

THE ARAGON WINDOW

By

JACQUELINE DRUGA-JOHNSTON

Druga-Johnston/The Aragon Window

CHAPTER ONE

November 4
Beginnings, Montana

Blood.

It had been since the morning when it was discovered, yet all Johnny Slagel could still see was blood. His day was spent hiding behind the vision that literally made him sick to his stomach. Pretending he wasn't effected when the truth in the matter was, he was screaming inside.

Hurt was an understatement. The young woman who was murdered was not only his ally to the Society, but his lover as well. Five months pregnant Bev Hadly was and she was shot, at close range in the head. Her body was found slumped over a desk, and that was all Johnny knew.

A tight lip was placed on what had occurred. Most of the people in the community didn't know whether she had murdered or took her own life. All that was released with the information of her death was the news that she worked for the society. How could she not. Her father, was the one and only George Hadly. Leader of the Caceres Society.

An enemy of Beginnings. The closest person to Johnny. Not to mention she was carrying his child. A child that in Johnny's mind caused her murder. They tried to use that child, pawn it off as Dean Hayes'. But when the truth of the baby was discovered, so was the news of her namesake. And before the community could find out Bev's true identity. She was shot.

On the floor of his home, back against the wall, Johnny sat clenching the cellular phone that did not work. Not a single phone worked in Beginnings. Not since the immediate order given by Joe to power down the communication ability of the community. Fear of what the society would do in retaliation of Bev's murder caused that order. And it went into effect just at the same moment Johnny had started to place that call to George. Five more seconds and George would have known his only child had been killed. But he wasn't giving up. He'd find a way to get in touch with George.

The hours had flown by for Johnny. Hours he spent trying to get as much of his grief out. He would have to place on a front, pretend he didn't care about what happened to Bev. Act the part of the outraged Beginnings' resident at the knowledge that she lived amongst them as a traitor for so long. Johnny would play the part and play it well, but there was something else he was determined to do. Find out who had killed Bev. And Johnny vowed as he sat in the rage of his anguish, that no matter what, no matter who it was, that

they would pay. At any cost, even at the revelation of his own subversiveness, Bev's death would not be in vain.

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The hollowness of the quantum lab added to the magnification of the tapping sound. A simple tap was the only noise in the room. The tip of a pen, in perfect thinking rhythm as it tapped on the counter of the lab.

Raising his eyes only, pen still moving, Joe Slagel peered to Jason Godrichson, who held the same thinking look as he. "I have to say yes."

"Joe." Jason spoke as if lost. "I don't think so."

"Frank was scared." Joe said. "Not to mention pale."

"He was frustrated. We had a shot at going back in time, seeing who it was that killed Bev and we missed the window."

"No, we hit the window, Frank saw who it was. And now he doesn't know what to do. I'm telling you, Jason." Joe set down the pen, and in the immediate quiet of the room he let out a loud breath and stood. "He knows. He knows who did it and he's close to them."

Jason snickered. "If it is someone in Beginnings, of course he's close to them."

"But would Frank protect just anyone." Joe shook his head. "No." He walked to the door. "We'll get together in the morning to discuss how we want to start this investigation."

"Where you going now?" Jason asked.

"To see Frank. I mean see him. Look at him. That will tell me everything."

"But if Frank doesn't tell you something, there's nothing we can do." Jason said.

"Officially. But unofficially, it'll tell us where to concentrate." Joe reached for the door. "If my son knows who killed Bev, and he won't say, well . . . in my mind, he narrowed down the suspect list."

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Water ejected upward into Ellen's face when she jolted from the peacefulness of her bath at the sound of the door. She immediately sat up. It was late, too late for anyone to be entering her home. Reaching for her towel she heard the sound of quiet walking. "Who's there?" She called out.

The walking stopped and then a single light knock was on the door.

"It's me, El." Dean whispered.

“Dean.” Ellen allowed for her body to relax back into the tub. She moved her trembling hand over her head.

“Can I . . . can I come in?”

“Yeah.” Ellen answered, swiping the hair from her eyes.

The door slowly creaked open. “Kind of late for a bath.” He said as he walked in. His tone down, his eyes never really looking at her.

“I couldn’t sleep. I thought you were staying at the clinic tonight with Alexandra.”

“I was going to. But the moment our daughter fell asleep, was the moment Robbie came in and woke her up. He wanted to stay with her tonight. So I finished up some work and came back. You don’t mind, do you?”

“No.” Ellen shook her head. “This is your home.”

A light scoffing breath came from Dean in the form of a chuckle. “Yeah. Home. Um, I’ll let you get back to your bath.” He moved to the door and stopped. “El, is everything all right?”

“Yes.” Ellen answered reaching for the wash cloth. “No.”

Dean stopped.

“I . . . I was doing some inventory this evening while Jenny had the kids. And . . . and I put the ‘need’ sheets on Andrea’s desk. I can’t . . .” The wash cloth dropped from Ellen’s hand. “I can’t believe she’s gone. I can’t accept it.”

Dean turned around. “I’m sorry.”

“Is she really, Dean?”

“Why are you asking me this now?” Dean questioned. “Yesterday, you said nothing.”

“Because I didn’t believe they did it.” Ellen spoke more to the water. “I can’t believe she was shot. Tell me . . . tell me she wasn’t. Tell me Joe conjured up some elaborate scheme as a way to prove Andrea’s innocence. Tell me that Dean.”

“I can’t.” Dean heard the saddened breath escape Ellen and he walked back over to the tub. “I wish I could.” He slowly sat down on the floor. “But she’s gone, El.”

“She can’t be.”

“El, sometimes . . . sometimes when people we care about leave us we . . .”

“No.” Ellen interrupted. “Where’s the remorse?”

“Excuse me?”

“Where is the remorse.” She asked with passion. “The woman lived here for eight years. Started this community. Cared for the ill. She was a mother

and a wife and everyone is acting as if nothing happened. As if she was just some survivor that got tossed aside.”

“Andrea admitted to being a traitor.” Dean explained. “She admitted to being a part of everything George did. That alone, in people’s mind wipes out a lot.”

“How about your mind, Dean?”

“Ellen, in my mind . . .” Dean stared down to his hands. “I won’t grieve her. I won’t expel any of my energy grieving her.”

Ellen’s eyes closed. “It’s because of what they’re saying she did with Bev, huh? Helping her out with the baby and all.”

“But we’ll never prove that, will we?” Dean asked. “Bev is gone. So is Andrea. I am stuck picking up what’s left of my life. Which isn’t very much.” He took a deep breath. “And I know I sound bitter and all. But I believe I have every right. For awhile I ran around this community with one ally. One. Frank. My arch enemy. Running around Beginnings, hoping to get you of all people to see I never betrayed you. Believing with everything I was that once me and Frank proved I was set up, that my kids, my . . .” With a swallow he raised his eyes to Ellen. “My wife. They would be mine again. That I would just come home and start back where we were before Bev . . .” Dean closed his eyes. “Fucked it all up. But what do I have. I have a house. I have my kids, but you . . . you don’t want me and I never did anything wrong. I feel cheated and I . . . I said too much.” Almost in defeat, Dean stood up.

“I wish you understood, Dean. A lot has happened. I can’t forget what I did to you. I can’t forget how I didn’t believe in you. It changed a lot in me. Please don’t think that it’s because I don’t love you.”

“You moved on.”

Ellen said nothing.

“Elliott Ryder and the Mystery man.”

“Elliott is very special to me, Dean. Our relationship is not what you think. It’s innocent and not physical. It’s a relationship built on something other than . . . other than sex.”

Dean nodded and walked to the door. “And what about the mystery man.” He looked at Ellen who drew silent. “I see. None of my business.” He reached for the door.

“There is no mystery man.”

His mouth formed the word first and then Dean turned to face Ellen. “What?” He saw her shake her head. “No. See. I saw the look on your face when Danny talked about the hidden camera in the bedroom. You panicked. Especially when Frank asked Danny who it was. And . . . There has to be a mystery man. You threw it in my face quite painfully and convincingly over

and over.”

“Yeah, I did. Telling you I slept with someone and was involved with them kept you away.”

“So there is someone.”

“No. There is no mystery man that has my heart and shares my bed. I got scared because I did have an incident. One incident. And I don’t want it out. We . . . him and I, we were drinking and we felt bad afterwards. I’m just scared it will get out. That’s why you saw that look on my face. It can’t get out.” Heavy was the breath she took.

Dean stepped back toward the tub. “So you’re not keeping the mystery man a secret to protect the relationship, you’re doing it to protect him and his identity.”

“Yep.” Ellen sadly nodded. “I have to.”

“When did you sleep with Hal?”

“What!” Ellen said in shock. “Hal! Why would you say Hal?”

“Because, you don’t want Frank to get mad at his brother. That’s why you panicked. Plus he did run around defending your honor beating me up.”

“Oh, my God.”

“It wasn’t Hal?”

“No.” Ellen said so offended. “That would be almost . . . incestuous. It was . . . Robbie.”

Dean laughed. “One brother is incestuous, the other is not.”

“Dean.”

Dean shook his head with a smile. “I guessed it, you know. A while ago.” He sat back down on the floor.

“Please don’t tell Frank.”

“No. I won’t.” Dean said.

“Thank you.”

“Can I ask why you decided to tell me the truth?”

Ellen’s hand played with the water as she spoke. “I feel bad. You’re still my husband. I still care about you. And so much has happened . . .” Her voice trailed off. “So much. We don’t need another riff between us.”

“I’m glad you lifted it.” Dean moved closer to the tub. “We can get past this, El.” he spoke deep persuasiveness to her. “The Robbie incident, The hurting each other. The mean things we said. It’ll just take work to build it back up.” He waited for a response and the moments of silence that stammered seemed like an eternity. “We can get past this.”

“Yeah . . . Yeah, we can.” Ellen said with an exhale.

Shocked. Dean felt the surprise of her words and his face conveyed it. “You really believe that?”

“Yes I do.” Ellen said. “It’ll just take time. But we can get beyond it. And tonight this . . . this sitting here, talking, me totally exposed to you.” Ellen snickered. “Tonight was the first step.” She took a moment to stare at him. “I’m glad you came back home tonight.”

Dean smiled. Not minutes before, the word ‘home’ ached through him. But in the simplicity of sharing a small conversation on that bathroom floor, the feeling shifted. The word ‘home’ had more meaning than just a place to live. He could be a father in any location, that would never change. But in Dean’s heart, no matter where he lived, he didn’t really have a ‘home’ if he didn’t have Ellen.

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How long had it been since he had one? To everyone else it had been months. But to Frank it seemed like only the day before. Because it was the day before that he last had the urge. He didn’t even have any in his home. Frank had to abuse his privilege as security to go into the social hall and take some.

Reaching that point. Was it a question of getting there again, or had Frank never left. He couldn’t remember a time since he was dry that he didn’t want a drink. Though no one else saw it, everyday was a struggle to him. And diving in again wasn’t as easy as the phrase ‘falling off the wagon’ sounded. It took a lot of thought. Perhaps that was why Frank sat on his couch, bottle in hand, staring so long in contemplation.

Was it a sign. To Frank, it had to be. Just as he unscrewed the cap, the oddness of the late hour knock, made him stop. Replacing the cap and setting the bottle on the coffee table, Frank stood up and walked over to answer the door.

“Dad?” Frank said surprised. “What uh . . . what are you doing here?”

“I was hanging out with Jason, and I thought I’d stop by on my way home.” Joe stood in the doorway.

“Oh, O.K., thanks. Night.” Frank reached to shut the door.

“Frank.” Joe pushed the door back open. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing much.”

“Can I come in.”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry.” He opened the door wider.

“Thank you.” Joe stepped inside and peered around. “Quiet.”

“It’s night. No kids.” Frank shrugged. “So, what bring you here at three in the morning.”

“I want to talk to you about the time machine.”

“Right now? At three in the morning.”

“Frank, I need to know what you saw. I really think you saw something.”

Frank shook his head. “Sorry.” He tossed his hands up. “We missed the time window.”

“And you would tell me if you saw who it was?”

“Yep. Why wouldn’t I? That’s the whole reason I went through right.”

“Right.” Joe placed his hands in his pockets. “Well, I’ll let you get to sleep. Think about it. Think about everything you saw. Maybe you can come up with something.”

“I’ll try.”

Joe moved to the door, then stopped. “Are you O.K.?”

Frank nodded.

A silent answer sent warnings to Joe. “By the way. I wanted to ask you something. I have a little proposition for you. Since Dean has moved back with Ellen and you lost your roommate. I was wondering . . . with Andrea being gone, it’s gonna be tough for me. I was hoping maybe I could convince you to maybe move into the house with me and the kids.”

“Excuse me?”

“Yeah. Move in. Help me out. Be a sort of emotional support.”

“Dad, I irritate you.”

“Keeps me young. What do you think. You can have the den as a room.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Frank debated. “Sounds weird.”

“I’d like you to, Frank.” Joe said. “I need you to.”

“What about Robbie.”

“I’m asking you.” Joe told him.

“Won’t Hal get . . .”

“Frank.” Joe snapped. “Forget it.”

“Dad.” Frank laughed. “I’ll move in. What the hell. It’s right next door to the kids and El, right?”

“Yep. It’ll be good for both of us.” Joe winked and opened the door. “And always remember. Things, they get tough. We have to make decisions. We’re faced with things we don’t want to face. There are ways to get through things. Talking helps. Understand?”

Holding on to the edge of the door, Frank, serious, nodded. “Yeah.”

“Good.” Joe took a step back as he took hold of the door knock. “And, Frank.. I’m proud of you no matter what.” His voice softened. “But just do me a favor.”

“What’s that.”

“Don’t . . . don’t take that first drink.”

So taken aback Frank was that his hand slid from that door and Joe had left before he could respond. He realized his father wasn’t a psychic when he turned around and saw the bottle in plain view on the table. “Fuck.” Frank closed his eyes and shook his head. He walked to the coffee table and in frustration of himself, he swept down his arm and lifted the bottle. “What am I thinking?” he huffed out and walked with the bottle of whiskey to the kitchen.

Standing before the sink, Frank uncapped that bottle. He questioned in his mind what brought him to the point that he came so close to breaking. And then he remembered. Just as he began pouring out the contents of the bottle, a vision of his time trip flashed in his mind at the same time the scent of the whiskey hit his nostrils, and Frank stopped pouring.

He stood in debate holding that bottle staring out his back kitchen window. Vividly he remembered what he saw when he watched Bev’s house, and with another flash of memory, Frank reached out his right hand and pulled a glass from the cabinet. He poured a shots worth of whiskey in that glass, brought it to his lips and before he could think about it anymore, he down the contents of that glass.

His chest burned with the alcohol and then it burned with guilt. Tightly his eyes closed in disappointment and pain that he had just did what he did. But with his closed eyes, he saw Bev’s house again. His body jolted at the realistic gunshot his mind replayed. And then Frank made a decision. After pouring another drink, Frank poured out the rest of that bottle.

Holding the glass, he stared at the liquid. And Frank swore at that moment that not only would it be his last drink, but the last time he ever thought about his trip back in time. When the alcohol vanished so would go the memory of who he saw going into Bev’s house. And he would view his witnessing the same as he viewed his taking a drink again. Both of them would be buried deep in his mind and they both would become something that, to Frank, never really happened.

Gone.

With a gasp, Frank set down the glass, shut off the light and headed to bed.

CHAPTER TWO

November 5
Beginnings, Montana

There wasn't a pity party to be handed out by Joe for Danny Hoi or Henry. He guessed they wanted some sort of reward for their efforts at staying up all night. But, Joe too, stayed up all night and half asleep, the best he could give was a 'thank you, boys. I'm very grateful.'

They did do a good job, and when Joe was less grumpy he would make sure he told them that. But while waiting on Jason, he took advantage of their labors.

A single cellular phone. Its twin in the hands of New Bowman. Both phones were programmed the same. And both phones were the only ones, according to Danny and Henry, that could actually work within a hundred mile radius. A de-scrambling signal was fed through the satellite dish making it impossible for any phone without the special programming to be used. It was a means to control any attempts of outside communication with the society should another informant remain. Yet, the special phone hook up was a way to keep communications open with New Bowman.

Joe had just finished utilizing that means of communication when Jason, after a knock, entered his office.

"Sorry for being late." Jason shut the door. "The clinic finally calmed down."

"When I radioed you, it sounded like all hell was breaking loose."

"More like all bile."

"What?" Joe asked with a hint of a laugh.

"Fourteen cases of food poisoning."

"You're shitting me . . . I mean. You know what I mean. Should I be worried? Do we have a possible contamination outbreak happening?"

"No." Jason shook his head. "We narrowed it down. There was a little Sunday dinner gathering happening with some of the security men. Twenty-two men, fourteen got sick. The eight that didn't get sick did not eat Kevin's Chicken Surprise."

"Surprise all right. So the chicken was bad."

"Yep. Defrosted it in the stove all night and half the day. That's what the problem was. So we got it under control."

"Dean going nuts?" Joe asked.

"Oh, yeah." Jason grinned.

“Good.” Joe sat back. “O.K., we don’t have much time. Henry will be here soon to discuss what we’re going to say at the emergency community meeting. You know, how we intend on handling the investigation. The official investigation.”

“But *we’re* going to discuss the unofficial one.”

“Or rather . . .” Joe pulled a folder forward. “The ‘Frank’ suspect list. The ones that not only had motive, but also would be protected by him.”

Slowly Jason shook his head. “That’s just about everyone he knows Joe. We’re talking about the murder of a Society insider. Frank could care less.”

“True, but . . .” Joe held up a finger. “Would Frank be so upset about finding out it was just *anyone*. He was thrown through a loop. The person Frank saw, ranks high with him. And those who rank high, are the ones that get placed on the ‘Frank’ list.”

Opening the notebook he brought, across his lap, Jason lifted a pen. “Might as well start with the Movie of the Week Mystery meeting at Henry’s house. Who was there?”

“You.” Joe said. “We know why you were called. There were two categories Danny divided up the meeting attendants. One, was those effected by Bev. The other attendants were those who helped in solving. You were neither. You were there because you were council. Motive.”

“None.” Jason said. “Really. Can you think of any? I’ve been trying because I think it would be interesting to have one.”

“But there is no motive. Unless . . . unless Bev knew something about you. After all you were frozen too.”

“True.” Jason rubbed his chin. “Put that down as my motive. I’d rather have one if I’m going to be a suspect.”

“Now, all important question. Would my son be frazzled, upset and thrown if you were the shooter.”

“Joe, you’re son wouldn’t even protect me if he saw me throw a rock.”

Joe nodded. “True. All right. We’ll take you off the Frank list and leave you on the official suspect list. Next . . . Hal.”

“Yes and yes.” Jason said. “Frank would protect and be upset.”

“Motive?” Joe asked.

“Family affected. Ellen effected. Really, Joe. The Ellen thing had him upset. How many times did he pummel Dean over it.”

“Too many to count. Hal stays. Robbie . . .” Joe stated. “Same reasoning. Robbie stays. Next, Trish.”

“No real motive except that she has this thing about running a picture perfect community.”

“She gets neurotic. She could have offed Bev to purge the community.”

"I like it."

Joe write down the motive. "Now would Frank . . ."

"No."

"No." Joe shook his head. "Trish stays on official. Off the Frank list. Next name . . . Henry." He whistled. "Motive galore. How many times was he the pawn in a Bev game to break up Ellen and Dean."

"Too many to count. Stays. Frank would protect him."

"Frank would." Joe jotted down. "Elliott Ryder." At the same time as Jason, Joe sat back. "Danny said he was at the meeting only because he happened to be at Ellen's house. Motive."

"Crazy about Ellen." Jason said. "Would Frank protect him. No."

"Yes." Joe mildly argued. "Frank used to hate him. He likes him now."

"Elliott is involved with Ellen."

"Still, he's his brother's best friend, and . . . Frank has made him into a 'Frank Mini-me'. I'm keeping him on the list."

Jason tossed his hands up. "I disagree, but . . . you're the leader."

"Josephine." After a second of seriousness, Joe laughed. "Off the Frank list, he'd love to get rid of her. But, just for the hell of it, leave her on the suspect list. Danny Hoi."

"No motive. No Frank concern." Jason stated. "Frank gets annoyed by him."

Joe nodded in agreement. "Next Dean . . ."

Jason's laugh interrupted. "Leave him. Major motive, and Frank has gotten close to him. Along with Dean, we don't even need to discuss Ellen."

"Those are our two major suspects." Joe sadly shook his head. "Now, there are two more names on this list that were at Danny's house. Danny wrote down that they were in attendance because they were affected by Bev." Joe shrugged. "But makes no sense. Jess Boyens and Hector."

"Does Danny have written why they were effected?" Jason asked.

"Threatened. That's it. I asked for details. Danny Hoi had none."

"Frank may or may not protect them . . ." Jason said with a thinking tone. "But they should be moved to the official list and off the Frank one, on the basis that Frank would not be frazzled if he saw they were the shooter."

"Good point." Joe closed the folder. "That's it for the Henry house meeting."

"Did Danny give you all of his material he gathered?"

"Yes." Joe answered. "Everything. Frank just took the box to sort through it. He's gonna use a portion of the cryo lab."

"Everything?" Jason asked. "Including the disks from Ellen's bedroom."

"Those too. But I don't think Frank wants to review the Ellen and Dean

bedroom antics.”

“What about the Ellen antics when Dean wasn’t around.” Jason raised his eyebrows. “The mystery man?”

Joe calmly panicked. Unknown to Ellen he was well aware—courtesy of looking out his kitchen window—of who the mystery man was. “Shit.”

“How long ago did he get the box?”

Joe looked at his watch. “Ten minutes. He’s probably in the lab now. Christ, I hope he forgot how to boot up a computer.” Hurrying, Joe stood and headed to the door.

“Where are you going?”

“To stop him and get that disk.”

“Radio him.”

Joe laughed. “Right. I’ll say ‘Frank, don’t view those disks’ and that’ll make him do it. No, I have to hurry.” In his reach for the door, Joe stopped. A smile hit him. “Wait. Maybe radioing him will do it.” Holding up a finger to Jason, Joe lifted his radio. “Frank. Frank, come in.”

“Yeah, Dad.”

“There’s trouble in the back gate region. I need you there STAT.”

“I’ll send one of my guys. I’m busy trying to figure out how to boot up a fuckin computer.”

“Frank, no. You have to go. Now. Frank.”

“Why? Tracking didn’t call me.”

Joe rolled his eyes. “I’m in tracking. Get up there. Only you can handle it. We have . . . we have a bear running around back there.”

“A bear. You mean like Goldie Locks?”

Joe took a calming breath. “Christ Frank. Yes.”

“Black bear. Brown bear, polar . . .”

“Frank! What the hell difference does it make.”

“I have to know what to use.”

“It’s a twenty foot goddamn grizzly bear.”

“Oh yeah.” Frank’s smile carried over the airways. “I’m on my way.”

Releasing the button on the radio, Joe shook his head. “Finally.” He headed back to his desk.

“I thought you wanted to go get that disk.”

“Oh, I do. But I think I’ll have a cigarette first.” Joe reached into his pocket. “If I know my son. He’ll be out there for a while. I have plenty of time now.” With a laugh, Joe lit up.

New Bowman, Montana

Over and over Hal Slagel's fingers rubbed his eyes as he sat behind his desk. Eyes that to Elliott Ryder looked tired, and dark. An uncommon occurrence for the leader of New Bowman. Elliott's presence in the office was unknown. The door ajar, Elliott slipped in. "You uh . . ." Elliott spoke softly. "You look worse than me."

Above his fingers, Hal raised his eyes. "If it's intended to be a funny comment regarding your illness, it's not."

"Ouch. What did I do?" Elliott shut the door and stepped further in. "And what's wrong with you."

"Migraine. I have a lot on my mind." Hal leaned back.. "My father just called."

"He called?" Elliott pulled up a chair. "I thought the phones were shut down."

"You must of slept well last night, Elliott. I can not believe you didn't hear the arrival of our Asian population in New Bowman last night or rather very early this morning. They brought the only other phone that works. That's how I spoke to my father."

"Nothing is wrong I hope."

"No. He needs us there this afternoon. There's an emergency community meeting. I think . . ." Hal played with the note on his desk. "I think it has to do with that girl's murder."

With an 'ah', Elliott only nodded.

"I believe we are suspects."

Elliott repeated his single knowing nod.

"None of this bothers you?"

"Why would it?" Elliott shrugged. "I'm not guilty. I've no motive for taking her life. Why? Are you worried?"

"Some. But not for myself. I really hope, Elliott, that there isn't an investigation into this murder."

"Why?"

"Well . . ." Hal exhaled. "Someone took her life. We don't need a repeat of another trial. Who was she? What did she do? Someone, in my opinion, did our communities a great favor."

"And you are concerned who that someone may be."

"A little."

"Do you think it's someone you're close to?" Elliott asked.

"You can say I worry that it is."

"Do you know something?"

Druga-Johnston/The Aragon Window

At that moment, Hal slipped into thought. His eyes stared off as his mind heard his brother's voice.

"Come on, Hal." Robbie nudged him as they walked from Henry's house after the meeting. "It's early. One drink before you head back. We need it."

"Dad's not feeling well. I really want to get back."

"One drink."

"One drink."

"Captain?" Elliott called a distant looking Hal.

Hal didn't hear Elliott, nor did he see him. His mind was in that social hall two nights before.

"It burns me up." Robbie said swallowing his drink.

"Let it go." Hal told him leaning over the bar. He shifted his eyes to Bev not far away.

"But knowing . . ."

"We decided to let Dad handle it. And . . . can you excuse me? I want to talk to Mark." After getting a nod from his brother, Hal walked around to Mark, a security man, who sat at the bar two bodies down from Robbie. Drink in hand, Hal nudged his body in between Mark and Forrest. "Hey, Mark, got a minute."

"Business or pleasure?" Mark asked.

"Business."

"No." Mark brought his drink to his mouth. "Hal, Frank said I am not allowed to talk to you if it is business."

"I assure you Frank would allow this."

"I am one of Frank's. I know this game you guys have."

"And as one of Frank's men, I need your help with one of mine. You're familiar with the tracking system. Right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, one of my men has been having trouble . . ." Hal stopped speaking when he heard Robbie's irritated voice snap, 'I'm warning you'. Hal held up a finger to Mark. "Excuse me." He walked back to Robbie. Standing behind his brother, he saw who he was talking to. Bev.

"What's it worth to you Robbie?" Bev whispered. "Hub, what's it worth."

"It isn't worth all this trouble you keep going through to throw it in my face."

"Oh, I don't buy that. Why else do you get so upset. I knew it was good when I found out." Bev said with a sneaky grin.

"It's amazing." Robbie said with such a hint of mean, one Hal had not heard his brother use before. "It really is. It's amazing how you know these things. Drop it Bev, and

go away."

"Yeah I think I will." She giggled. "I think I'll go speak to Frank right now. He's working isn't he? Wonder how big brother would react to your . . ."

Bev!" Robbie's voice graveled. "If you . . ."

"Robbie." Hal interceded, placing his body between Robbie's and Bev's. He stared directly at the young woman. "I will make a suggestion to you. Go home. Go home and stay there. This is not a place for a woman in your condition, and trust me when I tell you, walking around isn't best for you. Not right now, not tonight. Got that?"

Bev rolled her eyes and walked away.

Hal shook his head. "Guess she took me seriously." He said sarcastically and finished off his drink. "I have to head back. Call me if . . ." He saw his brother watching Bev. "Robbie."

"If she says one more thing to me, I'm killing her."

"She'll get her justice. And everything will come out."

Mumbling, Robbie spoke near whisper. "That's what I'm afraid of."

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing." Robbie exhaled and looked at Bev. "I hope to God one of us personally get the chance to put the bullet in her head."

"My God." Hal spoke surprised. "Robbie, I heard her say . . . Robbie, what does she know that she's threatening to tell Frank?"

Closed mouth, Robbie shook his head. "I love you guys, Hal. I wouldn't do anything to hurt you."

"I know that."

"Sometimes things happen. And we . . . we don't mean them too. But they're the sort of things that happen, that no one would ever believe we did them without intentions."

"What did you do?"

Robbie only shook his head. "Have a safe trip home." He laid his hand on Hal's shoulder as he passed him. "Night."

"Robbie . . ." Hal turned around and watched his saddened brother leave. He only looked back to Bev who—after a taunting wave to Hal goodbye—followed not far behind his brother.

"Captain?" Elliott's voice snapped him out of it.

Hal quickly gave a twitch of his head and rubbed his eyes. "I'm sorry, Elliott, I zoned off. My head. What did you say?"

"Do you know something?"

After a slight hesitation and quick remembrance back to the social hall, Hal shook his head. "No." He flashed a quick smile. "No, not at all."

Beginnings, Montana

In the world, pre plague, those who knew Ellen's brother Richie Martin, knew him as a meticulous guy, especially when it came to his hair. A quick witted, even tempered, fun to be around person. In Beginnings, the 'fun to be around person' quality never left him, but only for different reason.

"No." Robbie Slagel grabbed Richie's hand.

In the skills room of containment they sat at the activity table. Once a place to process only survivors before they went into the community, containment slowly became the old world equivalent to a mental hospital. They still worked with survivors. Only in the recent times it became a home for those who were basically safe but just couldn't live in the general population because they lacked the equivalent of low level sanity that the other Beginnings residents had.

"No." Robbie repeated. "No playing catch."

"F . . . Fun." He spoke each word with a sense of rapidity. In typical Richie mannerism, he lifted his hand, smacked it down across the top of his head and flattened his already flat hair, just before he rolled his chin against his shoulder. "Fun. Not . . . not fun."

"Work." Robbie pointed to the paper. "You want to get well, don't you?"

"Well."

"See?" Robbie smiled. "Now. Home." He showed a map of Beginnings.

"No."

"No?" Robbie snickered. "Yes. Home."

"Home. Cleveland."

"Before. Now, it's Beginnings."

"M . . . Middle. End."

"Funny."

Richie giggle. "I'm a, I'm a f . . . f un guy."

"You are. Now, try this again. Where is home?"

"Cleveland."

"No."

"Cleveland."

"O.K." Robbie shrugged. "Cleveland."

"Robbie." Ellen's voice carried into the skills room. "That's not helping him." She walked in closer carrying a clipboard. "You know what Dean said."

"D-Dean." Richie stated monotone.

"Yeah, Dean." Ellen looked at Robbie. "Work his mind, not patronize

him. He'll never come back. Dean . . ."

"Dean." Richie interrupted. "Dean. Bev."

"Richie." Robbie warned with a hint of a snicker.

"Bad Dean." Richie spoke as he rocked back and forth. "Dean and Bev. Dean loves Bev. Bev's pretty."

"Yeah?" Ellen nodded. "You like Bev."

"Bev . . . Bev's pretty."

"She's dead." Ellen grinned.

Richie screamed.

"Oh, look who's not helping now." Robbie said.

"I'm allowed." Ellen set down the clipboard in front of Robbie. "He's my brother. Besides, I don't really know if I want him like he used to be. Let the drug stay. I think he's funny this way."

Henry's gasp was the announcement that he was in the room. "El." Henry walked closer. "That isn't very nice."

"Yes, but I'm not a nice person." Ellen smiled. "And I'm out of here. Watch Julius Caesar, Robbie. He thinks everyone's trying to kill him today."

Robbie gave a thumbs up as Ellen left.

"El?" Henry stopped her. "Are you mad at me or something?"

Robbie made a scoffing noise, one that was repeated by Richie who began to draw on the map. After laughing, Robbie glanced up to Henry. "Henry, you made her leave. See if you weren't such a prick."

"Prick." Richie spoke. "Henry. Prick."

"Oh, nice." Henry shook his head. "Look what you're teaching him."

"Did I teach you that, Richie?" Robbie asked. "No right?"

"No, right." Richie nodded.

After a huff, Henry spoke. "What are doing here, Robbie."

"Working."

"Working." Richie mocked.

"You're supposed to be working in mechanics." Henry told him.

"Not now. El's busy. I'm working here with Richie."

"With me." Richie continued to draw.

"Robbie, I need you to do maintenance check ups on heaters for winter. Can't you get someone else to work here." Henry asked.

"No. Richie needs special therapy."

"But I was up all night." Henry complained. "You would think you would try to help out."

"Whine. Whine. Whine." Robbie instigated.

Richie whined.

Robbie laughed. "Good job Rich. Anything else, Henry?"

“No. Forget it.” Henry tossed his hands up. “And don’t think I won’t tell Joe.”

“Tell him.” Robbie said.

“Tell him.” Richie repeated.

Growling, Henry turned and walked out.

“Bye.” Richie waved then tapped his pencil on the map. “Work.”

“You wanna work?” Robbie smiled. “Cool. O.K., back to what we were learning. Where is home?”

“Beginnings.” Richie answered proudly.

Robbie made a buzzing noise. “Sorry, Rich, Wrong answer. Seattle.”

Richie moaned.

^^^

Emergency Community Meeting at three.

Jess Boyens traced his finger over the posted memo right on the board by the little ‘Joe park’. No reason for the emergency afternoon meeting was given, but Jess figured out what it was about. Bev. The only thing everyone talked about. Bev’s murder. Her relationship to the society. But those things weren’t where Jess’ mind was at. His mind kept going back to the note she had typed up and left for him on his locker. A simple note stating, ‘You know why you are in Beginnings. It’s time. The society needs you’. It was a note that could be Jess’ downfall. Not only did the note give hint to an alternative reason why Jess was in Beginnings, but it was a means to a possible motive.

“You look in thought.” Henry said as he approached Jess.

“I am.” Jess answered then pointed to the memo. “Do you know what this is about?”

“Yeah. I am on council.”

“Bev’s murder?” Jess asked.

Henry nodded. “The community has a lot of questions. Joe is giving a lot of answers, or at least he’s gonna try.”

“Is he going to discuss an investigation?”

Henry hesitated in answering. “To be honest . . .” He scratched his head in thought. “Joe didn’t say.”

“He didn’t say? To you? You’re on council.”

“Maybe he figured I was busy.” Henry shrugged.

“Or he didn’t say anything on purpose.”

Henry snickered in disbelief. “Jess, please.”

“You’re a suspect.”

“How do you figure?” Henry asked.

“How do you not?” Jess came back. “The way I’m guessing is, every single one of us who were at your house that night. All of us who found out what she did and who she was, we’re prime suspects. And Henry, everyone in that room was told by Danny, that she was blackmailing you.”

Henry closed his eyes. “But Danny doesn’t know why. And neither does anyone else. Except . . . except you and Frank.”

Jess nodded. “And someone else.”

“Hector.”

“Exactly. We’re all gonna have to come clean, Henry.” Jess said. “All of us on why we were in that room. Maybe you ought to sit and talk to Hector. Because if both of you go under investigation, there’s a possibility that what happened could come out.”

“I don’t want that.” Henry said firm.

“Don’t take that attitude.” Jess told him. “Really, don’t. Just be open and honest if it is brought up. No one is gonna care. Trust me.” He started to walk away. “And a bit of advice. Don’t try to cover it up. If you do, people are gonna think that you’ll go to any means to keep that information a secret.”

Henry nodded as Jess left. Looking in total agreement on what Jess said. But he wasn’t. If people were gonna think Henry would go to any means to keep the secret, then in Henry’s mind, people were right. And with the thought of a possible deep investigation, Henry decided to seek out Hector.

^^^

Shuffling around the back room of the clinic lab, Ellen was, and Dean peeked in to make sure she was still busy. Hurriedly he went to his computer, and biting his nails he looked at the screen. He watched the progress indicator move slowly. “Come on. Hurry up.” He whispered.

“No.” The deep voice answered.

Dean stood straight up. His eyes shifted then he turned around. Frank stood there, two M-16 rifles strapped to him, a hunting knife across his thigh, a cross bow over his left shoulder, and enough ammunition strips to kill an army. “Frank.” Dean snickered his name.

“Hey.” Frank shut the lab door. “See. Busy and all, but I’m still punctual. One o’clock.”

Dean looked at his watch. “Good for you Frank. You mastered telling time.”

“Ha, ha, ha asshole. Our meeting, remember. You said to bring it here at one. I have it. Do you have the program . . .”

A loud 'shh' by Dean interrupted Frank when he remembered about the meeting.

"O.K." Frank lowered his voice. "You said to bring it . . ."

"Frank."

"What?"

"No." Dean pointed to the back room.

"No what?" Frank asked. "I have . . ."

"Why are you dressed like that?" Dean asked, then peeked toward the back room.

"Huh?" Frank looked down at himself. "Oh, yeah. I was playing the mighty fuckin hunter up by the back gate."

"What were you hunting?" Dean asked.

"A grizzly bear. Now . . ."

"A grizzly bear?" Dean laughed.

"Dean." Frank said annoyed. "I have to get back up there. I don't want to miss the opportunity." He stepped closer to Dean. "Now are we gonna do . . .do . . ." Frank looked down as Dean leaned closer to him. "What are you doing?"

"Smelling you. You smell sweet."

"I am."

"No, Frank. Why do you smell sweet?"

"Bait." Frank nodded proudly. "I mixed honey and sugar with water and sprayed it on me."

"Why?"

"Dean." Frank rolled his eyes. "I'm hunting a fuckin grizzly bear. Honey? Get it? Sugar. Didn't you ever see Winnie the Pooh?"

"Yeah, Frank, but if you're hunting a grizzly bear you don't need honey. The smell of your flesh is good enough. In fact if you were bleeding it would help."

"Thanks. I'll remember that. Anyhow . . ."

"A grizzle bear?" Dean asked. "Frank I don't think they live in these parts of the country."

Annoyed, Frank snapped. "It's a different fuckin country now, everything's changed. Now do you have the program ready so we can check out the disk of El's bedroom or what?"

"Frank." Dean dropped his voice to a clenched jaw whisper. "Ellen's in the next room."

"What?"

"Ellen's in the next room."

"Dean, I can't understand you."

"He said . . ." Ellen spoke up. "Ellen's in the next room."

"Thanks." Frank said then looked back to Dean. "Is the program ready to view the disk. Shit." Frank realized Ellen was there.

Dean cringed.

Ellen walked closer. "What disk?"

"Um . . ." Frank shifted his eyes. "A video disk. Yeah. Me and Dean were gonna watch a movie."

"What movie?" Ellen quizzed.

"Rambo."

Ellen laughed. "Yeah, right. Rambo?"

Dean held out his hand to Frank. "Yep. Frank even dressed for the occasion."

"No I didn't." Frank corrected. "I'm bear hunting."

Ellen's eyes widened. "Bear hunting? Where?"

"At the back gate." Frank walked to her. "Here, smell me. I have on bait. But I think I'll cut myself to draw him in."

"You're serious." Ellen said. "There's a bear in Beginnings."

"Twenty foot grizzly. Even scares the killer babies. And speaking of predators. I have to go." He backed up. "Dean." Frank, behind Ellen's back, opened his jacket and lifted the disk into view. He mouthed the word 'later'. When Ellen turned around, Frank flashed a grin. "I'm gone. See you guys at the meeting."

Confused, Ellen watched Frank. "Dean what was he . . ." A beep of the computer interrupted her.

"Hold on." Dean rushed to his computer. "Stay there. Don't look."

"Look at what?"

Dean reviewed the results. "Yes." He smiled and hit the print button.

"What's going on?" Ellen asked.

Holding up a finger Dean walked to the printer and grabbed the sheet that came out. "All right. Yesterday morning we ran those test on Elliott's biopsy. We gave him the results of our new treatment."

"Yes. We told him things were good. No increase. No change."

"We made a mistake in reading them."

"What?"

"The count didn't look right to me. It wasn't consistent with the blood count, so I ran the test again on the biopsy cells." Dean took on a dead serious tone. "There . . . there was a change, El. A big one. I wanted to be the one to show this to you."

Afraid, Ellen apprehensively and with a beating heart took the sheet. Her eyes were closed as she brought it to her.

“Look at it, El. All the experiments we do in our lab. The demented ones. Ones that we always say are for the future. No matter what people make us out to be, I make us out to be brilliant. Look.”

Ellen slowly opened her eyes. “Oh my God.”

“The cancer wasn’t stable in this lymph node region. It didn’t increase. It decreased big time. You give this news to him when he comes in. You tell him, but tell him with pride.” Dean pointed to the results. “Finally, one of our ‘for the good of the future’ experiments is paying off. We’re not just saving your friend, El. We’re doing what doctors have been trying to do forever. The impossible. “ Dean smiled. “I believe we’re finally beating cancer.”

CHAPTER THREE

Johnny found the task annoying and attributed his having to do it more to the fact he was a flunky rather than the reason Jason gave him of being trusted. Cleaning out Andrea's desk. Organizing everything there. Andrea left it be as if she expected to return after the trial and continue on. Such high hopes Andrea had. How badly her hopes were shattered.

He took a box with him to Andrea's office because he knew the way she was. Probably a dozen or so, if not more, missing files would be found. As Johnny expected, a bin set on top of her desk. Files marked 'confidential' laid in there. Reaching for them, Johnny rolled his eyes at the inventory sheets Ellen left on top of the desk. Left there as if Ellen somehow thought Andrea would magically rise up from the grave and fill out those inventory requests.

All women. That was what the confidential files were. Sloppily he'd lift one at a time, dropping it in the box with an irritated look.. Perhaps it was fate that he did it that way, if Johnny had been more careful setting the files in the box he wouldn't have smiled at that moment.

The file fell in crooked and when Johnny went to fix it, not only did he see the name, but he saw the unmistakable pink paper. Wondering if it was from two years prior, Johnny pulled out the file then opened it. The grin widened. It was exactly the leverage he searched for. Reading over Andrea's notes, the find got even better.

The roll of the partition curtain in the hospital room made John Matoose shift his eyes. The only part of his body that could move or show emotions. And John Matoose did. Horror filled his eyes and they widened when he saw Johnny pull a chair up to the bedside.

"Hey ya, John." Johnny smiled. "No, no. Don't try to talk, you'll only frustrate yourself. How are you feeling. Better I suppose huh?" Johnny sat back with an arrogant look. "Probably wondering what you've been injected with. Don't worry about it. Dean is still trying to figure that out. He won't. No way. Anyhow . . ." He let out a breath. "Here's the deal. I was a bit worried. Just a bit, see, that I wouldn't be able to keep injecting you. They found out about Bev. She's gone, John. Someone killed her. So with Bev gone, Andrea gone, there's no one supposed to be left in Beginnings working for the society. You get injected again, someone will catch on. So I worried. Until this." He held up the folder. "It's your wife's medical file. Quite the vat of information it is." Johnny opened it and laid it over John's still legs.

“Here’s the deal.” He laid his hands over the open folder. “I am gonna let you come out of the drug. Yep. I’ll let you wake up. In a day, you’ll breath on your own, talk and all that good stuff. They’ll figure . . .” Johnny shrugged. “Since Andrea and Bev are gone, no more drug. And you John, will confirm one of them gave you the drug. You John won’t say it’s me. I need some help in Beginnings now, some tasks are left to complete. And guess who is gonna help me?” He winked. “You. Yep. Why? I’ll tell you.” With an exhale Johnny lifted up to read the folder. “Seems, when you confessed to my Pap and became the man who wanted to come clean. You really didn’t, did you. You left a few things out. Conveniently. Like, you forgot to tell my pap how a while back we went through the time machine and sent those letters to help George change time. But, I am grateful you took the rap for being up in that mobile lab that night with Moses. Couldn’t let them find out it was me. Getting back to my point. You’ll help me. You won’t open your mouth because you want to stay in Beginnings. If you open your mouth, I’ll open mine. But before I do . . . bet me . . .” Johnny’s voice graveled in a whisper. “Bet me that I not only kill your wife, but the baby she’s carrying too.” He dropped the folder to the bed. “Yep. Jenny’s pregnant. It’s a secret, you know. Five months along. Why is it a secret? It’s yours. Jenny wasn’t with Patrick at all for two months and Jenny didn’t want anyone to know she was pregnant to you John with all that you did. Ashamed.” He gasped out with a shake of his head. “But, knowing how Caroline is . . . dead.” He snickered. “You’ll want this baby. So does Jenny. But screw up John, don’t help me and . . . the baby goes first. Stillbirth. Second, Jenny. If I have to . . .” Johnny shrugged. “Both. After all someone took Bev and my baby from me. So what the hell do I care.” He slowly stood up and let out a loud breath. “Well, I must get back to cleaning out Andrea’s office. Don’t want to be missed.” He walked to the door and stopped. “Oh, and John. It’ll be good to have your help again.”

Seeing Johnny leave his room, John did what only he could do. Helpless, he closed his eyes in despair.

^^^

In Joe’s office, but never behind his desk, Jason worked. He looked up when the door to the office opened. “Hey, Joe. Finished the lottery of defected society soldiers that are going to New Bowman.”

“Thanks.” Joe shut the door. “That’s part one. The next is telling Frank. Which I will before Hal does.” Shaking off the chill from the outside air, Joe walked around his desk and sat down. He pulled the list Jason compiled

forward and nodded pleased. "Good."

"Speaking of good? Did you?" Jason asked.

"Nope. Tried."

"And?"

"Gone." Joe stated.

"Was the rest of the evidence there?"

"Yep." Joe nodded. "But that . . . gone."

"Gone?" Jason seemed so shocked.

"Gone."

Unexpectedly, Frank intruded with a comment when he walked in the office. "That's because I scared him."

"Who?" Joe asked. "Who did you scare?"

"The grizzly bear. Isn't that who you were saying was gone?" Frank pulled up a chair.

"Um, yeah." Joe smiled. "That's who. Gone." He saw his son shake his head. "No?"

"Nope. Bet me he's just having lunch somewhere. He's onto the smell of Beginnings." Frank nodded.

"Frank, listen . . ." Joe had a hint of embarrassment to him. "About the . . ." His eyes widened. "What the hell happened to your arm."

Frank looked down to the slice on his forearm. Blood smeared from it. "I cut it."

"On what?"

"My knife."

"You cut yourself on your own knife. How?" Joe was surprised.

"Dean."

"Dean cut your arm?"

"No I cut my arm. Dean suggested it. It may work." Frank spoke assuredly. "I left a blood trail to the Frank terminator."

"Frank." Joe shook his head. "You aren't going to terminate a grizzly bear."

"Dad!" Frank was offended. "Please. I can. I have to."

"Frank, I . . ."

"What did you say he was? Twenty feet?" He whistled. "Dad, that's big. I mean, I'm six-three, so that means the grizzly bear is . . ." Frank held out his fingers to count. "He's fourteen times bigger than me."

Jason snickered. "That's amazing."

"Basic math." Frank pointed to his temple.

"Christ." Joe's hand slammed to the desk and he saw the soldier lottery. "All right, I'm about to ruin your good mood."

“No.” Frank said with disappointment. “Don’t tell me.”

“Tell you what?”

“Someone else got him.”

“Who?” Joe asked.

“The grizzly bear.”

“Frank!” Joe snapped. “Enough about the goddamn bear.”

“Fine. Fuck, yell at me. But you won’t yell when he breaks in. So go on . . .” Frank waved his hand. “Ruin my mood. But you can’t. Nothing can. I’m in a good mood. I have important, revealing information I can’t wait to view. If the thought of moving in with you today doesn’t do it. Nothing will. Well, all right, telling me you’re giving my men to Hal would. But that’s not it.”

“That’s it.” Joe said.

“No. Fuck!” Frank yelled. “No. Who.”

“About one seventy of the two something you brought back. We don’t have the room. New Bowman does.”

“That’s fine.” Frank remained calm. “Will we bus them here for training?”

“No.” Joe shook his head.

“Will I go there?”

“No. Hal . . . Hal and Sgt. Ryder will be training and taking over those men.”

“Uhl!” Frank shrieked. “No.” He stood up. “Don’t even tell me. Almost two hundred finely trained Beginnings men are going to be converted to slapping pansies in civil war uniforms.”

“I beg your pardon.” Hal spoke as he walked in.

Frank snickered. “Speaking of which.”

“Dad.” Hal nodded in acknowledgment to Joe then to Jason. “Dr. Godrichson.” He stepped to Frank. “Asshole.”

“What?”

“Are you implying that we are less a soldier than you because of the way we dress.”

“Hal.” Frank said with a laugh. “I have news for you. Everyone is less a soldier than me.”

“That’s right. You’re high and Mighty Frank.”

“No, high and mighty hunter Frank. I’m chasing Grizzlies now.”

“Don’t change the subject.” Hal moved to him. “Are you saying we can’t fight because we wear this uniform. I’ll have you know, big brother, I train my men, well. Very well.”

“Your men suck.”

“Hal.” Joe had slight warning. “He’s just trying to get to you. Ignore

him.”

“Listen to Dad.” Frank pointed back. “Besides, even if you take my men, they’ll never listen to you. They respect me more.”

“Then that says a lot for your men. Respecting a man who does drugs over a leader who does not.”

Frank laughed. “What the hell are you talking about.”

“You. Who was it on my livingroom floor not that long ago, stoned.”

“I don’t know. Who?”

Hal growled. “You. But it’s only par for course. After all old habits die hard.” Instigating in tone, Hal walked from Frank, dropping his voice. “Guess it carried over from your teenage years.”

“What?” Frank asked. “I never did drugs.”

“Really, then why were you always hungry when you were a teenager.” Hal asked.

“I was growing. And . . .” Frank defended. “Dad kept forgetting to give me lunch money.”

“Dad gave you lunch money. You spent it on drugs.” Hal sat down and winked at his father.

Joe peered up with concern. “Is this true Frank. Did you spend your lunch money on drugs.”

“No.”

“Yes.” Hal nodded.

“No.” Frank sneered at Jason. “Stop laughing.”

“Dad.” Hal tilted his head slightly. “Who do you believe.”

“You Hal. Always.” Joe leaned back.

“Fuck.” Frank stormed across. “I’m out of here. He’s not back a few months and already this shit is starting again. Bye.” He flung open the door, complaining as he did. “Rearrange my day for meetings that piss me off. I should be out hunting.” He slammed the door on his exit. He blasted his voice outside just to be heard one last time. “And someone else better not get my bear!”

Oddly Hal looked at the door then back to his father. “What is he talking about?”

“Who knows.” Joe shrugged. “But at least he’s not talking about you taking his men. That’s for sure.”

“And . . .” Jason interjected. “You got him to leave. Good job.” He sighed outward. “Is it me, or do you notice the air of calm that enters a room when Frank leaves.”

