickered. “Knows.”

“No. No.” Danny shook his head. “I can only get a new chip, your nose is fine. Besides she has a girl nose Rich.”

“No.” Richie shook his head drastically following Danny down the main corridor.

“Yes. She’s a girl.”

“Bev.”

“Rich, get over it.” Danny reached for the keypad.

“Dad.” Richie yelled. “Dad!”

The buzz of the containment door made Danny stop. He made himself smile as he turned around. “Thanks for looking up to me like that. But I’m not that old. Night Rich.” With a tap to Richie’s cheek, Danny smiled again and walked out.

Richie growled and hit himself on the head several times. He twitched once, rubbed his chin and headed back to the skills room. “Sh . . .sh . . . sh . . . shit.”

^^^

It was a Frank-like booming opening of her front door and it made Ellen shriek, drop her book and nearly fall face forward when she sprang up from the couch.

“You!” Jess pointed at her in anger and slammed the door closed.

“Um . . .” Ellen nervously smiled. “How was your . . .”

“Where do you get off!” Jess watched her back up and he moved to her, stepping over the coffee table.

“Jess look.”

“Where do you get off calling me up, asking me if I want company then bringing me over a date!”

“I was trying to . . .”

“What! Do you think what I am, was, whatever . . . is a big joke!”

"Shut up!" Ellen screamed. "God!! Can I explain without you interrupting?"

Jess barely could speak through his outrage. He nodded though his huffing breaths.

"All right. First off, I'm going to own up here to a . . . a jealousy thing. Damn it, I laid the ground work for a great heterosexual guy and I'm sorry I don't want another woman reaping the benefits of my hard work. So . . ." She lifted a finger. "So . . . Knowing you, and I'm not making a gay reference here. Knowing what you are searching for, the companionship thing and knowing what you need, that part was a gay reference. I decided to see if I could help in a way that wouldn't make me jealous. A way that would really work for you. Brad . . ." she steered back when Jess moved to her even closer. "Brad, he's gay." Ellen spoke upbeat. "Always has been. Like you so it wouldn't be like an acquiring skill. And . . . and Jess, he wants the same thing. He's cute. He's built, young and funny. What more could you ask for."

"You."

"What about me."

"You. That's what I ask for. You."

"I'm not a man."

Jess growled as he tossed his head back. "El. Haven't I told you sex isn't important. Huh? You and I, we get along great. The nights we spend just sitting around, talking, watching movies, that . . . that is what companionship is. We cuddle. That feels good. We have sex, El, that feels good too."

"Jess, it will never fulfill you. And you'll eventually have to find it elsewhere and move on. And that is why I ended it."

"Because you're afraid I'll move on."

"Yes." Ellen nodded. "I was getting close. I was liking our time. The spoiling. Hell, come on, I was going to go out on a limb and really be the slut and try two understanding in Beginnings with you and Robbie. But that wouldn't make you happy. I like you, I want you to be happy. And I also could see myself getting hurt. I've been hurt a lot, and if I can avoid it now, I will."

"You're no making sense, only excuses."

"No." Ellen shook her head. "No, can't you see. It doesn't matter what I do. It will never fulfill you one hundred percent and eventually, you'll follow the gnawing at you and seek out what you need."

"I can say the exact same thing about you and trust me, I'm more apt to be right about you." Jess said.

"How?" Ellen asked with a snap. "How can you even go there. I'm talking about not fulfilling and you having to move on."

"So am I."

"Jess, you've lost it. Pay attention. I won't fulfill you because I am not a man."

"No you pay attention. I won't fulfill you because I'm not Frank."

Ellen opened an argumentative mouth, then tilted her head. "O.K., you got a point."

Jess tossed his head back. "Thanks."

"You brought it up." Ellen walked over and plopped on the couch.

"Think about it." Jess walked to the couch and sat next to her. "Dean too. No matter what, no matter who your with you always end up with them. Frank

especially, your whole life. You needed to get that Frank fix even if you were married. That will never change. So, no matter who you are with in Beginnings, eventually, with a little help from them two, it will end up being Frank and Dean. I said it before, who ever gets involved with you has to know this.”

“Just like who ever got involved with you, should know your secret as well.”

“Absolutely. Could you see . . .” He grabbed her hand. “Could you see me saying to Denice, hey, I love our understanding time, but, a part of me is going to go crazy if I don’t get what I really need. I have to move on because I need to touch or get that feel you can’t give me.”

“She’d freak.” Ellen said.

“She’d freak. I’d lose the companionship thing too and that is so important. You on the other hand . . .”

“Would probably bribe Robbie.”

Jess laughed a short shriek. “That’s good.” he smiled. “You know what I think> I think you and I should just go with it. I think we should forget what we are and what we need and enjoy what we started. Have fun at least until one or both of us say, ‘hey, look, I’m being pulled to move on’.”

“I could deal with that.”

“That’s probably because you’ll be the one to say it first.” Jess leaned into her. “Tell me you’re gonna stop playing homosexual match maker with me.”

“How about I stop, until you need me to. And I’ll help. I promise.”

“Then I promise the same. I’ll help you too.” Softly, like the smile on his face, Jess kissed Ellen. “So, do we forget these past couple days and just . . . continue?”

“I’d really like that.”

“Good.” Jess said perky and reached down to the floor lifting up the fallen book. “Then let’s continue.” He sat back and Ellen leaned into him, scooting closer when he put his arm around her. Jess opened the book. “Continuing.”

^^^

Just as Henry brought the glass to his mouth to take another drink of the hard whiskey he indulged in, a hand took it away. He followed the hand up as he slumped at the social hall.

Hector leaned into he bar. “You asked me once not to let you get out of control.”

“Yeah, but I feel I need that.” Henry tried to reach again but Hector pulled it away once more.

“I don’t know who’s worse. You or . . .” He turned and pointed across the hall. “Trish.”

Henry peered over, Trish was sleeping at the table. “She is.”

“What is it they say, it’s not over till the fat lady sings.”

“It went . . .” Henry slurred slightly in his words. “It went so bad today.” His hand dropped to the bar. “I didn’t expect that phone call. None of us did.”

“I heard. Word gets around fast. Henry.” Hector leaned in to him. “Risking a chance of losing a new friend, all this evidence that fell in your lap. All this bad stuff that points at Andrea. Maybe it’s not all coincidental like you and the other originals think.”

“What is everyone else saying?”

Hector didn’t want to answer, he only tossed up his hands. “Opinions differ. But . . . there’s no point getting down now, or upset now. When the time comes to celebrate or drink yourself into a stupor then . . .” Hector held up the glass. “I’ll make sure you get home. Until then . . . the old saying?”

“It’s not over until Grace belts it out.”

“Ouch.” Hector laughed and laid the darts on the bar. “You’re talking about Jason’s new woman. He may get mad. Let’s play.”

Nodding, and still not in a ‘playing’ mood, Henry was up for anything that would take his mind off his worries. And grateful to Hector for not letting him find that answer in a bottle, Henry swiped up the darts and followed him to the board.

~~~~~

Bev stared at the small folded paper. “Now?”

Johnny threw his head back groaning. “No. Do I have to take that? No.” He warned.

“But Johnny . . .”

“Bev. Timing is everything all right.” He argued. “You give that to Jess when the time is right. And not before. God . . . I hate leaving you alone. And you’re sure no one saw you typing this tonight.”

A flashback of Josephine glancing over at her in the library as she used the typewriter, hit Bev and just as she was about to answer ‘maybe’, she remembered the intoxicated state Josephine was in. “No and I don’t understand what the big deal is. Tonight. Tomorrow. What?”

“Jumping the gun can be deadly at a time like this. Tension is high. And we have a lot to get ready if they find Andrea guilty. We have to leave as well. Your father wants us out.”

Bev smiled. “Finally, good news. What about the other team members.”

“That note will secure Jess. He’ll have to secure the others. Definitely.”

“But I have a few people in mind. Maybe I can use my information against . . .”

“No.” Johnny stopped her. “No. Bev. Each person as to be thought through. You approach the wrong person. It’s over. And . . . I have to go.” He walked across her livingroom to the door. “Talk to you later.” As soon as he opened it, Johnny froze. “Dad.”

Frank peered down with his arms folded. “We have to talk.”

Johnny hoped the second he took to calm himself wasn’t obvious. “O.K.” He stepped out and pulled the door closed. “What uh, what’s up?”

“What the fuck are you doing in her house. An hour John. One hour. What’s up with that?”

“Dad.” Johnny snickered. “Please.”

“You know she’s starting shit. So you wanna tell me why you’re getting involved.”

“Exactly.”

“What.”

“Exactly. That’s why I’m getting involved.”

Frank looked confused.

"Dad." Johnny pulled him away from Bev's house and whispered. "I feel bad for Dr. Dean. And I know she's up to something. I just thought you know, see what I could find out. I didn't want to tell Dean and get his hopes up."

"John, that's very nice of you." Frank laid his hand on his back. "Find anything out?"

"Not yet." Johnny started to walk with his father. "But I think I'm making progress. She's starting to trust me."

"Excellent. Dean's gonna be glad to hear he has some one else on his side." So proud of his son's willingness to help, Frank slowed down his stride to enjoy his walk with Johnny.

~~~~~

The metal lighter shutting close seemed to blare out in the silent bedroom. Joe took a long first hit of his cigarette, sitting in the chair watching Andrea sleep. She tossed and turned and he had to wonder if maybe she was really sleeping. She hadn't said anything all night. Very little to anyone, perhaps that was her way of keeping in her fears. Especially after hearing the jury was not reconvening. Which meant, they were close to a decision. Andrea's reactions were hard to tell. Solemn, sad, worried. If Andrea was a book, Joe felt illiterate because he just couldn't read her.

Deciding air--even though it was cold--would be good, Joe slipped on his shoes, grabbed his shirt off the bottom of the bed and placed it on as he walked from the bedroom. His home was quiet, with everyone bedded down for the night. Across the dark livingroom lit by only his glowing cigarette, Joe walked to and out his front door. He tried to not let the screen door slam, but it slipped from his fingers and he cringed.

"It never fails." Denny's young voice spoke softly from the porch. "When you try to be quiet, you can't."

Joe looked at the young man sitting on the step and he walked to him and joined, sitting next to him. "Well you did a good job. I didn't know you were up."

"I couldn't sleep."

"Worried?"

"Yeah. That and there's these weird noise coming from Ellen's house. And banging too."

"Christ." Joe rubbed his hand down his own face.

"I was going to go over to see if everything was all right. But I saw Jess come out and he came back like ten minutes later so I guess he's holding down the fort."

"Or Ellen."

"Huh?"

Joe shook his head and looked over to Ellen's home. "Quiet now."

"Yeah." Denny stared down to his bare feet. "Joe?"

"What's up?"

"I'm gonna be sixteen next week. You haven't let me go to the trial at all, or mom. I want to be there when they make the decision."

"Denny. There's no need to. The decision will be made, we'll come home and Mom will try to put it behind her."

"That's if they don't find her guilty."

"That's the decision they'll make." Joe tossed his cigarette.

"But . . ."

"Denny."

"No, Joe. She's my mom. I'm scared. What happens if they find her guilty. What then, What happens to my mom?"

Joe stared out into the night for a minute before closing his eyes and placing his arm around Denny. He didn't answer because Joe just didn't know what to say.

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

October 31
Beginnings, Montana

Loudly and with a hint of a chuckle, Robbie blurted a ‘burr’ as he walked into Joe’s office just after first light. “Excellent dawn flight.” He shut the door. “Clear as a bell out there. Just sailed through. Eight more tents set up in the new savage base. Not going anywhere.” He ripped a sheet from the clipboard and hung the board on the side of the filing cabinet. “So it’s safe for me to plan that trip east with George. But of course I’d like to . . .” Robbie finally looked at his father. “Wait until . . .” His speech slowed as he walked to the desk where his father sat slumped staring at the phone. “Until the verdict is reached. What’s wrong?”

“Don’t have to wait long.” Joe looked slowly up. “They jury’s in.”

^^^

Though Jess really would have liked to stay all night at Ellen’s he was glad he didn’t. Or else he wouldn’t have been home in bed when Frank came for him. Jess was needed to fill in, the entire Slagel family was going to New Bowman. Andrea’s fate had been determined.

He himself felt the pounding of his heart just thinking about it. That combined with Robbie’s decision to leave immediately for Washington D.C. made Jess a nervous wreck. But he had to contain it. He had to run security. That was where his mind had to be.

Normal routine before staring his shift, Jess stopped at the security building, signed in on the clipboard and went to his locker. Unlike a lot of the other security men, Jess kept his hardware there. Radio, shoulder harness, work coat. Reaching for the door, he saw the whiteness of it poking out of the vent slots on the metal locker door. Curious, Jess reached up and pulled the small folded slip of paper out. His name was typed on the front. He didn’t think much of the note or who it was from. More than likely it was from Frank or Joe telling him something extra he had to do. And when Jess read it, Jess’ heart dropped. He literally spun in shock and slammed into the locker. His arm fell as he banged his head back. All he kept thinking was he didn’t read what he just read. He didn’t. And then he looked again. It was all true.

The note was for real. Times up . . .

--You know what you were
meant to do. You know why you
are here. The jury’s reached
the verdict. It’s time. Be
ready. Be willing. Or be
exposed. You can get a hold
of us. You have the means to
the number. In one week, you
call us. If you don’t, we

call Joe. You don't want
that. The Eastern Caceres
Society.--

^^^

Kids off to school, Ellen made her way to town. There was no way she could even try to go to the clinic and work before hearing the verdict being read. The weird sense of 'doom' hit Ellen as she saw the truck parked outside the clinic, Robbie by the back with Dean.

"Please be careful with that." Dean instructed Robbie. "Please."

Ellen slowed in her walk, knowing full well what they had in the truck. She saw the missel secured and the case next to it. Dean had just loaded the deadly tip.

"I will." Robbie replied.

"And you be careful on your trip." Dean extended his hand and shook Robbie's.

Robbie noticed Ellen. "Hey, El, riding with me?"

"Um, no. I told Frank I'd hop a ride with him. I'm meeting him in a couple minutes. Besides, there's something about riding with you in a moving vehicle equipped with death."

Robbie snickered. "Good one." He let out a breath. "Well, I'm heading out. See you there." he lifted his hand in a wave goodbye and walked around to the front of the truck.

So nervous Dean looked to Ellen as she approached him. He watched Robbie drive away.

"What about this is worrying you?" Ellen asked him.

Dean sprang from his thought and looked at Ellen. "I'm sorry what?"

"Whoa." Ellen raised her eyebrows. "I'm going to go with just about everything is bothering you."

"Stressful day."

"Yeah." Ellen placed her hands in her coat pockets. "So you got the tip ready?"

"Yep. I'm the only one I want touching the stuff."

"Kind of a scary thought, with all that's on your mind, you held in your hand the single element that could have wiped us all out."

"Thanks." Dean shook his head. "Let's just hope I didn't just make our death and hand it over to the enemy to drop on us."

"No. You can't think that way. I trust Joe. I do. He made this call. He wouldn't if he slightly believed it would be turned on us."

"I guess you're right. But then again I can't get reassurance from Joe. He speaks only business to me."

"I'm sorry." Ellen stepped closer.

"Don't be. I'm laying in a bed I didn't make. And . . . I'll prove it. I found out last night, someone else is helping me out."

"Who?"

"I'd rather not say." Dean turned to go in the clinic.

"Dean." Ellen grabbed the sleeve to his jacket. "Why aren't you coming today."

"I can't." Dean spoke softly. "I really can't. It's a family thing and I don't belong with your family anymore."

"Dean." she moved into him. "Please come. It's not about me. Not about my family. It's about Andrea. And we should be there to cheer when the verdict is not . . ." She saw Dean look away. "You think they're convicting her."

Dean's eyes shifted to Ellen. "I think George's phone call could have secured that."

"Then you should be there. Because if that happens, she goes straight from the court room into jail until the sentence is handed down. Come with me. Walk with me to Frank's jeep, ride with us."

"I can't." Dean shook his head. "Because if God forbid they find her guilty, I helped them to reach that verdict. I'll have to live with that for the rest of my life. I don't want to live with the memory of Andrea's face when she hears it."

"You are way too down on yourself. You didn't do anything You know . . ." Softening her voice, Ellen placed her face close to Dean's. "If I recall, Danny pretty much left the jury with the impression that you were nothing but a liar, a cheat and a manipulator."

Softly Dean chuckled. "Gee, thanks."

"I always know what to say."

"Why are you being so nice? It hurts El."

"I'm sorry. But I love you. I always will, no matter what."

"I love you too."

"Come with me." Ellen whispered. "Please."

"You know . . ." he chuckled.

"What?"

Dean laughed a breath in their closeness and ran his fingers through his hair. "I'm standing here. Loving this. Wanting to hug you. And I know the moment I do this . . ." He reached his arm out slipping his hand around her waist to the small of her back.

"Dean!" Bev's call out carried across the street.

"That . . ." Dean nodded "Happens and you run away."

Ellen smiled. "Not this time."

"Dean." Bev called out again.