Even though he was family and there was loyalty to that, Joe and Hal had to agree.

~~~~~

"If I didn't feel important enough when I came to Beginnings," Elliott said softly as he stood in the lab doorway watching Ellen. "You leave a message for me at the front gate that you need to see me immediately."

With a smile, Ellen turned around. "Elliott." She saw him walk into the lab, standing tall, wearing his UWA uniform. She made her way to meet him half way. "I feel like I haven't seen you in a while."

"That's because there's no communications. We used to talk." He leaned down to her but stopped. "Wait a sec. Did you need to see me medically or personal?"

"Can I say both?"

"Nope."

"Honestly?"

"Please."

"Though I couldn't wait to see you. This is medical.."

"Then, Dr. Hayes, I am all yours."

Ellen pulled up a stool. "Have a seat."

"Oh boy." Elliott let out a breath and sat down.

Grabbing a folder, Ellen sat across from him. "First. If you don't, I will, but Dean and I need you to sit with Hal and make arrangements for you to stay in Beginnings, starting tomorrow, for one whole week."

"I can't do that." Elliott said. "There's a lot of organizing that needs to be done with the new town for winter."

"I understand that. But I am sure Hal will organize fine without you."

"Can I ask why I am needed for an entire week?"

"Sure." Ellen nodded. "The last treatments that Dean and I gave you. We want to do them again, only we want to do them for seven days straight."

"I can commute."

Ellen shook her head. "No. We don't want you working, or physically exerting yourself at all during these treatments. You need to just hang back, get them, and take it easy. Besides, we're upping the strength, and we think you may be very sick for the first three days."

"Oh, my God." Elliott wisped out. "I'm getting worse."

"No, Elliott . . ." Ellen smiled. "You're getting better."

"What?"

"We made an error when we read your biopsy results. We told you there wasn't a change. There was. A big decrease.."

"This is great news." Elliott grinned.

"Yes, it is. So . . . we want to use the same treatment, but up the dosage

and give it to you for seven days. Game?”

“Absolutely.” He agreed.

“Excellent. We’ll start tomorrow, and I’ll speak to Hal if you want me to.”

“No, need. I’ll tell the Captain.” Slowly, Elliott stood up. “I’ll try to speak to him before the community meeting.”

“Elliott.” Ellen reached out laying her hand on his. She stood as well. “It’s good to see you.”

The right side of his mouth raised in a smile and Elliott leaned down kissing Ellen softly on the cheek. “It’s good to see you too. And I will see you all week. Right?”

“Right.”

“Good.” With a nod, he stepped back. “Oh, and Ellen. Should I not see the other Dr. Hayes, or get a chance to speak to him right away. Please tell him . . . Please tell him thank you very much.”

“I will.” Ellen smiled peacefully at him. “See you at the meeting.” After watching Elliott leave, Ellen gathered up the folder, and headed from the lab. She had to find Dean. Ellen knew he was as anxious to find out how things went with Elliott, as she was to tell him.

^^^

As long as he kept holding her hand, she was fine. Buried Alexandra’s hand was. Buried within the fingers and palm of Dean. His eyes smiled at her and they looked so big. To her, everything about him looked big. And nothing seemed to matter when he sat for hours and visited her at the clinic. Alexandra didn’t feel sick, in pain or even scared. Why would she? Her father’s presence seemed to take it all away.

“Is it true?” Alexandra asked Dean.

Looking up to the ceiling first, Dean smiled then peered back down to Alexandra. “Yes.”

“You’re back home? Living with Mommy.”

“Yep. I’m back.”

“For good?”

“As long as I have a say so.” He touched the tip of her nose.

“So you love each other again.”

“I never stopped loving your mother.” Dean told her.

“What about when you loved Bev?”

Dean swallowed. “Alex, I never loved Bev. I didn’t even like her. She started all kinds of trouble for really no reason. And it just kinda made Daddy

look like the bad guy.”

“You did.”

“Gee.” Dean said with little enthusiasm. “Thanks.”

Alexandra giggled, and then her smile quickly left. “Oh.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Who’s living with Uncle Frank?”

“I hear . . . I hear Uncle Frank is moving in with Pap-Pap.”

“So he’ll be right by us?” Alexandra asked.

“Most likely, always with us.”

“Good.” The little girl said in such relief. “You have Mommy. You have us. Who does Uncle Frank have? He used to have you. I just don’t want him to be lonely.”

“Let me let you in on a little secret.” Dean curled his finger and drew in toward Alexandra’s ear. “Ready? You can’t tell anyone.”

“I promise.”

“O.K. I kinda . . . I . . . your Uncle Frank. He’s not a bad guy. I kinda like him now. And he was really there for Daddy when I needed him. So, I am not going to let Uncle Frank be lonely. Understand?”

“Yes. That’s nice.”

“And it’s our secret. O.K.?”

“Our secret, Daddy.”

“And mine.” Ellen said as she walked into the room. “Hey you two.” She walked up to Alexandra and kissed her. “Hey, Sweetie.”

“El.” Dean said surprised. “About what you heard.”

“I heard nothing.” Ellen stroked her daughter’s hair. “When does she come home, Dean?”

“Well, she could come home now if she ate.”

“She’s not eating?” Ellen asked.

Dean shook his head. “Melissa said she hasn’t touched her food, that’s why we still have her on an IV”

Ellen looked to Alexandra. “Honey, why won’t you eat.”

“I don’t want it coming out the hole the arrow made in my chest.”

Ellen shifted her eyes to Dean in question.

“Seems . . .” Dean explained. “Our resident teenage boys stopped by and told her that if she eats it could seep out the injury. I tried to tell her it wouldn’t happen. But she doesn’t believe me.”

“Really?” Ellen shrugged and looked down to her daughter. “Alex, honey, that isn’t true. It won’t come out of your chest.”

“O.K., mommy. Thanks I was scared it would.”

Dean tossed his hands up in defeat. “Why did she believe you. Well,



good. Alex, you show us you're eating and you can come home."

Alexandra nodded.

Over the bed Dean leaned and kissed her. "Mommy and me have to go to a meeting. One of us will be back. Or Uncle Frank."

Ellen shook her head. "I don't know if Uncle Frank will be by today. He's busy protecting the community. There's a big giant killer bear running loose."

"Is Uncle Frank trying to get him?" Alexandra asked.

"Yes. And if anyone can get that bear, Uncle Frank can." Ellen spoke assuredly.

Dean slowly stood up. "And we all know there isn't much Uncle Frank can't do."

"Add." Alexandra stated. "He can't add."

As Dean started to smile he saw Elliott Ryder's file in Ellen's hand. "El, did you speak to Elliott?"

"Yes. He's gonna stay in Beginnings for the treatments. He said to tell you thank you. Of course I expect Elliott to tell you himself as well."

"Of course." Dean said. "It wouldn't be honorable if he didn't." He gave another kiss to his daughter. "See you at the social hall, El." He walked to the door.

"Daddy." Alexandra called to him. "You didn't kiss Mommy good bye."

Dean stopped and turned around. "No." He smiled ornery. "No I didn't. Did I?"

With a quirky smile, Ellen tilted her head at him as he neared her. "Dean?"

"El." With a flash raise of his eyebrows, Dean took a step, reached out his hand, laid it behind Ellen's neck and pulled her to him. After one more quick smile, he drew her closer to him, hovered his lips over Ellen's for only a moment, and then, unexpected to Ellen, Dean kissed her. He *really* kissed her.

Alexandra's 'oh, gross' rang out in the room.

"Bye, El." After a smack to her backside, Dean stepped away. Winked at his daughter, turned and left the room.

Ellen stared out.

"Mommy? Mommy?"

Snapping out of it, Ellen turned around to her daughter. "Sorry, sweetie." She grabbed a chair and pulled it to the bed.

"I thought you had a meeting."

"I do." Ellen exhaled. "But right now . . ." She lowered to the chair. "After that Daddy kiss I am really grossed out and I need to just sit down."

## Druga-Johnston/The Aragon Window

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She snickered with her daughter, then with a totally different expression, Ellen shifted her views back to the door where Dean had just left.

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It amazed Hal how much a warehouse the social hall actually was and how big the building ended up being when all the tables were taken down and chairs lined up. But even with its size in its favor, the social hall was crowded as people poured in for the emergency community meeting. Hal wasn't one for crowds, but he was one for having a small drink while he was there.

A lot of the men had the same thought. They were at the hall, they had to be subjected to a community meeting, they might as well have a drink to ease the pain. Doing like all the others, Hal walked to the bar for a drink to have with him during the meeting. He grabbed a glass, then grabbed the first bottle that he saw.

"Hey!" Her fragile elderly voice snapped.

"I'm sorry." Hal set down bottle back down in front of Josephine. "Were you reaching for it."

"I was drinking it. Get your own, goddamn it." Snatching up the bottle and cradling it to her chest, Josephine slid sloppily—almost falling—from the stool and staggered off. "Asshole men."

Widening his eyes, Hal grabbed another bottle. As he poured his drink, he saw through the corner of his eye, a cigarette being extinguished in a hard smashing manner into the ashtray. He looked up. "Frank."

"Hal." Frank leaned against the bar.

"How's the bear hunting."

"Going. And don't even think about trying to get him first."

"Wouldn't dream of it." Just as Hal lifted his glass to his lips to take that first sip, he saw it. "Frank?" He said soft and serious. "What are you doing?" Hal's eyes transfixed on Frank's reaching fingers for the bottle of whiskey.

Frank closed his eyes and withdrew his hand. "Oh, man. I just . . . I wasn't even thinking, I . . ."

"Understandable." Hal said. "Habits, they're uh, hard to break. Tell you what." He lifted his glass showing it to Frank. "I'll join you."

"Excuse me?"

Hal smiled, and then Hal leaned over the bar with his glass, reached it toward the sink and dumped it out. "I'll join you in *not* having a drink."

"Thanks." Frank smiled. "Give me a cigarette."

"You just put one out."

"Come on Hal, I left mine in the jeep."

Grunting, Hal pulled a cigarette from his pocket and handed it to Frank. "You smoke too much."

"You bitch too much."

"Captain." Elliott approached the pair.

"Wait." Frank held up his hand. "I need to know. Do you ever call him Hal? I mean, do you ever say, 'Hey, Hal, how's it going?'"

Elliott thought for a moment. "Maybe eight or nine . . . come to think of it. No." He looked back to the Captain. "Do you have a minute?"

"Sure." Hal said. "How was your meeting with Ellen?"

"Good."

"You had a meeting with Ellen?" Frank asked. "Why?"

"Frank." Hal said calmly. "Go away."

"No, that's all right, Captain." Elliott told him. "Frank is aware of everything. One of the few. And . . ." He looked to Frank. "My meeting with Ellen concerned my health. That's why I need to speak to you, Captain."

"What is it?" Hal asked.

"The Doctors Hayes . . ." Elliott stopped speaking when Frank laughed.

With a cross look, Hal glanced at his brother. "What, Frank?"

"The Doctors Hayes." He shook his head laughing.

"Can you think of another way to phrase it?" Hal asked.

"Yeah. Dean and Ellen." Frank shrugged.

Hal rolled his eyes. "Go on, Elliott."

Elliott hid his amusement. "The Doc . . . Dean and Ellen would like me to stay in Beginnings for a week. Starting tomorrow. The new treatments may actually work and they want to do a seven day series."

"Elliott." Hal smiled. "That sounds promising. Yes. By all means. We'll make due. Can you commute?"

"No. I have to stay. They say I may get very ill." Elliott told him. "They want me to, how did Ellen put it, hang back. Not work. But, Captain, I don't want to raise suspicion about my illness. How should I cover this up?"

"I will." Frank interjected. "I'm gonna be starting this investigation into the Bev murder, and I'll say I need you to do the security stupid reports for me while I get into the swing of it this week."

Impressed, Hal nodded. "Frank, that was very quick thinking on your part."

"Thanks." Frank nodded. "I thought of it just like that . . ." He snapped his finger. " . . . this morning when Dad said an investigation will be starting. I was gonna ask to steal Elliott anyhow. So . . ." Frank gave a swat to Elliott's arm. "You have a cover."

Hal shook his head. "Generally, Elliott. He isn't this nice."

“You lie.” Frank gasped out in a joke. “I’m the nice brother, you’re the mean one.”

“How do you figure?” Hal asked.

“Who was the one walking around Beginnings beating up midgets?”

“What?” Hal asked with a laugh..

“Dean. Who was the one that kept beating him up? Who?” Frank held up his finger to silence Hal. “No, you did. Shut up and . . .” Frank twitched his head in a point. “Speaking of Dean. There he is, wanna go pummel him. Hey Dean.” Frank yelled out to Dean who had just entered the hall. “Hal’s here. Run.”

“You’re an asshole, Frank.” Hal shook his head, looked at Elliott and pointed to his laughing brother. “See what I mean.”

Joe cringed in perfect synch with all the moans that emanated in the social hall following the loud feedback squeal. Stepping from the stage, Joe closed his ear, and turned around. “Christ, Danny.”

“Sorry.” Danny Hoi, upbeat, coal black hair perfect, stepped from the stage. “I want the perfect effect on your vocal.”

“On my vocal.” Joe shook his head and walked with Danny toward Robbie. “I’m not singing.”

“Really?” Danny joked. “I thought you started out every meeting with Beginnings nation Anthem.”

“Get the hell out of here.”

Danny laughed. “Oh, hey Mr. Slagel, one thing. This meeting. Is it what I think it’s about?”

“Yes.” Joe said.

“Good. Because everyone is talking about it and they need answers. They’re worried.”

“They shouldn’t be. I’m taking care of it and I’ll try to answer the questions as best as I can.”

“Be prepared to be bombard.” Danny warned.

“I will. Now fix my microphone.” Parting from Danny, Joe approached Robbie. “A couple minutes, as soon as a few people who should be here, arrive.”

“I’m in no hurry.” Robbie shrugged. “Are you going to mention to everyone what you have as far as evidence?”

“No.” Joe stated. “The investigation material will be hush-hush except to the team I picked out.”

“Speaking of evidence, Dad. Did you?”

Joe rubbed his eyes. "No, not yet. I went down there three times. It's not there."

"Dad." Robbie said serious. "We have to get that disk."

"I know. I think . . . I think your brother has it on him."

"Maybe if we distract him, we can steal it. But right now he's distracted with that bear he thinks is running around."

"Hey." Joe smiled. "You gave me an idea."

"What's that?"

"He wants that bear. Be the bear. Josephine has that fur coat she runs around in. Borrow that, go to the back gate, growl a few times and . . ."

"Dad." Robbie said with shock. "No. He'll shoot me."

"No he won't. Your hard headed brother isn't going to shoot. Christ, bet me he thinks he can tackle and take a twenty-foot grizzly bear."

"Bet me he'd shoot it. No way. I am not gambling on my life just to get the disk."

His voice in question surprised both Joe and Robbie. "What disk?" Dean asked.

"None of your business." Joe told him.

"Are you talking about *the* disk." Dean questioned.

"*The* disk?" Robbie repeated. "What do you mean, *the* disk. What disk would *the* disk be?"

"Robert." Joe warned.

"You know . . ." Dean winked. "*The* disk. The one from Ellen's bedroom. The one with the capturing of the mystery man who happened to get drunk with Ellen one night and had an incident." He raised his eyebrow. "I know, Robbie."

"What do you know?" Robbie asked.

"I know." Dean repeated.

"You know?" Robbie was surprised.

"I know." Dean nodded. "El told me. And I won't let it get out. In fact, I can get the disk. Frank is supposed to show me it anyhow on the side."

"That son of a bitch." Joe griped. "Abusing evidence, stealing it like that. But, Dean, get that disk, will ya."

"Yeah." Robbie agreed. "I don't wanna have to go up to the back gate, wear Josephine's fur coat and growl all to get . . . to get . . ." Robbie's eyes shifted. Then he picked up the speed of his words. "To get that grizzly before Frank does."

"Oh." Frank huffed out as he stepped to the group. "Between you and fuckin Hal wanting my bear."

Robbie lifted his hands in defense. "Hal's idea, Frank. He's always trying

to 'one up' you."

"I know." Frank looked down at his watch. "And speaking of the bear. Dad, you gonna start this meeting. I want to get back up to hunting."

Joe winced. "Um, yeah, Frank."

"And . . ." Frank patted his own chest pocket. "I prepared a statement. Worked real hard on it too."

"You prepared a statement?" Joe asked. "For what?"

"The meeting. You know, incase you ask me to get up and say some words about the grizzly situation."

"Frank." Joe quipped. "The meeting isn't about the grizzly bear."

"Oh." Frank nodded. "But just incase it comes up . . ." He pointed to the obvious paper sticking out of his pocket.

"I know, I know." Joe lifted his hand. "You have a statement prepared."

Frank winked and nodded.

"Hey, Frank." Robbie nudged him. "Out of curiosity. Would you shoot the bear first, trap the bear or, I don't know, tackle him."

"Robert."

With thought, Frank rubbed his chin. "I would have to say tackle him first, it's a fuckin bear, how tough could it be?"

Joe rolled his eyes. "What I tell you."

"How's the hunting going?" Robbie questioned.

"Robert." Joe shook his head.

"Bad." Frank answered Robbie. "Fuckin bear isn't taking the bait. I think he's chasing the killer babies or something. I tried honey, sugar, even sliced my arm according to Dean." Frank lifted his arm shoving it in Dean's face. "No use."

Very serious, Robbie nodded. "I see. Have you tried porridge?"

"Robert."

"No. But good idea. I'll try that. Thanks." Frank said then turned to Dean who released a squeal of a laugh. "What the fuck, Dean."

"Nothing." Dean held up his hand.

Shaking his head, Joe walked away. "I'm starting this meeting."

"Dad." Frank called out. "Remember . . ."

"I know. I know. The statement." Joe grumbled as he moved to the stage. He hesitated before speaking in the microphone that he knew would squeal. And it did. He cleared his throat. "If I . . . I-I-I-I-I-I . . ." The long strand of reverberating Joe sounds rang out in an echo across the room. With a quick snap of his views, Joe gave a stern look to Danny. "Fix it."

"Sorry." Danny snickered, hurried to the stage and pressed a button. "Go on, you're good."

"Thanks." Hands in pockets, Joe faced the crowd. "Now that I have your attention . . . we'll get this thing started. I'm sure you all know why we're here."

"Don't beat around the bush, Joe." Jenny's voice carried in the room. "Give it to us straight."

"I'll try." Joe said.

"Good." Jenny exhaled. "Because we need to know the chances of this thing getting in here."

"Excuse me?" Joe was confused.

"I am in charge of twenty-some children a day." Jenny continued. "I have to know if they are in danger."

"Jenny." Irritated, Joe spoke. "What the hell are you talking about."

"The grizzly bear. That's what this meeting is about, isn't it?" Jenny said.

Melissa stood up. "Joe, please tell us you called us here to discuss the bear. My son runs around, I am so scared . . ."

Joe held up his hand. "The meeting is about . . ."

"Joe." Dan from security stood up. "I think armory should issue us extra ammunition for this incase he tries to break through."

"Are the perimeters strong enough to keep it back?" Bill another security man asked. "I want to be prepared."

"How?" Mike asked. "How does one prepare for a ten foot grizzly?"

"Twenty." Frank yelled out. "He's twenty feet."

An out break of emotional scared screams rang out.

Joe cringed. "Enough." He waited for the silence. "All right. You wanna know about the bear . . . Frank has . . . he's prepared a statement that should give you all the answers. Frank?"

"Oh, yeah." Frank made his way to the stage. He whispered as he walked by his father. "You'll be impressed."

"I'm sure."

Reaching into his pocket Frank pulled out a paper and unfolded it. "I've prepared a statement about the bear. I hope you don't mind if I read it to you." He cleared his throat and began to read. He read slow and clear so everyone heard every word. "There is a bear at the back gate. I will get him. I will kill him. Don't worry." Frank looked up and folded the paper. "That's all."

Joe closed his eyes in preparation for the outcry of questions and confusions, but he didn't get it. He heard applause.

Robbie snickered and leaned toward his dad. "They bought it?"

"What can I say, they're all morons." Shrugging Joe walked back up to the stage. "All right now that you are completely satisfied with the bear

situation. We'll move on. This is important and I know a lot of you have questions and concerns. Bev's murder. Yes, Jenny." Joe called Jenny who frantically waved her hand.

"Do I have to stay? I really only wanted to know about the bear."

"Jenny, there was a murder."

"Yeah, Joe but it was . . . it was her. And out of loyalty to Ellen, I really don't want to waste my breath on being concerned."

Ellen smiled. "Thanks Jenny."

"You're welcome."

"Ladies. Please." Joe spoke up. "I'm sure others would like to know what course of action I as community leader intend to take . . ." Joe halted speaking when a wave of mumbles and 'no, not really' comments emerged tin the room. He looked about everyone who shook their heads to one another. "People." He raised his voice bringing quiet. "Tough. I'm gonna tell you. You'll listen. There's been a murder here. And whether you people liked her or not, a life has been taken and we intend to find out who did it. There will be a special investigation team consisting of myself and Frank, and the use of Johnny for forensics. That's it. All evidence and suspects will be kept confidential, and no details of the investigation will be given until we have concluded. I will tell you I don't believe there is a threat of it happening again. I ask that you cooperate with the efforts of the investigation team if we call you. Got that?" So irritated Joe sounded. "Now, any questions."

After a moment of silence, with hesitation Jenny raised her hand then slowly stood up. "I have a question, Joe."

"Sure, Jenny, what is it?"

"Will you at least keep us posted on the grizzly bear situation?"

Joe walked off the stage.

CHAPTER FOUR

Where? Where wouldn't have his father searched? Ignoring the sign that warned for anyone not to enter Bev's house, Johnny made his way in through a window. He was taking anything, not by any means. Why would he. Removing valuable evidence that could lead to the killer was not in Johnny's best interest. He wanted the killer found more than anyone else.

But what Johnny was doing at Bev's could have been a tarnishing of her memory, but in the same sense it was his protection. Finger prints removed from the bottle, Johnny held the drug that he had been giving to John Matoose. He had to place it somewhere so that his father would eventually find it while combing through Bev's house. Somewhere hidden away that Frank would not have searched his first time through, but would when he eventually returned.

Where? Johnny wondered again. Where the best place to be was. He thought of the likely places and unlikely. Then Johnny remembered the drug was evidence against Bev, not the killer, so with that in mind, and staying on the first floor where the least amount of killer evidence would be found, Johnny sought out a place to hide that drug.

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The 'clack' of the hard hit pool balls rang out in the empty social. Above the rim of the glass he brought to his lips, Jess peered at Henry, the only other patron there. Henry played pool, alone, as he wanted. Hit his frustrations out on the balls, Jess supposed. That was fine with Jess. He just wanted to sit in the hall in thought.

And he did. He sat in thought and he sat with a drink in one hand, a piece of paper in the other. Only the paper was more than it seemed. Sitting back in the chair, slouched some, Jess' forefinger flicked the edge of the fateful note. A letter from Bev. Her warning that she knew how he came about to Beginnings. How Jess Boyens was deliberately trained and educated so his defecting would seem like it was *his* idea, not an attempt by the society to send an unsuspected informant through the gates of Beginnings.

The truth behind the note had to come out and an explanation for the note had to be given. By means of Jess only. The words written would be discovered anyhow when Joe sifted through the Danny 'Bev is a Hadly' evidence. A typewriter ribbon and the letters that erased the ink would spell out that note exactly. Jess wanted to beat Joe to the punch of discovering it,

and he would.

Reading the note, hearing the sounds of the pool table, flashed Jess' mind back to the night that it was revealed Bev was George's daughter. Information that would be handed directly to Joe when he returned to New Bowman and then Bev would be confronted. After the meeting at Henry's all Jess wanted to do was have a drink. And following a few moments of talking with everyone who attended the meeting, Jess, with his intentions of alcohol, headed to the social hall.

"*Made a decision yet?*" Bev's voice called to him in the darkness of the night.

Jess stopped walking, then over his shoulder he glared at her.

"Live together, become alike." Bev snickered and walked to Jess. "Your roommate just gave me the same look."

"There's a reason for it." Jess started to walk again, or at least he tried.

"And there's a reason I'm stopping you. I need an answer. You know why you're here." She tauntingly walked to him. "How convenient, if you turn me down, a note will be found in Andrea's things explaining about your defecting."

"Keep that mouth going, Bev." Jess said calm. "Someone aside from me will hear you talk. How do you know someone won't find out about you, before you can pull off these threats?"

"Like who?" Bev laughed then saw Jess give a point with his head. She looked behind her to see Elliott standing just outside the social hall door. Shaking her head, Bev returned to Jess. "He heard nothing. But . . ." She leaned to Jess whispering. "If he did, If I go down, so do you. And there's nothing you can do about it." She raised her eyebrows to him, folded her arms and turned away waving to Elliott as she left.

Jess swallowed. "Hey, Elliott, leaving the hall already?"

"Actually I stopped by to see the Captain. You?"

"Having a drink. Wanna join me?" Jess asked.

"No, no. I'm heading back to yours and Robbie's. Are you sure you don't mind me staying with you?"

"Not at all."

"I appreciate it." Elliott started to leave, but stopped. "Jess, if you don't mind. What was that all about. You didn't tell her . . ."

"No. No. She hasn't a clue we know. Bev was just . . ." Jess exhaled. "Pulling her Bev antics. That's all. It was nothing . . ." Jess shook his head. "Nothing."

Refolding the note in his hand, Jess closed up the memory. He downed the rest of his drink and slowly stood up. "Night, Henry."

“Night Jess.” Henry said still in his game. “Sorry I wasn’t good company.”

“No problem. Nether was I.” Waving, Jess started to leave.

Henry took a shot and missed. Just as he was about to cringe he heard Jess’ voice saying ‘hey, Hector’, and Henry slowly stood upright, holding the pool stick. He watched Hector walk in.

“Hey, Henry.” Hector walked straight to the bar. His thick, but short hair, messed and he had a tattered look.

“You avoiding me?” Henry asked, setting down the cue and moving to the bar.

“No, why?”

“I’ve been looking for you all day. I’ve been trying to find you. You didn’t even show up for the meeting.”

“There’s a reason for it.”

“Yeah. You know I’m looking for you.”

“What?” Hector chuckled and poured a drink. “Me not going to the meeting or seeing you has nothing to do with avoidance. Where you been? It has everything to do with being trapped in a tool hatch with a cryogenically mind wasted field worker for nine hours.”

“Oh my God. How did that happen.”

“Remind me to kill Frank.” Hector took a drink. “Him and Robbie dug that tool pit. He wouldn’t let Robbie put the hinges on. Frank had to do it. Frank is strong. He screwed them too tight or something. And when Fieldworker three knocked over the ladder, the hatch closed. We were trapped.”

“How did you get out?”

“Joe came up to bitch at me for missing the meeting and he heard me pounding. I’ve been playing catch up on my work since. So . . .” Hector poured another drink. “What did you need to see me about?”

Pulling up a stool, Henry sat down. “There is going to be an investigation into Bev’s murder. I won’t be privileged to any information about it because I’m a suspect. Joe knows, through Danny, that Bev was threatening me. Joe doesn’t know why. *Or why you* were at the meeting. We have to come up with a reason why you were there.”

Hector just stared at Henry. “You really don’t want it out.”

“Neither should you.” Henry said. “It’s taboo with the security men, whether they do it or not, no one admits. If you like being security, you can’t let them know.”

Hector nodded.

“And, Hector, Joe can’t find out about it.”

"I just agreed Henry." Hector told him. "I won't tell him about what happened with us."

"That's not what I'm talking about. You know it. I need you to promise me you won't say anything."

Hector closed his eyes.

Bang. The aluminum side of warehouse number three rattled with the firm slamming of Bev into it.

"Henry!" Hector called out charging at full force. Shoulder first he rammed into Henry knocking him back off of Bev, and freeing Henry's hand from around Bev's neck.

Bev gasped as she grabbed her throat. "I'm telling."

"Tell!" Henry pointed with a heavy hand, his body being held back by Hector. "You go on and tell."

"Henry." Hector had warning to him. "Let it go."

"I'll tell everything."

"You know what Bev?" Henry said with bitterness. "You're as good as dead anyhow."

Setting down his glass, Hector ran his hand over his head and looked up to Henry's eyes that waited for an answer. "No. I won't say anything." He finished his drink. "I won't say anything at all."

^^^

With a huff of irritation, Joe glanced down to this watch. He shook his head then laid the casserole dish on the table. "Frank goddamn it!"

"What!" Frank's muffled voice carried through the house.

Grunting, Joe sat down at the table. He reached out and smacked Robbie's hand when he saw Robbie reaching. "No picking."

"I'm hungry."

"Wait." Joe tapped his hands on the table. "Frank!"

"All right!" A rattling noise rang out when the bathroom door opened.

A whiff of clean hit Joe and he smiled. "We'll start. He doesn't smell anymore." Dishing out his supper, Joe listened to Frank's tromping footsteps. They'd move, stop, move again. "Frank, what are you doing."

Frank's head popped out of the tee shirt he placed on. "Where's Denny and Katie?" He asked then ran his fingers through his wet hair.

"Where the hell do you think?" Joe snapped. "New Bowman. They aren't coming back yet. And . . . And mind you, would I be serving dinner at

nine at night if they were here.”

“Yeah. You did it when we were kids.”

“I never served dinner this late when you were growing up.”

“Hey, Robbie. Why are you here?”

“Free meal.” Robbie said.

“Frank.” Joe yelled out. “Sit down, you’re holding up my dinner.” He pointed a fork at a chair.,

“Dad.” Frank chuckled. “How am I holding up dinner. You could have eaten without me. Besides, I’m not hungry. Go on eat.”

“No, you’ll eat.” Joe told him.

“I’m not hungry.” Frank insisted. “I’m a grown man. I don’t have to eat.”

“The hell you don’t. You live under my roof. My rules. You’ll sit down and eat with me and your brother.”

“Fine.” Frank huffed. “All we need is fuckin Hal to walk in and it’ll be a nightmare of growing up all over again.” He looked at the door.

Robbie snickered. “Frank, what are you doing?”

“Waiting. I’m sure Hal will walk in.”

Joe slammed his hand on the table. “Frank. Hal is not coming. It’s late. He’s probably in bed. He is responsible.”

“Oh, Hal bites. And . . .” Frank held up a finger. “He wears fashion boots.”

“Sit. Let’s eat.” Joe told him.

“Fine.” Frank grabbed for a chair.

“Did you get rid of all that blood?” Joe asked.

“I’m clean. Smell.” Frank leaned over, and lifted his arm by his father.

“Asshole.” Joe swiped Frank’s arm away. “Now sit down.”

“I’m sitting.” Frank began to sit.

“Frank.” Joe said seconds before Frank’s rear rested in the chair. “I left my coffee in the kitchen. Can you get it.”

“Sit down. Stand up. Get my coffee. Wash behind your fuckin ears.” Frank stood up and complained as he moved to the kitchen. He searched for Joe’s coffee cup, mumbling as he did. “Next thing you know he’s gonna ask if I did my homework.” Spotting the cup, Frank grabbed it and took it in the diningroom. “Here.” He set it down.

“Thanks.” Joe said. “Frank, did you finish those reports?”

“Close enough.” Frank sat down.

“Excuse me?” Joe asked as he started to eat.

“Nothing.” Frank grumbled.

Robbie shook his head. “Man, are you tense.”

“Fuckin hunting wears me out. And . . . I still didn’t get my bear.”

“Hey, Frank.” Robbie leaned into him. “Wanna do something tonight. I got an idea about . . .”

“Elbows.” Joe warned.

Robbie removed his elbows from the table. “Frank, I have an idea. You game. It’ll be fun. And something I always wanted to try.” He looked at his father. “It might be semi loud. Do you mind?”

Joe shook his head. “As long as no one gets hurt.”

Frank shifted his eyes back and forth from his father to brother in sheer horror. Permission being asked. Elbows on the table. Frank feared it *was* his youth all over. But Frank was certain about one thing, unlike while growing up, dinner would be completed with out Hal getting him in trouble one way or another.

“So, Frank.” Joe wiped his mouth. “What’s this shit I hear from Hal about you stealing Elliott Ryder for a week to do paper work you should be doing?”

Frank slumped in his chair. He thought too soon.

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The warm smell of it carried to Ellen in the bedroom with a scent of familiarity. She thought maybe it was her imagination? How could she be smelling that smell.

“Sorry.” Dean walked in. “I didn’t want to ruin them.”

“Dean?” Ellen turned from a dresser pulling out clothes. “Are you making something?”

“Well, yeah.” Dean opened the duffel bag. “I wanted it to be a surprise. But I guess you can smell it.”

“Tortillas.”

“Yep.” Dean nodded. “Jess gave me the recipe. I thought it would be nice. You know, to sit around, talk. The kids are sleeping.” He shrugged. “What uh . . . what do you think. I don’t want to push.”

“I think it would be nice.” Ellen turned from the dresser. “Empty.”

“Thanks for giving me back my drawers.”

“Hating to give up the space. I am a woman. This is your home, and that was your dresser. Or is again.” Ellen reached for the duffel bag. “Let me help.”

“Thanks.” Dean handed her a stack of clothes. “I appreciate it.”

“It’s the least . . .” Ellen stopped talking when she took the clothes and falling immediately from it was a folded purple piece of paper that looked like

stationary. "What's that? I never saw that paper before." She put down the clothes.

"Um . . ." Dean ran his fingers through his hair. "You know what. Don't worry about it." In his reach, Ellen snatched it up.

Opening it, Ellen's eyes went from the words to Dean. "I see."

"El, it's really not what you think."

"Really?" Ellen said calm. "Let me read this line. *And I wish our night together could be sooner, but I am busy. I hope two weeks is not too long to wait. Until then, Margie.*" Ellen lifted her eyes. "It's starts out 'Dear Dean'."

"El, look. Nothing has happened. And it doesn't have to happen. I was just . . . I was just moving on with my life like you."

"Who is she? She has to be from New Bowman."

Dean nodded.

"And you like her?"

"She's very nice." Dean said. "Before you get mad . . ."

"I'm not mad." Ellen's voice raised in a fake nicety. "Not at all." She exhaled and folded the note. "I told you we were through and . . . I was moving on. I can't expect for you to wait on me. Especially now since there are a few more women."

"I need you to understand. I will forget . . ."

"No." Ellen held up her hand. "I'm happy that you met someone nice. Now . . . how about getting those tortillas on the table and I'll put these clothes away for you."

"I don't feel right, with you finding that note and all. Maybe I should put the clothes away."

"Dean." Ellen forced a grin. "Really. Go. We're trying to get along, right. Why fight?"

"Right. Why fight. I'll uh . . ." Dean walked to the bedroom door. "I'll go put the chips on the table. Coffee?"

"Please." Ellen smiled until Dean left. Then the smile dropped from her face. Speaking softly, under her breath she put the note in her pocket, then reached for the clothes she took from the duffle bag. "I'll put this away for you. Nice and . . ." She dropped them on the floor. "Neat." Grinning, she pushed the clothes in a pile and took them to the drawer. After shoving them inside, she turned happily for the next stack of Dean's perfectly folded clothes.

Dean didn't think much of the thump when he set the bowl of tortillas on the table. Not much, until the thump turned into a rattle and bang. It was loud and it sounded like it came from the kitchen. Walking in there, Dean

stopped when he heard it again. "What the hell?" Just as he turned to look he heard the unmistakable Frank laugh.

"Oh you suck." Frank yelled from outside.

"Oh, yeah?" Robbie came back. "You try."

With the wondering thought of what they were doing, heavy on his mind, Dean headed to the front door. He stopped when another bang rattled his house along with a Frank grunt. "That's it." He flung open his front door. "What are you two doing?" Dean yelled as he followed the noise that came from the side of the house. Both Slagel brothers were on the ground.

"Oh, hey Dean." Robbie smiled.

"Dean." Frank looked up.

"What are you doing?"

Frank stood. "Jumping. Trying to make it from my father's roof to yours."

"What!" Dean blasted. "You'll cave my roof in."

"No we won't." Frank argued. "And what's that smell."

"Tortilla and don't . . . Frank." Dean watched Frank run to the house.

"Robbie." Frank stopped at Dean's door. "You coming?"

"No, you go on." Robbie told him. "I have to get up early anyhow. Night Dean."

"Night Robbie." Turning, Dean froze when saw it. A snarling sound rumbled from his chest. "Frank." Shaking his head at the dent in the siding of his house, Dean went back in. "Frank." He called as he stepped into his house. "You dented my house."

"Sorry." Frank sat at the table with Ellen. "Dean. Good job."

"Thanks." Grumbling, Dean pulled out a chair and sat down. "I didn't invite you."

"So." Frank shrugged. "El, do you mind."

Staring out with a hint of sadness Ellen shook her head.

"What's wrong?" Frank asked her.

"Nothing." Ellen reached for the chips.

"You sure?" Frank waited for her to nod and he grabbed another chip. "Good job on these, Dean."

"Jess told me how to make them." Dean tried his creation. "I did do good though."

"Yeah, just don't turn gay like him. I know I'll be the first man you get a crush on."

"You figured out my deepest desire, Frank." Dean said sarcastically. "So how's bear hunting?"

"Going. I'll get him. Fuckin people in this community are driving me

nuts. Asking me how I'm getting him, what the odds of this and that are."

"You *are* Frank."

"I am."

Ellen smiled. "How big is this bear again you're chasing?"

"Huge." Frank nodded. "My Dad estimates it's fourteen times bigger than me."

Dean choked then took a drink. "Frank, that can't be right. Fourteen times bigger than you?"

"Dean. My dad said."

Quirky, he tilted his head. "That would make him around eighty-seven feet tall."

"Fuck." Frank commented. "That's a big bear." He shrugged. "Oh, well."

"I can't take it." Ellen stood up. "I can't."

"What?" Frank asked.

"You and you." She pointed to them both. "I can't take you guys getting along. It's not natural. Fight."

Frank shook his head. "I can't do that, El. He's my pal."

Dean held in his grin. "And Frank's my buddy."

"And I'm going to bed. Night." Snatching up one more chip, Ellen with a fling turned and walked out.

Laughing, Frank leaned into the table. "So, seeing the mood. I take it El found it."

"Yeah." Dean said with little enthusiasm.

"And?"

"She tried to act like it didn't phase her. But it did."

"Good." Frank smiled. "It'll work."

"Frank, I don't know . . ."

"Dean. I know her. I'm telling you. It's perfect. She'll know you haven't done anything but, she'll start to fear that if she doesn't make her move now someone else will snatch you up."

"Are you sure this isn't a Frank game to get her back." Dean asked.

"Dean, it's a brilliant one. Besides, I told you I'm done with that shit. So, who wrote the note?"

"Ben from fabrics."

"What name did you use. So I can play along. You know, come back from New Bowman and say.

'Dean, so and so, says hi.'."

"Margie." Dean stated.

"Margie? What kind of name is that."

Druga-Johnston/The Aragon Window

“You said pick something feminine. Besides, Ben picked it.”

Taking another chip Frank bobbed his head from side to side. “I guess that’ll be O.K.. Hey, at least it worked.”

“It worked.” Dean nodded.

Standing in the hall, back against the wall, Ellen pulled out the Margie note. She peeked around the bend to Frank and Dean at the diningroom table, then reread the note. With a pleased smirk, she crinkled it up and headed to her bedroom feeling even less guilty than before about wrinkling all of Dean’s clothes.

CHAPTER FIVE

November 6
Beginnings, Montana

Day two. Skill started to play into his thoughts, and Frank knew, in no time at all he would be the master. Determination returned him to the back gate region. Concern for the community's safety played some into the factor, but mostly, boredom with the lack of fall activity was the main reason Frank had to get that bear. That and the fact that it was just something really cool he wanted to do.

Dressed in fatigues he was the perfect soldier or rather, in Frank's eyes, the perfect bait. A little dirt to add that 'been working hard' look. Some blood for the scent of it, and Frank's newest and best touch. He had to break down and get some help from Robbie with it, because Robbie was good in that field. But basically Frank designed the 'catch' of the trap himself.

It couldn't go wrong. Just a Beginnings soldier hanging out in the woods having his breakfast. The bowl rested on his lap, just upon the hair pin trigger underneath. And then from a bag, Frank poured into that bowl over the Beginnings equivalent of a half a stick of dynamite, oatmeal. Frank knew porridge would work much better, but since he hadn't a clue what porridge was, he stuck with hot mushy breakfast food figuring if *he* didn't know the difference, how would a bear.

The only problem with the trap was the face. But Frank did the best he could do with color sticks and a canvass sack, but it lacked that realistic facial look. Then Frank again, thought, it was a bear, he would be clueless. All that bear would smell is that blood and the porridge, get hungry, reach for the bowl and . . . boom.

No more bear. Or at the very least if the bear wasn't dead he would be crippled enough for Frank to easily find. And the best part Frank thought of his brilliant new bear trap, was the fact that he didn't even have to be there. He could go about his business until he himself had time to be the sitting duck. And as it pushed six a.m., Frank had to do just that. Work.

Fixing the stuffed dummy against the tree, porridge bowl perched with him as the hidden ticking time bomb, Frank stood up. He smiled at his creation and the ingenious behind it, then Frank headed to the back gate. He had a good feeling. It wouldn't be long, not long at all, until the grizzly situation was under control.

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New Bowman, Montana

“And you’ve packed enough underwear, Elliott?” Hal stood in Elliott’s bedroom watching his right hand man get ready to go to Beginnings.

“Funny. Want to ask if I have my toothbrush as well.”

“Do you?”

Elliott shook his head and zipped his duffle bag. “I don’t like being away for so long.”

“It’s really not, and the treatments are needed.” Hal explained. “Besides, what will you be missing? Preparations for winter. Nothing big. What you are going to do is big. And that, my friend, requires all of your attention and energy. So lay off my sister.” Hal held up a finger.

“Captain, honestly, even if Ellen and I were intimate partners, I wouldn’t dream of crossing that boundary in Beginnings nor would I do so with her living with her husband again.”

“Elliott. Must you go into such long winded speeches. I was kidding you.”

“Oh.” Elliott exhaled.

“But, while we’re on the subject. I need to ask. What’s going to happen with you and Ellen. I mean, with Dean back in the house.”

Elliott shrugged. “I don’t know. Ellen says she wants to keep what we have going.”

“But you feel funny.”

“In a way. Yes.” Elliott stated. “I wouldn’t feel funny about partaking in a normal ‘understanding’ as they call them in Beginnings, but Dr. Hayes, the male Dr. Hayes, he hates me.”

“And rightfully so.”

“What?” Elliott laughed.

“Kidding. I’m willing to bet Dean won’t give his blessing to make it an official understanding.”

“Absolutely not. No.”

“Would you like my opinion?” Hal asked.

“With a lot of fear behind this answer . . . Yes.”

“O.K., here it is.” Hal paused for a second. “Don’t worry about it. If you want to be close to Ellen, then you allow Ellen to call it. If she wants to continue, you continue. I believe you are a good man, and you deserve some happiness.”

Elliott smiled. “Thank you. That means a lot.” Taking a breath, he

reached for his bag. "Well, I guess this is goodbye for a week."

"Are you kidding? No." Hal said. "I'm going with you. Then, you'll see me all the time."

"Why?"

"Beginnings isn't that far and . . . and mind you I have my issued electric jeep so I can make the trip with little time expended. I want to go and check on you."

Elliott chuckled. "I'll be fine. You don't need to do that."

Very serious, Hal looked at him. "Yes. Yes, I do. Granted I have my family back, but you, Elliott, have been my family and best friend for many, many years. I want to stand by you through this. I worry. So allow me to check up on you like a concerned brother."

"I'd appreciate that."

"Good. And, I'll need some support as well. Aside from my concern for you, I have to be available to go to Beginnings should they need me for this investigation."

"Helping?" Elliott asked.

"No. Suspect. My father unofficially told me I was one of them."

"You?" Elliott seemed shocked. "That's ludicrous. You of all people. I should hope they don't waste their time investigating you."

"Why do you say that?" Hal asked.

"Why wouldn't I? You hardly have means, opportunity or motive."

"I wouldn't exactly say that. Look at the facts. My father gets a call to go to Beginnings. I fail to wake him and go on my own. I attend this meeting. Means? I was in Beginnings. Motive? Well . . ." Hal shrugged. "Look what she did my family. Ellen especially. And I've made no bones about hiding the fact that I defend Ellen. Ask Dr. Hayes."

"All right. I'll give you motive and means. What of opportunity? They say the girl was killed around three a.m.. The fact that the tracking guard can verify your return to New Bowman is alibi enough." Elliott saw Hal shake his head. "No?"

"We had problems with tracking that night. They received signals, not documented time. The guard can say what time I radioed, whether that would be good enough, who's to say. My father, Johnny, they were sleeping when I returned."

"So are you worried."

"Not in the least." Hal stated. "Why should I be? Elliott, there is no rush of madness about this investigation. No outcry of the citizens for resolution. No one cares. And I believe my father and Frank will take their time. There will be no wrongly accused. When the shooter is named, trust

me, they *will* name the actual shooter. No mistakes. And even if I were the one who killed Bev, or even if you were the one. Still, no worries. Because when justice is served, I feel the punishment will match the crime. And what was the crime. 'The elimination of a traitor against our state.' Hal slightly smiled. "When you think about it, it really isn't a crime at all. Is it? Here . . ." He took Elliott's duffle. "I'll carry your bag."

Elliott's head spun, Hal had ended the conversation as quickly as he grabbed that bag and left the room. Before following Hal, Elliott thought for a second about what was said. Hal made a lot of sense but Elliott had to disagree on the punishment issue. He himself had a different way of thinking on it. The reality of it was, the world of Beginnings and New Bowman were worlds of playing favorites. And the severity of the punishment would depend, in Elliott's opinion, not on the crime, but rather on *who* the actual murderer ended up being.

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Joe came to the realization as he stared down at it in his hand, that when it came to a new toy, children would play. No matter how old the child was, even thirty.

Over Joe's shoulder, Danny Hoi spoke with his usual upbeat enthusiasm. "What do you think?" He pointed to the object Joe held. "*That*. Is pretty good quality from a small one."

"Why does containment need one?" Joe asked.

"Robbie and Ellen asked me to pick one up."

"I see. Why?"

"As Ellen put it, since they are dealing with mentally unbalanced individuals, some parts of Containment are clinical. And for clinic files, records of medications given are needed. Joe, do they really medicate these people in here?"

"Some. What about supplies for it?"

"We do the toner. It's a small machine. It won't get used much."

"Really?" Joe said with sarcasm looking down to the copy machine replica in his hand. "So what about this?"

"Ask your son."

"Ask me what?" Robbie asked as he walked into Ellen's office where the machine was. He stopped by his father and looked to the copy he held in his hand. "Cool, huh?"

"Robert, why am I holding a copy machine version of Richie Martin's face?" Joe looked down to the copy. Richie, with a near horrified look.. His

one eye center and wide open. His cheek smashed to the glass, hands next to his face. "An autographed one, none-the-lease."

"Instant photography. Richie wants to be popular so he's handing them out."

"Them? He made more than one?" Joe asked. "It's a piece of office equipment not a toy."

Robbie pointed to Danny. "He said we had to try it out."

"So you stuck Richie's face in there?"

"Richie wanted to do it."

"Really?" Joe questioned then showed Robbie the copy. "Then who's goddamn arm is this holding his head down."

"Danny's."

"No. No." Danny snickered. "I don't have that much hair on my arm."

"Gee, Dad." Robbie looked at the copy. "That *is* a lot of hair."

"You're right." Joe agreed "Asshole Frank. He ought to grow up."

"What?" Frank asked as he walked in.

"Frank." Joe turned to him, waving the photo copy as he did. "For crying out loud. Just because you knew Richie long ago. It's wrong. Wrong to take advantage of him. So knock it off."

"O.K." Frank shrugged. "Hey, what's that?" He took the picture of Richie. "Oh, my God." He started to laugh.

Robbie laughed also. "Isn't that hysterical?"

"I have to show El." Frank rolled it up.

"She will get the . . ." Robbie saw Joe looking at him. "What?" He grunted when he was backhanded in the gut.

"Hal junior." Joe quipped. "Blaming it on your brother. And Frank, why are you here?"

"Not to stand in a crowded office, I tell can you. Bub's here."

"Who?" Joe asked.

"Bub." Frank huffed. "You said it's O.K. to bring him here. The lobotomized savage?"

Danny snuck into the conversation. "There's a savage in containment?"

"Yep." Frank nodded. "But he's missing some of his brain. So he's safe. I think. Then again Dean removed some of his mind when Dean wasn't really in his right mind so . . . hey." Frank tossed his hands up when Danny left. "Where'd he go. Fuckin rude." He moved to the door. "Anyhow, I'm heading back down to my Frank corner of the cryo lab for the investigation."

"Where is Bub?" Joe asked.

"Mingling." Frank said. "He's now the intelligent one of the group. See ya."

Joe shook his head after Frank left. "He's an asshole."

"He's Frank."

"I am." Frank's fading voice called out from the hall.

Still shaking his head, Joe moved to the door. "Robbie, you're sure you're fine with the savage being here."

"Oh, yeah. No problem. I'll buddy him up with Richie."

"Good." He stopped walking. "And Robert. You have to find someone to work here in containment for you. Those hands of yours are needed in mechanics."

"I don't have a problem working mechanics, Dad. But there's no work."

"What do you mean no work. I was up there this morning, there's a stack of requisitions."

"Yep." Robbie nodded. "But bet me they're done. By Henry himself. He's just throwing himself into everything. Not talking to anyone."

"Do you think something is wrong? Maybe something is bothering him." Joe asked.

"Who cares."

"Thank you Mr. Compassion. I'll talk to him."

"I think it's a mistake." Robbie walked over to Ellen's desk. "Let him go. He's not bothering anyone. And most of us are quite happy that Henry is mental now. Hey maybe we can lock him in containment."

Grunting, Joe walked out.

He snickered to himself for a moment, then Robbie grabbed some papers off the desk. He stopped to stare in awe at the new copy machine. Then after laughing in a moment at the envisionment of a screaming Henry being forced to take self portraits in the copy machine, Robbie went to greet his newest resident in containment.

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"Negative." Ellen reported the results. Wearing what appeared to be goggles, she stood beside Dean at the long cryo counter. A clear flat case laid before them and she peered into it.

"Number seven." Dean asked.

"Negative."

"Eight."

Ellen hesitated in answering, she lowered her head to look into the case. "It will be a negative. My guess tomorrow."

"That can't be right. Adjust the magnification on the Hoi vision goggles."

Yesterday it was attached fine.”

After shrugging, Ellen reached up, and turned a dial on the side of her round goggles. “Boy, do I get nauseous when I do that.”

“Try living with auto focus.”

Snickering, Ellen looked at Dean. “That’s funny.”

Dean laughed at her eyes that seemed to bug out in the lenses. “Check that again.”

Ellen did. “Detaching.”

“Shit.” Dean moved closer. “I thought I had something in this batch.” He held such a look of disappointment.

“Dean, don’t be so dejected. It is sort of working.” Ellen lifted her goggles to on top of her head. They made her hair stand straight up.

“Yeah, I know. But . . . I was hoping, as a Christmas present this year that I could tell you we would be moving ahead and making an entire uterus.”

Ellen smiled. “Ah, that is really sweet. Thank you.”

“Premature thinking or hoping I guess.”

“The thought’s there.” She exhaled. “Anyhow . . . the bright side to this failure is, obviously you’re doing something right with number eight. Just go with that. I mean, the embryos are attaching. You have to figure out why they’re aborting and not developing. Maybe because they’re partials.”

“No. I did the calculation for blood flow and such.” Dean shook his head. “Maybe it’s in our procedures.”

“Cloning or implantation?”

“Both perhaps.” Dean shrugged. “I don’t want to say it’s with our gene cloning. Because look at the success we had with the new skin and such. I’m betting the embryos are defective.”

“We can try it again. I mean, now’s the time to do it since we’re working with animals. Once we move on to human embryos our supplies will be short.”

“You’re right. O.K.. How are we fixed for rabbit sperm.”

“Good.” Ellen looked up when the cryo lab door buzzed and Frank walked in. “Hey, Frank.”

“El, lovely look for you.” Frank carried a small box. “I’m gonna be in the back organizing the investigation stuff.”

“O.K.” Ellen nodded then returned to Dean. “But, we need more eggs.”

Frank stopped in his reach to unlock the back door. “That might be impossible.”

A little curious, Dean looked at Frank. “Impossible? What is?”

“Getting eggs. Remember? It was bad this week. Distribution is limiting them. How many did you get this week.”

Dean tried not to laugh. "Frank, We . . ."

"I have about a half a dozen. My Dad has some. Will that help?"

Ellen interjected. "Um, you know what, Frank? That would be great. Thanks." She smiled and returned the thumbs up that he gave her as he walked to the back. Then she looked at Dean who stared at her. "What's wrong?"

"Why did you do that?"

"Telling him what the truth meant Frank questions."

"You have a point."

"I know." She exhaled. "All right. Let me clean this up, then I have to go on to the clinic. Elliott should be here soon and I want to have things ready for his first treatment."

"And I want to explain things to him again."

"I was hoping you would." Ellen pointed backwards. "I'll go get things put away."

"Sounds good." Folding his arms, Dean watched Ellen go to the other backroom, then he walked to the room where Frank was. He stood in the archway for a minute, watching Frank load things on the freezer. "Hey." He knocked on the archway. "How's it going?"

"Good. I'll be situated soon." Frank said. "You'll hardly know I'm here."

"I doubt that. Did you get Bub settled?"

"I dropped him off. He's gonna be the popular guy." Frank moved his last item and stood up straight. "So . . . how's things going with the . . . Margie situation." He raised an eyebrow.

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. Ellen hasn't mentioned her at all. What do you make of it?"

"Jealous." Frank said assuredly. "She has to be."

"I hope this doesn't backfire."

"It won't."

"Frank, don't take this the wrong way. And don't be insulted. But, going by our history, are you sure you aren't telling me to do this just so you can get her back."

"Dean. I'm not doing that shit. Where's it gonna get me. Back with El? For how long?" Frank shook his head. "If I get her back in my life, I want to get her back the right way. On her own. We talked about this. I've done a lot of changing about it. And I want you to believe I mean that." Frank began to unpack a box.

"And, Frank, I want you to believe I meant it when I said, if things work out again with me and Ellen, I will give you the understanding."

From the things he took out of the box, Frank's eyes raised. "I didn't think you were serious about that." He said with some shock. "I knew you were at the time. But I figured once the Bev thing got settled, you would forget about it."

"No." Dean shook his head. "First off, I won't forget how you backed me up and were the only one. Second, like we said before, why fight anymore."

"True. Thanks. If you think about it . . ." Frank returned to pulling items from his box. "We could be happy. No tension. No competing. But, I'm not sure you and I could hash out understanding rules."

"I have a thought on that." Dean said and leaned against the archway. "Tell me what you think."

"Go on."

"No kiss and tell."

"Excuse me."

"O.K.. With every understanding, there are ground rules. You have her this day, I have her that day. I don't want that. Aside from the fact that it will drive us each insane thinking that it's the other's night, there's no need to set rules. I really don't think we need them. She's my wife. But . . . she'll always spend time with you, even without an official understanding. Time, night, it has and always will be that way. I just think, that if we work this out. Our understanding will be different . . ."

"Dean."

"No. Listen. There's no reason that we have to let each other know what we did, what we said. . ."

"Dean." Frank interrupted again.

"Frank, I thought you would like that. What's wrong." Dean watched Frank point and he turned around. Ellen stood there. "El." He grew a little nervous. "Look. I don't want you to think we were . . ."

". . . plotting." Frank interjected. "We weren't. We weren't setting up your life we were . . ."

Dean finished the sentence. "Talking hypothetically. Nothing's taken for granted."

Ellen nodded. "I know. I heard. I'm not mad. I'm leaving. I wanted you to know. Don't be too long, Dean."

"I won't."

With a gentle smile, Ellen stepped away, stopped and returned. "Just so you two know. Things would be different, they really would if *other* things were different."

Frank nodded. "Elliott."

“Yes.” Ellen answered. “And I don’t want you to think I’m with him out of pity. I’m not. It’s just that, Elliott is different and . . .”

“El.” Frank interrupted her. “Look. We know what kind of relationship you have with Elliott. At least I do. And with all that’s happening in his life. Know I’m O.K. with it.”

“Thanks, Frank.” Ellen smiled, looked to Dean then walked away.

Slowly Dean turned to Frank. “You sounded sincere.”

“I was.” Frank said sadly. “I mean, I like the guy. I feel bad about him. He’s got a tough road ahead. And if El can make it easier. Let her. The world’s bad enough as it is without having to die alone.”

“You’re not threatened by Elliott Ryder? You, you of all people aren’t threatened.” Dean found it hard to believe.

“Nope. Not in the least. They aren’t physical, Dean. And if they are, it’s not much. You know.” Frank shrugged. “I’ve talked to El about it. I’ve watched her with him. If you talk to her about Elliott and watch her, you won’t be threatened either by him.”

“Frank, I’m impressed. If you aren’t threatened, then I’m not seeing something.”

“You aren’t. So, speaking of . . . of Elliott.” Frank’s voice grew more sad. “How is he, Dean?”

“As you know he’s coming in for some pretty in-depth treatments. He’ll get really sick.”

Frank slowly, very slowly shook his head.

“But . . .” Dean’s voice lifted and he stood straight. “We’re hopeful.”

“And you should be.”

“Yes. And with reason. The last treatment we had progress. You’ll like hearing this. I think, now I think, mind you, that the last set of treatments could have added another three months on to his life.”

Slowly Frank looked up. He said nothing.

“Frank?”

“Fuck.” Frank snapped.

“What?”

“Fuck!” His hand cut through the air in frustration. “Now this messes everything up.”

“What?” Dean snickered. “I thought you wanted to hear that good news. I thought you liked the . . . Oh . . . oh I get it. It was an act. You are threatened by him.”

“No, I’m not.” Frank defended. “I just didn’t plan on him being long term with El, that’s all.”

It shouldn’t have come as a surprise to Dean, but it did. Too shocked to

say anything in response to Frank's comment, Dean merely smiled, lifted his hand in a wave and walked out.

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"Have a seat." Joe closed his office door and pointed to a chair for Henry.

"Is this official, Joe?"

"Excuse me?" Joe walked around to his desk and sat down.

"Official. Investigation things, you know."

"No." Joe shook his head. "We hope to start questioning and stuff tomorrow. No, Henry . . ." Joe leaned back in the chair. "This is about you."

"What did I do?"

"I everything all right?"

Henry shrugged. "I guess."

"Robbie says you're not the same."

"How does Robbie know." Henry snapped. "I never see him. He doesn't come to mechanics."

"He says he does. There's no work."

"There's lots of work."

Joe lifted his hands. "I told him that. He said that you're doing it all."

"He's lying."

"And is Danny Hoi lying too?" Joe asked. "He said the same thing."

"I guess I've been throwing myself into my work."

"Something on your mind?" Joe questioned. "Henry, I have to be concerned. I am gonna be wrapped up in the investigation, I need to know that you're all right with running things here if need be."

"I am." Henry said. "Andrea has been heavy on my mind, that's all. More than anything else."

"I understand that, I do." Joe said. "But talk to people. Don't shut yourself out."

"I'm not." Henry replied.

"Really? Ellen says you haven't talked to her. In fact I haven't seen you speak to anyone but Hector."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Henry snapped.

"Easy." Joe held up his hand. "I was merely . . ." Static from the radio and a call of his name interrupted Joe. "Hold on." He picked up the radio and pressed in the button. "Yeah, Dean?"

"Joe. You and Frank may want to get down here."

"Why is there a problem?"

"Hard to say. You can determine that. John Matoose has come out of it.

He's awake, alert and talking."

Joe sprang up. "I'm on my way." He hooked the radio to his belt. "Henry, do you mind?"

"No not at all."

"Thanks." Joe walked by him laying a hand on Henry's shoulder. "Just know, you need to talk. I'm here."

Henry nodded. His stares stayed forward and he remained in that chair even after the office door had closed and Joe was gone. He was glad Joe didn't talk to him any further. Henry wasn't in the mood to talk and he knew he would end up doing just that if he stayed in the same room as Joe for every long. Stepping into Joe's office was like stepping into a confessional, no matter how hard Henry tried to withhold information, the guilt factor took over and Henry ended up purging his soul.

^^^

"Any numbness?" Dean asked holding on to John's ankle.

"None." John answered. He cleared his throat. "My throat is sore."

"It will be for a little bit." Dean explained. He looked up to Ellen who was gathering up all the medical equipment that was attached to John. "El, do his vitals again, please. John, if I position you upright, you think you can handle it."

John nodded.

Dean grabbed the control on the bed and placed the bed in a sitting position. "How's that?"

"I'm a little dizzy, but I think I'll be fine."

"El. How's his vitals."

Ellen took the stethoscope from her ears. "Everything is good. Blood pressure normal, pulse normal."

Joe shifted his eyes from Ellen to Dean. "After the surgery I remember the concern. But . . . but you guys have to know. It wasn't being shot that made me like I was. Little by little I was injected."

Dean moved closer to the bed. "So you know who did it to you."

"Yes. I do."

"Who?"

John swallowed. "Dean, I'm scared to say . . ."

"Why is that?" Joe asked when he stepped inside. "Why are you scared to say?"

Around the room, Ellen, Dean Joe and Frank, John glanced. "I'm afraid for Jenny."

Slowly Joe walked to the bed. "John, I promise you nothing will happen to your family. Who injected you."

"Joe." Dean said with a whisper. "Me and El will let you and Frank alone with him."

"You sure?" Joe asked.

"Yeah." Dean replied. "I can finish the medical aspect later. Besides, Hal and Elliott pulled through the front gate a couple minutes ago. We should go. El?"

Ellen nodded and followed Dean out. She stopped in the hall and looked back in. After a glance, she walked on. "I'm glad we got out of there."

"Why is that?"

"I didn't want to hear incase . . . incase he said Andrea did it."

Dean paused in his walking. "I don't think he will El."

Sighing out, Ellen nodded. "Neither do I. But it would just be par for the course in more tarnishing of her . . ." She stopped.

"What's wrong?" Dean asked then noticed where they were.

Ellen stared into Andrea's office. "It feels so funny not waving to her when I walk by. I miss her, Dean."

"I know."

"And you know what? I just realized something."

"What's that?"

"No one got to say goodbye to her."

"El." Dean's voice cracked. "Andrea admitted to . . ."

"Who cares. And you know what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna make sure everyone gets a chance to say goodbye to her. Joe's probably been so busy, that's why he didn't think of it. I'm gonna do it for him."

"Do what?"

"Plan a memorial service for Andrea. A goodbye to a woman people really cared about. Yeah." Ellen smiled. "I'll do that. You'll come right?"

"Ellen, I don't think that's a good idea."

"Then don't come." Ellen flung her hand at him and started to walk away. "Everyone else will anyhow."

Dean looked back into Andrea's office. "Let's hope you're right."

^^^

Silence.

"John." Frank moved closer to his bed. "Tell me. Who injected you."

"It's been happening for a while. Mild at first, you know, making it hard

for me to talk, breath, move. Then I got hit, big time.”

“Who.” Frank asked.

John had a choice. Right then and there he could spill his guts. What good would it do him? He’d have to fear for Jenny’s life and he still didn’t know if anyone else was working for George in Beginnings. And as much as John wanted to blurt out the name of Johnny Slagel. He was in the room with Johnny’s grandfather and father. There would be a certain amount of disbelief. John decided if Johnny Slagel was going to go down, he would go down with everyone watching and without doubt in anyone’s mind. That would be the only right way. “Bev.”

Joe’s eyes closed and he nodded. “Well, you don’t have to fear about her. She’s gone. Dead.”

“So you guys found her out?”

“Nope.” Frank answered. “Someone else did the honors for us. Did you know about her?”

“No.” John answered. “I suspected because of the trouble she was starting, and with who. That’s why I put her on the list that I gave you Joe. But what would the connection be?”

“How about the fact that she was George’s daughter.” Joe told him.

“Oh my God.” Pummeled. John didn’t know.

“John. Do you know of anyone else, that is working for the society?” Joe asked.

“Joe, I swear. If I knew I’d tell you. I don’t want to leave Beginnings. I want to stay. And I want to help bring the society down. I will.”

Pacing a little, Joe stopped. “John, Rev. Bob gave a whole list of names of people who worked for the society and . . .”

“Rev. Bob?” John asked. “How did he find out?”

Frank quickly looked at his father then to John. “You don’t know about Rev. Bob? He was working for George as well.”

“No. No, I didn’t know.”

“What about Andrea.” Joe questioned. “Do you know anything about her?” Joe saw the lost look on John’s face. “John, Andrea was turned in by Rev. Bob as a traitor. She was found guilty in a trial and sentenced to death.”

John’s eyes widened. “Then you have to stop it, Joe. Stop it.”

“It’s too late.” Joe said.

“No.” John grew emotional. “No. A mistake was made. There is no way Andrea I a part of working for the society. No way.”

“Why are you so adamant?” Joe asked.

“Because Joe . . .” John stared down to his hands. “Remember after George escaped. It was after the salicain incident with you, when Frank and

Robbie were in holding.”

“Yes.” Joe said. “What about it.”

“Ellen started her accusing, you know. Well, one day, Andrea pulled me aside. Said she heard Ellen rambling on about it. And Andrea, in her Andrea way. Grabbed hold of my arm, and used that tone only she could use. I still remember the look in her eye. She said, the Christian woman in her is going to believe what ever I say. But, if she ever found out I was helping George, or working for him, she would personally make me suffer like everyone else in Beginnings did.” John looked up. “No, Joe. I believed Andrea. If she was working for George she wouldn’t have been so . . . so serious at that moment and deadly.”

“Do me a favor.” Joe dropped his voice. “What you just told me, it doesn’t leave this room.”

“But, why Joe, you would think . . .”

“Just.” Joe held up his hand. “Just not yet. O.K.?” Joe received an acknowledgment nod from John. “All right then, we’ll . . .” A loud ‘Boom’ in the distance. Shocking and loud vibrated the ground and made Joe jolt. “What in Christ name.” Surprised he looked to Frank when he heard an excited. ‘Yes.’. “Frank?”

Frank smiled. “Oh, yeah. My bear.” He backed up. “I’ll be right back.”

Joe tossed up his hands when Frank darted from the room.

They scurried, Hal and Elliott did at the sound of the explosion. Just when the meeting between them, Dean and Ellen started, the explosion rocked Beginnings. Moving to the lab door they heard Frank’s voice booming down the hall.

“No.” Frank spoke. “No, it’s all right. Stay away from the back gate. There’s no invasion. Trust me.”

“Frank.” Hal raced into the hall. “Is everything all right? Do you need help?”

“No.” Frank spoke as he moved toward the main doors. “I think I got my bear.” He stopped before he flung open the doors. “Oh, and Hal, no beating up Dean.”

Hal let out a huff of disgust then looked to Elliott who laughed. “I’m not living that down, am I?”

“Nope.”

“Shall we?” Hal pointed back in the lab.

Elliott only nodded.

Dean stood with Ellen at the counter waiting on the pair. “If we can get

started again.”

Hal shut the lab door then followed Elliott to the counter where they sat down. “Sorry, Dr. Hayes.”

“I understand.” Dean said. “It’s an inbred Slagel reaction to jump at the sound of danger.” He shifted his eyes to Ellen. “All right. We might as well start.” He waited for Ellen to sit, then he too took a seat. “The reason I wanted to have this little discussion before hand is because I wanted to make sure you understood everything, Elliott.”

“I think I do.” Elliott responded.

“Do you?” Dean asked. “Let me just go over it again. The treatments we gave you before worked. But there is a lot of the sickness that still remains and grows in your body. If I were talking percentages, realistically, and cold, I would tell you we only conquered two percent of the battle. But . . . analogically speaking, let’s say the treatment we used prior was a hand gun, old fashion, and the cancer was a platoon. We shot at it and did the best we could with the limited firepower and ammunition we had. Now . . .” Dean let out a breath. “What we want to do, and using the same analogy, is go after the platoon again, but this time, instead of a handgun, we’re using . . .” He shrugged. “Napalm..”

“Will this be normal procedure, this strength?” Elliott asked.

Dean shook his head. “This is a special sequence of procedures. We want to hit it hard, then we can go into a less severe means of fighting it. Normal treatments. We need, Elliott, we need to gain some ground with you. We found it so late in, we want to give ourselves a fighting chance. If we would stay on route with the lesser treatments without doing this, we couldn’t gain. Understand? For every step we knock it back, in a short period of time it will gain two. With this series of treatments, we hope to knock the malignancy back a good twenty steps.”

Elliott nodded. “I see. So, if this series is so powerful, and you feel it can be beneficial, why not keep doing it until we get the malignancy under control.”

Dean looked at Ellen then back to Elliott. “We prefer not to do that. See, remember when we did the last series. You experience some illness. Nothing major. Slight nausea, cramping, headache. And such. Well, we expect you do get much more ill.”

Elliott tossed his hands up. “I can handle it.”

“Very ill.” Dean explained. “At least for the first three days, then it will subside and by the end of the treatments you should take them without any, or minimal side effects. At least side effects you can deal with.”

“Three days.” Elliott spoke. “I can handle three days of illness.”

“Yes.” Dean said. “I know you can. But we prefer to stick with our course of action.”

More than Dean’s words, Ellen’s silence sent warnings to Hal. “My God.” He gasped out. “It could kill him.”

Elliott snickered at what he thought was Hal’s overreaction. “He didn’t say that.”

“He doesn’t need to.” Hal stated, looked at Dean’s who’s head was slightly down. “It can kill you, that’s why you don’t want to repeat this treatment over and over.”

Dean let out a breath. “The severity of the side effects may be a lot for Elliott’s body to handle if done repetitively.”

“So you’re saying . . .” Hal wanted to be clear. “You’re saying, one time is fine. He’ll be fine with these one time, napalm style treatments.”

“We believe Elliott should be fine with . . .”

“You believe?” Hal interrupted. “You don’t know?”

“Hal.” Dean stated. “The best that I can tell you is . . .”

“The best?” Hal stood up. “You *believe*? Excuse me, Dr. Hayes but this is bullshit. You *believe* the treatments won’t kill him. The *best* that you can tell me is what? You want to take a shot in the dark, hit him hard and hope that the treatments don’t kill him before the illness does?”

Dean’s jaw moved with the motions that raged inside. “Look.” He stood up. “And don’t interrupt me. All right? Here’s the truth. Yes, the treatments may kill him. May. But the illness definitely will if we don’t do something about it. I don’t want to just control this illness like in the old world, I want to beat it. Beat it, Hal. And there is a good chance we can. But this has to be done.”

Before Hal could say anything, Ellen interjected. “Hal, listen to me.” She spoke softly. “I know you’re concerned for Elliott. But believe me when I tell you, so am I. And trust me.” She closed her eyes. “I would not do anything, I would not support any treatment that I thought would hurt Elliott. I wouldn’t. Dean is confident that this treatment will be safe. I trust him. I’m asking you to do the same.”

Slowly Hal nodded and sat back down. “What about long term effects of these normal treatments. How will they take their toll on him.”

Wanting to roll his eyes at Hal sounding so much like Joe, Dean didn’t. “Chancing a Hal backlash on my choice of wording, I’ll answer you. We hope . . .” Dean held up his hand. “We hope, any side effects will be minimal. And they shouldn’t have bearing on his normal activity.”

Hal listened, and had more to ask. “What about . . .”

“Captain.” Elliott interrupted. “Why are you asking all these questions.”

“Because you’re not.” Hal told him. “You’re just nodding, saying, ‘OK do what you want with me’ without any regard to the consequences that go along with it. They’ve never done this before.”

“And that . . .” Elliott stated. “Is the reason for my lack of questioning.”

“Excuse me?” Hal asked.

“They’ve never done this.” Elliott said. “I am the first to experience this sort of illness. But I assure you I will not be the last. If I fail to agree to everything they want to try, then I am failing the next person that falls victim to this sicknesses. So what if I get sick for three days. And so what if the long term effects leave me debilitated. It’s not what I want, it’s what I have to do. In a way, isn’t it my obligation? If my life is extended, yet the quality is gone, then so be it. Though I myself would choose quality of life. I must do this with an open mind and with all willingness, because the next person just may choose quantity. I’m asking you to say no more about this. Just stand beside me in this fight, like you have in all the others.”

Dean probably didn’t realize he did it, but his eyes rolled when Ellen eluded a soft gasping ‘ah’. He looked at Hal, who slowly stood.

Hal opened his mouth, shut it, then opened it again. “I hate when you do that. Make those Elliott speeches. Christ.” He shook his head. “All right. I’ll say nothing. But don’t bitch to me later. Got that?”

Elliott nodded. “Yes, Captain.”

Dean stood and extended his hand to Elliott. “Thank you for your support on this.” After a firm shake Dean stepped back. “El and I will go finish getting everything ready. Ellen?”

Ellen laid her hand on Elliott’s arm. “We’ll do this. We will.” She smiled then joined Dean.

Walking across the lab, Dean stopped at the door and looked back. “I know you’re nervous. And if it makes you feel any better, you’re not alone. So are we.”

Elliott’s mouth dropped opened when Dean and Ellen left.

A look of ornery crossed Hal’s face. “Well, Elliott. They’re nervous too. Does that . . . does that make you feel better.”

Slowly Elliott’s eyes shifted to Hal. “Absolutely not.”

^^^

“Fuck.” Hands on hips, Frank stood in the back gate region staring at the massacre that remained. He side stepped out of the way from the piece of intestine that dripped his way from one of the remaining trees.

Disgusted, Joe’s voice came closer. “Oh. Oh, you’d better have a goddamn good reason for this mess.” He scolded when he made it do Frank

with Robbie.

High-pitched and hyena style was the laugh then emanated from Robbie. "Oh, my God." He looked around.

"This isn't funny." Joe yelled.

"Yeah, it is. Shit." Robbie laughed. "Watch out, Dad."

Plop.

"Son of a bitch bastard." Joe swiped the glob of flesh from his shoulder. "Frank." He grumbled and peered around. "What in Christ's name?"

Factual and calm, Frank stated. "Bear hunting."

"Bear hunting? Bear hunting?"

Frank's eyes shifted. "Um . . . yeah. It means I was trying to hunt a bear."

"I know what it mean, you idiot!" Joe blasted. "You didn't get it!"

Frank cleared his throat. "With all respect Dad. Look at the destruction. We have yet to determine that I didn't get the bear."

"You didn't." Joe said.

"We can't be sure. Not without proof."

"How's this." Joe bent down. "Here's the goddamn antlers." He whacked Frank with it. "You blew up half the damn back gate region to kill a deer!" He threw the antler.

"O.K." Frank held up his hand. "Maybe it was a bit much."

"A bit much?" Joe growled. "Robert." He scolded at Robbie's laughing. "Knock it off. And . . . explosives are your baby. Did you help."

"He asked." Robbie defended. "I told him how to do it. That's all."

"Who calculated the explosives needed?" Joe asked.

Without hesitation, Frank answered. "I did."

"Did you add instead of subtract again?" Joe asked so parent like.

"No. I calculated it this big on purpose. Please. It's basic math." Frank scoffed.

"And you needed to blow a twenty foot hole in Beginnings?" Joe questioned further.

"Yeah." Frank answered. "It's a big bear. Dad, sorry anything smaller wouldn't have killed an eighty-seven foot bear."

"Eighty-seven foot bear!" Joe blasted. "Robert, quit laughing."

Robbie stopped snickering. "Wow, Frank, that's a big bear."

"Yeah. I told you." Frank nodded.

"Frank." Joe rubbed his eyes. "Who told you it was an eighty-seven foot bear."

"You."

"Me?" Joe shook his head. "No. I believe I said twenty-foot."

“Yeah, but it’s fourteen times bigger than me.”

“Frank . . .” Irritated, Joe tried to talk.

“Dean did the math.”

“Frank . . .”

“Man, for a scientist, he sucks.”

“Knock it off!” Joe screamed.

“Hey!” Loudly, Frank blasted back. “Don’t yell at me! I’m trying to protect the fuckin community. That’s my job.”

“To defend against an eighty-seven foot bear?” Joe asked snidely.

“No.” Frank shook his head. “Dean screwed up. Twenty-foot.” He bobbed his head from side to side. “Come to think of it, that sounds more realistic. Twenty-feet. Doesn’t it, Robbie?”

“Yeah.” Robbie nodded. “I’m mean, eighty-seven feet would make it bigger than King Kong.”

“Man.” Frank gave a twitch to his head. “Would that be a fuckin blast or what?”

“Frank.” Joe snapped. “Listen to me. There is no bear.”

“Yeah there is.”

“No, Frank there isn’t.”

“But, Dad you said.”

“Yeah, Dad.” Robbie interjected. “You said.”

“I said there was a bear because . . .” Joe stopped to think and then he remembered why he told Frank that. And with that memory came the revelation, that Frank had spent his free time chasing the grizzly instead of the mystery man. With a quick look to Robbie, he glanced back at Frank who waited for an answer. “I said there was a bear because there was.”

“I knew it.” Frank threw his hands up. “So why did you say there wasn’t.”

“Well, Frank.” Joe shrugged. “Let the truth be known, I like Hal and he wants that bear.”

“Fuck Dad.” Frank shook his head. “Now is not the time to be playing favorites. Hal sucks. It’s my bear.”

“And . . . and you catch that bear, Frank.” Joe backed up.”Just don’t blow anything else up. I’m heading back in. And Robbie, help your brother clean up this mess.”

“I didn’t do it.” Robbie complained.

“You don’t think?” Joe said as he walked backwards. “More than you think, you’re responsible.”

Frank watched his father leave. “What’s he mean by that.”

Robbie shrugged. “Who knows. He’s getting old. Anyhow . . .” he turned

around. "Man., look at the mess."

"Yeah. But, you have to admit. It was a good trap. And it worked."

"That it did." Robbie grinned as he took in the mess. "Hey, Frank we should do this more often just for the hell of it."

"Yeah, but we really need a reason."

Robbie bent down and lifted the antlers. "Deer control."

Frank smiled as he took them. "Oh, yeah. Fuckin apocalypse will make us into real hunters yet."

^^^

A part of Johnny felt guilty for taking advantage of his grandfather as he did. But war was war. He needed to get in touch with George. It didn't take much to get the key that unlocked the phone. All Johnny had to do was fake drunk, crash at his grandfather's and steal the keys. They were out in the open, why would his grandfather hide them from his own family. And Johnny did just that. But his middle of the night attempt to call George was thwarted by a guard who was hanging out by the office. Knowing that having the keys would be a bonus, Johnny snuck into Mechanics and made copies. Then he'd have them, at anytime, to get that phone.

Empty.

Joe's office was empty when Johnny walked in. He knew there was some commotion at the back gate and he wanted to seize the opportunity. No sooner did Johnny pull out the key, he heard the door knob turning, and Johnny flew to the back examining room. Behind that door he waited until he heard the office door shut and a single cough come from his grandfather. Then he emerged. "Hey Pap."

Joe jolted just a little. "Oh, hi, John. What's up?"

"Thought we had some extra slides. You know, but none are up here."

Joe sank into his chair. "Glass division not keeping up?"

"Not really."

"I'll get on them."

"Thanks." Johnny moved to the door and stopped. "Pap. You all right?"

"Um . . ." Joe's words drew out. "Yeah. Yeah. I'm fine. A run in with your father. Christ does he aggravate me."

Johnny snickered. "That's Dad. And now he lives with you. Pap? Why is that?"

"Oh. I worry about him. And, well, since you're part of the investigation team . . . I can tell you. But you say nothing, hear?"

"I won't." Johnny held up his hand.

“Jason and I rigged up the time machine and sent your father through to watch Bev’s house the night of her murder. And, I think, think mind you, that he saw who it was.”

“My father knows who killed Bev? Why are we investigating?”

“Because he won’t say. He says he didn’t see. But, if you would have seen his demeanor.”

“So he’s protecting whoever it is.”

“May be.”

Johnny nodded. “He may act all right now. But eventually it will eat at hm.”

“Yep. And I’m afraid of that. We know you’re father. So, I want to watch him. Plus, with all that’s happened with Andrea, I can use the company.”

“He certainly is a diversion.”

“He certainly is.”

“I’m heading out. Take it easy, Pap.”

“I will.” Joe smiled and lifted a hand in a wave to Johnny.

Stepping from the office, Johnny pulled the door closed and paused on the little step. He may not have gained access to that phone, but he gained knowledge he really needed. If he thought he had an edge in finding Bev’s killer by working on the investigation, he discovered even more of an edge. The key to the shooter was his father. And even though Johnny had distanced himself from his dad and hated him, it was time to get close again to him. Be that friend, that confidant his father really needed. Johnny figured he could lay it on thick, more so with Frank than with any one else. Frank would never know. In Johnny’s mind, his father was too much of an imbecile to even suspect what Johnny was up to.

CHAPTER SIX

Her fragile little chest still sported the bandage of the injury she received from the savages. Hal pulled the covers just up to that bandage, then tucked them in tight around Alexandra.

She giggled. "Silly. It's not bedtime yet."

"I hear . . ." Hal sat on the bed. "That it is constant bed time for you for a while."

"I'm glad to be out of the hospital."

"And we're glad you're out. You have to get better so you can come visit me for a weekend."

"I'd like that Uncle Hal." Alexandra smiled. "Are you staying tonight?"

"No. I have to get back. In fact . . ." He looked at his watch. "I should be going now."

"Can you stay for just a little more? Please?"

"Hold on." Hal stood up, walked to her door and peered out. He saw Dean and Ellen's bedroom door was closed. "Yes. Yes I can. I don't want to leave without saying goodbye to Mommy and Daddy's other patient."

"I feel funny about this." Elliott said with some weakness. He stood in Ellen and Dean's bedroom by the bed.

"Nonsense." Ellen told him as she placed an intravenous pole in the corner of the room. "We need you comfortable. This is much better than the clinic."

"But this is your house. I don't want to put you out. You and your husband . . ."

"Elliott." Ellen walked to him. "Are you feeling funny putting me out, or are you feeling funny about me and Dean?" She asked. "If it makes you feel any better, we won't be having sex in the next room."

Elliott's mouth dropped open.

"That's what I wanted to hear. Thanks." Dean said as he emerged from the bathroom.

Ellen shook her head with a smile. "If you must know, Elliott, This is all Dean's idea to have you stay here. So don't feel funny, all right."

Dean nodded. "It was. She's not lying."

"And I'm glad." Ellen continued. "I want to be here for you. I need to be. So let me."

"Thank you." Elliott said.

Dean cleared his throat in the moment of silence. "O.K. Elliott, I put the meds on the sink, However . . ." He laid a bottle down on the night stand with a glass of water. "This should help you rest. Take this first. I need you sleeping. Before you do, are you hungry at all. You haven't eaten."

"No." Elliott shook his head. "My stomach is starting to feel bad. I'd rather not."

"Understandable." Dean said.

Ellen reached up and touched Elliott's neck. "You're getting warm. How about getting to bed."

"That might not be a bad idea." Elliott agreed.

"Good." Ellen reached for the covers and pulled them down. "Why don't you get undressed, and I'll help you in bed." She walked around to the dresser and the stack of clothes that laid there. She searched out night clothes for Elliott. Carrying them to him, she stopped when she saw Elliott just standing there. "Something wrong?"

Elliott reached out and took the shorts and tee shirt Ellen held. "I can do this, thanks."

"Elliott, you have that shunt in your arm." Ellen explained. "I need to make sure it's fine after you get changed."

"I still can manage."

"I know you can but . . ." Ellen moved to him. "You have this long sleeve shirt rolled up. But it has to come off. I don't want you pulling out the shunt when you do it. Now . . ." She reached her hands up for his buttons. "I just . . ."

"Ellen." Elliott grabbed her hand. He had a sense of gentle firmness to it. "Really. I will do it."

Dean swiped his finger over his top lip to cover the snicker. "You know what, El? Why don't I take care of the shunt, you go check on Alex. Would that be all right Elliott."

The exhale he let out was minimal but still there. "Yes."

"Good." Dean walked to Ellen and took hold of her arm. "Come on, El." He tugged and her eyes stayed on Elliott. "El?"

"All right." She gave one more look to Elliott. "If you need me . . ."

"Yes." Elliott smiled.

Dean led Ellen to the door. "I'll be right back, Elliott." He opened it and stepped into the hall with her.

"Dean, did I do something wrong in there? Did I say something to offend him?"

"Nope." Dean shook his head with a smile. "He just . . . plain and simple, doesn't want to undress in front of you, El." He gave a light tap of a

Druga-Johnston/The Aragon Window

pat to her cheek. "Imagine that. I'll be right out."

Dean slipped into the bedroom, and with a sense of feeling left out, and a little baffled, Ellen just stood there.



John Matoose knew by the late night walking down the corridor, it wasn't Melissa, Patrick or Glen. The footsteps moved slow, almost taunting as they neared his room. Sleep wasn't on John's agenda, to him, he had spent the last month of his life in a forced rest. So he heard the person coming, and John placed down the book he was reading seconds before he appeared in the door.

Johnny stepped in. "John." He said snidely.

"Kind of late for children to be up, isn't it?"

"You're funny. Good to see your sense of humor is still up." Johnny said as he walked to the bed.

"I'm gonna take the late night visit as one you're trying to hide."

"Not really. Melissa saw me. I said I was doing catch up for Dr. Dean, you know." He shrugged. "And I wanted to see how you were doing. I hear you're getting out tomorrow."

"But not to work. Dean said my legs aren't strong enough. Can't run your dirty work for you Johnny. Not yet."

"Not yet." Johnny sat on the side of the bed. "Communications are down, so anything we do. Notice how I said, 'we' John. Anything we do is gonna have to be through my idea."

"Didn't think you had any power Johnny. I mean, who are you? No body. Just a flunky who knows some of Dean's work, and a snide little boy who turned his back on his family."

Johnny shook his head. "Can't rattle me. I don't rattle. I'm not a flunky. And, just so you know, I only turned my back on my father."

"Turning your back on the community is turning your back on your family, no matter how you look at it." John told him.

"I'm helping the community. Have to. We need this place. We, as in the society. First order of business, on behalf of the man who has been like a father to me, I will find out who killed Bev. And I will, by way of you, get them. Then, I start with the other plans. See, George always knows communications can be shut down. He's thought of a contingency plan and routes I must take. But I can't do anything alone. It's a bit much. Along with the fact it's risky for me."

"And that's where I come in."

“Exactly.” Johnny smiled. “And for the sake of Jenny, you’re gonna help me John, aren’t you?”

“For the sake of Jenny, I will help you.” John stared at Johnny as he conveyed his words, but the meaning of them in his mind was different. Yes, he was going to help Johnny. But unknown to Johnny, John was going to help hang him. And as a payback to all the wrong he had done to Beginnings, John was going to be the one to personally end, what he believed, the final inside connection in Beginnings to the society.

^^^

Josh’s room. It was, at least for the week, Dean and Ellen’s room. The twin beds in there worked out perfect for them in there ‘still working it out’ stage of the marriage. And Josh had cleaned it up tolerable enough for them to be in there.

“Dean?” Ellen asked as she laid on the bed working on something.

Dean, reading, only mumbled a ‘hmm’.

“Check this out. I washed these sheets.” Ellen put her face to the pillow and sniffed. “But they still smell like Frank.”

Dean looked up. “Ellen, he could leave behind a hair and you’d still be able to follow his scent.”

“Funny.” She looked down to her puzzle. “Dean?”

“What?”

“Am I taking first shift with Elliott or second?”

“Why are you asking me this now?”

“Well, it’s late. You’re still up. I figured it . . .”

“I’m working on something.” Dean interrupted. “That’s why I’m up.”

“Reading.”

“Working.”

“Whatever. Anyhow, If I have first shift, I want to get up, so I should go to sleep.”

“You have first shift.” Dean told her and turned the page.

“You’re just telling me that so I can go to sleep.”

“Ellen.” He had a bit of firmness to his voice. “I’m . . .”

“Working. I know.” She held up her hand and lifted a pencil. “Gee, these Jenny crossword puzzles are tough. Dean? What’s a three letter word for awesome being and high power.”

“God.”

“No.” She shook her head. “That can’t be right. It starts with an ‘H’. Oh!” She giggled. “I know. Hal.”

"Hal?" Dean rolled his eyes.

"Jenny puzzle Dean, of course it would be . . ." Ellen's head lifted at the slight 'thump'. "Did you hear that?"

"Yeah." Dean put down the book.

"Elliott." Ellen swung her legs over the bed. "I'll check on him." She hurried from the bedroom and turned left into hers. After a single knock on the door she opened it and walked in. The bed was empty. "Elliott?" She called out, then headed to the bathroom. She froze upon entrance in there when she saw Elliott on the floor reaching for the commode. "Oh, my God."

"Ellen, don't . . ."

"Dean!" Ellen cried out as she braced under his arms. His body burned to the touch, his skin pale. Trying to lift him, Ellen saw the blood on the toilet seat and the blood that trailed from his mouth. "Dean!"

"El." Dean flew in. "Shit." He hurried to Elliott who tried to lift himself. "Elliott, what happened?"

"Room's . . spin . . . Spinning." His eyes rolled some.

"Dean." Ellen tried to hold him up, but it seemed as if Elliott fought her. "He's throwing up blood. What's happening?"

"Ellen, I told you this could be a side effect." Dean reached to help.

"Dr. Hayes." Elliott spoke weak, his eyes barely staying put as he looked to Dean. "With all . . . with all due respect. Could you . . . could you have your wife . . . leave." A painful grunt came from Elliott and he flung himself to the commode with all his strength. His body jolted and shook.

"Elliott." Ellen leaned with worry.

"El, come on." Dean pulled her. "I'll handle it."

"But I . . ."

"El." Dean led her to the door. "He wants you to leave, O.K.? I'll handle it."

"Dean . . ." Before Ellen could say anymore the bathroom door shut. In her worry and frustration, she swung out her hand, hit it against the wooden door, and dropped her head.

^^^

Hours.

Time had flown by, and Dean had made two trips to the clinic for more medical supplies. Each time entering the house and telling Ellen 'this should do it', and then Dean would slip, with the door barely open, into the bedroom with Elliott. Hours and all Ellen could do was wait in the hall, listen for voices and pace. Because despite how much she wanted to be in there

helping, Elliott, just as much, insisted she not.

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There was nothing more that Frank wanted to do than blame his middle of the night, tossing and turning on a dream. He would have loved to do that. But Frank didn't dream. How could he, he hadn't even fallen asleep.

He knew what it was that kept him up. The same thing that caused each toss of his body to grow more violent. An urge. Overwhelming, and consuming, the urge hit him. He felt the tremble in his hands, the numbness of his fingertips, and the swarming of his head in confusion. The urge.

Frank wanted a drink.

He was stronger than the urge, and bound and determined to make it through the night without breaking. How much he wanted to punish himself for taking that drink two nights earlier. So consumed with thinking the alcohol would help, he was blinded by the damage it was doing to him.

The den turned bedroom grew smaller and smaller. The tiny window was frozen shut and airflow into the room was nil. Every minute that passed Frank felt as if he were suffocating. But in actually Frank was drowning. Drowning in the desire to purge into a weakness he had given up.

Passing the point of frustration, Frank flung off the covers and swung his legs with a vengeance from the bed to the floor. He stood up, wearing only his boxers. He walked out of the den.

When he should have been cold, he wasn't. Body burning, a thin line of sweat forming on his neck, Frank walked to the kitchen and took in the coolness of the linoleum against the soles of his bare feet. He made it to the sink and turned on the faucet. His hand trembled so badly he couldn't even grab a glass.

Gripping the edge of the sink in desperation, Frank's head dropped. And he did something he rarely did. He prayed. He asked for strength, or something to get him through. Hands clinging with life to the metal of the sink, Frank raised his eyes to the window and got his answer.

Across the short distance from his father's house to the next. Window to kitchen window, he saw her. Ellen.

She too, at that moment, was standing at her sink. Did she see him. Both windows so similar, both had the night light lit. Just as he raised his hand in hopes that she'd spot him, Ellen did.

A surprise look graced her face and she waved, then held up a finger.

He tilted his head in wonder and watched Ellen disappear. Before he

could question, he heard the distant sound of a door creaking, and Frank walked to his own front door and opened it. Stepping out on to the porch he saw Ellen, in only a tee shirt, making her way across the frost covered grass. “El?”

“Hey.” She hurried. “Ouch. My feet are cold.”

“Get in here.” He stepped inside with her. “What are doing?”

“Oh, Frank.” She exhaled. “I’m cold.”

“It’s freezing out there. Wait.” His room wasn’t far from the livingroom, in reality only a few steps. He raced in and came back out with a blanket wrapping it around her shoulders. “Better.”

Ellen nodded. “Much.”

“What are you doing? Why did you come over?”

“I had to. Without a question, without doubt, I had to.”

A half smile hit Frank’s face. “Why?”

“I was standing at the sink, feeling so lost, just needing some sort of sign that everything is going to be all right. I looked up and I saw you. And I knew, I knew I had to come over here. That’s what I’m supposed to do.”

“El, what’s wrong?” Frank led her to the couch to sit.

“Elliott.” Ellen sat down. “Elliott is really bad, Frank. Really bad.” She closed her eyes. “I’m so scared that Dean and I pushed this too far. That we screwed something up.”

“No.” Frank shook his head as he brought himself to his knees. “I don’t know what’s going on over there, but I do know Dean. Dean wouldn’t do something that he wasn’t sure of. To rabbits maybe . . .”

Ellen slightly smiled. “Maybe. I don’t know. It could be the fact that I just don’t know. I’m in the dark.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, Dean’s handling Elliott. I don’t know if his fever broke. If he’s still throwing up. I don’t know. I can’t go in the bedroom.”

“Dean won’t let you in there?”

Ellen shook her head. “No, Elliott won’t.” She looked at Frank, so close. “Why? Why won’t he let me?”

“I don’t know. I can’t answer for Elliott. Maybe’s he’s vain and he doesn’t want you to see him look bad.”

“Frank.” Ellen gasped.

“I don’t know. Maybe . . . maybe, El, he just doesn’t want you to see him like that.”

“That’s stupid.”

“And so is the code of fuckin honor for the UWA. And what’s he? A UWA soldier.” Frank held out his hand. “There you have it.”

Ellen swiped his hand away, but before she could bring her hand back, Frank grabbed it. "Frank? I really think I was supposed to come here tonight. I was getting so upset just pacing and not knowing what to do. You really were my sign."

"You were mine too."

"What do you mean?" Ellen asked with a slight smile.

"Nothing." Frank shook his head. "You know what? I want coffee. Want some?" He started to get up.

Ellen, still holding his hand, tugged on him. "Frank. Stop. What's going on?"

"I'm making coffee."

"No. You said I was your sign. Why were you looking for a sign?"

"O.K. if you must know. I'm getting frustrated by the bear. That's all."

Ellen let go of his hand. "Fine. Don't tell me."

Frank started to walk away, but stopped. He turned around.

As soon as Ellen saw him, she knew it was something. It seemed as if gravity took hold of every muscle on Frank's face and pulled. "Frank? What is it?" She asked softly.

"You were my sign." His head slowly shook back and forth and he walked back over to Ellen. "I needed strength."

"For?"

After the long deep nostril breath he took, Frank dropped back down to his knees. He grabbed hold of Ellen's hands and cupped them. "I wanted a drink." He raised his eyes to meet hers. "And chancing you getting mad, changing you being disappointed in me I . . . two nights ago, I had a drink." Frank moved about their joined hands as he spoke. "And I didn't want to drink tonight. I swear El, I didn't want to drink. And I needed something, anything to tell me I would pull through without breaking. And like you, I looked up to the window, and you were there. So . . ." He laid her hands back down. "Ask me. Ask me why I drank. Why I wanted a drink. Ask me why I'm so weak."

"No." Ellen shook her head. "How about I ask you what I can do to help?"

Frank's eyes closed and he moved into her. His hand cupped the back of her head and he brought his mouth to her ear. "More than you know, you're doing it. Right now, you just being here is doing it."

She felt it in his breaths, heard it in Frank's voice and knew it through his touch. "Frank. Why didn't you come to me. You should have come to me anytime you felt you needed help."

Like the topic they discussed, their words were hush-hush. Huddled

close, lips to ears, they whispered.

“El, I was embarrassed.”

“With me? Frank? We’re different you and I. There’s nothing I can’t do in front of you and there’s nothing you can’t do in front of me. And that includes breaking.”

“I know this.”

“Then know this. I’ve loved you for a lifetime. I won’t stop. Nothing will make me stop. I’m here.”

“And I’m glad.” His hands clenched hers. “Because I wouldn’t have made it through this night. I wouldn’t have.”

Slightly, Ellen pulled back and looked at him. “So, when I walk out that door, you’ll be fine.”

“Yeah.” Eyes half closed, Frank nodded. “I think I will be.”

“What if I don’t leave?”

Frank hesitated before answering. He saw how close they were. “Then I know I will be.” Invitation wasn’t given, nor permission granted, but it felt right. It had been so long since Frank had done so, that he really didn’t think about it. Not too much. Slow, almost too slow, he lowered his lips to Ellen’s.

A part. A touch. A slight whimper of arriving and then, softly, Frank and Ellen kissed.

Joe had heard the whispers. For as much as people thought they were quiet. In the silence of a quiet house, whispering voices not only carried but awoke those who were just about due for a middle of the night cigarette. Wearing his favorite pajamas, Joe grumbled in his soft footsteps to the living. He stopped when he walked in. What the moment would typically call for was a ‘Joe-style’ intrusion. Possibly a crass ‘Jesus Christ’ at his son and Ellen kissing. Her sitting, him kneeling, both half dressed. Even a ‘this better not get obscene’ would have been amusing. But Joe couldn’t bring himself to speak. There was something so innocent about the interlude in the livingroom, that all Joe could do was walk back to his room.

CHAPTER SEVEN

November 7

Certain smells always graced a household at certain times of a day, especially in the morning. Joe knew that, and since he had rarely lived alone, he grew to know the normal scents that occurred with each roommate. When Andrea was in the house, though Joe always left the home first, Andrea was the first one up, even if it was to just help Joe get his day started then go back to bed. There was the smell of coffee, and something edible, toast, or a sweet roll that maybe Andrea had made the night before. The recent living with Frank brought scents that were blunt like him. Soap from his shower, and old coffee. Robbie was a different story. There were no smells with Robbie. No coffee, no shower, nothing. Because no matter how late Joe slept in, Robbie slept in too. Despite the alarm clock blaring, Frank's continuous yelling over the radio, Joe had to keep calling and calling him, increasing each yell of Robbie's name with intensity until he finally, like a ten year old, staggered from bed.

Joe's thoughts of morning smells stemmed from the oddity of the scent he took in that morning. Breakfast. It smelled fresh, warm, and it shouldn't have been happening considering Joe lived with Frank and Frank was out of the house before Joe was even up.

He moved slow down the hall and into the livingroom. The view of the diningroom table was the first thing he saw, and Ellen who sat there. A plate before her. "Ellen."

"Morning, Joe." Ellen smiled. "Coffee's all ready for you." She pointed to a cup at his seat. "Ashtray and An the Hoi Times paper, too."

"Thanks." Joe pulled out the chair. "What . . ."

"Morning, Dad." Frank walked in and laid a plate down for Joe.

"What are you doing home, Frank. Aren't you working?" Joe asked.

"Yeah. But Dan's covering for a little while. I wanted to have breakfast with Ellen."

"I see." Joe took a sip of his coffee, set it down, then lit up a cigarette. "Arriving early, Ellen, or staying late?"

Ellen snickered. "Staying late. And . . . I have to go." She finished her coffee. "Joe, I know Denny and Katie come home today. I'll be next door all day with Alex and Elliott. If you need me." She kissed him on the cheek.

"Tell Elliott my prayers are with him." Joe said.

"I will." She stepped back. "I have to go."

Frank moved with her. "I'll walk you to the door."

Joe rolled his eyes. "Christ it's three feet away."

Waving his father off, Frank stopped at the door with Ellen. "I . . . I want to thank you for last night."

Bringing his mug to his lips, Joe stopped.

Ellen smiled. "I should thank you too."

"It was just what I needed." Frank kept his voice low.

"Me, too."

Joe shook his head and sipped.

"I won't forget what you did. More than you realize it meant a lot. Especially knowing I can come to you when I reach that point of . . . of . . ." He dropped his voice to a whisper. "Frustration."

Almost ready to drink more coffee, Joe stopped again.

"Frank." Ellen said softly. "Just know, any time you reach that point you can come to me, day or night. And if takes a repeat of last night. We'll do it."

"I know it didn't seem it, but I had a blast last night."

"I knew you liked it, despite how much you griped."

A crinkle of oddity hit Joe's face.

"El, I was terrible."

Joe's eyes widened.

"You were fine. How long has it been?"

"A long time."

Sipping his coffee, and thinking 'true' Joe tilted his head with a nod.

Frank smiled at Ellen. "You didn't lose your touch."

"I'm the queen. Besides, you shined the last round, did you not?"

"Yeah, but that was after five times at not doing well."

Joe mouthed the word 'six' in question.

"I really have to get over there." Ellen reached for the door. "Thanks again. And . . . If on your break you feel like stopping to see me at the house, we can have a short repeat. Maybe even pull Elliott into it to help take his mind off of things."

Joe's mouth dropped open in disgust.

"Is he any good?" Frank asked.

"I don't know." Ellen answered. "Does it make a difference."

"Yeah. I don't want you two double teaming me and then I feel . . ."

Joe's mug of coffee slammed on the table. "Will you two knock it off! Ellen, go home."

"I'm going." She hurried and kissed Frank on the cheek. "But make sure if you do stop by for another challenge, you pick up your board. Our Scrabble missing some letters."

“Got it.” Frank opened the door and watched her leave. He turned around to see Joe staring. “What?”

“Scrabble?” Joe asked. “You were talking about scrabble?”

“Yeah. What did you . . . Oh.” Frank shook his head and walked to the table. “Fuckin dirty old man you are. Scrabble.” He sat down and grabbed his coffee.

“Let me get this straight. You thank her. She thanks you. Ellen spends the night, all night. And you spend the entire night just playing scrabble?”

“Yeah.” Frank sipped his coffee with a pleased smile. “Yeah, we did.”

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“And you and Joey walk straight to school this time.” Dean warned Billy as he set his cereal before him.

“Don’t blame me.” Billy said. “Joey wanders off, I have to find him. Usually he’s chasing animals with Marcus.”

“Well, let him chase. Get to school and tell Jenny about . . .” Dean turned his head to the front door opening.

Ellen popped her head in first, then slipped in. “Hey.” She said softly. “Morning.” she kicked off the large shoes she wore.

Staring at Ellen, Dean set down the milk. “Everything, O.K.?”

“Yeah.” Ellen nodded, walked up and kissed Billy and Joey. “Where’s Nick?”

“Henry came by and got him.”

“What?” Ellen laughed. “Henry picked up his kid.”

“Go figure.”

“Dean.” Ellen walked to him. “How’s Elliott?”

“He started feeling a little better around five.” Dean explained. “Right now I have him medicated.”

“I felt so left out last night.”

Dean nodded. “I knew that. And I’m sorry. Trust me, I wouldn’t have had a problem with you helping Elliott. But he . . .”

“I know.” Ellen exhaled. “So what now? Are you going to stop the treatments?”

“What? No.” Dean answered and started walking backwards. “Billy, Joey, finish up.”

“Dean?” Ellen followed him down the hall. “What do you mean, no. Last night . . .”

“Last night was round one.” Dean stopped. “We knew it would get bad before it got better. This is what we have to do. All right?” He stepped closer

to her. "He'll be sick, but he will be fine."

"I'm sorry. I just feel left in the dark."

"That's understandable."

"Did you sleep?" Ellen asked.

"Yeah, caught a few. You?"

"A few." Ellen folded her arms. "Dean, I didn't mean to be gone all night."

"El." He laid his hand on her arm. "I knew you were upset last night. And it was already late when you told me you were going over, I figured, once you and Frank started talking, you'd be gone."

"So you're not mad."

"No." Dean shook his head. "I want to get ready to go, though." He headed toward Josh's room.

"You aren't going to ask me what happened?" Ellen followed him.

"Frank and I have a 'no kiss and tell' agreement."

"So I shouldn't tell you that we kissed."

Dean froze. He turned around in the door.

"And that's all." Ellen walked to him. "One kiss." She said soft. "You may not want to know, but I want you to know because I don't want you thinking anymore happened."

"Thank you for that."

"Except scrabble. We played a lot of scrabble. Dean . . . without getting into details, Frank needed me there last night. He just needed me to be there."

"I understand."

"Good." She took a breath. "All right. Why don't I get dressed, I'll run to the clinic for today's supplies and I'll be on the day shift today."

"El." Dean's tone dropped. "Patrick is bringing over supplies for Alex and Elliott."

"Great." Ellen smiled. "I don't have to leave the house. I'll just get things ready here."

"El, I need you to work in the cryo lab and clinic today."

"Are you working with Elliott and Alex?" Ellen asked.

"No, Patrick is." Dean replied with some apprehension.

"Dean, that's dumb. Alex is our daughter . . ."

"And Patrick can handle her."

"What about Elliott?"

Dean stared for a second then turned and walked into Josh's room.

"Dean?" Ellen trailed behind.

"El, if you want to know." He took a breath. "Elliott told me this

morning, he'd prefer you not working with him while he's receiving treatments."

"That's insane."

"That's what he wants."

"We'll see about that." Ellen turned.

Dean reached out and stopped her. "El. I'm serious. He said he doesn't want you around. If you being around is a bother or worry to him, then that is an emotional issue that can affect his treatment. I can't have that. Understand. Against what I want to do, I'm pulling you."

"This is our project."

"I know."

"Elliott is my friend. We're supposed to be close."

"I know." Dean said. "It doesn't make any sense to me. I asked if you did something wrong. He said no." He shrugged.

Tighter her arms folded to her body as her eye shifted about and her jaw tensed. "Doesn't he know I want to do this with him?"

"Yeah, he does. El, I tried to talk to him. But I'm not going to argue with him. He's very sick right now."

"And what am I supposed to do? Sit back and watch a door."

"I'll keep you posted as best as I can."

Through her nostrils, Ellen took a deep breath. "You keep me posted. Do you know how cold that sounds. As if I'm not even part. Keep me posted." She shook her head. "I'm gonna get ready for the clinic." Turning to leave the room, Ellen stopped in the hall. She looked at the closed bedroom door and stepped to it. She listened, trying to hear anything of Elliott coming from there, but she heard nothing. All she wanted to do was walk in that room, see how he was and insist, like it or not, she was going to be there, but she didn't. Like Dean had said, if Elliott got too bogged down with worrying about Ellen being there, it could effect his treatment, and that was the last thing Ellen wanted to do. Knowing that, against what she wanted to do, Ellen walked away from that door.

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Frank didn't understand it. He was quite content with what he had planned. Fully utilizing the huge hole he blew into Beginnings, Frank was certain he had the world's biggest bear trap. The gap in the earth covered with branches that hid the eight steal jaws of death. And neatly over the laid down branches were what Frank called his 'Goldie Locks' set up. Three

bowls of oatmeal, all doused with honey.

Frank was positive the moment that bear got hungry, he would follow the scent and ‘whap’ he would get trapped. Figuring the steel clamps would cause excruciating pain, the scream of the bear would ring out alerting Frank and he wouldn’t have to run to the back gate to chase another deer.

It was a ‘check occasionally’ trap, and Frank had no plan to run up. He supposed his father heard something or had a gut instinct, because the moment Frank sat down to finally view the ‘mystery man’ disk, Joe screamed and yelled about the bear.

Frank complained especially when he arrived and saw nothing. But he didn’t complain for long. He knew the area behind that back gate well, the look, the feel and even the smell. And when he smelled the rancid, damp fur-like smell, he was certain it wasn’t coming from a deer. It was the scent he had waited for, and Joe’s psychic ability was right.

Knowing the bear had to be close, Frank had to secure his trophy. After peeking around to make sure he wasn’t seen, from the inside of his leather jacket, he pulled out the clincher. Given to him by Dean. And Frank was grateful for it, because had Dean not given him that half of pint of blood to use, the wound on Frank’s forearm would never heal. Hoping the expiration of the body fluid didn’t matter, Frank ripped the plastic top open—like a Kool-aid pouch—with his teeth, and poured half down into the hole.

The trap was ready. The scent was close, it was time to catch that bear. But there was one more thing Frank had to do . . . leave. Knowing there wasn’t anyway a bear with half a brain was going to trot along for a free breakfast while Frank was standing there, he snuck the blood bag back into his coat, and whistling like he was up there doing something routine, Frank left the back gate region.

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From the left and the right, Robbie and Danny both headed to the mechanics building. Robbie stopped the moment he saw Danny and looked to his watch. “Hey, Dan, is my watch wrong. Am I early.”

“No, I’m late.”

“Shit.” Robbie shook his head. “Here I thought I could sneak off and hang somewhere for a little bit more.” He grabbed the door and stepped inside. The second he did, a stack of papers slammed down on the edge of the counter.

“You’re late!” Henry blasted at Robbie. “We’re swamped.”

“Sorry.” Robbie shrugged.

Danny Hoi walked in. "Sorry, I'm late, Henry, I slept in."

"That's O.K." Henry said calm to Danny. "I have your reqs in my office."

"Thanks." Danny smiled. "I'll go get them." He flashed a snide grin to Robbie and walked to Henry's office.

"Whoa." Robbie held up his hand. "Why do I get the riot act and he doesn't."

"Because you have a reputation of being lazy and he doesn't."

Robbie scoffed facially. "Fuck off. Just give me my work."

"I have no work for you." Henry told him.

"You just said we're swamped." Robbie came back.

"I'll do it."

"Why are you throwing yourself into the work all of the sudden?" Robbie asked.

"Because I have a crew who doesn't work."

"Bullshit. Everyone works for you." Robbie snapped. "Now give me the work I have to do. My Dad said I have to be here."

"Tell Joe, I don't need you."

"Nope." Robbie reached across the counter and grabbed a piece of paper. He handed it to Henry.

"What's this for?" Henry looked at the paper.

"Write me an excuse. My father won't believe me."

"See even your father knows your reputation."

"Henry." Robbie tried to stay calm. "Write the note so I can give it to my dad and tell him Frank needs me in security. Then . . ." Robbie snickered. "I'll tell Frank my dad needs me and I'll go sleep."

"See." Henry tossed the paper at Robbie.

"You know, you have a real problem with me." Robbie leaned toward Henry.

"Yeah I do. And do you want to know why I can't take you lately."

"Lately?" Robbie laughed. "All right. Tell me why you can't take me lately."

"Because of Andrea."

"What!"

"You heard me. The woman's gone, Robbie. She was like a mother to you and you walk around here as if you could care less. You laugh, joke around, and pretend she meant nothing. And that's wrong."

Stone cold seriousness hit Robbie. "Listen to me you shit. Don't you even presume to tell me how I should or should not act. You got that? Now I won't stand here and waste my time arguing with you when you're nothing

but a little fuckin bitch lately.” Robbie shook his head and turned toward the door. “No wonder Hector’s the only one who talks to you.” Before Robbie could take another step, he felt the hard hit to his lower back and found himself slamming face first into the closed door.

The connection of his nose and the door’s surface stung, and it took him by surprise, but not as much as the shot Henry delivered in the form of a punch to Robbie’s kidneys. He cringed, more in anger than in pain. And just when Henry thought he’d take advantage of a stunned Robbie, he made his mistake.

Turning Robbie to face him, opened Henry up. The instant Robbie saw Henry raise his fist, he seized the opportunity. With rage, Robbie quickly reached out, cupped hold of Henry’s face and with the force of his outrage, in the same moment Robbie stepped from the door, he brought Henry into it.

Wham!

The back of Henry’s head ricocheted off the door and his eyes rolled. It was a hand exchange for Robbie only. Releasing Henry’s face, Robbie gripped Henry’s neck, lifted him up, held him to the door and right fist rolled tight, Robbie nailed Henry with everything he had. Biting his bottom lip, eyes focused on Henry, Robbie revved back again.

“No!” Firm, Danny Hoi shouted as he grabbed Robbie’s hand. “No. Stop. Right now. Enough.”

Still holding Henry, Robbie stepped to him slow and leaned his face close to his. “Don’t you ever take a cheap shot at me again. Ever.”

Henry fell to the floor with Robbie’s release.

Huffing and wiping the blood from his nose, Robbie reached for the door. He spoke with such graveling rage. “This goes way beyond you not liking how I grieve, Henry. This shit, this over the edge shit you’re pulling, is nothing but your guilt.”

“What’s that supposed to mean.” Henry staggered to a stand.

“You know exactly what it means.” Robbie opened the door. “When did you start getting like this? Withdrawing. I’ll tell you. When Bev was killed. Why don’t you save my father and brother the trouble and just confess to it. And trust me, Henry. Now, after this. That little secret you wanted me to keep about seeing you outside of Bev’s house that night. It’s not gonna be a secret anymore. Just makes me wonder what other little secrets are locked in the tormented Henry mind.” After one more glare, Robbie stormed out.

Danny stood hands in pockets, rocking from heel to toe. He moved an inch to Henry. “You know. If you feel like unloading them secrets. You can come to me..”

Druga-Johnston/The Aragon Window

A quick cold look was what Henry gave Danny and then he too, stormed out.

Danny looked at the just slammed door. "Maybe not." He shrugged. "Back to those reqs." He turned and went back to Henry's office and to what he was doing before he had to be the hero and break up the fight.

^^^

"But, Dad." Billy sat on a stool in the clinic lab, his legs swinging back and forth.

"No, buts. Bill . . ." Dean turned and faced him. "I'm busy. Go back to school. This is what I do, that is what you do."

"I hate it."

"So did I. But it's something you have to do."

"Why can't you teach me?" Billy asked.

"I don't have the time. And you can't just get up from your desk every time your class does basic math."

"It's not a challenge."

After running his fingers through his hair, Dean walked over to the pint size version of himself. "Look, you want to make basic math a challenge. Teach it to Uncle Frank."

"That's rude."

"So's Frank." Dean lifted Billy from the stool. "Now go. Go on."

"Fine. Don't think I won't remember this." He stormed his little body to the door and stopped. "I needed you and you let me down."

Dean smiled and waved as Billy spun and left.

Shaking his head and figuring he should place a call to Jenny at the school to tell her Billy was on his way back, Dean walked to the phone. He lifted it, started to turn it on and stopped. He remembered it wasn't working, and then he remembered why.

FLASH!

Slam went the phone and Dean growled in frustration. "I can't believe she had the gall to call here."

"I can. Bev doesn't know everyone's on to her." Ellen said with little care. "Kids are asleep. I'm turning in."

"You can't even look at me." Dean stood up and followed her to the kitchen. "El, don't go to bed."

"I'm tired."

"We need to talk."

Druga-Johnston/The Aragon Window

"Dean." Ellen set down a glass. "There's nothing to talk about."

"You don't think? What about us? Our marriage?"

"I told you there is no more us." Ellen said strongly.

"And I can't believe you want that. How about after all we found out about Bev. The extremes she went through."

"And why is that, Dean?"

"What?" Dean was shocked.

"Why is that?" Ellen folded her arms. "Why would Bev go to such extremes just to get you."

"She's George's daughter."

"Still." Ellen shrugged. "She may have set herself up to look like she was pregnant to you. But you sure got into the baby. Wasn't it you who had your hand on her stomach feeling your baby kick."

"This is bullshit. I argued that it wasn't my child."

"And I think there's more to it." Ellen nodded. "Much more than just needing you to work for Daddy. Or to get rid of Beginnings bright boy."

"What are you saying."

"I'm going to bed." Ellen walked from the kitchen.

"El." Dean pulled her back. "I can't believe we're still fighting over her. Let it go."

"Me? You? Didn't you just slam down the phone when she called? Why did you get so angry even though her gig is up? Unless there's something I don't know."

"I don't believe it." Dean laughed. "You still think I was with her. After all we found out, you think I slept with Bev."

"Did you?"

Dean hesitated through his anger. "You know what? Yeah, El. Is that what you want to hear. Yeah. I slept with her."

"Fuck you."

"No, fuck you." Dean's hand swung out. "She tore this community apart. Us apart. Everyone that we know and love has had a monkey wrench thrown into their lives courtesy of Bev. And we have a chance to stop at least one of her viscous cycles. And we aren't. We're still fighting. That's wrong."

"You're right. It is. I'm sorry." Ellen walked to the door grabbing her coat from the tree.

"Where are you going."

"I need some air." She flung open the door and looked back at Dean. "I'm sorry for fighting."

"El . . ." Before more could be said, Ellen was gone and Dean stood alone. He looked at his watch, then moved to the coat tree. The kids were asleep. Josh was there. Grabbing his jacket, Dean, too, left the house.

“Ring. Ring.”

The vocal bell snapped Dean from his memory. He looked up. “Frank.”

“Sorry. You were staring at that phone. I thought I’d give you a fond memory of when they worked.”

“The phone gave me a memory all right.” Dean set it down. “I was thinking back.”

“To?”

After a shrug, Dean looked up. “The night Bev was killed.”

“Fucked up night.” Frank’s demeanor fell.

“A mystery night.” Dean said. “Who killed Bev.”

Speaking almost in a daze, Frank stared out. “Maybe it’s not a mystery.”

“What was that.”

Frank shook his head. “Just thinking. You know, what if someone actually saw who killed Bev.”

“Did . . . did someone?” Dean asked.

“Never know.” Frank exhaled and returned to his previous ‘up’ mood. “Anyhow, is Billy sick?”

“No. Why?”

“I just saw him. I asked where he was going and he said, ‘Home, I hate my Dad’. I figured you wouldn’t treat him.”

“Ah.” Dean slammed his hand. “He cut school again.”

“So what. Let him.”

“He has to go, Frank.”

“Why? He’s smart.”

“He’s seven.”

“Still. He’s smarter than Jenny. Let me take him out on rounds and I’ll teach him some stuff.”

“No. No. If it’s the last thing I do, my son will not develop any Frank traits.”

“Pissy.” Frank shook his head.

“Frank. Why are you here?”

“Man . . .” Frank reached into his coat. “I brought back your blood. I didn’t use it all, and figured you might want it back.”

“No. I . . . Frank?” Dean stepped closer looking at the bag. “Please don’t tell me you ripped that open with your teeth.”

“Yeah. Why?”

“It’s blood.”

“It’s mine.”

“No, it’s not.” Dean snapped. “It’s type ‘B’. Didn’t you look on the bag.”

“Yeah.”

“You have type ‘O’.”

“I know that.” Frank said.

“And you still thought it was your blood?”

“Yeah. After all, it is my bear. My blood to catch my bear. I wouldn’t want him following anyone else’s scent. Right?”

Dean stared for a moment. “Right. Anything else.”

“Why are you in a bad mood?”

“Just busy.”

“Too bad. How’s Elliott?” Frank asked. “When El came over last night, she said he wasn’t doing good.”

“He’s not. But he’s doing as we expected. He’ll handle it better tonight. I’m positive.” Dean looked at Frank. “Let me ask you something. El said you guys kissed last night.”

“Is that why you’re being pissy?”

“Did you?” Dean asked.

Frank just stared.

“Frank?”

“What?”

“Did you kiss last night.”

Nothing. Not a peep. Not a sound.

“Frank!” Dean yelled. “Why won’t you answer me.”

“Rules are rules Dean. And a kiss falls under ‘no kiss and tell’. Now if you asked me if we slept together, I could answer you.”

“Did you?”

“No. But we played lots of scrabble.”

“This sucks. You know that. Really sucks.” Dean shook his head. “How did you end up getting close to her again. She swore you off as much as she swore me off and now . . .”

“Dean.” Frank interrupted. “If we’re going to have a semi understanding it will never work if you pick on me every time I’m with Ellen.”

“Pick on you? Me?”

“Yeah. Badgering me to death over a simple kiss.”

“That’s because I haven’t even hugged her since we broke up.”

“Have you even tried?”

Slowly, Dean looked up. “What do you mean, have I tried. Of course I . . . I . . .” Dean blinked. “Shit. I haven’t tried.”

“There you have it.” Frank exhaled. “Another dilemma solved by Frank.”

"You're the man."

"I am." Frank walked to the door. "And I am the mighty hunter. I have to go check on my trap. Are you sure you don't need this." He held up the bag of blood.

"No, you keep it."

"Thanks." A few steps taken, and Frank stopped. "Dean. In all seriousness. Did El tell you why I needed her?"

"No." Dean answered. "She didn't. It's none of my business."

"Well . . . just know I appreciate you not giving Dean little man attitude. Because I'm really glad she was there."

"Frank." Dean walked to him. "Look. I don't know for sure what was wrong. I'm gonna take a wild card shot in the dark, so forgive me if I'm wrong. O.K.? But know that it's all right, and it's perfectly normal to have trouble. Just because you quit, doesn't make you recovered. Not yet. You still have along road. A lot of us forgot about that road you're traveling."

"How did you know?"

"Not much rattles you. You needing El told me a lot."

"I swear, Dean, I swear sometimes I'm strong enough to have that drink and not have a problem again. But I know better."

"Well know this. Me, El, either one of us. We're both here."

"Thanks. I mean that. And I'll make it through this . . . rough spot. I will. I'm tough." Frank nodded.

"That you are."

Out in the hall Johnny stood, back against the wall, earshot to that door. He heard all he needed to hear and he smiled. It was a way to play his father. If Frank thought he was having a tough time with his drinking, things were only going to get tougher with Johnny aiding him in his problems.

^^^

With a typical Hal style grin, he sat in a chair by Elliott's bed. His hands folded, fingers taping as he talked. "So. Should I not want to face a New Bowman mutiny of my authority, I have to kind of stay in New Bowman for a couple days. I hope you understand. Especially since I have to be back in three days for my turn at questioning. Oh yes . . ." Hal nodded and sat back. "I'm scheduled to be questioned first. There's prepping for it. Must be big. You have to wonder what kind of evidence they are gathering. I know that there's this disk . . ." he tilted his head. "That my father says is valuable. But I

can't figure it out. It's of Ellen and Dean's bedroom. This room. Perhaps something was said. Well . . ." With a slap to his thighs, Hal stood up. "I must be going. I wanted to say good luck with these treatments, and I'll see you in a couple days. Remember my friend . . ." He leaned down toward Elliott. "My prayers . . . they are so much with you." Adjusting the covers over Elliott, Hal stepped back. Before leaving he looked upon Elliott, so white, so still, sleeping soundly under medication. Sadly Hal began to leave. He knew Elliott never awoke while he was there, but he hoped, at the very least, his presence and supported were felt much more than the concern that was tearing him apart.

^^^

"Robbie." Ellen called across the street when she saw Robbie walking toward the chapel. "Robbie, wait." She hurried to him, stopped and caught her breath. "Just the man I have been . . ." She froze when Robbie turned around. "What happened to your nose. Was Frank beating you up?"

"No." Robbie shook his head. "Fuckin Henry tackled me from behind and my face met the door that was there."

"Oh, my God." She reached up. "Can you breath?"

"I'm fine." Quick, in Robbie fashion, he grabbed her hand, pulled it down, but not before kissing it. "What's up?"

"Oh, I've been thinking. I want to have a memorial service for Andrea. Will you say the service. You are Rev. Robbie."

"El. I don't think that's a good idea."

"What?" Ellen asked shocked. "You of all people. I thought would want to have a memorial service for her."

"That's not what I was talking about. I was talking about me saying the service. I'll go. But the Reverend thing . . ."

"Was Andrea's doing. She loved you. She loved your short to the point sermons, Robbie . . ." Ellen snickered. "Remember when she walked around singing the silly song all the time."

"And she sang it slow and blues like."

"How about when you tried your new country song and put God in there just to make it religious. Boy, she bragged about you to everyone. I think, there would be nothing more that Andrea would want than for you to say her service."

"I think you're right. When do you want to do it?"

"I want to wait a few days. People, they're well, kind of still bitter about her. After a few days that should subside. She deserves a good farewell."

“Yeah, she does. I miss her.” Robbie said with a smile. “And, you let me know when.”

“I will.”

“Where you headed?” Robbie asked.

“Oh, house call for John Matoose. He’s home now. You?”

“Meeting with my Dad, Hal, Frank and . . .” Robbie cringed. “Henry.”

“Robbie? Why did he go after you?”

“El.” Robbie tossed his hands up. “I really don’t know. He was really nasty with me. He’s been nasty with everyone. I told him it was all that pent up guilt.”

“Guilt?” Ellen snickered. “Over what?”

“Bev.”

Ellen’s eyes lifted. “What about her?”

“I told him he was hiding his guilt over killing her. I also told him I’m not going to keep his little secret about seeing him outside of her house that night.”

“You saw Henry outside of Bev’s?” Ellen asked. “When?”

“Pretty much before she was killed.”

“What were you doing there?”

“To be honest . . .” Robbie shrugged. “I was gonna watch her house. I didn’t want her to leave. But, she wasn’t home. I tried to find her. I couldn’t.”

“Busy little girl her last night in Beginnings, wasn’t she?” “What do you mean?”

Ellen looked up to him . . .

Frank.

More than anything, Ellen wanted to see Frank. She felt like she needed to. One of his guards had said that he was in his office and that was where Ellen headed after her argument with Dean. Only the guard was wrong. Frank’s office was without Frank, but it was far from empty. At least before Ellen arrived.

“Oh, my God.” Robbie closed his eyes. “She said she was going to tell him. That was one of the reasons I was looking for her. I was so pissed off.”

“It was a good thing I found that note on his desk.. I was pissed too. I wanted to strangle her. I was so upset I went looking for you. But Dean found me.”

“El.” *Out of breath Dean caught up to her and grabbed her arm. “What is going on?”*

Shaking. Ellen couldn’t hide the shaking. Her hand still clenched that note and she

Druga-Johnston/The Aragon Window

slipped it unnoticed behind her back. "I need . . . I need some air. Can I just be alone?"

"No. You ran out. You were upset and . . ."

The shrill, emotional sound of Henry's voice yelling, 'Get out!' Made Dean and Ellen both, at the same time, turn their heads toward to sound. They hadn't realized it, but they were standing before Henry's house.

"Who was he yelling at?" Robbie asked.

Ellen took a deep breath. "Bev."

"How do you know?"

A giggle and laugh carried out into the street along with Bev's taunting voice. "Hide it Henry. Go on. But you won't be able to hide all your little secrets for very long, now will you?"

"Get out of my house."

Slam.

Dean and Ellen jolted at the screen door. Bev only snickered as she nearly skipped by them.

Dean glanced at Ellen. "We should go see . . ."

"Yeah. We should." With a twitch of her head, Ellen walked up Henry's step and opened the door. "Henry?" She called out.

"Henry." Dean spoke up as he walked in after her.

Henry stood in the living room wearing only his underwear. So surprised he looked up.

With concern, Ellen stepped to him. "Henry, what's going on? Are you all right? We heard you yelling with . . ."

Quick footsteps coming down the stairs silenced Ellen but not as much as the sight of Hector holding a towel around his waist.

"Henry, is she . . ." Hector froze. "Oh, God Henry. I'm sorry."

The word rage could have been written across Henry's face that was how predominant it was. His glare was fast and daggering to Dean and Ellen, and his two words deep and graveling. "Get out." With a slam of his hands to the back of the couch, Henry spun hard and walked upstairs.

Robbie snapped his finger in front of Ellen. "Hello?"

"Sorry." She smiled.

"What did you see when you walked in the house?"

"Um . . . nothing really, just Henry alone." She said. "You know. Upset."

“Did he say anything about it?”

Ellen shook her head.

“I wonder . . .” Robbie said with a thinking tone. “I wonder what secret Bev was referring to. What did she have on Henry?”

Ellen didn’t have to wonder. She knew. Or, at least she thought she knew what Henry’s secrets were. And to Robbie’s question, she only shrugged.

^^^

“Jenny, I’m fine.” John said laying in bed.

“I just want you to look presentable.” Jenny fluffed the pillows and straightened the covers. “Ellen should be here any second. I don’t want the other women to think you’re unkept.”

“Jenny, I’m fine.” He grabbed her hand. “You look . . . You look tired.”

“I am. A little. Damn Billy Hayes.” She shook her head. “Giving me miniature Dean attitude about basic math. He cut out. Just left. I am getting so frustrated with him.”

“Jenny?” John lowered his voice. “Please don’t get mad at me for asking. But I’ve been through this twice with you. Are you . . . are you pregnant?”

Jenny stopped cold in her fussing over the bed. “Oh, my God.”

“Are you . . . are you pregnant?”

“Yes.”

“Oh shit!” An excited Ellen yell echoed in the bedroom. “Oh, Jenny, that is so great!” She hurried to Jenny. “Why didn’t you come to me. You had to have just realized.”

“Well, no.” Jenny shook her head. “I’ve known for a while.”

“How long?” Ellen asked.

“Andrea knew.” Jenny shifted her eyes to John. “Four months.”

Ellen’s eyes widened. “You’ve known that long? Why keep it a secret.”

“Me.” John interjected. “I’m the reason, aren’t I? You’re ashamed if the baby is mine.”

Jenny exhaled. “I was a little. I’m sorry.”

“No.” John said sadly. “You have every right. Don’t apologize. But I promise you something. I promise you if this baby is mine, I will make you proud of me again.”

“Oh, John.” Jenny wisped out. “There’s no doubt that this baby is yours. I was glad. At the time, Bev was screaming paternity tests enough for everyone.” She quickly looked at Ellen. “I’m sorry, Ellen.”

Ellen shook her head.

Jenny saw the confusion on John's face. "That's right, you were comatose. Bev was running around saying she was pregnant to Dean."

"Dean?" John laughed. "That's absurd."

"That's what she was saying." Jenny shrugged. "But it wasn't Dean's. She was probably trying to pass of Kevin's as his."

"No." Ellen corrected. "Remember she said Kevin was out on runs during conception."

"That's right." Jenny said. "Then I wonder whose baby it is. Could be any one's, she was a slut."

Whose baby is it? Rang through John's mind and it made him produce a smile that he had to hide. A smile he got when he heard Johnny's voice taunting him, *'After all, someone took Bev and my baby from me. So what the hell do I care'* And John knew, the secret to Bev's baby's paternity held more than the truth of who she slept with. It told the truth, and gave the proof, that John Matoose needed to hang Johnny. And all he had to do was figure out a way to get that truth out. Because the last thing he wanted was the parentage of the child to be buried along with the mother.

^^^

"Don't know." Joe cupped his hands behind his head and rocked back in his office chair.

Hal looked again to his watch. "Why can't they just be punctual. Is that too much to ask?"

"Your brothers can't be like you."

"They should be."

"Except the hair." Joe pointed. "You ought to cut it."

"Right away." Hal shook his head. "At least you can't have them hold me down and shave my head during the night."

"You don't think?" Joe snickered.

Robbie's talking was his entrance into the office. "Keep in mind. The last place I want to be is in a meeting with Henry."

Ready to reprimand his little brother for tardiness, Hal looked back, when he did he immediately stood up. "Christ. What happened to your nose."

Before Robbie could answer Joe pointed to the door that opened bringing in Henry.

Hal looked. "Him? You let him get the best of you?"

"No." Robbie plopped down to a chair. "He took a cheap shot at me."

Hit me from behind.”

A shift of Hal’s eyes went to Henry. “You took a cheap shot at my brother?”

“Your brother . . .” Henry pulled out a chair with attitude. “Was starting trouble.”

“When doesn’t he?” Hal said.

“Hal.” Joe warned.

“It’s no reason for a cheap shot.” Hal continued.

“Hal sit.” Joe pointed to the chair.

“You know what I think, Dad.” Hal took a seat. “I think a long history of bad blood between the these two should come to a head. Put them in the street, let them beat the hell out of each other until one of them concedes.”

Robbie grinned. “Hal, you are fast becoming my favorite big brother.”

Joe winced. “We can’t do that Hal. No offence Henry, but Robbie would kill you.”

Henry rolled his eyes.

Robbie snapped his finger with a bright smile. “Hal, you just gave me an idea. You know what we should start. A wrestling federation.”

“Yes.” Hal smiled. “Entertainment. Frank would take it so serious.”

“He’d hate it if he got booed.”

“Boys.” Joe tried to stop the ‘off the subject’ talk.

“Oh.” Robbie laughed. “We can make Henry, Mr. Fuji.”

Henry hit his hand on the chair. “Joe. Can we just start this meeting.”

Joe shook his head. “We have to wait for Frank. And speaking of which . . .” Joe looked at his watch. “Where is Frank?”

“Oh, yeah.” Frank smiled staring down into the huge hole. “Someone’s hungry today. Been eating the oatmeal. Smart bear. Avoiding my trap.”

Crack.

The snap of a twig made Frank’s head lift, and the he took in a long whiff, “Man, what stinks.”

Growl.

Frank turned around and he looked up. Way up. “Fuck.”

Henry held one ear closed in annoyance to Hal and Robbie’s back and forth talking. “Joe. Can we just start this?”

“I told you Henry, we can’t . . .”

“Henry.” Robbie snapped. “Quit bitching.”

"See." Henry pointed to Robbie, "I didn't say anything to him."

"And all I did was tell you to stop bitching." Robbie defended. "Are you bitching. Yes."

Henry grumbled. "And you'll wonder why I want to leave Beginnings."

"Yes!" Robbie yelled out. "Go."

"Robert." Joe said calm. "Henry, you don't want to leave Beginnings."

"Yes I do, Joe. I hate it here anymore."

"You hate it here?" Joe questioned.

"I want to move to Bowman. I hate it here and everyone here."

"We hate you too." Robbie said.

"Robert. Stop. Henry." Joe looked at him serious. "Quit with the juvenile antics. You hate this. You hate that. What is up your ass."

"Yeah, Henry." Robbie instigated. "Grow up."

"Robert." Joe quickly looked to Hal. "Quit laughing Hal."

"I quit!" Henry stood up. "Yeah, all of you come down on me. You're a family. I'm outnumbered. Why am I even wasting my breath."

Robbie waved. "Bye."

"Robert." Joe said his name as he slammed his hand. "And Henry, sit your skinny ass down right now before . . ."

Hiss. Static. "Dad." Frank's voice came over the radio.

Holding his hand up to Henry, Joe lifted the radio. "Frank, where the hell are you?"

"Dad I . . ." Frank grunted. "I think I need some . . uh! Help at the back gate."

"You need to get your ass down for this meeting. Hal has to go back to New Bowman." Joe scolded. "Get down here."

"Dad. I can't . . . hold on."

With a twitch of his head in disgust, Frank watched the bear, huge and towering begin a taunting move his way. Figuring, it was just a bear, and he was a big guy, shoulder first Frank charged.

"Frank." Joe called out. "Frank." He moved his head back from the radio when he heard a scream. "Frank?"

"Dad, I'm a little busy. I need some help with the bear."

"Goddamn it, Frank." Joe said so perturbed. "There is no . . ."

GROWL.

"Jesus Christ." And on Joe's exclamation of blasphemy, he, Robbie, Hal and Henry flew from his office.

“Dad.” Rushing, Hal held his hand out to Joe at the back gate. “Stay here.”

“What?” Joe said with a laugh.

“Dad, it’s a bear.” Hal moved to the fence.

“No shit sherlock.”

“Dad, a man of your age.” Hal grabbed hold of Robbie.

“Fine.” Joe tossed up his hands. “Bet me not one of them pulls out their gun.” Joe reached for his revolver. “Morons.”

Hal made a hushing sound to Robbie. “Listen. I hear scuffling.”

“Do you think Frank is . . .”

A loud Frank scream rang out seconds before his body seemingly dropped from the sky and landed at Hal and Robbie’s feet.

Hal reached down to a bloodied Frank. “Are you all right?”

Like a cat, Frank twitched his head and stood up. “He’s strong.”

Robbie snickered. “He’s a bear.”

“And we can take him.” Hal stated.

“Hal.” Frank said with disgust. “He’s my bear.”

“You called for help.” Hal said. “We’re here to help.”

“Yeah, Frank.” Robbie interjected. “Come on, it’ll be fun. Let us help with the . . .”

The loud growl rang out and all three Slagel men looked up.

“Hal.” Frank whispered, eyes locked on the bear. “What ever you do, don’t be a pansy and pull out that sword.”

Offended Hal looked at Frank. “What do you mean, pansy. My sword could . . .”

“Hal!” Robbie shouted. “Watch out.”

“Yeah, watch . . .” Frank cringed when the bear lifted Hal as if he weighed nothing and tossed him hard the other way.

“Hey!” Robbie charged out racing full speed to the bear. He rammed shoulder first into the beast and bounced backwards. The bear reached down, lifted Robbie and threw him at the same time Frank and Hal thought maybe double teaming the bear would work. It didn’t.

Joe allowed it to amuse him for a while. Watching his sons get tossed about as they all made attempt after attempt to tackle that bear. He enjoyed their squeals and thumps. Their little huddled meetings on strategy on bringing the animal down. But Joe had enough. He had a busy day. Shifting

the chamber on his forty-five semi-automatic, Joe twitched his head in disgust, waited until the bear threw the last of his sons, and then he fired. Four shots, rapid and accurate all to the bear's head. The smile on Joe's face lasted only for a moment before it was replaced with annoyance when Frank yelled out. "He's weakened. Get him!" And after raising his hand, Joe dropped it in defeat and finally chuckled as he watched his three sons, all together shove the bear into the hole that Frank had created.

Snap-snap-snap-snap.

"Oh yeah." Frank smiled peering into the crater. "He's down."

Robbie wiped the blood from his mouth. "We should go down there and collect some souvenirs of this."

Hal nodded. "We should. Clip the claws. Frank?"

"Sure. I'll go." Frank sniffed through his blood clogged nose. "I wonder who shot him."

Crass, Joe's voice was. "Who do you think?"

Frank turned around. "Who?"

"Frank." Joe cringed.

"Oh, hey, Dad, look." Frank pointed to the hole. "We got the bear. We're gonna go clip its claws, want one."

"No. But clip the claws after you boys get some medical attention. Christ." He stepped to the bloodied three. "Look at you. What the hell were you thinking? Didn't one of you think to pull out your goddamn weapon and shoot him."

All three brothers looked at each other and shrugged.

"You have to admit." Robbie said. "It was fun."

Hal nodded. "It was."

"And . . ." Frank interjected. "Someone shot him. I heard. I think. Did I."

"Yeah, Frank." Joe snapped. "He was shot four times in the head."

Frank looked around. "By who?"

"Me!" Joe yelled. "Now get your asses down to the clinic before you get rabbis." Shaking his head, Joe turned and walked away.

"How do you like that." Frank said. "A family effort." He looked down to the hole. "We huffed and we puffed and we blew that bear down."

Hal blinked several times. "Frank? Huffed and puffed?"

"Um, yeah., Hal." Frank spoke to Hal as if Hal should have known. "It's from a children's story. Man, where have you been."

"Frank." Robbie tapped him on the shoulder. "The one story with 'huff and puff' that was about pigs and a wolf."

"Yeah." Hal snapped. "Wrong fairy tale, asshole."

Druga-Johnston/The Aragon Window

“O.K., O.K.” Frank held up his hand. “But still . . . did I or did I not say there was a bear. I did. And we got him.” Frank smiled looking down to the dead bear. “The nightmare in Beginnings is finally over.” The grin of Frank’s face dropped. “Fuck. It’s gonna get boring again.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

His eyebrow raised with oddity about the same time Jason raised a shredded and bloodied tee shirt with two fingers. "And they survived?"

Joe shrugged. "Go figure. But I'll tell you Jason, it was the funniest thing watching them try to take down that bear."

"How big was it?"

"Ready? Twenty-two feet."

Jason whistled and set down the shirt. "And they tried without weapons."

"My boys were always demented. It goes with their love of wrestling. Hell, you should have seen Hal and Frank trying to double team clothesline the thing. Even jumping in synch they made it to his stomach. The bear just got pissed."

"What made you decide to step in?"

"I saw a bit too much blood."

Jason nodded. "Robbie was lucky none of those ribs were broke. He . . . he was the lucky one."

"No stitches?" Joe nodded pleased when Jason agreed. "How about Hal?"

"Dean's finishing him up. A couple to his temple. I'm more worried about that thigh. Dean, too. That's why we need him to stay in Beginnings over night. That bear tooth went awfully deep."

"Frank?"

Very seriously, Jason looked at Joe. "The man should be gutted. That's how close he came. How he escaped is beyond me."

"Me too. And remind me not to make up any lies."

"You could turn into the boy who cried wolf."

"Or bear." Joe snickered. "No more lies. No more trouble."

"Joe!" Jenny Matoose called as she raced down the hall. "Oh, Joe." She caught her breath. "We've heard rumors. Tell me. Tell me the grizzly scare is over."

"Yes." Joe stated.

She shrieked a little and grabbed her chest. "Thank God. Joe, the women and I made a little gift for the person who was responsible for saving us from the bear. A nice sweater. Was it Frank?"

"Um . . . no." Joe shook his head. "Hal. All Hal."

Jenny grinned. "Thank you, Joe. I'll go get it and give it to him."

Joe winked.

Jason cleared his throat. "I thought you weren't gonna lie. Staring trouble Joe. Frank lured that bear in. He called it his bear."

"Yeah. But Hal's more of a sweater guy."

Jason nodded. "Valid point."

^^^

"Ouch." Frank said with some tone of 'fake'.

"Stop it." Ellen snickered as she leaned over his laying body. "I'm almost done."

"It's not that bad. Do I need stitches?"

Ellen looked up from the six inch gape in Frank's gut. "No. I need practice."

"Oh. O.K."

"Frank?" Ellen's hands stopped moving. "You have a bullet scar. When were you shot in the stomach?"

"Oh, Robbie shot me. Remember?"

"No. Robbie shot you?" Ellen looked at him with curiosity. "When?"

"El." Frank said with annoyance. "Fuck. I can't believe you forgot. I almost died. I did die. Dean saved my life with that drug and . . . and . . ."

Ellen waited.

"And . . . Am I done?"

"Yes. But, when did Robbie shoot . . ."

"My shirt." Frank sat up with a grunt. "Where is my shirt. I know I put it . . ."

"Frank. It's shredded. When did Robbie shoot you?"

"He didn't. He did. But he didn't. The time machine thing. In the Beginnings when he didn't arrive until late, he shot me by accident during shooting practice."

"Boy, he must have sucked."

"Yeah." Frank laughed. He started to get off the table. "Hey, El . . ."

"Frank. Let me bandage that."

"No. Hey, El." Frank stood before her. "I'm not working Wednesday. What are you doing?"

"Why?" Ellen asked.

Frank gave a shy shrug. "Curious."

"Are you asking me out on a date?"

"No." Frank shook his head. "Yeah. Maybe. Would you."

"I don't know. The last time we went out, you got me drunk and didn't put out."

"I had reason."

"Yeah, and if I recall . . ." Ellen began to gather her supplies. "It was a lame reason that made me vow never to bother with you again."

"Man . . . you're tough." Frank followed her.

"So you're not stuck to that code of Dean honor?"

"Sort of. But we have an agreement. So are you busy?"

"Why are you asking me out, Frank?" Ellen questioned.

"Because, maybe I'm wrong, but I think things are coming back together for us. I want to keep it going."

"What, uh, do you have in mind?" Ellen looked over her shoulder at him while she placed things away.

"Spend some of my hard earned Danny dollars. Hit the Danny-plex, bowl at the Dan-a-Rama, maybe hit the Hoi-Hoi on the Range Diner."

Ellen snickered. "An all out date then. Complete with sex?"

The corner of Frank's mouth raised in a smile that he quickly erased. "I would never presume that."

"Right." She shook her head. "I'm in New Bowman Wednesday working at the clinic."

"What about after?"

"I'm busy." She turned and faced him. "I have a date."

"Now see, why did you let me go on and on when . . ."

"With you." Ellen smiled.

"Yes."

"Oh." Dean's voice in a complaining manner sounded off in the room. "That sucks. You guys have a date."

"There he goes." Frank held out his hand. "Picking on me." He saw Dean glaring. "Dean, stop it. You're scaring me."

"Ha, ha, ha. Asshole. Here." Dean threw a shirt at Frank. "Cover up, your dad sent that. And those stitches should be bandaged."

"El said they don't need to." Frank tossed on his shirt. "I should head out. Thanks, El." He leaned down and kissed her on the cheek.

"Frank." Ellen said. "Good job with the bear."

"Thanks." He moved to the door.

"*You* got the bear?" Dean asked.

Frank stopped and turned around. "Yeah. I lured it in and wrestled him for fifteen minutes. Why?"

Dean shrugged. "Weird. I mean, I thought . . . Hal . . . got the bear. After all, he is wearing the present the women of the community gave him for being a hero."

"Fuck. I fuckin knew it. He claimed my bear. Chewed up or not, I'm

killing him.” Frank took off.

Ellen snickered. “Why did you do that?”

“Do what? I’m not lying. The women gave Hal a sweater they made to thank him for getting that bear.”

“Poor Frank.”

“Speaking of poor Frank. Are you really going on a date with him?”

“Yes.” Ellen answered. “We’re going to have an evening. He’s gonna spend some of his hard earned Danny Dollars on me. What else is there to do with them.”

Dean let out a confused snicker. “Danny Dollars? What are they?”

“Oh, they’re a mock form of money, Danny Hoi invented.” Ellen spoke nonchalantly. “You get one Danny dollar for every community hour worked. And they are used to buy things in Danny shop, or dinner, or movies and such.” She lifted the tray. “Everyone gets them. Of course I blow mine every time I’m in New Bowman. I’m taking this to the lab. See you there.”

Dean nodded as she left. And just as he was about to follow her, he stopped. “Wait a second.” He spoke to himself. “Danny Dollars. Hours worked.” He scratched his head. “We’re getting paid? Why do I not know this?”

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“Um . . . Um famous.” Richie Martin nodded to Jess in containment, then smacked himself on top of the head. “Looks, looks good. Huh?”

Long and drawn out was Jess’ one pacifying word. “Yeah.” He nodded and looked down to the copy machine photo of Richie’s face.

“Frank-Frank, took that one.” Richie said with enthusiasm. “Bet-better than the one Robbie, Robbie took. Yeah, better.”

“I see.” Jess smiled rocking in the chair as he sat behind Ellen’s desk. “And you signed it.”

“Yeah. And I don’t look so scared. Yeah. My hair looks good. Yeah.”

“Would be perfect if it wasn’t for Frank’s fingers.”

“Yeah.” Richie snickered. “But Frank’s cool.”

“Been hanging around with Frank?” Jess asked.

“Frank saved me. Yeah. From the society. Yeah. He’s my, he’s my pal. He’s my pal.” Richie gave twitch to his head and rubbed his chin on his shoulder. “Shame about that bear. Damn, damn Hal.”

“Yeah, that damn Hal.” Jess handed the picture back to Richie.

“No. For you. I can make lot, I can make lots more. Frank said Joe said.”

"I see. And does Joe . . ." Jess looked up when he heard the buzz of containment's security door. He looked to his watch. "Wonder who that is."

"Want me to check." Richie peeked his head out the office door. "It's Henry. Should I make him a picture."

"Yeah, you do that."

"O.K." Richie walked over to the copy machine and lifted the lid. "Wanna help."

"No, do a self portrait."

"O.K." Richie smiled and proceeded to do just that.

Henry walked in. "Robbie where did you . . . you're not Robbie." Before Jess could say anything the shifting sound of the copier was heard and Henry turned his head to see Richie under the lid. "What's he doing."

"Self portraits." Jess answered.

"Oh. Anyhow, what are you doing here?" Henry asked.

"Filling in for Robbie."

"Where's he at?" Henry asked then looked to the sound of the copier making another copy. "Hey, Richie, stop wasting paper."

"Joe said I could." Richie said muffled under the hood.

"Oh." Henry nodded. "All right." He looked back to Jess. "Why isn't Robbie working."

"Henry." Jess said his name with snicker. "He was attacked by a grizzly bear."

"Damn Hal." Richie said then handed Henry the picture. "Want me to, to sign it."

"No." Henry shook his head. "I'll come back for that. Jess, tell Robbie if you see him that I don't appreciate him sneaking into Mechanics and stealing work.."

"Listen to you." Jess snickered. "Stealing work. What? To do?"

"Yes."

"So, what." Jess stood up. "Let him. And Henry, can I offer you some advice. Ease up, O.K.?"

"Figures you would side with Robbie."

"No, that's not it." Jess explained. "You took a cheap shot at him. You came down on him. You stopped talking to almost everyone, especially Dean and Ellen."

Henry took a slow breath. "You know why."

"Yes, I do. You've been way too stressed out. Too stressed out."

"There's a lot on my mind, Jess." Henry stated then swiped a nosey Richie away. "Andrea was a good friend, she's gone. And . . . and the other thing is killing me."

"It shouldn't." Jess leaned against the desk and moved Richie's face as it interjected.

"Why?"

"Why? I'll tell you. You stopped talking to two of your friends because, out of concern, they discovered something you didn't want anyone to know. You're bitter and angry."

"Because I hate myself for it."

"Really?" Jess folded his arms. "So why did you let it happen again?" He waited for an answer. "You want my opinion on why the situation bothers you? You're pissed at yourself. Pissed . . . not because you hate it, but because you like it. Like it because, though considered not natural, it's giving you a part of something you want, need and miss."

"Stop it."

"No, you stop it." Jess remained calm. "You're mad at yourself and you're taking it out on everyone else. You can't do that. Getting defensive will not keep it a secret."

Placing his palm over Richie's face, Henry moved him out of the way. "I can't . . . I can't let it get out. I can't."

"And keeping it a secret is making you ashamed of what you're doing. The shame is making you nasty. You shut out Ellen and Dean."

"That's because the looks on their faces said it all. They were disgusted with me."

Jess laughed. "They were not. Talk to them about it. Me and Hector are here, but some people in this place have been there for you for a really long time. What about Frank?"

"I've been avoiding Frank."

"What's he say about it?"

"He hasn't noticed. He's been busy with the bear."

"Henry . . ."

"No, Jess. You act like I should just be open."

"You should." Jess said.

"Then if it's not such a terrible thing for everyone to know, why do you hide it?"

Jess was silent for a moment. "You're right. If it makes you feel any better, I'll let my preference of men be public knowledge too."

"No." Henry shook his head and moved to the door. "I think I just need to work it out in my mind, that's all."

"Do it less violently and less miserably." Jess told him. "You're timing is really bad for the personality change."

Henry paused in the door. "Robbie said something to you, didn't he?"