Stepping directly into Dean, seeing the question on his face along with the slight smile, Ellen secured his arm tighter to her and kissed him, never seeing the clenched fist Dean made as he vowed to steal that moment and not let her go.

~~~~~

"And your sure?" Jess asked Mark, leaning over his shoulder in tracking.

"Positive." Mark answered.

"History shows nothing at all yesterday or the day before."

"A few small animals." Mark replied. "Nothing that could even be close to the size of a human."

"Could history have been erased?" Jess asked.

"Nope. Gate could be shut down, power off. But we would have had that read out. Why, do you suspect some one came in?"

"No. No." Jess stood up. "I was out walking around last night and I thought I saw something. I wanted to see if it was my imagination. Next time I won't uh . . . drink so much. Thanks." He gave a pat on Mark's back and walked from tracking. Outside he looked at the note again. If no one came into Beginnings or near the gate to deliver the message, that meant one thing. The note definitely was created from within.

^^^

New Bowman, Montana

"I thought you said it looked good." Frank whispered leaning into Dean as they sat in the courtroom.

"I never said that. I said we had a moment."

"She's having one with Elliott now."

Dean glanced over to Ellen who sat with Elliott. "Maybe it's a New Bowman thing. His town, his time."

"Fuck that." Frank said. "I'll steal his ass, get him in Beginnings, he's on our territory, the man is history."

"The man is close to history anyhow Frank, he's dying. Have some compassion."

"Me?" Frank scoffed. "Listen to you."

"What?"

"What you just said." Frank told him.

"O.K. Maybe I said it a little cold. But he is."

"Fuck that. He doesn't want anyone to know, so he's not treated differently. I won't treat him differently. I'll make his life hell when he's with her."

Dean shook his head.

"But there is a bright side." Frank said.

"What's that?"

"If they do stay together, it won't be for very long."

Grumbling, Dean stood up and moved.

"What?" Frank lifted his hands.

Slowly they filed into the courtroom. Each person that entered added more tension to the anxiety already in the room. The courtroom was more packed than it had been the entire week of the trial.

Andrea wore a brand new blue suit. She looked confident sitting at the table with Danny and Trish. Joe sat behind her, Denny next to him.

Danny kept looking at his watch. How much longer? His heart couldn't take it. A usually relaxed and carefree Danny was on the verge of a nervous break down. He only wished he was the one giving encouragement to Andrea instead of her giving encouragement to him.

The 'all rise' seemed to play deeply and slow in Danny's blood filled ears as Judge Grace entered. He looked to the jury who stared ahead and not at Andrea. Danny hoped that was a jury tactic, not a sign.

"Good morning." Grace spoke softly. "I thought we'd pull a special Saturday session so we could get this trial over with and everyone's lives could



return to normal.” She looked to her left. “Will the jury foreman stand?” She waited until he did. “Have you reached a verdict.”

“We have your honor.” He answered.

With a nod, Grace sent the court assistant to the jury box to retrieve the folded verdict. The court assistant brought it to Grace and laid it before her.

Grace held the verdict in her hand. “Will the defendant please rise.”

After getting a squeeze from Danny, Andrea stood up. She reached back behind and grabbed Joe’s hand. She stood tall. Strong and ready.

Grace opened the verdict. “In the matter of The Untied Western Alliance state of Beginnings versus Andrea Winters-Slagel.” She took a breath “We the jury, find the defendant . . . guilty.”

## CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

### Quantico Marine Headquarters.

“Approximately four hours sir.” Steward told George. “Robbie Slagel stated he wants to get the job done before sentencing on Monday.”

Slowly George nodded as he sat down. “I don’t understand the sentencing. Johnny hasn’t called. What did Bev say?”

“She said he still isn’t back yet.”

“Andrea was found guilty. She gets kicked out. What’s the choice. They can’t incarcerate her there.” George huffed. “All right. Finish preparing for the Slagel arrival then have a team get everything ready for Andrea. Also notify a transport team to be ready ASAP to pick her up. Though I hate the tension she went through. One good thing . . . she’ll be where she should be . . . here.”

^^^

### Pandemonium.

That was the word Joe would use to describe the feel of that courtroom after the verdict was read. He could still see, hear and feel it. The rush of vocal objections, Andrea’s silent fall forward into the table as she passed out. The tears. The shock.

Joe’s heart was broke. Twelve men who did not know the Andrea he did, in one instant changed her life and his, by finding her guilty of working for the society.

Joe hated the thoughts he had. Though he believed in his wife one hundred percent, he heard the evidence. He couldn’t be angry with the New Bowman jury. Because he knew if he too were in their position, he probably would have come up with the exact same verdict.

“Joe.” Danny spoke sadly as he approached him.

From his curb seat, Joe looked up. “Hey.”

“God, Joe. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“No.” Joe stood with a grunt. “You . . . you did the best you could. I know that. Andrea knows that.”

“I want to believe that. I went with every angle Joe. I’m . . . I’m no lawyer.”

“This isn’t the old world court of law either. The evidence . . . well, it was pretty overwhelming.”

Danny nodded sadly and placed his hands in his pockets. “I always look at every situation. And . . . though I prayed, Joe, I prayed that I would win this. Hell, Henry and I even tried to cheat.”

Joe snickered. “I know.”

“But even with wishing and praying for the good, I didn’t forget the bad. I thought about it. And I need. I need to talk to you.”

Hearing the seriousness in Danny’s voice, Joe was all ears.

^^^

Ellen's lips pressed hard to Robbie's cheek and she seemed to squeeze the life out of him.

"El." He grunted through the tight embrace. "I really have to . . . go."

"I know." She stepped back. "Please be careful."

"Hey, it's me." Robbie looked to Frank who stood behind her. "Big brother,"

"Little brother." Frank stepped to Robbie and embraced him. "I'm proud of you. Come back."

"You bet."

"And remember." Frank pointed.

"I will be the eyes and ears of Beginnings. Call me the invited spy. God, how long has it been since I been to Quantico."

Ellen, horrified, looked at Frank. "You're making him spy?"

"Hell yeah."

"Robbie." Ellen called out worried.

"I'll bring you a souvenir." He grinned, moved to the door of the jet, and before he embarked, Robbie gave a thumbs up.

^^^^

"Come in." Grace looked up from her paperwork on her desk.

Joe and Danny stepped in the office.

"Mr. Hoi. Mr. Slagel." Grace set down her pen. "Have a seat. Are they still getting Andrea situated?"

"You can say, Andrea's getting herself situated. She's kind of wanting to be alone with the kids right now." Joe closed the office door. "You look busy."

"Beginnings Domestic squabbles."

"Your problem now." Joe said as he took a seat. "You decide the fate."

After a quick shift of her eyes to a oddly silent Danny, Grace nodded. "Is the key word 'fate'?"

"You could say that." Joe said. "Monday a lot of testimonies will be read, people will speak on behalf or against Andrea. All of which trying to sway you and the jury to make the best punishment decision."

"And you are not here to sway me?" She asked.

"No." Joe answered.

Danny took over. "As I understand. The option to oust Andrea is not an option. She will go. The decision you and the jury jointly make will be . . . when, where, will we aid her, will we take her, will we send her out cold . . . The whole nine yards. We just . . . we just came up with another option for you to consider."

"Another option?" Grace folded her hands and leaned into her desk. "I'm listening."

^^^^

### Beginnings, Montana

"Allen Boyens." Jess said the name almost frightened.

It still didn't make sense to Ellen. The name. The note. The look on Jess'

face and state she found him in when she returned. He waited anxiously, almost in pain for her. "Jess. I don't understand."

"Oh, God." Jess started to pace about her empty livingroom. "Help me El."

"I will. Please tell me what's going on. Please." Ellen begged him.

"I'm being pressured. And I know what I have to do. But if I don't do what the note says, I will lose everything."

"Jess. You aren't making any sense. Do you know who wrote the note?"

"No." He shook his head. "Obviously someone that knows about me."

"Then tell me."

"You have to give me your word, you'll believe me."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Your word." Jess stopped pacing and laid his hands on her arms. "Your word."

"You got it."

Jess lifted the note and crumbled it. "My name is Allen Boyens. Jess . . . Jess was my little brother. I took his name hoping I was so far away from it I wouldn't be traced."

"Traced?"

"When I worked for the society. I worked in their farming division. But it isn't farming as you think. It was . . . breeding. I would herd the animals. I was one of the men responsible for bringing in the women they would lobotomized, place in hibernated sleep and use only as breeders. Bodies for breeding. I hated it. I hated every second. But in the society, you get a job, you don't get out of it."

"So you were stuck doing this." Ellen said. "Understandable. You were confused. This is nothing that . . ."

"No." Jess shook his head. "I wanted out. I made a deal." He lifted the note again. "My deal. My end to my life in Beginnings." Jess lowered his hand. "For three months I was trained. Eighteen hours a day. Trained, tested, trained, retested. I had to be perfect. I was. What I was taught in those three months was . . . the layout of Beginnings. How it worked. Who of importance lived there. Their known weaknesses, their strengths. Everything. I was trained to be a spy. None of my men knew. I was supposed to defect to Beginnings right after our attack. I did. I was supposed to be trusted. I was. And then . . . I was supposed to work for the society against Beginnings. I can't." Jess backed up from a silent Ellen. "I didn't want any parts of the society. When they told me how I would leave them and live here, I grabbed it. I figured, no one here knew what I looked like, at least the person working for George. I thought I could pretend to do what they wanted and once I was in here, I would say 'screw the society'."

"But someone knows about you."

"Obviously. El, you have to believe me. It was never my intention to ever be a spy. It was my full intention to take my opportunity to get the hell away from the society and run with it. How . . . How could I turn my back on this place. I fell in love with Beginnings the moment I started looking at pictures of it. The moment I learned about the lives here. The smiles on people's faces. This place this was what I was searching for when the society found me. Not what the society offers. I want to live here. I don't want to lose it."

"Oh Jess."

"Tell me you believe me. Please."

Ellen stared into the begging eyes of Jess. "I do. I believe you." Barely did she complete her words and Jess had embraced her. She felt it all right then and there in that embrace. Jess was telling the truth and he needed help.

"What am I gonna do? If I go to Joe . . ."

"Right now he won't buy it." Ellen said. "And even if he does. He'll be pissed you weren't straight with him. Then . . . Word gets out."

"I no longer will be trusted by anyone. I'm gone El, either way."

"Give me the note." Ellen took it and opened it. "All right. We have one week. There aren't many typewriters in Beginnings. We start there."

"I already did."

"And?"

Jess closed his eyes. "Mary at the library said. She said yesterday evening, Andrea . . ."

"No."

"Yes." Jess nodded. "She was in there using the typewriter because hers is taken as evidence."

"Fuck!" Ellen stomped. "Fuck! This is not good. Whoever is working for George just added another conviction knot to Andrea's belt. They knew she was in there."

"El? What if . . . what if it was Andrea?"

Ellen handed the note back to Jess. "I refuse to believe that. Anyhow, we have one week. While I'm back in New Bowman, I'll try to think of other ways."

"I'll do the same."

"I'll call you tonight. I promise."

Jess nodded.

"It'll be all right." Ellen assured. "We'll get through this. I'll help you. And if we find nothing out in a week. We'll both go to Joe. I'll stand beside you."

"As much as I appreciate that. I won't let you."

"Why?" Ellen asked.

"Because I don't want people not to trust you. And they'll think your judgement is clouded."

Snickering, Ellen waved Jess off. "Oh that's crazy. I'm an original."

"True. But in the people of Beginnings eyes. Those who truly hate George. You El . . ." Jess reached up and laid his hand on her cheek. "You are the original who's been sleeping with the enemy."

^^^

#### Andrew's Air Force Base

The teams had worked hard to clear a viable runway for Robbie's landing. Amongst other things they worked hard to do. Accommodations, food, materials Robbie said he needed.

George stood with Steward listening the trailing off engines of Robbie's plane. Watching the plane that had just landed.

"I have to admit." Steward said. "I think this is a monumental day. A peacetime movement."

"Yeah. Yeah." George said. "Temporary peacetime. I want Beginnings back. I need that communications set up." He looked up to the sky. "It's getting dark. Do we have those spotlights ready?"

"Yes. So there should be very little problem with getting started right away." Steward didn't want to own up to George that he felt nervous watching the top of the jet open. He actually was excited about meeting Robbie.

"Christ." George stated when Robbie stepped from the jet. "I forgot how big he was."

"I'm shocked you aren't trying to come up with a way to keep him for us."

"Yeah, well, if it wasn't in our best interest to work with him, hell I'd knock his big ass out, tap into that brain of his and make him ours." George put on a fake greeting smile when Robbie drew closer. He walked to meet him. "Robert. How was your flight."

"It was good. Wow. D.C., been awhile." Robbie looked around then down to George. He squinted a little from the setting sun. At first he thought the brightness of the beams caused it, then he saw the vision before him was real. Deep down inside of him, Robbie searched for those manners he learned as a youngster. Being polite, hiding any cringing or facial expression that could make a person feel bad. Robbie knew Joe taught him well. And he tried, he really tried not to let his mouth part in the pre-giggle mode when he saw George. He was tilted some, the left side of him dropping in a melted sort of way. His hand moved but it clearly showed the signs of shriveling. Robbie knew it worked because George reached up and snapped two of those hideously crooked fingers in front of his face.

"Robert."

"Oh. Sorry." Robbie shook his head and snapped out of his mesmerized stare of George.

"Everything all right?" George asked.

"Yeah. I was just thinking," Robbie's mouth lifted in a smile. "Man, did Dean and Frank fuck you up." He whistled. "O.K., let's go see the jet. Is that it." Robbie pointed and walked by George and Steward to another awaiting aircraft.

George growled in irritation and turned to follow Robbie, never seeing the snickering look upon Steward's face.

^^^^

Even though everyone was in custom, laughing, talking and dancing, there were a few things really missing from the Halloween party at the social hall; Robbie from the Starters, they played without him. Danny Hoi, who worked hard to plan the party. In fact Danny was no where to be found. Almost all originals were missing.

Except Henry. He wanted to drink. He came to the hall because he hated drinking alone, yet he sat, by himself at a table. Head down toward the glass he kept refilling. Hand holding back his hair. Head swarming, and he felt sick to the pit of his stomach. Henry was getting drunk. But he had to wonder if it was his imagination that made him think there was something else missing from the Halloween party . . . originality. Because it seemed to Henry, with the exception of a few men dressed in drag, every single man, even seventy-year of Hap, was dressed up as Frank. It most likely was the alcohol. Because even intoxicated Henry couldn't find the logic in everyone dressing like Frank.

"You look like you can use the company." Hector pulled up a chair and sat down.

From his drink Henry lifted his eyes. His blurred vision focused in on the ethnic looking Hector who sported a goatee and scar. "Who . . . Who . . ."

"Hector." He laughed. "Are you that drunk."

"Not yet. Who are you supposed to be."

"Aw, Henry, I'm taking that as an insult. Frank."

"Frank?" Henry sat up and looked around. "And who is Hap supposed to be?"

"Frank."

"Paul?"

"A black Frank." Hector made Henry look to his right. "And Ben from fabrics. A gay Frank."

Henry snickered and ran his hand down his face. "God. Why?"

"It's the Frank dress up contest. There's supposed to be this big prize for whoever is the best Frank. Really big prize. We don't know what it is."

"Who told you about the contest?"

"Frank."

"And you believed him?" Henry asked. "Hector, Frank's an asshole. He's lying just to get all you guys to dress up like him for some stupid ego thing to brag about."

"No. I don't think. Everyone is dressed like Frank."

"Yeah. That's the point. Danny arranged this party. I spent a lot of time with Danny." Henry said then finished his drink. "Danny made no mention of this contest."

"Maybe not. But it must be for real. Look." Hector pointed to the door.

Henry turned in his chair, Danny had finally arrived, and when Henry saw his costume, he grunted and dropped his head to the table. He had seen it all. A Chinese Frank.

Dean probably laughed harder than Frank when he peeked into the social hall trying not to be seen. He grabbed his stomach because it twisted in a knot from laughing. "Oh my God. Even I have to admit that's funny."

"Yeah." Frank grinned and reached for the door.

"Frank." Dean stopped him. "They'll know if someone sees you peeking."

"But I have to." Slowly he opened the door, peeked through the crack, shut it and laughed. "This is too great." he started walking. "We'd better head home. You know how Josh gets."

"Yeah." Dean wiped the tear from his eye. "I needed the laugh. How did you pull it off?"

"I'm Frank. I just spread the word. Everyone bought it and why not."

"Shh." Dean backhanded Frank in the gut while whispering then pointed to Josephine in costume. "No laughing."

Frank put on a serious face as they passed her. "Evening."

Dean nodded at her. "Evening."

"Evening boys." Josephine winked and moved her elderly body quickly toward the hall.

Dean and Frank both stopped at the edge of the living section. And at the same time, they both turned around, waited until Josephine disappeared into the

hall and they both burst into loud laughter again. Josephine was the icing on the cake, because she was dressed . . . as Frank.

^^^

New Bowman, Montana

The child in Ellen couldn't resist it. Drawing on the steam of the window she stood before. Her little finger made a squeaking noise as she drew a stick man and snickered at her own art work. Looking out Elliott's window made her feel more nostalgic than she had ever felt before. The quiet quaint street reminded her of a home she hadn't seen in forever . . . Ashtonville.

The smell of coffee hit her first then the reflection of Elliott in the pane of glass. She looked down to the mug extended in front of her. "Thanks." She took it.

"You look in thought."

"I am. You know, I think I saw a snowflake."

"It's October."

"Almost November. I feel snow."

"I hate snow."

"Me too." Ellen released the curtain and turned around giving a smile to Elliott. "Feeling better."

"Yes, thanks. The nervousness is starting to leave now." He took a liar's breath. "Risking sounding as if I'm wanting this to turn romantic. Want to . . ." He motioned his head and pointed to the fire.

"I'd love to sit at the fire with you Elliott. And I won't think you're trying to be romantic."

"Thanks."

Ellen sipped her coffee as she moved to the nicely blazing fire and sat down. "You know what sucks. This coffee is really good."

Elliott paused slightly in his sitting. "You don't like good coffee."

"I love good coffee. But our coffee in Beginnings sucks." She faced Elliott. "And no matter what me and Dean tried to do to it, nothing worked."

"What do you mean 'tried to do with it'?"

"You know, chemicals and stuff."

Elliott was grateful he wasn't drinking his coffee, he would have choked. "Chemicals don't belong in coffee."

"Yeah, we figured that out. And they don't mix well either. Oh, Frank got so sick. He still to this day doesn't know what hit him."

Elliott's eyes widened. "Should you be telling me this considering I'm your new human guinea pig."

"No." Ellen chuckled. "Anyway . . . I wanted to let you know. I really love this house."

"It pales in comparison to yours."

"Yeah, but mine is new looking. This has charm. Do you suppose, Elliott, we'll ever fix this world enough where families can live in a place like New Bowman instead of just soldiers."

"I believe we're close to that now. The only problem is. There aren't that many families.. The captain was wanting to suggest to, don't laugh, Mr. Slagel."



Ellen laughed.

"The Captain . . ." Elliott tried again. "Was wanting to suggest to . . . about the possibility of moving the families here. Think of the yard space. The streets. The home life that would be so wonderful for them."

"What changed his mind?"

"I don't think he's changed his mind. I believe he hasn't gotten to it yet."

"I want to live here. I love New Bowman. It's old world." Ellen said with a bit of airiness.

"You do know, you are welcome to bring the children here when it's our time. Or even for an extended visit if you . . . I'm sorry. I'm pushing."

"What?" Ellen laughed. "No. Not pushing. Fall break at school is coming up. Maybe we'll take you up on that."

"Jess won't mind?" Elliott asked. "Since you've worked things out I don't want to step on his toes."

"Jess." Ellen blurted his name in worry. "I mean, no he won't mind. He's not really a primary, or even an understanding. He's sort of by agreeable default a . . . temporary."

"I'm glad you worked things out with your friend."

"I'm glad I can talk to you about it. I enjoyed our reunion last night. Of course I'm still sore . . ."

"Ellen."

Ellen's eyes grew wide. "No. No. I'm, not talking about that. We had a physical-free reunion. Well, almost, we moved furniture around." She giggled. "I thought we'd wake the neighborhood up." She set her mug down. "Elliott. I'm going to move closer to you, not because I'm hitting on you but because . . . I just want to be closer to you." She inched closer. Slowly as if dealing with a child, she laid her hand on his bent leg, and moved it to make room. She drew close until she saw his uncomfortableness and then she stopped and backed up a tad.

"You must think I'm pitiful." Elliott spoke softly.

"I think you're intriguing. Why in the world would I even think of you as pitiful."

"Because of the way I am with you. So afraid to get close. Wanting to move, probably, slower than I should."

"You're doing great. And I like this pace. Don't think I don't. I need this pace finally. It makes me feel like you're with me for . . . me."

"I am. And I want to be able to reach that point where I feel comfortable enough to kiss you. It isn't because I don't want to. We've just gone through so much self brainwashing."

Ellen snickered. "Sorry. Self brainwashing?"

"Yes. All of us, especially those who helped found the UWA. We set down rules, we established the way we wanted to be. Well, The Captain brought it up so convincingly and with such a passion. It wasn't until I got to know you that I learned it wasn't for his patriotism as much as it was for his love of John Wayne. But it worked. We learned to be alone. We worked toward acting honorable and strong for that one day when we may happen upon a society where our efforts and standards would be highly recognized and wanted."

"You worked at being old fashion heroes in a devastated world."

Elliott blinked in thought. "Perhaps."

"And you are." Ellen said. "Everything about you guys. I pray it never changes. From the way you fight, dress, to the way all of you speak."

Elliott seemed shocked by her final comment. "Speak? Do we speak differently?"

"Um . . . uh, no. That was a joke." Ellen grabbed her cup to take a sip and cover up her snicker. "Are you going to keep it going?"

"The UWA code? I hope. We want to train more men and keep training ours. We have an entire eastern half of this country to take back."

Proudly, Ellen looked at him as she set down her mug. "And together, we all will."

"Yes." Elliott near whispered as he locked into Ellen's eyes. "We will." He felt a moment and didn't want to miss it. Hoping it didn't come off as 'thought over' Elliott leaned down toward Ellen and softly brought his lips to hers. Moments into the parting, the separation of their lips, there was a knock at the door. Elliott pulled back. "I'll get that." Just as he stood, Hal walked in.

"Elliott there is . . ." His eyes shifted to the scene before him. "I'm sorry for the interruption. I totally forgot Ellen was here for the weekend."

"Hal." Ellen stood up. "Did Frank put you up to this?"

"No." Hal shook his head. "Once again I'm sorry. But I need to steal Sgt. Ryder. Elliott? Can I steal you for a little while. Something vital has come up. It involves some secrecy. You're my most trusted."

Ellen saw that Elliott knew where he had to be and she didn't want to place him in an awkward position. "Elliott, you know what? Why don't you go. I am so, so, tired anyway."

"Thank you." Elliott nodded as he let out his tension. "Captain, there's no danger, is there?"

"No. Just a phase of the savage war we must cover. And cover soon especially with the 'drop' so imminent."

"I see. I'm not in uniform, should I change."

Hal wanted to remain serious and in the Captain mode he had to be in at the moment, but he couldn't. "Um, yeah, sure why not."

"Right away."

"Hal." Ellen scolded, seeing through him. "Elliott he's joking."

Elliott couldn't assume, he just looked back at Hal.

"I'm kidding. Let's go." Hal waved and moved to the door. "Elliott?" He waited for him to follow.

"One moment." Elliott held up a hand and walked to Ellen, he saw Hal watching. "Captain, can you . . ."

Grunting, Hal turned his back.

"I won't be long." Elliott slowly leaned to Ellen and kissed her on the cheek. "Goodnight."

"Night."

Hal bobbed his head and opened the door. "That was it? I turned around for that?"

"You watched?" Elliott seemed so shocked.

"Of course, lets go. Move it Elliott, you're moving like turtle." Holding the door open, Hal waited for Elliott to walk out first, then he wiggled his fingers in typical Hal Slagel arrogant fashion to Ellen and left as well.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Henry snarled loudly once as Bev snickered at him when she walked by his table. "Why is she even here?" Henry slumped on his arm. "God. She's pregnant."

"It's her right to be here too." Hector told him. "Don't seek out another thing to get upset about Henry. You have enough already on your mind."

"You're right." Henry reached for his glass, it was empty. He lifted the bottle and poured, only a drop fell out. "Oh, my God have I drank that much?"

"Afraid so."

"And I've ruined your good time. Sorry I made you sit here and listen to me ramble."

"Don't apologize. You needed a friend."

"I still do. And . . ." Henry tried to stand, he swayed. "Whoa. And another drink."

"No you don't." Hector stood as well. "Hall's closing anyhow."

Henry squinted in his wobbly stand as he looked at his watch. "Shit. It's that late. Man, I must have talked and talked."

"If you need to talk some more. We can talk while I take you home. I did tell you I would do that."

"Yes." Henry nodded. "Home. God, I'm so depressed." Almost in slow motion he slid his hand over the bridge of his nose. "I better head home. Let's go. And . . ." Henry staggered to the door. "You don't have to leave, You can hang out for a while. If I don't bore you." After several attempts to grab the door, Henry finally succeeded. "I could use the company. I'm still down."