He nodded. "Did he give you the theory that my mood is the result of my suppressed guilt."

"As far fetched to you as it sounds . . ." Jess tossed his hands up. "You keep snapping at people, coming down on people, avoiding them, Robbie won't be the only one who thinks you killed Bev."

Wrong thing to say. A mild conversation went out of control and it started with a long, loud Richie scream, that ended with Richie flinging his little body so hard at Henry, they both sailed into the hall.

From the hall, Henry grunted loud and angry. "Get off!"

Jess sprang forward, but didn't have to go to far to stop the violence. With a smirk he stepped back when Richie came back into the office with the photocopy of himself.

"Got my picture back." Richie huffed. "Henry killed Bev. Killed Bev. Henry killed Bev."

Jess cringed. "Richie, you shouldn't . . . nah, never mind." He returned to sitting behind Ellen's desk.

Richie poked his head out of the office door watching Henry leave. "Henry killed Bev. That, that, bastard."

^^^

It was odd because the transfer was so polite. Ellen glanced from her running sink water to the plate Denny set in the sink. "Thank you." She said softly.

Denny smiled and nodded then stepped back.

Ellen heard shuffling, the sound of nervous moving feet behind her. She turned to see Denny and Josh standing there. "I thought you guys were getting the game ready."

Josh nudged Denny. "Ask her."

"No you ask her."

"I'm standing right here." Ellen said. "Ask me what?"

"O.K." Josh cleared his throat. "Can I live with Denny?"

"No." Ellen answered.

"Can I at least go with him?"

"No." Ellen said. "Pap is having a Slagel men night over there. And we're playing a game."

"Huh?" Josh scratched his head.

"She doesn't know what you mean." Denny said.

"Oh." Josh nodded. "No. I want to live in New Bowman with Denny."

Ellen laughed. "Denny isn't living in New Bowman."

Denny nodded. "Yes, I am."

"Does Joe know this?" Ellen asked.

"He gave the O.K." Denny explained. "He thinks it would be a good idea to be away from Beginnings with all that went on with Mom."

Ellen pegged it. Right then and there. She knew Denny was different, and she couldn't figure it out until that moment. Denny spoke differently. "Josh . . ." Ellen kept her eyes on Denny. "Josh, go get the game board set up."

"O.K., but will you think about me leaving?" He asked.

"Yes. I'll think about it." Ellen gave an a pacifying answer then returned to Denny after Josh had left. "Denny, Katie will miss you too much."

"Katie is going to live in New Bowman too."

Ellen's eyes widened. "This is ridiculous. How and what are you two going to do in New Bowman. Hal can't take care of you."

"Cap . . . I mean Hal isn't." Denny explained. "There's this woman in New Bowman who has asked to take care of us. Joe will visit as much as he can. Hal will be there every day. And it's just for a little while. At least with Katie. Me . . . I'm joining the UWA."

"Oh my God. Hal will not allow it. You're only sixteen."

"I'll be seventeen and Hal gave permission and Joe agreed. They have this school there Ellen. They teach you how to be one of them. They also teach you history and math and culture."

"And they'll change you." Ellen told him. "They already have."

Denny shook his head. "No, the UWA didn't change me. What happened with my mother did. I want to do this. Katie does too."

Ellen exhaled. "Well, I guess I have my excuse. Alex loves New Bowman, Now I have a reason to bring her every time I go." She looked up to Denny. "My response is shock, Denny. Don't misinterpret it as anything bad. Being a UWA soldier is something to be proud of." Her eyes shifted when Dean hurried into the kitchen and to the refrigerator. "Dean? What's wrong?"

"Elliott, he . . ." Dean noticed Denny standing there. "Den, could you . . ."

"Sure, Dr. Dean. Ellen, thanks. I'll go make sure Josh doesn't set the game up to cheat like Uncle Frank."

"You do that." Ellen smiled, then turned serious when she looked at Dean. "What's wrong?"

"Elliott's neck has swelled up."

"The treatments?"

"A side effect we didn't think of. I need to blast him with an anti



inflammatory.” Dean opened the fridge. “And pack his neck with ice. We have to get the swelling down, it’s effecting his breathing.”

“Sedate him.” Ellen suggested.

“Oh, I plan on it. A man who can not get enough air is a man who can’t stay calm. No matter how much he tries to act it.” He set the vial on the counter and opened the fridge. “Can you get me a dish towel.”

“Sure.” Ellen handed him one and lifted the vial as Dean wrapped ice in the towel. “El, wet a cloth and stick it in the . . . what are you doing?” His views shifted to the medication she held.

“Dean. Let me give him this. Please. I’m worried. Let me just give him one dose and see how he’s doing for myself.”

“El.” His hand wrapped around hers and he clenched it. “As much as I would love to have you see for yourself, and feel better knowing. I can’t. I can’t.”

“Maybe Elliott changed his mind. He’s out.”

“He’s awake now.”

“Maybe he changed his mind.”

Dean shook his head.

“How do you know.”

After a brief pause, Dean slowly pulled the vial from her hand. “I asked him. I’m sorry.”

Ellen wanted to try just one more argument to see Elliott, but she couldn’t. Dean had left before she could get out a single syllable.

^^^

It was vibrant deep blue, cozy and warm, and it was way too small for Frank. The knitted sleeves came mid-forearm, and the bottom of the sweater—had Frank not been wearing a tee shirt—would have exposed his hairy belly.

“Fuck.” He grabbed the collar of the sweater. “I’m strangling here.”

Joe pointed at him as he passed through the livingroom. “And you’ll wear it.”

“It’s Hal’s.” Frank argued.

Hal come from the kitchen and set the plates on the table. “And you were the one whining about it.”

“No.” Frank corrected. “I bitched about you claiming victory on my bear. I said nothing about the sweater.”

Joe shrugged. “You wanna be a hero. You have to look the hero, Frank.”

"Tell me when the last time you saw a might bear hunter with a knitted fuckin sweater." Frank said. "Ask Robbie." He indicated to Robbie who was occupied with something that beeped on the couch. "What's that?"

"Oh, check this out." Robbie held it up. "It's an old hand held video game. I got it from Bev's house."

"Dad." Frank looked at Joe. "He's stealing evidence."

"I told him he could play with it." Joe said. "He dusted it for prints."

"And Robbie's a suspect." Frank interjected. "What if his prints were on there, and he wiped them away."

Robbie only looked up from his game.

Joe went dramatically serious. "Well, then, Frank, we'll just dust the game again, and get them."

"How?" Frank asked.

The plates dropped from Hal's hand. "He's touching it, Frank. God."

"What?" Frank tossed his hands up. "Everyone picks on me." He walked to the window. "Where's Johnny? He said he's coming."

Joe shook his head. "He said it before. Doesn't mean he will."

"Yeah, but he said he wants to start hanging out with me."

Robbie laughed in a high pitch and shook his head.

Oddly, Hal looked at Robbie. "I hope that was in reference to the game."

"No." Robbie's fingers moved fanatically. He bit his bottom lip. "It's funny. Johnny hanging with Frank. He hates him."

"Hey." Frank said with defense. "My kid doesn't hate me."

"Johnny hates Frank?" Hal questioned. "Why don't I know this?"

"You suck." Frank replied.

Hal rolled his eyes. "Dad?"

"Johnny doesn't hate Frank." Joe explained. "Johnny went through that distancing phase everyone goes through. You know, wants to be independent. And he and Frank don't see eye to eye."

Frank had the answer to that. "That's because I'm six . . ."

"Don't." Joe stopped him. "Don't even say something stupid."

Hal laughed and began to set the table. He spotted Joe's keys. "Where do you want these?" He picked both sets up.

"Toss them on the counter." Joe said as he moved toward the kitchen.

"Honestly, Dad." Hal lifted both sets. One had multitudes of keys, the other two. A normal size key and a small odd looking one. "Why do you need two sets?"

"Ones community keys, the other my office and telephone lock box."

With a chuckle Hal set down the keys on the counter and returned to

the table. "You lock the phone?"

"You don't?" Joe asked. "Those phones are high security."

"Yes, that's why I pass-code protect it. As soon as you turn it on, you have to enter your code."

Shocked, Joe stopped lifting the casserole dish. "They do that?"

"Yes, would you like me to show you."

With a grumble, Joe shook his head. "Nah. Can't be bothered." He carried the dish to the table. "Frank. Robbie. Dinner." He moved to his seat.

"Can I take off this sweater?" Frank asked as he made it to the table.

"Nope." Joe began to dish out his food. "You wanted it. You got it."

"Yes, Frank." Hal instigated. "It looks great on you."

"Shut up Hal." Frank sat down.

"Enough. I would like to eat in peace." Joe stated while starting his dinner.

"Dad?" Robbie asked, sitting down. "Where's Katie and Denny?"

"Next door." Joe answered. "And, do you think I want them here with the language you three goddamn assholes use."

Frank shrugged. "Guess not."

"Dad." Hal folded his hands. "I take offense to that. I rarely use bad . . ." He shifted his eyes to Frank who laughed. "What is your problem."

"You take offense." Frank shook his head with a laugh.

"And what is wrong with me taking offense." Hal asked.

"Really, nothing. You saying you take offense is another thing." Frank said. "Why do you talk like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you do. I don't know . . ."

Joe interjected. "Proper."

Frank snapped his finger. "Yeah. Thanks, Dad. Proper. Why do you talk proper."

"Why not?" Hal asked.

"Why do it."

Joe grumbled. Robbie laughed.

"Why not?" Hal asked again. "Civilization is being rebuilt, why not speak civilized."

Frank scoffed. "I speak civilized. You speak pompous. It's a fucked up apocalyptic world Hal and you talk like you're ready to schedule tea. Plus, your women are lesbians."

Hal gasped. "What's that have to do with anything?"

Frank shrugged with a snicker. "It's funny."

"There is something wrong with you." Hal shook his head and ate. "I swear you get worse the older you get."

"But . . ." Frank held up a finger. "No matter how old I get, I can still kick your ass."

"You think?" Hal questioned with a snap.

"I know."

"You think?"

"Boys." Joe grunted. "Stop it."

"Dad." Frank defended. "I'm merely stating the facts. Ask Robbie, Hal, ask him who can kick who's ass."

Joe set down the fork. "Leave Robbie out of it."

"Yes." Hal agreed. "Robbie would be biased. You can be in a wheel chair and he'd still say you'd kick my ass."

"That's because I could." Frank stated. "Tell him Robbie."

Robbie tilted his head innocently. "He could, Hal. Sorry."

Hal grumbled. "Figures. Frank, you have brain washed him."

"No." Frank shook his head. "He respects me. That's because he's been with me. You on the other hand, haven't been around."

"Yeah, Hal." Robbie instigated. "Where you been?"

A squeal came from Hal. "I've been out in this world. And surely I would have been in Beginnings has someone not taken the contingency note off of Dad's door."

"Who?" Frank asked. "Who did that?"

Robbie raised his hand. "Guilty."

Frank laughed hard. "Oh, man is that funny."

"Funny?" Hal questioned with anger. "You think it's funny that . . ."

"Hal." Joe interrupted. "It's getting old this complaint. Robbie made a mistake. Let it go."

Hal couldn't believe his ears. "You act as if it was nothing. You guys were together. I spent years thinking I had lost my family."

"Robbie never thought we died." Frank said. "He searched for us. You should have searched too."

Robbie looked up. Even though he knew the reasoning behind Frank's comment, he had to add fuel to the fire. "I searched for you guys? When?"

"Yes, Frank." Joe repeated. "When?"

"When what?" Frank asked.

Joe held back his irritation. "You said Robbie searched for us. When?"

"Um . . ." Frank's eyes shifted about. "I had a dream that he did. So there." He exhaled. "Anyhow. Even if Robbie did search for us in the non Frank dream world, bet me we wouldn't have found him dressed like a

wuss.”

“A wuss?” Hal asked with edge. “Why do you pick on my uniform so much.”

“Look at it.”

“Yes, look at it.” Hal said. “It has flare, it stands out. You on the other hand dress the way you did twenty years ago.”

“Yeah, and there’s a reason.” Frank stated. “Not all of us can wear button down fancy fuckin uniforms with fashion boots. Some of us have to be comfortable to do the shit we do. Plus . . .” Frank ran his hand down his own chest. “With the exception of the sweater, I go to great lengths to look this good.”

Hal rolled his eyes. “Yes, Frank, it’s tough to be you.”

“A lot tougher than being you.”

“All right.” Joe finally intruded in a strong manner. “You wanna know why you two bicker and fight so bad. Yell and judge each other?”

Frank shrugged. “No, not really.”

“Frank.” Joe snapped. “I’ll tell you. You’ve never walked in each others shoes, that’s why.”

“Dad.” Frank snickered. “I can’t walk in Hal’s shoes. I wear three sizes bigger than . . .”

Joe closed his eyes. “Frank . . .”

“It would be tough. I mean walk in shoes that are too small . . .”

“Frank!”

“Of course he could walk in my shoes, there would be room to move about, shove a pair of socks . . .”

“Frank.” Joe slammed his hand. “Knock it off!”

“All right!” Frank yelled. “I’ll fuckin wear Hal shoes. Can I at least take off the sweater.”

“Christ.” Joe rubbed his eyes. “Why do I bother. No Frank. What I mean is, you’ve never done each other’s job.”

“That’s because Hal can’t do my job.” Frank nodded. “Can he Robbie?”

“I doubt it.” Robbie agreed.

Hal held out his hand. “Of course he’d agree, *he* can do your job Frank. Anyone can do your job. What do you do. Walk a few perimeters, fill out reports, yell a lot.”

“And what do you do?” Frank asked. “Raise the flag, lower the flag. Eat at your mess hall. Hal, your job’s as fuckin easy as Dad’s . . .” He saw Joe look at him. “As Dad’s used to be. Yeah.”

“If you two think each other’s lives are so simple. Switch.” Joe suggested. “Twenty four hours, switch jobs and everything.”

“Oh my God.” Robbie smiled. “This would be so great. Can I switch with you, Dad?”

“No.” Joe answered. “Frank? Hal?”

“Sure.” Hal sat back. “I mean, if I can’t do Frank’s job, I’m not fit to lead my community. I’ll switch. Frank?”

“Yeah. I’ll do it. Name when.”

“Let’s see. We are heavy into Spanish literature this week, so I’d prefer my men not speaking like baboons. Wednesday.”

“Wednesday it is . . . no.” Frank shook his head. “I’m off on Wednesday.”

“You take days off?” Hals asked. “Wow, I don’t.”

“No. I don’t take days off. I’ll do it Wednesday.”

“Good.” Joe spoke up. “It’s settled. Wednesday morning, both of you finish up your early morning stuff. And from eight Wednesday to eight a.m. Thursday you switch places. Hal, do you have a uniform big enough for Frank.”

“Uh!” Frank’s shriek drowned out Hals’ response. “No. I am not wearing a UWA uniform.”

“Um, Frank.” Robbie whispered. “You’re wearing a tight blue sweater. Really it isn’t any worse.”

“True. But still.” Frank argued.

“But still my ass.” Joe said. “You switch everything. Even Hal will dress like you. Everything. You agreed. If you back out now, Hal’s the better man.”

Hal grinned “Frank?”

“I’ll do it.” He grumbled. “Now, what exactly is the point to this switch again?”

Through the moans of Hal and Robbie Joe spoke up. “It’s for you to appreciate how hard the other works. And for me . . .” He gave a twitch to his head. “It’s gonna be worth it just to see you, Frank in . . . what do you call them? Fashion boots.” After a flash of a smile, Joe happily returned to his dinner. It was quiet, it was enjoyable, because Frank had finally shut up.

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“Two hundred and thirty-two, El.” Dean followed Ellen down the hall.

“Dean. Enough.” She laughed.

“No, I’m serious.”

“You’re making too much out of this.” She walked into their room. “Stop it.”

“El, listen.” He shut the bedroom door. “I figured it out. I figured out I

am owed two hundred and thirty-two hours. Now I went to Danny, and he said. 'Dean, you never punched the time clock'. So, like a 'Frank', I believed him and went to Joe, figuring he could pull some strings. I didn't know about punching a clock, hell, I didn't know about getting paid. Joe laughed."

"That's because this is silly." Ellen plopped on the bed. "Dean, you really don't even need Danny dollars. You want to see a show, bowl, buy something, do it. The dollars are . . ."

"A symbol." Dean finished the sentence. "They symbolize that you worked hard. El, half the enjoyment of having something is knowing you earned it. I want Danny Dollars. Why didn't I get them?"

"Danny hated you when it all started. That's all I can think of."

"Swell." Dean sat on his twin bed.

"Dean, they won't do you any good. You're not allowed to hoard them. You have to put them right back to the community."

"Hoard them?"

"Yeah, save them up. I can see you doing that."

"Ellen, I probably would turn them all over to you anyhow on pay day."

"Ah, that's sweet." Ellen smiled. "You don't need them. What is the big deal?"

"Did it ever occur to you, El, that I would love to have them just so . . . just for once I can buy my wife something. Take her somewhere like on a date."

"Oh." Ellen nodded and sang the word. "This is what it's all about. You're mad about my date with Frank."

"No. Yes, but not why you think. Frank and I have a sort of understanding." He saw her laughing. "What?"

"It's funny, you two getting along." She shook her head. "It doesn't seem natural."

"Well, it doesn't feel natural either. But we're still doing it. Only, until you tell me we're officially staying married, I can't tell you who to go out with."

"We're officially staying married, Dean. Are you making me break my date with Frank?"

"No."

"But you're mad."

"Yes. But not about the date." Dean explained. "Taking you out . . . I want to do that. Since New Bowman developed I never got a chance to take you there. Every guy in this community who is involved with a woman has taken her to New Bowman. It's the night spot. I have a wife and haven't taken her there. Then again, Frank says the reason I'm not making progress

with you is because I never tried.”

“You haven’t.”

Dean went silent for a moment and he slowly stood from the bed. He walked over crouching before Ellen.

She giggled. “What are you doing?”

“I’m gonna try.”

“Dean.” Ellen stood up laughing. “You don’t have to try. We’re O.K., we’re really getting there.”

“But, El.” He stood before her close. “We haven’t touched. We haven’t kissed. It’s been forever since we’ve . . .” He lowered his head and brought it close to whisper. “You know how long it’s been.”

“Dean.” She whispered back. “We’ll get back to all that. We will. It takes time, and steps and . . .”

They both looked up to the sound of coughing.

Dean took a breath. “Elliott. I should go check on him.”

“I would like to be the one but . . .” She saw Dean getting ready to speak. “I know. He says, ‘no.’ Dean? When do you think he’ll let me care for him?”

“I think he should be letting you care for him now. But, I don’t know. Maybe tomorrow when he starts getting better.”

“Can I ask you something? Honest opinion, O.K.?” Ellen waited for Dean to nod. “I’m like starting to think this is bullshit. I know that sounds cold with him sick and . . .”

“It is.” Dean interrupted. “I think it is. You care for him. A lot. You want to be there in a doctor capacity and friend. Out of care for you, he should want you there. Now, I don’t think the question is whether Elliott cares about you or not. I believe he does. The question is, does he know *how* to care for someone. And if you think about it, I say the answer is ‘no’. Elliott doesn’t know *how* to care. He needs to learn. And if you think about that, at this point in your life, his life, is that a learning process you want to wade through.” Dean started to leave.

“Dean.” Ellen stopped him. “Are you saying this because you don’t want me involved with Elliott?”

“No. I’m saying this because I don’t want you hurt. You don’t need that. Other things keep you too happy for you to get down over him.”

Ellen snickered in a scoff. “Elliott, would never hurt me.”

Very seriously, Dean looked at her. “He already has.” He grabbed for the door. “Think about it.”

Perhaps in was a momentary lapse of brain power, but Ellen stood dumfounded when Dean left as to how Elliott hurt her. And just as her mind



wished she was able to go into the next bedroom and help take care of Elliott, she knew exactly what Dean meant.

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“Frank, no.” Hal grabbed Frank’s hand mid reach into the scrabble lid. “Seven tiles.”

“I took seven tiles.” Frank stated. “Now I’m getting one more.”

“No, Frank.” Hal argued. “Read the rules. You only take seven tiles.”

“When I’m not playing with Robbie. Robbie lets me take eight.”

Hal looked at Robbie. “Is that true?”

“Yeah.” Robbie nodded staring at his tile holder. “I mean, he is at a disadvantage sometimes.”

“I am.” Frank said. “I’ve been temporarily mentally disabled off and on for a while. See . . .” He reached into his back pocket and handed Hal a note. “It’s a doctor’s excuse from Dean.”

Hal read the note. “*Frank is temporarily mentally disabled.*” He handed the note back. “Seven tiles only.”

Deciding to give his two cents worth, Joe interjected. “Hal. Seven tiles. Eight tiles. It’s Frank, what does it matter.”

Hal stared at Frank’s hovering hand. “All right. Take eight.”

“Thank you.” Frank reached in and pulled one out. “Yes! Oh, yes! This is beautiful.” He placed it in his holder with a smirk.

Like a spirit raising up into the clouds, Joe stood from the diningroom table into the cloud of cigarette smoke that lingered above the Slagel men. “I’m calling it a night.”

Hal stopped in his setting up his tiles. “You’re not playing?”

“No. And you three should think about rest too. You were wrestling with a pretty big bear.”

Cigarette dangling from his mouth, Robbie looked up. “Wait until you see the next one we get.” “Oh, brother.” Joe shook his head and gave a pat to Frank’s back as he passed him. “Night.”

Frank leaned into the table. “Notice which one of us he gave affection to?” He winked.

“I heard that.” Joe said then stopped when the door opened. “Look what the cat dragged in.”

Johnny stepped inside. “Hey, Pap. Dad. Am I too late?”

Joe shook his head. “You can take my place in scrabble.”

“Going to bed, Pap?”

“Yeah. Night, John.” Joe lifted his hand and walked down the hall.

"Sorry, I'm late." Johnny took off his coat and tossed it at the coat rack. It bounced off and fell to the floor. Rolling up his sleeves he walked over and sat next to his father. "Dr. Dean had so much work for me."

"That's all right." Frank laid his hand on Johnny's back. "You're here now."

"Cool job on the bear guys." Johnny reached for a tile rack. "Hey, Uncle Robbie. Since Dad is playing, are we playing your rules for scrabble, Ellen's or Pap's."

"Mine." Robbie answered. "They're the fairest."

"Wait a second." Hal held up his hand. "You mean everyone has different rules when it comes to playing with Frank?"

"Have to." Robbie said. "It's Frank. My rules are simple. He gets an extra tile, spelling doesn't count for him, and you don't have to use a 'U' on a 'Q' word. You can use a 'W' because they sound alike."

"That's absurd." Hal commented. "What are Ellen's rules."

Johnny decided to answer. "She sticks pretty much to the game rules with the exception of switching tiles. Dad can switch his tiles any time he wants and not lose a turn. But . . . he loses ten points for every tile he switches."

"And Dad's rules?" Hal asked.

"Simple." Robbie answered. "Blunt. The moment Frank uses a misspelled word, made up word or one Dad deems stupid. Game over. Dad wins."

Hal smiled. "I like that way. But, doesn't matter. I'll win." He rubbed his hands together. "All right, Since I'm first." Reaching for his tiles, he saw Robbie shake his head. "No? I'm not first? I picked the letter 'A' when we all reached into the bag."

"True, but . . ." Robbie pointed to Frank. "Frank goes first. He always goes first. My rules."

Hal grunted. "Go on. Since you have a gloating look."

"I do." Frank said cocky and began to lay his tiles down. "Ha!"

"Fuck?" Hal questioned. "You're proud of the word 'Fuck'?"

"Yeah." Frank nodded. "And it's worth what?"

Robbie answered and wrote down the score. "Twenty four points."

"Bite me, Hal." Frank reached for replacement tiles.

Shaking his head, Hal stood up. "I'm getting a drink. Anyone?" He saw them shake their heads. "I'll be back." He spoke as he walked backwards. "Don't let Frank touch my . . ." He saw Johnny's coat on the floor. "Tiles." Bending down because he wasn't one for a mess, Hal picked up Johnny's jacket. As he lifted it, his eyes caught glimpse of it fall to the floor. Hal

probably wouldn't have made that much out of seeing it, had it not been so small and odd shaped. A key. Like one he had just seen earlier. Shifting his eyes to see if he was being watched, Hal placed the jacket on the rack, turned and with a small scuff, gave a kick to the little key and sent it a few feet from him. In a swing of his arm during the walk to the kitchen, Hal swept the key up from the floor and continued his pace.

Key in hand, Hal peered out the opening of the kitchen then took that key to the counter. He looked at both sets of his father's keys laying there. Seeing the set with only two keys, Hal held up the small key on Joe's ring next to the one that fell from Johnny's coat. They looked the same. And it wasn't until he held them right against each other, that Hal knew they were the same. Carbon copies.

Hal was aware, without a doubt, that the small key unlocked the phone in his father's office. And to Hal, unless Joe authorized it, there was no reason for Johnny to have a copy of that key. It could have been innocent. It could have just been his father's back up key. Without justification for his feelings, warnings went immediately off to Hal. It was a tricky situation. He could say something to his father, and if it was innocent, everyone would come down on him for jumping to conclusions. But if Johnny was up to no good with that key, the problem would be getting his father and brothers to see that. The only thing for Hal to do was find out. And the solution to doing that was easy enough. Hal would just keep the key and tell no one. Because the key was of high importance. It locked away the only outside means of communication in Beginnings. If anything was mentioned about Johnny's key being missing, then Hal would know he was wrong. But if nothing was said, the key never brought up, then the gut instincts Hal was unfoundedly having of a family member were correct, and he'd have to pursue.

But for the time being he was taking too long. Hurrying to fetch a drink, Hal slipped the key into his pocket and walked to the diningroom. Everyone clapped.

"It's about fuckin time." Frank complained.

"Couldn't decide. Alcohol or not." Hal stated and looked at the board. "Let's see . . ."

"Hal!" Frank yelled. "Take your turn."

"Frank. Wait." Hal snapped. "I have to have a moment to see what . . . oh, yes. Here." Smiling, he grabbed some tiles. "Off your 'F'." He happily laid down his letters. "There."

Robbie shook his head. "Nope. Try again."

"What?" Hal laughed. "I used the word, 'Frank'. And it isn't only a proper name. So I can use it."

“No, you can’t.” Robbie told him. “Forgot to tell you a rule. Only Frank can use his name.”

“Damn it.” Hal took the tiles off. “Here. This describes how I feel.” He added two tiles to Frank’s original word.

“Hal, good one. Fucked.” Frank nodded impressed. “I never thought of doing that.”

Reaching for his tiles, Hal looked at him. “That’s because your swearing vocabulary consist of only the word ‘Fuck’ you fail to see there are many derivatives of it.”

“Hey, Hal.” Frank lifted his hand. “Here’s a derivative of it.” He flipped him off.

“Nice, very nice.” Ignoring what he thought was childish, praising laughter on Robbie’s part, Hal sunk into thought reviewing his tiles. Trying to plan ahead based on the spelling mentality of his brothers.

“Oh, man, John.” Frank said proud and loud. “Good word.”

“Double word too.” Robbie added and wrote down.

From his own forming of words with a shifting around of tiles, Hal looked up to see what Johnny had laid down. A hard shiver went through him. Stunned, he muttered in a whisper the word Johnny spelled. “Society.”

“That’s correct.” Frank told Hal. “And it’s spelled right. Good job with the ‘T’ before ‘E’ thing John.”

“Thanks.” Johnny snickered and grabbed tiles.

Clenching a little letter in his hand, Hal’s unblinking stare went from the word, to Johnny. The word to Johnny. Thoughts racing. No justification for them. Anger at himself for even thinking.

“Uncle Hal?” Johnny called out when he noticed the stare. “Is there a problem?”

“Um . . .” Hal smiled. “No.” He laid the tile back down. “I thought I had taken eight but only had seven. My fault. Good word, Johnny.” Hal looked at the word again. “Very . . . good . . . word.”

## CHAPTER NINE

November 9

Music not only soothed the savage beast, but it helped in keeping Grace quiet as she rode in the jeep with Hal to Beginnings. It limited his conversation for the ten miles that seemed like an eternity. But somehow, Hal wished that maybe Grace would start complaining. At the very least it would take his mind from where it was at. His family.

It had been two days since Hal was in Beginnings. He had no intentions of staying very long. He'd drop Grace off—she was above the Dan-tram mass transportation—say hello to his father and head back. Short trip.

But the trip to Beginnings brought to mind to Hal, the one thing Beginnings symbolized. His family. And with that thought came the thoughts of Johnny.

Was he wrong? Was he overreacting. Somehow, even though he was a Slagel, he still had a bit of an outsider point of view when it came to Johnny. His brothers and father, he knew well. But what of the young man did he know? The last he remembered of Johnny was a nine year old boy who barely spoke to him when he came home for leave.

Johnny.

Hal had to wonder if perhaps the key wouldn't have been that big of a deal had he not heard Robbie's comment that Johnny hated his father. Hal, Robbie, Frank and Jimmy had all gone through that phase that Joe spoke of. But never, in any of Hal's recollections, did the rebellion phase of their youth ever get misconstrued with hatred. What had Johnny done to make Robbie spew forth such a comment.

Hal thought a lot the night before. It was accompanied by so much tossing and turning. He debated on whether the restlessness was a result of his gut instincts, or guilt for thinking so badly of a family member.

He traced back in his mind since he had met Johnny a few months earlier. Had he ever seen Frank and Johnny argue? No. Had he ever seen Frank and Johnny just hang out . . . no. But the one thing that came to Hal's mind was when he question whether Johnny showed concern for Frank. And again, another no.

Frank was believed to be dead. Why was Johnny not exhibiting any grief? And then came the 'wheres'. Frank had returned from his episode with the society. Where was Johnny? There was a homecoming celebration. Where was Johnny? And when Frank was shot on the field during Neville

competition, everyone gathered around. But where was Johnny?

If Johnny showed no concern or went out of his way to make time for Frank, then why all of the sudden did he tell Frank he wanted to be pals? That, in itself made Hal think. Did Johnny have something to gain by getting close to Frank? Frank was security in Beginnings, but surely Johnny would have tried for security secrets sooner if that were the case. The only recent and new thing that Frank endeavored was heading off the Bev investigation. And that wouldn't be the reason, because Johnny, too, in part was in on the investigation. Unless there were things that Frank knew that Johnny had to find out. But why would Johnny care.

Who was Bev to him? Unless . . .

Hal's hand squeezed the steering wheel in his thoughts in frustration when he thought of the one word. The same one Johnny laid down on the Scrabble board.

Society.

Bev was more a part of the society than any other insider Beginnings had ever encountered. She was the leader's daughter. And because of cut off communication in fear of retaliation, George Hadly sat on the other side of the country ill informed about his daughter's death.

The only way for George to find out was if another insider lurked in Beginnings. And the only means to communication was a single phone, in Joe's office, under lock and key.

His father had the key. However, would he entrust a duplicate to just anyone. No matter who it was. There was no reason for Joe to mistrust his family, so why give Johnny a second key? Why not Frank, Robbie, or himself. The key was like gold, and Johnny had that treasure? It made no sense.

It was the key that was the final straw and the one that emotionally killed Hal. Letting it rest would be something he could not do. Even if quietly on his own he would look into it, Hal would. Something was just screaming 'amiss' about the whole thing.

"Captain." Grace's call of his name snapped him out. Her eyes looked to his hands that fidgeted on the steering wheel. "Are you . . . are you all right?"

Hal quickly shifted his eyes to the older woman. "As a matter of fact, Grace. No. I've a lot on my mind."

"Though I highly doubt the answer will be yes. Would you like to talk about it."

"No." Hal shook his head and ejected the tape that played in the jeep's player. "I however, would just like to talk about anything."

"Wonderful." Grace smiled. "Maybe you can share some pointers on

how I can capture the interest of Dr. Godrichson.”

Usually, Hal would grumble, but he didn’t. He smiled polite and sunk into thoughts that could help her. And Hal enjoyed doing that, because finally he was sinking into thoughts that weren’t eating him away.

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The buzz of the cryo lab door brought in a fast moving Dean. “Sorry.”

Ellen looked up, goggles on, from the counter. “That’s all right. You having things situated above means more time down here.”

“True.” In his pass of her, Dean kissed her on the cheek and moved to the sink. “All ready?”

“Yep.” Ellen looked at the microscope looking contraption on the counter. It was encircled with vials and petri dishes. “Let’s conceive some rabbits. This thing is so neat. I wish it worked for me.”

Dean dried off his hands. “If you had bionic vision, which Frank calls it, it would.”

“Does it work for you?”

“Yeah.” Dean nodded. “It really helps. Kind of tunnel visions the object I have to focus in on. It doesn’t magnify . . .”

“Only concentrates your focus so *you* can.”

“Exactly.” Dean said then pointed back to the window. “Does he know what we’re doing?”

Ellen quickly looked at Frank in his little Bev investigation office. “Nah. Hasn’t a clue and really he can care less.”

“Hey, El.” Dean leaned his hip on the counter. “I was thinking of trying the experimental acceleration enzyme.”

“Dean, we can barely get the embryos to attach . . .”

“Yeah, I know. But think about it. If we speed up the formation process, maybe we can speed up the attachment process so much, that there isn’t time for it to detach.”

“That’s a good theory.” Ellen said. “But we never tried it.”

“Why not now?” Dean asked. “I mean, we’re working on embryos anyhow. How long ago did we copy the acceleration gene sequence from the society embryos? A while ago. And how long have we been saying we’re gonna try our version.”

“For a long time. But we never . . .”

“Exactly.” Dean said without Ellen finishing. “We never really got a chance to do embryo work.”

“Dean, if this works we can end up with eight killer rabbits.”

Dean smiled. “That would be so funny.”

“Yeah.”

“Or, you know . . .” Dean’s smile dropped. “They could be normal. I mean the enzyme wasn’t designed to aid in mutating fetuses.”

“But you’re talking about a ‘Dean and Ellen’ experiment.”

“True. So . . . what do you say?”

“Why not.” Ellen said. “Oh, Dean. I just had a thought. Tell me what you think. O.K., now, we’re doing this artificial wombs to make a uterus that is what?”

“Suitable for all forms of mammal life. Why? What are you wanting to create. Our supplies of ovum and sperm are limited.”

“A human.”

Dean laughed. “No.” He shook his head. “Highly unethical in this phase of our experiment.”

“Dean, everything we do is highly unethical. What’s the difference.”

“It will probably abort.”

“A chance we take. But . . .” Ellen held up a finger. “It could rocket us so far ahead if it implants successfully and stays attached.”

“Would you want to inject it with the acceleration enzyme.”

“It was designed for humans anyhow . . .”

“It could be deformed.” Dean stated. “What then.”

“We watch the developmental phase. Learn from it. If the embryo is deformed. We abort.”

“Will you be able to do that? I mean, your ovum are the only ones we harvested. That child will be yours.”

“I won’t look at it that way.” Ellen held up her hand. “I won’t. We harvested my eggs for science, not for anything else.”

In thought, Dean tapped his hand on the counter. “The only problem is the sperm. The supply of human sperm is frozen. To do a successful conception today, we’d have to take time to defrost it and break it down. Fresh sperm would work..”

“We’ll get fresh sperm.” Ellen raised her eyebrows.

Dean cringed. “El, I’m not in the mood to do that.”

“Not in the mood?”

“Yeah. As hard as this is for you to believe, it’s a chore to produce a sample with you outside that door. Even if you left the lab, the pressure will still be there. I really don’t want to be stressed.”

“I understand . . .” Ellen paused to think. “Hey, what about . . .” She pointed.



Dean looked over Ellen's shoulder. "Frank? Frank will never do it."

"He might. It's been a while since he had sex. It won't hurt to ask."

"All right." Dean shrugged. "We'll ask. He looks like he's coming out now."

From behind his desk, Frank stood and grabbed the folder he had just placed a stack of papers into. "I'm out of here for now." He spoke softly, pushed in his chair and looked to the long freezer case that set behind him. "I'll be back later, Bri." After giving a smile Frank walked to the door, looked back one more time at the freezer and shut off the light.

They waited patiently for him to emerge.

In Frank's stride he stopped when he saw Dean and Ellen staring at him with what seemed to be, forced smiles. "What?"

"Hi, Frank." Ellen smiled.

"Frank." Dean grinned.

"I'm leaving." He started walking, but he never stopped staring in oddity at the pair.

After an exchange of nudging, Ellen spoke up. "Frank. What are you doing?"

"Leaving." He answered. "I have some questioning to do. Why?" He walked back to the counter.

"Well . . ." Ellen sounded innocent. "We were wondering if you could help us out with something."

"Yes." Dean added. "We need your help with an experiment we're working on."

"You don't wanna blow me up or electrocute me do you?"

Ellen snickered. "Don't be silly."

Frank looked at his watch. "How long will it take?"

Dean answered. "Depends on you. A few minutes maybe."

Nodding, Frank set down his folder. "What do you need?"

Ellen hesitated before she told him. "Sperm."

Frank's eyes widened. "Sperm? My sperm?"

"Yes." Ellen answered. "That's why we're asking you. Only your sperm will work. Because see, we need strong sperm and since you're strong we thought we'd ask you."

Frank understood. "O.K.. I'll do it."

Ellen smiled in her breath of relief. "See, Dean, I told you he would. Thanks Frank."

Frank shrugged. "Sure. Hey, it's not gonna hurt when you take it, is it?"

Curiously, Dean looked at Ellen then back to Frank. "Take it?"

"Yeah Dean." Frank rolled his eyes. "You know my sperm. You asked

for it. Did you forget. Is it gonna hurt when you take it.”

“Um, Frank.” Dean said. “We don’t take it. You give it.” He saw the confused look on Frank’s face. “Let me see if I can clarify.” He lifted a small specimen cup and gave it to Frank. “Here.”

Frank looked at the cup in his hand. “What’s this for.”

Hearing Dean groan, Ellen decided to answer. “It’s for your sperm. You put it in there. We have a back room for privacy so you can make the deposit.”

From the cup to Ellen, Frank looked. Calmly he nodded, set down the cup, picked up his folder and walked out of the lab.

Ellen slammed her hand with a moan. “Damn it.”

“I told you.” Dean said shaking his head.

“You were right. I’m upset. I wanted to do this.” Slowly her eyes lifted to Dean and they took on a pleading look. “I really wanted to do this. Dean?”

With a flutter of his eyes, Dean let out a wince. “Oh . . . all right. But no knocking on the door to see if I’m done yet or singing bad porno movie music.”

“Promise.”

After a grunt, Dean, with irritation, swept up the specimen cup and went to the back room.

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The anticipation of waiting made it worse on Jenny, and Joe knew it. After looking at his watch, he glanced to Grace who was going to be at every questioning as a silent, impartial observer, just to ensure fairness. “Grace, this really isn’t an all out thing. Do you suppose it would be all right if I didn’t wait for Frank.”

Grace nodded.

After a deep breath, Joe looked at Jenny. “O.K., I kind of think you know what is going on.”

“I sort of do, Joe, yes.” Jenny stared down to her folded hands.

Joe looked at her. “The reason I called you here Jenny, is not to question you. That will be done later. I just wanted you to know, based on the bad history and incidents, you’re being considered a suspect in Bev’s murder.”

Very calmly, Jenny bit her bottom lip with a nod. “And you’ll let me know when you need to question me?”

“Yes. Not yet. You’re pretty low priority.” Joe winked.

“All right.” She said almost sweet. “Will that be all, I have rolls baking.”

“Yes, that will be all. Thank you.” Joe watched her stand up. “Jenny. Thanks for taking this very calm. A lot of folks aren’t.”

“What other way is there to be? I’m not worried, Joe. Not at all. Why should I be upset. I didn’t kill her.” She smiled. In the reach for the door, it opened and Frank walked in. “Hi, Frank.”

“Hey, Jenny. Dad, sorry I’m late.” He handed the folder to Joe.

Jenny waved and proceeded to leave, stepping aside in her exit for Jess who walked in.

Jess closed the door and exhaled his nervousness. “Joe, Frank.” He gave a nod to Grace.

“Have a set.” Joe indicated to a chair.

“Thanks.” Jess sat down.

“Jess.” Joe spoke. “This is informal questioning. Grace is here to make sure we’re fair. If you feel uncomfortable and refuse to answer any questions, you state your objection to her. Got that.”

“Yes.” He folded his hands and leaned forward slightly. “I’m an open book.”

“Good. Glad to hear it.” Joe lifted a notebook. “Frank? All yours.”

“Thanks.” Frank leaned on the edge of the desk. He projected a different air to him, one more serious and focused. “Jess, when would you say your first contact with Bev was in Beginnings.”

“Hard to say, Frank.” Jess shrugged. “I may or may not have had contact with her when the virus hit. I was helping out. I do remember having contact with her here and there, seeing her in the social hall from then on.”

“Any long conversations with her ever?”

“No.”

“Did you talk to her at all in a social capacity.”

“No.” Jess answered. “I didn’t really bother much with her. Actually, I don’t really bother too much with anyone in Beginnings.” As he answered he looked to Joe who only wrote down.

And Joe did. In his own version of shorthand he jotted the question and the answer given. But the whole time Joe kept looking at Frank, looking at his son’s face. Checking it out for signs. Perhaps Frank would show hint that Jess was the one he saw at Bev’s house. Or Frank would show irritation in wasting time on Jess. But Frank didn’t. His expression was cold.

“When Danny Hoi and his little mystery buster gang discovered Bev’s antics . . .” Frank continued. “He said they called everyone she affected. Why were you there?”

“I was at Ellen’s when Henry came over and busted the wall. We all went together. Me, El, Robbie and Elliott.”

“So you attended the meeting because you happened to be there when the invitation was given?”

“Yes.” Jess replied.

“There’s talk she was blackmailing you. That wasn’t the reason you were at the meeting?” Frank asked.

“I told you Frank, I went because I was around. But if you want the truth, yeah, she was blackmailing me or trying to.” Jess reached into his back pocket and handed Frank the note. “Here. This is the one she left me. You’ll see this matches word for word what was on that typewriter ribbon.”

Frank read it and passed it to Joe.

After reviewing the words, Joe glanced up at Jess. “This is pretty incriminating. It implies . . .”

“That I’m a traitor, yes.” Jess answered. “She had it in her mind that I defected on purpose.” He shrugged. “Like it was a set up by the society. It was one of her games I guess. And it really sounded plausible and the thought of defending myself against her allegations frightened me.”

“Is that why you didn’t come forward with the note?” Joe asked.

“Yes. With all that was going down with Andrea, it seemed Beginnings was out for blood with insiders. Joe, I didn’t want to even take a chance of you thinking I was a traitor. I just thought I’d let her play her games and she tire of them.”

“Or die.” Frank said. “O.K. What I need for you to do is write me a statement. I want hour by hour details of what you did that night from the meeting on. Got that?”

“Yes. When do you need it?” Jess asked.

“As soon as you can give it to me.”

“You’ll have it tomorrow. Will that be all?” Jess started to stand up.

“Yeah.” Frank nodded. “That’s it.”

“Thanks.” Jess walked to the door. “If you need anything else, let me know.”

Joe smiled with a wave and waited for him to leave. “All right. I wrote down questions and answers. You plan on rephrasing them?”

“Yeah, after he has a couple . . .”

“Frank.” Joe stopped him and gave a motion point of his head to the door that opened.

Pale, drawn out and seemingly out of breath, Dan the security guy entered. “Do you . . . Do you guys have a second?”

“Sure.” Joe answered. “What’s wrong.”

“Oh, Joe.” Dan grabbed his chest. “This has me so upset.” He sat down. “I hate to do this. I may be wrong, but it’s something you guys should

look into.”

“What’s that?” Frank asked.

“It has to deal with Bev’s murder.” Dan replied. “I believe there’s someone that you have to talk to. They know something.”

Joe and Frank looked at each other.

^^^

“Getting situated . . .” Dean stood in an explaining mode before Ellen in the clinic lab. “You take care of these results, I do John’s quick exam and head down to the cryo lab again. And stop that.”

“What?” Ellen held back her giggle.

“Looking at me like that. You do that on purpose.”

“I can’t help it Dean. You look so . . . relieved?”

“Bye.” He kissed her on the cheek and walked across the lab.

“Dean, what do you think of when you . . .”

“Bye.” Dean lifted his hand as he walked out. He ignored her laughing and proceeded to the examining room where John was waiting. “Sorry. I had to talk to Ellen.”

“No problem.” John sat on the examine table.

“So, you walked here?” Dean opened his chart.

“Yes. My legs held up fine.”

“Any weakness.”

“Just a little. But nothing I can’t deal with. I don’t think I can run a marathon.”

“No, not yet.” Dean wrote in the chart. “Any other complaints?”

“None. I want to get back to work in Mechanics though. Henry won’t let me until you give me a note.”

“I’ll do that if you’re up to it. But on a limited schedule.” Dean said. “I’m kind of busy right now, can you get it tomorrow before you head up to mechanics.”

“Sure thing.” John slid from the table.

“Good.” Tucking the chart, Dean moved to the door. “Oh, John. El, told me about Jenny’s pregnancy. Can you pass along to her that she needs to stop by and schedule an appointment with me, El, or Jason. I can’t find any record of her being seen for it and if she’s as far along as she is, she should be checked.”

“I can do that. I want the best for the . . .” A bright thought hit John. An opportunity doorway was open about the same time Dean opened the exam room door. “. . . baby. Dean?”

“Yeah.” Dean halted in his exit.

“Um . . . Jenny, she uh . . .” John saddened his voice. “She told me about all that went down with Bev and the baby situation. I bet that was tough.”

“Yes.”

“Did you ever wonder . . .” John grunted. Dean had left. Shaking his head he finished his sentence as he stood alone. “Ever wonder who the baby’s father was?”

^^^

The beeping of the computer indicating her results were finished, sounded off and Ellen went to retrieve them. Viewing the monitor, she tossed her hands up in the air. “I told you, Dean.” She spoke to herself. “I told you.” Sitting down she flipped open a folder. “I said it was too soon. You said it wasn’t. Now look, the sample was too overrun with our treatment to get a viable result.”

Pencil moving down the folder, Ellen stopped when she looked at the name.

Elliott Ryder.

How painful the name was to her. His results were what she worked on. And his results were all she knew of him, them and the info placed in the thick folder before her. She brought the pencil to her mouth in angry thought. Thinking of the day before. Returning home from work to see the bedroom door open. The first thing that raced through her mind was Elliott was feeling better. The door was open, invitation given for her to care for him. But when she walked in there, the room was empty. Bed made, medical equipment packed up, Elliott’s bag gone. Where was he? Fear struck her that he had passed away and Dean didn’t know how to tell her. She was frightened until Patrick emerged from the bathroom.

*“Oh, hi, Ellen.” He was drying his hands. “All cleaned up in there. Thought I’d be nice.”*

*“Patrick? Where’s Elliott?”*

*“You don’t know?” Patrick asked. “He’s at Jess and Robbie’s. He had his treatment and decided to go there. He’s doing better. Dean said if he improves he can commute for the final four. But then again you know this.”*

Ellen didn’t. She hadn’t spoken to Dean for an Elliott update on that day. And she never did. After that, Ellen asked no questions.

Returning to registering Elliott's results, Ellen paused when she heard the soft clearing of a throat. In her swivel chair she turned around. "Elliott."

He smiled slightly, looked thinner, but he wore his full UWA uniform. "I was here for a treatment."

"Oh." Ellen returned to the computer. She spoke as she wrote the results. "I'll be sure to leave this folder out so I don't have to dig it out when Dean or Patrick give me the work up on it."

"It went well."

"Good."

After setting his bandana on the counter, Elliott stepped closer. "I feel a hundred percent better."

"Good." Ellen closed the folder and stood up. "But honestly Elliott, if you're giving a medical update, you should give it to your doctor and Dean can note it in your chart."

Elliott was bit confused. "You're my doctor."

"Not anymore." Ellen said. "Not your personal doctor. If you need medical attention and no one else is available . . ." She shrugged. "I guess I'm it. But for ongoing care . . . no."

"When . . . when did you stop being my doctor?"

"When you took your first treatment."

Elliott smiled and took the demeanor as if he was about to set the record straight. "Ellen then you misunderstood. I didn't mean for you not to be my doctor. I just meant for you not to be there during those treatments."

"And from that moment on, I ceased being your doctor."

"For the duration of the treatments."

"No, Elliott. Forever."

"I didn't make that choice."

"I did." Ellen set the folder in the bin and started to leave.

"You're angry."

Ellen froze. Every part of her stopped moving except for her head which moved slowly in a cold stare to Elliott.

Elliott stepped to her. "You're angry about me shutting you out."

"Well aren't you the budding fucking Einstein today?"

"You are."

Ellen gasped. "And this shocks you!"

"Yes."

Turning fully to face him, Ellen's anger projected in her face, movements and voice. "Why? Don't you think I should be."

"To be honest. No." Elliott spoke shocked. "Maybe I was wrong but . . ."

“You’re damn right, you were wrong.”

“But look at why I did it. Please. I was ill. So ill. And my pride . . .”

“Fuck your pride.”

“Ellen.”

“No!” Her voice raised. “Fuck your pride. You hear me. There are times we let our pride get in the way and there are times we don’t. What you went through Elliott was one of those times. Did it ever occur to you that I not only wanted to be with you, but needed to be with you. I needed, needed Elliott to know you were all right.”

“Dean was giving you updates.”

“And that makes it all right? No! Dean’s eyes are not mine! You shut me out without any regard to how I felt, how I would react, and you shut me out as if you could care less about me.”

“No.” Elliott spoke with pleading defense. “I shut you out because I care so much about you. I didn’t want you to see me like that. I made that choice. I’m sorry hurt you. I really am. I didn’t think.” He shook his head. “I just didn’t think.”

“Well, I did. I did a lot of thinking over these past four days. A lot. When you closed that door on me Elliott, you closed the door on a lot of other things as well.”

“I . . . I don’t understand. This has to be with you not being my doctor?”

“It has to do with everything. Everything. Physician, friend . . . everything.” Ellen explained. “Like everyone else, my life has been tough. It took a lot of years to get it together and I went through a lot of shit. I lost a lot. I felt a lot of pain. And you know what, Elliott?” She spoke calm. Her attitude seemed as if she lacked any anger at all. “I’m happy now. Thinking about it, finally, in my life, I am happy again. I never thought I’d get here.” She placed on a slight smile. “My kids are healthy, thank God. The thing with Dean is over. He’s back home, we’re working through things. And Frank. Frank is back in my life as well. But, I wanted to make room for someone else. Forget one or both of them, for this one special person. I would have. Then I started thinking . . . why?” Ellen tilted her head. “Why would I want to make room in my life, when I am only making space for hurt. I don’t want to do that. There’s no room in my life for hurt.” Slowly she looked up to him. “And there’s no room in my life . . . for you.”

Ellen’s words made Elliott speechless, and her exit from the lab at that moment caused him to close his eyes softly in pain. He stood briefly then grabbed his bandana from the counter and walked across the lab. In the doorway he stopped with a stare. After clearing his throat, and regaining his



composure, Elliott stood tall, an emotionless look on his face, and with a pivot turn, he walked in a military stride from that clinic.

^^^

‘Someone knows something’ Joe and Frank were told. ‘You should talk to him’ was the advice given. Something, probably excitement stirred in Joe when he saw the distress on Dan the security man’s face. And with a little enthusiasm, and not wanting to alarm the person Dan was referring to, Joe asked Dan to bring them to his office.

Perhaps Joe should have asked who it was first. But he didn’t. All he knew was that the person said something in front of Dan about Bev’s murder.

“Dad.” Frank whispered in the examining room adjacent to Joe’s office. “This is stupid.”

“Why is that? Huh, Frank? Why is this stupid.”

“Because it is. Look who Dan brought up.”

“Afraid maybe . . . afraid maybe he knows what you know?”

“What?” Frank laughed. “What are you talking about.”

“The person you saw that night you went back in time.”

“I told you I didn’t see anyone. We missed the window. Now are we gonna do this or not.”

“Absolutely. It’s well worth a shot. Maybe he does know something.” Joe smiled positive that the brand new witness bred fear in Frank. Against his better judgement, Joe smiled, walked to his desk and sat down. “So.” He leaned back in his chair.

“So.” Richie gave a twitch to his head and rubbed his chin on his shoulder.

“Dan says . . .”

“Did you get a picture of me? I took pictures.”

“Yes, I did, Richie.” Joe spoke pacifying. “Richie. Dan says you heard . . .”

“I hear everything, Joe. Yeah.” Richie spoke upbeat. “Everything. People. People talk.” He nodded. “They talk by me. They think I don’t hear. They think I don’t know. I know. I hear. I know. They think I’m dumb.”

“Well . . .” Joe winced a little. “They have good reason to think that.” He held up his hand. “Not that you are mind you. But you kind of project that.”

“Too bad. I’m bright.” Richie patted his hair down.

“Richie.” Frank spoke up. “Do you know something about Bev.”

"Yes." Richie nodded then shook his head. "Oh, yes. Yes I know."

"What do you know?" Frank asked.

"Bev's dead."

Frank nodded and looked at Joe. "There you have it. Richie does know something."

"Richie . . ." Joe took a shot. "Dan, you know Dan, right?"

"Which Dan? I know two." Richie held up three fingers. "There's Dan, Danny the hair Dan. And Dan. Dan, the security man."

"That's the one." Joe pointed. "Well Dan the security man said you may know something about Bev's murder."

"I do. Yes." Richie nodded. "I hear people talk."

Frank decided to ask. "Did you hear people talk about Bev's murder?"

"Yep." He nodded. "All the time."

"Who do you hear talk about Bev's murder?" Frank questioned.

"Who do you want to know?" Richie asked.

"Who did you hear talk?"

"Who do you want to know?"

"Who did you hear talk?"

"Enough." Joe stopped them before they ping-ponged back and forth too much. "Richie, tell us everyone you heard talk about Bev's murder."

"Let's see." Richie put his finger to his lip. "Dan, hair Dan. He talks about it. Ellen, Ellen talks about it. Dan talks to Ellen. Robbie he talks. Then Robbie talks to Ellen. Robbie talks to Dan. Dan with the hair Dan. Not Dan security Dan. Yeah. But Dan doesn't talk to Jess. But Jess talks about it. Jess talks to Ellen. Jess talks to Robbie. But not hair Dan. Henry. Henry talks to Jess." Richie tried to whistle but only blew out air. "Oh, boy. Does Henry talk. He talks a lot. He talks the most. Cries Joe. Cries."

"He cries?" Joe questioned with some disbelief.

"Yep. When he talks. Or whines. Yeah. Whines."

"What does Henry say?" Joe asked.

Calmly, Richie brought this finger to his lip. "He killed Bev."

"He killed Bev? Who?" Joe continued. "Henry or Jess?"

"Henry." Richie nodded. "Henry killed Bev. That . . . that bastard." Richie twitched his head.

Frank stood up from his lean against the desk. "Henry killed Bev?"

"Henry killed Bev." Richie repeated.

"How do you know?" Frank questioned.

"He said." Richie answered.

"Who said?" Frank asked.

"Henry." Richie nodded then twitched. "Henry said. I killed Bev. Not

me. Henry. Henry said. I killed Bev, Jess. Jess said. Henry killed Bev. Killed Bev. Henry hates Bev. She knows . . . she knows things. Henry likes men like Jess likes men. They like men. Bev knows. Knew. Henry hates, hates her.” Richie made a face of disgust. “Henry killed Bev.”

Joe interceded. “Richie, did you hear them say this?”

“Yep. Yep.” Richie spoke fast. “Right in front of me. Talked. Oh, boy did they talk. Then I screamed . . .” Richie shrieked out. “Henry killed Bev!” he dropped his voice. “And Jess. He said. Please don’t say . . . say anything. Don’t say that. O.K.” Richie covered his mouth.

“I see.” Joe slowly stood up from his desk. “Frank, can I see you outside for a moment.”

“Yeah.” Frank nodded and walked to the door.

“Grace?” Joe looked at her. “Do you mind if I leave you with Richie.”

“No, not at all.” Grace smiled. She watched Joe and Frank leave, then she looked at Richie who stared. “Hello.”

“Hi,” Richie patted his hair down.

“You seem like a very charming man.”

“Thanks.” Richie gave a bashful look. “And . . .and gosh. You’re . . . you’re pretty.”

Grace smiled and tucked her short hair behind her ear. “So, I hear you Ellen’s brother?”

“Yeah. She hates me. I owe her money. Yeah. Three thousand, six hundred Yeah. Plus penalties and interest. Yeah.”

With a nod, Grace smiled, said, ‘I see,’ and looked back down to her notes.

After a breath and a look to his closed office door, Joe faced Frank. “What do you think?”

“What do I think?” Frank laughed. “I think Richie’s got a distorted view on everything. I think he hears things and exaggerates them.”

“Exactly.” Joe said. “So knowing this. And knowing we’d have to decipher the truth, there’s one very important thing we are missing here. Do you know what it is?”

“No.”

“I didn’t think so. Think about it. People talk in front of Richie.”

“That’s because they think he’s an idiot.”

“But he’s not.” Joe corrected. “He can hear. He can process thoughts, understands, but Dean said, he just can’t project them correctly.”

“People don’t know that though. They just think he’s mental.” Frank saw his father smile. “What? What am I missing.”

“The boat, Frank. If people think Richie can’t comprehend. Let them. They’ll still talk. If people talk in front of him, who knows what they’ll say. I think, I think it’s time to put Richie in general population during the day.”

“And do what?”

“Who knows. Resident janitor.” Joe shrugged. “He can be our ears. Our distorted ears, but our ears none-the-less.”

“Do you think that is smart. I mean, he really isn’t all there.”

“Neither are you, Frank, but we let you run around.”

“True.” Frank bobbed his head. “All right. Let’s do it.”

“Good.” Joe reached for the door. “What do we have to lose?”

Frank softly chuckled to himself after his father walked in the office. “*What do we have to lose?*” His father asked. Frank knew, if Richie Martin inadvertently found out the truth behind Bev’s murder, the answer to that question would be . . . a lot.

## CHAPTER TEN

When Dean nodded that one time, his eyes looked to Ellen as if they said, 'El, I completely understand'. Then he stared. "O.K." He held a hand palms out to her. "Hear me out."

"All right." Sitting on the edge of her bed, Ellen looked up.

"Do you think that was a wise decision."

"What!" Ellen nearly shrieked it out and stood up.

"No, El." Dean took hold of her arm and pulled her back. "Listen to me."

"You said all you had to say."

"Not entirely."

"Dean." Ellen had an almost laugh to her. "Before you speak, look at your position. You are my husband."

"And . . . I am a doctor."

"So what?"

"No, El. Not 'so what'. The doctor in me is questioning the doctor in you on this one."

"This is ridiculous. My husband, the doctor, is questioning, his wife, the doctor, on why she ended a budding relationship with Elliott Ryder."

"I wouldn't be questioning you El, I wouldn't care less, if . . . if the man wasn't so ill."

"So you think I should stay with him out of pity."

"No." Dean lifted a finger. "If I pleaded that argument, it would be the human side. I am going on the medical side here, El. And . . . at this point in his health, at this point in his treatment, do you think it is wise to be dragging him down."

"As if . . ." Ellen shrugged. "As if my breaking it off will affect him?"

"Yes."

"No." Ellen tried to make her escape again.

"El," Dean charged to in front of her. "You don't think? A person's mental state is so vital to their healing state. You know that. You do. This is the first case of cancer we are dealing with. These treatments, can work, if not on Elliott then on the next person. But . . . but, we can not judge the success or failure of them fairly. Not if Elliott gets depressed. If he gets depressed, you know as well as I do it will affect his treatment."

"And Dean I whole heartedly agree. A good mental state is vital to positive therapy."

"Good." Dean said. "Then you see my point."

"I never said I didn't see your point on *that* issue. But if you're applying it to Elliott's case. You're wrong. Elliott's mental state will not be affected." She started to walk again.

"Why even take a chance. How can you be so sure?"

"Because Elliott could care less." Ellen stopped cold and faced him. "When I said I wasn't going to be his doctor. He gave argument. When I said I was breaking it off between us, he said nothing. Nothing. Not a word, not an argument. Nothing."

"What?" Dean laughed. "Did you expect the man to beg you? That is not his style."

"No. But what would have been so wrong with him just saying he didn't want it to happen. Nothing. Why? Because it didn't matter. If he had a woman, so be it. If not, so be it as well."

"You're wrong." Dean argued.

"See!" Ellen grabbed her head in confusion. "Why . . . why are you defending him."

"Because I don't want him to die!"

"Don't." Ellen stepped to him, her voice graveling. "Don't you dare put his life on my shoulders. Don't. His dying or living should not be contingent on whether or not I am his girlfriend."

"No. You're right." Dean softened his voice. "I'm sorry. That was wrong." He looked into the eyes that, with rage, locked into his. "I just thought you didn't want him to die either."

"I don't. I care about him."

"Then stick by him."

"No, Dean. No." Ellen shook her head. "I can't. I care too much. And I don't want to get hurt. Trust me, I know Elliott. I know him much better than you or anyone else. This will not affect him. He will not let it. He is a fighter and he wants to fight for his life. Whether I am in it emotionally or not, Elliott Ryder will still fight. Trust me." She dropped her voice. "This won't have a bearing on his health at all. He won't let it."

"Maybe consciously. But what about subconsciously?" Dean asked.

Ellen walked away.

^^^

New Bowman, Montana

Pretty much Hal replayed Dean's doctor words of advice on when he met him at the clinic to drive Elliott home. Dean basically told Hal the

treatments could make Elliott tired and ill and just to let him rest. Hal did. He figured since Elliot was quiet most of the ride back to New Bowman, the effects of the treatments were hitting him. And when Hal dropped his friend off at his home, he figured Elliott was doing just what the doctor ordered. Getting rest.

But there was another thing Dean prescribed, nourishment. Though Elliott didn't need to stop by the mess hall to eat, Hal figured it was easier for him than preparing his own meal. But Elliott didn't stop by, nor did he hit the mess for the late night snacks that the mess crew always set out for the men.

No one had seen or heard a word from Sgt. Elliott Ryder. And that bred concern.

Making something hot, easy, yet filling, Hal brought with him to Elliott's house the newest food rage, Oodles of Danoodles.

His voice was raspy and thick when he spoke as he answered the door. "Captain. Hey. Come in."

"Elliott." Hal walked inside. "You look like shit."

"Thanks." Elliott scratched his head then tried to straighten his hair. "I've been sleeping. A lot."

"Doctor's orders. Were you sleeping now?"

"No, actually I was making tea."

"I'll get that. You . . ." Hal walked over to the coffee table and set down the bowl. "I would like you to eat."

"I'm not really hungry."

"Did you eat?" Hal asked.

"No."

"Then you are hungry. Sit." He moved to the kitchen. "And they are the newest food. Excellent. I love them. Oodles of Danoodles."

Mouthing with a snicker the name, 'Oodles of Danoodles', Elliott sat before the covered dish. He lifted the lid and the steam pelted his stuffed nose. The scent of spices actually penetrated.

"Fork. Tea." Hal set them both down and sat in the chair.

Elliott plunged his fork into the bowl and lifted the long noodles. "They look like Ramen Noodles."

"They are. Only Danny Hoi version. How are you feeling?"

"Sick. Like I have the flu. I've been . . ." Elliott coughed. "Doing that a lot." He coughed again.

"Did Dean say that was normal?"

"Yes, he said my defenses are down. But he did say he was confident I would probably feel no side effects at all after my last treatment Monday."

Elliott took a bite. "These are good."

"Told you. And that is good news about Monday. Ellen is in town. You wouldn't want to feel ill for your evening together."

Elliott set down his fork.

"What's wrong?" Hal asked. "She is coming Monday isn't she? I mean she works clinic here Mondays and Wednesdays. The women will have a fit if she . . ."

"She's coming. I guess."

"Oh." Hal nodded. "Then what's wrong."

"She won't be staying here."

"Is she bringing the children?"

"I don't know." Elliott shrugged.

"Then why isn't she staying here?"

"Ellen and I . . . Ellen and I are no more. She ended it today."

Hal stared for a moment. "I see. I can't say that I blame her."

"Captain."

"No, Elliott. You want me to side with you, I won't. I told you, you should not shut her out like that. I told you that. In this world, when you have someone, you don't make vital mistakes like that. I'll talk to her."

"No." Elliott shook his head. "Let it go."

"Let it go? Why? Are you planning to wait a little bit and then see if she changes her mind."

"No. I plan on letting it go." Elliott stood up and paced his nervous energy.

"Elliott." Hal stood. "You don't want that. You love her."

"I never said that."

"You don't have to. I know you. I've watched you. Why would you want to let it go."

Elliott shook his head. "I don't *want* to let it go. I just am."

"Can I ask why?"

"Because she is a woman. There are very, very few of them. I had a chance. I blew it. It's not right for me to ask for another chance when she has made her choice. I can't ask her to change her mind."

"Yes, you can. She's a woman. They do it all the time."

Elliott bred his first smile of the night. "Thank you for that."

"You're welcome for that." Hal said. "Now, sit down and eat you Oodles of Danoodles, before they get cold. And we'll work this out for you. We will. And you can start feeling better."

"But I'm sick because of the illness and treatments."

"Nonsense." Hal walked to the couch with Elliott. "You're depressed."



That's why you feel so badly today."

"Really?" Elliott asked. "Do you think it's depression and not sickness?"

"By all means I think it's depression." Hal laid his hand on Elliott's back. Hot. The temperature of his friend's skin seeped through the clothing. Hal slid his hand from Elliott and rolled his fingers into a fist. Behind Elliott's back he closed his eyes. "No, my friend." Hal spoke softly as Elliott sat down. "It's not the illness at all."

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### Beginnings, Montana

"Laid." Frank whispered, back leaning against the bar in the social hall.

"Companionship." Johnny whispered back..

"Laid."

"Companionship."

"Enough." Joe said with a hard setting down of his empty glass. "Whatever the reason . . ." He pointed to Jason and Grace in an intimated slow dance on the dance floor. Robbie, alone on stage sang and played acoustic guitar. "It's none of your business." He reached over the bar, and placed his glass in this sink. "This place is dead for a Saturday. Whoever leaves last clean up." He walked by Frank and Johnny.

"Dad." Frank called to him. "Doesn't she have a home in New Bowman. The Dan-Tram stopped running hours ago."

"Yeah, Frank it did. And yeah, Frank she does. But tonight." Joe looked at the couple. "She has a home with Jason." Giving a chuckle to Frank's audible cringe of disgust, Joe walked from the social hall.

"Man." Frank shook his head, then clapped when Robbie finished the song.

Johnny poured a drink. "I think they're ready to go now. Look." He pointed.

"I can't." Frank turned his head. "I just . . ." He stopped. Johnny was pointing with the hand that held a drink. Directly to him it was and Frank quickly turned away.

"Dad?" Johnny asked, hiding his smile. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Frank shook his head and cringed when, arm in arm, Jason and Grace walked out. "Something is just not right about that. What pushes a man to the extremes of Judge Grace, all to get laid."

Johnny held up his drink to Frank. "Enough Alcohol." He down it and gasped.

After, clearing his throat Frank looked up to the stage. "Journey!" he called out. "Play some Journey!"

"Frank." Robbie packed up his acoustic guitar. "Can I go home. Everyone is gone." He yelled across the empty social hall.

"I'm here." Frank said.

"But I'm tired. I have a service in the morning."

"But, Robbie, come on, I just got done working. I want to hear you play."

"I've been playing all night." Robbie said. "Listen, I sound like Stevie Nicks."

Frank laughed. "Go home."

"Thanks." Robbie walked off the stage. "Besides, I have to conserve my voice for tomorrow night. It's Andrea's memorial service and I'm singing the Silly Song."

"Slow and bluesie I hope." Frank nodded.

"The only way. Night Frank."

"Night." Frank lifted his water glass.

"And no drinking." Robbie smiled then walked out.

Johnny shook his head. "Why do they do that?"

"What?" Frank asked.

"Say that to you."

"It's more of a joke." Frank shrugged.

"No, it's not. It's a slap in your face."

"John . . ."

"No, Dad." Johnny faced him. "Why do they care? Why do they treat you like a child over it?"

"Really, they don't. They just worry. I had a problem. A bad one."

"Yeah, but you got through it."

Frank shrugged as he brought his water to his lips.

"And . . ." Johnny poured a tiny bit in his glass, setting the bottle predominantly on the bar. "How much faith does it show that they have in you." He finished his sip of a drink. "Really. You got out of control. You got it back in control. That's something to be proud of. But . . ." he held up his finger. "You're tough Dad."

"And so is an addiction." Frank stated.

"You really think, if you had a drink now and then, you don't know what to watch out for? You wouldn't know how to control it?" Johnny snickered. "You're stronger than that. You learned in your mistakes. If you wanna have a drink, you have a drink. That's my opinion." He lifted his hands. "Maybe I'm wrong. Probably. But I give you more credit than anyone

## Druga-Johnston/The Aragon Window

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else. And . . .” Johnny looked at his watch. “I have to go. I have to do blood work at the clinic in the morning. Want me to help clean up?”

“Nah. You go on. I’m gonna wind down and throw some darts.”

“O.K. night, Dad.” Johnny leaned over and kissed Frank on the cheek.

“Night, John.” Frank smiled peacefully.

Hands in pockets, Johnny walked from the social hall. Unsure of how his father would end the evening, Johnny was certain of one thing. He left his father alone, in that social hall, and with that bottle.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

November 10

‘Odd’ was the first word that came to Jess’ mind when he came down the steps half awake. Robbie was not only awake, but at the table working on something.

“Not go to bed?” Jess asked.

“Yeah. Why?” Robbie snickered.

“You woke up on your own.” Jess looked at his watch. “And before seven.”

“Have services today.” Robbie folded the piece of paper he was writing on.

“That your sermon?” Jess asked as he walked to the kitchen. “Oh, my God, you made coffee.”

Robbie chuckled. “How do you like that.” He stood up. “No, this isn’t my sermon. You know I wing those. This is for Frank.”

“Ah.” Jess nodded emerging from the kitchen with his brew. “The proverbial detail of the fateful night.”

“Did you do yours?”

“Turned in yesterday an hour after questioning.”

“Yeah, I wanna get mine in before questioning. That way I may eliminate an extra day of Frank and my dad asking me things.”

“Good point.” Jess set his cup down. “I guess this is their way of weeding out the suspects.”

“Or rather trapping you.”

“What do you mean?” Jess asked.

“Jess, my Dad spent too many years on the CIA. They get you to write a statement of that night. They ask you about it see if you’re telling the truth. Then they’ll ask you again, trust me. And . . . they won’t forget a word of what you told them prior.”

“Well, they have to do it if they want to catch the person.” Jess said. “And in my opinion, it was someone that was at Henry’s house that night for that ‘reveal about Bev’ meeting.”

Robbie raised his eyes. “You really think?”

“For sure. But . . . I think the wrong person is gonna end up being accused.”

“Why do you say that?”

“The thing of ‘It’s never the obvious’ is gonna come into play. And I

think a person with the least contact with Bev and motive are going to be the one paying the price for the real killer.”

Robbie gave a curious look. “There were only two people in that room without real motive and who didn’t have any contact at all with Bev.”

“Elliott and your brother.”

“I think Elliott is totally out of the question, there’s no way they would even blame him. And Hal, really, why would they think . . .” Robbie’s eyes raised. He sunk into thought of what could be . . .

*“You did it, Hal, didn’t you!” He heard Joe’s voice blast in a brotherly concern bred fantasy. “You and you’re almighty UWA attitude. She hurt our family. She betrayed our state. And you decided to end it all that night. You walked into her house and declared yourself the judge, jury and executioner.”*

Robbie snapped from his thought. “Shit.”

“What?” Jess gave a quirky look.

Holding his testimony tight in his hand, Robbie shook his head. “Nothing.”

^^^

Henry’s eyes closed after he looked at the breakfast spread upon his diningroom table.

“And coffee . . .” Hector set down the cups. “Eat, it’ll get cold.”

“You shouldn’t be here.”

“Why?” Hector asked.

“People will see you leave and think you spent the night.”

Hector chuckled, then an intensity took over his brown eyes. “You’re serious.”

“Yes, I am.”

“I came over to make you breakfast.”

“But you came over early, no one saw you come in here and . . .”

“Henry.” Hector snapped his name. “You know, there are two people in this community that you speak to. The rest you stopped. Why do you want to shut one of us out.”

“It’s not shutting you out, Hector. It’s withholding the truth of what has happened.”

“Is happening.” Hector corrected. “Do you think I want people categorizing me with Ben and Todd from fabrics. That isn’t me. This . . . this, everything that’s going on with you and me. It’s not what I wanted in my life. If I had the chance to be with a woman, then, like you, I would snatch it up. But the only thing we get from women, if we’re lucky, is a once a year Jenny

Matoose lottery lay.”

Henry shook his head with a slight smile.

“Oh, you don’t know about those, do you? You’ve never registered. I did. About once a year you win and one of Jenny’s registered women show up at your door. They undress, they lay on their backs, and when you are done, they smile and leave. That’s it.”

“But isn’t it the same thing with most of the men. When they get together. They . . . they . . .” Henry twitched his head instead of saying the word. “Then they get dressed, leave and never say another word.”

“Yes.” Hector answered. “Yes, that’s the way it is. It’s for sex only. No one admits to it, so no one is gay.”

“So why do you get angry when I try to hide what happened between us?”

“Because it’s different.” Hector explained. “I wish you could see that. I never came to a man’s house to cook for him. God.” Hector shook his head. “It’s not about being physical with you Henry. It never has to happen again. But I don’t want to lose the friendship and closeness we have building. And if you don’t see it, you’re wrong. All those late night talks at the social hall. What about the every night talks we have been having lately. I don’t want to lose that.” He stepped closer to Henry. “Sex, I can get anytime. *That*, I can’t.”

“You have friends.” Henry said.

“I don’t have closeness. And I don’t mean physically when I say this. But you and me, we’re just a little beyond the closeness of everyday friends.” Hector’s voice dropped to a whisper. “You don’t want to lose it either.”

Henry’s eyes closed tight.

“Eat breakfast. I won’t even stay if you don’t want me to.”

Just as Henry was about to say something, there was a knock at his door. “Shit.”

“Want me to hide.”

Henry held up hand. “Who is it?” He called out.

“Ellen.”

Henry shook his head “I’ll get rid of her.” He moved to the door and opened it. “El, I’m busy.” He went to close it, but it met with a slam of her hand.

“Tough.” Ellen fought with Henry in a tug of war over the opening and closing of the door. “Every single day . . .” She grunted. “I try to talk to you.”

“Get the . . .” Henry struggled. “Hint.”

“I’ve known you for a lot . . .” Ellen shoved. “Of years. Everyone else may . . .” She pushed the door again. “Have given up on you. But I haven’t.”

“I don’t want you around.”

"I need to talk to you." She nearly shouted. "I'll scream in the street the reason why I'm here."

"Then scream in the street." Henry tried to close the door.

"Fine." She cupped her hands over her mouth and shouted. "My Brother Richie is running around Beginnings saying Henry killed . . ." She shrieked when her arm was tugged and she flew inside Henry's house. "Bev."

"Why did you scream that?" Henry asked.

"You said to."

"No, I mean, why did you scream about Richie saying I killed Bev?"

"Because he is." Ellen said. "He's telling everyone. I worked containment last night. Got called in. Bub was a little out of control. And he told me you killed her. Henry, I had to come and tell you because you get questioned today. He told Dan, Danny, Joe, Frank. He said you admitted it."

"Oh, my God." Henry's hand slid down his nose. "I never said that."

Ellen shrugged. "It's Richie. Anyway. I just wanted you to be prepared. I'm gonna go home and get some sleep so . . ." She sniffed. "Hey, you made breakfast."

Henry blocked her way. "Ellen go."

"Didn't you make enough?"

"No that's not it. It's . . ."

"Hector." Ellen wisped out the name when she saw him. With offense she spoke and stepped back. "Oh. Oh. I understand. Great. Henry. Great. Is this the reason you don't talk to me anymore." She crinkled her nose, sneered at Hector and spoke with attitude. "*Hector?*"

"Yes."

"Fuck you." She snapped. "I was your friend long before him. What? You make new friends and you shut me out? I was good enough when no one else wanted to be your friend. I was good enough when everyone hated you."

"Who hated me?"

"Everyone. And now that you finally made a different friend. You don't need me anymore. Hell, you've been getting Nick so much lately, you don't even need Frank to be a Dad anymore. That sucks. And you know what? I don't want to be your friend. So . . . so there."

Hector moved quickly behind Henry with a whisper as Ellen started to leave. "She has been your friend for a long time. Don't shut her out."

There was a slight hesitation. "El." Henry called her. "Wait."

She smiled before shutting the door, and then Ellen turned around. "Yes."

"I have to tell you something." Henry said nervously.

Hector spoke softly. "You want me to leave."

"No." Henry shook his head. "El, the reason I shut you out, isn't because I don't want to be your friend. God, I miss that. It's because . . . it's because I was embarrassed of what you saw."

"What do you mean?" Ellen asked. "What did I see?"

"That night . . . than night Bev was killed and she was here. We were fighting . . ."

"Henry, I didn't see anything. I only heard you guys argue. That's it. Why? Did you hit her?"

"No." Henry said. "I mean about Hector, El. Him and I . . . we . . . him and I, we're close. We're friends. Special friends."

"Ah." She smiled. "That's nice. I'm glad you made a special friend, Henry. You need that."

"No. El." He tried again. "We're very close. Understand?"

Ellen gave a thumbs up. "Got it. And you were worried." She smiled. "Thought I'd be jealous, huh? No. I'm glad." With a 'whew' she chuckled. "And not that it would make a difference, but here I thought you were gonna tell me you two were lovers." She snickered. "Was I wrong or what?" She moved to the diningroom. "Wow these eggs look good. Can I eat?"

Henry just stared in disbelief as Ellen made herself comfortable. "Frank has had a *huge* affect on her lately."

With a chuckle, Hector gave a swat to Henry's back. "And *you've* been avoiding her." He laughed again. "That's funny. Let's eat." He shrugged and walked to the diningroom leaving Henry still standing there baffled.

^^^

It was the gripe of the morning. If Dean earned a Danny Dollar for each time he said it, he'd have all the Danny Dollars in circulation.

"Damn it. I can't believe Johnny didn't show." He said, once again, in total disgust, looking at the work upon the clinic counter. "And when you spin that blood, careful taking the tubes from the centrifuge." He flipped through paper after paper. "All these tests. What the hell has Johnny been doing. I can't believe he didn't show up today. Probably the investigation." He looked over his shoulder. "If you get to where you have to remove the plasma. Be extra careful. But for right now, if you can prepare those urine samples for simple strip testing I'd be happy."

"What exactly do you want me to do first?" Billy asked his father. "You're spitting out order, after order. I'm not mom. I'm only seven."

"Gees. Sorry." Dean ran his fingers through his hair. "Do the urine first.



God knows how long they've been waiting." He looked at the work orders on the counter. "I don't even want to view the dates those samples were taken."

"Swell." Billy mumbled looking at the tray of urine. "Old pee."

John Matoose peeked into the clinic lab. He hated to interrupt a father son moment, but other than getting his doctor's release to go back to work. John had it. A brilliant way—at least he thought—to plant the seed of thought in Dean's mind. Reaching up he knocked on the archway. "Dean?"

With a turn, Dean looked. "Hey, John." He snapped his finger. "Yeah, that release." He pulled it from his pocket. "I have it. Why are you standing there."

"Can I speak to you." John gave a twitch of his head.

"Sure." Dean walked across the lab. "Bill, I'll be right back." He stepped into the hall. "Here." He handed him the release. "What's up."

"Well I needed to talk to you about something. I know it will be a little sensitive for you with the *Bev* situation. But . . . Jenny, God I hate to say this."

"Why?"

"It may bring back painful memories of the Bev paternity situation."

"No." Dean held up his hand. "Go on."

"Jenny was speaking to me about running paternity tests. You know, to see who the actually father is. And I wanted to tell you if you find out who the biological father really is, not to tell me. Unlike in *other* circumstance where the *real* father really has an impact. It doesn't for me."

Dean stared..

"Uh!" A sound of disgust came from the lab. "Gross. There's a hair in this urine. What am I supposed to do with it?"

"Dean, do you understand."

"Got it. You don't want to know. Bye John." Dean raced in the lab. "Don't touch that, Billy."

John closed his eyes. He failed again. Dean may have listened but he didn't hear a word John said.

^^^

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

Perhaps it was a bit sadistic of Joe, tapping his pencil lightly on the desk at the same speed and rhythm that Henry tapped his fingers on his thighs.

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

Down to the paper, up to Frank, then to Henry

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

“Dad.” Frank spoke up.

Outwardly breathing heavily, Joe leaned back in his chair. He began a slight rocking.

“Dad, come on.” Frank beckoned.

Grace, from her corner, only raised her eyes. Watching with curiosity as to what Joe was up to.

A silencing hand shot up to Frank. Joe said nothing. He rocked, slow and heavy.

Squeak-squeak-squeak.

Patience wasn't always someone else's virtue. Especially not Henry. Joe could see the artiness on Henry's face. Joe had a plan, part of it dealt with his and Frank asking minimal questions. Not because there was nothing to ask, but because Joe wanted Henry to do all the work. Timing was everything. And if Joe was right, Henry would do as he mind predicted the moment Joe spoke. “O.K., we'll start.”

“Why do I have to go first, Joe.” Henry complained. “It isn't fair.”

“You're not first, Henry.” Joe explained. “Others have been questioned. Jess, Trish, Danny.”

“But they aren't viable suspects, Joe.”

“And you are.”

“Yes. No. Yes., It's no secret I hated her.”

Joe nodded. “Really, though Henry. Hate? Hate is a strong word. Hate?” He leaned forward. “Why did you hate her? To me, it isn't a reason to hate. I mean, she caused a short riff in your's and Ellen's friendship, Understandable. But you got dragged in to Bev's little scheme to get Dean. Inadvertently of course.”

“Joe.” Henry gasped. “I would never deliberately help break them up or make it look like she was with Dean.”

“But you did.”

“No, I didn't.”

“You sided with her.”

“When?” Henry got defensive.

“You hung out with her.”

“She came to see me.”

“You ordered Ellen put in holding and made her apologize to Bev.”

“You called them woman ‘A’ and woman ‘B’.” Henry spoke fast.

“Still. No reason to hate the woman. I don't hate anyone. Do I Frank?”

“George.” Frank answered.

“Yeah, but is it hate? I learned to let things go in my life. I would call it more of a war of powers. Grace? Anyone you hate?”

Grace let out a ‘hmm’ then shook her head. “Not that I recall.”

“Frank?” Joe asked.

“Fuckin Barney the Dinosaur. But does he count.”

“No. Hate is a nasty word. Did you really hate her Henry?”

“I suppose not, Joe.” Henry leaned back more relaxed in his chair.

“Surprising.” Joe said. “Seeing how she was blackmailing you and all.”

Henry snapped forward. “You said I shouldn’t hate.”

“No, I said the Ellen reason is no reason to hate her. Blackmail is. Was she blackmailing you or is that a rumor.”

“It’s a rumor.” Henry stated.

“Really?” Folding his hands Joe rocked in his chair. “Thought so, because I can’t think of any reason that she was blackmailing you. But . . . are you sure you want to stick with that answer. She wasn’t blackmailing you.”

Henry peered to Frank then to Joe. His voice softened. “She was blackmailing me.”

“Why?” Joe asked. “What did she have on you or think she had on you.”

“I can’t say.”

“Then she had something on you.”

Henry didn’t answer.

“All right.” Joe calmed his voice to a pacifying one. “Whether or not it was true, what was she blackmailing you with.”

“I can’t say.”

“You can’t say or won’t.”

“I can’t, Joe.” Henry said. “I can’t. I’d rather not. But she was. Over and over and over. Harping. Beating me with it. She wouldn’t leave me alone.”

“Did she approach you the night she was killed?” Joe asked.

“Yes.” Henry answered.

“Before the meeting, after or both.”

There was a slight pause in Henry’s response. “Before.”

“And you’re sure about that. She didn’t approach you at all after the meeting.”

“No, she didn’t.”

“Positive?”

“Why? What did someone say?”

“Is there someone that would say something?” Joe asked.

“No.” Henry shook his head. “I mean with Richie running around and all saying I killed Bev.”

“Yeah.” Joe snickered. “That’s pretty funny. Now . . . back to the reason she was blackmailing you.”

“Joe, I don’t want to talk about why she was blackmailing me. I don’t. All right. There’s just things. There are . . . things. It’s not important.”

“I have to argue that point Henry. It is very important. If she had something on you that you didn’t want out, then you have a very plausible motive for killing her.”

Henry’s hands slapped to the chair as he stood up. “Then I had a plausible reason for killing her. And if staying a viable suspect is the way to protect things from getting out, then keep me on the suspect list. I’m done.” He walked to the door and paused to look at Grace. “I am exercising my option to call it quits on the questioning right now. I’m . . . I’m distressed.” With a slam of the door, Henry left.

Joe did his routine questioning, quick look to Frank. Checking him for signs if Henry was the one he saw. Again, Frank let him down. With an exhale he stood up. “That went well. I need coffee. Grace? Feel like walking to tracking to steal a cup.”

“Yes.” She stood up. “Frank?”

Frank shook his head. “I’ll wait here. Go on.” He lifted his clipboard of notes and sat on the edge of the desk, only until his father and Grace had left. Then Frank, after looking at the door again, walked to Joe’s seat and sat down. Not like he wouldn’t get a chance to later, but at that moment, Frank wanted to read what his father wrote down. He picked up Joe’s notes at the same time he sat. Sighing out heavily, Frank read and dropped the notes to the desk, speaking softly to himself. “Man, Henry. If you don’t fuckin calm down you’re gonna be paying a high price for keeping such a stupid secret.” Shaking his head, Frank leaned back in thought. “If . . . if it’s the secret I’m thinking about.”

^^^

“O.K., so listen, Dean . . .” Ellen followed him around the lab.

“El, I’m busy. Can’t you help instead of talking.”

“No, I have Andrea’s service to prep and I have puffs in the oven.”

Dean paused in his organizing. He mouthed the word ‘puffs?’

“So, listen. Dean, if you stop and listen, I’ll be done.”

“Fine.” He set down a stack of work orders on the counter and faced her. “I’m all yours.”

Ellen giggled. “Thanks.”

Dean rolled his eyes and waved his hand to hurry her along.

"Dean, please. Anyhow . . . the reason Henry is taking Nick so much is because Hector is helping him to learn how to be a father. He had children, two, that passed away in the old world." Ellen shook her head. "We related on that tragedy. And we talked about it for a good forty minutes over eggs."

"Was this when I had the kids scattered about so you could rest and sleep."

"Yeah, so, Hector is helping him out. That's why Henry is getting better."

"A-ha." Dean nodded. "And what was so wrong with learning off of me and Frank?"

"Well, Dean, you're not Hector. And Hector really is enjoying it because, like he said to me, when is he going to get a chance in this world to be a father. With Henry he's getting that chance. They've become very good friends."

"I should think so considering they're gay lovers."

Ellen gasped.

"What?" Dean asked.

"They are not."

"El . . ." Dean hid his snicker. "Stop it. They are too."

"No, what in the world would make you say that?"

"Um, I don't know. Maybe the fact that the we saw Henry in his underwear and Hector came down the steps wearing only a towel."

"Yeah, so. That doesn't mean anything."

Dean stared at her for a minute. "Who are you trying to convince, me or you?"

"Mostly you. I know what I believe."

"And you believe Hector and Henry aren't a couple."

"Absolutely."

Hand on hip, eyes on Ellen, Dean nodded. "I know you aren't that dumb. So I am going to assume . . . no." He covered her mouth before she spoke. "I am going to assume this is a big Ellen act for the sake of Henry."

With his hand still covering her mouth, Ellen walked to Dean. When she was so close that they almost touched, she lowered his hand and whispered. "If it is a big act for the sake of Henry. Could you, Dean, maybe think of playing the same act. Because if he is a couple with Hector, he really doesn't want anyone to know."

"I won't say anything." Dean kept his voice level the same as hers.

"I appreciate it."

"How much." He lifted his head slightly as he spoke soft.

"Why?" Ellen smiled.

“Well . . .” Dean stepped even closer and tilted his head. “I was just hoping there was something in it for me.”

Ellen’s eyes locked into his. “What did you want.”

“This.” Body to body and with a slight push, Dean backed Ellen into the counter and kissed her. In that kiss they got lost. But their first real sign of reunion was interrupted by the clearing of a throat. Pulling his lips from Ellen’s, but not too far, Dean raised his eyes to see Elliott. “Sgt. Ryder.”

Ellen looked over her shoulder, then quickly turned her back again. Her fingers touched her lips as if to wipe away the kiss.

Dean’s eyes picked up on that, at the same time he caught himself doing the same thing.

“I’m sorry for interrupting.” Elliott said, “I’m here for my treatment.”

“Yes.” Dean nodded. “I have patient room thirty-four all ready. If you want to head down, I’m right behind you.”

“Yes, sir.” Elliott moved to the door. “Ellen.” He blinked long when she only lifted her hand in acknowledgment without turning around. After a single nod, he walked out.

“That . . .” Dean whispered. “. . . was wrong.” he took a step away and stopped. “And just for doing that, I am telling Elliott not to come to Beginnings for his treatment tomorrow.”

“Dean. No. He needs his treatment.”

“That’s right. And he’ll get it. In New Bowman because I’m packing up the stuff for your trip there tomorrow and you will give it to him.”

“Dean . . .”

“Bye Ellen.” Dean walked to the door.

“Dean . . .”

Turning the bend from the lab, Dean’s voice faded as he walked. “Go finish your puffs.”

Ellen huffed out and hit her hand on the counter. “I hate him.” She folded her arms, was angry for a second then shrugged with an ‘oh, well’ and went off, as instructed to finish her puffs.

^^^

“All right.” Joe said with the exhale of cigarette smoke. “Who do we have.” He looked at the papers spread on the desk. “Jess’, Danny’s, Hector’s . . .”

“Henry’s.” Frank added as he reached in to his back pocket and pulled out a rolled up piece of paper.

Joe with a perturbed look, peered up and straightened the wrinkled

paper. "You know how I feel about this."

"I forgot to give it to you. He only gave it to me about . . ."

"No, Frank. About wrinkling the papers."

Frank rolled his eyes. "Go to the copy machine, copy it. There. It won't be wrinkled anymore."

"Smart ass." Joe shook his head as he flipped through the pages. "Jason's is here." He lifted a paper and winced. "I can't read Josephine's handwriting. Did you tell her to be sober when she comes up?"

"Yeah, but she won't listen."

"Who's left. Dean and Ellen."

"They probably are waiting until they have a moment to work on it together."

"They aren't allowed to do that. Did they say they would do that?"

"No." Frank replied. "But I know them. Bet me they are the same, word for word."

"Then I'll lock them in two separate goddamn rooms and make them write them all over again." Joe looked through the statements. "Jenny's is here. Then all that would be left is Elliott's . . ."

"I just saw him going in for a treatment. He said Hal was dropping his off."

"Then all we need is your brothers' . . ." Joe lifted his eyes to the knock on the door. "Come in."

"Hey, Dad." Robbie grinned peeking his head in, then he walked inside. "I just wanted to drop this off." He reached back to shut the door.

"Hold it." Hal called out from behind him, then rushed in. "Hey, Robbie. Dad." He shifted his eyes. "Frank."

"Hal."

Joe grumbled. "I'm hoping you boys have your statements."

Robbie, pulled his from his back pocket. A replica of what Frank handed him. Wrinkled and folded. "Here."

Another unhappy grumble came from Joe. "Thanks."

"Dad." Hal handed Joe a folder. "Mine and Elliott's."

"Now, see." Joe took the folder and opened it. "Not only typed. But wrinkle free."

Hal smiled.

Frank shook his head. "You suck, Hal."

"Thank you, Frank.. Glad to know I keep you happy." Hal said sarcastically.

Robbie stepped back toward the door. "Hating to leave, but I have to go. Don't forget. Six-thirty for Andrea's service. Ellen's serving refreshments

after.”

“Did she cook?” Joe asked.

“Yeah.” Robbie smiled.

“Swell.” Joe griped. “Remind me to stop at the clinic for some antacid.”

With a chuckle, Robbie waved and left.

“Robbie, wait.” Hal said. He looked back with a wave to Joe and Frank and walked out of the office. “Wait. I’ll walk with you.”

“Why? Did I do something?” Robbie asked.

“No. Not at all.” Hal talked as they walked. “I wanted to talk to you about . . . well about the statement.”

Robbie slowed down. “Are you . . . are you worried, Hal?”

“A little, Robbie. Are you?”

“A little.” Robbie nodded.

“I mean, things were said . . .”

“I know.”

Hal took a breath. “We exchanged thoughts. Some brutal thoughts.”

“Hal.” Robbie stopped him. “I know what you’re getting at.”

“Do you?” Hal asked. “We’re brothers. I live by that. You’ve only one family. And . . . I need you to know. I believe as brothers, we . . . we should go to any lengths to protect one another? Do you get my drift?”

With a slow wink, Robbie nodded. “You bet. We’re brothers. It’s the only way.”

Both brothers halted for a second in their walk to give each other a look of confidence, they thought the other needed. After that, a little more at ease, they walked on.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

What was it?

Was it the song or was it Elliott. When Ellen weighed the scales of what caused her to stop upon entrance into the chapel, and slip quietly unnoticed into the back pew, the scales tipped to Elliott.

In the back she sat watching and listening. It was mentioned to her by Hal that Elliott sang and played piano, but in Ellen's mind, Hal underplayed it. Never would she have expected Elliott to sound the way he did.

What song was it? It was one she didn't recognize, slow and moving. But the words would have been just that, words, had Elliott not added the heart that gave them meaning. They took her away, played at her mind and at her soul. The roses picked from the greenhouse nearly slipped from her grip when her mind, through Elliott's music, slipped from that chapel.

Visions.

Taylor, her sweet face, five years old, her tiny perfect voice that called Ellen 'Mommy' with an edge of innocence so tragically lost. Josh, the smells and feel of her ten year old son engulfed her. Even with so many years gone by, how badly Ellen missed them. She had always thought of them. Not a day had passed since the plague that they didn't cross her mind and that she didn't think how much she loved them. A tear flowed down her cheek and landed almost perfectly across the pedal of one of the long stem roses. Memories, good, placed way in the back of her mind, rammed forefront. And in that pew, her life of the presence encircling her, Ellen wept for the first time in a long time, for the life she had lost.

When did the music stop?

"Ellen." Elliott called softly, so close, right next to her.

Her exhale breathed out the last of her sob, and Ellen wiped the tears from her cheek.

"Are you all right?"

"Oh, Elliott." She looked at him. "Oh, my God."

"What?"

"What was that song?"

"I'm not sure of its name. Robbie asked me to pick something. I thought of that one. I sang it when my own mother passed away."

"Oh, my God." Ellen closed her eyes.

"You liked the song?"

"Not as much as I loved the way you sang it. Why didn't you tell me?" She grabbed the roses, sniffled and stood up slipping by him.

"Tell you what?"

"That you sang like that."

"I thought that you knew I sang."

"Yes, but not like that." Ellen began to place a rose in every pew. "Does Hal know. Wait. Robbie knows right?"

"He's never heard me. And the Captain should know, he hears me every Sunday in church. Mainly, I sing for God."

"Then God is probably pissed that you're holding out."

"What?" Elliott smiled.

Ellen stopped third pew down. "He gave you a gift Elliott. If you can move people with your voice, which you can, then it is a gift. You should share that gift."

"Thank you for the compliment."

"You're welcome." She returned to laying down the flowers. "You know, I wouldn't be surprised if Robbie asks you to join the Starters after he hears you."

"That's kind of funny, considering my whole life I wanted to be a rock star."

Ellen froze and turned around. "You're much too reserved. I can't see it."

"I didn't use to be. The world and the UWA pretty much has . . ."

"Neutered you." Ellen finished his sentence her own way.

"Well, yes, I suppose that could be a great analogy." Elliott smiled and followed her. "Ellen. Wait."

"Yes?" She faced him.

"You're not angry with me anymore?"

"No." She shook her head. "Not at all."

He exhaled. "Good. I thought, since you wouldn't look at me this afternoon . . ."

"Elliott." Ellen stopped him. "I didn't look at you this afternoon because I was angry, it was because . . . just know it wasn't because I was angry. O.K.?"

"O.K. Ellen, before everything starts to happen his evening. Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"You're in New Bowman tomorrow. Would you . . . would you have dinner with me?"

Ellen shook her head. "No. I won't be in New Bowman at dinner time. Hal is coming to Beginnings for questioning and I'm catching a ride."

"I see. What about lunch?"

Another shake of her head. "No, Elliott. I don't think so."

"Am I overstepping boundaries I shouldn't because of your reunion with Dr. Hayes?"

"It has nothing to do with Dean, Elliott. It has everything to do with you. I won't allow myself to be involved with you."

Elliott cleared his throat. "I'm sorry I placed you in an awkward position this evening. It was wrong. But will you at least let me thank you. You did not give me a chance to do that."

Folding her arms, Ellen slightly bobbed her head. "I guess I should have known this was coming. Go on, give me your sarcastic thank you for leading you on."

Elliott shook his head. "No. That wasn't what I was going to do. I'm very serious about my thank you. I'm not going to be bitter about you breaking it off. That would be wrong. We are all given chances in our lifetime. And it is up to each and everyone of us to make the most out of them. In the past what was once trivial and opportune, in this world has become vital and priceless. Though I wish I wouldn't have erred, I am grateful for getting the chance that so many others do not."

Ellen just stared.

"I'm going to go practice. Do you mind?"

"No." Ellen nearly whispered. "Not at all." She watched Elliott moved to the piano, and planned on listening until she not only felt the presence but heard the whisper of Danny Hoi behind her.

"So. Tell me. Do you think the speech thing was planned, or was it a spur of the moment, last ditch effort to make you feel guilty?"

With a gasp, Ellen faced Danny. He grinned.

Simple was the covering. But the entire thing was a surprise. Danny and Robbie did good. Ellen hoped they wouldn't receive backlash from Joe about using the copy machine. Ellen kind of felt they wouldn't. After all it was for Andrea.

She supposed Danny had that supply of peach paper hid in his Danny Hoi House of Publishing. In her hand she held the folded document, a rose, she guessed drawn by Forrest, graced the front just under the simply written name, 'Andrea'.

Inside was the years of her birth and death. Her favorite bible passages. A listing of songs that would be sang, and an annotation from Robbie.

*God gives us only one life.*

*The length of life is not measured by the years we live it, but rather, how we live it.*

*Should time dictate we've spent a hundred years on this earth, but  
lived without reaching out to others, then we've not lived at all.*

*But if we gain time for every life we touch, then in God's wisdom and  
eyes, we never perish. We live for all eternity.*

It didn't surprise Ellen that Robbie wrote that. It shouldn't have surprised anyone. If they only listened to any of the words to the songs he wrote, they would know Robbie went a lot deeper than the childlike prankishness he projected.

Robbie's feelings for Andrea surely shone in the way he planned her service. Picking out the songs, readings and writing a sermon that spoke more as if Andrea were just away rather than passed on. But in essence she was. She would always live on.

Ellen could see the pride in Joe's eyes even though he would never speak it about Robbie. He clenched Ellen's hand at the finish of a song where Elliott sang and Robbie played. Giving that squeeze that said more than words ever could, that he was glad that Ellen did what she did.

Hair combed, unlike his usual tossed locks, Robbie took the pulpit in the silence of the chapel that was only half filled.

"I want to thank everyone who joined us this evening in the celebration of life." Robbie spoke almost nervously, hands gripping the edges of the podium. "Ellen and Dean would like to invite everyone to their home for a late meal they prepared."

Ellen quickly shifted her eyes to Joe when she thought she heard him groan.

"Before we go . . . there's something I'd like to say." Robbie stood straight. "Beginnings, since it originated, has always been a very strong religiously based community. Rev. Bob though . . . though a man who hid the truth, he led this community and kept it strong faithfully. A big part of that was Andrea. When I first became a pastoral assistant, it was for other reasons. When Andrea named me new Reverend . . . she had faith in me. I've not been living up to the standard of those who led this community religiously before. So, I just don't want all of you to be shocked, if for now, I take it as seriously as Andrea wanted me to." He slightly cleared his throat. "Let us pray."

All heads bowed.



With the illumination of the quantum regressionator archway came the

rabbit, that seconds before hand, Grace and Jason watched disappear.

“Oh.” Grace gasped out as she applauded. “Wonderful. Again.”

“I wish I could.” Jason began to shut things down. “But I have to be careful how many times I do this. Sometimes the glow of the time machine can be seen in town on a clear night.”

“Jason.” Grace stood up from her chair. “This is wonderful. And they call Dr. Hayes intelligent. Can he break the barriers of time? No.”

“No.” Jason said. “I’ve broken them.”

“You enchant me.” She moved to him. “You were wonderful last night.”

“And didn’t I tell you I wouldn’t be affected by Frank’s taunts all night.”

“You were right. Now . . .” She breathed out heavily. “I only wish the Captain wasn’t waiting to return me home.”

Jason looked at his watch. “It’s early. The Captain is visiting family. I think he can wait.” He winked.

“Do you really think he won’t mind?”

“When those Slagel’s get together they lose track of time anyhow. Hal will never know.” Jason placed his arm around Grace. “Come my authoritarian little woman.”

Grace giggled as she walked out with Jason. “You flatter me.”

The door to the quantum lab closed, and unknown to Jason and Grace who were wrapped up in their reasoning for leaving, the archway to the regressionator lit back up.

^^^

From his final drink of milk, Joe looked over his empty glass and shook his head in disgust at his son. “Hal.”

Hal stopped pacing. “I am not understanding this.”

“Take it easy.” Joe winced and laid his hand on his stomach. “Damn Ellen and her puffs. I’m kicking her ass.”

“If you knew her cooking would give you indigestion, why did you eat it.”

“How could I not. It would make her feel bad.”

“And cursing her in your late night pain pace, would not?”

“She won’t know. Why don’t you sit down.”

Hal checked out the time. “Does Grace not know it’s late.”

“It’s early.”

“I would like to get back.”

“They’re old, how long can it take?” Joe shrugged and finally set down

his glass.

"I hope she doesn't smell like sex in my jeep."

Cringing Joe shook his head. "Now, did I need that comment. Christ my stomach is bothering me enough. Hal, find something to do."

"This is Beginnings. There is nothing to do."

"Go to the hall." Joe suggested.

"No one is there. It's Sunday."

"Frank's there with Johnny."

Hal stopped pacing. "Why is that? Why are Frank and Johnny hanging out at the social hall. Considering Frank's past problem with alcohol I would think he should find another place to hang out."

"Johnny's with him."

"Do you think that makes a difference?" Hal asked.

"Of course I do. Johnny doesn't want Frank drinking. Besides, Frank and Johnny they need to hang out. For reasons other than the father son thing."

"Which are?"

"Why are you so curious?"

"I'm bored." Hal tossed his hands up.

"Well, Johnny's sort of in on this investigation. And there are things only those two can discuss."

"True."

"Plus, if Frank wants to break, Johnny is a good one, because of being on the investigation team, to break to."

"Break?" Hal questioned.

"Well, I think, I'm not sure, but I believe, through his own eyewitness account, your brother knows exactly who killed Bev."

"Frank . . . Frank knows who killed Bev?"

"I think so." Joe nodded.

"Why wouldn't he say anything?"

"If he knows, he's protecting them."

"Excuse me." Hal took a step back, turned and walked straight out of Joe's house.

"Well." Joe spoke to himself. "I'd say Hal's a little concerned." He moved to the kitchen. "I have to make a note about this one."

^^^

Hal made a beeline straight through the living section, to town and to the social hall. As he originally thought, it was empty. Empty all but for

Johnny and Frank who played darts. They were oblivious, not seeing him open the doorway and stand there in thought.

Hal was beating himself. Hating what he was thinking. He was searching for an answer to Johnny's all of the sudden, 'be a pal with Dad' turn around, and he believed he found one. But was he searching too hard? If Frank knew who killed Bev, and Johnny wanted to find out for his own personal retaliation, then Frank was the key. The Key, the other one, the physical one haunted him as well. Nothing had been mentioned about that key being missing. And before Hal could continue on what he thought in his heart was a 'hunt against blood' trail, he had to confirm his two biggest suspicions about Johnny. The key. And Frank.

Hal would do just that. And with an idea in his head, he would start immediately. But prior to initiating step one, there was something Hal had to do. With a firm stride, eyes fixed on Johnny pouring moonshine into two glasses, Hal approached Frank and Johnny. "Stop." He said then looked at Frank. "Don't." With that firm word, without saying anymore, Hal lifted the two glasses and bottle, walked them across the social hall, set them down on the bar and then he left.

^^^

Quiet and alone Joe was and he wasted no time whatsoever putting on his favorite pajamas. Making his way across the livingroom to get one more glass of milk to combat after-Ellen meal side effects, he stopped when the door opened.

"Dad." Hal walked in. He grinned. "Oh, you still have those pajamas."

"Where the hell did you run off to?" Joe asked. "You didn't even say goodbye."

"Yes, well, it dawned on me that I had to check in with Elliott. So I went to use the phone."

"It dawned on you in the middle of the conversation we were having."

"Well to be truthful, my mind kind of wandered off in the middle of our talk."

"Figures."

"Anyhow, I went to use the phone."

"It's locked up." Joe said.

"Yes, I realized that. And when I tried to find who had the second key . . ."

"There is no second key."

"No one has a spare for you? Possibly holding it if you lose yours?" Hal

asked.

“What do you think I am? An idiot? No one has a second key. I have *it*. It.” He moved to the kitchen counter. “Frank can break that lock anyhow if need be. So I . . .” Picking up his key chain Joe tuned around to see an empty living room. “Now where did he go? I thought he needed this.” Grunting and tossing back down the phone key, Joe walked to the door. “The hell with him this time. He won’t get back in.” After turning the lock on the door, Joe flicked off the lights and went to bed.

In oddity Hal watched his father’s house go black. “He locked me out?” He questioned as he stood outside in a thinking pace. He knew what he had to do next, how to do it was the question. Then with a glance of the house next door, Hal got his answer.

^^^

Ellen finished tucking the covers around Alexandra. “And Daddy says tomorrow if you feel up to it, maybe you can go to one class at school to see the kids. Would you like that?”

“No.” Alexandra shook her head. “I hate school.”

“O.K.” Ellen shrugged then kissed her daughter. “Night, Sweetie. I love you.”

“Night Mommy.”

Giving a smile to Alexandra, Ellen pulled the bedroom door closed just a little and walked toward the livingroom. She stopped upon entrance when she had to step over what looked like a train of small papers. Billy was before them. “Time for bed.”

“Dad said I could stay up. He said since I helped him today I can work on my own stuff.”

“Oh. What are you building a game?”

Billy slightly rolled his eye. “No. Theories.”

“Theories.”

“Yes. See.” He held up the first paper. “I start with a tale I’ve been told, or a story that supposed to be true but has no proof, then I build theories around it.”

“What theory are you building.”

“Noah’s Ark.” Billy answered. “See. Card two. Rained for forty days and forty night. Mom, do you know how hard it would have to rain, even for that long, to flood the earth. And Dad said, the pounds per pressure of rainfall that hard would crush someone’s skull.”



"Bill. You're seven. How about coloring."

"Right." Billy shook his head. "One of these days you'll be glad for my theories."

"I'm sure. Where's Daddy?"

"Dad." Billy gave a correction of name. "Is in his office breathing heavy."

"What?" Ellen said with a laugh.

"Listen to him."

Curious to what her son was talking about, Ellen walked to Dean's closed office door. She placed her ear close. Sure enough Billy was right, she heard slow, heavy Dean breathing. Just when Ellen deducted perhaps Dean may have been up to something, she heard a woman's moan. It sounded like her own. Snickering a 'what the hell'. Ellen, without knocking, opened the door. "Got ya!" She pointed.

"El." Dean looked surprised. "What's up?"

"I know what you're doing." She shut the door and hurried to his desk. "Let me see."

"See what?"

"You have it, Don't you?"

"El."

"Dean." She tried to see the computer screen. "I know you're watching it. Joe said you have it. Are you."

After a grunt, Dean tossed his hands up in the air. "Yes. I was trying."

Giggling Ellen walked behind him and leaned over his shoulder to see the computer. "Play it."

With a maneuver of the mouse, Dean began to play the disk video of their bedroom antics.

"Dean? Why *are* you watching this?"

"Trying to remember what it was like." He felt the nudge to his back. "I don't know. It's fun. I can. It's us, so it's not wrong to watch it. And . . . maybe . . ." He sounded sly. "Try to get some pointers."

"From yourself."

"Sure." Dean shrugged. "See. Here, you seem to like this."

Ellen softened her voice. "Yeah."

"And this too."

"Um . . . yeah."

"But this." Dean said. "Look at your face. You are somewhere else. And twice you made this face. What the hell are you thinking right here."

"Dean." Ellen stated his name. "Only you would analyze our love making."

Quickly Dean swivelled his chair around. "But its all for you."

"Yeah right." Ellen laughed when Dean's hand gripped her waist and pulled her closer. "Now you got yourself all worked up."

"Not yet." Dean pulled her into him. "I'm still in control."

Ellen's eyes closed lightly when she felt the soft nuzzle of Dean's head into her chest, brushing against her. His hands roamed slow about her body. "In control?"

"Yep." He spoke soft. "Never know who can walk in."

"Dad." Billy stepped into the office.

Like a springboard, Dean's hands ejected from the places they rested. "Yes, Bill." He turned around.

"Uncle Hal says he needs to speak to you immediately. It's important."

"Oh, tell him to come in."

Nodding sarcastically as if tired of being the slave, Billy stepped out of the office. "Uncle Hal."

"Dean." Hal stood un the office door. "I'm sorry to bother you."

"No. No problem. What's up?" Dean asked.

"Um . . ." Hal shifted his eyes to Ellen. "El, Dad's not feeling well. He says he got sick from your puffs. Can you run over an make sure he's all right."

"Joe got sick from my puffs? Oh I feel bad." She walked across the office. "Sure, Hal. I'll go check."

Hal waited until Ellen had left and he shut the door.

Dean leaned back in his chair. "You got rid of my wife for a reason. What's going on."

"This . . . this request may seem absurd, but there is reason I assure you. It may be regarded as highly unethical. But Dean . . ." Almost with passion to his voice, Hal stepped to Dean's desk. "There's something I need from you."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

November 11

Johnny Slagel never realized how much of a night owl his father actually was until he was forced to spend an evening with him. Frank finished his rounds late, most of his security guards had been moved to the greenhouses for winter work.. And with the investigation, Frank was running behind. Not only did Andrea's service make Frank behind schedule in his arrival at the social hall, but Hal's abrupt politically correct, snatching away the whiskey, sent Frank on a guilt frenzy Johnny spent half the night trying to dismantle.

He wanted to sleep, but other things were vital. Getting in contact with George. It had been a week since he contacted him. A week since communications were shut down. He supposed George knew something was up, how could he not. But Johnny gathered George couldn't even imagine in his worst nightmare what had happened. Little did Johnny know, on the other side of the country, George wasn't worried at all. George basked in the fact then when he tried to contact Joe, no signal could go through. He rationalized it as some sort of repercussion of a blunder Henry committed when he hurriedly set up the communication center. It was a set back in Beginnings communication world, and to the society, any set back was a good one.

Johnny had to get through. He hadn't any idea where he lost the key to the phone's lock, nor did he worry about it. A replacement was easy to get. He made two. And opportunity to make that call was finally upon him.

The sun wasn't up. There wasn't a guard, and Johnny slipped into Joe's office with ease.

He rushed, but in a sense didn't panic. He tuned the lock on the drawer that held the phone, smiled with the lock unlatched, and then Johnny opened the drawer.

Salvation. In the case was the phone. And excited to have it in his reach, Johnny lifted it. He listened for outside sounds, then he removed it from the case.

Every ounce of happy arrogance fell to the floor when Johnny powered up the phone. "Fuck." He whispered out in total disgust. He wanted, in his anger, to sail that phone across the room, but he couldn't. He had to think of something else. But the more he looked down to that phone, the more aggravated he got over the simple message on the display, 'Enter passcode'.

^^^

New Bowman, Montana

The 'ah' was a replacement for thank you, as Hal only raised his eyes to the paper lowered to his desk. "Just what I have been waiting for. I need to know who is available to teach Wednesday. With my brother replacing me, I don't want my men scholastically in disarray. Hating to do in, I may have to keep Frank in Shakespearian Drama. It might teach him a lesson, Elliott, don't you . . ." Hal looked up to Sgt. Joshua Owens who stood before him. "You're not Elliott."

"Did you want me to be?"

Hal leaned back. "Where is Sgt. Ryder?"

"Sick." Sgt. Owens laid another paper before Hal. "He asked me very early this morning to take over his duties until his afternoon."

"He expects to be well in a time frame?" Hal asked.

Sgt. Owens shrugged. "He doesn't look good."

Immediately Hal stood up. "He has to be sick. He never calls off of work." He moved to the door. "I'll be right back. Handle anything."

Sgt. Owens nodded a 'sure' and watched the door close. He thought to himself, handling things and filling in for Sgt. Ryder and the Captain would never be a problem *if* they taught someone else to do their job. No one ever really filled in for the two of them. They filled in for each other and that was it. Walking over to the Captain's desk, he looked at the agendas laying there and all he could think of was 'poor Frank'.

Hal knocked on the door only once, and then when he didn't receive an immediate response, with worry he blasted in. "Elliott." He called out.

Wearing jeans and a tee shirt, Elliott came from the kitchen with his coffee. "Hey, Captain."

"Didn't you hear me knock?"

"No." Elliott shook his head. "Did you want coffee?"

"No, I want to know how you are."

"Honestly?" Elliott shrugged. "Fine."

"Fine? So you're feeling better."

"I feel fine. A little tired, I got some extra sleep."

"So that was why you called off for the morning?" Hal questioned.

"No. I took the morning off to just take the morning off."

"I . . . I don't understand."

"I didn't feel like working."

As if he heard the most offensive news, Hal gasped. "What?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"You didn't feel like working, so you took the day off?"

"Yes."

"I don't take days off."

"Captain, usually I don't either. But . . . I wanted to take a day off. I didn't feel like dealing with much."

Hal moved to the couch. "Sgt. Owens said you didn't look well. Did you look bad this morning?"

"No, I told him to say that."

Perturbed, Hal shook his head. "You know, I saw this coming when you left Beginnings last night. Your whole demeanor had changed because you failed to get Ellen to have lunch with you. Oh, you acted the part well. But it was an act."

Elliott stood up. "That's ridiculous. It has no bearing whatsoever on why I didn't go to work."

"Like hell it doesn't. Don't let this get to you, Elliott. Don't." Hal instructed firmly.

"I'm not. I'm sick."

"You're pathetic." Hal marched to the door, and stopped. "Calling off work. Sleeping extra long, failing to comb your hair. Using your illness as an excuse for your weak mental state. Get over it." He flung open the door. "Or I'm kicking your ass." Hal stormed out.

Elliott stood there speechless. Just as he was about to sit down again, the door reopened.

Hal poked his head in. "And Elliott. Get dressed. Now. In uniform. You have fifteen minutes to be back on duty or Owens becomes my official right hand man." The door closed.

Elliott shook his head at Hal's attempts to strong arm him. "The Captain wouldn't replace me." Lowering down to the couch, Elliott stopped. "Then again . . ." Grabbing his coffee, and not taking a chance that Hal wasn't joking, Elliott went to get dressed.

^^^

### Beginnings, Montana

"Christ." Joe shook his head staring at the two pieces of paper before him. "Could they have been any more obvious that they copied."

“What I tell you?” Frank said. “Same.” He pointed at the papers. “Word for word.”

“They didn’t even make an attempt.” Joe read the simple statements of the wayward married couple. Both were short compared to everyone else’s and both said the exact same thing except for when they mentioned each other.

--*‘The night was pretty uneventful. After the meeting at Danny’s, I went home. The kids were in bed. Dean/Ellen and I fought for fifteen minutes. We went to the bedroom, cleaned up Henry’s mess, fought again briefly, then went to sleep in the same bed together.’--*

“Do you even think Ellen will say anything different than Dean did this morning.” Joe asked.

Frank shrugged. “Hard to say. You can rattle her pretty good.”

“Yeah.” Joe smiled. “I can. Go on, let her in.”

Frank walked to the door and opened it. “El.”

“It’s about time. It’s cold out there. Making me wait.” She closed the door. “Hey, Where’s Grace?”

“She’s not here yet.” Frank answered.

“Oh.” Ellen turned to leave.

“Hold it.” Joe called out. “Sit. She wasn’t here for Dean’s. She won’t be here for yours.”

“But, Joe. Grace is supposed to ensure these interrogations are fair.”

“True.” Joe said. “But it’s more for the suspects than the community. And after reading yours and Dean’s statement of what you did that night. She doesn’t need to be here.”

“All right.” Ellen sat down. “That makes sense.”

“Besides . . .” Joe continued. “I can give a rat’s ass if you and Dean think I’m fair. Now . . .”

“Joe.”

“Quiet.” Joe ordered then looked up to Frank who snickered. “Ellen. What did you do the night Bev was killed?”

“The whole night?”

“No. Just from the meeting on.”

“I wrote that down for you.” Ellen said.

“Well I want you to tell me.”

“O.K.” Ellen smiled. “The night was pretty uneventful. After the meeting at Danny’s, I went home. The kids were in bed. Dean and I fought for fifteen minutes. We went to the bedroom, cleaned up Henry’s mess, fought again briefly, then went to sleep in the same bed together.”

Joe looked down to the statement. He grumbled. “What? Did you

memorize this?"

"No, not at all. The night was pretty . . ."

"Uneventful." Joe finished her sentence. "Yes, I know you have that written down. Ellen? Why did you and Dean sleep in the same bed?"

"We're married."

"But you weren't getting along."

"Yes. True." Ellen held up a finger. "But everything was solved that night."

"And the next day you went back to it not being solved."

Ellen looked at him confused. "What are you talking about?"

"Ellen. When I saw you the next day, after Bev's murder, I asked you how it was going with you and Dean since the truth was out. You told me, he was back home but you two had a long way to go."

"True."

"But you slept with him."

"Slept." Ellen corrected. "We didn't have sex. We can sleep in the same bed without sex. We're allowed."

"Yes, you are." Joe told her. "My error. So . . . you never left the house after that."

"Nope." Ellen shook her head.

"What would you say if I told you one of Frank's guards spoke to you that night and said you were looking for Frank?" Joe questioned.

"I'd say he was lying."

"Frank's guard was lying?"

"Yep." Ellen nodded.

"Why would he lie?" Joe questioned.

"To start trouble. They get like that when they're bored."

"Ellen." Joe said perturbed. "And Frank, feel free to jump in any time you'd like."

"Nah." Frank smiled. "I'm enjoying this too much."

Ellen giggled. "You're cute, Frank. Don't forget our date tomorrow."

"Enough." Joe grumbled. "Now, getting back to the guard."

"What guard?" Ellen asked.

"The one that was lying." Joe answered.

"See. I knew it. You admit it."

"Christ." Joe rubbed his eyes. "Ellen." He slammed his hand on the desk. "The guard said he saw you looking for Frank and he's not lying to start trouble."

"Well, he was mistaken." Ellen said nonchalantly. "I was home in bed with my husband all night. In the same bed, mind you."

“How could the guard mistake seeing you.”

“Maybe it was dark.” Ellen tossed her hands up in the air and stood. “And I really have to go if I want to catch the Dan-Tram to get to New Bowman. Can I leave?”

After a huff Joe flicked his hand out in a wave. “Go.”

“Thanks.” She walked to the door.

“Ellen.” Joe called out. “One more time. You never left your home that night. You or Dean.”

“Nope.” She smiled and shook her head. “Honestly, Joe, why would I lie?”

“Um, I don’t know . . .” Joe bobbed his head from side to side. “To cover up the fact that you killed her.”

Ellen snickered. “Don’t be silly. Why would I kill Bev. Even though I had every right to put a gun to her head and shoot her.” She reached for the door.

“Hold it.” Joe scolded as he slowly stood up.

“What?” Ellen turned around.

“Why did you say that?”

“Say what?”

“That you had every right to put a gun to her head and shoot her.”

“Because I did.” Ellen argued. “She caused me a lot of grief and . . .”

“No.” Joe walked to her. “Why did you use that form of murder.”

Ellen giggled. “Not much of an investigator, are you. That was how she died.”

“Really?” Joe folded his arms as he stood before Ellen. “And how do you know this?”

“Everyone does.” She saw Joe shaking her head. “No, they don’t?”

“We didn’t let that get out.”

“Well then you’d better tell Dean to keep his mouth shut, he was the one that told me.”

“Dean? How does he know?”

“Are you tired, Joe?” Ellen asked. “Dean. Me. Where’s Bev. In our morgue. Me and Dean run that. No one else wants to. She’s there.”

Frank stepped forward. “El. We gave strict instructions for no one to go near her, or for that body to be touched.”

“Dean didn’t touch her. He said he was curious so . . .” She shrugged. “He peeked. No biggie. I have to run. See ya.” Her escape was fast and Ellen was gone before anymore could be said.

Frank closed the door that Ellen left open. “Dean peeked.”

Sarcastic Joe was as he made his way back to his desk. “Oh, yeah, you



heard her. No biggie. It's a goddamn murder investigation. No biggie." He grunted as he sat down. "Christ."

^^^

John Matoose was a little jealous watching Dean moved about the clinic lab at a fast pace. He guessed even if his legs were back to normal he probably wouldn't be as wiry as Dean. Even though Dean looked busy, he was alone, and John had to talk to him. "Dean."

With a squeak of his high top tennis shoes, Dean stopped and turned around. "Hey, John. What's up?"

"I need to talk to you. It's important."

"Sure."

Stepping in further, John lowered his voice. "It's about a baby's paternity."

"I told you don't worry about that."

"No, not mine . . ." John's eyes shifted when he saw Johnny come from the back room. "Never mind."

Dean shrugged. "O.K." he returned to work.

After a glance at Johnny, John walked from the lab. He'd have to find another way, get another chance. He was reaching the point where pretty soon he was going to have to not even beat around the bush, he would have to come right out with it.

"John." Johnny called him.

Outside the clinic, John Matoose stopped. He turned around. "I don't have time."

"You should make time for me."

"For what? What is it you want me to do, Johnny?" John stepped to him. "I'm really not in the mood. I think you're just playing games because your running idle waiting to hear from your *society* people."

"Things are gonna need done." Johnny didn't rattle.

"Do them yourself."

"Why are you even testing me?"

"Because I'm starting to wonder, what the hell can you do. Jenny dies, someone is gonna know something is up. Blame it on me? Go on. If she's gone what do I care. And you know what else I think . . ." John raised his eyebrows. "I think you're really nothing right now. Nothing but alone in Beginnings. You're a scare little boy with no one on your side and you just need a friend. Go away Johnny, I'm not gonna be that friend. You can't scare me." He turned and started to walk.

Snide, Johnny grinned. "Caroline."

John Matoose stopped. He peered over his shoulder. "What?"

"Caroline."

Graveling, John stormed to him. "How dare you even mention my dead daughter."

"You're dead daughter?" Johnny laughed. "Really."

Deep and emotional John spoke. His head dropped with the lowering of the freezer case in the Cryo lab. "Oh my God."

"Watch out. I have to lock this back up." Johnny replaced the pad lock then pulled the sheet that covered the case. "For the longest time I thought this case held those missing embryos. Hell, what a fool I was going after them too. But . . . good thing my father trusts me. I busted him talking to the case. And then, he explained." Johnny moved close to John. "It was a group effort, they went through the time machine and saved Brian and Caroline. Only thing now is, they have to remain in stasis for six months to a year until they can safely bring them out and cure them completely. I guess . . ." He exhaled. ". . .they have to be strong. But . . .they have to make it through stasis. One pull of the plug . . ." Johnny laughed as he laid a hard smack to John's arched back. "Bye-bye. You got her back John. Wouldn't it be terrible to lose her again. And . . the best part is, no one in the community is supposed to know they're still alive, so no one will miss them if they don't survive."

John couldn't say anything. He couldn't move. Protecting Jenny was one thing, but protecting his daughter brought an entirely different motivation. When he failed Beginnings before, his very own flesh and blood paid the price for his sins, or at least that was how he felt. John failed Caroline once. He would *not* fail her again.

^^^

The length of indulgent time for that cup of coffee was the span of a slurp, gasp and burp. Josephine, snickered, swayed and reached to set her cup on Joe's desk.

Frank took it from her hand and put it down.

"Thank you, Frank." Josephine spoke in her thin way. "Sometimes you ain't such an asshole."

"Thanks." Frank grumbled.

“Josephine.” Joe folded his hands. “We’d like to . . .”

“Who’s the broad?” Josephine pointed back to Grace.

“She’s here to make sure things run fairly.” Joe answered.

With a ‘hmpf’ Josephine nodded. “I can understand that. You are Slagels. But who is she?”

“Grace Hawthorn.” Joe explained. “In the old world she used to be a Judge, now she’s a judge in New Bowman.”

“Where?” Josephine asked.

“New Bowman!” Joe repeated louder.

“I’m not deaf!” Josephine yelled back. “What the hell is New Bowman?”

“It’s the town we acquired.” Joe explained. “The UWA soldiers, the men that dress . . .”

Frank completed that sentiment. “Like pansy civil war soldiers. You remember, weren’t you born.”

Josephine rolled her eyes. “I seen them men run around here. They don’t live here?”

“No.” Joe told her. “There’s five hundred of them. They live in that town. In fact it’s pretty built up. Courtesy of Danny Hoi. Theater, restaurant . . .”

“Any bars?”

“Well, yeah.” Joe nodded. “And my son, Hal, is the leader.”

“Christ Almighty, you have another son?” Josephine whistled. “They’re just popping out of the woodwork, aren’t they. Forget the next plague, It’s a Slagel epidemic.”

Grace covered her mouth to hide the giggle of amusement she found in Josephine.

“Now, Josephine.” Joe tried to continue.

“You keeping this place a secret?” Josephine asked.

“New Bowman?” Joe shook his head. “No. Not at all.”

“How come I don’t know about it.”

Frank fluttered his lips. “Well, if you’d leave your fuckin bar stool at the hall.”

“Frank.” Joe cringed.

“Aren’t you just one to talk.” Josephine snapped back. “In the old days Dean Martin would have called you a lush.”

“How would you know what I do or don’t do?” Frank argued. “You can’t lift your head off the bar past nine o’clock.”

“Here, Frank, I’ll lift something.” Josephine flipped him off.

“Dad.”

“Frank.” Joe slammed his hand. “She’s ninety years old for crying out

loud. Don't argue with her."

"That's right." Josephine straightened her dress. "Treat me with some respect."

Joe just wanted to proceed. "Josephine, the reason you're here is we need to ask you some questions."

"No need." Josephine shook her head. "No questions, in fact . . ." She hiccupped. "Stop the investigation. I'm confessing."

Frank rolled his eyes. "To?"

"Aren't you just proving you're as big and dumb as they say you are." Josephine snapped. "To Bev's murder. Idiot. I did it. I killed her."

"Josephine . . ." Joe tried to talk. "Look, you . . ."

"No, Joey. I did it. I insist you let me confess. No need letting it go on. I killed her. I hated her. That bitch."

Rubbing his eyes, Joe barely looked up. "Why did you kill her?"

"She's a Hadly. But that wasn't it. Got into a fight with her. She called me a slut. Said I was stepping on her territory. I told her, ain't she just one to call the kettle black. She was nothing but a fungus growing little tart."

Joe cringed. "O.K., I think we heard enough."

"No. I'm not done confessing." Josephine softened her voice. "So I said, say one more word, Bev Hadly and you're dead. She did. She called me a slut again. So . . ." Josephine leaned back in her chair. "I waited til she was a sleep, then I snuck into her room with the biggest knife I could find. I lunged on the bed like a jackrabbit and I stabbed her, Joey. Stabbed her maybe fifty, sixty times. Blood shot out. She screamed. And I stabbed, over and over and over and over and . . ."

"Enough." Joe halted her.

"O.K." Josephine folded her hands. "I'm done. But, I killed her. So . . . do what you have to do with me. But end this cops and robbers game you have going. You got your man."

"Thank you." Joe nodded and stood up. "Frank, can I see you outside?" He waved his hand for Frank to follow. "Grace, we'll be right back." As soon as Joe stepped out, he lit up a cigarette and held one out for Frank to grab when he emerged.

"Man." Frank took the smoke. "Josephine killed Bev."

"Frank, you asshole."

Frank laughed.

"But you have to admit." Joe dropped his voice to a whisper. "It's not a bad thought."

"What?"

"Letting her confess. I mean, ninety, the community could care less

about the murder. They aren't gonna want anything done with Josephine, her cakes are too good."

"You want to leave a murder unsolved. You?" Frank asked. "Why?"

"Not that I would, mind you. But we could, if well, you know, just in case the real killer ends up being someone we really love." Joe watched for a Frank reaction. A 'damn it' went through his mind when Frank didn't react. "And Frank, you could freely and without fear, release that burden you have of seeing who actually shot Bev." Joe made himself sound so fatherly. "Like, now, Frank, If you want to just tell me . . ."

"Dad." Frank chuckled. "I told you. We missed the window." Frank grabbed the office door. "But I like the Josephine idea. Come on, let's get rid of her, Hector's coming up."

When Frank disappeared, Joe swung out his arm with a snap to his finger in disgust. "Shit. I thought I'd get him." After a shake his head, he slipped into his office.

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### New Bowman, Montana

The simple ding-a-ling brought a smile to Ellen's face when she entered the newest addition to New Bowman shops, The Unique Boutique. "Oh, my God." She wisped out like a little girl, turning and looking around the small shop geared for women.

*Ben and Todd from Fabrics opened a new shop.' Jenny Matoose had told Ellen. 'You have to go see it. Even though I hate that Todd, the shop is the greatest. Look what I got.'*

From the memory of Jenny's showing off of her new handbag, Ellen looked to the wall where a few purses were on display.

"Can I help you?" Todd, in his snide feminine way came from the back.

"Wow, this place is really great." Ellen said. "Who would have thought."

"Well, Ben and myself have been thinking about it for some time. Really, there is no where in this world to get good accessories. And you must accessorize."

"Oh, I agree." Ellen checked out a peach color purse. "You made all these?"

"Our division made everything in this store."

"How's my father feel about using community supplies."

"Throwing our little Slagel weight?" Todd raised his eyebrows. "Actually all of these items were made from fabrics we don't use. Plus that wonderful

Mr. Hoi retrieved us more.”

“Thought profiteering was not allowed.”

“Like Mr. Hoi, we are not profiting.” Todd said snooty. “Now, are you going to buy something. Because if you aren’t please window shop from outside.”

“Well, with that attitude you’ll be out of business very fast.” Ellen reached for the purse. “Oh, I like this . . . no wait . . .” She stopped in her reach when she saw a huge, almost too big, deep purple purse. “Oh, this one. Yes, this is the one.” She took it down from the shelf and giggled. “I haven’t carried a purse in ages.” She slipped the strap over her shoulder. “How do I look.”

“Very feminine.”

Ellen saw the dangling price tag. “Whoa. Three Danny Dollars. How reasonable. I’ll take it.”

“Shall I bag it?”

“Oh, my God. Yes.” Ellen said with excitement and gave the purse to Todd. She followed him to the counter.

Todd lifted a plastic bag. “Three Danny Dollars please.”

“Um . . . Can I pay you on Friday? I’m out.”

“Nope.” Todd took the purse back to the shelf. “No money. No purse.”

“But I’ll give it to you Friday.”

“We don’t issue credit.” Todd snapped.

“I want that purse.”

“I want three Danny dollars.”

“My father said, that there is no profiteering. If someone doesn’t have any Danny Dollars they don’t have to pay. The Danny dollars were established as a symbol of earning. They really have no value.” She took the purse back. “So there.”

“Well, your father . . .” Todd snatched the purse back. “Told me when he O.K.’d our shop that since our items aren’t entertainment or necessities, we, like the other non-necessity stores, do not have to follow the barter rules or freebie rules.”

“That sucks.”

“Get the purse on Friday.”

“It’s only Monday. It might be gone. Come on Todd. I’m good for it.” Ellen pleaded.

“No.”

“Can you hold it for me?”

“No.” Todd looked up to the bell on the door and smiled. “Captain. Can I help you.”

“Oh!” Ellen said excited. “Hal.” She spun to him.

“I’m not here to purchase thank you.” Hal said politely. “I need to speak to her. Ellen.” He stepped to her.

“Hal, just the man I wanted to see.” Ellen said.

“Good. Ellen, I was wondering if I could see you in my office right now.”

“Sure. Hey, Hal do you have any Danny Dollars?”

“Yes, why?” Hal asked.

“Good. Can you buy me a purse. Todd won’t hold it until Friday, it might be gone, and I’m out of money.”

“Ellen.” Hal spoke calm. “We were just distributed our earnings on Friday. It’s Monday.”

“Yeah, but I’m broke.”

“How?” Hal was confused. “Nobody spends their earnings in three days. Everything, entertainment, drinks, they are incredibly cheap.”

“True, but, I only had forty-two dollars. I spent it Friday.”

“Good Lord, Ellen.” Appalled Hal sounded. “On what?”

“Most of it was at that new Hoi-scents candle shop. The rest was at the new Hoi Interior Decorator shop. They have the cutest table . . .”

“Ellen. No.” Hal took hold of her arm. “If you can be so irresponsible with the budgeting of your finances, then you must gamble on the availability of that purse and wait until Friday. Let’s go.”

“Listen how you talk to me.” Ellen complained as she left with Hal. “I missed being able to shop.”

“This is such a return of the old world Ellen.” Hal shook his head. “Go to my office I have something to take care of with Sgt. Owens over there.”

“All right.” Ellen grumbled and walked away.

Hal bobbed his head in antsiness waiting for Ellen, who moved at her own pace to make it to the corner and to the Town Hall building where his office was at. When he saw her go in, Hal walked back into The Unique Boutique. “Todd.” Hal approached the counter. “I’m going to purchase that purse. Do not tell her I did, but no not give it to her until Friday.”

“Oh.” Todd smiled pleased and gave a flirtatious look to Hal. “That is sweet of you. Of course.” He walked to the purse.

“No. Wait.” Hal told him. “I’m just going to pay for it. Let it dangle there as a tease to my sister.”

Todd winked then giggled.

Uncomfortably, Hal just nodded.

Ellen raised a quirky eyebrow when she heard the door to Hal's office shut. She looked behind her. "Oh, for a second I thought it was Joe. Calling me in here like I did something wrong."

"I need to speak to you." Hal sat down behind the desk.

"Did I do something?" Ellen asked.

"Aside from unnecessarily spending your Danny Dollars."

"Hal." Ellen huffed. "The best thing Danny did was give us women, and some men, the ability to shop again."

"At the rate you're going, there'll be nothing to buy."

"Please. We'll buy anything. Danny won't disappoint us. And . . . it keeps the economy booming."

"There is no economy. You know how the Danny Dollar thing works. It's only an allotment of resources to use for enjoyment. You're abusing that privilege."

"It was invented for that."

"Oh, I'm not going to argue with you." Hal stated.

"Good." Ellen folded her hands. "Now, what did you want to talk to me about?"

"Ellen . . ." Hal switched his tone to a serious one. "I am coming to you not only as family, but as a friend. I would like to ask you to reconsider the understanding with Elliott."

"No."

Hal blinked. "Just like that? No?"

"No, Hal. My mind is made up. And I'm telling Frank you're trying to undermine his relationship with me."

"I am doing no such thing." Hal said with offense. "What you had going with Elliott was on a totally different level. You know that. It was a closeness. You were giving him a chance to be close to someone."

"I am married to Dean. Dean has an understanding with Frank. I can't take on another man."

"That's absurd." Hal argued. "You know you can."

Ellen gasped. "Are you implying I'm a slut?"

"What?! No!" Hal shrieked. "I'm saying you can make room for someone else. And you know that. You can be close to Elliott, be that friend and if you want to stay committed to the demented Dean and Frank thing, then as long as you cross no extreme physical boundaries with Elliott, you are. Because I can assure you Ellen, the physical aspect is not what my friend needs. He just needs you."

"No, Hal, he doesn't. He proved that."



“He made a mistake.” Hal defended. “I am being totally honest with you, Ellen, he thought that was the thing to do. The man is an idiot. Scold him, be a normal woman and make his life miserable for a week or so, but don’t kill him, because that is exactly what you are doing.”

Jaw twitching, holding back her anger, Ellen stood up. “I’m not even going to justify that with a remark. I am not killing Elliott. Don’t play on my guilt. It’s my life Hal.” She turned and walked to the door.

“And it’s Elliott’s life. But only, Ellen . . .” Hal rose slowly. “You can make a difference in that life.”

Ellen stopped.

“I wouldn’t appeal to you if I thought you didn’t feel for Elliott. How can you not feel for him. It’s Elliott.”

“Hal.” Ellen turned to face him.

“Listen to me. Whether you believe it or not, whether he admits it or not, you will have an impact on the medical care he receives.”

“I know what you’re trying to say, I do.” Ellen softened her voice. “But . . . I will not make a difference in how he fights this illness. I won’t. Elliott has pride. Elliott wants to live. With me or without me, he will try his damndest to do that.”

“You’re absolutely right. Argument lost on that point.” Hal lifted his hand in defeat. “I don’t doubt in my heart that my friend will fight to the end for his life. But look at it this way. If without you, he is giving a hundred percent, then, with you, he will give a hundred and ten. And who knows. Who knows how much difference that extra ten percent is going to make. And on a different angle . . .” Hal walked to her. “I love him as much as my brothers. To me he is no less than a brother. If God wills that he has a year left on this earth, then I want him to be happy for that year. Is that so wrong? You can give that to him Ellen, you really, really can. Let me ask you this . . .” Hal allowed the silence of the office to be his dramatic effect. “Do you dislike him so much, that you can’t find time, a day or two a week, to be that friend. That someone he can unload on, talk to, lean on.” When Ellen opened her mouth, Hal laid a finger over her lips. “Don’t answer. Think about it. All right?”

Ellen exhaled. “I’ll think about it.”

“Thank you.” Hal kissed her on the cheek.

A single knock was a surprising interruption, and then the door to the office opened, and in walked Elliott. “Captain, did you get a chance to talk to . . .” He paused. “I’m sorry I’m . . .”

Ellen’s disgusted grunt cut him off. “Oh! You!” So angry she sneered at Elliott. “Thought I’d be gone, didn’t you. Huh? Well, I’m still here. And here

I was buying it all. Such a fuckin player you are. Next time have the balls to do your own dirty work, asshole.” She stormed to the door, stopped and spun around. “And let me remind you . . . *I’m* giving you your treatment today. *I* will have needles in my hand.” She nodded. “And you have ten minutes! Be there!” Swiping the hair from her face, Ellen lifted her chin, folded her arms and marched away.

Stunned, shocked and speechless, Elliott stood. “What is this?” He spoke confused. “Yell at Elliott day?”

“Looks it.” Hal stated and walked to his door. “I’m on my way to the school. What did you need?”

“I just need to know if you talked to Sgt. Owens about tonight’s schedule if I’m going to help you out.”

“Shit.” Hal cringed. “I forgot. I will. Sorry. And I still need your help. It’s vital.”

“Absolutely.” Elliott pivoted as Hal walked by him. “Captain, can I ask. What was wrong with Ellen. Why did she yell at me?”

Hal shrugged. “Don’t know. Guess you just set her off for no reason.” He took a step and halted. “Oh, and Elliot. Best get down for your treatment. You don’t want to be late. She has needles you know.” Hal winked and walked away.

Elliott’s shoulders dropped “Swell.”

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### Beginnings, Montana

Quiet. There was barely a sound in Joe’s office except for his exhale. He laid down a paper, then placed his hand over top of it. “Thank you, Hector.”

“You’re welcome.” Hector nodded and stood up. “If you need anything else. Just let me know.”

“We will.” Joe told him.

Frank walked Hector to the door and opened it. After Hector was gone, a worried look hit Frank’s face and with rub of his hand over his face, Frank let out a heavy breath. “Well?”

“Telling the truth.” Joe looked at his notes and then Hector’s statement. “I think it’s time to call Henry back up here.”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Aggravated Henry was. He shifted in the chair, and he projected no less than he was annoyed for being called again to Joe's office. "I told you."

"Tell me again." Joe said calm.

"Fine." Henry tossed his hands up. "It's not gonna change. I took a walk. I went home and went to bed."

"That's it?" Joe asked.

"That is it." Henry stated firm.

"Why are you lying, Henry?" Joe questioned.

"What?" Henry nearly shrieked. "I'm not lying, Joe."

"Then Hector is."

Silence.

Henry cleared his throat. "What do you mean."

"I mean . . ." Joe leaned in toward his desk. "Hector told me, and gave a statement that he hung out with you all evening. You guys walked around, played some cards, hooked up an old Nintendo set and until about four in the morning, you two got caught up in a whirlwind game of . . ."

"Mario Brothers." Henry closed his eyes.

Joe shrugged. "That's what Hector says. Sounds pretty innocent to me. So . . . why lie?"

The swallow Henry made was predominant. "I had reasons."

"What reasons. Not accusing you of murder, Henry. You're making yourself look awfully guilty with all this lying." Joe said calm. "What's up?"

Henry shifted his eyes to where Grace sat in the corner. "Joe, what I want to say has nothing to do with the murder. Can Grace . . ."

Grace interrupted. "Say, no more. I need a beverage anyhow." She gathered her folder and hurriedly left the office.

Joe waited, the squeak of his rocking chair was like a timer in his wait.

After fiddling in nervousness with his hands, Henry peered up. "I'm sorry I lied. I . . . did hang out with Hector all night. I just didn't want anyone to know."

"He's an alibi, Henry." Joe told him. "Why."

"Joe, I'm sure Dean's statement said it all." Henry shook his head. "I just figured if I said nothing, it would be my word against Dean's."

"Ex . . . cuse me?" Joe asked and grabbed Dean's statement. "I have it hear. What is it supposed to say."

Henry looked up to Frank who quickly shook his head to Henry.

"I saw that." Joe said.

“Fuck.”

“Henry?” Joe asked again. “What is it supposed to say.”

“That Dean and Ellen stopped into my house and saw me and Hector in what could have been taken as an embarrassing situation.”

“I see.” Joe stated. “What made them just stop in?”

Henry stopped to think. If Dean didn’t write down that he had stopped by his house, than nothing was mentioned about Bev. “I really don’t know, Joe. I don’t. They took what they saw the wrong way and I got mad and kicked them out.”

“That explains you not talking to them.” Joe said. “Now, Dean and Ellen stopped by? Both of them?”

“Um . . . no, just Dean.”

“But you said Dean and Ellen.”

“Well, Joe, it’s just habit to say their names together. You know, Abbott and Costello, Dean and Ellen . . .”

“You’re lying.”

Henry breathed out. “Yeah.” He said sadly. “I’m lying.”

“O.K.” Joe moved all the papers aside. “Thanks, Henry, that will be all for now.”

“Thanks, Joe.” Henry sadly nodded, stood up and without saying anymore, walked out of Joe’s office.

Seconds after the door closed, Joe let out a huff. “Goddamn Dean and Ellen.”

“Want me to get them?” Frank asked.

“No. No.” Joe shook his head. “I’m gonna just wait. Let them get all comfortable then . . .” Relaxed Joe leaned back. “I’ll nail their skinny little asses. I’m telling you Frank, those two. Something is up with them.” Joe quickly looked up to Frank to see if there was some sort of ‘I saw one of them kill Bev’ reaction. But as usual . . . nothing.

^^^

Elliott wasn’t used to entering the clinic too many times after evening. How different it was, quiet. Not that he wanted to be there, but he had to be. Slowly he walked hoping only to run into the person he set out to find . . . Johnny.

In the lab, Johnny was, looking as if he were reading or something. Elliott knocked on the door and waited for Johnny to look up before he said anything. “May I . . . May I speak to you?”

“Hey, Elliott, yeah, sure.” He closed his book. “What’s up.”

Distraught, Elliott looked and he shut the lab door. "Johnny, this is so important. But even more important than what I have to tell you, is the fact it needs to remain a secret."

"Sure. Why?"

"It has to do with family. Your family. And I hope you don't get mad at me."

"What's going on."

"Well . . . I was at your Uncle Hal's home the other night, my first night after treatments. And while stying there I found something. It frightened me." Reaching into his back pocket Elliott pulled out a red bandana. "Only us officer's use this color."

"Uncle Hals?"

"I believe." Elliott said, "But look."

Johnny lifted up the bandana. Brownish spots splattered across it and then a smear. "It looks like blood."

"That's what I thought." Elliott exhaled. "It was thrown away. I saw the red and thought perhaps the Captain tossed it away by accident but when I saw the blood . . . I worried."

"Why would he throw away a bandana with blood."

"That's why I'm here. I'm hoping you can tell me." Elliott softened his voice. "I need to know if that's whose blood I think it is before I do anything about it."

Seriousness swept across Johnny's eyes. "Bev's?"

Elliott swallowed. "I don't want to turn it in and look the fool, plus chance losing the Captain's friendship over it. But, for the sake of justice, should that be Bev's blood, I must turn it in."

"I understand. So you want me to test it first before you do something about it or stop worrying."

"Any chance of that?" Elliott asked. "I will understand if you prefer just to turn it over to . . ."

"No." Johnny stopped him. "No. It's . . . It's Uncle Hal. Let's get the worry out of our minds before we decide what to do."

"Good. Good." Elliott said with relief. "Could you let me know what you find as soon as possible."

"I can let you know this evening."

"Then I'll check back before I leave." Elliott nodded. "Thanks again."

"No problem." Johnny clenched the bandana in his hand, then shifted his eyes to it.

After a glance at Johnny, so serious and down, Elliott turned and walked from the lab. He pulled the door closed behind him. In the hall, he stopped

and looked into the lab window. Johnny was still staring at the bandana. Mood changed, facial expression switching to a snide one, Elliott left the clinic.

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The first plate slammed as it was set on the table. Henry carried himself as angry as he carried the dishes. "And do you know how I felt?" He snapped at Hector.

Hector hit his cigarette.

"Going in there. Telling Joe this. Telling Joe that. I looked like a fool Hector, a fool." Henry set another plate down. "I can't believe you would do something so stupid without even letting me know. If you had one idea . . ."

"Henry." Hector stood up. "Look, I will tell you this one time. I'm not your bitch. Don't talk down to me, because I'll knock you on your ass. And . . ." His hand pointed. "Why are *you* getting mad at *me*, when you're the one that was busted lying."

"Because you could have told me."

"I did." Hector said strongly. "I told you I was putting that in my statement. You didn't listen. Why not tell him we hung out. We hang out every other night."

"But a lot happened that night with Bev."

"Yeah, well, what better reason to tell Joe then we were together." Hector calmed down. "Now why are you this upset. You said Joe understood."

"Yeah, he did." Henry tossed out his hand. "It's just that . . . don't get upset, but I worry about what you could tell Joe."

"And you don't think I worry. I'm sticking to that story Henry, it won't change. For both our sakes."

Henry looked up. "Both our sakes?"

"Oh, yeah." Hector nodded. "We both had reason to kill Bev. And despite what my little statement said. You and I both know, we were no where near each other when she was killed."

^^^

Joe's rear was starting to hurt from all the sitting he had done during the long day of questioning. But the day of first round interrogations was coming to an end, and it was finishing up with Hal.

"Sorry." Frank apologized as he walked into the office. "I wanted to tell

Josh I wouldn't be long. You're not gonna take long, Hal, are you?"

"I hope not Frank." Hal answered.

"We appreciate this, Hal." Joe said. "At least we know we're done with round one."

"Well, I had to come anyhow . . ." Hal stated. "I had to pick up. . ." He motioned his head to her. "Grace. And I wanted to return Ellen before she went into withdrawal over being unable to purchase anything in town."

"Yes, we know Ellen." Joe commented. "I remember how she was before."

"The shops aren't helping her Dad." Hal complained. "Really, she spent forty-two Danny Dollars on candles."

From her seat, Grace whispered her thoughts, not thinking she was heard. "I love that shop."

Rolling his eyes slightly, Joe looked at Hal. "Shopping is something for the women, and some of the men, to do. They may not need the items, or really want them. But, it doesn't hurt. It gives everyone incentive. And . . . though I was against the Danny Dollar thing at first, I see his point now. I mean, people work hard, and now they're able to see the fruits of their labor with something else besides, medical, shelter, clothing and food."

"I understand that point." Hal responded. "The movies, restaurants, saloon, bowling alley, even the coffee house. But specialty shops. Dad, Ben and that Todd opened a shop that sells accessories."

"Oh." Grace spoke up. "Were you there? Did you see if they still have the peach handbag?"

Joe held out his hand. "There you have it. People are looking forward to things now. Good for moral. Now, let's get to this questioning." Joe saw Grace lift her hand. "Yes, Grace."

"The Captain didn't answer me." Grace said. "Did you see the peach bag?"

Hal's whole body shuddered. It was a forced control he was in when he answer. "I don't know." He spoke with some irritation. "Ask, Ellen she was in there making a scene because Todd wouldn't issue her credit." He looked up to Frank's laugh. "You would think that was funny."

"Yeah." Frank nodded. "El was always the charge queen."

"That's a title to be proud of." Hal said sarcastically.

"Can we start?" Joe asked. "O.K." He pulled Hal's statement before him. "We'll get to your statement in a second. I want to ask you about Bev."