"Then I'm there." Taking the door from Henry, Hector followed him out.

^^^

Washington, D.C.

Room service and a hotel were two things Robbie never thought he'd experience ever in his life again. Yet he stood, drinking coffee from a cup brought to him by a badly dressed room service attendant, while standing in a hotel room straight from the world that was, before God abandoned it.

Of course, Robbie knew it was set up for him. Though his room was presidential perfect, he had seen the rest of the hotel that still laid in shambles. And he saw outside. He was in a comfortable prison, or at least detention center to keep him from wandering about. Not that he wanted to wander about Washington, he actually wanted to wander about Quantico. But after the airfield he was brought directly to the Hilton, given food and guarded.

He peered outside his room's window to the barricade below him. Trucks lined up, spotlights surrounding. He was told it was for his protection in case the savages hit. Robbie didn't buy it. But he was amazed and taken aback none-the-less. Because he had the picture perfect view of Washington D.C. A town they started to revamp. The power partially was up allowing for the street lights to come on and allowing for Robbie to see what had happened to the once city. Had it not been for the dome, he wouldn't have recognized the vine overgrown

capital building whose steps were cracked. The only thing that remained the same in the nation's capital was the Washington Monument. It was undaunted. As if perhaps the architect that designed it wanted a creation that would withstand what could happen to the world. A keen foresight placed into it's construction. So tall, so clean, so far above the earth that not even nature itself could reach up and touch it.

To Robbie a part of seeing the monument was a sign of hope, that life will always survive and go on. He just wished that beautiful sign of hope didn't lay on the enemy's side of the country.

## CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

November 1  
Beginnings, Montana

Spears of the savages were what Henry felt went through his head the second he lifted it from his pillow. The headache he experienced was one he was sure was a symptom of his imminent death. He didn't want to move, and barely he did move from his laying position on his side to sitting on the edge of his bed. Even running his fingers through his hair hurt so bad Henry was afraid of what walking would do, but he had to get up.

Slowly, hands on the bed, he lifted himself, and bare feet against the cold floor he staggered away from his bed.

A groggy moan in the room made Henry stop cold. It wasn't his. Panicked and afraid, he turned around to look and when he did, Henry nearly passed out. Hector was asleep in his bed.

Wanting to scream and feeling immediately sick, Henry bolted from the bedroom into the bathroom.

"God, no. It's a mistake. I wasn't with him". Henry spoke through the dry heaves he fought in his lean over the commode. He closed his eyes tightly still seeing Hector in his bed. His stomach pulled and twisted. It had to be a mistake. There was no way.

FLASH . . . The alcohol induced memory loss was gone.

*"I really should let you get to sleep." Hector said as he moved to the door of Henry's home.*

*"Thanks. You were . . . you were a big help." Henry followed him.*

To the sink Henry moved. He breathed heavily turning on the faucet. *Hector walked to the door. Hector left.* When Henry splashed his face with cold water he splashed himself with reality as well . . .

*A laugh.*

*A smile.*

*A nod.*

*Hector hesitated in opening the door. "I really wanna go out on limb here. Can I?"*

*"Sure why not?"*

*"I'll prepare for a hit."*

*"A what?" Henry laughed.*

*The firm grip of the masculine hand behind his neck and Henry was pulled forward. The lips that met his met wide and hard. And the kiss that was delivered was deep.*

*The drunkenness had to be the answer. It masked the reality of what was happening because Henry responded briefly before pulling back.*

Shoulders bouncing up and down, Henry looked at his sweaty reflection in

the bathroom mirror. He ran the kiss through his mind. He remembered that and then . . . he remembered the rest . . .\*\*

*"I don't understand." Hector sat down next to Henry on the couch. "You pulled away. You responded then you pulled away."*

*"It's not me." Henry told him. "I'm sorry. That . . . that was wrong of me. I got confused for a second. It was the alcohol."*

*"I think it was something else." Hector moved closer to Henry.*

*"Maybe you . . . maybe you better leave."*

*"O.K." Hector spoke in a pacifying manner. "I will. But only if that's what you really want. Because how long has it been Henry?" Hector's knee brushed against Henry's. "How long has it been?" His hand rested on Henry's leg. "Since you have been touched."*

*Henry looked down to the moving fingers that inched slowly up his thigh. Why was he letting Hector touch him was the question his mind pondered. Yet he didn't pull back.*

*"Since you've been loved."*

*Henry swallowed when the hand reached the top of his leg. He fought his pounding heart of nervousness. His pulling away was more of a lead. As Henry's body leaned back on the couch, Hector followed.*

*The second Henry's head hit the arm of the sofa was the second Hector's body weight was more into him and his lips were on Henry's neck.*

*Each wide, moist sweep of Hector's mouth against Henry's throat sent a tingle he wanted to fight. But he didn't. He insisted in his mind, at any moment he would stop. He felt Hector's hip brush against his leg, and then he felt Hector's hand move with a firmness to a place Henry thought no man would ever touch.*

*Up and down the nape of Henry's neck Hector's mouth slid, biting, and pulling as his hand moved harder with every moan that Henry inadvertently produced.*

*Somewhere his body took over his mind. It was almost like a dream. The sexual feeling became so overwhelming, Henry no longer placed a gender to the touch. Feeling the room warm up, Henry lifted off his shirt.*

*"I want to make you forget about all that's bothering you." Hector whispered in his ear. "Let me make you feel good."*

*A move of a hand, a press of his hips to Henry's thigh and Henry found himself sliding down on the couch, digging his hips into the cushion and spreading his legs wider in some sort of invitation he had never given before. The sound of a zipper should have been Henry's alarm. It wasn't. It made him pause, but it don't make him stop. He just kept his eyes closed, feeling the air of the room as the front to his pants opened more.*

*The body weight of Hector lifted. No feel of hips, No lips. No hands. Only briefly then the weight pressed down again and Henry moaned. His hand instinctively gripped onto Hector's back as their bodies rubbed slowly together. Skin against skin. Flesh against flesh. It was if it was sealed with a kiss, the type that Henry hadn't felt in so long.*

*"You can stop me at anytime." Hector's words hit with warm breath against his lips.*

*Henry didn't answer. And Hector moved his lips down to Henry's chest then to his stomach and then . . . it was over. Henry's head went far back and his*

*neck tensed up when he found himself in a point of no return and swimming in the sensation of being pleased.*

In the painful revelation of it all. It was time to face the music. Drying off his face, Henry opened the bathroom door and slowly walked to his bedroom. He hoped it was all a dream, but knew it wasn't. The remnants of the messed up bed were the evidence. But what was to become of his error was a mystery, because Hector was gone.

^^^

"I'm telling you." Johnny snapped at Frank in the security office.

"And I'm telling you!" Frank stood up slamming his hands on the desk. "There is no fuckin way over four hundred savages packed up and disappeared out of range in three hours."

"Dad."

"John!" Frank yelled. "You didn't follow the coordinates. This is the exact reason I took you off of surveillance before."

"I followed them!" he screamed back. "You're wrong."

"No you're wrong! Get your ass back out and up there and find them."

"No." Johnny backed up to the door. "I'm not wasting my time. They are gone."

"No? No?" Frank walked around his desk. "Are you questioning me?"

Johnny huffed in disgust. "You can be a real asshole, you know that?"

"And I also am in charge. Get back out there!" Frank strongly ordered.

"Fine." Johnny raged to the door and flung it open.

"Fuck!" Frank's hand cut through the air. "Fuckin savage war and he's not wanting to check again. What the fuck." He bitched--so he thought--to himself and then when he went to shut the door he saw Henry. "What."

"You . . . you got a minute Frank?"

"Oh, I hope to fuckin God you aren't here to bitch about the Frank contest too. I hope. I had it up to fuckin here with bitches about that. Fuckin Ben from fabrics telling me had he known there was no prize, he would have been a ballerina. I got more important things on my . . ." Finally Frank saw the expression on Henry's face. And his whole demeanor changed. With concerned curiosity, Frank reached out and shut the door. "What happened?"

Henry's head dropped.

Frank heard what he thought was a sob. "Henry?"

"I know people will think I'm an asshole for coming to you. But I suppose I'm doing it because I want you to scream at me.."

"O.K., not much of a complement."

"I made a mistake Frank. A huge mistake. Something that someone who's going to be leader of this community shouldn't have done. And if it gets out . . ."

"What did you do?" Frank asked with patience.

"I . . ." Henry lifted his head. "Last night. I was with . . . I was with another man."

"Doing what? Darts. Pool?"

"No. We talked and drank."

“Henry. Last I heard that wasn’t anything to get yourself all worked up . . .”

“And we had sex.”

It took everything Frank had not to show a change in expression. He saw his friend didn’t need that. His eyes only widened slightly and the little vein in his neck twitched some in his surprise. Not knowing what exactly to say, Frank cleared his throat.

“Frank.”

Frank nodded and stepped back. He had to take a moment to think.

“Yell at me Frank. Scream at me for being weak. Call me names. Something. Anything.”

“Why?” Frank asked strongly. “Why would I do that. You want me to chastize you for being with someone. You want me to call you a fuckin fag, is that what you’re seeking?”

“Yes.”

“Well you won’t get it. Not from me. Because if I do that to you, I have to do that to a hell of a lot of men in this community. You’re not alone in this Henry, and you aren’t the first man to walk into my office wanting to be punished for something that . . .” Frank walked to his desk. “For something that isn’t wrong.” He sat down. “Man, people must really see me as an asshole. Why is that? Why do they come to me to make them feel bad?”

“Because they think they should feel worse than they do.” Henry slowly walked to a chair and sat down. “And other men have done the same? They came to you to get yelled at?”

“Yeah.” Frank rocked in his chair. “O.K., I have to admit. The first time. I did yell, I thought that’s what I was supposed to do. And then I realized I was on the wrong track. Look . . .” Frank leaned into his desk. “Here’s what I can tell you. What you found last night, you must have needed. And in this world we all aren’t fortunate enough to get what we need from a woman. Because my friend, there aren’t that many.”

“I know.” Henry’s head still hung low. “I feel bad. I feel wrong. I’m scared that this will get out. Even if men have done it they won’t own up to it. I want to be able to lead the community Frank. Joe’s taking a sabbatical. This guy disappeared this morning.”

“Then maybe you need to go and talk to this guy.. Make sure you set the record straight.”

“You think I should?” Henry asked.

“It will make you feel better.”

Slightly, Henry smiled. “This talk with you has made me feel better. You’re smarter than people give you credit for.”

“Thanks. I think.” Frank scratched his head.

Henry stood up. “I’m going to go find him. And I appreciate you telling me I’m not alone.”

“You’re not Henry. More men than you realize have been in your position, excuse the terminology.”

Henry shook his head. “Thanks. That makes me feel less bad.”

“And to really make your mind feel at ease. Since we moved in together, Dean and me have found ourselves, many a times making out on the couch.”

“Oh, my God.”



"Dean is quite the little romancer."

"Oh, shit."

"Kidding." Frank snickered.

"Frank." Henry snapped. "You're an asshole." He opened the door. "But an asshole who . . . who is a really good guy." Peacefully and with gratitude, Henry smiled then left.

^^^

### New Bowman, Montana

It had to be the fact that Elliott was out so late in his meeting with Hal, that he slept so hard. In such a deep slumber, that he failed to hear the continuous beeping of his alarm clock that seeped into Ellen's room and awakened her.

She hated to go in and wake him up, especially knowing the time he returned. But she knew Elliott always attended mass on Sunday's and that was probably why he set his alarm.

Hurrying to shut off the annoying, wakening device, Ellen hit the button, silenced it then reached to Elliott. He slept heavily and his body moved with his deep breaths. Before she could wake him Ellen retracted her hand. She looked at the side of his neck, all under the chin in the glandular area was lightly bruised. Her eyes closed. Slowly she reached out to gently touch him. Warm. His skin was feverishly warm to the touch. Knowing if the alarm clock didn't wake him, surely she wouldn't, Ellen felt for his pulse. It was strong, and steady, a good sign. But Ellen saw other signs. Signs of his illness. The hard sleep. The slight bruising. The fever. They were indications that signals were being ignored by Elliott and his body just said 'enough. I'm shutting down to heal.'

Recognizing them and being aware how hard he pushed himself, Ellen played doctor and prescribed undisturbed rest. When Elliott regained his strength, Elliott would awake, and not a minute before., Not if she could help it. So Ellen, unplugged the alarm clock, tucked it under her arm, bent down and kissed Elliott then left the room.

^^^

### Beginnings, Montana

Hector's hand felt for the firmness of the tomato that had hint of green. "This will work." He gave it back to Bev. "But concentrate more on the ones that look like they're gonna fall."

"I hate this. I'm pregnant." Bev whined.

Hector shook his head. "Come on Bev, don't do this to me. All right? You have to get this done. I can't do it alone."

"But I . . ."

"I let you go all the time. If Joe found out how much I allow you *not* to work, my division leadership would be nil. Do you know how hard I worked to earn this."

"Please. Miguel died then Cole was eaten. You got this by default."

Hector held up a finger. "That's so wrong. Especially when I'm fair to you."

I understand the pregnancy. Don't I?"

"Yeah." Bev lowered her head. "You're right. You're a rarity in Beginnings Hector. You're actually a nice guy."

"Please quit taking advantage of that. At least when my ass is on the line."

"All right."

"Tomatoes." Hector pointed to the vines.

"Tomatoes." Bev pouted and grabbed her basket.

Hector moved across the huge green house. "Oh, and Bev." He stopped. "It's humid in here, so please make sure you stop to cool down and drink enough."

Stopping in her crouch to the lower plants, Bev smiled and nodded, watching Hector leave. "What a nice guy. Daddy would like him." Bev spoke to herself and readied to do her work. Turning once more to look at Hector as he made it to the next greenhouse, Bev tilted her head in oddity. She watched Hector stiffen in his walk when he was approached by an uncomfortable looking Henry.

"I'm busy." Hector opened the greenhouse door. "I'd like to finish up, it is Sunday."

"So this is your attitude." Henry followed him.

"I don't understand what you're talking about." Hector headed to his office.

"Yes, you do. The reason why you left. It's all a game to . . ."

"No Henry." Hector spun around when he stepped inside his office. "You wanna know why I left? Huh? Let me tell you. There's something that tends to make a person feel really bad when they hear the person they were intimate with, puking in the toilet as they regretfully question themselves about it."

"You heard that?"

"Um, yeah Henry. Sound travels, Especially when it has the echoing effect of a porcelain bowl."

Henry tilted his head to the side. "I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry. I had, I had a lot of incidences in Beginnings. A lot. I won't lie. But I swear I don't think any of them ever made me feel so cheap. So wrong about something I thought felt so good. And you know what sucks. I like you Henry. I do. You're the first man I ever felt something for."

"I hope to God you weren't thinking we'd start a relationship."

"Was that necessary?" Hector snapped. "No. And think about that statement. Be a gay man in Beginnings? You can do it, but just like in prison you'd better not let a single soul find out. If you're anything less than some macho, hard nose, roughneck, then you end up working in fabrics. Or . . . something like that." Hector shook his head.

"Look . . ."

"No, you look Henry. I didn't go into last night to hurt you or to harm you if that's what you're thinking. I also have myself to think about as well. But lets not forget, you were not the total innocent." He watched Henry's eyes closed. "I'm sorry it bothers you to think of what you did. But it happened. And if you remember, I wanted last night to be about you. In my stupid mind I thought, well, maybe there'll be a next time and *that* night will be about me. But no, you

turned the tables and then I tried to stop you.”

“I know.”

“You became the initiator as well as me.”

“I know.” Henry said with anger.

“And let me tell you something Henry, you didn’t back off or stop because it was something you needed. Something that felt good. And now you’re bitter and pissed because it was something you never thought you’d let happen.”

Henry swallowed. “Sounds like you’re reading my mind.”

“No Henry. I’ve had your mind. I’ve stood where you are. I have felt what you felt. When I had my first experience, I wanted to slit my wrists. Not because I did something so wrong, but because I enjoyed it and I wasn’t feeling as bad as I thought I should. I’m not gay. I don’t want to have gay sex., but you take what you can get in a fucked up world. To have someone touch you, hold you and pay attention to you can make the difference in the next day. And don’t think for one second if a woman approached me and said they wanted me, I would turn them down. Hell no, I’ll grab that opportunity and cherish it. But I’m not that fortunate.”

“Hector . . . what happened. It can’t get out.”

“I know this.” Hector spoke with sincerity.

“I’m next in line for leadership. I’m filling in and any minuscule chance I have with Ellen would. . .”

“I know.” Hector silenced him. “Don’t worry. I’m not a bad guy. No one will know. I can stay silent. I can be a good friend.”

“No, Hector. You can’t, because I don’t want you to be my friend. In fact, I want you to stay as far away from me as possible. Don’t look at me, don’t talk to me, don’t come near me. Last night was wrong.” Henry moved to the door. “And basically, as hard as it sounds, the sight of you makes me sick.” Turning, Henry walked out leaving his hard words to linger in the air around Hector.

Bev felt a little bad for Hector, the demented side of her wanted to see his expression. But she couldn’t, she had to stay hid. She didn’t want them to know she had been there. She may not have heard the entire conversation. But she heard enough.

^^^

### Andrew’s Air Force Base

There was nothing more Robbie wanted to do than to give into the urge to give a high five to George over the excitement of hearing the jet engines roar. But he didn’t, Not because George was the enemy, but because he didn’t want to take a chance of his hand connecting with that grotesque thing George called a hand.

“Yes.” Robbie tossed the rag. “Ready to take her for a spin?”

George tilted his head. “It’s been a while.”

“Like riding a bike.” Robbie stated. “Let’s go up. I’ll take my bird we’ll do some practice communications. You need that for the drop.”

“Two days isn’t much time.”

“It’s plenty. Like I said, riding a bike. But let’s try it now. I have to head

back soon, especially with that camp gone.” Robbie walked from the jet.

“Robert.” George called out. “You didn’t rig this jet in some sort of demented Slagel way to get rid of me, did you?”

Robbie grinned, then took a serious face. “No George.”

“Robbie . . .”

“Nah. Don’t get your crippled butt in a tizzy. I wouldn’t do that. Not when we need that plane to drop that missel. See you up there.”

Grunting and watching one of the reasons he hated Beginnings, move to his jet, George moved with worry to his.

^^^

### Beginnings, Montana

Joe was exhausted. He knew he had slept, but he supposed the worry weighted heavy on his mind and that wore him down. He just wanted to finish his Monday things a day early so he would be mind-free when he went into Andrea’s sentencing the next day.

Tossing his nearly finished cigarette, Joe opened his office door and slowed in his stride in. “Frank.”

Frank stopped mid pace to the filing cabinet. “Dad. What are you doing here?”

“I could ask the same.”

“Worrying. Trying to help. You?”

“Getting things done for tomorrow. I have the field projections for the week to pre . . .”

“Done.”

“Oh. But I have the division reports to distribute to . . .”

“Done.”

“Distribution schedules.”

“Done.”

“New Bowman meetings to set up.”

“Done.”

“Inventory of warehouses . . .”

“Done. Done. Done.” Frank walked to the filing cabinet, opened the top drawer, found his spot and put his folder in.

“Who did it all?”

“Me. Henry’s having a emotional break down and Jason is saying service. Go figure.”

“You . . .” Joe moved to him. “You did it?”

“Yeah, why?”

“I didn’t know you knew how.”

Frank chuckled. “Neither did I. But I stopped by to start my plans and while I was waiting for return phone calls, I thought I’d help you out for tomorrow. Next thing I knew. I was done. Fuckin Hal has taken forever to get back to me. Talk to him.”

“I will. Everything?”

“Um . . .” Frank hurried to Joe’s desk, he lifted the clipboard up. “Monday’s schedule for you. Yep, no, wait, the lock inspection we pull together

is not done, but I'll get there."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." Frank moved out of the way for his father to sit. "How are you?"

"Been better. I'm sure I'll feel a lot less stressed when I get to New Bowman this evening. Frank, Johnny, he's coming with me. Is that O.K.? Can you manage without him."

"Absolutely. I have to talk to him. I was a little hard on him this morning about that savage camp."

"Yeah, but you have reason to be. He has a history of missing them."

"Still."

"All right, what's the situation." Joe asked. "how bad?"

"Dad I'm moving us to level four security. Us and Bowman. I want every security man, reserve and full time on alert and positioned. I want to implement an order for everyone to refresh the strategy of massive attack on us. Where they go, what to do, issuing of gas masks to those who stay topside."

"Chemical defense."

"No choice. There's close to five hundred."

Joe nodded. "You think they're coming here."

"They aren't going home. They aren't at their new base. They aren't anywhere to be seen. I think they're moving our direction."

"Possibly caught on to our surveillance schedule?"

"Yep And we can't change it. Even if we sneak a surveillance in, If they're quiet., in a dead world they have a good ten minute warning by the motor sounds."

"Then you do what you need to do."

"I'm on it." Frank replied and moved to the door. "Oh, and dad. Everything, it'll be all right. I promise."

Leaning back in his chair Joe nodded when Frank left, then he let out a breath and hoped that Frank was right.

^^^

Bev peeked through the window of Hector's office, before knocking on the door. He worked on some sort of paperwork, sitting at his desk. She knew Johnny hadn't given her the O.K., but she saw no harm in laying the groundwork. "I'm done." Bev said at the same time she knocked. "Leo is moving the bushels now."

"Good excellent." Hector stood up as he set down his clipboard. "How many?"

"Four."

"Good job."

"Thanks." Bev was perky and she started to leave. Back facing Hector she grinned widely before turning around. "By the way, Hector. Have sex with any . . . I don't know, council members lately." She watched and enjoyed the dropped expression on his face. "How much is it worth to you for that little secret to stay just that way. See ya." Waving, Bev walked out.

Hector with a strong, scared beating heart, just stood there.



New Bowman, Montana

Hal looked at his watch then to Elliott's stairs. Back and forth and he tossed his hands up when Ellen came down. "Well?"

"Still sleeping."

"Good God Ellen it's one o'clock, wake the man up."

"No." Ellen walked by him.

"Ellen." Hal stopped her. "I realize this is your little understanding time, but . . ."

"It has nothing to do with our understanding." Ellen saw the look on Hal's face. "What? It doesn't."

"No. No. I maybe out of practice, but I still remember the old world."

"What are you talking about."

"Ellen. Things need to be done. All right. I won't let this insecure female ploy get in the . . ."

"Oh, fuck you Hal. He's not getting up. I won't wake him."

"Then I will." Hal moved to the steps.

"Hal." Ellen leaped out and grabbed hold his pants pulling him back.

"Ellen, stop this." He quit trying to make it up the steps. He straightened his clothes and demeanor. "What is wrong with you. He is going to be very upset if he finds out he slept so late. Elliott hates that. He not only missed mass, he missed an important training session. Now I need him. Get him or I will."

"Hal. There are some things that are important. Elliott sleeping right now is. O.K.? I will not, will not let you wake him up."

"You have really no say so. This isn't the way to start a relationship, Ellen." Hal raised his eyebrow. "I know you throw that little body's weight around in Beginnings but not here. I'm in charge."

"When it comes to someone's health, I outrank you Hal."

Hal stepped back. "Is Elliott ill?" he asked. "Why didn't you say so. Oh, don't worry about his rest. Elliott fights his illnesses. Wake him up, he'd want that."

"I don't want that." Ellen stressed. "He has to sleep. Has to until he wakes up. His body needs it. And I don't care if he gets pissed at me or not. He'll deal with it."

"Is it a cold? Flu?" Hal questioned.

"Just know he's sick and I didn't tell you."

"Is it more?"

"Hal."

"Ellen, why would you say 'I didn't tell you'."

"Because I have a doctor's oath. O.K. can you drop it."

Hal bit his bottom lip, looked up the stairs and stepped back to the door. He stared for a second at Ellen, reached for the knob, stopped, then turned around. "Absolutely not. I won't drop it, What's going on."

"Hal. No."

"Ellen, I am his commanding officer. He is my right hand man, and above all that he is my best friend in this whole God forsaken world. I give you my word. My word what comes from your lips will not pass back again through

mine. My word.”

Ellen hesitated. She moved a little from the steps and folded her arms speaking softly. “Sometimes we push ourselves. We use mind over matter and it works. But there are time when we are fighting a terminal illness where our body says ‘stop, I have to take a break to . . .’”

“Wait.” Hal held up his hand and took a step to her. His words were breathy. “Back up. Terminal illness.”

“Elliott is in the moderate to advanced stages of Leukosarcoma. His blood has gone leukemic, and the malignancy has spread to portions of his glands. It’s not only progressive it’s aggressive as well.”

Teeth clenched tightly, mouth closed, Hal’s jaw twitched, The sides beating out with his emotions like a pulse. He trembled some, not wanting to show how badly he felt he was hit with an iron wall. “Ex . . . excuse me.” Pivoting tall, he walked in a heavy straight stride from the house.

“Hal.” Ellen called out softly and followed him. “Hal.” she hurried to catch up to him. “Please.”