"What do you want to know?" Hal asked. "I really wasn't familiar personally with her. I didn't like who I did see."

"All right. Honest." Joe wrote down. "So you would say, you had no

motive for killing her.”

“No, I wouldn’t say that.” Replied Hal. “I had plenty of motive.”

Joe looked up. “You’re telling us you had motive?”

“Family honor.” Hal stated. “I hated what she did to this family. I despised what she did to Ellen and what she put her through. She was a Hadly, living in Beginnings as a spy, that in itself, in my opinion, is a reason for her to immediately be executed.”

“Why . . . why are you saying all this?” Joe asked.

“Because it’s the way I feel. Why lie.”

“True.” Joe lifted a pencil. “Why lie. Lying gets you in nothing but trouble whether you ask for it or not, correct?”

“Correct.” Hal answered.

“You wouldn’t lie to me?” Joe asked.

“I’ve nothing to hide.” Hal raised his hands.

Joe tapped his pencil a few times, looked to Frank then back to Hal. “You know, you would have been dismissed immediately from the suspect list without hesitation. I mean, the tracking guard said he remembered you returning by one or two, no later than two. Bev dies around three. Even though I know how loyal your men are, I was ready to accept that guards word until . . .” Joe grabbed the statement. “This.”

“What about it?” Hal questioned. “I would think that too should remove me.”

Sounding agreeable, Joe nodded. “Oh, sure. Lets read it. You went to the meeting for me . . . wait. Why was that? Why didn’t you wake me?”

“No one told me what it was about. You weren’t feeling well. Why wake you. I lead my own community, surely I can fill in for you in crisis.”

Joe shifted his eyes to Frank who fluttered his lips. “Frank. Thank you, Hal that’s thoughtful.”

“That’s me.” Hal lifted his shoulder.

“God.” Frank groaned.

“Frank.” Joe picked up the statement again. “All right. You went to the meeting, you walked to the hall with Robbie. At the hall you had a drink, talked to your brother, talked to Mark, then hung out a little.”

“That’s it.” Hal said.

“No arguments that night? No disagreements witnessed?” Joe questioned.

“No.” Hal shook his head.

“How about Robbie. Did he fight with anyone at the hall, argue?”

“Nope.”

“Would you consider yourself a perceptive man?”



“Absolutely.” Hal said assuredly.

“Then how in Christ’s name did you miss Robbie’s fight with Bev in the social hall.”

“Shit.” Hal whispered.

“Hal!” Frank taunted

“Frank.” Joe warned. “Hal? How did you miss it? Did you . . . miss it?”

“Dad.” Hal chuckled. “Where are you getting this information? Obviously someone is mistaken. Robbie didn’t fight with Bev.”

“Then why would Robbie say that? And why would Robbie fail to mention you were at the hall all night.”

“Damn it.”

“Ha.”

“Frank.” Joe shifted his eyes. “Hal. I’m waiting. You were at the hall.”

“Yes.”

“Were you there when Robbie left?” Joe asked.

“Yes.”

“Robbie said he fought with Bev. He said it was pretty heated. Did you lie on the statement?”

“No.” Hal shook his head.

“You didn’t lie?” Joe questioned. “Hal.” He nearly snapped his name. “Robbie said he fought with Bev. You said he did not. A heated fight with a woman that ends up dead not long after, is pretty incriminating. Are you protecting your brother.” When those words were spoken Joe quickly looked at Frank. Frank just stared. “Hal?”

“Absolutely not.” Hal replied.

“Then why did Robbie say that?”

“Because . . . because . . . Someone did fight with Bev. Robbie . . . he’s protecting me. I told him not to do that. I guess . . . I guess he’s watching out for me. We’re brothers we should do that. I fought with Bev. Write that down.”

“You?” Joe had some disbelief. “You fought with Bev. And I suppose Robbie was the one who broke it up.”

“Yes, thank God.” Hal’s head dropped. “I’m sorry I lied.”

“Right.” Joe leaned back. “Knock it off.”

“What?” Hal acted clueless.

“You didn’t fight with Bev. I would think Mark would have told me that.”

“O.K., O.K., I didn’t fight with Bev.”

“Then Robbie did?” Joe questioned.

“Not to my knowledge.”

“Hal.” Joe barked. “Robbie admitted it. Why would he do that?”

“Haven’t a clue.” Hal said calmly. “He was drinking.”

“Why are you doing this? Just tell me the truth.”

“With all due respect, Dad.” Hal spoke softly. “Statements are given. Questions answered. But isn’t it your place to find out who is telling the truth.”

Joe’s mouth closed in his anger and it took all he had not to blast out. However, his words were still hard as he pointed a fatherly finger at Hal. “You obstinate, arrogant, son of a bitch.”

Frank let out an excited, whispering, ‘yes!’

After quick look to Frank, Joe returned to Hal. “You just pissed me off, Hal. I expected better from you.”

“And I’m sorry I let you down. But I have to do what I have to do. I saw my little brother get into no fight with Bev. Perhaps they had words, perhaps they did not. But I will firmly stand by my statement.”

Loyalty. That was the word that came to Joe’s mind. Joe knew Hal was lying. It was all in some sort of big brother protection of Robbie. It never mattered how much his boys fought growing up, their loyalty and protection of one another was unshakable. Hal’s insistence that nothing happened that night, Robbie’s statement Hal wasn’t there, combined with Frank’s persistence that he didn’t see the shooter, only left Joe to wonder in fright. Was the brotherly allegiance of their youth being instinctively rekindled again in the unspoken protection of one of them?

^^^

Kicked back is what they were. Seated around one of the tables in the dining area of containment were Robbie, Dean and Ellen. Coffee cups on the table, chips and such to munch on. They just were hanging out, Dean and Ellen there to help Robbie’s night shift move a little faster.

Dean shook his head in disbelief looking to the card he held in his hand. “Unbelievable.”

“Dean.” Robbie laughed his name. “Enough.”

“I’m just shocked. Finally I get my Danny Dollars. I expect to get a stack of bills with Danny’s face on it and I get a credit card.”

“No.” Ellen corrected. “Well, yeah, I guess it is. Sort of. It’s like the gift certificate cards used to be in the old world. Danny wanted to do bills, then when he figured out, in order to pay people he’d actually have to start a Danny Mint. He went into the old computer systems in New Bowman. And launched it back up.”

“Now it just deducts your earnings.” Robbie added. “If you worked

forty hours. You have forty Danny dollars. If you don't spend it all, it keeps adding. A swipe of the card will automatically deduct it from your balance."

"O.K." Dean said inquisitively. "So the systems have to be networked together, right? How?"

"Um, Dean? Computers." Robbie answered. "He's using the old registers and he reprogrammed them."

"Yes, but, they have to be done on some sort of communication line. Isn't that dangerous with the communications being shutoff?"

Ellen rolled her eyes. "They're only linked to one main terminal in New Bowman. That's why Danny Dollars aren't any good in Beginnings."

"Question." Dean held up his card and ignored their moans. "If it's linked to the one main terminal in New Bowman, how does *that* computer in New Bowman, get our earning information from here."

"Data entry." Ellen stated.

"That's a lot of people how . . ."

"Dean." Ellen shut him up. "I'm not going to answer these stupid questions. God. Only you would care about this."

"El, no one informed me about this." Dean said.

"But everyone knew." Ellen came back.

Robbie snickered. "Dean, its simple. Every division leader gets a payroll type program, They log in hours into the program by Wednesday. They give the disk to Danny. Danny takes them to New Bowman. He gives the men there bonus Danny dollars to down load them into the main system and . . ."

"Wait." Ellen stopped Robbie. "Danny gives bonus dollars for that? Wow. I have to talk to him."

"So, let me get this right." Dean said.

Robbie and Ellen groaned.

"Shh. Shut up." Dean waved them off. "Division leaders. Frank does payroll?" He watched them nod. "He can't add." He snickered. "So Andrea was responsible for issuing me money, right."

"No." Ellen responded. "Andrea handled Jason, Johnny and the clinic workers."

"So we weren't lumped in with the clinic?" Dean asked. "Is that why I didn't get paid. I got lost."

"Sure." Ellen shrugged.

"What about you. Where did you fall under?" Dean asked.

"I fell under the new division of labs." Ellen nodded.

"Wouldn't I?"

"Sure."

"Whose in charge of payroll there." Dean saw Ellen smile. "You? Then

why didn't I ever get paid?"

"Dean." Ellen said. "You were with Bev. Or at least I thought you were with Bev. I didn't want her having any money."

Robbie grinned as he munched on a chip. "And here you've been blaming it on Danny. That's funny. But you got go it all back, right?"

"Yep." Dean looked at the card again. "Retro pay courtesy of Joe."

"Say, Dean." Ellen sounded sneaky. "Just how much retro pay do you have built up on that Danny Dollar card?"

"Two hundred and seventy-nine."

Ellen smiled. "Dean?" She softened her voice. "Can I have it?"

Her words almost looked as if they truly pleased Dean. His mouth parted and he smiled. "Years. Years I have been waiting to do an old world real husband thing . . . And now I can." He extended the card.

"Good. I want to get that purse." From her fingers the card was snatched. "Hey!"

"A purse?" Dean asked. He swiped away her reach for the card. "El, why do you need a purse?"

"To carry things."

"What things?"

"Things." Ellen reached for the card again. "Come on Dean let me go shopping."

"No. You'll end up buying a box full of candles again."

"You never get me anything." Ellen griped.

"I got you the best house in Beginnings"

"Yeah, but you didn't pay. You're cheap. I knew you'd be like that." She turned and smiled at Robbie. "Robbie? How much do you have on your Danny card?"

"Something like ninety dollars." Robbie answered.

"Can I have it?"

"Absolutely." Robbie reached into his back pocket and handed her the card. "Just leave me enough on there for the rest of the week. Ten should work, if not I'll steal Frank's, He has a ton. He put in like, eighty hours alone last week."

Ellen's eyes widened. "You know I never thought about that. Frank probably has more than Dean."

Dean shook his head. "Robbie, you just gave her everything. Why would you do that?"

"Why not?" Robbie shrugged. "Dean, in the old world, Ellen used to buy me anything I wanted. I never even asked her. So why not. It's only Danny Dollars."

“See Dean?” Ellen grinned. “He’s sweet. And I was very generous in the old world when I had lots of money.”

“Ellen.” Dean snickered. “You didn’t have lots of money, you had lots of credit cards.”

“Gees, Dean.” She rolled her eyes. “Same difference.”

“Figures you would think that.” Dean stood up. “Well, it’s getting late. I know you don’t want to be alone, Robbie, with the unstable, but early day tomorrow.”

“I understand.” Robbie rocked some in his chair. “I’m not alone. El’s here.”

“El?” Dean looked down at her. “You aren’t coming with me? The kids aren’t there. It’s the first time the house is completely, utterly empty.”

Ellen winked at Robbie without looking at Dean. “Dean? Are you wanting to take advantage of me?”

“Yes.”

“Are you going to give me your Danny Dollar card.”

“I can not believe you want me to buy you.”

Ellen laughed. “Hey you wanted to be an old world husband, I can be an old world wife.”

“So . . .” Dean softened his voice and from behind leaned down into her. “If I give you my Danny dollar card, I can take advantage of you.”

“Absolutely.”

Placing his hands on Ellen’s head, he tilted her back, and kissed her quickly. “Night.” He walked to the door. “Night Robbie.”

Robbie waved then looked to Ellen after Dean left. “Guess your chance at being an old world wife failed.”

“Not really” Ellen shrugged. “I’ll still be that old world wife.”

“Oh, yeah? How?”

“Just wait until he goes to sleep and then steal his Danny Dollars.”

Robbie laughed.

“I heard that.” Dean yelled from the distance.

Ellen’s expression dropped. “Shit.”

^^^

Frank wanted to call it an early night. The kids were asleep and he had every intention of joining them in the land of slumber. But he was restless. Tossing and turning more than he should have. And Frank knew exactly why. Grabbing his pants, he swung his legs off the bed and then stepped into them as he stood up. Walking off his energy would be the best solution, the easiest

solution would be to just take one drink, one small drink from the flask that Johnny gave him 'just in case'. Frank understood that Johnny's heart was in the right place. Feeling bad for his father because no one seemed to trust him or have faith in him. Telling Frank he could drink if he wanted one without worrying about getting addicted again. But for fear of disappointing his son, Frank didn't tell Johnny the addiction was there and would always be there. So Frank, just smiled, took the flask, and placed himself in the mind set that the flask would be a symbol of a nightmare he once was in, not an escape from a nightmare he faced at the moment.

Tossing on a shirt with every intention of grabbing a cigarette and heading out for a walk, Frank heard the shuffling of papers. He knew it was the deterrent from alcohol that he needed. His father.

Stepping from his bedroom directly to the dining area, Frank saw Joe sitting at the table. "What's up?"

"Hey, Frank." Joe lowered his glasses some. "Couldn't sleep?"

"Not yet." Frank pulled out a chair.

"Hal said he and Elliott were wanting to play some pool tonight. Why don't you go join them?"

Making a face like a child who didn't know what he wanted, Frank shook his head. "Nah. Hey . . ." He looked down at the table. "The statements?"

"Yep." Joe shook his head in disgust. "Why did we even bother having people fill them out. Why question them?"

Frank chuckled. "What do you mean?"

"List." Joe nodded. "Just list it out. What do we have?" Joe began to rattle nonchalantly. "Josephine confesses to stabbing to death a woman that was shot. Hector spends the evening playing Mario Brothers with Henry, but Henry spends the evening alone. Alone mind you, after Dean, then Dean and Ellen stopped by to talk to him when Dean and Ellen spent the night in bed. No wait. In the same bed. The entire night. Amazing that Ellen spent the entire uneventful night in bed when your guard saw her looking for you. But to Ellen, no guard saw her, he thought she was someone else. Of course speaking of seeing things. Hal failed to see a fight between Robbie and Bev when he was with Robbie at the hall. But according to Robbie, Robbie wasn't with Hal at the hall. Hal left." Joe finished with a firm hand to the table.

"O.K." Frank waited for more.

"O.K.?"

"Yeah, what's the problem?"

Joe grunted. "The problem is . . . everyone is lying. Everyone! Why is that Frank?"

“No one cares.”

“No. No I strongly disagree with that.” Joe said. “Someone, somewhere in Beginnings has to care that Bev Hadly was murdered.”

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It was a long night for Johnny, he put in a lot more work than he wanted to, but he had to catch up on some of the lab work before Dean started to wonder exactly what Johnny spent time on doing. Plus, there was another reason for Johnny’s late night at the lab. He couldn’t run the test he needed while people still moved around.

“Johnny.” Elliott called softly into the lab.

Johnny jumped at the intrusion, but turned around with a smile. “Hey, Elliott.”

“I don’t have much time. I have to return. Did you get a chance to check that?” He asked.

“Yes.” Johnny nodded. “And . . .” He exhaled. “I threw it away like Uncle Hal originally did. It wasn’t Bev’s blood, it was his own.”

Loudly was the sigh of relief Elliott made. “Good. I’m sorry for doubting your uncle.”

“Hey, no problem. You were just concerned.”

“Yes.” Elliott nodded. “Well, I must be off. Thank you again.”

“Sure.”

Giving a motion of his head goodnight, Elliott turned and walked from the lab. In the hall he took his bandana and placed it over his head in his pace out of the clinic. He pulled his coat closed some when he stepped out into the cold night. Crossing the street, Elliott turned to his right and walked some to the jeep where Hal waited.

“Well?” Hal asked when Elliott got in.

“He said . . . he said it wasn’t Bev’s blood. It was yours.”

Hands gripping the steering wheel, Hal curiously looked out with a tilted head. “Are you sure he said that?”

“Positive. He also said he threw it out for you.”

“Why . . .” Hal looked at Elliott. “Do you think he checked.”

“I believe so.”

“But why would he say it was my blood, when clearly it was Bev’s.”

“Are you sure it was Bev’s?” Elliott asked.

“Positive. Dean gave me an entire vial he had. I don’t . . .” A smile hit Hal and he snapped his finger. “I got it.” He nodded. “I was wrong the entire time. I’m family. Johnny’s not a bad seed. He’s protecting me.”

Druga-Johnston/The Aragon Window

“Or else you just confirmed to him something he wanted to know . . . Bev’s killer, and he’s planning to serve his own justice. If that’s the case Captain. Family or not . . .” Elliott spoke seriously. “Watch your back.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

November 13
Beginnings, Montana

It rattled with a thump on the diningroom table, then Ellen in a rushed way began to spew out words to a half awake Dean. "I want to catch the early Dan-Tram. Are you sure you don't mind."

"Ellen." From his coffee Dean looked at the large purple purse on the table. "That's as big as you."

"Yeah." She smiled. "Isn't it great?"

Dean extended his arm to the purse that looked packed. He tried to lift it. "What the hell do you have in here."

"Stuff."

"What kind of stuff?"

"Just stuff." She tossed it over her shoulder.

"Your clothes for New Bowman."

"No." Ellen answered. "I have stuff at Elliott's . . . shit."

"What?"

"I have to get my stuff from his house."

"Fearing facing him, El?" Dean asked as he stood up.

"No. Isn't this purse great?"

"You're changing the subject."

"No, I'm not. You asked if my clothes were in here. Same subject. You should have seen Todd's face when I returned with Robbie yesterday for this. But he had to go and ruin Robbie's good deed by telling me Hal already bought me the purse as a surprise."

"Why do they spoil you?" Dean asked.

"We're family. Who else are they going to spoil. Speaking of spoiling. Can I have your Danny Dollar card?"

"Why?"

Ellen huffed. "I want to buy something. See, this woman from the house of Lesbians made this great centerpiece and I know its gonna be gone if I don't snatch it up today."

Calmly, Dean nodded. "A-ha." He took a look around the house at all the recently displayed nicknacks and candles Ellen had purchased. His eyes moved to the box in the corner of the room that was still filled with candles

she had yet to put away. "A centerpiece. How big?"

"Nice size for our diningroom table. I'm mean, Dean, please, our diningroom table is huge. It looks empty.."

"How much."

"Fifty bucks."

Dean laughed, shook his head and went to the kitchen with his coffee cup.

"God, are you cheap. What happened to the man who told me he would gladly turn over his Danny Dollars to me like a good husband?"

"Reason set it." Dean emerged from the kitchen. "Plus, I realized all those stories you told about how you shopped in the old world, you didn't exaggerate. Ellen, you alone could probably bring back debt."

Ellen giggled. "That's cute. I have to go."

"Wait. I have to talk to you." Dean hurried to her. "I need to talk to you about Elliott."

"What about him?" Ellen asked.

"Yesterday when I was in New Bowman . . ."

"Why were you in New Bowman yesterday?"

"I went there to get you a gift."

Ellen grinned. "Oh, Dean, that's sweet where is it?"

"I didn't get you anything. It's too expensive."

Ellen gasped.

"Anyhow, listen. I saw Elliott, briefly in passing. El . . . he didn't look good."

Ellen turned serious. "The cancer?"

Dean hesitated in debate. "Well, I'm gonna say no, but I can't be sure. I'm thinking we broke down his immunities and he's getting an infection somewhere. He was pale, but not a sickly gray. And he was coughing."

"What do you need me to do?"

"Stop at the clinic, get an IV bag of Kenya anti-infection, ice it down and take it with you. Do a manual white blood count on him, if it looks high. Hook him up, admit him there and bag him for the night. And if he's still coughing, see if you can pull me a sample."

"Got it." Ellen kissed Dean on the cheek. "See ya, tomorrow."

"Call from Hal's phone if you need me."

"I need your Danny Dollar card."

Dean opened the door for her. "Get going."

After another quick kiss, Ellen darted out.

There was an abundance of immature laughter that exuded from Frank and Robbie following Hal's entrance into Joe's office.

Wearing Army-Green Fatigues bloused above a pair of combat boots, and a white tee shirt, Hal set down a large duffle bag and folded his arms. "Are we done boys?"

"Man." Frank shook his head. "I never knew how heavy you were until you weren't hiding behind that pansy uniform."

"Oh, kiss my ass Frank." Hal snapped., "I am not heavy."

"Yeah, you are. Robbie?"

Hal rolled his eyes. "Go on." He held out his hand to Robbie. "Do the normal thing. Agree with Frank."

"No." Robbie shook his head. "I wouldn't say heavy."

"Thank you."

"Pleasantly plump." Robbie laughed with Frank.

Another roll of his eyes and Hal looked at Joe who sat behind the desk not paying attention. "Dad, can't you do something about forcing these two to act at least half their age."

"I've tried." Joe turned a page in what he was looking at, "Doesn't work. Ignore them. You aren't heavy or pleasantly plump. They're trying to rattle you, why do you let them."

"I don't know." Hal shrugged. "Why do they do it?"

From his paperwork, Joe looked up. "They're jealous, that's why."

Both Frank and Robbie groaned.

"Thank you Dad." Hal said. "Now, since you've rattled me, Frank, let me rattle you."

"Can't be done." Frank said arrogantly. "Especially since I have to fill in for you today. Is that what you think. Your work will rattle me."

"No. I went to great lengths to make sure you aren't lost in the day. Everything's prepared."

"You did that?" Frank gave a closed mouth, impressed look. "Excellent. I didn't."

"Figures."

"Rattle me." Frank said arrogantly, then nudged Robbie.

"Absolutely." Hal bent down to the duffle bag. "You laughed at me. Now Frank . . ." He handed it to Frank. "We laugh at you."

Unzipping the bag just a tad, Frank peeked in. The smiled dropped from his face. "Fuck."

It wasn't a days worth of extra sleep, but to Jess, that two hours did the trick. He didn't realize how tired he was until he went to sleep the night before. Jess was pulling extra hours in security and training men, due to the shifting of man power to the greenhouses. He really didn't mind, he liked the responsibility. And that same responsibility would begin all over again, he just wished he had time to spend all of those Danny Dollars he was accumulating.

Amazed that he never heard Robbie leave, Jess, still getting dressed walked down the stairs. He knew coffee wouldn't be made, and he wanted to brew a pot before starting work. Making his pass through the livingroom, he saw the envelope with his typed name on the front. It perched against a planter on the table behind the sofa. Curious what it was, Jess reached for it. His fingers felt the thickness of it, and then he opened it.

Before he even read the short note, Jess felt a sickening feeling hit his stomach, because he saw the photocopy of his picture in the right hand corner of the paper behind the note.

He swallowed hard, reading the words, '*Courtesy of Bev. We still remain in Beginnings. Duty calls. It's time. You will help.*' Then Jess lifted the small note to expose it. The document pummeled him with memories and regrets. How badly he wanted to just take that note and that document, head to Joe's office and inform him that someone else was working for the society in Beginnings. But he couldn't. Showing Joe meant telling him he had lied to him. And that single admittance of a lie would dismantle any trust Joe had in Jess. How would he ever believe that Jess' defection wasn't a set up like originally planned by the society. That Jess, had it in his mind, *not* to deceive Beginnings, but to deceive the society into thinking he was still on their side.

He agreed so he could get his freedom from the society, and that freedom was threatened by the documentation he held in his hand. A single record from his society file, equipped with his picture and signature on the statement that he was to be an inside infiltrator working for the society.

There was someone in Beginnings that knew. And that someone could easily be the exile from a home in Beginnings he loved, if Jess didn't do what they wanted. Jess knew what had to be done, in his mind plan, he had no intention of working for the society.

Jess was being threatened . . . again. Blackmailed . . . again. The person sending the note had to be dealt with, and if that was the last thing Jess did, he would find out exactly who that *someone* was.

^^^

Outside Hal's closed office door, Sgt. Owens listened with oddity to the 'fill in' Captain. He was instructed to aid if need be, and he wanted to, if he could figure out what the Captain's brother was doing.

Beep-beep-beep-beep-beep-buzz.

"Fuck."

Beep-beep-beep-beep-beep-buzz.

"Fuck."

Beep-beep-beep-beep-beep-buzz.

"Fuck."

After listening several more times, Sgt. Owens knocked once and entered. "Sir."

"Oh, hey." Frank looked up from behind the desk.

"I was just curious as to if you needed any assistance?"

"What?"

"Do you need help?"

"With?"

"Today."

"Um . . ." Frank thought for a second. "Nah, I'm good. Thanks." Just as Sgt. Owens started to walk away, Frank looked to the phone that laid on the desk.. "Oh, wait."

"Yes, sir." Sgt. Owens turned around.

"This." Frank held up the phone. "Maybe you might know. See." He pressed the power on. "My brother has this passcode protected."

"I'm not privileged to know that code."

"Fuck." Frank looked at the phone. "Maybe you might have luck though. I don't. I've been trying to call Hal to find out what the code is. But every time I dial . . ."

Beep-beep-beep-beep-beep-buzz.

"Fuck. See. It won't go through."

"It's passcode protected."

"I know."

"The phone won't dial until you put the correct passcode in."

Frank huffed in irritation. "I know this. That's why I'm trying to call Hal. To get the passcode so I can use the phone."

Nothing. Sgt. Owens said nothing to that. He only nodded. "I'm lost as to what to tell you. Maybe Sgt. Ryder can assist. I believe he knows the code."

"Great. Can you tell him I need to see him when you see him?"

"Um . . . yes." Sgt. Owens smiled. "I'll look for him on the way to the

school.” He checked out the time. “Sir, class begins in twenty minutes.”

“O.K.”

“You have to teach.”

“Me?” Frank laughed. “Teach what?”

“I believe you are to teach Shakespearean Drama.”

“Oh, good. I thought it would be something hard like math. Piece of cake.” Frank gave a wave of his hand then returned to the phone.

Beep-beep-beep-beep-beep-buzz.

“Fuck.”

“Piece of cake? Shakespearean drama.”

“Yeah, I saw Mel Gibson’s Hamlet. Cool movie.” Frank bit his bottom lip trying the phone.

Beep-beep-beep-beep-beep-buzz.

“Fuck.” He set it down. “Can you get Ryder.”

“Yes.” Sgt. Owens held back a snicker of amusement. “Right away.” He walked to the door and stopped in the archway. He hurriedly looked back. “You wanted warned. Dr. Hayes is coming. The female Dr. Hayes.”

“Shit. Thanks.” To the door Frank rushed.

Ellen in her own world waltzed down the hall. She smiled to Sgt. Owens as he passed her. “Hi.” She said and kept walking. The second she reached the office door it slammed closed. “Hey.” She tried the knob. “Frank?” She knocked. “Let me in.”

“On one condition.” Frank said from the other side.

“What’s that?”

“You won’t laugh.”

“At?”

A slight hesitation, then Frank opened the door. “This.”

Ellen shrieked.

“See.” Frank closed the door.

“Oh, my God.” Ellen covered her mouth.

“I told you not to laugh.”

Staring, Ellen’s hand slid from her face. “I’m not. Really, I’m not. Whoa.”

“Whoa?”

Ellen giggled, then with a widening of her eyes, she nodded and stepped to him. “Whoa.” Her hand reached out and ran down his chest that sported the standard officer’s uniform shirt.

“Took me twenty fuckin minutes to get these buttons right.” Frank’s eyes shifted to her hand, no longer was Ellen just touching, she was feeling. He smiled.

“You look so good, Frank.”

“No, don’t . . .” He winced when she stepped back.

Arms folded Ellen cased him up and down. “You don’t like the uniform?”

“I didn’t. Well, I still don’t like the pants. Smashing my balls.” He pulled at the crotch.

With a laugh, Ellen stepped back into him. “The fashion boot thing works for you.”

“Now, I know you’re kidding me.”

“No, I’m not. Frank . . .” She stated his name. “How long have you known me. What was mine and Hal’s favorite movie.”

“I don’t know . . .” Frank hem hawed.

“Frank.”

“Um, seeing it’s Hal, Gone With the Wind.” He laughed when she grunted. “I’m joking.”

Closer to Frank, Ellen moved. She softened her voice. “Are you uh . . .” She brought her finger to her lip. “Gonna wear this little outfit tonight?”

“You want me to?”

“It could work in your favor.”

“I’m wearing it.” He cleared his throat when Ellen, eyes locked on him stood toe to toe, body to body. He wanted to laugh. In oddness he peered down. “What are you doing.”

“You look really good.”

“El, if I didn’t know better I’d swear you were coming on to me.”

“I am.”

“Oh, yeah.” Frank pulled her into him, crouched down some to be at her level. He tilted his head and stopped. “No.”

“I hate you.” Ellen grunted. “Don’t even tell me it’s Dean again.”

“No, El. It’s these fuckin buttons and uniform. I have to teach in less time then it takes me to get dressed. But . . .” He winked. “You know what?” He snickered ornery. “When, not if, when we’re back together, you know, completely. We should have sex on Hal’s desk. He’d be so pissed.”

“You would tell him?”

“Fuck yeah. And . . .” He looked down to his watch. “I have to go teach. Wanna come?”

“No. I’d love to but I have patients to see and . . . I have to get blood from Elliott and make him spit in a cup.”

“Oh. O.K., then I’ll stop and see you later.” He kissed her quick on the cheek. “Walk out with me.”

“Sure.” Ellen took a step. “Hey, Frank? Can you put on the bandana?”

“Does it give me brownie points for tonight?”

“Absolutely.”

From his back pocket, Frank pulled out the bandana, flapped it open the stuck it on. “Well?”

Ellen grinned with a thumbs up.

“Let’s go.” He laid his hand on her back. “You know, El, aside form the uniform being too tight . . .” He stopped to pull the crotch of his trousers. “I could get used to this leadership thing.”

“You should put in for Joe’s replacement when he retires.” Ellen spoke seriously.

“You think? Me?”

“Oh, sure.”

“But, El, people think I’m dumb.”

“Frank. All kidding aside, when you put your mind to something, you can do it. You’re a great leader, you come by it honestly. Hell . . . If this country needed a president, I can see you being it.”

“El . . . come on.” He shrugged in an embarrassed way. “Now I know you’re joking.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Think about it. Me? President? I can be the leader of a country. A president is pushing it.”

Ellen hesitated in her walk, she looked up at Frank. She didn’t want to say anything, but maybe he had a valid point.

^^^

It was tiresome for John whenever Johnny would show up where he was. Middle of the day, really nothing new to say, John was actually getting bored with fighting and arguing.

“John.” Johnny spoke out snidely, his voice echoing into the empty chapel. “Just the man I was looking for.”

With a grunt and a turn of a screwdriver, John looked from the pew he was securing to the floor. “If you made some friends around Beginnings you wouldn’t have to leech onto me.”

“Funny. We need to talk.”

“When don’t we.”

“Shut up and listen.”

Figuring, he wasn’t going to get his work done with Johnny there anyhow, John rose to his feet. “What?”

“The Bev murder investigation will be over soon.”

John chuckled. “You’re nuts. They aren’t even close. They don’t want to be close.”

“I am. I know who killed her. And they go down today, literally. If not, I can bring them down another way.”

“What makes you think you know the killer and your grandfather doesn’t.”

“I have proof.”

“All of the sudden you have proof?” John laughed. “Sounds awfully convenient. Maybe Johnny, this person is on to you and they’re just setting you up to see what you do.”

Johnny fluttered his lips in sarcasm. “Hardly. Now the reason that I’m here.”

“There’s another reason? Wow. Here I thought it was to share the demented results of your own Nancy Drew Mystery.”

“Who?”

John rolled his eyes.

“Here.” Johnny handed him an envelope.

“What is this?”

“Your job. I need you to finish it off.”

John tried to hand it back, but Johnny wouldn’t take it. “I’m not helping.”

“Really? I would think you’d want to do this. It has to do with someone else doing dirty work. See, there’s someone in Beginnings who can help us. That info in that envelope is their downfall here. They help us . . .” Johnny shrugged. “Or they go down. You get them to help us, that’s your job. I already started it for you. He has a copy of that.” He stepped back. “And try to secure him by the week’s end.”

Holding the envelope, John watched Johnny leave. Another victim of society circumstance in Beginnings? John’s curiosity piqued. If a person in Beginnings was being blackmailed into helping, then surely this person would want to help. But not the society. Help John, in his task of bringing down Johnny Slagel.

^^^

New Bowman, Montana

Cold and flu season was certainly off to an early start in Bowman, and Ellen had poof. She couldn’t recall doing so many throat cultures in one day,

since Robbie, four years earlier started the rumor that a deadly form of strep throat was going around. Panic hit Beginnings and all because Robbie didn't feel like harvesting at the greenhouse.

Ellen could hear Dean whine when he saw how many tests he had to do. She knew him well, and figured he was going to take the lazy route, mark them all positive for strep and hit everyone up with antibiotics. Ellen paused in her work when she heard the rattling cough before she heard the voice.

"Dr. Hayes." Elliott said her name as he walked in.

Logging in her throat cultures, Ellen shook her head, *'Oh, he just thinks I'll get pissed because he went back to being formal. What a childish game.'* She thought.

"Dr. Hayes." He called again.

"One sec . . . Sgt. Ryder." Ellen marked down the last one, then turned around. "Now what . . ." She froze when she saw him and his name whispered from her in concern without control. "Elliott." She walked to him. He was pale, too pale for Ellen's liking.

"How are you?" He asked.

"Good." She reached for his neck. "You're warm."

"I have a little cold. I received word you wanted to see me?"

"Yes. I'm admitting you tonight in the clinic here."

"What?" Elliott asked with a laugh. "What for?"

"Dean wants you hit with some antibiotics."

"I'm fine."

"Good. But you're warm, that's a sign of infection. Let's fight it before it wears you down. Plus . . ." She walked over to her tray of supplies. "I need blood." She pulled some tubes out. "And . . . Dean says you have a cough. I heard you. So I'm gonna need you to produce a sputum sample for me." She grabbed a small cup. "Dean wants to examine it for . . ." She turned, holding the specimen cup. Elliott was gone. "Shit."

"Hold it!" Ellen blasted out just as she saw Elliott reach for the door of the school. "Just . . ." She trotted his way ignoring the wince she saw him do. "Hold it."

"I need to get in there."

"I need my samples." She grabbed his hand that reached for the door. "Elliott, I am serious."

"And I am not spitting in a cup. Tough."

Ellen placed her hands on her hips. "You will. I'll have you know this is the first time I have ever chased someone down for phlegm."

A look of disgust hit Elliott and he flung open the door and walked in

the school.

“Elliott.” Ellen called out in a soft way. “Please, stop.”

“Dr. Hayes . . .” Elliott grunted from the smack to his stomach.

“Stop that. You know my name.”

“Ellen.” He had a slight smile. “I am fine. It’s just a cold. Are you running around with a sputum cup to every man in this town who is ill.”

“No.”

“Argument over.”

“Argument over? Oh, I don’t think so Elliott. I’m not chasing every man around Bowman because they aren’t you.” She walked closer to him. “Your immunities are way down, like it or not. We just need you strong. A common cold will beat you, if you don’t try to stay ahead of it. Now . . . I’ll forget the spit.” She chuckled at Elliott’s cringe. “If you agree to let me hook you up to an IV for a good dose of antibiotics.”

“I’ll agree to that if . . .” He held up his finger. “We stop this back and forth and you allow me to go assist Frank in his teaching of Shakespear.”

Ellen’s eyes widened. “Frank’s teaching Shakespear? Frank?”

“What the fuck is this shit?” Frank held open the book as he stood before the classroom of men. “Where’s the ‘To be or not to be’ line?”

A soldier raised his hand. “It’s not in there. That is Romeo and Juliet.”

“Oh.” Frank nodded. “I thought we were doing Shakespear.”

The same soldier spoke. “Romeo and Juliet, is Shakespear as well.”

“He wrote more than one?” Frank nodded impressed. “O.K., I guess if Hal wants Romeo and Juliet, I’ll teach it.” He took a deep breath and grabbed the notes Hal had left him. “*Scene interpretation. Read the scene, Frank and help the men interpret it.*” He shrugged. “Easy enough. I guess it doesn’t matter where I start, huh?” He flipped open a page. After a blink, Frank began to read. “*Many a mourning bath . . . what the piss is hath . . . he . . . been there . . . seen?*” Frank looked up from the words. “Hath he been there seen?” He shrugged. “Must be a typo.” He began to read again. “*With . . . tears . . . aug . . . aug . . . augmenting, yeah, with tears augmenting . . . the fresh . . . morning’s . . . dew.*” Exhaling, Frank lowered the book. “Interpretation.” He paused. “Haven’t a clue.” He raised the book again.

“Sir.” One of the soldiers called out. “The Captain, often has us read. Would you like that?”

“For you guys to read? Yeah.” Frank walked to the desk. “In fact, let’s make this even more fun. Let’s act it out. Wait. There are no women.” He gave a wave of his hand. “Doesn’t matter. Not like you’ll kiss or anything. All

right. Um . . .” Frank hummed as he flipped through the pages. “Excellent. A two character scene. Page . . . seventy-two.” He listened for the flipping of pages. “Let’s get the worst part out of the way. I need a Juliet.” Surprised Frank was by the show of hands. “All right how about . . .”

“Oh!” Ellen who quietly had been watching called out from the back excitedly. “Let me, Frank. Please.”

“El.” Frank’s eyes smiled. “Hey, look, it’s El. She’s a woman. Yeah, you be this Juliet person.”

So pleased, Ellen look as she trotted into the classroom waving as she did. “I always wanted to be Juliet. Will you be my Romeo, Frank?”

“Fuck no.” Frank then spoke to the class. “I need a Romeo.”

No one raised their hands.

“What?” Frank asked confused. “You raised your hand to be a broad, but not a man?”

Little did Frank know the reason no one volunteered. Elliott slowly walked into the classroom. “I’ll be Romeo, Frank.”

“Good.” Frank walked to Elliott whispering. “You better have a word with these guys. They all volunteered to be a woman, but not one for a guy. Either they’ve been hanging out together, you know, too long. OR the House of Lesbians is having a bad influence.”

“Got it.” Elliott said.

Frank handed Ellen a book, then Elliott. “It’s some story that, check this out, that Shakespear guy wrote. But it doesn’t have ‘To be or not to be’ in it. O.K. page seventy-two.”

Ellen opened her book and turned the page over. “Oh.” She said softly.

“You know this scene?” Elliott asked.

“Surprised I know it? I’ll have you know I loved the movie.” Ellen nodded. “How about you?”

“This is required for eloquence amongst us. All of his works.” Elliott faced her. “You’re not angry at me for doing this, are you?”

Frank’s voice spoke up instead of Ellen. “Stop. I’m lost.” He flipped page. “Are you guys on the right scene?”

Ellen looked over her shoulder. “Um, no. We got it now.”

“Good. Start.” Frank walked to his desk. “You’re confusing my class. I had them prepped. And do good, because I don’t want them thinking this Shakespear guy writes bad.” Just as he was about to sit down, he heard whispering from the men, then almost in unison, they all hurriedly grabbed a notebook, opened it up, held a pen and watched forward. Instead of sitting Frank made his way to the soldier sitting up front. “Are you supposed to take notes.”

"No, sir." The soldier answered. "Actually, to be honest. Knowing the Captain, we figure, since it is Sgt. Ryder and Dr. Hayes doing the scene with you here, he'll pay a hefty Danny Dollar reward for the man who best writes down the outcome."

"Oh." Frank nodded. "O.K., well, I want in on this." He grabbed a piece of paper, and figured he could critique as well. "Start." He told Ellen and Elliott.

With a quick raise of his eyebrows, Elliott grabbed Ellen's hand. "If I profane with my unworthiest hand, The holy shrine, the gentle sin is this; My lips, two blushing pilgrim, ready stand. To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss."

Frank set down his pencil and lifted his own copy of the play. With a silent snicker he shook his head thinking, even a good acting job of Ellen and Elliott wasn't going to help with the writing on the play.

Ellen spoke so unlike herself, soft, and with a added slight British accent. "Pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much. Which mannerly devotion shows in this. For saints have hands that pilgrims hands do touch. And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss."

Frank, at first, thought the play was about something else. He didn't even know Shakespear wrote another play, let alone he was quiet impressed that a little British guy wrote about the first settlers.

Elliott continued, he brought Ellen's hand to his chest as he stepped into her. "Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too."

Ellen looked up to his eyes. "Ah, yes, pilgrim, lips that must use in prayer."

Frank was lost. He hadn't a clue what they were saying. Then he looked up as he took his notes for the Danny Dollar contest.

With a voice dropped to a barely audible one in a classroom so quiet, Elliott let go of the book and lowered his head. "Then move not, while my prayer's effect I take." Softly, he brought his lips to Ellen's, parting them and drawing them away.

Frank stood up. The soldiers in the classroom began to write fast and diligently.

Elliott swallowed, still staring at Ellen. "Thus by my lips, by thine, my sin is purged."

Ellen barely moved, just as written in the play. But she couldn't determine if it was stage direction or Elliott. With a quick shift to the words, Ellen spoke, her voice cracking in a hint of nervousness. "Then have my lips . . . the sin . . ." She brought her mouth closer to Elliott's . "That they did took."

Breathing a slightly heavy breath, Elliott lowered his mouth to hers. "Sin from my lips. Oh, trespass sweetly urged. Give me . . . my sin again." Parting his lips, a hair from Ellen's, Elliott caught in his peripheral vision, the sight of a pair of big brown eyes. He looked to them, lips so close to Ellen's. Frank stood there.

"Don't even think about it, Ryder." Frank's voice was raspy. "Back those lips away about, I don't know, say . . ." He bobbed his head side to side. "Three or four *fuckin* miles?"

Enthusiasm filled the note taking of the men.

Elliott stepped back some, looking at Ellen who giggled. "We were just doing the play."

"Yeah, right. Taking advantage." He turned to Ellen. "Give me that." He snatched the book from her hand. "Only you El, would turn an innocent Thanksgiving play into something pornographic. Sick." He shook his head. "You guys are done. Fuckin Shakespear would roll over in his grave if he knew what you did to his work. If it isn't bad enough." He huffed and sat back down. Frank would have to find a new scene, and have to find one with women since they were the only roles Hal's men wanted to read. And when Frank thought of Hal he got a little upset that he wouldn't win that Danny Dollar contest. And he tried. Little did Frank know, his short review of the scene that consisted of, *'They're standing. They're talking about pilgrims. Holy people. They mentioned lips'* would probably be the winner, because the abrupt end to his review, that stopped with the hard written word, *'fuck'* said it all.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

What a great younger brother Robbie thought himself to be. Even though Frank gave him strict orders not to help Hal out, he was going to anyhow. Why not? He was done with Mechanics. He didn't have to be at containment for a while, Hal was stuck with all of Frank's work. And whether Hal was capable of doing it or not, Robbie was well aware how much work that was.

He checked out the time of two p.m., he hadn't seen or heard from Hal, except for when they had lunch with Joe. If Hal stayed up with the typical Frank agenda of the day, he would be at the back gate region checking out traps. It was a big region divided up, and since Robbie was near that area, he figured he's lend a hand to speed things along.

He stopped by Frank's office and stepped inside just enough to grab a

clipboard marked 'eight' that hung on the side of the file cabinet. On it was a map of traps to be checked in that particular region. Tucking it under his arm, Robbie left the office and headed the rest of the way to the back gate region. Midway there, he pulled out the clipboard and it brought Robbie to a dead stop.

He lifted the single sheet of paper. "This isn't right." He spoke to himself. His eyes shifted to the number 'eight' on the clipboard handle, then the region map of area 'twelve' that he had. He thought how lucky he was that he knew the maps at a glance or he would have been in trouble when he went up to area eight. It would have been like walking in a 'Frank' style mine field. As soon as Robbie had that thought, fear struck him. If Hal was sticking to the schedule then Hal was at area twelve checking for traps. But the problem was, Robbie had the map.

^^^

From a squatting position in a wooded area, Hal stood up and brushed off his hands. "Well." He spoke to himself. "Either my brother Frank is a genius at traps, or there isn't any. How can I secure the traps if I don't see them, Frank. He's messing with me. Try it again." Legs tired and needing a break from all the walking he did, Hal turned around and looked to where the start of the area was marked. "All right. Red post. I see it. This seems ten paces from . . ."

"Hal!" Robbie's voice was heard in the woods.

"Over here." Hal responded looking about the area, then checking the map. "Maybe I headed in the wrong direction."

"Hal!" Robbie called out again.

Hal checked out where the voice was coming from. He saw Robbie, then he didn't. Just as his curiosity was piqued, he saw him again. Zig zagging Robbie did. Left to right, down to the ground, rolling into a stand then charging forth. Hal laughed. "What the hell is he doing."

"Hal don't move., Don't move."

"I knew it." Hal said. "The way him and Frank are, they're probably are no traps in this region. Assholes." With a shake of his head, and a mind set to ignore his taunting little brother, Hal trudged on.

Combat boots were something Hal hadn't worn in a long time. They were heavy, and ached his legs. They lacked the connection to the ground that his UWA boots had. But heavy, thick or not, Hal felt the sensation when he stepped on it. The slight 'crack' emerged first, along with the feeling that something snapped. Hal looked down.

The sounds. 'Click-shift-release-whistle'

No sooner did Hal's eyes lift, all air escaped him when in a blur of movement, fast and hard, Robbie pummeled into him. Shoulder to gut, Hal grunted with the force of the hit and slammed backwards, Robbie on top, into the ground.

A shake of his head, Robbie on his chest. Hal's eyes met Robbie's. "What the . . ."

Clank. Thump.

Hal only had a moment to see the grenade that laid by the base of a tree, before he felt his body roll. Grabbed by Robbie, body over body, with speed they moved seconds before the grenade exploded. Hal felt the pelting of dust and debris hit against his face as they came to a stop, and then he felt something else.

Snap.

"Shit." Robbie, fist clenched to Hal's shirt, ejected himself backwards, holding on to his brother. With everything he had, he moved them both out of the way just as a board of spikes lifted from the ground and smacked down with a vengeance where they once were.

Breathing heavily from the excitement, Hal looked up to Robbie. "Safe?"

"Yeah." Robbie lifted to his knees. "I think. Let me get my bearings. We're . . . shit."

"What."

Crack.

"Fuck!" Robbie's one word echoed with the disappearance of the ground behind him. Balance lost, still on his knees, Robbie toppled backwards, head first only to be stopped by a grab of his ankles, a split second before his skull careened into the spears that layered the bottom. "Shit." His voice echoed. "Hal?" Robbie called up as his eyes locked onto the point of a spear. So close he was he swore he could see every ridge of their carvings. "Um, don't let me go."

"You're heavy." Hal held on. "Wait. I got it. But I have to secure your weight."

"How are you gonna do . . ." Robbie screamed. "You're breaking my legs. Get off!"

"I have to hold you while I try to lasso the rope around the tree and tie it to your ankles." Hal secured his weight on Robbie's legs.

"Play cowboys and fuckin Indians later, Hal. Pull me up!"

"Fine."

Robbie widened his eyes in question. "Fine?" He tilted his head back to

see the tips of the spears. "He's getting pissy with me and I . . ." Robbie shrieked as he slipped another inch. "Hal!"

"I got you."

Robbie breathed a slight sigh of relief when he felt his body being pulled up. But he wasn't going to totally be secure until he felt the safety of the ground and Hal no longer set off any more Frank booby traps.

^^^

Robbie, cigarette in mouth, ignited his light. "Welcome to the Frank house of horrors." He lit his cigarette and extended the still flickering flame to Hal.

"Thanks." Hal lit his. "I could have been killed."

"We have to tell Frank they worked." Robbie tugged Hal's arm and pulled him to the right. "Almost out."

"It's a maze."

"Frank has no pattern, well, he does." Robbie took them to the left. "Just enough room for us to walk through and do a check."

"It's almost unnecessary to have all these traps."

"Yeah, it's habit though . . . big step here, Hal." Robbie stepped well over a log. "I mean, years ago survivors tried to sneak in left and right, but they were nothing compared to the savages and SUTs."

"I see your point. But why keep them up?" Hal followed Robbie into the safety zone.

"Fun."

"Fun? Look what happened today. Was that fun?"

Robbie shrugged and hit his cigarette. "In a way."

"I guess you have a point . But . . ." Hal held up his hand. "Mistakes are made. Frank forgot to mark down where one of his traps were at."

"Frank never forgets to mark down where his traps are at." Robbie said. "He's too good at theat. You just had the wrong map."

"The wrong map?" Hal was shocked. "My God, how often does that happen?"

"Never, really." Robbie replied. "I guess someone screwed up. Or Hal, someone did it on purpose because . . ." With a kidding swat to Hal's back, Robbie walked passed him. " . . .they wanted to kill you."

Hal stopped cold. He watched Robbie walk away, laughing at what he thought was a funny comment. But to Hal it wasn't funny, nor was it a joke. Hating himself for thinking it, Hal knew the idea of someone trying to kill him was more a reality that Robbie would ever imagine possible. And with

Druga-Johnston/The Aragon Window

that thought came another . . . *Johnny*.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

New Bowman, Montana

Ellen stared at the note that was left for her on the diningroom table of Hal's home. Neatly written and folded, for her to find when she returned from a day of patients.

I'm sorry if I overstepped any boundaries. ' Was a line in the letter that simply told Ellen the kiss was not intentional. After the scene from the play, Elliott stepped to the back of the room and hung out in case Frank needed any help. Actually, Ellen stayed for a while as well, hoping to get more amusement out of the class. But Frank, like he always did, pulled through, and ended up not looking like a Shakespearean illiterate. He had the class so confused when he went from Romeo and Juliet into a pilgrims frenzy that they didn't even have time to question what happened to Shakespear. Ellen still chuckled at Frank's theory on why John Smith was nearly beheaded. Pocohantas' father was pissed, not because it was a case of 'white man and Indian', but rather John Smith was nothing but a pedophile hitting on his underage daughter.

"El." Frank called out from the livingroom.

Folding the note she held, Ellen slipped it in her purse. "Almost done."

"I'm doing this now."

"No, Frank. I'm done." Ellen checked her reflection in Hal's bedroom mirror, tossed her purse over her shoulder and walked out. "I'm ready."

Frank smiled. "You look really nice."

"Just jeans." She shrugged, and tucked her hair behind her ears.

"I'm doing it. Take that off." Frank reached for her purse. "It's not . . . Christ, El." He slipped the purse from her shoulder. "What do you have in here."

"Stuff."

"Fuck." He tossed it on the couch and the bang it caused when it rolled to the floor made Frank hunch. "Man. All right." He clapped his hands. "Ready."

"To go?"

"No. You know."

Ellen whined. "Fine."

"Go on." He flung out his hand at her. "Go."

Rolling her eyes slightly, Ellen shook her head and walked back in the bedroom. She stood there, arms folded and listened to the door closed. She bobbed her head in the few second wait until she heard the knock on the

door. Trying to shun the annoyed look, Ellen placed on a fake pleasant smile, walked to the door and opened it. "Oh." She said with badly acted surprise. "Frank?"

"Hello, El. I'm here for our date."

"Gee. Come in." She opened the door wider. "Let me grab my purse."

Frank chuckled out a 'ha'. "El, isn't this great," He said with enthusiasm. "I pick you up. You grab your purse. Dean wouldn't do this."

"No, Dean wouldn't act out picking me up."

"No, I mean the date. He wouldn't take you out on a date."

So offended Ellen looked at him. "Yes he would." She adjusted the purse on her shoulder.

"No, he wouldn't. I know. He said something about taking you out."

"See."

"And then . . ." Frank continued. "He asked how much everything cost to do in New Bowman and when I told him. He said forget he asked."

"He is so cheap."

"He's a doctor." Frank shrugged.

"Hey, Frank." Ellen smiled sneaky. "Wanna make Dean into a generous man?"

"How?" Frank asked.

Ellen unzipped her purse, emerged her hand into the deep sac, rummaged around and with a wide grin, pulled out Dean's Danny Dollar card.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

His little face was smashed beneath the palm of his hand, as Billy leaned elbow on the table rolling his eyes. A closed book sat before him.

Over his cupped hands that held his cigarette, Joe kept peering from Billy to Dean who stood by the door.

Hal listened more than watched facial reactions. He felt bad the way they spoke of Billy more so as if he wasn't in the room.

"It's concern. Not picking on him." Jenny explained. "Dean . . ." She exhaled. "I'm at a loss."

"It gets frustrating, I know." Dean told her. "I'll talk to him . . . again."

"I appreciate it. It undermines my authority when he refuses to do the work. Yes, he very well may know the answers, but the other children don't. Dean, I even asked him to help the other children. He scoffed at me.

Scoffed.”

Lifting his hand as if at a loss for words, Dean shook his head. “I’m right with you there Jenny. But I’ll try.”

“Chapter four.”

“Got it.”

“Hal?” Jenny called out. “Care to walk me home.”

Hal’s head lifted up in surprise. “Excuse me?”

“Walk me home.” Jenny tucked her hair behind her ear. “It’s dark.”

Joe saw the hesitation in Hal. “Hal, walk her home.”

“Yes.” Slowly Hal stood up.

Joe saw it as Hal moved. Slow, with a slight limp and almost in a slant. “Hal. What’s wrong with you. You got the gout?”

“The gout?” Hal laughed. “I walked quite a bit today. My legs weren’t used to it. Besides, I’m thirty-five years old, I hardly have the gout.”

“Actually, Uncle Hal.” Billy spoke up with a tapping of his fingers. “The gout has no boundaries on age.”

Dean snapped a view to Billy and smiled.

“See, Dean.” Jenny pointed. “Billy, we don’t correct adults.”

“What if they’re wrong?” Billy asked. “So I should let Uncle Hal think just because he’s grown up, that at thirty-five he can’t get the gout.”

“Yes. Well. You put it in a nicer way.” Jenny told him. “We don’t speak down to adults.”

“O.K.” Billy shrugged. “Uncle Hal, I know you’re young. But you can still get the gout.”

“Yes, I know.” Hal stated. “But I just said that because it’s uncommon.”

“Actually . . .” Billy’s words were cut off by Dean’s hand.

Giving an awkward smile, Dean looked at Hal. “Why don’t you walk Jenny.”

Not looking like he wanted to do so, Hal escorted Jenny out.

Releasing a breath, Dean slid his hand off of Billy. “Control your mouth.”

“I’ll try.” Billy laid his hand on his book.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with you.” Dean sat down.

“Dean.” Joe spoke up. “Remembering what William used to tell me, you were pretty much the same way.”

“Yes. But I didn’t act that way.”

“You don’t think?” Joe asked.

“I’m positive, Joe.”

“O.K.” Joe shrugged. “Try this. Did your father ever say to you that when you have kids, he hopes you have a son just like you.”

"Yes." Dean answered.

"Then trust me, you were just like him. He did the parent curse on you."

"It worked."

"Always does. Look at Robbie." Joe reached over and laid his hand on Billy's book. "Do your work. It's one chapter."

"Pap, I don't want to. It's dumb."

"I realize that." Joe said. "But you have to do it."

"Tell me why."

"Ah," Joe leaned back. "The proverbial argument I have heard before. Let me tell a story to you. A while ago there was this boy. Son of a bitch was the kid smart. At five he was doing mathematical equations that college scholars couldn't do. In the old world, they gave awards for smart kids. This kid . . ." Joe whistled. "Won a ton. He wasn't allowed to enter contests. He invented things. He actually invented the little gadget inside an M-16 rifle that lets it go with a squeeze of a trigger from semiautomatic to automatic. And that was at age seven. The world knew him as the prodigy boy. Experts were saying he made Albert Einstein look like an idiot. Well, this kid, see, he started getting attitude about school. Said he didn't need it. He was smart enough. He argued up and down."

"Rightfully so." Billy said. "He was smart."

"Yeah. And the world agreed. He got special permission from the courts to not have to go to school. And at age nine. He never went to school again."

"See." Billy stated. "He was lucky. So, what happened to him?"

"Well . . ." Joe breathed out. "Sadly enough he turned into the Frank we know and love today."

Without hesitation, Billy opened his book.

^^^

"Beautiful night isn't it." Jenny commented as her and Hal walked into the living section.

"Yes. It is." Hal folded his hands behind his back.

"Oh, Hal." Jenny wisped out and locked her arm through his.

Hal shifted his eyes down.

"I know what you're thinking." Jenny said. "But . . . we have to talk."

"Talk? About?"

"I think you know."

"I assure you, I do not."

Jenny stopped walking three doors before her own. "Don't make this hard by telling me you didn't see it coming."

"Then whatever it is will be difficult, because I'm clueless."

Bringing her forefinger and thumb to her eyes, Jenny squeezed as she held them shut for a moment, "Just . . . give me a second."

Hal stared at her.

"All right." Jenny sighed out. "For a couple months, you and I, we . . . we've been working at being together."

"I wouldn't exactly say we were working at it."

"No, you're right. Working is a chore. Being with you . . . is . . . never work." She smiled. "You're right. I stand corrected. And I want to say, the chemistry that has been sparking between us, I have never felt before."

"Neither did I."

"You flatter me."

"I . . . I flatter you. How?" Hal asked.

Jenny giggled. "And modest too. That's why I am so taken with you. But, Hal there's something that I have to tell you. As fresh and exciting as this has been, I have to . . . I have to work things out completely with John. It was fine when he was in a coma, but he's conscious now and we have to get our relationship back on track. At least for a little while. Do you . . . do you understand what I'm getting at?"

"No."

Jenny closed her eyes. "My heart is breaking. Don't make this any more difficult by fighting me. Hal . . . it's . . . at least for now, it's over. We have to stop seeing each other."

Hal looked at Jenny for a long time. "Did I miss something?"

Inhaling through her nostrils, Jenny spoke as if reading in question. "Did you miss something. Did you miss something. If you mean, did you do anything wrong. No. No, you did nothing wrong. It's me. It's John. It's fate keeping us apart again and . . ." She shuddered. "I have to go, or I'll fall apart. That's the last thing we need. Good night Hal." Kissing her own fingertips, Jenny brought them to Hal's lips, backed away and hurried into her home.

Hal stood there dumbfounded. "Oh, I know I missed something."

^^^

"Thanks a lot Henry, I mean it." Jess said standing in the door of Henry's home. "I just needed to hang back."

"And you sure there's nothing you want to talk about?" Henry asked.

"No. I just needed to hang. Hey, I'll be at the hall."

"Maybe I'll stop by later."

"Good." Jess peeked into the house. "Hector." He lifted his hand in a

wave.

Hector nodded an acknowledgment as he was picking Nick out of the walker.

"Night" Henry closed the door. He turned around to see Hector holding Nick. "What are you doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't hold him. Just let him set, I have to take him back."

"Listen to you." Hector shook his head. "You *borrowed* him, as you put it, for two hours and spent the entire time hanging out with Jess. You didn't see your son at all."

"Jess needed to talk to someone."

"Jess could have waited." Hector stated strong. "What is he up to anyhow?"

"Why are you being like this?" Henry asked. "You're acting jealous."

"I'm pissed. You told me you were getting Nick. I came over for that. You hung out with Jess. You need to spend time with your son, Henry. He's the only one you got and the only one you will have." Hector extended the baby to him. "Hold him."

"Not right now, maybe tomorrow."

"There's something wrong with you. You should keep him tonight."

"What are you nuts? First, Dean wouldn't like it, second, I would have to run to Dean's and get belongings."

"The you go get them. My God, Henry, this is your kid. You should be happy to have him over night. Besides, we have enough diapers. He's fine."

"Hector, why are you pushing me to take my kid."

"It's your kid." Hector kept hold of Nick. "Henry, you should seriously talk to Dean and Ellen, and Frank and tell them you want to raise this child. Look at him. He's you. He's a heritage of a people that will be forgotten if you don't get off your ass and do something about it."

Henry huffed out. "It's the way we decided it would be."

"And I'm willing to bet my life they would understand." Hector explained. "If they want him, then share, have him three days a week. But don't treat having this kid like a babysitting detail. Treat it as a privilege. Because Henry . . ." Hector stepped to him. "Having a kid is. You don't know. If you knew one inkling of the pain it is to lose a child, then you would never want to let this child go. Ask Ellen. Ask me. We know. And you're lucky . . ." Hector started to pace with Nick to keep him calm. "You're so lucky. Most of us . . . we'll never have a kid to raise, to love. You have it and your just tossing the honors to someone else. Don't you want this?" He cupped Nick's face in his hand. "Don't you want to see this kid at twenty,

standing tall, doing good. And you can say to yourself, hey, that's my son."

"It's not easy. I'm not a fatherly type."

"Learn." Hector told him. "I'll help you. You know I like being around this kid. He's so young and innocent. So much he still can learn. Walk, talk, run. Be the one to teach him."

"It's easier said than done."

"Hey. I realize that. I had two kids."

"You had a wife." Henry pointed. "I would have to do it alone."

There was a slight silence in the room, and Hector looked to Nick, kissed him and set him in the walker. "I can help you raise him."

"You mean move in here?"

"Yes, for the days you have him. Give him a sense of family here as well as at Dean and Ellen's. A different sense, but still one."

"You can't. People will talk." Henry said.

"Let them." Hector came back. "What are they gonna say. We're gay?"

"Yes."

"I'm not gay." Hector tossed his hand up. "I'll argue that fact."

"How can you say you aren't gay?" Henry asked.

"Henry . . . we're friends. I like this friendship we have. But . . . don't kid yourself." He held up a finger., "If a bus load of women rolled into Beginnings tomorrow, you'd be Henry history, because I'd be on that. And . . ." He sniffed in joking arrogance. "I'm a good looking guy. I stand a chance too."

"No one's ever lived with me before. Well, El, for a little bit. I'm not an easy person to live with."

"That doesn't surprise me. But I won't take your shit." Hector told him. "I'm here to help with Nick. Use you a little to get a chance to be a father . . ." He smirked. "But seriously. We've got this bond between us, and I'm not talking about things that have happened. I'm talking about circumstances that caused it."

"Bev."

"Bev." A nod came from Hector. "For as much bad as she did, she brought us together. We share lot of secrets, and sticking together will keep them secrets hidden."

Just as Henry started to agree, he looked up when there was a knock at his door. "That must be Dean." He walked to the baby.

"Don't let him go back tonight." Hector spoke soft. "Keep Nick. Let him stay over night. Make up for the time you didn't put in. I'm here."

"You'll stay?"

"Yes." Hector spoke with certainty. "Tell him." He motioned his head

at the door.

"He's not going to take it well." Henry walked across the room. "Dean is very fussy. He'll yell. You may have to help with convincing him." He opened the door. "Hey, Dean."

"Henry." Dean shook some of the cold from him. "Nick ready?"

"Um . . ." Henry looked back to the walker. "Dean, I know this is short notice. But, I would like to keep Nick over night tonight."

"O.K." Dean shrugged, walked up to Nick, kissed him, turned around and walked out. "See ya."

Stunned, Henry closed the door. He looked back to Hector, who picked up Nick and laughed.

^^^

New Bowman, Montana

"Sorry." Ellen moved down the hall of the small clinic to Frank who waited by the doors.

"No, that's O.K." He extended a popcorn bag to her.

"No." She shook her head. "I'd better not. We have reservation at the Hoi-Hoi on the Range for dinner."

"We still have a half hour." Frank pushed open the clinic doors. "What do you want to do?"

"Let's hit the Danny-Bucks."

"Sounds good." Frank walked with her. "So, how was Elliott?"

"Fine, his IV was clogged. Dr. Blue isn't very good with them."

They walked a little down the block to the coffee shop. Frank reached for the door. "Oh, it's crowded." He said with some excitement. "Watch this." He let Ellen walk in first, then the second he stepped inside, all men, seated or standing, stopped and saluted him. Frank gave a commanding nod and proceeded to the counter, where the two men not waited on let them go first. "El." He smiled. "IS that cool or what?"

"What has Hal done to them?"

"I'm telling you." Frank approached the counter. Hap from Beginnings worked there. "Hey, Hap."

"Frank." Hap stated. "What can I get ya?"

"Um . . ." Frank looked down to Ellen. "Want anything special El?"

"No." She shook her head.

"Two coffees." Frank pulled out a Danny Dollar card. "Here and add a two Danny Dollar tip on for yourself."

Hap finally placed a smile on his old face. "Thanks, Frank." he took the

card.

"That was nice." Ellen said.

"What can I say? Dean's a generous guy." He laughed, took the coffees and his card. "You O.K.?" He handed the coffee to Ellen.

"Yes." She secured the plastic lid. "No. Frank? Can I talk to you as my best friend in the whole world."

"Yeah." He opened the coffee shop door further. "What's wrong."

Immediately Ellen, even though it was cold, sat down at a table out front. "It's Elliott."

"Oh." Frank joined her. "What about him."

"Frank." So lost she spoke. "I just don't know what to do. Tell me."

"Tell you? What do you want me to tell you?"

"Everyone keeps on saying I was wrong for stopping our understanding. Hal. Hal is badgering me to take him back because Elliott is sick. Dean, he wants me back with Elliott to get an accurate reaction from our treatments." She shrugged. "I don't know."

"I'm not understanding what you want me to tell you."

"Should I go back with him?" Ellen asked.

"I'm not going to tell you what to do." Frank answered. "Especially about that. Look at why you stopped the understanding. He shut you out. You, El, had good reason. Then on the other hand, look at the understanding. It's not like what we had, or you and Dean."

"True. But Frank . . ." Ellen leaned into the table. "I'm scared. Him and I, we were getting close. Really close as friends. If I go back with him, be that person that fills the void in his life, I'm only going to get closer. I like him a lot. He's dying, Frank. I don't think I can take losing another person I'm close to."

"I see." Folding his hands around his cup, Frank, too, leaned into the table, bringing his face closer to Ellen's. "That's understandable. It is. But, you can't let his being sick be the reason you do or you don't go back with him. It sucks that Elliott has cancer. It does. He's a good guy. He plays you . . ." Frank tilted his head. "But he's a good guy. We're all gonna learn a lot from Elliott Ryder, because he is the first person to get this. But just like Elliott's dying, so is everyone else. Just because he's sick, doesn't mean nothing. Dean. Dean is perfectly healthy, yet he can walk out of the house and drop dead tomorrow. Me, I could get shot walking a perimeter. Time is short on this earth. Life . . ." Frank closed one eye and nodded. "Life's pretty precious. It's not a matter of making his life fuller. It goes the same way for you. We get from people as much as we give. Yeah, if you go back with him, you're gonna feel really bad when he leaves this earth. But . . . will you feel worse, if you

don't go back and lose out on what you would have gained staying that friend to him."

Ellen stared at Frank.

"What? I rambled."

"Yeah." Ellen leaned all the way to Frank and softly kissed him. "You rambled. You rambled advice that only you could give.."

Frank didn't get exactly what she was saying. Perhaps he wasn't listening, he was too busy staring at Ellen. Because she was looking at him, with that look, that only Ellen could give him.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Monday nights were never the busy night for the Social hall, except for the dart teams that went in, were loud, played their games and left.

John spotted him go into the hall, then after saying goodnight to Jenny, John returned. It was a perfect opportunity and place, to talk to the person Johnny wanted him to blackmail. Jess Boyens.

Seated at the bar leaning forward. Jess looked as if the weight of his troubles slipped from his shoulders into that drink he nursed.

There were other seats John could have taken in the empty hall, but he chose the one directly next to Jess. Sliding onto the stool slowly and announcing his presence with a heavy breath. "Jess." John said his name.

"Hey." Jess brought the drink to his mouth.

"You O.K.?" John asked.

"Could be better."

John nodded. It took a lot of nerve to do what he was going to do, and he took a big chance. "I know what's bothering you."

"I doubt it." Jess finished his drink.

Dropping his voice to a whisper, John stared at his own folded hands. "I'm there with you. It eats you alive when someone threatens what you love. Holds it over your head to get you to . . . join them."

No words.

With a violent squeak of his barstool, Jess ejected up. In his pivot, he grabbed hold of John's shirt and raged with him to the nearest wall slamming him into it. "I should kill you right now. End this." Jess graveled his voice. "Take you to Joe and just take my chance."

Dan rushed over. "Hey, Hey, easy. Break it up."

Struggling to stay focused on Jess, John spoke. "We're fine. It's all

right.”

“Let him go, Jess.” Dan instructed. “I mean it.”

Firm Jess pinned John to the wall, daggering his eyes at him.

“Jess.” Dan tried again slowly. “Let him go.” He waited until Jess released John’s shirt. “Good. Now have a drink and relax.”

John waited until Dan walked away. He saw Jess still locked a stare on him. “You want to end this. You want to take me to Joe. Fine,” He told Jess. “But that won’t stop it. I’m in the same boat as you.”

“Bullshit.”

“No.” John shook his head. “Things are being hung over my head. Stop and think. I was in a coma for a over a month. How was I doing anything around here.” He waited until he knew he had a calmer version of Jess’ attention. “I’m not that man.”

“Then who is.”

“I’ll tell you. But you and I, we can’t do shit about it. Turning him in, is turning ourselves in. No one is going to buy it. I want him to go down, but he has to sink on his own. Maybe with a little help. But I can’t . . . I can’t do it alone, Jess. I can’t. Especially me . . . No one will believe me.” John reached into his pocket and handed Jess an envelope, the one Johnny gave him. “I’m supposed to use this to get you to join the society. I don’t give a shit about it. It remains our secret. He’s the last George person in here, or at least the top one. Let’s do this. Let’s really end this.”

Jess took the envelope, and eyes still locked on John’s, he crumbled it with rage within his fist. “What do you need me to do?”

^^^

Frank’s life was simple, yet difficult all in the same breath. Hal was convinced at first that they just gave him all the work to do until his father explained, what Hal did, was what Frank did every single day. Legs aching, and not sleepy, Hal had to keep moving. As soon as he laid down, the cramping in his calves would make him sit straight up.

He had gotten dressed, thinking perhaps he’d go back down to the social hall. He tried it after he left Dean’s for the evening. But somehow news, true or not, flew through Beginnings, and Hal found himself being pelted with condolences over his and Jenny’s break up. Enough sympathy that it made Hal leave immediately.

It was getting late, the hall was still open, and chances were no one would be there. Except for Josephine who didn’t count, and Johnny who seemed to go there every night. Johnny was someone Hal wanted to avoid,

until he sat down at Frank's desk to work on one of his short stories.

Opening the drawer, searching for a pen, Hal's hand froze when he saw the flask. A rubber band secured a piece of paper around it. Heart in the pit of his stomach, Hal lifted the flask that felt full. "Frank." He whispered out. "What are you doing?" Ready to toss out the flask, Hal stopped. He looked at the paper secured to it and he slipped it out from under the band. A small note, Hal unfolded it and read it, *'Dad, just incase. I know they watch you like a hawk . . . Johnny'*

Suddenly with the replacement of that note, Hal felt compelled not only to go to the social but to seek out Johnny if he wasn't there. Flask in hand, Hal walked from the bedroom, through the darkened sleeping house, then after grabbing his coat in his walk, Hal left.

He waited until he was outside to put on his coat, and he slipped the flask into the inside pocket. Eyes forward, anger building, the aching of Hal's legs seemed to sink to the back of his mind and were buried beneath the thoughts of finding his nephew.

Passed the last row, fifth row and the fourth row of house, Hal walked. He stride was fast, his peripheral vision cut off. Blinders on, he focused on the lights of town.

"Hal." The male voice called his name.

Hal slowed down and looked to his right. "Oh, Jess. Didn't see you. Good evening." He started to walk again.

"Hal. You got a minute?" Jess asked.

Wanting to say 'not really' Hal refrained. "Sure." He stepped back to Jess. "What's up?"

"Well, I was gonna grab you tomorrow, but I'm glad I ran into you. Heard what happened up in the back gate region today."

"Yes. Well, it appears I had the wrong . . ."

"Map." Jess finished. "Yes, I know. That's why I wanted to talk to you. I just wanted to make sure, you knew, I checked what was hanging there on that file cabinet. It's my job. I put the maps on the boards, then after my mind is clear, before rounds, I check them again. And I did, about fifteen minutes before you went out."

"I see." Hal said.

"Yeah, and I'm sorry. I really thought I checked them good. I feel really bad."

"Well, mistakes happen." Hal gave a reassuring squeeze to Jess' arm. "No one got hurt." He also felt relief that it wasn't done intentional.

"I'd love to make up an excuse and say, some one switched them but . . ." Jess gave an apologetic look. "I guess my mind was in the wrong place. I

swore they were fine. But the only other person who went in the office after me, was Johnny, and why would he switch them, right?”

Hal hesitated. “Right. Thank you for clearing that up, Jess.”

“Night.” Staying put while Hal moved on, Jess slipped into thought. He would had never of done what he did, had John Matoose not given him so much verbal proof and sounded so convincing. And it really wasn’t much, just a mention of a name. But unknown to Jess, it was much more than the simple seed of doubt he was supposed to subconsciously plant it Hal’s brain, it ended up being the confirmation Hal needed.

^^^

New Bowman, Montana

“No.” Ellen slightly smiled, leaning against Hal’s apartment door in the hall. “Don’t tell me.”

“El, I have to.” Frank stood before her.

“Frank.” She snickered. “No, you don’t. It’s late.”

“I know.”

“Were tired.” Ellen said. “It was a great date.”

“Yeah. Yeah it was.” Frank smiled.

“Then let’s just end it right here, and you can pretend you left and came back.”

Frank thought about it for a second. “I guess that would be all right. Can I . . .” He stepped to her and placed his hand on the door above her head. “Can I kiss you right here?”

“Oh, absolutely.”

Every ounce of Frank’s face smiled as he tilted his head and brought his lips to Ellen’s. Hand securing her back with a gentleness, they kissed. And the smile that preluded it was still there when Frank pulled back. “Night, El.”

“Night Frank.” Ellen reached behind her and opened the door. She walked inside with a change of demeanor. “Want anything to drink?”

“Um . . . nah. It’s been a long day. I just want to go to sleep.”

“Me too.” Ellen took off her purse and sighed.

“Heavy huh?” Frank sat down on the couch.

“It’ll take some getting used to. Frank? I’m sorry I dragged you to the clinic again.” Ellen walked around to join him.

“No. It’s fine. In fact, better. That way we don’t have to do it in the morning before heading back.”

“True.” Ellen tapped her hands on her knees. “I need to thank you. You

were a really big help tonight.”

“With Elliott?”

“Yes. You were really great. You showed me how much my friend you are.”

Frank nodded slowly. “Thanks. But . . . I get the feeling, don’t get mad, that I’m gonna lose out.”

“What do you mean?” Ellen asked with surprise.

“Us. I’ve been trying for so long, and so hard to get you back. And what do I do, instead of proving we should be a we, I keep proving we should be good friends.”

The corner of Ellen’s mouth raised. “You’re serious? You’re worried about that?”

“Yeah, El. Not that being just friends is a bad thing, it isn’t, but when you have a lifetime behind you, you kind of feel cheated.” He shook his head. “Maybe it’s wrong to assume. I don’t know. How long have we been together. Weigh that against how long we been apart. You’re the love of my life, you know. And the longer we are apart the harder it seems to get you back.”

“Frank.” Ellen kissed him on the cheek. “Where you been?”

“Huh?”

“You said it’s wrong to assume. I guess I was wrong. I just assumed, since I was back with Dean, and you two have this unholy alliance, that I was back with you as well.”

“Gee, thanks El, I’m with you by default?”

Ellen’s eyes widened. “Oh, my God, I didn’t mean it that way. I just meant, all these little steps we were taking, plus all our years, we didn’t have to vocalize it.”

“I’m lost.”

“I’m saying.” With a giggle, Ellen shook her head. “We’re passed the point in our lives where we have to officially state we’re back together. I just thought with all the things we’ve been making time to do together, it was our way of saying it. Unless, you don’t want to get back.”

“Can I . . . can I think about it?”

Ellen laughed and nudged him. “You coming to bed? I’m tired.”

“I’ll be there in a little bit. I want to read some of that play. You know the one about the pilgrims?”

“Romeo and Juliet?” Ellen asked with oddity as she stood. “Why?”

“Well, not because I’m enjoying it. I guess I will when they land on Plymouth Rock. But check this out . . .” He picked the book up from the coffee table. “On the left page is the original play, and on the right page is the

Druga-Johnston/The Aragon Window

English version.”

Ellen was confused at first. “Oh, O.K., I get it. They simplified it on the right pages.”

“Yeah, whatever. And here I thought this Shakespear guy was just repeating himself.”

Laughing Ellen folded her arms, leaned down to Frank and kissed him on the cheek. “Goodnight Frank.”

“Night, El.”

She took a step back. “I love you.”

The book nearly toppled from Frank’s hand, her words were so unexpected. He smiled then looked over his shoulder. “I love you, too.”

Ellen turned and walked toward the bedroom. She stopped. “Frank. Let me ask you something. We had this date. It went so well. You kissed me. Why did you stop at the kiss? Why didn’t you try?”

“I wasn’t going to.” Frank picked the book up. “That wasn’t what tonight was about.”

“Didn’t you want to?”

“I wasn’t going to say anything and I wasn’t going to ask.” From the pages he saw an extended hand to him.

“You don’t have to.” Ellen stood before him.

Setting down the book, Frank grabbed Ellen’s hand and stood up. With Ellen in the lead, they walked down the small hall and they stopped before the bedroom. Outside they kissed once, and with no words, they walked inside.

The bedroom door closed.

^^^

As predicted, Johnny was the only one in the social hall. And it was perfect for Hal. He just walked in, went straight to the bar and poured a drink. “Hey, John.”

“Hey, Uncle Hal.”

Hal downed the shots worth of whiskey and set the glass on the bar. “Alone?”

Arrogant, Johnny looked around the empty hall. “Um . . . yeah.” He said with attitude. “Dad’s in New Bowman.”

“Seems to be the only one you hang out with. Why is that?”

Johnny looked up. “What do you mean?”

“Kind of sad. You don’t associate with many people.”

“I’m not a people person.”

"I didn't get that." Hal poured another drink. "Of course, it's hard for me to judge right? Really, I've known you as an adult for just a few months."

"True."

"Speaking of which." Hal took a sip and leaned into the bar. "Let me ask you an opinion. Would you say . . ." Hal lifted a finger. "Would you say I am more of a stranger to you than Uncle Robbie?"

"Yeah." Johnny nodded. "I knew Uncle Robbie more growing up. I hardly saw you."

"I was away." Hal said. "I mean the last I saw you, you were nine years old. You've grown up."

"Most people do."

"So . . . would you say, above Uncle Robbie, Pap, and your Dad, I would have a different perspective when it comes to you. And you have a different perspective when it comes to me?"

"Why are you asking me this?"

"Because I need to know if there's something wrong with me."

Johnny laughed. "What do you mean?"

"I believe I see you differently than my father or brothers do." Hal explained so calm. "I believe they see you through such rose colored glasses, that they can't see how dark you really are. How any care, love or concern you have is overshadowed by some sort of obscure vindictiveness you have toward your father."

"Vindictiveness to my father? Where are you getting this from?" Johnny scoffed.

"You're not encouraging him to drink?" Hal asked.

"No." Johnny snapped. "My dad's a fucking alcoholic. Why would I encourage him?"

Snide, and with such typical dramatics, Hal tilted his head. "Fucking Alcoholic. Fucking alcoholic? Terms of endearment Johnny?"

"You're a bigger asshole than everyone says you are."

"And you're more screwed than you believe." *Slam!* The flask landed hard on the bar before Johnny, then dropped the little phone key. No soon did Johnny shoot up, Hal's strong hand shoved him back down in his seat. "Listen to me." Hal whispered hard in Johnny's ear. "I look at you different than my family does. I hardly know you and I don't like what I see. I see someone trying to hurt my brother, my family. I won't stand for it. I won't let it happen. Know that. And . . . If I ever catch you trying to put another bottle in my brothers hand . . ." Hal soften his voice. "I'll break your fuckin neck without a second thought." He stepped back. "Have a good night." With a swipe of the key off the bar, into his hand, Hal walked away.

Druga-Johnston/The Aragon Window

Johnny snarled in the sound of tromping boots as Hal left. With anger, he reached for a bottle and poured a drink. “Yeah threaten me, asshole.” Johnny looked back at the door as he downed his drink. “Threaten me.” He poured another. “But whose the one who has *your* bandana with Bev’s blood smeared all over it.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

November 14

Beginnings, Montana

Frank wasted not time whatsoever in changing back into his basic Beginnings attire. In fact, he made Ellen wait until he changed in his office to walk her back into town. Ellen didn't mind. Though she loved the Frank UWA look, it was good to see him dress like himself.

"So what's the plan?" Frank asked Ellen in their walk.

"With?"

"Tonight."

"Oh." Ellen nodded. "If you want the kids, that's fine."

"Can you stop by?"

"I'll talk to Dean see what he has planned." She told him.

"Speaking of talking to Dean . . ." Frank took hold of her arm and stopped her. "Listen . . ." He peered up to the sky then back down to her. "Don't get pissed, all right? But, Dean and I, as weird as this is to say. We've become friends. And even though we have this agreement to have an understanding with you. Don't say anything about last night, all right. Because I know, I don't want to know, when you and him . . . you know."

"I know." Ellen smiled. "I had no intention of saying anything. I'm aware of the 'no kiss and tell' rule you have going. But I am going to tell him you and I talked and that, I'm wanting to go with the arrangement you have."

"Good. Oh . . ." Frank reached into his back pocket as they started to walk again. "Before I forget." He handed her Dean's Danny dollar card.

"Thanks. I'll put this back in his hiding place."

"What's he gonna say when he finds out?"

"Dean?" Ellen laughed. "He'll never know, because he'll never use this. He's too cheap. Hey there's Hal."

Frank grumbled.

"Be nice." Ellen said softly. "You know why."

"Did I miss something?" Frank asked. "Because . . ." He grunted when Ellen elbowed him in Hal's close approach.

"Hey, El." Hal nodded. "Frank."

"Hal." Frank said his name snide. "I see you wasted no time in putting on the pansy uniform."

"Hal." Ellen interrupted. "The guard told us when we came in. We're

really sorry to hear about the break up.” She reached out, laid her hand on his arm and kissed him on the cheek. “If you need to talk. I’m here.” She stepped back. “Frank, I’ll talk to you later.” On tip toes she kissed him.

“See ya, El.” Frank watched her then he noticed Hal just staring out. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Frank? Why does everyone think I had this relationship with Jenny?”

“You did.”

“I did not.” Hal snapped in offence.

“I know.” Frank laughed. “Distorted fuckin views of people. Hey, Hal.” Frank sounded so much like a kid. “Guess what? Me and El are back together.”

“Really?” Hal smiled. “Frank, that is great. I am very happy for you. I mean it.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” Frank shrugged.

“Without sounding like a dick . . .”

“Can you?”

“Hmm.” Hal grumbled. “Listen, what about . . . did Ellen say anything about Elliott?”

Frank paused in his answering. “We talked last night about it.”

“So you told her to stay away from him?” asked Hal.

“No, Hal.” Frank barked. “I didn’t do that. I know what’s up with them. Her and I talked. And . . . I think, I’m not sure. But I think your friend will have his friend back soon enough.”

Peacefully and with gratefulness, Hal looked at Frank. “Thank you very much.”

“You’re welcome . . . and I have to go. I got things to get ready for the meeting, Have you seen Robbie?”

“In the cryo lab.”

“Excellent. I have to go there anyhow.” Frank started to leave.

“Frank. Before I forget.” Hal approached him. “I need to let you know. I have never given you enough credit. You work very hard here in Beginnings. Your job is vital. I’d admire that. I have developed a whole new respect for you.”

“Thanks Hal.” Frank nodded. “That’s pretty nice. Your job . . . your job’s a piece of cake.” He gave a swat to Hal’s arm, took a step and stopped. With an ornery grin, he leaned close to a still shocked Hal. “By the way, we had sex in your bed last night.” Flashing a grin, Frank walked off.

Utter disgust took over the look on Hal’s face, and by the time he could

say anything. Frank was gone.

^^^

So unlike his usual juvenile self, Robbie, arms folded listened with a mentor look to Johnny.

"It's bad, Uncle Robbie. I don't know what I did." Johnny unhappily did Dean's filing in the cryo lab.

"And when did you start to notice it."

"Scrabble, the other night. Remember? He kept staring at me."

"To be honest, I didn't notice. And what exactly did Hal say to you last night?"

Johnny sighed out. "He was acting like a bully or something. I don't know. He said he didn't like me. That I'm a bad influence on my father because he's . . . and he called him, a fucking alcoholic."

A smirk hit Robbie. "Hal said that? Not that I don't believe you, I do. But it just doesn't sound like Hal."

"The Hal you knew. How well do any of us really know him?"

Robbie shrugged in debate. "Uh, I don't know if that applies to me. Really, I mean, yeah he's been gone for seven years, but still, Johnny, there's twenty-six years remaining that I knew him. But . . . I'll keep my eye open, unless you want me to say something."

"Not yet. But if he keeps trying to pull that intimidating shit, I'd appreciate it."

"Sure." Robbie gave a swat to Johnny's arm and turned when the cryo lab door buzzed opened. "The man of the hour."

"That's me." Frank said as he strolled in. "And you are just the man I wanted to see. Hey, Johnny."

"Dad."

"You look different." Robbie commented to Frank.

"I'm dressed like me." He ran his hand down his own tee shirt. "Feels good to not have to work at putting your clothes on."

"I bet." Robbie chuckled. "What did you want to see me about? The meeting?"

"No. Something else. Ready?" Frank grinned. "El and I got back together last night."

Robbie blinked several times. "Really?"

"Yeah. You don't look happy."

"I am. But I thought you guys were already back."

"Last night was official. And I'll tell you, Robbie. I'm really happy. I am."

But I'm trying not to let it show too much."

"Too late." Robbie said. "Is that what you wanted me for."

"No." Frank shook his head. "What I wanted was, since you are the big religious community leader. I want to talk to El, and Dean of course, about doing one of those dedication deals. I want you to do the honors."

"Wow." Robbie was shocked. "Yeah. I'd love that. That's really great you asked me, it means a lot."

"I'm glad you'll do it."

"Let me know what El and Dean say. O.K.?" Robbie got an agreeing nod from Frank. "I have to take off. Johnny, talk to your dad about that."

"I will." Johnny lifted his hand in a wave.

"Frank, I'll see you at this big meeting that's such a secret." Robbie moved to the door. "Oh, hey, Frank, what's the secret meeting for?"

"Group suspect meeting about Bev's murder."

"Thanks." Robbie left.

"Shit." Frank said. "I told him." He shrugged. "Oh, well. Hey, what did you need to talk to me about?" He asked as he walked to the back room.

"Uncle Hal." Johnny replied.

"What about him?"

"He's been kind of strong arming me. Being mean. Pushing me around a bit."

Frank stopped. "Hal? That doesn't sound like him. When did he do this?" He stepped into the back office.

"Last night at the social hall."

"Maybe you were drinking too much and you're over exaggerating."

"Why don't you believe me?" Johnny grew angry.

"Because it isn't Hal to do that. Hal doesn't get mean. Hal gets, I don't know . . . Snide. That's it." He moved to his desk and began to collect papers. He looked up when he heard a sarcastic snicker come from Johnny. "What?"

"Why do you guys do that? Defend each other?"

"We're brothers It's habit. You want me to talk to Hal?"

"No. Forget it. Maybe I was drinking too much. But, in a way, it's pretty cool that you guys are like that."

"Yeah." Frank smiled. "It is." He stacked investigation folders to take.

"You overlook a lot with each other. I mean, look at you and Uncle Robbie. He's dedicating you and El. You would think after what happened between him and her when you guys were broke up, you wouldn't want anything to do with him."

Frank froze. Hands in a pause on lifting his folders, his eyes raised. Deep his voice was and any smile that was on his face was gone. "What are

you talking about.”

Johnny snickered. “Dad. Come on. You don’t have to pretend with me. I know. I didn’t see what was on the disk. But I heard.” He rattled off as if reading a list. “This fall. Dean and Ellen’s bedroom. The disk. Mystery man. Uncle Robbie.”

Suddenly Frank began to rummage his desk furiously.

“Dad? What are you looking for?”

“Where’s the fuckin disk?”

“Pap gave it to Dean.”

Frank, saying no more, flew out.

Johnny grinned.

^^^

Dean screamed. It wasn’t loud, but it was a sound that resembled a shriek of shock when he saw the amount of strep tests Ellen brought back. Ten percent of New Bowman’s population had a swab stuck down their throat by Ellen. Shaking his head and looking at the time, Dean knew if he wanted to get started on the embryo experiments before Joe’s mystery meeting, he’d have to invent more time. Either that or mark all of the strep tests positive and hit everyone up with antibiotics. Taping his finger on the counter in thought while staring at the strep tests, Dean knew that was exactly what he would do. Lifting the requisitions out of the case, Dean picked up a pen.

“Dean.” Frank said his name as he stepped into the lab.

“Hey, Frank.” Dean tried to write. The pen didn’t work. He shook it.

“Where’s the disk?”

“What disk?”

“Dean.” Frank said his name stronger. “Turn around.”

“I’m busy. I have over fifty strep tests to do before the meeting. What disk?”

“The one from the camera hidden in your bedroom.”

“I have it.” Dean tried another pen and wrote ‘positive’ on the first requisition. “Joe said it’s our bedroom and it has nothing to do with the investigation, so he let me have it.”

“So you watched it?”

“Some of it.” Dean marked the second ‘positive’.

“So you’re hiding the truth from me.”

“About?”

“Robbie being the mystery man.”

The pen dropped from Dean's hand and his eyes went to the wall.

"Dean? Is my little brother the mystery man?"

Dean took a split second to think and he turned around and faced Frank. "What are you talking about. Robbie?"

"When everyone accused you of being with Bev, I knew you weren't the moment you denied it. Because you, Dean, can't lie. Thank you. You just answered me question." Frank walked out.

"Frank." Dean tried to call out. His raised hand lowered and as he went to turn around again, John Matoose walked in.

"Dean. Do you have a minute?"

"Not really I am very busy"

"This won't take long. It's really important that I talk to you." John said. "Please."

After a huff, Dean nodded. "Go on."

"I've been trying to talk to you for days about this. So now I'm just gonna come right out and say it."

"John, I know where you going with this. This is getting out of line here . . ."

"Dean."

"No." Dean interrupted. "How many times are you going to go on and on about your baby's paternity tests. Fine. I get the point."

"No, you don't."

"John, I'm not a stupid man. You come in here . . ."

"Dean, shut up."

Cold, and quick Dean looked up. "Fuck you."

"No, Dean, fuck you." John argued with anger. "You have no idea how frustrating it is. My word means squat around her. I can't suggest or say anything." His point was being proved when Dean walked away to the other counter. John didn't give up, he followed. "Yet . . . yet, there's a murder investigation going on, and not one damn person has even thought, if Kevin was out of Beginnings, and it wasn't you, who the hell fathered Bev's baby?"

The signature squeak of his tennis shoes rang out in the room and slowly Dean looked back at John in shock. "Oh, my God."

John threw his hands up in there air. "Hello!"

"John, do not. Do not say anything about this. You got it?" With a rush, Dean moved across the lab. "I'm mean total secrecy. You never mentioned this."

"I swear. Anyone else knowing is taking a chance those tests get screwed up."

"You got it." Dean ran out, but not far, he stuck his head back in the

lab. "John, do me a favor. Find El. Tell her to get to the morgue. Now."

John nodded when Dean left. He'd find Ellen only after he took a second to smile. Finally, mission accomplished.



The peaceful morning in his office wouldn't last long. In fact, to Joe, the rest of the day would be screwed following the big group meeting he had planned. That was why he hurried with his work, snuck to his office with that piping hot cup of coffee. He was going to steal a moment of solitude. The steam from the cup rose up, and with a tilted head, Joe gave an impressed look to the brew that stayed hot. Lowering his lips at the same time he lifted the cup, Joe anticipated that sip.

Bang! The office door flew open.

A wave of a splash ejected from Joe's cup. "Christ, Frank." He wiped his shirt off.

"Did you know!" Frank nearly shouted.

"Did I know what? And nice to see you too. How was New Bowman?"

"Dad." Strong his words were as he stepped into the office. "Did you know that Robbie was the mystery man Ellen had the affair with?"

"Haven't a clue." Joe sipped his coffee. "And that's old news Frank. Over and done with."

"Yeah, if it was someone else. But he's my brother. My brother. And if Robbie betrayed me, stabbed me in my back, and slept with Ellen, I need to know. Because I need to deal with . . ."

"Frank." Hal's voice intruded.

Frank looked back. "Hal, not now."

"Yes, now." Hal walked in. "I overheard."

From his desk, Joe looked up. "Hal. Stay out of it."

"No." Hal shook his head. "I won't."

"Hal." Frank barked. "It's none of your fuckin business."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Really." Frank said snide. "It's between me and Robbie."

"No, Frank." Hal stepped to him. "It's between me and you. You can't go after Robbie. Robbie didn't betray you. Yes, your brother was the mystery man, but you've got the wrong brother. It was me. Ellen and I had a bit too much to drink. One thing led to another . . ."

"Bull shit." Frank snapped. "You're lying. You're protecting him."

"No." Hal shook his head slowly. "No. I'm not. Why would I do that? If you don't believe me, view the disk. But to save yourself the pain of seeing

your brother betray you, take my word. I assure you it was me, not Robbie.”

“Frank!” Joe sprung to a stand shouting when he saw Frank rage to Hal. Shirt grabbed, fist raised, Frank snatched Hal into him.

Hal didn’t flinch. His eyes stayed fixed on Frank’s and he spoke calm into the enraged face. “Go on. I deserve it. But don’t expect a fight. I will not hit my brother.”

With a hard release, Frank shoved by Hal and stormed out.

Joe closed his eyes as he plopped down to his chair. “Christ. Here we go.”

Hal lowered his head.

“What are you thinking?” Joe asked.

“Of my little brother.”

“Your little brother made his own bed on this one. Why are you climbing in the sheets?”

“Well, as you keep saying when it’s brought up about the contingency note. Robbie made a mistake, let it go.”

“Sometimes we have to. But in this case, Robbie is the . . .” Joe’s eyes raised. “Robbie.” He said when Robbie walked in the office.

Hal looked behind him.

“What’s going on?” Robbie asked. “I saw Frank. Man is he pissed. And you guys . . . is everything all right?”

Joe shook his head. “For you. Frank . . . Frank found out somehow that you and Ellen . . . he found out you were the mystery man.”

“Oh, my God.” Robbie closed his eyes.

“But . . .” Joe continued. “Hal here, took the blame. Used the fact that Frank won’t view Ellen being with someone else, and he said it was him not you.”

“Hal.” Robbie’s voice cracked. “You can’t do that. I won’t let you do that. I’ll tell Frank the truth.”

“No, you won’t.” Hal stated strong. “Let this go. Just let him think it was me and the mystery man ordeal will finally be put to rest.”

“But he’ll hate you.” Robbie said.

“No, Robbie.” Hal gently responded. “He won’t hate me. He’ll hate you if he finds out the truth. Me? He’ll get mad, he’ll treat me as if I were any other man in this community that betrayed him. And Frank will get over it. It will not effect our relationship in the long run. We aren’t that close. But you . . .” Hal stepped to him. “You and him have this bond. This thing. You really look up to him. You idolize him, and Frank basks in that. If the truth comes out things will never be that way again. Neither one of you want to lose that, so why do it.” Hal laid a hand on Robbie’s cheek. “Let it go. For me. O.K.?”

When he received a half nod, Hal gave a firm squeeze and stepped back. “Dad, I’m gonna go and grab a bite to eat before the meeting, is that O.K.?”

“Sure.” Joe said. “You have time.” His eyes stayed on Hal until he left, then Joe let out a long breath.

“Dad.” Robbie spoke up. “I can’t let him do this.”

“Yes, you can. Hating to say it, Hal brought up points. The last thing I want is to see you and Frank at each other’s throat. It’ll kill you Robbie.”

Sadly, Robbie nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t tell me. Tell Hal.” Joe lifted a pencil as if he were going to do work. “And . . . while you’re had it, you owe your brother a thank you. I don’t believe I heard that when he was here.”

“I know.” Robbie nodded again.

“Go.” Joe looked down to his papers.

“I’ll be back.” Robbie rushed out.

Hearing the door slam, was Joe’s sign to drop that pencil again. Alone he was in his office and he leaned far back in his chair in deep thought. It never stopped. Despite how much he thought in passing years that it would, it didn’t. No matter how old they got, they were still boys to Joe. Fighting back and forth, raging at each other, each defending and protecting Robbie, who at times, was hardly the innocent he ended up being. Only in their adulthood, they had bigger problems, bigger disputes, and bigger bodies to fight with. But Joe had to take stock in the fact that he did something right while raising his sons. And the tension he felt at that moment would dissipate, because things would work out . . . they always did.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Cold and clinical, both in appearance and feel, Dean whispered out an excited, 'this is beautiful' as he stepped into the morgue. He rolled a covered tray of surgical supplies center of the empty room. It probably would be considered inappropriate, but he whistled as he grabbed a pair of gloves and ran his hand over a covered specimen container as if it were gold.

Like a child up to something, he snicked and walked to the huge metal door. It creaked as he opened it and one lone covered body was in the freezer. "Hello, Bev." He walked to the covered cart and began to roll her out. "I hear you have a little secret." He shut the freezer door with his foot then brought the cart center room. "Wanna share that secret? No? Too bad." Pulling the covers down slightly from the head, Dean gave a shudder at the sight of Bev. Her face, what was left of it, was a cold gray. Shaking his head he covered her face back up. "Don't need to see that. That's not the end I'm worrying about." To her feet he moved and he lifted the sheet to uncover her nude body from the waist up.

"Dean." Ellen spoke as she walked in. "Taking up necrophilia?"

"El?" Dean grinned. "This is so great?"

"What are you doing?" Ellen asked with curiosity. "John said you needed to see me here immediately."

"Yep." Dean nodded. "And, no one is to know we're here."

"O.K." She pacified him. "Why?"

"We're gonna help with this investigation."

"Joe will get mad."

"Joe won't know. Think about it. John brought this up to me." He waited to heighten anticipation. "Kevin was out on a run for a while. He's not Bev's baby's father. I'm not the father. Who is?"

"I don't know. Who?"

"El, don't you get it?" Dean said with sick enthusiasm. "There's another party involved here. A silent party. Bev was carrying his child. Why isn't he speaking up? I think there's a reason he's being so quiet."

"Oh, my God." Ellen's eyes widened.

"Yep. He doesn't want to be found out. Why?"

"He doesn't want to get blamed for the murder?"

"Or . . ." Dean held up a finger. "What if . . . he too is part of the society."

Ellen scoffed. "Dean. Another society insider. Please."

"It's feasible."

“Not probable.”

“Why are we arguing. Let’s just find out what Joe and Frank aren’t even thinking about.” Dean reached for the tray. “When we run paternity tests and get the results, then we’ll let them know who the father is and they can leave us alone and we won’t have to go . . .”

“. . . to any more stupid meetings.” Ellen smiled. “Brilliant.”

“I thought so. Wanna assist?”

“Absolutely. But . . . Dean? How are you going to determine the paternity.”

“El, we have DNA on almost every man in Beginnings. We’ll run a match. It may take time. We may have to do it manually, you know, so no one sees us do it in the clinic lab.”

“No.” Ellen shook her head. “That’s not what I mean. The amniotic fluid won’t be there.”

“But the fetus will.”

“So you’re removing the baby? Good thinking. However . . . What if Joe and Frank come to look at the body. I think they’ll know if they see a big incision in her stomach.”

“You have a point. Good thing I brought the right instrument, incase.” He rolled the tray to the foot of the cart and grabbed hold of Bev’s ankles and widened her legs.

Ellen screamed.

“What?” Dean said in shock.

“Don’t you dear put your hand there.” Ellen scolded.

“I have to go up inside to remove the uterus. It’s the only way for them not to know visually.”

“But you are not going down there.”

“El.” Dean laughed. “She’s dead.”

“I don’t care.”

“Well then, we only have one more option.” Dean smiled and handed Ellen the rubber gloves.

Squeamishly, Ellen walked to between Bev’s legs. She cringed and held out her hand. “Speculum.”

^^^

“For as long as I live . . .” Dean said as they hurried into the cryo lab. “. . . It will be a vision I will never forget.”

“Drop it.” Ellen commanded.

“I never thought I’d see the day when I’d witness someone do a

postmortem, vaginal hysterectomy with their eyes closed.” He set the covered specimen container on the lab counter.

“It wasn’t easy.”

“It was a sight to see.” Dean shook his head. “But we got it. I’m proud of you. You did good.”

“She was frozen, Dean. It brought back bad memories of reaching into a Thanksgiving turkey . . . and speaking of which, wait until I tell you about Frank reading Shakespear.”

“Frank read Shakespear?” Dean laughed and uncovered the container exposing the uterus encased in fluid. “Whoa. Definitely five months along.”

A sense of sadness hit Ellen, and she actually felt her stomach flutter. “Dean?”

He picked it up in her voice. “What’s wrong?”

“I feel bad. There was a baby in there. A child who died. I don’t know if I can do this.”

“El.” He laid his hand over hers. “If you don’t want to, you don’t have to. I will.”

“Good. Because, I just don’t know if I can look at the baby, that’s all.” She lowered her head and when she did, she caught glimpse of her watch. “Shit. Joe’s meeting.”

“Damn it.” Dean covered the case. “We’ll lock this away and finish up later.”

“Other back room, away from Frank.”

“I’ll be right back.” Hurriedly, because he didn’t want to get chastised by Joe for tardiness, Dean swept up the specimen case and carried it to the back until they returned.

^^^

“What was his reaction?” John Matoose asked Jess outside of warehouse five.

“Get this. Delayed.” Jess said.

“You think you were just looking for a good reaction, or did he really hesitate.”

“Oh, he hesitated.” Jess nodded. “You think you’re theory is right?”

“You mean about Hal setting up Johnny to see what he does?” John shrugged. “I don’t know now. Why would Hal even suspect him?”

“Shit. Speaking of suspecting. I have to go. I hear Joe is having a big group suspect meeting. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Yeah. Thanks.” John nodded and turned, when he did, he saw Johnny

walking toward him. "Shit."

"Hey, John." Johnny smiled. "It warms my heart to see you two getting along. So . . . he agreed?"

"Yep." John said. "He agreed. We've been talking about it. We're gonna do what you want."

"Good. Because as soon as I figure out how, my Uncle Hal is first." Johnny started to walk away.

"Johnny." John stopped him. "You're awfully focused on your Uncle Hal."

"Because he killed Bev."

"What if you succeed in taking care of him, and you end up being wrong. What if someone else is the killer?"

Johnny acted as if he could care less. "Then I'll take care of them."

Blowing slightly in a huff of disbelief, John shook his head. "You have all the answers. You know, Johnny." he spoke sarcastically. "I hear Joe's starting to have group suspect meetings. Why don't you save yourself the trouble of eliminating them one by one and just . . . kill them all." John walked away. Even though his comments were meant to be facetious, they did more than he anticipated. He didn't just leave Johnny standing alone, he left Johnny standing in thought.

^^^

He knew exactly where to go, and how long he had to wait. Running his fingers through his longer dark blonde hair, he checked to see if anyone was around, and he hurried to the far end of the utility building where Joe's office was. Like a pouting child, he slid down to sit on the ground. Huddled tight against the wall, knees brought up, he draped his arms over his legs and dropped his head to his knees.

"Hey, Dean." Dan from security said as he walked by him

Without lifting his head, he raised his hand in a wave.

^^^

The face of Joe's watch screamed how far behind schedule they would run. He shuddered at the thought of all those people in his office. Robbie and Jess were there, along with Henry and Hector and it was already crowded. Four more were still to arrive. He'd have to find a bigger place to hold the meeting when he got every single one of the suspects together, but he

grabbed the main bunch. The viable ones. And unfortunately, the ones that would cause the ensuing migraine.

Elliott Ryder entered the office and was greeted with looks of surprise. “Am I late?”

“On time.” Joe stated. “Just surprised to see you. We heard you weren’t feeling well.”

“I’m getting better. Ellen hooked me up last night.”

Henry’s ‘tisk’ of disgust rang out.

Hector nudged him. “I don’t think that’s what he meant.”

“Antibiotics.” Elliott overheard them speak. “I have a tough cold.”

“Have a space.” Joe held out his hand. “I didn’t bother setting up too many chairs.”

Finding a space on the other side of the file cabinet, Elliott leaned against the wall barely noticed.

“Ow.” Dean grabbed his arm in the quick paced walk with Ellen to Joe’s office.

“Hurry up.” Ellen told him turning her body to face him. In her spin forward she swapped him with her purse by accident.

“I swear I’m gonna have a bruise.” Dean rubbed his arm. “And take this off.” He reached for it.

“Dean, it’s my purse.” Ellen tugged when she felt it slip from her shoulder. “Stop. We have to get into Joe’s.”

“El, this thing is as big as you. If you can’t stop hurting people with it. Don’t carry it.” He pulled it again. “I will.”

“Fine. Look weird.” Letting go of her hold, and assuming Dean had the bag, she cringed when she heard it drop. “Oh, way to go, Dean.” She bent down to get it and saw the contents on the ground. “Good thing everything didn’t spill.”

“What matters did.”

“What?”

Anger filled his eyes as Dean lifted his Danny Dollar card. “What’s this?”

“Shit.” Ellen hurried and stuck the items into her purse. “We’re late.”

“You took my card.”

“No I didn’t.” She nearly ran to Joe’s office in sight.

“You stole from your own husband.” Dean trailed behind. “Don’t tell me you used it in New Bowman.”

“OK. I won’t.”

"El!" He screamed out.

"Dean." She spun around her purse swinging forward off her shoulder hitting him. "We'll discuss this later."

"God. I wish I could press charges."

"You would." She opened the door and stepped in.

"Joe, she stole from me." Dean told as they walked in.

"I did not. Joe, I'm married to him." Ellen defended. "Don't I have the right to have his Danny Dollar card." She turned to her right. "Oh, hey Elliott, barely seen you back there."

Elliott peeked out and waved with an innocent smile.

"How cute." Dean rolled his eyes then turned to Joe. "Joe, tell her it's not right. She stole my card."

Joe opened his mouth but didn't get a chance to speak.

Henry spoke up. "How can you call it stealing from your own husband. You guys are supposed to share. It's not stealing."

"See." Ellen nodded.

"Oh, Henry *would* agree." Dean snapped.

"I agree." Robbie interjected. "Actually, Dean you wouldn't have this problem had you just bought her the purse."

"Yeah, I would have had bruises a couple days sooner." Dean rubbed his arm. "And . . . let's spoil Ellen and give her everything she wants."

"Joe." Ellen called out. "Tell him."

Joe's hand slammed down. "Knock it off. What the hell is the matter with you two coming in here arguing. Keep it to yourself, and keep it at home. Christ. Find a place to stand."

Ellen stepped back and bumped into Dean. "Watch out."

"You wouldn't need so much room . . ." He whispered. "If you didn't have that luggage you call a purse."

With a 'sorry' Frank walked into the office.

Joe peered up. "Calmer?"

"Yes." Frank answered.

Hal walked in.

"No." Frank said. "I was. Not now. Why does he have to be here."

"Frank. He's a suspect, like everyone else." Joe answered.

Hal shut the door. "Dad, if it's going to cause tension. I'll leave."

"No, you'll stay." Joe instructed.

"Leave." Frank told him.

"Frank." Joe warned.

"Robbie." Frank spoke up. "Do me a favor, don't talk to Hal or I'll get pissed at you."

"All right." Robbie shrugged.

Hal's mouth dropped open. "How can you do that. And Frank." He lowered his voice. "Maybe after the meeting we can talk."

"I have nothing to say to you. You . . ."

"Frank." Joe tried his warning. "Don't say it."

Verbally, Frank trudged on. "You slept with Ellen."

Hal cringed.

Dean's loud, 'what!' erupted in the room. "When?" He asked Ellen. "When did you sleep with Hal?"

"Oh!" Dramatic, Frank boasted. "You didn't know? How about this Dean? Hal's the mystery man we were trying to figure out."

"Hal's the mystery man?" Dean repeated in question. "Ellen?"

Hal, nearly covering his eyes, spoke up. "Can we leave what occurred between me and Ellen, while you two weren't with her, out of this meeting."

From the other side of the file cabinet, Elliott walked forward. A look of shock and question was on his face. "Captain."

"Elliott." Hal was surprised to see him. "Look, let me explain."

Frank folded his arms. "I want to hear this. Explain to your best friend how you dogged him. Because . . . El and I may have been broke up, but if I recall . . . him and El were a couple. Weren't they"

Hal closed his eyes.

"Captain." Elliott spoke soft. "I know this is not the place. But after this meeting I would like to talk to you."

"Talk?" Frank taunted. "Fuck that, Elliott. Nail him. I can't. He's my brother. You can. He dogged you."

"Frank." Hal said yelling his name. "Stop it."

"Oh, no." Frank shook his head. "You're the one who acts all high and mighty. You stab your brother in the back, your best friend. I'd say Dean but you made no bones about it, the way you kept beating him up."

So aggravated Hal spoke. "Will you stop it. Grow up."

Joe looked at the entire room of people. Those who bickered. Jess and Hector who seemed to facially be fighting a headache. Henry who looked offended. And then he glanced at Robbie who sat calmly in the chair looking at his nails and waiting. "Robert? Anything you want to do or say right now?"

Robbie shook his head. "Nah. I'm good."

Lifting his hand in a 'it figures', Joe prepared to yell out. "If . . ." He cringed the noise level drowned him out. "Christ."

Dean's voice rose over the noise. "Frank. You're instigating Elliott. But what about us? I'd like to know how Hal ended up being the mystery man."

"Me too." Henry said. "That's very incestuous sounding, El."

Ellen couldn't get a word in edge wise.

"El?" Dean asked. "I thought Robbie was the mystery man. Or was it Robbie, too, and you just left Hal out of the truth?"

Ellen gasped. "No! How dare you accuse me of sleeping with every Slagel."

"Hey." Joe barked out. "Leave me out of this. And can we . . ."

"El?" Dean questioned.

Hal stepped forward. "Quit badgering her. It was me."

Dean's hand lifted. "So this explains why you kept pummeling me every chance you got."

"No." Hal corrected. "I kept pummeling you because you were cheating on Ellen with Bev."

"I did not sleep with Bev!" Dean shouted. "And Ellen, was the 'Hal's like a brother' a crock of shit? How could you have sex with Hal?"

"I didn't have sex with Hal!" Ellen screamed in defense.

The room went silent.

"No." Hal spoke up. "We . . ."

Joe cringed. He knew it was coming. "Christ."

Hal finished his sentiment. "We made love."

The room groaned.

Joe's head fell to the desk.

"Great." Frank spoke up. "Now we find out they're having a love affair."

Hal looked at Elliott who stared at him. He tried, he really tried to send Elliott some sort of sign it was all a misunderstanding, but everyone shouted and Hal's head spun.

"Why am I the last to find these things out?" Dean asked. "First you steal my Danny Dollar card, then I find out you had a long affair with Hal."

"It wasn't a long affair." Ellen said.

"So you were lying before." Dean nodded. "Next thing you know, I'm gonna find out you slept with Frank last night."

Ellen turned away from Dean.

"You did." Dean gasped.

Hal interjected. "In my bed."

Ellen spun to Frank. "You told!"

Enough was enough, Joe stood up with the loudest of piercing whistles. "Shut up!" He screamed his loudest, his face a beet red. "This is a goddamn suspect meeting. I need order, you . . ." He pointed to Dean. "And you." He swung his finger at Ellen. "Both. Out of my office. Now!"

Ellen's mouth dropped open. "But Joe . . ."

"Don't but Joe me." He complained. "Your little asses came in here first starting the tension with this bickering shit. Out! Out! And the rest of you, if I hear another word, another argument about anything that has nothing to do with Bev, I swear to God I'll pull out my gun and shoot you." He saw Dan and Ellen standing there. "What are you waiting for? Out!"

"Fine." Ellen said snobby, spun her body, hit Dean with her swinging purse and stormed out.

Dean followed in suit. "Wait."

"Go away."

"Ellen, we need to talk." He grabbed her arm.

"Off!" She turned her body pummeling him with her purse. "You got us kicked out."

"Me!?" Dean screamed. "You're the one who hid the fact that you were with Hal."

"Dean." Ellen bluntly stated his name. "I wasn't with Hal. I swear. I don't know where that came from. Look at the disk. OK? It was Robbie."

"So why did Hal admit it?"

Ellen shook her head. "You know what? I'm not going to argue with you. I told you the truth."

"Just like you told me about Frank last night."

"You didn't ask!" Ellen shouted.

"You should have told me!" Dean's voice was at the same level.

"You have a no . . . no . . ." Ellen's words slowed down. "No kiss . . . Her eyes shifted to the right.

"No kiss and tell. Finish your sentence." Dean said, then saw where Ellen looked.

So engrossed in their argument, Dean and Ellen didn't notice, the man of average height, with, longer blonde hair, standing there watching. And he didn't just stand there, he stood close and smiled.

"Dean." Ellen stepped back. "Who . . . who . . . Dean call security. I don't know him."

"I don't have my radio." Dean told her.

"Hi." He spoke softly. "Oh, my God." He grinned such a perfect smile, his green eyes, though hidden behind glasses, pierced through. He reached his hand out to Ellen's face.

Ellen screamed and stepped back.

"Hey!" Dean shouted. "Get your hands away from my wife!"

"Dean." Ellen stood behind him.

He lifted his hands. "I'm not here for trouble. Don't you know who I am?" He asked.

"Haven't a clue." Dean stated. "I know everyone in Beginnings. How you broke perimeter is beyond me. El, go get Frank."

"No." He shook his head. "You know me." He smiled. "Look at me. Just look at me."

"Oh, my God." Ellen whispered and stepped out from behind Dean.

"El." Dean looked oddly at her. "Go get Frank."

Ellen stepped closer to the man. "Dean. Look at him. He looks just like you. Only taller." She wisped. "Like William. Oh, my God." She peered up to the man. "You're . . ."

"Yes." He nodded.

"Dean." She stood astonished. "It's Billy."

"Who?" Dean asked.

"Billy. Our son." Ellen said.

"What?" Dean laughed "Billy is seven."

"Twenty-two years ago." Billy answered. "In this time frame. Not in mine."

Dean, in a daze walked closer to him.

"Dean." Ellen whispered. "He has your face."

"Billy?" Dean questioned.

"Yes. So good to see you. And we can talk later. But now . . . we have to hurry. The Aragon Window will only be open for another eight minutes. Please." He held out his hand.

From the palm of the thin hand to Dean, Ellen looked. "I think he wants us to go with him."

Dean looked at Billy. "Where?"

"I believe you call it . . ." Billy took a moment to think. "New Bowman. Bowman. I can't recall. It's not important. We just need to go now." He grabbed Ellen's hand.

Dean separated them. "O.K. stop. No." he shook his head. "You approach us, tell us you're Billy. Say 'you have to come with me'. The something window . . ."

"Aragon." Billy corrected.

"Whatever." Dean waved his hand about. "You say 'let's go', grab my wife . . ."

"My mother."

Dean huffed. "And expect us to go. No explanations. What in the world made you think, that without being informed, we would just follow you? Did you think we wouldn't question? And what the hell is an Aragon Window?"

Billy, in such a Dean fashion, ran his fingers through his hair. He spoke rapidly, after glancing at his watch. "The Aragon window is what you call the

time machine. Special permission was granted to come back. One trip. Get you, have you two do what you have to do, and return you unnoticed.”

“What is it that we need to do?” Dean asked.

“Dean.” Ellen shook her head. “I think he wants us to go with him to his time frame.”

“Yes.” Billy said in relief. “I have four minutes. Please.”

“Not that.” Dean snapped. “I understood that. What in the future.”

“If you’ll trust me, I’ll tell you when we get there.” Billy pleaded.

“I don’t know you.” Dean argued.

“I’m your son.” Billy came back. “I’ll just take *her*.” He grabbed Ellen’s hand and started to walk.

“Billy.” Ellen spoke pacifying as they moved. Billy pulling her one way, Dean pulling the other. “Not that it’s a bad thing to go, you know, to the future. But it took me three weeks to get a hair appointment at Bentley’s Hoi House of Hair and I really can’t miss it.”

Billy stopped, Ellen flew back into Dean.. He grabbed her again. “In this time you’ll be gone a matter of seconds. Well, forty-two seconds give or take one. That’s it. How long you’re in the future remains to be seen. It’s up to you.”

“Can we get back?” Ellen asked. “Can you assure that?”

“The Aragon window will make a return trip. Yes. Remember Dr. Godrichson said, even if time is rippled, and the machine becomes nonexistence in the time frame you left from, window will still allow you to return. The window stays in limbo until you reactive it.” He looked down at his watch. “Now we have less than two minutes.” He grew nervous. “I hate wasting the energy.”

“Fine.” Ellen adjusted her purse. “I’ll go. It’ll be interesting. Dean?”

Dean stood behind as they walked toward the end of the utility building. “I *better* get back.” He mumbled and hurried to catch up. “You know, Billy, I took several trips in the regressionator, I don’t recall it having a limit. Actually, in theory, that is absurd.”

Billy stopped cold.

“And . . .” Dean spoke arrogantly. “It has not been over six minutes since you approached us.”

Billy faced Dean. “Fine. I lied.”

“You lied!” Dean yelled.

Billy winced. “Please. Thank God you two were fighting, or else everyone in that office would come out. I had to lie. I had to add a sense of urgency, My father told me that people are always walking around, I couldn’t take a chance of being seen.”

Ellen nodded impressed. "He has a point. And isn't he cute talking about you in the third person."

"Please." Billy softened his voice. "I'll explain everything. I promise. Well, as much as I can. Can we do this?"

Without hesitation, Ellen nodded. "I feel important."

"You are." Billy raised his eyebrows. "More than you know. I will take only you, if need be, but I would like you . . ." He looked at Dean. "To come. We need you as well."

Dean took a deep breath in along with his thoughts. "Why not?"

Billy grinned. "Thank you. My father is going to be so happy. He's counting on this working." He moved fast to the end of the building.

Ellen nudged Dean with a whisper as they walked. "It's the two minds are better than one thing. Two of you, is double the brains."

Dean snapped his finger. "Bet me you're right. Two of me, two of you. All of our minds working."

Ellen giggled. "I hope we get along."

"That's funny." Dean stopped walking with Ellen when they reached behind the utility building.

"Hey." Ellen turned serious. "We're fighting. I forgot."

Billy who was going from left to right, looked back. "Please, don't I heard about how you two fought. Look at it this way. Everything happening now is being put on pause. So pause that too."

Offended Dean looked. "He's arrogant."

"Like you." Ellen said. "He has your body, only taller."

"Really? I'm that thin?"

"Petite."

Dean rolled his eyes then watched Billy zig zag around. "What are you doing, Billy?"

"Looking for my mark."

Hands in pockets, Dean bounced from heel to toe. "And he wants us to go with him."

"Leave him alone." Ellen scolded.

"Found it." Billy bent down to the ground and picked something up.

Ellen snuck up from behind. "What is that?"

Billy laid it in her hand with a quirky look. "A coin." He snickered.

Showing Dean, Ellen checked it out with curiosity. "Weird. Look at the date. Whoa. You guys use money?"

"Sometimes." Billy pulled out a pendant. "Things will be different. I'll give you the rules when we get there."

Dean mouthed the word, 'rules' to Ellen.

Druga-Johnston/The Aragon Window

Ellen shrugged and put the coin in her pocket. “Hey Billy. Is it better in the future?”

“Better than now?” Billy punched in numbers. “In someways, it’s a lot better, others . . . well, that’s where we’re hoping you help out.” Seemingly out of no where, a doorway of bright light appeared. “Let’s go.”

The three of them stepped through.

Druga-Johnston/The Aragon Window

The Aragon Entrance

Beginnings, Montana

TWENTY-TWO YEARS IN THE FUTURE

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The warm sensation of stepping through the time machine was still with Ellen and Dean when they emerged into an emptiness on the other side. A dark room with a slight glow, and a tin feel to it was where they were at.

“Um . . .” Ellen shifted her eyes to Dean. “I think we’re in no man’s time land.”

“Bill.” Dean called to him. “Did you mess up.”

Billy walked a few steps to a table where computers were set up. “No.” He looked up with a smile. One so much like Dean’s. “This is a special room designed for the machine. It had be secluded and secured.” He punched a final click on the keyboard. “Ready?”

Dean stayed close to Ellen. As close as he could with the purse on her shoulder. “Can you tell us why we’re here?”

“You’re needed. That’s all I’m allowed to tell you.” Billy said. “But, you will be told everything, like I said, including the rules. And rule number one, was this visit was contingent on telling you nothing that happened from the moment I took you until this point in time. ”

Dean nodded. “Understandable. You want no ripples.”

“But you’ll tell us, right?” Ellen asked. “We’re your parents.”

Billy shook his head. “No. I can’t. If you knew what I went through to be the one to make this trip, you wouldn’t ask me. This is the only instant that you’ll be alone with anyone from this time frame. The rest of the time, they’ll be a, well, time theorist, who will ensure no information is transferred to you.”

Dean took a deep breath. “I’m really confused.”

“Me, too.” Ellen whispered.

“I promise you. It will be made clear, everything at the Joint Council briefing for you. Just bear with us. This is monumental.” Billy started to walk. “Ready?”

Ellen whispered to Dean. “Joint Council. Bet Beginnings acquired another town.”

“Oh, yeah. Most definitely. Twenty years.” Dean nodded. “Bill, when will this meeting be?”

“Early evening.” Billy answered. “We don’t believe they’ll be any time machine memory loss. But to be on the safe side, they want to give it at least eight hours before they speak to you. Can I make a suggestion?” Billy stopped walking.

“Sure.” Dean shrugged. “What’s that?”

“This is just my personal suggestion.” Billy said. “They are going to check you into the hotel for the wait until the meeting . . .”

“Hotel?” Ellen asked. “Oh my God, Danny has really built this up.”

Billy smiled. “It’s changed., You’ll see. But they’ll check you in. For what you are needed, it may take a while in this time frame. Then again, it may not. Use the time in the hotel room, and the paper there, to write down everything. I mean everything that was happening in your lives the moment you left.”

Dean looked impressed. “Bill. Good idea. That way, before we head back. We’ll refresh.”

“Exactly.” Billy said. “And write down the emotions as well. That may help so you don’t act strange.”

Ellen was a little in shock. “We could be gone a while then.”

Billy didn’t know how to answer, he simply gave a twitch of his head in indecisiveness. “We should move ahead. We’re a little behind schedule.”

“What do we . . .” Ellen slowed down in her walk when they entered a long metal tunnel. “What is this?” She looked around.

“Your protection.” Billy answered.

“From what?” Dean asked.

“This.” A black thick tarp was before Billy. He extended his hand and opened it.

Flash!

They were pummeled, blinding flashes went off in their faces. Mobs of voices shouted so much that they merged together in an non-comprehensiveness.

Frightened by the sudden splurge into what seemed an unknown, Ellen turned into Dean.

Dean had to turn his head away. He couldn’t see. Flash. Flash. Flash. “Bill.”

A deep male voice spoke so close. “This way, Dr. Hayes.”

Disoriented Dean was. He gripped tight to Ellen refusing to let her body get more than an inch from his. He was grabbed and led. The blinding lights pelting him in the face continuously. Swarming in confusion and voices that yelled, Dean couldn’t get his bearings. He tried to see what was happening, but he was surrounded by soldiers, both him and Ellen. Only on occasion did he see the blur of a face jumping out at them. Moved more than they walked, Dean could only followed the lead. He looked for his son, he didn’t see him. The brushing of Ellen’s hair against his face was the only direction Dean had to aim his voice. “Hold on, El. Just hold on.” He whispered. He didn’t hear her response, the noise level was too loud. But the grip Ellen had on his arm,

the one that nearly drew blood, said more than any words could.

Silence.

Slam.

Dean's heart pounded up into his throat. He found himself and Ellen, sitting on the leather back seat to a huge car.

"Oh God." Ellen whispered huddling into him. "Dean?"

The noise level erupted again with the opening of the car door. Billy slid in and shut out the crowd again. "Sorry." He said. "Driver. We're ready."

A motorized noise brought the winding down of the window between the back seat and the front. A younger man, wearing what looked like a black military uniform looked into the back seat. "For assurance Dr. Hayes. I need to hear what's being said." he put the window up, leaving it open a few inches.

"Whew." Billy fidgeted into a comfortable position. "That's one of those time theorists." He pointed to the man and spoke upbeat. "That was the worst part. What we just went through. We knew it was coming." He caught his breath. "You guys O.K.?"

Dean wanted to say 'no', but at that moment he couldn't speak. Shock would have been the best diagnosis he could give of what he and Ellen were experiencing. That and maybe regret. Had he not felt Ellen trembling against his chest, Dean wouldn't have believed, such a strong woman would have been so scared. But she was, and so was Dean. Fingers twined within Ellen's hair, holding her tight to his body, Dean planted his lips to the top of her head. He didn't move, he didn't speak. He closed his eyes when the car started to move, and he wondered the same thing he supposed Ellen wondered.

What in the world did they just step into?

^^^

The tinted windows and the speed in which the limousine traveled, allowed for Dean and Ellen to see very little of where they headed. A tree lined road and occasional cars on the other side were their view. The bright flashing lights ahead and behind the limo, told them they were labeled as important.

But why? Mobbed was the way Dean felt when he walked out of that metal tunnel with Billy. After thinking about it during the silent ride, Dean figured out the flashes. Or at least he thought he did. Cameras. But it sounded ridiculous. Why would anyone want to take pictures of him and Ellen? Wasn't their time trip branded a secret, like most of the Beginnings

times trips were.

The sense of urgency stopped the moment the car did.

Dean watched as Ellen's fingers slipped out of his. "El? You O.K.?"

"Yes." She sat up and tucked her hair behind her ears. "I'm fine now. It was a bit overwhelming, whatever occurred."

Billy interjected. "That sort of thing shouldn't happen again. You have to understand, for three years we have been preparing this trip. Everyone's been waiting. I mean, I'm to tell you to remember when you guys brought Dr. Forrest Caceres to Beginnings. The excitement around that is the same. Only on a bigger scale. But . . . things will be calm. We're here now."

"Where's here?" Dean asked.

"The hotel." Billy answered.

"But where's that?" Dean questioned.

Billy nodded to the time theorist.

The window went down all the way and the theorist extended his hand shaking Dean and Ellen's. "My name's Lancing. I'm one of your assigned theorists. Many questions will be answered through me. So don't be offended or alarmed if I answer for someone. We just have to be sure no paradox information is passed."

"I understand." Dean said. "Now where are we?"

"Actually, you wouldn't know." Lancing answered. "We're sitting about two miles outside of a place you called New Bowman. It's expanded. It's called Freedom City."

Dean looked quickly when the car door opened. Within seconds Lancing was standing there. He extended his hand to Ellen to help her out. Dean emerged with the same look of 'awe' on his face as Ellen when they looked at the hotel before them. Five stories. Turning in a clockwise circle Dean inhaled the view. Cars, military trucks, and police vehicles were around them.

Ellen exhaled. "We're not in Kansas anymore."

Lancing held up his hands to the escorts. "We're fine now, Young Dr. Hayes and myself can take it. Thank you. Dr. Hayes." He nodded to Billy.

"Thanks." Billy smiled. "See, this is where I am allowed to explain things. Well, some of it. The hotel has been cleared out. The most contact you'll have is with those on Joint Council that are staying here, security, and of course my father." He pushed open the glass double doors.

"Whoa." Ellen commented as she stepped into the lobby.

"This is a new building." Billy explained. "It was the first newly constructed building following the United Renovation seven years ago. Which I am not allowed to explain." He held up a finger. "You'll stay here.

Clothes are in the room for you.”

Ellen leaned into Dean as they walked. “Good thing I brought my purse. I have stuff.” She nodded.

Billy led them to the elevator. “More will be explained to you at the meeting. As far as contact with people you knew in your time frame. It’s going to be by chance. If you run into them . . . you do. If you don’t, they aren’t allowed to deliberately see you. Well, except for my father.” Billy held the doors open. “Trust me when I tell you, anyone you know from your Beginnings now, their pretty spread out.”

Dean whispered so soft to Ellen. “Make a mental note. Freedom City. Spread about. We won the war against the society.”

Ellen nodded with a wink.

After Lancing stepped in the elevator, Billy pressed the top floor button. “The hotel is pretty impressive. It was constructed mainly for tourists.”

Dean looked surprised. “Tourist?”

Lancing gave a nod to Billy to answer.

“Tourists.” Billy explained. “The Beginnings that you live in, is a landmark now. A tourist attraction. It outgrew it’s use.”

Dean understood. “Makes sense. We’re outgrowing it now.”

“Exactly.” Billy held the elevator doors. “When you see your accommodations, I think you’ll be pleased.”

“Is that where we’re going?” Ellen asked.

“No.” Billy stopped in the hall. “See all these men. Security? This is a special stop before we settle you in. It has to be short, but because of the circumstances, Joint Council approved it. Everything has been moved here. My father moved all his work, everything to this hotel to be here while you guys are. To be able to see you. It was a big move. He’s not usually in this part of the country. But . . .” Billy smiled. “He wants to be. He’s so excited. I’m . . . I’m very happy for him.” He started to walk again.

“Dean.” Ellen spoke soft. “My heart is pounding. You in your sixties. Bet me you aged well.”

“I had to have.” Dean said.

Billy stopped before a set of closed double doors. “Keep in mind, this is going to be a shock for him. I am asking, even though he’s prepared, to not overwhelm him. He’s got a lot on his mind with other things that are just as important. He wanted to be at your arrival. But you saw all the hysteria. It wouldn’t have been a good idea in his position.”

“His position?” Ellen questioned.

Billy grinned proud. “He’s the president now.”

So excited, Ellen shot a view to Dean. “Oh, my God, you’re the

president. I knew you had leadership qualities.”

Dean laid his hand on his chest. “Don’t let this go to my head when I get back.”

“Please, you know I will.”

Billy knocked on the door. “Dad.” He called out. “They’re here.” He stepped aside.

It was an office, and it was filled with people that surrounded a desk as if they were a wall. One by one they stepped back, parting like the Red Sea. But to see him they didn’t need to part. He stood up. His short and thick grey hair emerged first then the rest of him. Still fit, and still towering over everyone, stood Frank.

The room spun to Ellen when she saw him and she actually lost her balance. She reached for Dean.

Deep and almost sandy, Frank’s voice sounded. His eyes were wide. “Oh, my God.”

Questions not answered. Information not given. Rules established. Yet, Ellen didn’t need any information. No matter how much Frank had aged, she still saw him, and saw through him. She knew by the way he locked his eyes to hers, the way he fought to contain the emotion on his face, that it had been too long since he saw her. There was too much shock, too much hurt and so much gratefulness that glazed his eyes. And she knew one other thing, *seeing* her wasn’t what Frank wanted at that moment. He didn’t need to speak, Ellen understood. “Frank.” She said his name with a smile and stepped into him with a rush. Around his neck she threw her arms and nearly lost every ounce of her breath when his arms embraced her with a tightness she had never felt from him.

His body hunched into hers and he hovered Ellen. She swore she heard an emotional deep, gasp come from him. But his lips were buried near her ear and any sound he made was hidden from the room.

“El.” Frank held her. “Don’t let go yet. Please, don’t let go yet.”

“I’m not.”

“Oh, my God.” Frank’s voice cracked. “This feels so good. This feels . . .” He stopped talking and he pressed his lips to her cheek with everything he had.

The release of his embrace was preluded with another squeeze and rumbling sigh of emotions. He set her down, laid his hands on her face, grinned wide and kissed her again. “El.” Frank shook his head and then he saw Dean. “And you.” Frank walked to him. “My God.” He extended his hand first, then when Dean gripped it, he pulled Dean into a huge embrace.

Dean was confused. He caught his breath after the Frank hug and

looked at his friend who had aged so much but still looked the same. And then he looked at Billy. *Tears? Did Billy have tears in his eyes? Why?* Dean questioned in his mind. He then peered around the office that had emptied out. "Where am I?"

Billy blinked, snapping his views from Frank who held Ellen's hand. "What was that?"

"Where am I?" Dean repeated. "You said your father. The president." His eyes widened. "No." He looked at Frank. "You call him 'Dad'?"

Lancing answered. "President Slagel has been a father to Dr. Hayes."

"President Slagel?" Dean laughed. "Right. This is a joke. Frank, you're pulling a joke. You knew we were coming from the past and this is a joke."

Frank shook his head.

"Oh, my God." Dean exclaimed. "Frank's the president of this country and it still functions?"

"Sir." Lancing spoke up. "I know you are of importance, but I am going to ask you, out of respect to not insult this man."

With a smile of enjoyment, Frank closed his eyes and shook his head. He had a soft spokeness to him. "Lancing. That's fine. Really. Dean . . . Dean is coming straight from a time where, well, I was a very different man. He used to . . ." Frank winked. "He used to pick on me. So let him. I think I'll enjoy it."

Dean scratched his head. He checked out Ellen who stared at Frank like a teenage girl to her idol. "What is going on?"

"Sir." Lancing said. "I really have to secure them in their quarters."

"I understand." Frank replied. "I'll see them at the meeting."

"And . . ." Lancing continued. "You do have the late private supper with them scheduled for after the meeting. Shall I get your secretary to finish picking out the menu?"

"No." Frank said. "I'll do it." He looked at Ellen and brought her hand to his lips. "Thank you for this." he kissed her hand softly then gave it back to her. "See you in a little while."

"I'll see you." Ellen spoke near whisper. She felt Lancing take hold of her arm and lead her away from Frank. But Ellen kept looking back to him.

"Bill." Frank called out. "How . . . how did I do?"

Billy stopped at the door as Dean and Ellen passed him with Lancing. "You did really good, Dad." Giving Frank a smile, he pulled the door closed.

"Dad?" Dean questioned. "Dad? President Slagel?" He said as they walked. "El, I feel like I'm in a remake of *'It's a Wonderful Life'*."

Ellen chuckled just as a courteous response. But her mind was elsewhere, on Frank and on all the non-verbal information she received in

that brief moment in his office.

^^^

“Dead.” Ellen stepped from the bathroom into the hotel room suite. She wore a thick white robe and combed her wet hair. “What are you doing?” She walked to the bed where Dean laid on his stomach writing.

“Oh, making notes of what was going on when we left Beginnings.” He looked at her. “Did you shower?”

“Yeah. The bathroom is great.” She sat on the bed. “Dean, a hotel. Can you believe that.”

“If I wasn’t here, no.” He bit the pencil, then shifted his eyes to her bare leg that protruded from the robe. He lifted the edge of the robe slightly, peeked, smiled and returned to his writing.

“I can’t believe you just did that.”

“It’s been a while. Did you see” Dean paused to write. “El? What was Hal’s demeanor in Joe’s office.”

“Lost.” Ellen stated.

“Not mad?” Dean shrugged.

“No. He was covering for Robbie. Remember Robbie was just sitting there all quiet. Hal got himself into something and was stuck. Lost.”

“All right. Lost.” Dean wrote down. “Did you see the clothes they provided? They gave me a suit. A suit?”

“I guess Sears and Roebucks Children’s department opened back up again.” She stood from the bed.

“Oh, you’re funny. Thanks. No, when will I where a suit.”

“Didn’t they give you anything else?”

“Yeah. But they included a suit.”

“They must need you dressed up or something.” She opened the armoire. “Shit. They gave me a dress.”

“See.”

“I hope they at least give me pantyhose. I probably won’t be able to put them on it’s been so long since I wore them.”

“You’ll feel like you’re strangling.”

Smiling, while holding a shirt, Ellen turned around. “That’s cute.” She tossed the shirt on the chair and began to rummage for clothing, checking everything out. “Oh, wow. Make-up.”

Biting the pencil, Dean peeked over his shoulder. “You’re not going to wear it, are you?”

“Dean. Why not?” She laughed. “If they have make up, women are

wearing it again. I'll look so drab compared to them."

"I doubt it." Dean rolled to his side to keep his eyes on Ellen when he realized she was getting dressed. "What um . . . what . . ." Dean's words got lost as he slipped into concentrating more on her dressing.

Ellen giggled. "Stop that."

"Sorry. It's been a while. Anyhow . . ." Dean cleared his throat. "What were you saying when you came out of the bathroom. Who was dead.?"

"Us."

Dean laughed. "No, El."

"Dean, why do you think we didn't see us?"

"Um, maybe because we aren't allowed to deliberately see anyone from our time. Or maybe we're spread, living in Georgia or something."

"No, Dean. We're dead."

"How do you know?"

"Frank told me."

"El." He snickered. "I was right there. What did he do? Whisper it in your ear."

"I can't believe you, Mr. Scientist, aren't seeing it. You're in denial."

"You're crazy."

"Nope. Dead." Ellen finished dressing and returned to the bed to sit with him. "The look on Frank's face when he saw me, I know that look. Remember . . . well, no, you wouldn't, but when you died on me, and when I saw you for the first time after that, I made that look. Only Frank's was deeper. He was shocked. I'm gonna guess it's been a really long time since I died."

"El, that's sad." Dean sat up. "So is that why you rushed to him like it's been forever since you seen him?"

"Yeah." She nodded. "Because I wished, when I saw you, that you would have done the same thing to me. But how would you have known. I knew as soon as I saw him. And . . . even though it was only an hour since I saw him last, I kind of figured, he needed that return 'good to see ya' feel."

Dean's expression dropped. "I wish I would have thought of that."

"Why would you. You were looking for yourself."

"I should have known. Billy was calling him Dad. And, honestly, why would they need us here, if we were already here."

"Denial."

"Denial."

Ellen breathed out. "So . . . I'm gonna guess, ten years, maybe a few more, no less."

"Where do you get that reasoning?" Dean asked.

“Think about it. Our work is important. Important enough to bring us back. But . . . What have we done. All of our ‘for the future’ work is just getting off the ground. So going by that theory, we had to have accomplished much to make an impact.”

“You’ve given this a lot of thought.”

“I took a long shower.”

“I thought you were just shaving your legs.”

“That too.” Ellen smiled.

Without forewarning, Dean slipped his hand behind her neck, pulled her to him and kissed her. “Do you realize what’s happening right now?”

“We’re on a bed in a hotel room?”

“Aside from that.” Dean laid his hand on hers. “We’re twenty years in the future. They’re gonna shield us El, pretty much from anything and everything, because they are sending us back. But . . . While we’re here. It’s gonna be, you and me.”

“O.K.” Ellen didn’t know where he was going.

“You took a long shower. I was thinking too. It’s never been just you and me, ever. For the first time in our lives, our relationship will have no outside influence.”

“It could be for a very short time.”

“It could be for longer. Think how interesting.” Dean peered with seriousness. “Our lives. The ones we know, are actually freeze framed. When we go back, everything will be right exactly where we left off. We, El, are given the chance to step out of our normal lives, return and never miss a beat. We can take full advantage of it.” Innocently from her hands to her eyes he looked up. “Can I?”

“Without a doubt. But . . .”

Dean whined and plopped completely backwards to the bed. “I knew it.”

“What?” Ellen leaned down to him. “I didn’t even say anything.”

“I’m sitting here telling you we finally have no outside influence, and you want to add it.” Dean raised his arm over his eyes.

“Dean.” She moved his arm hovering her face over his. “How much of an outside influence can Frank really be? He’ll never be alone one on one with us. I’m not saying make him an outside influence, I’m saying let’s make him a part of our lives. If I lost Frank tomorrow and ten years from now, he entered my life, I’d want to bask in it. Relive what I had with him. Feel it again. Think about it.”

“You’re right.” Dean had no argument to him. “I know what you’re saying. But, Lancing is going to be around, or another time cop.”

“Dean, you’re so witty tonight.”

“Thanks. So what do you have in mind.”

“Just basic stuff. Pay attention to him while we’re here. He’s not gonna wanna bring up memories, because he’s gonna think it’ll sound stupid to us because we just saw him. So let’s us bring up memories. He’s going to act like we’re long lost friends, we’ll act the same. It’ll be a gift.”

“I’ll do it. And . . . Since he requested it, don’t think I won’t pick on him.”

“I think that will be a little hard.” Ellen said.

“Because of Lancing?”

“No, because of Frank. Or haven’t you noticed? He’s a totally different man now.” Almost sad she spoke. “He seems like he lost his spark for life.”

Dean swallowed intensely. “That’s because he lost you. But . . .” He cleared his throat. “You’re back. And I’ll bet the world won’t be ready, because it won’t be long before the old Frank is too.”

Ellen smiled leaning further down into him. “Dean?” She spoke soft. “Do you know how long it’s been since you and I were on a bed in a hotel together?”

“Never for me.” He pulled her closer. “Frank changed that time frame with Robbie. I have no recollection.”

“Maybe while we’re here I can fill you in sometime.”

“Oh, I’d like that.” Moving Ellen to him, Dean began to kiss her, but not for long. The ‘click-click’ of the hotel room door, along with Billy’s ‘whoops, sorry’ separated them quickly.

Ellen looked back at Billy who stood there with Lancing right behind him, then down to Dean with a smile. “What was that you were saying about outside influence?”

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Wasn’t that nice of Billy.” Sarcastically Dean spoke as he and Ellen stepped from the hotel suite. “Stopping by to tell us to get dressed up.”

“You look handsome.” Ellen commented as they started to follow the guard. “I can’t believe you forgot how to tie a tie.”

“I was rusty. I didn’t forget.” Dean inched his fingers between the collar of his dress shirt and his neck. “I’m strangling here.”

“You?” Ellen tugged on the waist of her pantyhose, then lost her balance in the high heels she wore.

Dean laughed. “Aren’t we the sight?”

The guard held open the elevator door for them to step inside.

“This is so weird.” Dean commented.

“Dean. You look really handsome. You dress up well.” She reached and fixed the side of his hair.

“You look great too, El. I don’t know if I like the make-up.”

“I’m not wearing much. I don’t think. Less than I did in the old world.” She tapped the guard on the shoulder. “Soldier. Compared to the women now, am I wearing too much, the same or too little make-up?”

“I really couldn’t tell you, Ma’am.” He answered.

“Odd.” Ellen gave a quirky look. “What impact on the future would that have telling me.”

“Has nothing to do with that.” The guard said when the elevator stopped. “I mean ... I really couldn’t tell you.”

“Oh.” Ellen shrugged and whispered to Dean. “Maybe he’s gay.”

“No, if he was gay. He’d know.”

“True.” Ellen exhaled. “Talk about feeling like fish out of water.”

“You feel that way too?”

“Yeah. Dean? I wonder if they’ll allow us to bring back souvenirs.”

“I doubt it.”

Ellen slowed down and brought her lips to his ear. “Good thing I brought my purse then, huh?”

A bright look hit Dean. “You know what? Yeah it is now. Just don’t hit me with it.” They resumed their pace.

“Don’t you sort of feel like that couple in the one Planet of the Apes movie?” Ellen asked.

So excited, Dean responded. “Oh, my God, El, you are so right.”

“Hope they don’t plan on gunning us down on a barge somewhere.”

At that exact moment, at the same time, Dean and Ellen stopped.

"El." Dean turned serious. "You know what thought I just had."

"I hope it's not the same one I'm having."

"It could be. With all the stuff we're working on."

"God, Dean, what if they brought us here to kill us? You know. Say we invent something that is really bad. They brought us here to wipe us out and stop it."

At that instant, the guard chuckled.

Both Ellen and Dean looked back at him, then at each other.

"Dean? Why is he laughing?"

"He knows something."

The guard walked ahead of them. "Here we are."

Ellen peeked into the conference room. "It looks empty."

"They'll be here." The guard stepped in first. He motioned his hand to a long table where only two seats were. "Please. Have a seat. Can I get you anything?"

"We're fine." Dean responded and sat down at the same time as Ellen. He watched the guard step to the corner of the room, then Dean's eyes went forward. A distance of about eight feet separated the table where Dean and Ellen sat, from the long table with more chairs. "I feel like we're going to be on trial."

"It's an inquisition."

"Our death."

Again, both Dean and Ellen looked to the guard, who again, laughed.

"Dean? What if we're dead already and we're in some sort of purgatory?"

"That's actually not a bad theory." Dean said. "Like, if we died when we stepped from Joe's office, but don't remember dying."

"We really should go back to our room and right down every single theory we come up with."

After looking at the guard, Dean slumped in his chair toward Ellen so as not to be heard. "Everything we write down, we have to hide in the lining of your purse. Just in case they check it."

Ellen nodded, then they both sat straight up, when from behind the long table before them, a door opened.

Billy stepped out and grinned. He held up a finger, then whispered out. "I feel important."

Ellen just stared. "He looks so much like you. But he has that grin . . ."

"Robbie." Dean said.

"Yeah." Ellen nodded. "He grins like Robbie. Shit."

"What?" After looking at Ellen, Dean looked forward to the group of

men, including Frank that Billy led over to them.

“Stand up.” Billy instructed in a soft voice.

Ellen stood up and waved to Frank who was second from last in what looked like a receiving line.

“Mother. Father.” Billy said. “I’d like to introduce you to the Joint Council. First. General Yokasumi, Prime minister Of Japan.”

An elderly gentle looking Asian man approached first. “Doctors Hayes. Pleasure to meet you.” He shook their hands with a slight bow to him.

“Prime Minister Lexington, European Leader.” Billy introduced the next.

Yet, another man, around sixty, shook their hands and stepped aside.

Billy introduced the next older gentleman, then the next, countries were spewed forth in their introductions. “And you know my father.”

“The introduction is a formality.” Frank grabbed Ellen’s hand and kissed it, squeezed it and let it go. He grabbed Dean’s.

“Don’t kiss me, Frank.” Dean joked.

Frank smiled, shook Dean’s hand and stepped aside.

Dean looked lost. He paid no attention to the remaining man when he was shaking hands with him. He kept looking at Frank who took his seat at the table.

“All right.” Billy spoke up. “I’ll let Gen. Yokasumi take it from here . He’s the speaker for joint council.” Billy side stepped and took a lone chair.

“Please be seated.” Gen. Yokasumi instructed Dean and Ellen. He folded his hands on the table before him. “First and foremost, I would like to say, that is a great pleasure and honor to have you here with us. I am most jealous of President Slagel for the privilege he has of spending time with you, as friends. I hope on such an occasion of remembrance, he shall invite us to bear witness and enjoy some stories.”

Frank gave an agreement nod.

“Now, I am sure you are so full of questions on why you are with us.” Gen. Yokasumi said. “I hope that we can answer. But you must understand, some information can not be shared. We can not take a chance that events get changed.”

Dean nodded. “But bringing us here, even without telling us anything, is taking that chance.”

“We hope.” Gen. Yokasumi continued. “That your past experience with changing time will weigh heavy on any decision you make which will alter the time we live in now. We ask you do not make an attempt to do so. We shelter you for that fear. It took great thought and consideration in bringing you to our time. We have spent a great deal of time preparing for your arrival and

dealing with the sifting of present time information that you receive. We realize there will be error. That our time theorist will not pick up everything you hear. That is a chance we take. When the problem we've brought you here for, first came to light in most seriousness, your son . . ." He pointed to Billy. "Approached us with the possibility of bringing you back to solve this. You are intelligent people. We need not tell you why we had to go back in time to get you."

"We're dead." Ellen spoke up.

Gen. Yokasumi nodded once.

Dean caught a glimpse of the lowered head of Frank.

"When that was, is not important." Gen. Yokasumi explained. "You will understand when we tell you, why we chose the time we pulled you from. A fresh mind, is so vital. Your minds are fresh in that time. Now . . . credit needs to be given. Your son, since late teenage years has been working on a machine long since destroyed. He rebuilt what you call the quantum regressionator. He did so out of bits and pieces of information that remained. His intelligence is to be rewarded. You are here. Our plan is now in motion. The problem was bad enough to begin with, it was worsened some years ago. May I ask, you, Dr. Dean Hayes. Since your arrival, what is different?"

"Everything," Dean said. "I mean we rode in a limo. We're in a hotel."

"Aside from that." He held up his hand. "What don't you see?"

"It's a hard question to answer." Dean replied. "I mean, you're sheltering us."

"Women." Ellen spoke up. "I haven't see another woman."

"And you shall not." Gen. Yokasumi explained. "What few women this world has remaining, live in one area, protected and taken care of. They hold our hopes of this world. But those hopes are bleak. We are a people closing in on extinction. You, Dr. Dean Hayes had the foresight to make note of a situation you saw occurring. Yet, you spoke it to no one, not even your wife. Do you recall what that was?"

"I'm gonna take a guess." Dean said. "I made a notation that the male to female ratios on babies being born were frighteningly bad. We had two female children born to date in Beginnings."

"Exactly."

Dean chuckled. "Simple gene manipulation using in vitro fertilization would have solved the problem. Why wasn't that done. Or was it done?"

"It was done." Gen. Yokasumi stated. "But as a scientist, you know, we needed brain power and medical intelligence this world lacked. We were aborting more children than we were birthing. Plus, nature, and relationships intruded on any successful rate we were trying to achieve to even out the

ratio.”

“Still.” Dean had a bit of argumentativeness to him. “I’m going to assume by what little information you are giving me, that knowing the way things work, it took a while for this world to come together again. When it did, it took a little while for us to recognize the problem. When the problem was recognized, why didn’t isolation occur to a select group of women.”

Billy’s sarcastic snicker rang into the room. He saw all eyes were upon him. “Sorry. But you’re assuming, father, and begging your pardon, but you’re assuming we’re idiots. We’re not. What you are suggesting, was already thought of. Go on, toss something else out and I’ll bet we’ve tried it. I know. I’ve been working on the problem. We would be fine if . . . If . . .” His outburst subsided and Billy went silent.