“Tell me Ellen.” Hal tried to appear strong. “Are we just giving up. Is there no fight. I can’t believe Elliott would just not . . .”

“No.” Ellen shook her head. “Trust me Hal, Dean and I are throwing everything and anything at him. Even theories. Anything to try to beat this or at least send him into remission. We’re dealing with something we have never faced. And Elliott has will. He is so strong.”

“How strong though Ellen. By what you said, it sounded to me as if you just informed me my best friend is dying.”

Ellen’s head dropped.

“Is this why you’re with him?”

“No.” Ellen answered quickly. “No, Hal. No. I really, really care for Elliott so much and this . . . this is breaking my heart.”

“But you can’t let him see that.” Hal breathed heavily. “I know Elliott. The last thing he would want is pity or for anyone to treat him like he’s sick.”

“You’re right. That’s why this information is not out. He doesn’t want anyone to know. And, Frank, you, everyone has to treat him no differently. That plays such a factor in his mental state. I’ll step in when I think it’s too much and we’ll, we’ll work around the reasoning so Elliott doesn’t know why he’s suddenly resting.”

“This is awful.” Hal stated. “It makes me sick. How long, Ellen?”

“Does he have?” Ellen paused. “A textbook prognosis would place Elliott into a full blown symptomatic stage within three months. Meaning, he’ll not be able to do what he does now. He’ll be sick, visually, physically, mentally and he’ll leave us within six months.”

“Oh my God.”

“But . . . that’s textbook. And let me tell you, Elliott has already proved the textbooks wrong. The outwardly symptoms he shows now are usually taken as minuscule warning signals , they are nothing compared to what he should be showing.”

“So he’s doing well.”

“He’s doing very well. And I hold high hopes that with his will, and strength and mental endurance along with everything Dean and I are doing, Elliott will be with us for a very long time.”

“Oh, God I hope.”

“You O.K.?” Ellen asked.

Hal nodded.

“Come here.” She stepped into him and placed her arms around Hal.

Tightly and with his heart he embraced her. “Promise me you’ll do everything you can. Promise me.” Closing his eyes, Hal held on.



## CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

### Beginnings. Montana

Dean's thin long fingers stroked gently the top of Furball's head. He smiled as Furball was the center of attention on the livingroom floor as he, Alexandra, Billy, and Joey laid on their stomachs encircling him. "What you don't know about Furball, is how many people in the old world had one just like him as a pet." He explained.

"Why?" Billy asked. "They seem rather boring."

Alexandra gasped. "He isn't boring. Him and me go out to the field and have fun. I draw him all the time."

"That's because he just sits there." Billy argued.

"Nah-uh." Joey added his two cents. "When you swing him around by his tail he moves."

Billy laughed, Alexandra seemed offended.

"We don't swing kittens Joey." Dean explained. "This little guy is a treasure."

"Daddy." Alexandra spoke up innocently. "If there are no more kittens. If they all died. Where did furball come from?"

"Don't know." Dean answered. "Dr. Godrichson thinks he slipped through the perimeter. Maybe all the kittens didn't die, and finally enough of them were made to start spanning out."

"Like people?" Joey asked.

"Yes." Dean answered. "We're growing. Slowly."

Billy snickered a laugh. "Not for long."

Oddly Dean looked at his son. "Why would you say that?"

"You can't have babies if you don't have women, unless you figure out a way Dad."

"There are women." Dean argued.

"Not being born."

"Hey!" Alexandra shrieked. "What am I? A freakin boy."

"You look like one."

"Stop it." Dean did his fatherly scolding bit. "Billy, you and I should sit down and discuss this theory."

"O.K." Billy shrugged. "Better than this stupid cat."

"Hey!" Alexandra shrieked out.

Dean grabbed his ear. "Alex."

"You idiot. He thinks he's so smart." Alexandra pointed.

"I am." Billy said. "You're the one who can't talk."

"Billy." Dean warned.

"Joey beat him up." Alexandra ordered.

"Alex." Dean said.

"O.K." Joey stood up.

"Joey don't you . . ."

*Whap!*

"Ow!" Billy called out. "Dad!"

Alexandra laughed.

"Guys." Dean tried to take control. "Can we . . ."

"God!" Billy, so Dean-like declared. "He domed me. Moron." He snapped at Joey.

"What's a moron?" Joey asked.

"See." Billy pointed. "Such a Frank."

"Hit him again." Alex said so excited.

"Alex." Dean strengthened his voice. "Joey don't . . ."

*Whap!*

"Hey!" Billy jumped up. "Dad, do something right now." He rubbed his head. "And keep him away from Uncle Frank."

"Guys!" Dean yelled. "Knock it off. Can we just all sit down and hang out for once. We have the house to ourselves. Mommy's not here."

"I want Mommy." Alexandra pouted. "I want to go with her when she goes to New Bowman."

"You can't go." Billy told her. "New Bowman isn't safe."

"I'm telling uncle Hal. He'll get mad at you."

"Uncle Frank says Uncle Hal's a pansy in a civil war uniform."

"No." Joey shook his head and spoke deeply. "Uncle Frank doesn't say that. He says Uncle Hal's a pansy in a fa . . ."

"O.K.!" Dean interrupted. "That's enough. We get the point."

"Daddy." Alexandra said as she picked up her cat. "When are we all gonna be a family again and live here?"

"Soon." Dean sat up. "I hope."

"How ya gonna do that?" Billy said sarcastically. "I thought you were marrying Bev."

"What?" Dean seemed shocked.

"I hate her." Alexandra commented.

"Dad, loves her." Joey added.

"No I do not." Dean defended. "I love your mother."

"Yeah right." Billy said. "She's having your baby."

Alexandra growled at Billy's lack of knowledge. "What are you? A freakin idiot? She just saying it's Daddy's baby. It's not your baby is it. I don't want a brother from her. That means she'd be my mother and I freakin . . ."

"Alex." Dean halted her. "What is with the use of the word freakin all of the sudden?"

All three of the kids answered "Frank."

"Frank?" Dean questioned. "Why is Frank telling you to use the word 'freakin.'?"

"He didn't." Billy explained. "It's a substitution. He busted her using the word fa . . ."

"O.K. All right." Dean held up his hand.

"Yeah." Alexandra nodded. "He said it's all right to use it as a coloring ad . . .ad . . ."

Billy rolled his eyes. "A colorful adjective. Get it right stupid."

"Hey!" Alexandra yelled. "Joey hit him."

"No." Dean intercepted Joey's swinging hand. "Let's just all calm down."

"Let's call mommy." Alexandra jumped up from the floor. "I'll grab the phone."

Billy and Joey ran behind her.

"Guys." Dean stood up. "We can't call mommy she's with . . . well, yeah, let's call mommy."

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New Bowman, Montana

From the kitchen, Elliott could hear Ellen in the other room hanging up the phone. He resumed his cooking.

"Sorry." She apologized. "They wouldn't let me go."

"No problem. Is everything all right at home?" Elliott asked.

"Yes. Are you O.K.?"

Elliott set down the spoon. "To be honest. No. I'm embarrassed."

"Elliott."

"Ellen you let me sleep for fourteen hours. Don't you think that's a bit much. And now you've gone and invited the Captain over for dinner. Imagine how lazy he must think I am."

"Hal doesn't even know you slept that long." Ellen spoke in a blow off manner. "Besides, when he stopped by this morning to tell you to take the day off, I figured your body needed rest, let you sleep. You're filling in for Frank tomorrow, you'll need it. And you really need to stop worrying about Hal."

"He's the captain."

"He's Hal."

"And there's no other like me." Hal grinned as he walked in the kitchen.

Ellen saw how Elliott immediately, almost at attention, straightened up., She backhanded him in the gut making him grunt. "Stop that. This is your home."

"He's the Captain." Elliott defended.

"He's Hal."

"Ellen." Hal said. "I really wish you wouldn't undermine my authority."

Ellen laughed. "Get off the pedestal Hal."

"Would love to." Hal winked. "However, you my dear keep putting me back up there."

Just as Ellen started to laugh, she heard the voice that sent her heart into a racing spin . . . Robbie's.

"Hello!" He called out and closed the door. "I smell food. Is there enough for me."

Ellen shrieked and bolted from the kitchen. She ran straight to Robbie.

"Hey, El how's . . ." He grunted when her body slammed into his sending him back into the door.

"God, I was so worried they wouldn't let you come back." She wrapped her arms around him kissing him fast and over and over.

"This is cool. They couldn't keep me, I'm the man. But as long as I'm getting this reunion." Robbie puckered up.

"Robert." Hal stepped into the livingroom. "Back off. Elliott's home, Elliott's time."

"Oh, no Captain. That's all right." Elliott commented. "Ellen was really concerned."

"See Hal." Robbie said.

"No, see Hal. Back up." Hal ordered.

"Fine." Robbie shook Ellen's hand. "You guys should see George, man is he fucked up. Oh," He reached behind him and pulled something from his back pocket. "Never do I go without a gift." He handed a hand towel to Ellen. "For you."

"Oh!" Ellen opened it. "The Hilton. Look Hal. Look Elliott. A towel. Thank you."

Seeing Ellen so excited and rubbing the towel all over her face made Hal raise one eyebrow to Elliott and lean in. "It's is a true testament of how badly Beginnings men treat their women when they get excited about a towel."

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"Nope." Joe walked, hands in pockets slowly with Johnny. "Home is Beginnings, no matter what." He stopped on the street and looked back to the corner building he just came from. A guard was posted out front. On the second floor he could see the lit room and the shadow of Andrea pacing about. "No matter what happens."

"But this is a great place Pap." Johnny commented.

"Yeah it is. And . . .after this savage Shit is over and things with Andrea, I'm taking a vacation here. But I won't live here."

"Vacation." Johnny snickered. "Sorry. I was just thinking about fishing."

"Don't be sorry. Let's do it. Let's take a day, you and me. I could use that."

"When everything is over."

"Yeah." Joe said sadly. "I'll need the time with my family. Because I just don't know when they oust Andrea, how I'm going to be."

Johnny's head lowered. If his grandfather was going to be that hurt by losing Andrea, how bad would it make it when Johnny left at the same time. Even though George insisted *that* was how it was supposed to go down, Johnny loved his grandfather and had to wonder if he could actually hurt him that badly by leaving right away.

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### Beginnings, Montana

No one was going to tell Bev that she wasn't smart enough to handle things on her own. Despite what Johnny thought of her, Bev knew better. It was only a matter of time before her and Johnny left Beginnings and an established inside team had not been made. She knew that could play a role in them not leaving, along with what Johnny told her on the phone about maybe staying a few days longer just so it didn't kill his grandfather.

Bev didn't see the reasoning in that. What difference would it make if he hurt his grandfather the same day Andrea left or a little later. Same pain. Same difference. She would have to tell him that, perhaps give him an analogy. She was smart enough to do that and she was smart enough to help out her father.

How much she would shine in her father eyes if she pulled off the biggest insider to date. And she had, like with Hector, the ground work to lay. Lay the ground work and ease into the proposition. So she sat and waited.

Henry was a little perturbed and confused when he saw Bev smiling as she sat on his small porch as if waiting. He had a long day, things were on his mind, plus he had to get ready to fill in as leader. That always made Henry a little antsy.

“Hi Henry.” Bev stood up when he approached.

“Is there something you want?” Henry asked.

“A friend.” Bev held her hands behind her back swaying some.

“Don’t look at me.”

“Why not. You’d be the perfect friend. Really Henry.”

“I don’t want to be your friend Bev. You ruined my life. You ruined my relationship with Ellen.”

“So you think. But . . . you’re the one that did it, and more so recently you nailed that coffin shut. Well, maybe, if it gets out.”

“What are you talking about?”

From behind her back Bev pulled a tomato. She handed it to Henry. “I had to work the greenhouse today.” She giggled. “It’s amazing the thing you learn.”

Henry’s hand gripped the tomato so tight he almost squashed it. He just begged in his mind, that she, of all people, didn’t know.

“Tell me Henry. Mentally is it a difficult transition to make when you go from being inside of a woman to being inside of . . . a man.”

Henry’s heart dropped. “How . . .”

“I hid. I heard. You two really shouldn’t have talked so loud. But . . . did you know Hector has this reputation, I checked, he has this reputation for bending over and down for just about any man. The equivalent to a male slut.” Bev chuckled. “Him and Ellen really ought to sit down and have tea one day and discuss how it feels to be everyone’s whore.”

Henry’s eyes glared in anger. “What is your game, Bev? What do you want.”

“You’ll find out. Knowledge is a very powerful tool to have. Isn’t that what Jenny preaches. Yep. Knowledge. You’re gaining quite the reputation Henry of getting drunk and seeking out sex. I don’t know, that doesn’t sound like a very stable leader, especially in a growing world. How damaging would that be . . . if . . . if the news of your drunken fling got out. Not to mention how badly and cheap you made Hector feel about it. Use them, lose them I’ve been there with you. Think about it. See ya.”

Henry’s hand closed and his fingers tore into the tomato with such a vengeance the juice splattered out and ran down his arm. He didn’t think about it, he only watched with hatred as Bev walked away.

^^^^

Bowman, North Dakota

It was evening and he could sit safely before a fire without his hood. His journey days had been long searching out the Utopia he had left his home to

find. But Christopher knew when he stopped at the small town that looked as if recently ravished, that he may have found a clue.

He stared at the items before him that he had found in his search of a town that held remnants of a civilization that moved. A patch that had the letters UWA, a pen, a lantern still filled with kerosene. Food still in foil packets. The inside of many buildings lacked cobwebs, dust and growth. They showed signs of residents that had passed. But the most important item Christopher found was a document with corrections made on it. Clearly it was a deal that whoever lived in that town was trying to make with another place. A place much better, with so much to offer, A place close to the utopia he had heard about. And through the wrinkled document that had amendments and correction upon it, Christopher discovered his next route to go. He just had to figure out which direction to head because he didn't have a clue where this place called Beginnings Montana was.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

November 2  
Beginnings, Montana

"She knows." Henry followed in a storm behind Hector toward the main greenhouse.

"I know she knows."

"You know?"

Hector stopped walking. "Yeah, I know."

"Wait. Are we talking about the same person?"

"Bev." Hector stated.

"Where is she?"

"I gave her the day off, where do you think?" He shook his head and moved back into the greenhouse heading straight to his office.

"Why?"

"Because personally, I don't want to be around her." Hector waited until Henry stepped in the office, then he slammed the door shut. "And if you're here to accuse me of saying something. Don't. Don't go there. I don't want it out as much as you don't want it out."

"But you failed to tell me she was working when we started to talk."

"How the hell was I supposed to know she'd eavesdrop. I left her in the other greenhouse. And besides, fuck you for even blaming this on me."

"I didn't say . . ."

"You don't have to. Now what is it that you want Henry. Are you here to see if you can be more of a dick than you were yesterday?" Hector glared at him.

"Excuse me Hector for being pissed right now that some little girl is holding it over my head."

"Yeah, I'm pissed too. But you know Henry, if you weren't so bitter, you would stop and think about how much better it would be if we worked together to figure out her game plan instead of against."

"I won't work with you." Henry moved to the door.

"Then why did you come up here?"

"To lash out. I guess."

"Why do you hate me." Hector asked. "You walked into our situation. Yeah, I admit, I started it, but you Henry you finished it. And to be honest, I'm scared to death of you."

Henry stopped

"Yeah. Do you even comprehend the authority you have, the position you hold here in Beginnings. You hate me, you blame me, what happens to me now. How much longer will I enjoy this job I worked hard for. So easily you can make my life miserable and I can't say a word."

"What would make you think I would do that?"

"Because of your attitude. And it surprises me, because you never struck me as such a mean person. But you are. You have to be to tell someone you were intimate with that they make you sick to look at."

"Hector, that's not me." Henry spoke softly. "It's not. I was so upset

yesterday, and it . . . it wasn't just what happened with us. Just so you know, it goes back. The hostility is pretty deep seeded."

"What? Were you a gay basher in the old world?"

"No. Not that far back. Just know, not too long ago, I was almost raped by the savages. It was painfully close. So I think that has something to do with it." Henry opened the door.

"I'm not a savage. And know, there's an open invitation despite how you are, if you want to talk and work out what you're going through. You can talk to me."

Henry just nodded, then Henry left.

^^^

"Oh, she arrives." Dean stated as Ellen walked into the house. "You got back an hour ago."

"I had to stop at the clinic. Sorry, I forgot the kids didn't have school." She shut the door.

"Well I have to get down there."

"There's a Elliott sample, Dean. He was sick this weekend."

Dean slowed in his leaving. "How bad?"

"Low grade fever, predominant glands, fatigue."

"How is he now?"

"He's good." Ellen nodded. "But just run the test, I don't want to look."

"I'll do that."

"How were the kids?" Ellen asked.

"Fine. We had fun. All except for . . ." Dean hunched when Alexandra's whining scream of aggravation carried to him. "That. God, that girl has been premenstrual."

"Daddy!" Alexandra stormed into the livingroom. "Where's my freakin cat? If Billy hid him again, I'll freakin kill him." She stormed back out.

"See." Dean pointed. "And she's using that word 'freakin' El, using it as a substitution for the word 'fuck'."

"So."

"So?"

"Yeah. I would rather have her running around using the word freakin."

"I'd rather have her not use any means of vulgar exclaiming. Can you get her to stop?"

"No."

"Why?"

"It's cute." Ellen said.

"It's annoying." Dean marched to the door.

"And you're pissy."

"I'm late." He hesitated. "El, just so you know, I really did enjoy staying here with the kids. Going out on a limb, any chance I can move back in soon."

"Absolutely not."

"Just checking." Dean opened the door and left.

Chuckling, Ellen began to clean up the scattered mess about the livingroom. Not much into picking up the disarray, there was a knock at the door. Figuring it was Dean and trying to think of the best insult to throw at him



when she saw him, Ellen set down the toys and opened the door. The smile dropped from her face. "Bev."

"Hi." Bev looked around her. "Is Jess here? I have to ask him something."

"Jess is working. And why would he be here."

"Doesn't he live here."

"No."

"Gee, I thought he did, considering you two are lovers. O.K., bye." Chipper and nonchalant, Bev turned, skipped down the steps of the porch and walked away.

Ellen was bowled over.

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New Bowman, Montana

"Please be seated." Grace spoke somber as she took her seat behind the bench. She stared into the tense court room packed with people, many of which from Beginnings. "I have a long list of people who would like to speak for and against Mrs. Slagel. But . . .before we begin. I'd like to explain these proceedings. We are here today to decide Mrs. Slagel's fate. When and where she goes. Do we help her. However, with all the talk of what people want the punishment to be, I want all to know, another option has been brought to this court's attention. An option that I feel is a viable consideration when reviewing the testimonies. In a growing community, medical knowledge is vital. Mrs. Slagel has that medical knowledge. If we lose that, we could lose. If we could find a way . . ."

"Stop." Andrea stood up.

"Mrs. Slagel please be seated."

"No." Andrea spoke softly.

"Andrea." Danny whispered. "Sit."

"No." She held out her hand to silence him. "No option. I need to speak. May I speak?"

The courtroom became attentive.

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### Beginnings, Montana

Mark had learned his lesson well in tracking. So when the first indication of a beep was heard, he gave it his full attention. Setting down his book, he looked to the screen. "Shit." Lights flashed and blinked all over the place. "Shit." His fingers moved rapidly against the keyboard for the answers he would have to get before he made the call out.

"Ellen." Elliott tried to remain in control as he quickened his pace to tracking.

"You aren't taking me serious. I'm coming to you Elliott, don't be a dick."

Elliott stopped walking. "I'm not understanding why this has you bothered. She merely took an educated guess by watching you two. So what?"

"So what? What if it gets out about me and Jess."

"Why is this a big secret. Let it get out, then you'll have nothing to fear."

"What about Jess, Elliott? He has so much to fear. You know about that note. You know what would happen to him. And if there's a known connection to me, the both of us . . . Oh my God."

"What?"

"What if . . . what if?"

"Ellen, I really must get to tracking. I have to do a history."

"Elliott, what if Bev typed that note to Jess. Then she is working for the society."

Elliott took a second. "Where's the connection. I don't see it."

"Think about it. She writes a note to Jess telling him she knows. Then . . . then she drops a subtle hint to me that she knows him and I are lovers."

"I hardly see where the truth about you and Jess has the same community impact as the truth about his participation."

"Because if the truth gets out about me and Jess, I can go down right along with him. I don't want Jess going down."

"Then find out who wrote that note."

"Bev did. Yeah." Ellen smiled.

"Ellen, if you really think that. Then you have to find a connection to Bev and the society. A connection that everyone else has failed to find. Just make sure you aren't . . . hold on." Elliott lowered the headset microphone. "Yes, Mark." His eyes widened. "I'm there in thirty seconds." He backed up.

"Elliott?"

"Ellen where are your children?" He spoke fast as he moved.

"Home with Josh."

"Go there. Get them. Get below. Now!" he ordered out. "Get a jump on the horns. We're under attack." Elliott took off running.

"What's happening?" Elliott questioned in his rush into tracking.

"Four thirty-two heading straight at us at a steady pace." Mark indicated, "We have seventy percent heading straight to the back gate. The rest scattered in groups heading to different regions."

"New Bowman?"

"Nothing."

Elliott called into his radio. "Tower hit the horn. Security base, come in. Mobilize the town, living section and clinic teams to move in now. I want everyone who is not supposed to be topside, below. Stat, this is not a drill. I want every available man at their posts. Double up at the back gate. I'm heading to armory now." Elliott raced to the door. "Mark keep me posted, Get New Bowman on the line. Since nothing is headed their way, tell them . . . we're going to need more men."

^^^

New Bowman, Montana

"No option." Andrea spoke softly before the court. "There is nothing to be decided. I don't want to be let go. I don't want to go to the society. I don't want to live in that world. Simply . . ." Her voice trembled some. "I want my life . . . to be taken from me."

The gasps that took over the courtroom were silenced with a slam of her gavel. Grace looked at Andrea. "Mrs. Slagel, do you have any idea what you are requesting?"

"Yes." Andrea dropped her head. "I want to be put to death. You live by the sword . . . you die by the sword."

"Andrea." Joe stood up calling out. "Dear God, you don't know what you're saying!"

"Mr. Slagel." Grace called out.

"No!" Joe shouted. "No, Andrea. You are not guilty. There is no reason to even ask this. We'll find a way to get you . . ."

"Joe!" Andrea cried out with a sob. "I know . . . I know what I'm asking. This is what I want Joe. This . . . this is what I want." Her tear filled eyes looked to Grace. "Order it. Please. The sooner the better."

Grace's eyes closed, her voice cracked. "So be it . . ."

"No!" Joe stood up again crying out. "No!"

"Tomorrow morning. By firing squad this case will officially end." Raising her gavel amongst the commotion in the room. Grace brought it down with a finale drop. Just as it hit with a 'slam' the sirens in New Bowman, blared.

Frank, Robbie, Johnny and Hal jumped to their feet.

Moving to the door, Frank lifted his radio. "Beginnings come in. What's going on. I have sirens here?"

"Attack is imminent. Looks like that missing camp is moving in. We need men." Mark came in.

"Fuck." Frank lowered the radio. "Robbie follow me, you and Johnny, I'm going to need you in the air." Frank barreled through the wooden doors calling out as he spoke. "Hal, secure your town then prep the second army, ride them to Beginnings STAT. We have incoming in masses." Without missing a beat, Frank grabbed his M-16 from the guard post outside the courtroom and took off running, ahead and faster than everyone else.

Outside, Frank jumped on his awaiting motorcycle and took off.

Ellen never realized how muffled and distant the sirens sounded where her home was located, especially when she burst into her house and the stereo played, blocking out any indications to Josh that there was a problem. "Josh!" She called out frantic, snatching up baby Nick from the walker in her race.

"Hey, El what . . ."

"Let's go, we have to hit the tunnels. Help me with the kids."

"They're in the back."

"Billy, Joey, Alex!" Ellen called out, handed the baby to Josh and ran toward the hall. "Let's go. Hurry!"

Billy and Joey came from their room.

"Mom?" Billy questioned.

"Let's go." Ellen grabbed his arm, "Joey, move fast. Both of you. Run straight to town, straight to containment and to the hatch. Move." Ellen looked around. "Where's Alex?"

"She's not here." Billy answered.

Pushing them to move down the hall, Ellen headed back into the livingroom. "Josh, where's Alex."

"She went out to play. I think to Kimmy's."

"Fuck." Ellen screamed and opened the door. "Let's go. The team should be in the living section. If Gemma doesn't get her below, they will. Let's go."

"Should we stop and check anyhow." Josh suggested.

"You know what. I'll check, you head below." Ellen hurried them from the house.

"Take your positions! Snipers hit the roof." Elliott ordered as he made his rush about the buzzing center of town. The sirens slowed down to a silence. Soldiers moved by him, escorting resident to containment and patients from the clinic. "Dan, how's my time on those drops."

"Good." Dan came over the radio. "Should be in the air in minutes. Loaded up plenty of threes."

"I want you south and Jess, I need you to head toward the back gate. That's where are masses are moving."

"Got it." Jess answered.

"Watch. I repeat watch how close you drop to home. They may be small missiles but this is a small area. Give us warning."

"Got it."

"Henry, you in tracking yet."

"I'm here."

"How we looking?" Elliott asked.

"Moving steady. Back gate is where my concern lies, got a number of three hundred. The rest pretty evenly distributed. Got a small group headed toward the field area. But the killer babies should take them out."

"I'll move a second team up there as back up. Keep me posted." In his stride across to the clinic, Elliott moved around a patient cart to Dean who was running to the clinic. "Dean."

"I'll have the pellets ready. Do I have three minutes? I had to get the patients out."

"You got it. I need you for something else. Any chance I can get you to hang around town. Our drop and roll man, Danny, is in New Bowman."

"Yeah. I'll do it." Dean raced inside. "Three minutes." He called as he did.

With motorcycle engine noise and static, Frank's voice emerged. "Ryder, Come in. What's the situation."

"Locking down. Town's looking good. We got them coming in at all direction. Bulk is headed to the back gate. I think they feel that's the best perimeter to charge."

"And they will. Cut off?"

"Dan and Jess should be in the air momentarily. I have Jess heading to that region loaded with Dean tip-threes. This, Frank, has the makings of a very well thought out attack."

"What's the ETA to Beginnings border."

"Henry?" Elliott called in question.

"Direct gate at their speed, ETA 12 minutes." Henry answered.

"I'll be there in four." Frank stated.

"We need the other two pilots." Elliott said.

Robbie's voice came through. "We're right behind Frank."

Frank continued. "I should see the tunnel entrance shortly. I'm on the strait now."

"Watch your backs." Henry interjected. "We have movement headed toward the front tunnel."

"Got it." Frank commented. "Robbie."

"I'm watching. But we better let Hal know. He's coming this road with his men."

"Hal." Frank called out.

"I hear." Hal said. "I'll watch."

"Ryder, Danny's in Bowman. Who'd you get?" Frank asked.

"Dean. He'll do it."

"Good, his wiry little ass shouldn't have a problem. All teams?"

"Positioned, but doubled at the back."

"Good, the small group we can take out by air. Keep the reigns Ryder."

Frank grinned. "Tunnels coming into scope. I'm on my way."

"Back gate?" Joe questioned as he stood with Hal at New Bowman's border.

"We'll ride in as close to the tunnels as we can." Hal placed on his gloves and secured his gear as he spoke. "Hopefully take that perimeter all the way in, cut the incoming off from the front. If not, we'll sideswipe them."

"I'll keep your men positioned here. Be careful."

"Without a doubt." Hal stepped back and saluted his father. He pivoted and mounted his horse. Holding the reigns and controlling the animal, Hal counted out. "Flag!"

"Here." It was raised.

"Battle horn!"

"Here."

"Sound off!" Hal ordered

The trumpets blared.

The cry out of imminent triumph came in the form of a roaring unison cheer. Hal raised a high fisted hand, and with a tight pull of the reigns, his horse lifted to its hind legs, then Hal led the way before his army of two hundred men, in their full speed, UWA-style charge to Beginnings.

"Alex!" Ellen called out through the moans and worried cries that filled the tunnels along with the residents of Beginnings. "Alex!" Fanatic she felt, as Nick wailed loudly in her ear as she held him up. "Please." She moved with haste down the tunnel. "Alex!"

"El." Josh ran to her.

"Did you find her?"

"No. She's not in the communications room or that tunnel."

"Oh my God . . . Gemma." Finally Ellen spotted Gemma and ran her way. "Gemma, tell me you know where Alex is."

"No." Gemma shook her head. "She was supposed to come over, she didn't."

"Fuck." Ellen spun and handed the baby to Josh. "Stay here. Watch Billy and Joey."

"El, where you going?"

Ellen called her answer as she bolted. "I have to find Alex."

"The lioness is now airborne." Dan called out over his chopper noise.

The switches flipped up all in a row.

Flip. Flip. Flip. Flip. Engines started, and the chopper bladed spun. Jess adjusted the stick and maneuvered the pedals and the helicopter lifted. "The Big DT is airborne as well. Frank, come in."

The bright sun hit against Frank's face as he sped through the end of the tunnels. "I hear you Jess. Get it going, Robbie will be joining you shortly."

"Roger on that."

"Robbie." Frank called out. "Nearing town. Where are you."

"Just entered the tunnel. We're heading up to the hanger. Our chopper partners are waiting and getting the bird ready.."

"Good. You join Jess behind the back gate. Lay fire. Make it safe for Hal and his men. Johnny you go north."

Robbie had to question. "What about east. We have nothing east."

"That's underdeveloped little brother, our biggest open area, we can safely gas the fuck out of them if they breach."

"And I'll do the honors."

"They're all yours." Town was ahead of Frank and he saw it. The movement. All check points were in. All they had to do was divert, attack and wait.

Elliott secured the gas mask on Dean's head. "You know what to do."

"Absolutely. If they hit town, I aim for the packs." Dean said.

"Full speed ahead, dive for the ground, drop the pellet and roll on out."

"What about you?" Dean asked. "Where's your mask."

"Ah, Dr. Hayes, I'll try to make it out, but . . . if I don't." Elliott grinned. "This is the way I wanna go." He winked.

Ellen heaved a loud worried breath upon her blasting entrance into the abandoned school. The only movement in there was the dust particles that floated in the beams of sun. "Oh, God" She held back her hair and spun. Her heart beat so fast she literally couldn't breath. Her legs shook, chest burned, Ellen was frightened but she couldn't stop. She had to find Alex.

"Oh yeah." Frank grinned when he dismounted his bike and looked around the ghost town. Elliott and Dean were the only ones standing there. "All ready in town. Henry's what's our ETA."

"Three minutes and moving into the last mile."

"Frank." Robbie's voice came over the radio. "We're at the hanger,

loading up.”

“Excellent, get it up in the air Lil brother.” Frank moved to Elliott and Dean.

“Frank, come in, this is Jess.”

“Go head.”

“I see them. There’s a ton.”

“Can you hit them.”

“Hard to say, trees are thick. I’ll make the first small drop then lay fire ahead of them and try to set them back.”

“Good, buy us time until Hal gets here.”

“Not that far big brother.” Hal called out over the radio.

“Jess, do it. Robbie get on up there. Tower one do you spot the UWA.”

“This is tower one, that’s a negative.”

“Let me know when you got them so security can shut down the slice and dice beam.” He arrived at Dean and Elliott. “Ready Dean. This could be you big hero . . .”

“Eagle one is in the air.” Robbie stated.

“Prodigy one joins you.” Johnny added.

“Yes.” Frank clenched his fist.

“This is tower one, I got the calvary in my scope.”

“Get ready to down the beams.” Frank ordered. “Hal make the call when you’re near.”

“Got it Frank.”

Just as Frank went to continue with his instructions to Dean, another radio interruption occurred.

“Laid fired Frank, they’re backing up.” Jess said. “Dean tip three took out about seventy.”

“Did you hear that Hal?” Frank asked. “Making it easier for you.”

“Ha.” Hal chuckled. “I’m nearing, get ready on that beam.”

“Security, get ready on that beam.” Frank reiterated.

“Down it.” Hal called out.

“Beam is down.” Paul from security assured.

“This is tower one, The UWA has veered off.”

“Henry.” Frank called out. “How far are they.”

“If they keep at the steady course they’re going, in about a mile and we’re gonna have a major interception at hand. God speed Hal.”

“We’re ready.” Hal came back.

Frank lowered his microphone. “Elliott, you stay here and man town. And where the fuck’s you mask. I’m going to . . .”

“This is tower two. I have fire in the sky. I repeat from the west, I have fire in the sky,”

Frank curled a lip in confusion. “What the fuck is fire in the . . .” A hiss of static blared in Frank’s ear almost making him fling off his headset.

“Fuck!” Henry screamed. “We lost power, I’m getting nothing from the east. Absolutely nothing. They must have taken out solar panel three.”

“Divert to reserve pool.” Frank instructed. “Birds, we have no power to the east perimeter, get ready to make a field drop if necessary. Henry how far were they last check.”

“Good two miles and moving slow. I’m heading down to the reserve poll,

there's a ten minute delay before power transferred.."

"Get it going now Henry." Frank instructed then jumped when he heard the loud 'Whew-who' Blast in his ear. "Hal, was that you."

Hal grinned widely in his speed filled ride, ducking the branches that smacked out at him. "We see them Frank, they aren't expecting up. Man, big brother you should get your ass up here. It's gonna be one hell of a battle." Hal drew his sword.

"You know what. I'm heading up to the back gate with my men, maybe I will . . ." Frank's eyes widened when he spotted Josh walking aimless around town. "What the . . ."

"This is tower one, second UWA group just entered on horse back full speed through the front tunnel entrance."

"Second group?" Frank questioned "Hal, did you bring a second group."

"No Frank, I have two hundred plus now."

"Shit."

Elliott looked up. "Savages."

"Down the gate!" Frank ordered as he rushed to Josh. "What the hell are you doing up here."

"This is tower one, the gate is going, no . . ."

"Don't tell me." Frank closed his eyes.

"They're in. About fifty."

"Fuck!" Frank's hand cut through the air. "All men in town be prepared they'll head our way. Elliott. Get in position, Dean you too. Josh, get the hell below."

"I can't Frank. I have to find Ellen." Josh sounded so panicked.

Frank whined loudly as he tossed his head back. "Can she never be where she's supposed to be when there's fuckin danger. Fuck!"

Elliott began to back up. "I'll find her."

"Where did she go?" Frank asked.

"To look for Alex, I think she headed back home. I'm not sure."

"Alex?" Frank asked.

"Oh my God. My daughter." Dean reached for his mask.

Frank stopped him. "Stay put. I'll find her. Like mother, like fuckin daughter." Just as Frank dropped his hand with a frustrational growl he turned slowly and zoomed into the on coming stampede sound that was accompanied by screaming savages. "Hal? How's it looking up there for you."

A clank of a sword preluded Hal's response. "Good. Why?"

"Oh, nothing." Frank kept his eyes on the savages. "Robbie we may need you hover near town, Jess and Johnny stay put. Back gate send me half your man double time we are under attack. Secure the gas masks down below." Frank swung around his M-16 and pumped the chamber. "Dean get ready. Josh, get below. Elliott?"

"I'm right behind you."

"Let's go." Top speed, gun in hand, Frank and Elliott speed of toward the living section.

Dean backed up to where he was supposed to hide. His mind wasn't where it was supposed to be, it was with Frank and Elliott, and he prayed they would find his family.



Horse bouncing up and down and out of control, Hal swung out his leg kicking back the savage from him and pumped once on his rifle then fired the savage back. He tried to get his aim, but his horse did not remain steady enough. Tossing the gun back, Hal pulled his sword again, and dismounted from his horse. Almost happily he glared at the savage before him, tossing his sword from hand to hand in a teasing manner before quickly giving a full swing and beheading the human beast.

Biting his bottom lip in arrogance, Hal turned around and began to fight again. He showed his true colors and why he led the UWA. Ahead of his soldiers, in the thick of it all. Hal was where he wanted to be, thrived to be, and lived to be. And along side of his men, in all of his glory, Hal battled in true UWA style.

“El!” Frank called out. “Stop”

So much relief hit Ellen when she reached for her door, stopped, turned around and saw Frank racing to her. Elliott was behind him. “Oh God Frank. I can’t find Alex. I can’t find her anywhere,” Her face was red, tear streaked.

Frank laid his hands on her arms. “Where did you look.”

“Everywhere. I screamed up and down the streets. I’m checking here again incase she’s hiding. Frank.” Ellen gasped out.

“Calm down. I’ll find her. Go with Elliott.”

“I can’t leave. I have to find her I have to find . . .”

“El!” Frank blasted. “Get out of here. Elliott! Grab her.” He charged for the house.

“Frank!” Ellen screamed out fighting Elliott’s hold.

“Get her out of here!” Frank angrily screamed with a heavy point and opened the front door.

“He’ll find her.” Elliott, arm around Ellen rushed her toward town. “I promise.” He slowed in his moving.

“What’s wrong.”

Briefly Elliott closed his eyes because in ear shot he heard the entailing battle in town. He knew the men were trying to keep the savages from going any further. “Get ready for excitement.”

“Alex!” Frank bellowed out deeply in his move through the house. “Alex come out.” He opened every closet looked under each bed. Ellen’s room was the last he got to. “Alex are you . . .” Frank stopped. His shoulders dropped in relief and he smiled as he ran to the window. Had she not been wearing that hideous orange shirt, Frank wouldn’t have seen her. But he did. Way out in the underdeveloped section, sitting alone in her own world. “Alex.” He whispered. And then horror bestowed him when he saw coming from the cliff into the underdeveloped section, savages. Slowly, many of them, one by one they dropped like beads of dew. They dropped and ran to the perimeter fence Alexandra sat not far from. “Oh God! No power.”

“Elliott.” Ellen clenched her teeth in fright, grabbing onto his back as they

hit the edge of town. All she could see were savages. Gun fire erupted but the savage eluded it by moving so fast.

"Stay close." Elliott held his gun ready.

"I have no desire to leave . . ."

Up from the side, springing into view came a savage.

Ellen screamed.

The savage screamed.

With a reflex action, Elliott turned some, revved back his elbow and shot it into the savage. He lifted his gun aimed and fired as the savage started his charge back. Off went the savage's forehead and outward shot his blood. "Let's go." Elliott ordered.

"Where?"

"We have to get you to containment."

"We'll never make it." How far away a building so close seemed to be when a battle enraged around it.

"Dean." Elliott called into the radio. "You better do your thing. Soon."

Emotional, fear filled gasps were the sounds Frank made with each pounding, charging slam of his boot to the concrete as he raced as fast as his body would move. Alexandra was in sight. So oblivious. Drawing or something as she sat amidst the high weeds. So unaware that climbing the fence not fifty feet from her were a wall of savages.

"Robbie." Frank called out in his run. "Robbie veer our way. Out to the UD. Hurry. Savages. Do not gas. Do not gas."

"Frank?" Robbie had question in his voice. He had never heard Frank sound so upset. "What's wrong?"

"Oh God, there has to be fifty of them, Oh God." Frank ran. "Alex is out here." Frank grunted out loudly and with a scream to release some of the pain he felt was crushing his chest. Burning, aching, focus on Alex. And when he was close enough to her, Frank called out. "ALEX!"

Lifting her kitten, Alex looked at Frank.

"Alex!"

Giggling she waved.

So close. So close. Too close. Over the fence the first one dropped. Then the second, then the third. Still at a distance Frank had to decide, stop and shoot or keep going. He watched the first group move toward Alex and Frank kept moving. In his heart and in his mind, he knew that God forbid something were to happen to her, he was going down too. "Alex! Run!" M-16 swinging in his run, gripped to his hand, Frank charged ahead. "Alex! Run!"

Slowly Alex started to stand, as she did, she saw them. So many of them, men like she had never seen, they ran her way. Eight of them led the way, more were behind them and more climbed over the fence. Gripping furball tight in her little arms, Alexandra stepped back and tripped over her papers that laid on the ground.

Frank literally screamed when he saw her disappear into the high grass. "Oh God." He cried out with each step he ran. "Alex!"

Alex stumbled to a stand again. She looked behind her to see Frank, then she looked ahead to see the savages. She was in the middle and she just couldn't move.

As close as Frank got to Alexandra that was how close the first wave of eight savages grew. Alexandra was a frozen target. A prize of some sorts and it was race against each other to see who could reach her first.

It was Frank versus the savages.

Alexandra's eyes became blurry with her welling tears of fear. Why couldn't she move. She wanted to run. She squeezed onto Furball nearly pushing the life from him. Her eyes transfixed, almost hypnotized on the savages that were so close she could smell them. She felt it build from her stomach, the scream that rumbled from her when she saw the one savage leap forward, spear in hand ready to lunge. His arm went back. Alexandra's shrill scream was interrupted when her body shook from the rapid gunfire right behind her. In a perfectly straight, line it cut into the eight savages shooting out the blood and guts and in ripping manner to the right. They fell like toy soldiers, dropping and exposing even more savages that raced up behind them. Just as she turned to run, she felt the jolt of her tiny body and an air of instant relief when she was swept up into the safety of Frank's arms.

Frank gripped her so tight, despite the fact he still held onto his rifle. "Robbie. " Be beckoned. "Where are you. Oh God." He held on to Alex seeing the charging savages. Too many and his arms were full.

"I see you Frank. Find me. To the west."

Frank couldn't look back. Not yet. He heard the frightened whimper of Alexandra as her arms wrapped around his neck and her legs around his chest. "Hold on to daddy. That's it. Just hold on to Daddy. Real tight. Don't let go. Please don't let go."

Alexandra squeezed even tighter.

"Robbie I need a signal." Frank lifted his weapon and fired out aimlessly trying to fend them off.

"I'll swing around Frank. Take off to your left. It's you best chance.

Between firing shots, Frank tried to comfort a crying Alex. "It's gonna be all right. Just hold onto Daddy. We're gonna run. Ready?"

Alexandra nodded.

Just as Frank leaped to charge so did the savages, the first spear sailed out and with his gun as a bat he smacked it way, but wasn't fortunate enough to knock out the next.

Into the side of his right thigh the thick heavy spear sailed, he snapped it immediately off at the head, and saw, four feet ahead of him in the direction he had to go, were six savages. Shooting and killing were not an option, getting Alex out of there was the only one. Holding on to this gun just until he made it in the clear, Frank held on to Alexandra with one hand and barreled through like a football player into the six savages.

His M-16 was his only line of defense, that and his body. Feeling the secure lock of Alexandra's arms, Frank used both hands on his weapons and cut his way through. Up he swung the M-16 knocking the one on the chin, to the right he brought it down on another. And with the weight of his big body, the heat of the raging savages behind him, Frank gave it all he had and rammed his way through the remaining four. He lost his balanced and stumbled only for a second. Then arrows and spears sailing in multitudes at him, he regained his footing with the momentum he needed when he saw the dangling rope of Robbie's savior chopper.

"We made it, Alex. We made."

"I'm scared." Alexandra cried.

"We made it. Hold on." Tossing out his weapon and holding tight to Alexandra, Frank made his final charge and leaped up gripping the moving rope with one hand. "I got it! Robbie lift!" The rope swung out, wide and around with the weight of Frank and Alexandra's bodies as the chopper lifted.

"We'll pull you up." Robbie spoke over the chopper noise.

Frank smiled feeling the rope move upward. "See Alex. See." He breathed a sigh of relief.

Until . . .

So weak it was, the little voice that came from her. Weak, raspy and full of air. "Daddy."

Frank's whole entire being shuddered and his heart left him when he felt her tiny body release her grip. Her legs fell, arms dropped and her head and body fell in a drastic arch back. When it did, Frank not only felt the back of the arrow hit against his hand that held her, he saw the tip of the head trying to protrude through her fragile chest, just under her neck. "Oh God! Alex. Alex. Robbie move." He could see the chopper floor came into view and then he saw the hands reach down. "Take her, Gently."

The hands reached down and locked onto Alex's limp body. And Hector lifted her into the chopper.

"Easy with her, Watch," Frank climbed in and immediately took her. "Please be alive. Please, please, please be alive." He begged her as his huge hand covered her entire neck looking for a pulse. He found one, he gasped. "Robbie."

Robbie looked once over his shoulder, then the helicopter drastically went sideways when he saw Alexandra bleeding in Frank's arms and he lost control. "Oh my God."

"Get us to the clinic. Radio for help."

"We're . . ." Robbie looked out the window. "Shit we can't drop there."

"Then you know where to go. Go there. Go fast Robbie." Frank adjusted Alexandra in between his legs and his arms, being careful not to even touch the arrow. "Hurry. Please." His lips pressed emotionally hard to the soft silent face of Alex. "Hold on. Please hold on. Please." over and over he kissed her, stroking her hair, imploring her with his soul. Impassioned he cradled her in his arms, afraid to let her frail body go.

So afraid.

The door to Andrea's prison room flung open and Judge Grace entered with two guards.

Andrea sprang from the bed. "Sweet Jesus what's happening."

"You don't have to. But we need you at the hospital now."

Without hesitation, Andrea was out that door.

Every single time Ellen and Elliott thought they had a clear path something happened. Dean was getting frustrated, not to mention tired. Only eighteen savages remained, running amuck. And the soldiers that fought them tried more to stop them by hand instead of destroying town completely with the laying

down of rapid gunfire. In fact Dean had to wonder what the point of Elliott even trying to get Ellen down below was. From what he saw it was almost over, and Dean was going to bitch. They grouped them, and like a pawn, he ran out, risked his life and took them out.

"What?" Dean gasped in his mask watching Elliott and Ellen in some sort of game lead the pack of savages to containment. "Damn it." Pellet of death in hand, from his hiding spot Dean charged out, darting in and out, up and down the gunfire filled street.

He dove. He rolled. He realized how old his body was when, like a bowling ball he slammed into the savages and felt every ached. Seeing Elliott's boots, Dean hoped Elliott knew, because there wasn't anytime.. Pellet in hand, Dean crushed it releasing the gas.

Ellen couldn't breath, Elliott made sure of that. His hand covered her mouth and nose so hard even if she tried to breath, she couldn't. Arm around her waist Elliott reached back, opened the containment door and pulled her in.

Outside, savages surrounding him, Dean found no escape from the ones that encircled him. He knew the gas was released. He knew it wouldn't take that long. Seeing the choking faces of the attackers, Dean tensed up when he saw something else. A spear diving his way. Inches before it rammed into his flesh, the spear dropped and so did the savage.

The doors to the hospital burst open and Frank, carried at full speed, Alexandra in his arms.

Andrea and Blue pushed the cart his way.

"Sweet Jesus." Andrea exclaimed. "On her side, lay her on her side."

Frank didn't want to let her go, but he placed Alexandra on the cart. "Andrea, help her."

Andrea began her examination right then and there in the hall. Checking Alexandra's pupils, pulse, respiratory. "The blood loss isn't that bad. Look Frank." Andrea smiled at him. "It's clotted. She's in shock right now. I'm positive we can get this out. It entered at the best place it could have." she reassured. "You just wait here."

"Take care of her, please." Frank spoke with so much worry. As they wheeled away Alexandra, her little hand slipped from his and Frank's heart broke. His head dropped when he felt the last tiny bit of her fingers tips.

"Frank," Robbie laid a strong gripping hand on his back. "It's gonna be all right. You did good."

Frank reached back and grabbed on to the hand that clung on to his shoulder. Robbie's hand and from that he stole the strength he lacked at that moment.

"Pap, come in." Johnny called over the radio. "The UD is secure."

"Excellent. Did you make the drop?" Joe asked.

"That's a negative Pap, I open fired, me and Jess, took them out the hard way but the fun way."

"You're as sick as you're father. Hal, check in."

"Flags secure dad." Hal spoke. "Victory belongs to the UWA as usual."

"How's our losses?"

"Unfortunately we did suffer a few, Not many. We have some injuries, we're transporting to the clinic now."

"Johnny, still with me."

"Yeah, Pap, what's up."

"I need you to get to the hanger and wait for Dean and Ellen. They have to get to New Bowman. It's . . . It's Alex."

Frank not only heard the 'boom' of the opening hospital doors, but the racing panicked filled voices of Dean and Ellen. He dreaded the moment, and was afraid to face them in his failure to deliver Alexandra unharmed. He stood up the moment Ellen raced in the waiting room.

"Frank." She called out, Dean right with her.

"El." With so much pain he spoke.

"Oh my God." Ellen saw him covered in blood. "Alex. She's not . . ."

"No." Frank shook his head. "El, I'm sorry. Dean." He raised his sad eyes. "Dean I'm sorry. I tried to get her out of there, I tried. But there were so many. I know that's no excuse but . . ." Frank at that moment got all he needed. His words were cut short when Ellen slammed her arms around him and embraced him tight. "El?"

"Thank you." She kissed him. "Thank you. Only you Frank, could have gotten her out of there alive. Only you. Thank you."

"Frank." Dean walked up behind Ellen with an extended hand. "Thank you for saving my daughter."

Just as Frank shook his hand and closed his eyes. Andrea entered.

"Who wants good news." Andrea spoke on her entrance. She waited until they gathered close to her. "The operation went well. We removed the arrow, no damage is done. Alexandra will be just fine."

^^^

Dean hovered his daughter on one side of the bed while Frank hovered on the other. Both holding on to Alexandra's hands, watching her sleeping face.

Andrea closed the chart. "I see no reason why she can't be transported to Beginnings. She's stable and doing well." She laid the chart down and looked at Alexandra then at Ellen, Frank and Dean. "I just thank the good Lord I got to do this before I leave." Smiling peacefully and touching Alexandra's leg, Andrea stepped back.

Ellen followed. "Andrea wait." She called out to stop her as Andrea approached the guard. "Please."

"Yes."

A sobbing breath came from Ellen. "They told me. Tell me it's not true."

"I'm sorry, Ellen."

"But Andrea listen. Change your mind. Don't do this. I am begging you don't do this. Talk to Judge Grace, I am positive she will rescind the order."

"Tomorrow . . . tomorrow is my judgement." She laid her hand on Ellen's cheek.

"You're making yourself sound guilty. You aren't."

Andrea's head dropped.

"Say it." Ellen told her. "Tell me you're guilty."

Andrea said nothing.

"Andrea."

"I asked to be put to death didn't I? That should tell you it all." Leaning down, Andrea kissed Ellen on the cheek. "You take care." solemnly, arms folded, Andrea walked to the guard.

"She looks like El." Frank commented peering down to Alexandra.

"Oh without a doubt." Dean lifted Alexandra's hand. "Look how petite."

"Just like El."

"Yep."

"But I see a lot of you in her."

"You think?" Dean asked.

"Oh yeah. She has your mouth."

"No Frank." Dean chuckled, "After hearing her substitution for the word fuck, she has your mouth."

Laughing, Frank noticed Alexandra's eyes fluttering. "Hey."

"Hey Alex." Dean leaned down into her. "How are you."

Slowly Alexandra opened her eyes and shifted them from Frank to Dean.

"Did you want to say something?" Dean asked.

"You need anything?" Frank questioned as well.

Her voice was soft and tired. "Where's Furball?"

## CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE

### Beginnings, Montana

“Johnny.” There was beckoning in George’s voice. “No.”

“One more week, George. That’s all.” Johnny said on the phone. “I can’t do this to him. I can’t. If I go tomorrow with Reverend Bob, then with Andrea’s execution it will kill my Pap.”

“I hate the thought of you and Bev staying there.”

“We’ll be quiet, maybe even secure that team.” Johnny sadly said. “But after tomorrow, I have to stay with my pap.”

~~~~~

“This is nuts.” Jess’ voice commented in the dark UD. “The bodies are still out here.” He moved the flashlight around.

“Evidence.” Robbie said as he searched. “We have to.”

Henry daintily and squeamishly moved about. “I’ll scream if I see it dead.”

“We just have to know.” Robbie said. “That’s all. If it’s alive and out here it won’t live till morning.”

“It’s like finding a needle in a haystack.” Jess commented. “I can’t see shit out here.”

“I want to go back in.” Henry complained. “It smells. It really smells. And I’m getting . . .” Henry froze when not only he felt something under his foot but heard the painful animal scream as well. “Shit.”

“Henry.” Robbie rushed over. “If you fuckin killed it.” He bent down by Henry’s boot and smiled. Dirty, shaking, covered with blood, but still alive was Furball.

~~~~~

It was tender, it was slow and it was the kind of kiss Frank had waited to get from Ellen for a really long time. His one arm locked around her, holding Ellen to him while the other caressed her face occasionally touching the reality of their kissing mouths.

Slightly he moaned with a chuckle as he pulled back from the kiss. “Thank you.”

“No thank you.” Ellen kissed him quickly. “You sure you don’t mind sitting here with Alex for a while.”

“What are you nuts? I want to.” He took a deep breath and kissed her again. “You better go. Get some rest.”

“I will.” she pulled back.

“You do know I love taking advantage of this hero stuff with you.”

“Oh, yeah I know. But you didn’t save me this time, you saved my daughter.” She bent down and kissed Alexandra then moved to the door. “Elliott saved me. You got a kiss. Imagine what he got.” leaving only briefly, Ellen popped her head back in the room to see Frank’s expression. “I’m joking.” She winked and walked out.



It had been a long day, an exhausting one and the next day wouldn't be any better. Ellen hoped that it was all a nightmare. Some sort of mistake had been made. She refused to believe that Andrea would be executed the next day.

The lights from the lab surprised her, Ellen thought Dean was shutting down for the night. "Hey." She spoke softly walking in the lab. "Aren't you ready?"

"Um, yeah." Dean booted down the computer and turned around. He looked frazzled.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. A lot on my mind. I have some work to review at home."

"Alone?"

"That's how I live." Dean shrugged.

"Wanna come home with me? This is not a sexual proposition, nor a reunion, just . . . just an invitation. I think after today, you and I need to wind down together, I'll help with the work, what do you say?"

Dean breathed out. "El, I'd love that. But what about the Beginnings mystery man. Won't he mind?"

"Who? Oh, yeah. Him. No. He knows I was going to ask you over. Actually Elliott suggested it so thank him."

"Swell. So Robbie doesn't mind me spending the night."

"Why would Robbie mind?" Ellen smiled. "And no it's not Robbie."

"Henry tends to get neurotic if he even thinks we're . . ."

"Dean. Stop;. You won't figure it out."

"There's only a hundred and . . ."

"Dean." Ellen walked to the counter. "Let's go home. Here, I'll help carry the folders." Reaching out, Ellen saw the folded piece of paper with Dean's name handwritten on it. "Dean, this looks like Andrea's writing."

"It is."

"What's it . . ." Ellen reached for it, but Dean pulled it away. "I'm sorry. It's none of my business."

"It's not that. It's just . . . it's not that." Dean placed the note in his pocket.

"Are you feeling bad about tomorrow with her."

Dean didn't answer at first he just grabbed his stack of folders. "You can say I really don't give shit about what happens to Andrea tomorrow. In fact I will take pleasure in watching." He moved to the door.

"Dean." Ellen gasped out. "What the hell was that about?"

Dean closed his eyes then turned around. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the note holding it up. "Andrea explained a lot in this note. You can say . . . it was her final confession." Saying no more, Dean shoved the note back in his pocket and walked out.

Ellen didn't respond any further, she just followed Dean out. She may have left that lab with a stack of folders, but she also left that lab seriously wondering, for the first time, if perhaps the note to Dean wasn't the only recent letter Andrea wrote to a Beginnings resident.

## CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX

November 3  
New Bowman. Montana

Hands locked tightly in the silent darkened room, Robbie just didn't want to leave Andrea. So sad, and tightly he held his eyes closed. His head swayed slowly side to side.

"Robbie." Andrea spoke sadly. "You have to go."

Robbie sniffled once and raised his eyes. "I hate leaving right now."

"You have to end this." Andrea lifted their joined hands and brought her lips to them. "You know this."

"But now?"

"Now." She spoke just as sad as he did. "You have to be our hero. End this bitterness. Put an end to everything right now. You need to shine, Robbie."

"I can't believe this is happening."

"Oh, the Good Lord will watch over me. And I'm expecting you to continue in his work."

Robbie nodded.

"Robbie." She whispered. "It's gonna be a long time till we see each other again. You . . . you take care of your father. O.K.? And your brothers. Do me a favor, you keep Ellen and Dean in line. Them two." She smiled.

"I can't go Andrea. I can't do this flight. Not right now. Not with all that's gonna happen."

"Oh yes you can." Andrea clenched his hand tighter. "You must. When I'm standing out there today. I'm not alone. I know all of you are with me. And I will take great pride in knowing, you Robbie are out there ending this bitter savage war."

Gasping out a breath in preparation for his emotional goodbye, Robbie reached out. With tears in his eyes, he embraced Andrea for the final time.

^^^^

### Andrew's Air Force Base

Was he praying? In thought, or just worried. Steward had to wonder as he looked at George. Facing the jet, hands against the surface, George leaned into the aircraft with his head down. He had been that way for a long time.

"Sir." Steward apprehensively approached. "Sir, if you don't leave right now, you won't make the synchronization time."

Lifting his head, George's face was plastered with more worry than ever before. Looking at Steward, George stepped back and nodded.

^^^^

### Beginnings, Montana

In the front seat of the jeep, right outside of the clinic, Dean stared down to

his hands. 'I'm telling you, Frank, she's not coming.'

"Dean, she is. What did she say last night?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing about it."

After tapping his hand several times on the steering wheel, Frank got out of the jeep. "I'll be right back."

"She won't come."

Frank didn't listen, he just headed directly into the clinic. Down the hall to the lab he moved and walked inside, Ellen was there with Elliott. "El, let's go."

Slowly Ellen looked at Frank. "I'm not going."

"I can't believe this shit. Get your ass in the jeep."

"I am not going Frank." Ellen stated strongly. "I can't."

"What?" He stepped to her. "Why?"

"I can't watch it."

"You won't have to. Just be there."

"Being there is just as bad," Ellen said. "Being in New Bowman will make it a reality. I don't want to face this. I don't want to believe that Andrea is going to die. So I won't. I'll just tell myself she left." She spoke softly. "And I'll live with that."

"That's wrong."

"It's what I want."

"You should be there for my dad." Frank told her.

"Joe knows I'm there with him. So does Andrea. But I stay here. I'll pray for her and Robbie here. Here. Right here and no where else."

"Please come." Frank beckoned softly.

Sadly Ellen peered up to him. "I can't."

He nodded once, laid his hand on her cheek and kissed her. "I'll call you. Elliott, watch her." Frank instructed as he walked from the lab, only stopping to look back once more before finally leaving.

Elliott had said nothing. He didn't know what to say and it was when he moved to Ellen, that he realized he didn't have to say anything at all. His being there was what she needed because she turned into him and into his arms and Elliott held her.

^^^

### New Bowman, Montana

Behind Andrea Joe stood with his arms wrapped tightly around her, his cheek pressed to hers. And Andrea sobbed. "It's not too late to change your mind." Joe whispered. "It's not."

"It has to be done. Just tell me. Assure me."

"The children . . . they'll be fine. I'll watch. I'll take care of them. There will not be a day that goes by when they won't miss you."

Andrea's shoulders bounced as she cried even harder "Tell them everyday for me that I love them."

"I will."

"I love you . . . Joseph Slagel."

"And I love Andrea. Know that." Just as Joe placed his lips to her cheek the sound of the turning doorknob went through them both like a bolt of

electricity.

Corporal Lewis stepped into the room. So nervous he seemed. "It's . . . it's time."

~~~~~

"N-now something just doesn't seem right." Rev. Bob said to Hal as Hal stopped the jeep.

"What doesn't seem right? You're being released to the other side."

"There's no one here." Rev. Bob looked around.

"They'll be here. A deals a deal. Now out. Out." Hal shooed his hand.

Nervously, Reverend Bob, stepped out of the jeep. He grabbed his bag from the back. "Just wait here?"

"Yep."

"It seems so far out."

"I won't let the Society near my home. Do you blame me?"

"I suppose not." Rev. Bob moved away from the jeep. "You aren't going to shoot me are you?"

"Me, no. That's not my style. I'd behead you if it was my call." Hal tossed the jeep in gear.

"Tell Andrea I sincerely am praying for her."

"I won't see Andrea. I won't witness that. Good luck to you Reverend." With a sad smile and a nod, Hal backed up the jeep and drove away. Rev. Bob, outside of New Bowman stood alone.

~~~~~

It was the last kiss. Sincere and emotional Joe held on to Andrea until the UWA soldier took hold of her arm.

Andrea didn't want to look back, but she did as she was escorted up the long hill to the top where her death sentence would be delivered. She saw Joe mouth the words 'I love you' And head held high, She walked.

Joe was glad he wasn't allowed up that hill. He didn't want to be there. Standing at the bottom he watched them ascend. The only one who wasn't part of the firing squad, who was allowed to be there, was Dean. He not only was the witness, he was the one who would confirm her death.

~~~~~

Shield down, mouthpiece close to his lips, Robbie veered his plane to the right. "Flipper Boy this is Eagle One, do you read?"

"Why do you insist on calling me that?" George replied over the airwaves.

"It's a cool name. Be honored."

"Yeah. Yeah."

"I'm coming into scope now."

"I am too."

"Getting ready to make my first visual sweep in approximately . . ."

"Three minutes and twenty-two seconds." George finished the sentence. "I'm right with you in time."

"Destination in scope. Flipper Boy Eagle one is flying in."

After a grunt, George responded. "Destination in scope on this end. Flip . . . Flipper boy is moving in."

^^^

They lined up twelve across, standing tall at attention, rifles held erect beside them. Yet not one of the eight UWA or four Beginnings men would look at Andrea as Corporal Lewis led her to the post not twenty-five feet from them.

Grabbing her hands, Corporal Lewis secured them behind the post with rope. "Would you like a hood?"

"No." Andrea whimpered out she tried to make eye contact with Dean but he wouldn't even look at her. He moved to behind the firing squad at a distance. Andrea knew the time was coming. She felt it more so when Corporal Lewis finished tying her wrist and stepped back.

Taking a deep breath through her nostrils, Andrea stopped crying, drew in every ounce of courage she had and held her head high.

^^^

"Finally." Rev. Bob spoke in relief and stood up from his seat on his suitcase when he saw the military truck with the Caceres Society symbol on the doors. "It's about time." He picked up his bag and moved to the truck.

A society soldier stepped out staring passed him.

Rev. Bob tried to hand him the bag, the soldier wouldn't take it. "Fine. Should I put it in the back?" Still no response. "Damn lab created zombies." Chuckling at his joke and glad he was leaving, Rev. Bob walked to the back of the truck. Reaching up to put the bag in, the tarp to the truck opened. "Oh my God."

Frank grinned as he stepped from the back of the truck.

"But . . . But . . . these are society . . ."

"You really should pay more attention to what the defectors look like."

"Shit." The bag dropped from his hand.

"Surprised?" Frank asked and watched Rev. Bob nod. "I thought so." Giving just one more snide smile, Frank raised his revolver, aimed and released one fatal shot.

There was a delayed reaction, then Rev. Bob bodily dropped back.

"Ha." Frank put his gun away.

"Sick." Hal came from the back of the truck. "Is this an acquired skill?"

"I like to think of it as more of an . . . an art." As Frank raised his hand, he saw his watch. "Shit, Hal. It's happening."

^^^

"Target in scope." Robbie stated.

"Target in scope."

"Eagle one locked in." Robbie flicked a switch.

"Locked in." George did the same.

"On my call." Robbie said. "Let's do it."

"Yes." George replied. "Let's end this savage war,"

“Three . . . two . . . one . . . drop.” Robbie’s thumb depressed the button.

And together, at the same time, thousands of miles apart the deliverance of instant death to the massive savage camps were released.

The missiles dropped.

^^^

“Ready.” Corporal Lewis called out. He stared forward, not at Andrea, nor at his men. His frame of mind was evident on his face. He had taken himself mentally from the situation.

The executioners raised their weapons.

“Aim.”

The shifting of chambers rang out as the guns were aimed.

There was silence. There was hesitation. Corporal Lewis’ heart pounded in his throat. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

A single tear rolled down Andrea’s cheek.

“Fire.”

The popping crackling sound of gunfire echoed in the air. Twelve shots were fired and Andrea’s body jolted with everyone single one. Twelve shots. That’s all that was needed.

The smell of gunpowder predominantly around him, Corporal Lewis, spoke up. “Weapons down.” Slowly he shifted his views to Andrea. Still bound to the post, her body was saturated in blood and her head hung low. “Dr. Hayes.”

Clearing the tenseness from his throat Dean walked forward past the line of gunmen. His face showed no emotions as he approached a still Andrea. Reaching up to her red stained neck, Dean felt for a pulse. His hand dropped and he slid his hand down Andrea’s face closing her open eyes. He faced Corporal Lewis. “Dead.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN

Beginnings, Montana

There was a different air of feeling as Frank sat in his office alone. His night shift wasn't far from starting and already he knew it would be the last one. He reviewed the information taken from the surveillance cameras on the jets. The Savage camps were gone. A feeling in his gut told him there would be no retaliation, not yet at least.

A feeling a safety not felt for a while was with Frank. He knew the problem with the savages was not a hundred percent gone. It would never be, not with a world so bad. But it was under control. He wanted to believe they were at peace, but he knew that wasn't possible. Peace was a word that mankind long since strived for yet never achieved or would. Whether it be in a pre-plague world, or apocalyptic world, as long as wills collided, war would always be imminent.

But for the time being, Frank enjoyed the break.

^^^^

The light from the greenhouse told Henry he was right in his assumption on where to find Hector. Going in, he headed straight to the office where Hector sat. "Working late?" Henry asked as he knocked on the door.

"Yep. Have to. I'm short a person." Hector tossed his clipboard. "Blackmail will do that to you."

Running his fingers through his hair, Henry stepped inside the office. "So much happened today. I . . . I need something to take my mind off of everything. Feel . . . feel like working a little harder? Working together and maybe we can find out exactly what Bev is up to?"

Without hesitation, Hector stood up. "What do you need me to do?"

^^^^

New Bowman, Montana

Joe's fork dropped as sadly as his head at the dinner table.

"Dad." Hal reached out. "It'll work out. I promise."

Joe nodded.

"Pap." Johnny came from the back hall. "Denny, he just wants to be alone and Katie sleeping."

"I'll check on them later." Joe stood up. "Are you heading back?"

"Me?" Johnny asked. "Unless you want me to stay."

"You know what John? I'd like that."

Smiling, Johnny nodded. "Then I stay in New Bowman with you."

^^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Danny Hoi, always upbeat, was not immune to depression and he wasn't in the mood to get drunk. He needed something to take his mind off the events of the day and all the repairs he had to do in Beginning in the post-attack.

Being creative and doing good always made Danny feel better. And he knew of someone he had been neglecting that needed some of Danny's good doing. Though he couldn't promise any results, Danny had to try. So toting his laptop computer Danny headed to containment to see Richie.

^^^^

"One hundred even." Ellen laid down the thermometer then sat on the couch next to Elliott. "What all are you feeling?"

"Just . . . just tired, El." Elliott slowly shook his head. "It's frustrating. I feel so tired. My whole body is numb."

Reaching out, Ellen laid her hand over Elliott's. "Yesterday was eventful. You didn't stop."

"I don't want to stop."

"Well sometimes you'll have to." Ellen explained. "That doesn't make you weak. It makes you smart. We'll just sit back and . . . relax tonight."

"I'd like that." Elliott gripped on to her hand and stared at her. "Can I kiss you?"

"Elliott Ryder, I would like that very much."

Smiling, Elliott leaned down into Ellen and began to kiss her.

"Hey now." Robbie said loudly as he just walked in Ellen's house. "Knock the shit off."

"Yeah!" Jess followed behind.

Elliott quickly pulled back. "Robbie. Jess., Jess, I'm sorry I . . ."

"I'm kidding." Jess stated.

Ellen still holding Elliott's hand, looked at the pair. "What are you two doing here?"

"Entertainment." Robbie answered.

"Yes, we're going to strip." Jess said, "And I'll get the drinks."

Ellen's eyes widened. "Strip?"

"Ha." Robbie set a box on the coffee table. "And you believe that. Man El are you kinky." He looked at Elliott. "Elliott, are you all right?"

"Yes." Elliott blinked. "Just kind of tired."

"Oh. Are you too tired to play?" Robbie asked.

"Play what?"

Robbie grinned. "With all that happened, I need to just forget. Relax, And I thought nothing was better than a good game of Pictionary."

Jess came from the kitchen. "But Robbie, you and El can't be a team."

Ellen seemed offended. "Why not?"

"You guys cheat." Jess sat on the floor.

Elliott looked confused. "How . . . how can you cheat in Pictionary."

"If you can cheat at a game . . ." Jess started getting the game ready. "These two find a way, Trust me. They cheat."

"I'll show you a cheat." Robbie joined Jess on the floor. "Me and Elliott against you and El."

Ellen saw Robbie and Jess so enthusiastic, get everything ready to play, "Elliott." She spoke soft. "If you aren't up to . . ."

"No." He shook his head "I want to but . . ." He leaned into her and whispered. "Can you show me how you pull off cheating in Pictionary?"

"Absolutely." She smiled. "Robbie, Elliott and I are partners."

"Even better." Robbie said as he helped Jess finish setting up. "Elliott has honor."

^^^^

Henry stayed close to the side of Bev's house. He waited until he saw Hector and Bev walk far from his view, and then Henry went inside.

He didn't know how much time he had. He didn't even know what he was searching for. But he felt deep inside of him there was something in that house. He just had to start looking . . . and Henry did.

^^^^

"I don't understand." Danny packed up his laptop. "It should have worked Rich. I'm sorry."

Richie rolled his chin over his shoulder "That's, that's all right Dan."

"Thanks. You're a good guy. Too bad you're mentally challenged now. I can't figure it out. Maybe it's me. Or maybe that chip of yours is screwed up. I couldn't even erase it with the auralnator."

"No chip."

"Of course you have a chip, Richie, no one just all the sudden goes nuts."

"Drugs."

"Did you do a lot when you were younger."

"Drugs. No chip."

Danny chuckled. "There's a chip Richie. You worked for George. Chances he implanted you are good. I better go." He stood up.

"George."

"Yep. Good ole George." Danny moved across the room.

"Bev."

"Bev? What is your infatuation with the girl."

"George. Bev."

"Richie, I have to go."

"Bev." Richie followed him down the hall. "Bev. Bev."

"Richie, get over her."

"Bev. Bev Hadly. Bev. Bev Hadly."

Danny stopped cold and turned around.

^^^^

It should have been the first place Henry searched, but because he didn't want to touch anything that intimate to Bev, Henry checked there last. Bev's underwear drawer. Fingers lifting the items. Henry zoomed in on the oddity of the small black case. It was one he never saw and it had to be something because it was hidden in her personal items. Lifting it from the drawer, Henry opened the

case. When the lid popped up, four small round black disk flew out. “What the hell?” Henry lifted one of them and examined the oddness of it. He had never seen one quite like it and there before him were four. He hadn’t any idea what were on the disks, but Henry was bound and determined to find out.

^^^

“Danny Rather Hoi.” Trish bitched when she opened her front door “I believe I have seen enough of you to last a lifetime. I’m getting ready to go to sleep.”

“It’s only eight o’clock.”

“I don’t have my baby and I want to enjoy my peace.”

“Too bad. Listen to this. Bev Hadly.”

“All right.”

“No, listen Beverly Hadly. Wasn’t that President Hadly’s daughter’s name.”

“Hell, Danny, I don’t remember, do you know how many years ago that . . .” Trish lifted her head. “No.”

“I think so.”

“How?” Trish asked.

“Richie.”

“He’s nuts.”

“It’s a shot. How can we confirm this information,”

“We’d really need confirmation. Like pictures.”

“A magazine would have it.”

Trish smiled. “The library.”

“Get dressed, I’ll meet you there.” Danny raced from her door.

^^^

He didn’t care. Henry took them.

Even though the color was really deep, they looked like compact disks. They fit into his computer like them as well, but Henry growled in frustration when he tried to find out what was on them. Continuous patterns of mumbled letters and numbers scrolled across his screen. It was a sequence to something. But what? There was a familiarity about it, and Henry wasn’t giving up. Even if he had to stare at the useless information all night.

^^^

“Thank you for walking with me.” Bev said sweetly as her and Hector approached her house.

“I think we needed this walk.” Hector said hoping Henry was long gone.

“Want to come in?”

“No.” He shook his head. “So are you going to tell me? Is it just days off. Free work time. What?”

“What do you mean?”

“Bev, we walked for an hour. You all but blackmailed me the day before yesterday. Why? What is it that you want?”

"Blunt aren't you?" Bev said. "You're smart Hector, very smart. And trusted. You don't want this little Homo thing to get out do you?"

"No."

"Could lose your division position. Security position, lose it all."

"I know."

"So, what would you do to keep this information from getting out." Bev questioned as she stepped up to her porch.

Hector tried his hardest to sound desperate. He looked down. "I . . . I would do anything."

"Would you . . . work as an insider for the society?"

Hector raised his head.

~~~~~

"Damn it." Trish tossed another magazine onto the pile. "This should be proof enough."

"But it isn't." Danny handed her another. "Keep looking."

"God, Danny." Trish gripped open a magazine from the 'viewed' pile. "Come on. President Hadly and family in Disney World. Picture cut out." she tossed it and took another. "President Hadly and family in Jamaica. Picture gone." She reached for another. "What did she do, cut every picture out."

"A ha!" Slurry and with drunkenness, old lady Josephine called out. "I knew it. The new hang out."

Trish rolled her eyes. "Swell. She's loaded. Josephine,. Go home."

"No." she staggered over. "This is the new yong people's hangout. I'm on to you guys." She winked as she carried a bottle.

"What are you talking about." Trish snapped.

"Trish." Danny warned. "Be nice."

"Yeah!" Josephine yelled. "Be nice or I'll spill my guts about this place."

Hard Trish's hand slammed in irritation n the table. "This is a library for crying out loud."

"Oh yeah?" Josephine asked. "Then hows come all you young people are hanging out here at night. Huh? Huh?" She stepped closer to Trish. "Huh?"

Trish waved her hand to bat away the alcohol breath.

"Secret Rendevous. Love letters. Especially that Bev. She's in here all the time."

Danny and Trish both looked up.

"Josephine." Danny had question in his tone. "When was she here last. Was she in these magazines."

"No, she was typing a love letter to Jess. Telling him about this place. She wants him to join the new high society she's starting right here. In the library."

Danny mouthed the word 'society'. He looked at Josephine. "How do you know."

"I peeked at the letter." Josephine replied.

"Damn it." Danny shook his head. "If we could get the letter to read."

"Don't need to." Trish jumped up and raced to the typewriter. "The ribbons." She flipped open the lid and took the cartridge. "Single use." she handed it to Danny. "Pull the tape, find it and read."

Danny grinned.

^^^

“Shit.” Henry’s hand slammed down next to his laptop computer at the same time his front door flew open.

“Henry.” Hector excitedly raced in. “You aren’t going to believe this.”

“You found something out.” Henry stood up.

“Oh, yeah. The reason Bev is blackmailing me. Andrea’s gone. She needs people to work for . . . the society.”

“Hector this is great. She actually told you she was working for the society?”

“Well, no.” Hector tilted his head. “She asked if I would go as far as to work for the society.”

“That’s not proof enough.” Henry stated. “We need proof she’s working for the society.”

Through Henry’s open door, Danny walked. “If you’re talking about Bev. I got the best proof.”

Henry looked beyond Hector to Danny, Trish and Josephine when they walked in his home. “Danny?”

“Check this out.” Danny pulled Josephine into the room.

“Hey . . .” Josephine hiccuped. “Henry.”

“She’s drunk.” Henry stated.

“She’s a witness.” Danny told him. “To Bev’s connection to the society. Josephine witnessed Bev typing some sort of blackmail letter to Jess to get him to work for the society.”

Henry looked at Hector. “Jess too?”

Danny shifted his eyes “You mean Jess isn’t the only one she blackmailed?”

Henry shook his head. “No. I won’t say who else, but she has. Where in the hell is she getting this power to blackmail people. And why does a stupid kid like her have it?”

“How about the fact that she has a deep connection to the society.” Danny said. “Like for example, I don’t know. Her real name is Bev Hadly.”

“What?” Henry laughed.

“Oh my God.” Hector stated. “Beverly Hadly. That was president Hadly’s daughter’s name.”

Danny pointed to him. “I knew someone would have remembered,”

Josephine shrieked. “Bev is a Hadly!”

“Shh.” Henry silenced her.

“Can’t be.” Hector declared. “She was grown up then. Unless she was in some sort of suspended animation there is no way she could go that long without aging. She would have had to be a kid. Hadly had no little kids.”

Danny grinned at Henry. “Suspended animation,”

“Hadly froze his assets.” Henry said.

“Literally.” Danny nodded. “Cryogenics.”

“Yes.” Henry clenched his fist. “And here I was searching her house for clues.”

“Did you find anything?” Danny asked.

“Just . . .” Henry walked to the computer. “These stupid disks.”

"Oh." Danny looked at them "They're video games."

"No they aren't." Henry indicated to the screen. "Look how they come up."

Danny checked it out. "Wait a second. I have seen this before. Not so much this exact thing but something like it. Think." He began to pace, "When's the last time I pulled something up that didn't make sense?"

"When you tried to create the new program for Richie." Henry suggested.

"Program. That's it." Danny moved to the laptop. "It's on here. This is the one I used to down load from Dean." His fingers clicked. "There."

"Holy Shit." Henry exclaimed. "That looks exactly alike."

"A program for SUTs maybe." Danny guessed.

"You know . . ." Hector peered from behind the pair. "You know what this looks like don't you?" He saw they awaited his suggestion. "Come on. Didn't you ever try to attach a image to an email and it only came up a document source."

"Image?" Danny asked then looked to Henry. "An image."

"I'll pull up the image viewer." Henry made room and sat down before the laptop. "We'll see if we can link it through."

"It's worth a try." Just as Danny leaned in to watch, so did everyone else.

Silence.

Embarrassed breaths and awkward stares came from Henry, Danny, Hector and Trish after watching the computer screen. All but Josephine. She still giggled.

"Well." Danny cleared his throat. "Bedroom secrets perhaps?"

Henry shrugged. "You can learn a uh . . . lot from someone's bedroom."

Trish whistled. "I learned more than I wanted to know."

"Bev . . ." Danny pointed to the computer "Learned what she needed to know." He snapped his finger. "Hector stay here with Josephine. Trish . . . Trish you make up a list of everyone this little girl's games affected and bring them here. We have a little visual presentation to give to them. All except for Dean. He was the most affected for a while. Let me and Henry speak to him fist alone.. Henry?" Danny called Henry who stared blankly at the computer screen. "Henry, you coming with me to see Dean?"

"No." Henry shook his head. "You go on. I'll meet you back here. There's . . . there's something I have to do first and I need supplies."

Shrugging and anxious to speak to Dean, Danny opened the door. "Trish get on that."

"Right away." She stood up.

"We'll meet back here in a half hour." Danny, back to his upbeat self, walked from the house.

^^^

New Bowman, Montana

The phone call without details made Hal curious. Late, but not too late it came, and through his quiet home, he walked to get his father. He opened up the spare bedroom door to wake him and as he stepped foot in the room, he looked

upon his father.

Hal had noticed all night the toll that Andrea's execution took on his Joe. Things he had never seen before. Tired and drawn. Complaining of a headache, trouble breathing. Symptoms on a man his father's age that spelled warning if a break was not given and anxiety relieved. And Joe specifically gave Hal instructions that unless Beginnings was literally falling apart, Henry was to handle it all. With that in mind, Hal closed the door.

Henry did say it was important and he needed Joe to hear something. But to Hal, his father's health was important as well. Figuring he was the leader of his own community, Hal gathered up his things and decided to go Beginnings himself. He'd help out as best as he could. That was his obligation as a son and leader of New Bowman. And, it was the least Hal could do to try to relieve the abundance of pressure Joe was already feeling.

^^^

Dean's eyes closed. "So that's how she knew so much." His head dropped as his hand fell to the lab counter. "Danny." He looked up to him., "Thank you."

"I had to tell you first. You needed to know. I hope this helps your cause out now." Danny stated. "And Dean, I'm sorry man. I treated you bad about this."

Dean shook his head "Don't apologize. I'm still not in the clear yet." He said. "I still can't figure out how she is pregnant with my baby. The best answer is she stole some of my sperm. But . . . there's no evidence of that. Her amnio showed the baby tested as mine."

"Shame El's not pregnant. There would be your answer."

"What do you mean?" Dean asked.

"She could have just stole Ellen's amniotic fluid. Or wait, that's not possible, is it."

"Danny." Dean's eyes lit up.

"What?"

"You are a genius."

"Yes, I know."

"I am serious." Dean grabbed hold of Danny's arms. "I could kiss you."

"Now-now don't go that far. What did I do?"

"God am I stupid." Dean backed up. "But happy. I hope I'm right, You're right, Whatever." He moved to the door.

"Dean?" Danny, confused looked into the hall. "Dean."

"I'll meet you at the house. I think this mystery is solved." With a gleeful scream, and a basketball leaping jump that made Dean hit the exit light, he raced out of the clinic.

Danny smiled with a tilted head. "Ah yes, another life brightened by Danny Hoi."

^^^

"Ready?" Robbie held the timer then watched Jess holding the pen. "Go."

He turned over the timer.

Ellen huddled to Elliott, simply wrote down the words ‘cowboy boot’.

“Cowboy boot!” Elliott snapped his finger.

“Yes!!” Ellen dropped the pen.

“Man.” Robbie tossed his hands up. “Elliott you’re good.”

“They’re just coming to me.” He stated with a smile.

Robbie politely nodded and then leaned into Jess speaking through clenched teeth. “Jess, write the word faster.”

“I’m trying.”

The door to Ellen’s home opened and without warning Henry walked in.

Ellen looked up with a smile. “Hi Henry, here to join us?”

Henry kept walking through the livingroom and to the hall.

Jess looked at Robbie. “He looked pissed.”

Robbie’s hand lifted in a point. “Was it my imagination or was he carrying a sledge hammer.”

Ellen shrieked. “My God he’s gone mad. He’s gonna kill my kids.”

Elliott, Robbie and Jess, leaped before her.

“Oh my God, it’s like one of those stories.” Ellen worried as she hurried behind the three men.

Henry’s growl of frustration rang out as he looked around the bedroom with the sledgehammer dangling. “El! You rearranged the bedroom. Where the hell did the bed use to be.”

“Why?” Ellen asked.

“Where!” Henry snapped.

Robbie stepped forward. “Henry don’t fuckin talk to her like that.”

“Where!” Henry glared.

“There.” Ellen pointed to where it used to set.

Spinning around as if looking for something, Henry stopped and looked at the bathroom door. He grinned, grabbed the desk chair and pulled it to the archway. He climbed up, lifted the sledge hammer.

“No!” Ellen called out.

“Oh. Whoa. No!” Everyone else yelled.

With a loud slam, the wall cracked, plaster flew about.

“Nothing.” Henry revved back again amidst the second wave of screams in the room.

*Slam!* Henry barreled it down again, ignoring the reaches for him. Covered in plaster, Henry reached into the hole.

“Robbie.” Ellen begged. “Stop him. Henry, I hope to God you’re gonna clean up this mess.”

“Ha. Fuckin bitch.!” Henry screamed retracted his hand from the wall and pulled out the camera. Holding it he jumped from the chair.

Ellen just looked to Jess when she saw the camera. “Oh my God.” She hurried to Henry who walked out. “Henry, how long has that been in my wall?”

“A long time El, a long time.” He marched through the bedroom door and stopped. “Oh, and Danny needs you all at his house.”

^^^

Packed.

They all crammed into Danny's house for one reason or another. But they all had a reason to be there.

Aside from the Blue's clues bunch of Henry, Danny, Hector, Trish and Josephine. In the livingroom, standing, listening and watching were everyone else somehow or another affected or hurt.

Dean, Frank, Ellen, Jess, Robbie, Elliott, Hal, and because he was council, Jason.

All there. All listening.

"Oh my God!" Frank complained loudly staring at the computer screen that showed Dean and Ellen making love. "Do we have to watch this?"

"Yes." Danny answered. "Not because it proves that sex can actually be fulfilling even if it only lasts two minutes and thirteen seconds. Not that we timed you Dean or anything, but . . ." Danny shut off the viewer. "But because it tells us it all. Ellen is center of the community. She hears everything. Ellen also has a big mouth, no offense and I'm uh, talking about talking. What she knows come out one way or another. Either through talking to that person on the phone in her room or . . . she may have slept with someone there."

Frank's eyes widened. "Who is he? I wanna fuckin kill him Danny. Who?"

Danny quickly looked at Ellen then back to Frank. "If you're referring to the guy that Ellen is involved with. Sorry, we didn't get that far in the disks. I don't know who it is, I don't wanna know. That is moot. The point is, Bev planted the camera and learned all she needed to know."

Jason slowly shook his head. "How do we know that she planted it. Did you see her?"

"No." Danny answered. "But Bev works for the society. The camera was a way to get information on people she wanted to hurt or wanted to get involved in the society."

Frank tossed his hands up. "For as much as we want to buy this. Danny, there is no way to prove a connection. We tried."

"Ah, but there is." Danny smiled. "Mr. Kusakari. Do the honors and pull up the next demo."

Frank whined. "We aren't gonna have to sit here and watch Dean's little hump again are we."

The loud blast of scolding 'Franks!' Made Frank jolt.

"What?"

"Watch the screen." Danny instructed. "This was supposed to be Dean. Supposed to be. See, this wasn't taken from any disk found in Bev's house. This is the information I downloaded from Dean's chip when it went nuts." Danny nodded and the video played of Bev being orally appreciative to someone. Only a part of the man's body was seen from a higher angle.

Ellen pointed. "That's not Dean."

Frank tossed his head back and rolled his eyes. "Thank you Ellen for informing us that you have the ability to recognize Dean's genitals."

"I'd recognize yours."

"Oh yeah?" Frank grinned.

"Can we get back to this." Danny stated. "Anyway. No, that's not Dean. Henry could you freeze frame it perfectly please." He nodded to Henry. "Because, Dean never slept with Bev. We figured she filmed this to try to feed this into his chip and his chip rejected it. Now I know all of you are probably



wondering. How did she pul this off? Well, of course, she had help. Andrea? Someone else? That remains to be seen. Only little Bevie knows the answer to that. But how she got the power when she's so stupid is this." Danny pointed to the still frame. "See this small purple mark? Jason, will you."

Jason tilted his head and exposed the exact same mark.

"What is that Jason?" Danny asked.

"I call it my cryo genic birthmark. All of us frozen have them from the electrodes."

Danny held up his hands to silence the loud eruption of questions. "Bev was cryogenically frozen. And why not? If you were about to wipe out a country the world or at least a major portion of it, wouldn't you want to see your children live?"

Josephine hiccuped loudly. "She's a Hadly!"

Ellen's eyes widened. "Bev is George's daughter?"

"Absolutely." Danny responded. "I found this out, thanks to your brother. He recognized her and he must have recognized her a while ago. Because, by the way his chip isn't bad he just was drugged by her, or something like that he's insisting, so you may want to check it out."

So stunned Ellen just nodded.

Danny continued. "A brilliant plan. Take down Beginnings from within." He looked to Frank, Robbie and Hal. "Hurt your father, destroy what he built." He turned to Dean. "Break the community by breaking the spirit of our most brilliant scientist, who by the way is our brilliant chemical defense man. Maybe even, have him leave. Go to their side."

Jess had a question of his own. "What about Andrea's participation in this. Did she help Bev?"

Danny shrugged. "Don't know. Only Bev does. But she did need medical help and that's the sad part. I'm sure Joe can get it out of her. I know all of you are angry, because all of you were hurt by this. But Joe deserves to be the one to bring her in. This is his community, so many people he loves were affected by this. Tell him first thing when he arrives home and give him the honors. She's not going anywhere."

"There's still one mystery." Ellen spoke up. "How did she get pregnant to Dean."

"She's not." Dean answered. "She is not carrying my baby. It's actually really good how she pulled it off El. And how stupid you are going to feel, like me, because we missed it." He stepped to her. "Keep in mind, you, me and Andrea were the only ones aware of this. That we know. See, yeah, the amnio fluid, when tested, sure it proved it was my baby. We could test it a million times and still it would come up as my baby. Why? Because it is." Dean said. "But, had we'd just tested it differently, we would have seen . . . it was your baby too. Not Bev's. Remember the old amnio fluid of yours down in the cryo lab? B . . ." Dean stopped himself from saying 'Brian'. "Billy's?"

Ellen closed her eyes. "Was it gone."

"No. Not really." Dean stated. "It was just put in place of Bev's real fluid, that's all."

"Oh! Yes!" Frank blared out. "Yes! Who's the man! Yes! I knew. I was the only one who one hundred percent believed him. Yes!" He pointed at Ellen. "Feel bad, don't you. Don't you. I told you it wasn't like Dean. I told you he

wouldn't do it."

"Frank." Hal  
gave a Joe-style  
warning.

"No. Everyone got mad at me. Everyone called him a dick. You, Hal punched him. You Robbie stole his woman. Elliott moved right in. Not me, I held firm." Frank was excited. "Who's the man. Who is the man. Ha!"

Ellen looked to Dean who stood right before her, as if waiting. "I know." she spoke softly. "Words, words can't say it. They can't. I'm so . . ." Ellen grew emotional and closed her eyes. "I'm so sorry Dean." Saying nothing else, she hurried, turned and left Danny's house.

"See Frank." Dean backhanded him.

"What?"

"You made her feel really bad."

"She should feel bad." Frank argued.

"Doesn't matter." Dean looked around the room then to Danny and Henry. "Danny, Henry . . ." He closed his eyes. "Trish, Josephine. All of you. Thank you. I mean it thank you." He stopped before Elliott in his move to the door. He spoke low trying not be heard by anyone but him. "Sgt. Ryder, I know you care about her. I do. But I'm going to ask you as a gentleman, and on the honor of the UWA, to step back from my wife. Thank you." Dean went to the door and opened it.

"Dean." Frank called him. "Where you going?"

Dean hesitated with a deep breath. "I'm going to get my things Frank. Because I'm . . . I'm going home."

The door closed.

^^^

She stood in the kitchen, sipping her coffee mixed with the sweet liqueur Ellen found herself addicted to. It relaxed her and she really enjoyed it. She set down her mug when she heard the front door open. Getting ready to call out 'Elliott', Ellen hurried to the livingroom. "Dean."

Dean set down his duffle bag. "Hey, El." He walked to her and kissed her. "Sorry it took so long."

"What . . . what are you doing here?"

Dean smiled. "What do you think?"

"Is Elliott with you?"

"Elliott's not coming back. I saw him with Robbie on my way here, they were headed to the hall."

"Did I do something to him?"

"El." Dean chuckled. "Come on. Even he knows better than to be around tonight. Not tonight. It's . . . it's our night." Dean softened his voice.

"Oh Dean."

Dean laid his hand on her cheek. "It's over, El."

Ellen grabbed his hand and removed it from her cheek. She stepped back.

"El?"

"Dean." She whispered out. "I told you I was sorry. And I am. I am so sorry I doubted you. But so much has happened. I doubted you. You, and

rightfully so were and probably are still bitter about it.”

“Apart of me. Yeah. But I’ll get over it. I’ll get by it.”

“I won’t.”

“What?” Dean asked confused.

“I don’t think I can get over what I felt, and I put myself in the frame of mind to move on.”

Dean nodded. “I see. Elliott.”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s Elliott.” He held his hand up in defense. “No. Listen. I’ll be good with it. If you want to continue with him. If you want the understanding to be with him. I’ll accept that. I will. I’ll work with him. Besides, he’s in New Bowman, mentally that will work in my favor and . . .”

“He’s dying,. So he won’t be around that long.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to.” Ellen moved further back. “How can you be such a dick about that. I care about Elliott If you got to know him, you wouldn’t even question why.”

“El. Stop. This isn’t about that. Let’s not argue now. Not now. Let’s just enjoy everything being behind us.” He stepped to her.

“It is.”

“I know.”

“I mean everything. Us, our marriage. It’s behind us. I have moved on.”

“No.” Dean was shocked. “El, no. Come on. I thought when we resolved this Bev thing we would get back together.”

“I’m sorry Dean.”

“No!” He said strongly. “She broke us up once. She played her stupid games. Don’t El, don’t let it kill us forever. Don’t. You love me.”

“I moved on. There are other people involved now.”

“Tough.” Dean grabbed his duffle bag.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m not going anywhere.” He moved across the room. “Too bad if your little mystery lover doesn’t like. He’s gonna have to deal with it.” Dean hit the hall and spun to her. “This is my home. My kids. You are my wife. And you can’t go running to Daddy now. Before, yeah. You thought you had reason. But I didn’t do anything wrong. You have no reason to kick me out now. You don’t love me? I don’t buy that. You don’t like me? Right. We get along great. I never slept with Bev. I never dogged you. I never got her pregnant. All I ever did was love you and that won’t stop.” He started to march down the hall. “Tough. Deal with it. I’m going nowhere. I’m back.”

Ellen listened to his voice trail off and then heard the bedroom door slam. Just as she closed her eyes she heard it open again and then Dean called out with a whole change in his demeanor.

“Hey.” He sounded actually pleased. “Who fixed out door? Wow.”

## CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT

November 4  
Beginnings, Montana

Jess smiled in that storage closet, but he had a look of gratefulness on his face. "We'll work something out then."

"Are you sure?" Ellen asked.

"Positive. I'm glad . . . I'm glad you aren't getting rid of me. Not yet anyway. Hey, it'll be fun sneaking around."

"We already do."

"We do. Don't we." Jess quickly kissed her. "I'd better go."

"Check first."

"I will." Slightly he opened the door and peered out. "All clear. See ya." Jess slipped out.

Ellen leaned against the wall, waited for the safety time frame, then she too, opened the door and peeked out. It was clear and she stepped into the hall. She hurried to the lab, it was empty and she grabbed the supplies she needed. Rushing out, she rushed directly into Dean. "Excuse me."

"Sorry. Hey, Elliott's waiting in room two."

"I know." Ellen walked by him.

"How's your back?" He asked snidely.

"Dick."

"I didn't tell you to sleep on the couch. You could have slept in bed . . . with me." He snickered at her glare, then went into the lab. "Hanging around with Frank does have it's benefits. Snide arrogance." Dean spoke to himself then tilted his head. "And speaking of Frank." He pulled his phone from the waist of his pants. He checked the ringer then listened for a dial tone. Shrugging, Dean put it back. "Why hasn't he called me back."

"Sorry." Ellen slipped into examining room two. "I have good news." She held up the folder showing it to Elliott. "I wanted to be the one to give it to you then you can go on home to New Bowman." she moved to Elliott. "No progression. We're steady. This . . . is a victory right now."

Elliott's eyes closed in happiness. "The treatment is working."

"It's controlling. Dean wants to up it. Are you game?"

Elliott slid from the table "Absolutely. I just wished we could cheat like last night."

Ellen snickered. "We're gonna win anyhow. And speaking of last night." She hit Elliott with the folder. "Why didn't you come back."

"I didn't want to intrude on your reunion with your husband."

"I'm not reunited with my husband Elliott."

"You're not. But the Bev situation . . ."

"May be over, yes. But I moved on. You know that. I moved on with you."

"Ellen." Elliott spoke softly. "Please do not feel any obligation to me. I have enjoyed what time we had. And I am grateful. I promise you nothing will

change or affect our friendship if you want to stop seeing me. In fact, Dr. Hayes has asked me to step back.”

“Then Dean is wrong for asking. And if you do, then you’re wrong for stepping back.” Ellen leaned closer to him. “Elliott, what we are building. It’s so different. It’s . . . innocent and special and I want to keep building it.”

“I would like that very much. Maybe it’s selfish of me.”

“How do you figure?”

“Well” Elliott’s head lowered a little. “When one finds out their time on this earth may be short, Even though they want to fight to stay here longer. Which I am.” He held up a finger with a smile. “A part of you still wants to live life to the fullest. And Ellen, I can think of no better way to make my life full then to be given the freedom and the chance to love again.”

He did it to Ellen again. He made her slip into something Frank would describe as a ‘stupid’ awe. “Oh, Elliott.” she stared at him.

“I must go.” He smiled and kissed her softly on the cheek. “Thank you again. And remember.” He paused by the door. “I am not asking for those feelings in return from you. I don’t expect that. I just want to experience feeling it for someone I know is a part of my life.”

“Elliott.” Ellen spoke in a bashful way as he started to leave. “Do you . . . do you love me?”

“No.” Elliott walked out.

Ellen’s mouth dropped then the door open.

Elliott grinned as he poked his head back in. “How do you like that? I did it. I was kidding. I’m getting good.” Another flash of a smile and he pulled the door closed.

^^^

The lines on Joe’s face seemed to deepen overnight. Even the long rest did no good to take away the tired look and paleness across his face. But that was coupled with something else as he walked with Robbie toward the living section with Johnny. Total disbelief, anger and shock.

“And that’s it in a nutshell.” Robbie explained as they hit the second row of houses.

“Unbelievable.” Joe shook his head. “Johnny, I know you were trying to help Dean. Any indication of this?”

“No Pap.” Johnny’s heart pounded.

“Christ. Where is she.”

“In here.” Robbie opened Bev’s front door. “After the little pow-wow revelation, it became evident that you, Dad, deserved to be the one who arrested her. You deserved the honors.” Robbie led them up the steps. “We knew she wasn’t going anywhere because she had no reason to think she was busted. None.” He stopped before the bedroom door. “Then came the little problem.”

“What problem is that?” Joe asked.

Robbie opened up the door.

Joe stepped inside. “Dear God.”

Johnny took one look. “Oh, shit. Oh, shit.” He backed up, gagged, spun and raced from the house.

Robbie peeked out into the hall then shrugged. “Anyway . . . hence a dead Bev.”

Slowly Joe stepped into the room. Frank was in there apparently picking up evidence and placing it in bag. "Frank."

"Hey, dad." Frank put down a bag and took off his gloves. "Our first true murder."

Had the desk not been in plain view of the door, it wouldn't have even looked like there was anything wrong. But the desk showed it all. The wall behind it was splattered with blood as if someone painted it, tossing a bucket there. Bev slumped over on the desk, her arm dangled and dried blood laced the limb. Blood that came from Bev's head where a huge piece was missing. Her exposed eye stared blank.

Joe took a deep breath and looked around. "Anything Frank."

"Nope. Us three, and I guess now Johnny are the only ones who know about it. I was up at the back fence. Fuckin killer babies learned how to throw things. Anyhow, I was up at the fence with Tony when we got the call about a gunshot in town. I came down. Here she was."

"What time?" Joe asked.

"Three-thirty."

"We've been collecting up the evidence Dad." Robbie stated. "And . . . we have an entire list of suspects."

"I bet. Like everyone that was at Danny's house." Shaking his head Joe walked over to the desk. He saw a pen laying on the floor, it was covered in blood. "Was she writing something when she was shot."

Frank stepped closer. "Looks that way. Check under her head." He pointed. "We left that for you."

To Bev's body, Joe moved. Clearly a piece of paper with writing on it laid beneath her shattered skull. Using only two fingers, Joe grabbed hold of her hair, lifted her head, slid out the paper and dropped her again. Though covered in blood, the words could still be seen. Joe read them.

Robbie heard his father's heavy breathing, he peered to Frank and stepped to Joe. "Dad?"

Frank moved in as well. "What is it?"

"You can say . . . I guess you can say this note just reiterates the right thing was done with Andrea." Walking away, Joe handed the note to Frank. "Let me know what you find." taking one more look around the murder scene at hand, Joe sadly looked to his sons, then he left Bev's room.

CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE

Barflies. That was what Joe and Jason seemed to be. Sitting alone in the social hall that evening, Sam the bartender before them. Drinks and cigarettes in hand, along with something else.

"Hal, Robbie, Ellen, Jess, Elliott, Dean, Danny . . ." Joe read.

"Henry, Trish, Hector, Josephine."

"What?" Josephine lifted her head from the end of the bar.

"Nothing." Joe waved her off. "Lay back down." He leaned into Jason. "It's one hell of a suspect list."

"It's gonna be tricky."

"Christ. All we needed was another mystery to solve."

"Any fingerprints yet?" Jason asked.

"Nil. We have no weapon. We have lots of motives. Have a body and a time."

"Time." Jason sat up straight and grinned.

"I see that look in your eye."

"Joe, I have been waiting for another reason. We have the . . . time."

"No." Joe shook his head and puffed his cigarette. "Absolutely not. We decided against it."

"But not only can I get it up in a couple hours and functional enough to make the trip, we can solve this before this day is over with."

Joe closed his eyes. "It's cheating. And . . . is a trip in a time machine admissible in a court of law?"

"Maybe not." Jason shrugged. "But evidence is. And we can at least confirm who we have to dig evidence up on."

"It's not right."

"Nobody has to know. Just me, you and the person we send."

"What about . . ." Joe pointed to Josephine.

"Nah, she's out." Jason waved his hand. "What do you say. Let's have some fun."

"If we would, who would we send?"

"I know who." Jason finished his drink. "He's perfect. He has a solid alibi and he . . ."

"If you're thinking about who I think you're thinking about. He also has a reputation of screwing time up."

"Not this . . . time." Jason ginned. "All he has to do is go, look, come back."

"How long to get the Regressionator ready again."

"Couple hours."

"Will it work. You rigged it not to."

"It's not perfect anymore. We can try. The thing that can mess this up, is we miss our shot and get there too late or too early. Or worse case scenario our traveler could get sucked into some sort of dimensional time warp and never return. That's worse case scenario."

Mouth going from side to side in thought, Joe downed his drink, slammed the glass on the bar, stood up and grabbed his cigarette, "let's go."

^^^

Frank moaned annoyed in the quantum lab.

"One more time." Jason said. "You know what to do."

"Yes." Frank nodded. "I go through, I go to Bev's. I hide out and wait. I watch. I see who goes in and then I leave."

"Good." Jason handed him the pendant. "Remember, we can't run this for very long. The time door will be open on the other side. Be careful. And if by chance you get there and it's the wrong time frame or we missed it, come right back."

"Got it." Frank nodded.

Joe took a deep breath. "Stay out of sight."

"Dad, I know. Start the machine." Frank held the pendant.

Jason worked the computer. "Ready."

"Yes." Frank nodded.

Joe stepped back.

The doorway illuminated in a bright flash of light and Frank stepped through. And on the present day side of the time door, the entrance closed.

Joe looked at Jason. "Did he get sucked out."

"Only time will tell."

Both of them snickered.

Frank knew the second he hit Bev's street that he had made it there in the time frame. The upstairs bedroom light was on in her home and he could see walking back and forth, a pregnant Bev. Looking at his watch--which he had set in synch with the clock in Jason's lab when he stepped through the machine--Frank backed up and stayed hidden. It wouldn't be long. The killer would show. Frank only had to wait. And in the back yard of the house across from Bev's, he did.

^^^

Mid laugh at Frank's 'lost in time' scenario, Jason and Joe moved back when the door illuminated again.

Frank stepped back through. His face stone cold. His eyes wide. He handed the pendant to Jason and started to leave.

"Well?" Joe called out. "Frank?"

Frank stopped walking.

*Bang!* His body shuddered in the memory of the gunshot he heard outside of Bev's home. His eyes closed.

"Frank?" Joe asked again stepping to him. "Did you see who shot Bev?"

Frank looked at his father. His jaws twitched in tenseness. "No." His voice graveled. "I missed the time frame. Sorry." Saying no more, Frank walked straight across the quantum lab and out. Outside he stopped. He had to. Shocked and a little sacred, his heart pounded so strong that Frank could barely breath. He hated the fact that he had lied to his father. But he had to. The truth was, he did see who walked into the house. He saw that person through the bedroom window arguing with Bev and that same person run out in a panic right after the



shot was fired. And if asked once more, Frank would lie again. Because to Frank, no matter what, the identity of Bev's killer would remain with him. He couldn't nor would he ever, let that information be revealed. He just . . . couldn't.

^^^

**NEXT: THE ARAGON WINDOW**