Gen. Yokasumi decided to explain. “We can’t tell you how it began, but not long ago, an infection spread. It ended up being easily spread through skin to skin contact. It began in an essence as a sexually transmitted disease, and affected only. . .”

Ellen closed her eyes and finished the sentence. “Women. Like undiscovered Chlamydia in the old world.”

“Yes. Only, much more deadly.” Gen. Yokasumi continued. “By the time we defeated this simple infection, it had killed sixty five percent of our female population and left all but one percent of them with the inability to carry a child.” He paused. “Carry. They can produce. That is where you come in.”

Dean got it. “The artificial wombs.”

“You Doctors Hayes are now working on an artificial womb, a production line of sorts. You are also trying to accelerate the entire process. It was your secret experiment and when found out, it was frowned upon heavily. The work was stopped, and everything tucked aside abruptly and forever.”

Dean nodded with attitude and looked to Ellen. “Joe stopped it.”

“He hates when we work on unethical things.” Ellen said. “But he wouldn’t have done so if the community didn’t vote on it.”

“Beginnings caused this.” Dean commented. “The people there are so closed minded.” Doing what was becoming typical, Dean whispered. “Make a mental note of this.”

“Dr. Hayes.” Gen. Yokasumi called their attention.

“Sorry.” Dean apologized. “So . . . you want us to go back and make sure we finish it.”

Gen. Yokasumi shook his head. “We can not take a chance on that. We want you to finish it now.”

Ellen slightly whistled. "Man, the negative feedback we got on it must've be bad. Sir . . ." She looked up to the general. "We still can go back and work on it despite what we do here."

"That is your choice." He told them. "But right now, we need the assurance. Can we have your help. We know that finishing it can take some time. But Young Dr. Hayes is brilliant. Just get him to the point where he can finish it. Do we have your agreement."

Dean held up his hand, pushed his chair back from the table and he dragged Ellen to him. "What do you think?" He spoke in a low voice.

"I think, we should. Think about it. Our lives in Beginnings are on pause. We copy everything we do here, stick them in the lining of my purse, go back . . ."

"Bam." Dean grinned. "We're ahead of the game. We'll change the future, El."

"Who cares. And Dean, it's gonna be the only thing we're working on here. Just like in our relationship, when has that ever happened. The only thing that gets our attention. Think how fast we'll do it."

"So is that a yes?"

"Yes."

Together they squeaked their chairs all the way back to the table.

"All right," Dean said. "We'll do it."

It was almost too dramatic, the sighs of relief.

In oddity, Dean looked at Ellen. "They thought we wouldn't?"

"We are grateful." The general said. "The notes you worked on up until you stopped are here. We have a special lab, with equipment, should you need more, let us know. We plan on mass producing these wombs when you are successful. But there is one more thing." He looked to Frank. "President Slagel, will you do the honors?"

Frank was so silent through the meeting, it seemed odd to hear him speak. "Dean, we want to get a head of things once the womb is finished. We need something that only you can help us with. Where are the embryos?"

"Excuse me?" Dean was confused.

"The embryos, Dean. The ones that were made by the society."

Dean laughed. "You haven't found the embryos?"

"No one really thought about them until recently." Frank said. "And we can't find them."

"Why didn't you ask Henry or . . ." Dean shut up. It was obvious at that moment, if Frank didn't know where the embryos were, then Henry or Joe, the only other people to know the location, were no longer around. "Frank. They're in Beginnings."

“No, Dean.” Frank shook his head. “No they aren’t.”

“Frank. They are. Unless you moved them out.” Dean explained. “Tell me this. How much original stuff is there?”

“Everything,” Frank answered. “Nothing was moved out except people.”

“Then they are there.”

Calmly, Frank spoke. “No. We searched.”

“They’re hid.”

“Dean. We searched everywhere. They aren’t there.”

“Then you just didn’t find them.” Dean grinned. “Man, Henry was brilliant with that one. Now, the question is, are they still viable.”

“If they are there.” Frank said.

“Oh, they’re there.” Dean came back. “Just tell me this. At anytime were all three solar generators down?”

Frank shook his head. “Not to my recollection.”

“Then they are viable. See, after we initially hid them, me, Henry and your father, we began thinking. George was bad, if there was even a remote possibility someone *else* was in Beginnings, we had to keep them hidden where no one would even suspect. Henry came up with it and redesigned the whole new freezer for them. Then we moved them to the safe location after he designed a mock power reserve like what was used when the cryo lab was undiscovered. In the event of power failure, as long as at least one of the generators were running, the case would be powered.”

“Where in Beginnings.” Frank asked.

“I’ll show you.”

Frank looked at Council.

Gen. Yokasumi shook his head. “We can not allow you in Beginnings.”

Dean lifted his hand. “Then you won’t find them. Guarantee. I can tell you. But you won’t find them. And I’ll bet you looked right at them.”

In a circle that eluded whispers, the council joined. After a few seconds Gen. Yokasumi spoke. “We will need to make some preparation in Beginnings, so it will be a few days. Until then. Tomorrow, you begin the other work.”

Curiously, Ellen looked at Dean. “Are they that hidden?”

“No, not at all.” Dean said. “That’s why they were never found.”

“Where?”

Dean just smiled. He opened his mouth to tell her, but stopped. He figured he’d make her suffer and wait to find out. But for Ellen it would be a little bit longer than everyone else, Dean had no intention of telling her the location at all. To him, they were returning to Beginnings time, and the last

thing he wanted was for Ellen to know the really great hiding spot of the embryos. Knowing Ellen, she would be so impressed, she would share it with everyone.



A second time theorist entered the picture when it came to the dinner on Frank's floor. Lancing admitted defeat before the dinner even began, knowing if they broke off into separate conversation, he would be unable to track all that was said. And they did break off.

Adjustments were made to the top floor of the hotel. The far end was a wing designated for Frank's living quarters while he stayed in Freedom City. Security stopped at the entrance to the wing for privacy, and the doors to the suites were left open for movement. They tried to make it as much of a home as possible for him, as was done for the other members of Joint council on *their* floors. Suites were manipulated to be separate rooms; livingroom, diningroom, bedrooms and so forth.

It was a hard mental adaptation for Dean, seeing Frank get all the attention as if he were royalty. Billy assured him that wasn't the case when it came to Frank on a regular basis. Frank was a 'hands on' leader, and lived a reserved life in a small home, where no one waited on him hand and foot as was happening right then and there. The only reason it was occurring was because the rest of the Joint Council were used to living like that. Despite Frank's attempts to obtain a small house for him, Billy, Dean and Ellen, the Joint Council refused and insisted on an 'all under one roof' deal.

Billy noticed the shifting of his father's eyes across the designated sitting room, to the open door. "Quit worrying about them." He instructed Dean.

"I'm not." Dean sipped his coffee.

"Yes, you are. You keep trying to see. Doesn't he, Luke?" Billy asked the time theorist that sat close by.

"Appears to me." Luke replied. He was dressed like Lancing, in a black military style uniform. He was black man, shaved head, younger, and projected a more 'at ease' and 'light' feel than Lancing probably ever could.

"See." Billy nodded. "Quit it. What are they gonna do? Have sex? Lancing is in the room with them."

"They might. You don't know Frank."

Billy snickered. "No. You don't know Frank."

"Maybe not." Dean sat back in the chair. "Not this Frank. And the Frank I knew certainly wasn't presidential material. I still can't see it. Frank discussing foreign trade policies, negotiating, taxes." He shook his head.

“Baffles me.”

“There are no taxes. We really don’t use money like people in the old world used to. We’re basically still the same as Beginnings. Money is used for certain things as established under the Hoi Trade Laws. And well, see the president . . .” Billy looked to Luke. “I want to explain the president in comparison to the old world, pre plague.”

Luke nodded.

Billy continued. “The president isn’t what you remember a president being. It’s more of a group effort amongst the countries that are joined. Each leader specializes in something and pretty much dominates when it comes to that area. Example, Lexington, he’s the trade guy, so when they all sit around, well, he dominates that aspects. Gen. Yokasumi is the speaker, he usually is the peace ambassador should trouble start. Now my father . . .”

“Frank.”

“My father.” Billy corrected. “He deals with defense, military and police action. No matter where the problem occurs, they turn to him for advice.”

“Like the old Frank.” Dean commented. “Except for when he played the action hero.” He saw his son laugh. “What?”

“He still does.” Billy chuckled. “And he doesn’t care what they say. President or not, if there’s trouble around him, my father is right in there doing his thing.”

“He’s the president. That’s absurd.” Dean said.

“That’s why people love him. He never places himself above them. Ever. He’s not afraid to get his hands dirty, or pick up a gun and defend.”

“Frank’s still going?” Dean shook his head. “That’s frightening. Because the Frank I remember, in my time, went into cardiac arrest twice.”

“Then make it three. The third time he nearly died.” Billy hurriedly looked at Luke when Luke cleared his throat. “Sorry.”

Dean slowly looked up. “That’s not good.”

“No. But what are we going to do? Seriously, if he dies as a result of being out there, fighting, isn’t he going down the way he wants. Not sitting behind some desk getting old.”

“You’re right.” Dean lifted his hand. “No argument there. You really care about him.”

“He raised me.”

“Yeah, but you seem to have so much . . .”

“Respect? Love. Yeah. That’s because . . .” Billy turned to Luke. “I know this isn’t allowed, but may I tell him. It could spare me the pain.”

With a total look of seriousness, Luke nodded. “I won’t say anything, go on.”

Billy took a deep breath. "You're not gonna want to hear this. But, not long from the time we took you from, you . . . you developed a drug addiction problem."

Dean's eyes widened. "Me?"

"Yes. I know . . ." Billy held up his hand. "It's hard for you to believe. But you did. You started to get nasty. Really, really nasty. Mood swings and all."

"Me?" Dean was shocked.

"I know this is hard. Uncle Hal had to beat you up many times because you use to go after Mom. Then one day, you snapped." Bully snapped his finger. "And you beat me up. See this . . ." He lifted his hair, exposing the long scar on the side of his neck. "You put me in a vice. Frank had to save me. From then on you stopped being my father."

Dean was speechless. His eyes were wide. "Oh God. I am so sorry. Billy. I am sorry."

"So am I." Billy laughed. "I'm kidding."

"What! What the hell is the matter with you?" Dean yelled.

Billy shrugged and laughed as he stood up. "You're too serious. Wanna drink?"

"No." Dean looked at Luke, "You knew he was going to do that?"

"He asked. It sounded demented . . ."

"Demented. That's it." Dean nodded. "He turned Slagel."

With a glass of whiskey, Billy sat back down at the table. "In all seriousness and no lying. You keep looking at that door, waiting for Mom. Don't, O.K.?" Billy asked softly. "If you only knew what this meant to him, you wouldn't even think twice about letting them spend time. Give this to him, if for nothing else, for me?"

After a slow breath, Dean looked at Billy, then decided he wanted that drink after all, so he took Billy's.

^^^

It would have been the perfect intimate setting had it not been for Lancing standing right by them. But Ellen paid him no mind while her and Frank, sat by candlelight at the long diningroom table. They shared a corner of it. Music played softly in the background.

"So, that's basically it." Ellen's finger ran across the rim of her glass. "That's how I felt."

"My appearance didn't shock you?"

A small shrug was all Ellen did. "Some. But only because you're still so

handsome.” She leaned into him, drawing close. “You still look the same.”

Frank half smiled. “You’re still so beautiful.”

“Did you . . . and you don’t have to answer this. But did you ever find anyone else?”

“Are you serious?” Frank asked. “No.” he shook his head emotionally. “The thought never crossed my mind. When you left me, I died. I died.” He closed his eyes. “I lost all will to live. My heart broke, I couldn’t reason, I couldn’t think, I started drinking again. If it wasn’t for the kids, I swear, I swear I wouldn’t have bounced back.” Frank told her. “I didn’t want to be on this earth without you. You are the love of my life.”

Ellen’s heart ached. Every emotional feeling Frank projected, told Ellen more than his words. She swore she was experiencing the pain she knew he had felt and still was feeling. Slowly she stood up and walked behind him. She wrapped her arms around Frank and placed her lips so close to his ear. “It may have been years, but to me it was literally last night that you told me I was the love of your life. We just had our date, Frank. Last night, less than twenty four hours ago, this body felt your body with mine. We made love.” She closed her eyes tightly and felt him grip onto her arm. Her lips brushed against him as she spoke. “I can still feel your arms around me. Everything that came back last night is so fresh in my mind . . . in my heart. I love you. I love you so much.” She held him tighter. “And any hurt that my leaving caused you, I am so sorry. But I am going to make you a promise. Right here and right now. When I get back, I will make sure, from that moment on, every second. Every single second of my life with you is precious. If I was going to try to make it work before with you, there’s not a doubt in my mind, when I get back, I *will* make it work with you.” Against her chest, Ellen felt the falling of Frank’s back in an emotional sigh he tried to keep silent. “But for right now, in this time, right here for you. If you want . . . anything . . . anything you want from me, you tell me. I’ll give it to you. I’m here.”

“This . . .” Frank’s voice broke up and he cleared his throat. “This is all I need. Having you here with me again. Feeling this again. Just . . . talking to *you* El. If I die tomorrow, I can say, I finally will die happy.”

“Hold me Frank. Can you? Just standup and hold me. I can use that.”

“Not as much as I can.” Frank stood up.

As Ellen backed away, she glanced her eyes at Lancing.

Lancing stepped back. “I am very sorry that you can not share this moment alone. I am. Know that I feel very intrusive. right now.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Ellen said softly. “I don’t even see you. All I see . . .” She looked up to Frank. “Is him.”

Frank knew everything seemed so magnified. The moment he was

Druga-Johnston/The Aragon Window

having with Ellen. Her return. Perhaps the next day he'd be better. That it would breed less anxiety and less emotions, and he would be able to fully enjoy her return without getting overwhelmed. But for the moment, in that room, he was just going to enjoy the hold he placed around Ellen.

^^^

'My, God, look at all this stuff.' Dean thought, laying on his stomach on the bed, the contents of Ellen's huge purse spread before him. *'A diaper, two hair brushes . . .'*

"Did you hear me?" Ellen called out from the bathroom.

"Yep. Wrote it down." Just to be sure, Dean looked at his notes to his right. He read them to Ellen. "Time machine gets destroyed. Tell Jason to make another back up and hide it."

"Good." There was a splashing water sound that came from the bathroom. "We have to really listen to what they say. They're gonna let a lot more slip by than they think."

"I agree." Dean went back to rummaging through her stuff. He lifted a monstrous key chain with one single lone key. He shook his head. *'Three tubes of lipstick, a notepad, four pens, crayons . . .'*

"Wow, this is like the biggest tub." Ellen yelled from the bathroom. "Wanna join me."

"Yeah, right, Ellen. I believe that." Dean looked back down to the bed. *'Robbie's Fly Boy pin, a jam sandwich?'* he snickered. *'Feminine protection? Ellen, you had a hysterectomy, you don't even get a period. A billfold? Where did you get this from. It looks old.'* Unsnapping it, Dean was immediately greeted with Ellen's old world Drivers license. Upon opening the billfold more, an entire line of credit cards each in their individual pockets of plastic, flew out at him in a long strand. *'Macy's, Sears, Sax, Visa, my God Ellen are you losing it or . . . wait.'* Dean sat up. "Shit." He looked. *'Four Danny Dollar cards?'*

"Dean, did you hear me?" Ellen stepped from the bathroom.

"Yeah." He spoke in a daze.

"No you . . ." Ellen shrieked.

"What?"

"You went in my purse, you asshole." She flew to the bed and started to gather up the items. "What an invasion of privacy."

"And stealing my Danny Dollar card isn't."

"You're my husband, I'm allowed."

"Then I'm allowed in your purse."

"No. No-no." Ellen shook her head, tossing everything in. "See, this is

why you never had a girlfriend in the old world. You are so relationship ignorant. My purse. My privacy. You never go into a woman's purse and look at her stuff."

"And Ellen, that is exactly what it is. Stuff. What did you do, just toss things in there to make it look full?"

"Yes." She zipped it shut.

"And who's Danny Dollar Cards are they. I know one is yours."

"And yours, Robbie's and Frank."

"There is something wrong with you."

"No. Dean, there is something wrong with you going in my purse."

"I'll have you know . . ." Dean defended. "I went in to see how we can make room for all these notes and things we plan to take back."

"I would have found the room. And why weren't you paying attention to me."

"You were in the bathroom again. It's hard to hear you. Why were you taking another bath."

"They have little bars of soap."

"Swell. Now, what did you say?" Dean asked.

"That you died before me."

Curiously, Dean looked at her. "Why do you say that." He pulled his notebook forward.

"Just Frank's whole demeanor. He implied it. And that you took a . . . a . . . stroke."

"Wow, and Lancing let him tell me that."

"Um, yeah. It slipped." Ellen nodded. "So make a note to watch your blood pressure."

"Thanks." Dean wrote down. "I also theorized that there was some sort of attack on Beginnings. And that would explain our deaths along with the destruction of the time machine. Think about it. We die, Billy, a teenager becomes obsessed with our death and wanting to bring us back."

Ellen smiled as she sat on the bed. "Good one."

"I thought so too." Dean returned to laying down with his notes.

Ellen tried to peek. "What do you have written down for Henry?"

"I think he defected to the society."

"I didn't even think of that. I assumed he was dead."

"Really?" Dean asked. "Maybe he is. But how do you think he died."

"He didn't defect. Not Henry. I think he committed suicide."

Dean smiled and grabbed the pen. That is really a good guess. I hate mine now." Looking up he noticed Ellen holding her stomach. "What's wrong."

"Oh, the lamb isn't sitting right with me. I'm a bit nauseous."

"I told you not to eat so much of it. You don't listen. Suffer."

Ellen gasped. "And to think I was going to put aside my illness and make love to you. Forget it now, mister, there's no way I'm gonna chance vomiting after the moving around."

"Yeah right, El. You can't even think about me. You're so wrapped up in President Slagel."

"That's because he's so amazing."

"It's Frank, El."

"Yeah." Ellen lowered to her side. "But he's different. He's grown up. He's smart, strong, gentle, handsome, soft spoken . . ."

"Old."

"Dean." She smacked him on the head.

"No, El. He's old. Don't you see it?"

"No." She shook her head. "Dean you would have felt so sorry for him. I mean, listening to him talk and all. I didn't want to leave him. It's not a sex thing, it was a friendship thing."

"Why did you leave?"

"I think you know." She winked.

"Lancing wouldn't let you."

"Nope. Said if I stayed with him, *he* would have to stay up all night and he wasn't in the mood for that."

"And you thought I was gonna buy you not staying with him because of me." Dean shook his head.

"Dean. Being serious for a second. Talk to Frank. You haven't, I know I've been hogging him, but find time to talk to him. He really missed you too. And I'm also curious if you do the same thing."

"What do you mean?" He asked as he rolled do his side.

"You find him pulling things from you. You find yourself saying things to him that he wants to hear. Like I did. And, strangely enough, I wasn't saying them just to say them. I felt compelled to say them because I felt like maybe I never told him before I died."

Dean nodded. "If you think about it, that really makes sense. I mean, how often do we tell people we care about how we feel? We get wrapped up in our day to day living, and we never get the chance."

"Well, incase I didn't get a chance today. Even though you snoop in my purse . . ." Ellen smiled. "I'm glad you're a part of my life, Dean. I love you."

Dean smiled and looked up to her.

"Well?" Ellen asked.

Laughing Dean returned to his notes. "Ti just will sound too contrived if

Druga-Johnston/The Aragon Window

I say it now. I'll wait until I'm not forced."

The loud 'whap' was followed by a loud Dean 'ow' when Ellen pummeled him with her purse.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Good morning Dr. Hayes. This is your wake up call.”

Dean only grumbled and then blindly placed the phone back on the receiver. He blinked his eyes, and took a second to let the reality sink in that he was still twenty-two years in the future. He rubbed his forehead against the pillow, then lifted himself to his elbows. “El.” He turned his head.

Empty.

“El.” He called out then peered to the bathroom where she had been hanging out every chance they had in the room. The door was open and he could smell the humidity of a shower. “She’s going to be the cleanest person in the world when we leave.” Flinging the covers off, Dean slowly got out of bed. Ellen was no where to be found. He looked around for the tell tale item. The purse. If he didn’t see it, he knew Ellen had trotted off somewhere. But it sat on the dresser, partially opened.

Never had he known Ellen to be so excited about starting work, and she had to be, she was up, showered and gone, way before the normal Ellen even rolled over to shut off the alarm.

Figuring, Ellen was off getting coffee. Dean decided he’d finally check out how great that shower was in the bathroom, and use some of that little soap. Ellen would be back by the time he was finished.

Dean heard the call of his name as his hand turned off the shower water. “Billy. Is that you.”

“Yeah.” Billy said from the suite.

“I’ll be out in a minute.” Dean grabbed a towel.

“Just don’t dart out naked. Luke is standing right by the door. Unless you’re . . . you’re a . . .”

“I’m a what?” Dean asked as he stepped out of the bathroom.

Billy nearly jumped from his skin as he stood near Ellen’s dresser staring down to it. “Unless you’re an exhibitionist.”

“What’s wrong.” Dean ran his fingers through his wet hair. “What are you looking at?”

“Mom’s purse. Big and purple.”

“Yes, I see you’re observant, like Frank.”

Billy rolled his eyes. “Does she . . . does she always leave it behind?”

“Hard to say.” Dean picked up the brush. “Seeing how in our time she just got it. It’s a new toy. I’m sure she’ll stop carrying it around. I hope. Or

it's gonna start to smell."

"Smell?" Billy laughed.

"She has a jam sandwich in there." Dean peeked around Billy. "Morning Luke."

Luke who stood flush against the door lifted a hand in a wave.

"Where's your mother?" Dean asked as he gathered his clothes.

"She's with my father."

"Frank."

"My father. That's why I'm here. You want breakfast before we work."

"Why didn't she wake me. Did you talk to her?"

Billy shrugged. "She probably just wanted to have a private breakfast with dad."

"Swell." Dean held his clothes. "I'll be right out, then we'll go there."

"O.K." Billy nodded, watched Dean slip into the bathroom, then Billy turned and looked with curiosity at the purse.

^^^

Along with her giggles, Ellen wiped the crumps from her lips, and tossed the end of her toast on to her plate. "You seem so much better today. More relaxed." She said to Frank.

"Oh, I am." He relaxed at the table over remnants of their breakfast. "I'm not as nervous. It was very overwhelming," Frank picked up his coffee.

"You're talking more."

"As much as we can. We're constricted to the point that you came here."

"But you're going way back. Pre plague."

"There's a reason for that. It's hard to determine when you get really close to that date, what happened right before or what happened right after. So I figure I'll just steer clear of most of that year."

"That was a big year. The year we discovered Hal." From her coffee Ellen looked up. "Frank?"

Lancing intervened. "He can't answer that."

"Is Hal alive?" Ellen asked.

"He can't answer that."

"Oh." She grunted at Lancing. "What about Robbie . . . Danny . . . Jenny . . . My brother . . ."

"Dr. Hayes." Lancing interceded. "Please don't place the president in a position where he can not answer you."

Ellen rolled her eyes and returned to Frank. "How did you pick the day

to come and get us.”

“You heard the general. Fresh in your mind.”

“No.” Ellen shook her head. “That exact date.”

“Well, I remembered the fight in the office. And I remembered you and Dean getting kicked out. That probably was the only date in my mind around that time period where I knew precisely what hour it was.”

“Hey, Frank. Who’s the vice president?”

Frank’s mouth opened, he looked at Lancing who shook his head, then Frank said nothing.

“Is there one?” Ellen asked.

“Yes.” Frank answered.

“Where is he?”

“East.” Frank grabbed his coffee.

“Who is he?”

“You asked that.”

“You didn’t answer.”

“I’m not allowed.”

Ellen grinned. “It’s someone I know, huh?” She turned around to Lancing. “You may not let him give me a name, but you all but said it was someone I know.”

“I did not.” Lancing stated.

“You did.” Ellen argued. “If I didn’t know the person you would tell me. Wouldn’t you.”

Lancing huffed a breath out.

“Case closed.” Ellen said. “Who is he.”

In defeat, Lancing held out his hand to Frank. “Tell her. But Dr. Hayes, if you open your mouth that I committed a blunder, I could lose my job.”

Pretending there was a zipper over her mouth, Ellen pulled it. “Frank?”

“Hal.”

“Hal!” Ellen shrieked

Lancing made a loud ‘shh’.

“Sorry.” Ellen smiled. “But is that allowed?”

“I guess so.” Frank stated.

“Oh, I’m so proud of both of you. Hey, if you quit or something happens, at least they don’t have to change the letter head.”

Lancing was appalled. “That is a terrible remark to make.”

“You know . . .” Ellen spun her head over her shoulder. “I know you must eavesdrop, but I don’t believe it’s your job to interject personal comments.”

“El” Frank shook his head. “Leave him alone.”

“Thank you, Sir.” Lancing said.

“Hey, Frank.” Ellen spoke with some enthusiasm. “Guess what me and Dean were doing right before the meeting in Joe’s office. Wait. You may know.” She paused to think. “Maybe not. You probably found out, but you may not have know it was the exact same day.”

“You’re rambling.”

“Sorry.” Ellen smiled. “We just removed Bev’s uterus from her corpse.” She peered over her shoulder to Lancing’s gasp. “There he goes again. Anyhow, we pulled it to see who the baby’s father was. Wasn’t that brilliant. Anyhow, not like we aren’t gonna go back and find out, but who is it?”

“Bev’s baby’s father?” Frank saw Lancing shake his head.

“Yeah. Who?” Ellen repeated the question.

Frank looked past Ellen. “Dean.”

Ellen screamed.

“What?” Frank quickly looked at her.

“Dean’s the father?” Ellen asked with panic.

“That wasn’t an answer. Dean’s here.” Frank pointed.

“Oh.” Ellen grabbed her chest. “Morning.” Dean kissed Ellen on the cheek. “Morning, Frank.” With a loud thump Dean dropped Ellen’s purse to her lap. “You left that behind. Billy said we’re going straight to the lab.”

“Thanks.” Ellen set it on the floor.

Billy walked in. “Morning. How was the private breakfast.”

“Good.” Ellen smiled. “Dean are you eating?”

“Nah.” He stood while he poured a cup of coffee. “Actually, I’m anxious to get started.”

Frank looked up to Dean. “Are you sure. They didn’t make arrangements to take you to lunch until midday.”

“Um . . .” Dean was taken aback by Frank’s concern over his eating. It was too odd. “Um, I’ll grab this.” He picked a piece of toast up. “Ready, El?”

“Yes.” She stood up. “Billy.”

“In a second.” He tossed eggs and bacon onto to a slice of toast to make a sandwich.

“Frank? Will we see you at lunch?” Ellen asked.

“No.” Frank sadly answered. “I have an emergency that I have to take care of. I probably won’t see you until tonight, or early tomorrow morning at breakfast.”

“Oh, then.” Ellen walked over and kissed him on the cheek. “Be careful.” She stepped back and stopped.

Frank peered from his seat to her. “Have a good day.”

“No, Frank. I said . . . be careful.”

A slight smile graced Frank's face. "Always."

Ellen grinned and walked to the door and out with Dean.

Lancing stood and waited on Billy. "Dr. Hayes?"

Shoving food on his mouth, Billy darted around the table. "Hold on I'm . . ." He stopped.

"What's wrong?" Frank asked.

Billy bent down to the floor and smiled. "She forgot her purse again."

"Better take that to her." Frank shifted his eyes to Lancing.

"Yes. But better, yet . . ." Billy with a grin tossed it to Lancing. "I'll let you hand it to my mother. Thanks." He stood at the door. "Lancing, let's go."

Looking at the bag, Lancing, confused raised his eyes to Frank. "Honestly sir, there wouldn't have been a problem for Dr. Hayes to give this to his mother." Lancing stated as he followed Billy.

"I know." Frank said standing up. "But it works for you."

Lancing froze in his stride out looked back at the odd joking remark from the president, and walked back out.

^^^

Ellen had to do a double take when they stepped into the special lab. "This looks like the cryo."

"That was our goal." Billy explained. "We wanted you to feel comfortable when you work."

"Is this your lab, Bill?" Dean asked.

Billy snickered. "Um, no. Hardly. Mines better. I also have a staff."

"If your lab is better. Why are we working here?" Dean questioned.

"Because there is stuff there they don't want you to see." Billy lifted a stack of folders. "Here are your notes from the artificial wombs and acceleration process."

Dean immediately grabbed the bottom folder and opened it to the end. "Shit. We stopped two weeks from the time they took us."

Ellen peered over Dean's shoulder. "Look what you wrote Dean. Work stopped by order of Joe."

"This is so weird. Usually we wouldn't stop. Bet me we didn't."

"You're right." Ellen said then looked to Billy. "Did you check around for hidden notes?"

"Wouldn't have mattered." Dean spoke before Billy could. "Like other things we aren't allowed to work on, it would have been coded. Billy wouldn't have had a clue."

“Dean.” Ellen had a thought. “Do you suppose, now think about this. Do you think at the point we stopped that we actually knew we had gone to the future, knew we stopped it, and didn’t code it, because we knew if we coded it no one would find it.”

“Good thought. Bill, did you check?” Dean asked.

Answering a question his mother already asked, Billy nodded. “Yes.”

Dean glanced at Ellen. “Then when we stopped working on it per Joe, we obviously hadn’t gone to the future, because had we, we wouldn’t have stopped or at the very least wouldn’t have coded it.”

“That’s what I was saying.”

“So we coded it.” Dean said then looked at Billy and Lancing who looked lost. “Our little means of communicating. Don’t mind us.” Dean grabbed the folder. “We were where?”

“We ran into a delay. So we paused everything. We just started to create that new womb hoping to get a better attachment.” Ellen told him. “And test the batch of acceleration you copied from the society embryos. We were gonna inject it into the rabbits and the baby we made.”

“We’re going to have to construct the wombs and the acceleration all over again.”

“And embryos. So we need animals.”

Dean glanced at Billy. “Are all the materials I have listed here, available.”

“We got them ready.” Billy answered.

“We are going to need to fertilize.” Dean explained.

“I’m one step ahead of you.” Billy walked over to a long silver freezer. “When we got approval to do this, I started in vitro. I have about sixty various embryos frozen.”

Dean nodded. “Good. Fresh would be better, we may have problems getting the frozen to attach, but it will be worth a shot. Let’s start. El, we have the recipe, let’s start constructing.”

“Eight?” Ellen asked.

“Eight.” Dean replied.

“Wait.” Billy joined in. “Are you going by what you have here.” He pointed to the file. “This is the last batch you were getting ready to construct.”

“Yes.” Dean said.

“Well, I followed these recipes exactly. On both the womb seventeen and the acceleration. They didn’t work.” Billy walked a bit and lifted a thick folder. “Here. Here are my notes on what went wrong.”

“I don’t need that.” Dean pushed the folder aside. “El, start getting everything . . .”

"Hello." Billy interrupted. "It's a waste of time. I tried this."

"I understand." Dean stayed calm. "You tried *this*." He pointed to the outline in the notes.

"Yes. That's what I'm saying. Isn't that the next step you were taking?"

"Oh, without a doubt." Dean gave a motion of his head to Ellen.

"Billy?" Ellen questioned. "Where are the supplies?"

"In the back." Billy pointed, then in Dean fashion he ran his hand through his own hair. "So you're doubting that I did it correctly."

"No, I'm saying you followed it correctly, but you did it wrong."

Billy huffed out his feeling of being insulted. "So you're saying I screwed up."

"No, I'm not." Dean shook his head. "The reason it didn't work is because, first, you followed this, second, you did it. You're not me."

"Me. You. Shouldn't make a difference." Billy drew into an arguing mode. "Your level seven artificial womb experiment failed. Why can't you admit that? Why do you act like you know everything? I followed your work. I read your notes. I did everything written down."

"And that . . ." Dean held up a finger. "Is why it didn't work. I do know everything Bill, when it comes to my work. What is written here . . ." Dean tapped hard to his notes. "Is never a full interpretation of what's up here." He brought his finger to his temple and his voice rose some in anger. "There are things missing. I know what they are. I know what I left out. And if you followed my specifications written, then you followed it all wrong. If my experiments are going to be labeled a failure then *I* will label them a failure. Not you! They are only *my* experiments when *my* hands and mind create them! Not anyone else. Not even my son." Dean stepped back. "Excuse me. I have to help El."

Letting out a breath, hand resting on the back of his head, Billy slowly swayed his head to the right. He caught a lost looking Lancing. "Don't worry. Hopefully, we won't argue like this all the time." He looked to the back where Dean and Ellen were and whispered. "Hopefully."

^^^

The changing of the time guard, and Lancing couldn't have been happier.

"How was lunch?" Luke asked in the doorway of the lab.

"Tasted good. Everything else is sitting badly." Lancing gave a motion of his head into the lab.

"That bad?"

"Put it this way. Remember the days of basic training. Carrying seventy five pound packs. Trudging in hot humid weather for thirty some miles."

"Yeah."

"I'd gladly exchange for those days again." He gave a slap to Luke's back. "See you at the dinner switch."

Looking baffled, Luke walked into the lab.

"He's exaggerating." Ellen spoke passing Luke. "Lancing's just a pissy man. Dean, I'm moving forward to the next step."

At that instant, Dean was peering over Billy's shoulder. "Good." He told him and walked to El. "How are you hitting the next step already?"

"Dean, please. Are we doing other things? No." Ellen answered. "No blood work. No clinic work. No chasing Billy around Beginnings because he's wandered off from school."

"No outside interference," Dean added.

Billy stretched his arms and stepped away from his work space. "Boy, you guys were like the only ones back in the old days, weren't you?"

"We worked like dogs." Ellen said. "Never seemed to have a day off. Do you get those here?"

"Days off." Billy pulled up a stool. "Oh, sure. We work hard. But there's a lot more people now. Or at least a lot more communicating with one another."

"I'd love to see more of this time." Ellen commented as she worked. "It seems a great place to live."

"Would you?" Billy asked.

"Would I what?" Ellen questioned. "Live here?"

"Yes. Would you stay if you had the opportunity."

"Oh, Billy." Ellen wisped out. "I have to go back. I don't want to miss too much of your lives."

"It was hypothetical." Billy said. "But here's another one. If you got stuck here, and something happened that you couldn't go back right away, would you consider being with my father."

Ellen snickered. "I am with your father."

"Not him." Billy pointed to Dean.

"Him?" Dean questioned. "I'm your father."

"I'm talking about Frank." Billy explained. "Would you, mom? Be like a couple with him?"

"Oh my God." Dean exclaimed. "You aren't sending us back."

"Yeah, we are. This is out of curiosity." Billy, again, looked at Ellen. "Would you do that for him?"

"No." Ellen said. "I'd do it for both of us."

Druga-Johnston/The Aragon Window

“That’s good to hear. But . . .” Billy stood up. “Rest assured, there is nothing wrong with the Aragon window.”

Out of the blue Billy’s conversation was, and to Dean it was an odd one to pull out of thin air. Billy suddenly talking about the Aragon Window not working, and Ellen maybe staying, sent Dean immediately into thought, and in his mind he wrote diligently, those mental notes.

^^^

‘So tell us how you and President Slagel met.’ Gen. Yokasumi asked of Ellen.
‘My God, how long you two were together.’ Another Joint Council member commented.

‘What was he like in the college years?’

‘Tell us about his early days in Beginnings when he was in security.’

‘Did young Dr. Hayes exaggerate or did President Slagel really do all those things?’

Totally aggravated at remembering the bombarding questions thrown at Ellen, Dean tossed a french fry down to his plate that set on the coffee table by the sofa in his suite. He lifted the remote control and turned off the movie he had just started to watch. Lifting his notebook, he grabbed his hamburger and took a bite. He was a bit disgusted seeing how at the dinner, Joint Council invited him and Ellen to, they were having lobster. Dean knew he’d be paying for the burger later that night, but it tasted so good, to him it would be worth it. However, he’d rather be paying for lobster. But the lobster came with another price aside from a wayward digestive system. It came with hours of conversation that revolved around the Frank in the Beginnings Dean was still accustomed to.

Placing down his burger, while still chewing, Dean flipped back a page in the note book to the morning notes he and Ellen took. He tore it out and started to do that little ‘football’ fold, so it would slip with ease into the lining of her purse.

Folded, Dean dated the outside. He wanted to put it in Ellen’s purse, but it was one of those times she had taken it. Ready to zone back out while finishing his dinner, Dean grabbed the remote to watch the old movie he actually was going to enjoy. Finger getting ready to press, reclining comfortably on the couch, Dean looked back when he heard the door to the suite open.

“Hey.” He said to Ellen. “You’re back early.”

“I’m heading back down for desert and after dinner drinks.”

“Swell.” Dean mumbled.

“Do you want to come?”

“No.”

Ellen walked closer. “Room service?” She giggled then swiped his feet off the couch to make room. “You ordered room service.” She lifted the burger. “Man, you must have a thing about ordering a hamburger and french fries from room service.”

“Funny you should say that.” Dean said. “It was the only thing I ever ordered when I stayed in hotels. Why did you know that? Did I tell you?”

“Dean.” Ellen snickered. “That’s right, you don’t know. You really weren’t there. When we had our little afternoon affair right before the plague. You ordered hamburgers and french fries.”

“I wish I remembered that.”

“I told you I’ll rekindle that with you.”

Dean only grumbled slightly.

“You do know, you’ll pay tonight for eating that.”

“I know. But it’s so good. Try it.”

Ellen shrugged and took a small bite. “Oh, my God.” She savored each chew. “This is better than the lobster.”

“Really?”

“No.” She smiled. “But I see you feel better. How’s the headache?”

“Gone. Actually, it never was.”

“I kind of figured that.” Ellen stated. “I thought with everything going on, you just wanted to hang back in the peace and quiet and try to absorb it all in.”

“You got it.”

“That and try to take advantage of what we don’t have at home?” Ellen motioned her hand to the room service food.

“Yep.” Dean raised his eyebrows. “Only, part of that I’m not getting.”

Confused, Ellen looked at him.

“Let me clarify. There’s something else I don’t have at home that I wanted to take advantage of. Time with you. Alone time. Hating to say it, El, even though I know why we’re here, a part of me is looking at it as a first ever vacation with my wife.”

“I’m here, Dean.”

Dean chuckled and shook his head. “In the future, yeah. But where. Last night you huddle with Frank. Tonight, you were going on and on with the joint council.”

“You could have been there tonight.”

“For what?” The strain in Dean’s voice was evident. “To talk about Frank. Frank this. Frank that. You and Frank.”

“You’re jealous.”

"Damn right I am. Don't you see it?" Dean questioned. "No, you don't. Why would you. Everything that has nothing to do with work, evolves around you. You and Frank.. That is getting so much attention."

"It'll stop. I'm new here. I'm a novelty."

"And what about me?" Dean asked. "I just arrived as well. Yet, no one cares what I did pre plague. And mind you, my own flesh and blood worships, and that's putting it mildly, worships Frank. Frank? Billy hated Frank. Billy treats me like an intrusion. Which leads me to ask, what the hell I ever did to him that left him so sour about me."

"You died on him."

"Exactly. And quite early in his life too." Dean stated. "I had to have. He doesn't even know me. You, you must have lived years beyond me."

"Did you write that down. You don't want to forget that theory."

Dean jolted a quick look to Ellen. "Yeah. I'm bitching here, El. Stay with me."

"Dean, I'm sorry you feel left out. I promise you, I won't forget you while we're here." She kissed him on the cheek. "Hey. How about this. How about . . . I go back down to the diningroom, tell them you just have the worst migraine, steal the desert and we'll share that over coffee while we watch whatever you were getting ready to."

"Wizard of Oz."

"Excuse me?" Ellen asked.

"I was watching Wizard of Oz. After your initial 'were not in Kansas anymore', I started thinking that there are some similarities."

"Feeling like Dorothy?" Ellen joked.

"No, you're Dorothy, everyone paying attention to you. I'm Toto the little mutt, running around yapping, annoying and lost."

Laughing, Ellen leaned into Dean. "I'll be right back." Just as she went to kiss him she saw his notes. "What's this?"

"Theories."

Oddly, Ellen lifted the notebook. "I'm not understanding this. January 19th?"

"Think. The last future trip we made was to when?"

"January 19th."

"The exact January coming up in two months. Now, I distinctively remember seeing Hal in that future. You didn't. I did, but I didn't have a clue who he was. Just theorizing that, what if the plague we beat isn't the one that strikes on January 19th. Maybe fate tosses another one at us."

"That's a scary thought. And what is this one."

"Ah." Dean nodded. "The Forrest Caceres theory. I was just writing

that down when I paused to watch Dorothy.”

“Wanna tell me about it?”

“Sure. But you may not want to hear it.”

“I’m gonna read it anyhow. Try me.”

“O.K.” Dean paused to shove another fry in his mouth. He dusted off his hands. “When we went back in time to get Forrest. How did we pull that off without effecting history too much.”

“Easy. He died in an explosion. There were no remains to trace, no one was the wiser . . .” Ellen’s eyes widened. “Oh, my God.”

“I think you got it. What if . . . now this is just a theory. What if something happened to us right after we left Joe’s office.”

“No.” Ellen shook her head. “The notes on the embryos, they go two weeks ahead.”

“Two theories on that.” Dean held up his hand. “They screwed up and got us too soon or . . . look at Billy’s handwriting. It’s exactly like mine. Nothing in the two weeks following the meeting at Joe’s is all that pertinent.”

“Billy filled in the blanks?”

“Yes. Possibly.”

“Nah. I’ll argue with you on that. I read the notes. You put too much of yourself into them. Billy doesn’t have your knack at all. I’ve known you a lot of years, I don’t have the knack to write down what you would. They could have got us early like you said, getting us two weeks early wouldn’t have made that big of a Ripple.”

“Nope.” Dean shook his head.

“Can I ask what made you think of this?”

“Sure. Billy. Billy asking you if you ended up staying, would you be with Frank.”

“Dean.” Ellen chuckled his name. “It was purely hypothetical.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. But . . .” He lifted a finger. “I think we should brace ourselves for the very real possibility, that, like Forrest, something happened to us twenty-two years ago, *and* like Forrest, they have no intentions of sending us back.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The window between the front and back seats of the limousine was down. During the trip, Lancing drove, while Luke did more of the ear watching needed to complete his tasks as a time theorists.

"I wanted this to be more private." Frank said to Dean and Ellen. "Me and Bill thought a private trip to Beginnings was better."

"What about them?" Dean pointed.

"Dean, come on." Frank smiled. "They have to be here. I just hope you aren't uneasy with lack of security."

Ellen giggled. "Frank, please we have you."

Dean leaned to Ellen whispering. "Before you secure yourself in that, keep in mind he's sixty-two years old."

Ellen smacked Dean's leg and smiled at Frank.

"We had to make some preparations to Beginnings." Frank explained. "Covering dates and so forth. I hope this trip doesn't set you too far behind in your work."

Dean shook his head. "Nah. Not as much as the day we lost when the fluid level dropped in the bin of wombs." he shrugged. "How that happened, I don't know. Anyhow, we're doing good. We've been here, what, four days? The wombs should be prepped enough to implant tomorrow."

"Sir." Luke peered to the backseat. "We're pulling up to the front gate."

Frank nodded and looked at Billy.

Ellen grabbed her stomach. "Why am I nervous about seeing home?"

"Because it's not the home you remember." Frank answered. "Not at all."

^^^

"Listen." Dean cupped Ellen's chin and turned her to look at him. "Are you listening?"

"I'm just looking around at . . ."

"Look on your tour. Right now, I'm getting the embryos with Frank. I'll meet you back here in a few minutes." Dean saw Ellen's eyes moving. "El?"

"O.K., God, Dean, how hard is this to understand. Go."

"I'm going. Billy will be right over." Kissing Ellen on the cheek, Dean looked at Luke who would stay with Ellen, and he walked off in the direction of Frank and Billy.

Pulling his hand from his mouth, lips closed tight, Frank nodded.

"You O.K.?" Billy asked.

"Fine." Frank spoke muffled.

"Are you sure. I can do this with . . ."

"No, I'm good."

"All right. I have it on me." With a slight rattling noise, Billy put a bottle back in his pocket and looked up when Lancing cleared his throat.

Dean stood there. "What did he just take?" he asked.

"Excuse me?" Billy played dumb.

Extending his hand, Dean gave a pat to Billy's pocket, heard the rattle, then looked up to Frank. "Are you taking Nitro?"

Frank quickly shifted his eyes to Billy.

"I'm not a dumb man." Dean said. "I watched you slip a pill under your tongue. Why are you taking Nitro, Frank." Dean turned to Billy. "Is his heart that bad?"

After getting approval from Lancing, Billy answered. "Not really. Sometimes we have to watch. Dad's had a stressful week with you and mom coming back. He's got some tightness."

Dean reached for Frank's wrist.

"Dean." Frank said stern pulling his arm back. "I'm fine. I get like this when I come back here. When you reach my age, things get a little bit more emotional to you, that's all. I'm fine. Don't check on me like a doctor. The last thing I want is for El to see. All right?"

"I understand." Dean nodded. "Bill? Your mother's waiting."

"I'm going." Looking at Frank once more, Billy walked away.

"Now the moment you've been waiting twenty-two years for." Dean stated. "The embryos."

"Dean." Frank spoke calm. "For as much as I want to believe they are here. I have to tell you, they aren't here."

Dean grinned.

^^^

It was something Dean hadn't heard out of Frank since they arrived in the future. A hearty laugh. But Frank released one the second they walked into the social hall.

"Dean. They aren't here."

"They are." Dean walked around the bar. He chuckled at Sam the mannequin that was still there. "Come here, Frank."

Shrugging, Frank followed. He saw Dean stand before the long cooler.

“Dean.” He lifted the lid. “Empty. And . . .” Frank bent down. “Nothing underneath. Or behind. We checked.”

“They’re in this cooler.”

Frank peeked inside. “Where.” He reached inside and banged his hand around. “Nothing.”

Dean smiled. “Excuse me.” He lowered the lid.

“Maybe you’re wrong.” Frank said.

“Doubtful. It’s only been a few days to me since I checked on them.”

Dean ran his hand on the side of the freezer then extended it to the corner of the back. A clicking sound preluded the opening of the top side panel no wider than three inches. There was a hiss, then an emergence of steam. “Wow, it’s been awhile since this was opened. Look at the frost.”

“Oh, my God.”

Dean reached inside and lifted a small black case. “Here’s twenty-five. They layer all the way down. Five this side, five on the others.”

“We checked this whole thing out.”

“I told you, you missed them.”

“How many times people were right on top of them. All those years.”

“Brilliancy on Henry’s part.” Dean replaced the case. “Let’s leave them in here until this tour is over. It’s pretty warm outside. What is it, July?”

Still staring in awe, Frank shook his head. “January.”

Dean snapped a view to Frank.

Lancing grumbled.

“Sorry.” Frank shrugged. “It slipped.”

“January.” Dean said in surprise. “Wow, talk about another brilliant guess on Henry’s part. He predicted the weather would get like this.”

“And we all made fun of him.” Frank said.

“Not anymore.” Dean looked at Lancing who looked so perturbed. “Will you stop that? He made an error. Big deal. He told me what month it is. How in the world will that effect the future by letting me know that?”

“Because you’ll treat this Henry with more respect in the meteorological field.” Lancing explained. “Listen to his weather predictions more, therefore you could send him into another career.”

Dean snickered and looked at Frank. “Respect Henry more? Listen to him.” He gave a motion of his head to Lancing. “He never met Henry, did he?”



Emptiness filled Ellen with each step through Beginnings she took. It

was like a museum tour. Only it hadn't been that long to her, since she was there. Not a soul on the streets. No faint industrial sounds, no children laughing, gunshots from security training in the distance. Nothing.

The main street was nicely set up with signs of explanation what each building was for. There were a couple warehouses missing. They were the empty ones from what she remembered. Ellen supposed since they were never used in the Beginnings she knew, they tore them down for room.

The clinic bred the coldest reality. A glass wall was placed over the open lab door. Everything looked set up as if her and Dean had just left it. Tourist could peek in. The tourist attraction was geared toward the very early life in Beginnings, even before numerous survivors were brought in. At least that was what containment indicated.

Lost was what she felt. Lost in a town she had spent eight years of her life in. It didn't seem as much a nightmare until she stopped at the 'Joe Park' by herself. Suggested by Joe, built by Henry, the little square section became a haven for a lot of people in Beginnings, along with an obscure way to walk. Ellen could never figure that out. They'd stroll around and around the little winding path, when if they wanted exercise, they had a huge Beginnings to roam around. They also flocked there, fighting over the bench and the wall by the flagpole as lunch spots when the weather was nice.

The bench was still there, and so was the wall. The flag pole had been moved to the right, and perched into a smaller concrete stand, because the huge three foot wall that mounted the flag before was deserving of something better. And *that* was what caused Ellen to stop. *That* was what broke her heart.

Dean's whispering voice slipped to her, jolting her slightly but not much. "Oh my God."

Ellen swallowed. "He's gone, Dean. He's really gone."

"This is painful." He placed his arms around Ellen, holding her from behind. "More than anything else, this is painful."

Both of their heads had to tilt back to take in the full view of the statue mounted where the flag used to be. Shiny, bronze and huge. Perfectly sculptured into a realistic lifelikeness. Staring down, a pleased look on his face, hands in the front pockets of those brown pants, and still wearing a button down shirt was Joe.

For as warm as the air was around them, Ellen felt a chill and rested her hands on Dean's. "They covered the dates so we wouldn't see."

"I'm glad we got to view this alone. I think . . . I think you and I needed to see this alone."

"Look at the plaque." Ellen whispered. "They didn't cover that."

At the base of the front of the wall, tilted out for everyone to read, was a homage to Joe in gold lettering. --*Founding Father Joseph Anthony Slagel--By your guidance, out of the ashes we were lead from a deadened world into a brighter future. A new beginning because of your doing. We will live on, and so shall you.*

Dean chuckled emotionally. "That's great. But you know what I'm thinking."

"Joe would have a fit. He'd say, Christ Almighty."

Dean continued the sentiment doing his best 'Joe' imitation. "Do you know how hard it was to get that goddamn wall built. What a waste."

"Look, Dean." Ellen smiled and pointed. "They have his cigarettes in his front pocket." She let out a sad breath. "How empty this world has to be without Joe. I can't imagine it."

"I wonder when."

"I'm glad they covered the dates. Because I don't want to know when I lose my father."

Dean felt Ellen step from him and peer closer. "What are you doing?"

"Oh, my God." She pointed to the foot of the statue. "Look at the signature of the artist." She faced Dean with a grin. "Look who made this."

Dean looked with wide proud eyes. "Alexandra."

Lancing's stock, grumbling whine was heard. "You weren't supposed to see that. Only you two would look at the artist's signature."

Cocky, Ellen looked at Lancing. "We saw. Now you have to tell us about our daughter."

Lancing huffed. "You've developed some sort of obscure rules of your own about what you can know and not know."

Ellen tossed her hands up. "They way I figure it, if we half know, we could go back and change time according to what we half know, then how screwy will everything be."

Rubbing his eyes, Lancing shook his head. "I just know, after this detail, I'm going to be one of those guys in a security uniform scooping up monkey poop at the zoo."

After laughing at his word choice, Dean quickly looked to Ellen. "They have a zoo."

Lancing moaned.

^^^

Frank looked over his shoulder in peculiarity to Lancing following the bump they hit on the road. "What was that?"

Lancing shrugged as he drove. "I guess something was there."

"Odd." Frank shook his head and resumed his talking to Dean, Ellen

and Billy. "Anyhow, Alexandra is fine. Actually, she's very fine. She lives in one of the three sheltered areas and is happily married to David. They have four children. Two boys, two girls."

Ellen turned to Billy. "Do you see your sister much?"

"As much as I can." Billy answered. "We fight a lot. She's really jealous right now about this. But, she can't leave that seclusion."

Frank smiled. "They're normal brother and sister."

"What about Nick?" Ellen asked. "Josh . . ."

"Dr. Hayes." Lancing called from his driver's position. "Enough information was given to you already. Please don't ask."

Ellen gave a fling of her hand at him.

"Frank?" Dean leaned forward. "What's this David like?"

"Very good man. I didn't like him at first." Frank gave a twitch of his head. "He's older than Alex. Fifteen years. But they've been married nine years. So I guess I was wrong."

Dean sat back and dropped his voice to a whisper to Ellen. "Make a mental note. We start paying attention to all men named David who are right now twenty-three."

"Here's something." Ellen spoke up. "When I was on my tour de Beginnings, in the cryo lab, I noticed the case we held Brian in was empty." she raised her eyebrows. "Now, knowing you assured Dean nothing was taken from Beginnings, I am going to assume, Brian and Caroline were. Is that true?"

Luke answered. "Ma'am, if you didn't see them."

"O.K." Ellen nodded. "Can I at least know if the process worked?"

Billy with such a pleading look gazed up to Luke for an affirmation. "Something went wrong while they were coming out of stasis. They never revived."

Dean's heart sunk. "Shit. We screwed up." He dropped his voice to Ellen. "The process for bringing them out is etched in stone. That is the one we're taking. I say when we go back we review that process heavily."

"Dean, but what if we were right, and went to the future, went back to Beginnings and changed it, therefore erasing the correct procedure."

"No, El. We established we were never on a future trip, remember. If we were, we certainly wouldn't be here now. We would have changed things"

"True. But I'll make a mental note."

"We'll write all this . . ." Dean stopped talking when the limousine came to an abrupt screeching halt.

Frank turned around to the window separating front from back. "Lancing? What's wrong?"

Lancing breathed heavily, gripping the steering wheel. "It's them."

"How many?" Frank asked.

"Three, four. Hard to tell they move too fast." Lancing reached his hand up to the roof. "We'll take care of it."

"Hold it." Frank ordered. "What is your L.E.P. training level?"

"Two." Lancing answered.

"Luke?" Frank asked.

"Two."

"They'll kill you. Bill, let's go." Reaching his hand up, Frank pulled what looked like a hatch down from the inside roof of the car.

Dean was confused. "What's going on?"

"Stay put." Frank told him. "Just stay inside." Two long tubes he pulled from the hatch and handed one to Billy and exchanged it for a shot gun. "Ready."

Shotgun armed, and with the long metal pole, Billy nodded and reached for the other car door. "Ready."

The moment Frank and Billy stepped from the car, and knowing they couldn't see through the dark tinted windows, Ellen and Dean ejected themselves forward to see through the front.

"What's happening?" Dean asked.

Lancing and Luke only shook their heads as Frank and Billy walked around the front of the limousine.

Frank gave a twirl to the metal rod he had and tucked it under his arm, he lifted his shot gun. "They'll smell us in a second. Be ready. Listen for the direction. Watch your neck."

Billy nodded and held both the rod and the shotgun forward.

Frank's foot dug into a firm stance when he heard the rustle. Not long following it was the deep chesty cry out. He pivoted to his left, pumped his shot gun and no sooner did he raise it, out from the side of the road it leaped at him.

Flesh in color, it's toothy mouth lunged open inches from Frank's face only to have the barrel of the shotgun shoved inside. Frank didn't hesitate, he fired.

Another rustling and a quick turn to his right. "Billy."

A cry out. Lunging.

Billy, with a spin, dodged out of the way causing it to crash hard into the limousine. He daggered the metal rod in toward it, zapped it like a cattle prod, swung around his shotgun and fired at its head.

Frank held up three fingers. "I smell one more."

Billy sniffed. "Behind me?"

“You got it.”

Inside the limousine Ellen and Dean watched nothing but rains of red blood and motions of movement. They could see Frank on one side of the car, then Billy on the other. Both stood looking in the same direction.

It was like watching a movie and the windshield was the screen. Both Frank and Billy turned counter clock wise when something so fast, zipped across the road to the other side. A moment of stillness, then they watched Frank duck fast, and in his stand he had caught it. Over his shoulder, he catapulted the beastly thing onto the hood of the car. And in the same motion, turned, lifted, then jammed it with the electric rod. Sparks of blue current flew out and the thing shook violently. It stopped moving only for a moment, then it jumped.

Bang.

Ellen screamed when in a flip of a turn, the distorted face of the creature smashed into the windshield of the car. Bits of its head smeared along with the blood on the glass surface.

The car door opened.

Frank popped his head. “We’re good. We’re gonna clear a path.”

Dean wanted answers, he obviously wasn’t getting any. Knowing that Frank gave an ‘all clear’ he held his hand up to Ellen to wait, then Dean slipped from the car.

“Dean get back in.” Frank told him.

Dean’s eyes were transfixed on the creature. Huge it was, grotesque in appearance.

“Dr. Hayes.” Lancing stepped out from the driver’s door. “Get back in the car, sir.”

“Frank?” Dean ignored Lancing. “What . . . what the hell is this?”

^^^

“Leps.” Frank explained in the lab. “Or rather, L, E, P, S.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “Another Frank acronym. You mean like SUT? What’s this one stand for. Lurking Enemy Provoking Slime?”

Frank chuckled. “No, but that’s good. Leps is really almost a double acronym if that’s possible. Leps short for leopard because these things move fast, and the name, Laboratory Enhanced Predator Species.”

Dean stopped cold.

Ellen lifted her hand from bandaging Billy’s shoulder. “What was that?”

“Laboratory Enhanced Predator Species.” Frank repeated.

Ellen shook her head. “Talk about sci fi.” She finished with Billy’s

shoulder. "Why were *you* out fighting them."

"Me?" Billy stood and grabbed his shirt. "Dad's worked and trained me. There are only six that have a rating of LEP level five. Me and Dad are two of them. Uncle Hal, Joey . . ." Billy's mouth closed and he looked to Lancing. "Sorry."

"So you're trained to fight these things?" Ellen asked. "Luke and Lancing were level two."

"Standard." Frank interjected. "Standard military personnel have to achieve a level two. They are not forced to go any further. We encourage all military personnel to have a level three but . . ." he shrugged. "If you have a desk job, why bother. Optimum suggested for fighting them is a level four. You can beat one or more of them at that level. They travel in small packs when they attack."

"Wait." Dean held up his hand. "You're going on and on about training. What are they?"

"Dean." Pacifying Frank spoke. "I told you. Laboratory . . ."

"Yeah. Yeah." Dean nodded and moved his hand in a 'go on' fashion. "*What* are they. You're holding back. Lancing shut up."

Lancing looked at Luke. "I didn't say a word."

"All right." Frank breathed out. "I called them small predators in the old days. Now, they're pretty big predators."

"Shit." Dean's eyes widened. "Those are the grown up killer babies?"

"Hardly." Billy commented. "Decadents."

Dean slowly directed a view to Billy. "Decedents? They have no viable sex organs."

"Nope." Billy shook his head. "Only to about age three our time. Then those little formless sex organs protrude big time. But . . . they truly are asexual. The females need no male to reproduce. And they do, starting at age four our time." He looked at Lancing. "You're not stopping me."

Lancing was answer less. "Honestly, the Lep's weren't brought up in space time continuum discussion training. So be my guest."

Billy grinned. "Cool. O.K., so . . ." He pulled up a stool. "It was realized in your time when they started popping up everywhere."

Frank decided to add. "Killer adults, killer adolescents, killer babies. A whole breed of families running around. And they move even faster as adults."

"Life span?" Dean asked. "They age six times faster than humans."

"True." Billy answered. "Dr. Morrows came up with extensive research. She ended up being fascinated by them. She estimates they're in their prime at about five and a half years old then they start to fizzle. Slowing down

about seven, very catchable about eight, dead usually by nine.”

“So Marcus never lived that long.” Dean said. “Obviously that is where you got your data from.”

“Or you.” Billy shrugged. “Dr. Morrows ended up having year long research expeditions. Having them captured, caged, lobotomized.”

Dean was puzzled. “Who’s Dr. Morrows?”

“You know . . . Dr. Morrows.” Billy smiled and spoke as if Dean should have known. “She said to wish you the best and wanted to be here, but she lives in seclusion as the doctor for the women.”

“Oh, yeah.” Dean nodded knowingly. “Dr. Morrows. Pass on my well wishes to her as well.” In a stock mannerism he leaned to Ellen.

“I know.” She whispered. “Mental note. We meet a Dr. Morrows.”

Dean winked, then returned to conversation with Billy. “How many are there now?”

“Dad could answer that better.”

“They’re a whole entire species and race, Dean.” Frank answered. “They multiply, spread out. We usually track them coming in. In fact, the attack today was unusual because they tend to hit small cities or rural areas. Less likely hood of being killed. And they attack frequently. Remember the savages. They are the new age savages.”

“How are they surviving. They’re carnivorous.” Dean questioned.

“Animal life.” Frank leaned on the counter. “Dean. Remember the grizzly bear in Beginnings? Remember how big it was. Record breaking. Well, that, my friend, is normal now. Something happened.” Frank shrugged. “Air changed. Less pollutants. I don’t know. Everything grows bigger. Including animals. And when they get you, they tear you apart. Our biggest threat. They . . .” Frank pointed. “Are the reason we push extinction.”

Lancing grumbled.

“No.” Frank looked at him. “You said we can discuss Leps. I gave no more information. I won’t. But Dean can guess.”

Dean thought about it. “You’re pushing extinction because they are attacking everyone?”

Frank just stared.

“No. That’s wrong.” Dean tapped his hand on the counter in thought.

Ellen had a guess. “They attacked the women.”

Billy whistled.

“Oh, Dean we’re close.” Ellen said with excitement.

Dean ran through his mind everything that was told to him. “Got it.” He snapped his finger. “The reason your pushing extinction is because the woman can not carry a child. They can’t carry a child because of the sexually

transmitted disease. One of them raped a woman and started the whole mess.”

Lancing groaned.

Dean grinned with an excited ‘yes’. He turned to Ellen. “El.” He pointed to his temple.

“Mental note made.” She nodded.

“So why don’t you wipe them out?” Dean asked.

Frank laughed. “Dean. It takes a lot of time and power to kill one. You have to shoot them close range and into an open mouth. You yourself proved you can’t burn them, freeze them. You can explode them with a nuclear device but . . .” He lifted his hands. “Who wants to go around exploding nukes. Even gassing them doesn’t work. They turned out to be exactly what they were supposed to be. An indestructible army.”

Dean laughed arrogantly. “I can’t believe you haven’t figured out how to kill them yet. You have had all these years.”

“You act as if you do.” Billy said.

“I may. Frank does. He’s the one that came up with it. Actually, sort of. Who knows. But . . .” Dean rattled on. “Frank, think back. Why did you stop using Marcus in your war games?”

Frank thought for a second and his eyes grew wide. “Because if he got hit accidentally with the paint pellet he got hurt. Burned.”

Dean nodded. “Henry had to do what in order for you to use Marcus again.”

“Reduce the amount of alcohol in the mixture.”

“There you have it. It might work.” Dean held out his hand. “Find Henry’s old paint pellet recipe, which I remember, thank you. Increase the amount of alcohol, paint the outside of every shell with it. In theory . . .”

Billy finished the sentiment. “They should penetrate the tough skin.” Excitedly he looked at Frank. “If this works, we can totally annihilate camps with some expert marksmen.”

Frank hurried to the door. “Dean, get on remembering that paint recipe. As soon as we reproduce it, we’re gonna test it out. I’ll be back.”

Biting her nails, and shifting her eyes about, Ellen waited until the excitement of the room ceased. She spoke soft. “Dean? I forgot we already had that figured out. I feel really bad.”

“No, need.” He murmured. “Just, you know, make a mental note and when we go back, we’ll fix our mistake. We’ll immediately tell Frank how to kill them.”

“O.K.” She exhaled. “But what about all that happened?”

“El, Please. Everything that went down is moot now that we know

about it.” Dean looked up when he saw the eyes of Billy, Lancing and Luke were upon him. He just smiled nervously and reminded himself to stop slipping into private conversations with Ellen when people were around.

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“Bet I can beat you.” Dean said cocky.

“Please.” Ellen scoffed and looked down the long hallway before them. “You have a bum knee.”

“Bet.”

“You’re on.”

“Go.”

Lancing tossed his hand in defeat. “Doctors.” He spoke. “You can not intrude. That is the president’s office.” He mumbled. “Immature, assholes.” He shook his head and trotted to catch up to them.

Laughing, Dean caught his breath, “Lancing doesn’t see happy about . . .” He shut up when Ellen covered his mouth.

“Listen.” She whispered.

Frank’s voice carried out of the office. “Two platoons. Both ends of Hoi Road. One troop, one mile in from Beginnings, the other, one mile in before Freedom City. Your men are all LEP level four, and that’s what I need until we produce and test the new ammo.”

Ellen spoke soft. “Who’s he talking to?”

“Let’s see.”

They stepped into Frank’s office.

Ellen froze. She looked at him from behind, standing almost as tall as Frank. His long blonde ponytail draped downward across the UWA officer’s uniform he wore. “Hal?”

He turned around.

Dean’s gasp was louder than Ellen’s. “Denny?”

“My God.” Denny stepped to them. Older, almost forty he was, lines of his age, graced his face with distinctiveness. He laid his hand on Ellen’s cheek, kissed her then embraced her. “I was hoping to run into you by chance. And Dean.” He embraced Dean. “So good to see you.”

Disgusted Lancing was when he entered the office. “I tried to keep them back, but they raced. I see you know Captain Sanchez.”

Quirky Ellen smiled. “Captain? You’re the UWA Captain now.”

Denny modestly nodded.

Proud, Frank grabbed Denny’s arm. “He took over for Hal when Hal

retired into politics.” Frank cringed. “Sorry, Lancing.”

Swishing his mouth back and forth in irritation, Lancing nodded. “I expect as President, you will put in a good word at my court martial.”

“Why do you care?” Ellen asked Lancing. “I mean, really. If we find out something we shouldn’t and we go back and change time, you’ll never know. So who’s the wiser if you just pretend that you are keeping time order.”

To a small lapel button, Lancing pointed. “See this.”

“Yeah.” Ellen replied. “What is that some sort of oath.”

“No, some sort of recording device. Everything is monitored. *That* is why I care.”

“Sorry.” She turned back to Denny. “So, how’s Katie.”

“See.” Lancing interjected. “Look at you trying to be sneaky like that. He can not answer. Stop that.”

Shaking her head, Ellen faced Denny. “Are you going to be at the dinner tonight?”

“No.” Denny answered. “I have my men to disperse for detail. And I should be going. Really we weren’t to see each other.” He leaned down to Ellen. “Thank you for all the support all those years ago.”

“Your mother would be proud of you Denny.”

Denny only smiled. “Dr. Dean.” He shook his hand. “Be well. Frank, I’ll get right on that. Lancing, I apologize for placing you in any predicament that may cause you distress. I’ll make sure I speak on your behalf.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Lancing stepped from his way.

“Wow.” Ellen commented as Denny left. “So strong. I’ll bet Joey is a wonderful UWA soldier. Or Josh.”

Frank glanced at a disgruntled Lancing with a smile and lifted his hands. “You have to give her credit for trying though.”

^^^

It was a heads or tails call situation, and Lancing would swear for the first time in his life he won the toss of a coin. Happily he bestowed the honors of monitoring Ellen’s conversation with Joint Council on Luke, while he himself stayed closed to Dean. Dean was easy, he was alone most of the time.

Dean didn’t mind Lancing. Lancing seemed to be the only one who wasn’t taken by Ellen. He did find curiosity about Lancing and found himself wanting to ask him questions. Lancing was about forty. Where was he twenty-two years ago. Dean was willing to bet Lancing was a society soldier.

A heavy exhaustion breath, accompanied Frank as he sat down in a chair

next to Dean.

From his drink, Dean raised his eyes. "Hey, Frank."

He said his name with an exhale. "Dean."

One of Dean's eyebrows raised when he felt the fatherly pat given to his hand by Frank. "Why did you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Pat my hand."

"I don't know. Felt like it. You look lost."

"I feel lost." Dean sat back in his chair. "This is going to sound really dumb. Ready? I miss my kids. I miss the Billy I know, my Alexandra, Josh, Joey, and Nick. I miss them. This Billy . . . He's not the kid I know, the one I chase around Beginnings pleading to do his school work. And . . . and I miss you, Frank."

"You wouldn't miss me if you sat down and talked to me once these past four days."

"There's a reason for that, Frank." Dean said. "This isn't the Frank I know either. It makes me kind of . . . I don't know. Sad? Would that be the right way to put it." Dean played with his drink. "My worst enemy. My best friend. You and I couldn't be in the room for ten minutes together, in a single conversation without arguing once."

"I know." Frank smiled at the memory. "A lot has changed."

"No kidding. What's up with the George Bush, kinder, gentler version of Frank?"

"I'm old."

"Bullshit." Dean snapped. "Joe . . . Joe in the time frame you took me from, was a year, maybe two younger than you. That man was not old. He wasn't kind or gentle, well, in the way people would depict kind and gentle. He's crass, full of life, and verbally, not too mention physically, would knock anyone on their ass. Hap. There. Hap was the Casanova of Beginnings. Seventy-six years old. Remember Trish and Mary cat fighting on the street over him."

Lancing perked up with attention. "Sorry for intruding. But that sounds so funny."

"It was." Dean said. "Remember Frank?"

Frank laughed. "Yeah. Even I had a hard time breaking it up. Jenny was screaming 'let it go, let it go, let the best woman win'. All over Hap."

"Hap. And . . ." Dean snapped his finger. "Josephine." He turned to Lancing. "Just so you can get the most of this story. Josephine was pushing ninety, is still, in my time. Maybe she's like four foot ten, weighs seventy pounds soaking wet, fragile but Beginnings biggest . . ."

“Lush.” Frank finished. “Couldn’t lift her head off the bar after nine o’clock.”

“That was unless she got a man to take her home.”

Lancing who had been sipping a drink, downed it. “She took men home at ninety.”

“Still does.” Dean said. “Every single night of the week. But my point is, Frank, she used to fight with you. And she’d zip that little body about Beginnings, maybe not fully clothed, and maybe not in control of her mental faculties, but she did. Remember when she tackled Ellen over the bouquet at your father’s wedding?”

Lancing lifted his drink. “I like this Josephine.”

Dean snickered. “She has her moments. But what I’m getting at Frank. Is age has nothing to do with it. Your body may slow down, but it shouldn’t change who we are. I bet Joe was as crass at thirty as he is at sixty. Hap., bet me he was always the sharpened tongued Casanova. Josephine, I’d give my life on the fact she never stopped boozing and slept around since she was sixteen.”

“Dean, I know where you’re going. But some people, some people just change.”

“Not as much as you have. I don’t buy it.” Dean said. “Not at all. You’re in there Frank. Did you ever get together with kids you hung out as a teenager? Remember that highschool reunion, when all of the sudden, this twenty-seven year old boy is talking and acting like he was fifteen. I’m here. Why am I not bringing out the worst in you?”

Frank’s shoulder’s bounced in his laughter. “Dean. You haven’t been around me enough. If you are, trust me, you probably will.”

“Good. Let me ask you this. I’m curious. When’s the last time you said fuck?”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, stop it.” Dean stated. “You’re not pretending you don’t know the word that graced every single sentence you spoke.”

“President Slagel swore that much?” Lancing asked.

“He’s exaggerating.” Frank defended.

Dean’s shock verbally came out. “I am not. And you know it. Lancing, he used to sing songs all the time over his radio. Called it Frank FM. And . . . popular, ageless songs this man would sing and insert the word ‘fuck’ into it because he couldn’t speak without saying it.”

“Dean.” Frank shook his head. “Maybe I abused the word.”

“Abused?” Dean laughed. “No, you didn’t even know half the time you were saying it. Go on, Frank say it. Let me hear.”

“Dean. I’m the president.”

“And you think that makes a difference?” Dean asked. “You don’t think Reagan didn’t say, ‘Fuck the Russians’. You don’t think Bush didn’t say, ‘Fuck Saddam’. How about Clinton? You don’t think he said ‘Fuck . . .’” Dean stopped. “Knowing Clinton, he definitely did.”

Frank really laughed. “Dean. Breaking the swearing habit was a very hard thing for me to do. I’m telling you, it was almost as bad as giving up the booze, only without the physical side effects. I did it.”

“One time. Say it.” Dean taunted.

“No.”

“Frank. I know you want to. And I know the real Frank has been dying to jump out from behind this aged exterior he hides behind. Also, this intelligent exterior you put up.”

“You don’t think I’m intelligent.”

“In all military aspects, you, Frank are a genius. In all other aspects. Sorry.” Dean shrugged. “No man gains that much knowledge through age. I’m your doctor. You got hit too many times in the head in one year. It would be an anatomical impossibility for you to absorb that much knowledge through all that scar tissue.”

“You’re baiting me.”

“Absolutely.” Dean nodded. “Can you add yet?”

“Dean.”

“Were you confused in the lab when the term ‘asexual’ was used.”

“Dean.” Frank stated.

“Did you find yourself wondering again, a sexual what?”

“You aren’t going to do it.” Frank stayed calm.

“Bet me.”

“Dean, you can’t. I am in control. I’m always in control.”

“I’ll get you to swear.”

“Never.”

“How about this.” Dean folded his hands on the table. “That day you snatched up us from . . .”

Frank, arrogantly shook his head. “Go on. I’m waiting to hear.”

“Robbie was the real mystery man. Hal was covering.”

“Knew it.”

“Against the investigations wishes we desecrated Bev’s corpse and stole her uterus.”

“Knew it.”

Dean grinned. “Billy was pissed that you went on a date with Ellen. Did you ever find out he was the one, on the morning you took us, who went to



your house, into your room, and pulled the tape out of three of your Journey tapes.”

Frank stood up. “Fuck!”

Silence hit the room.

Frank’s hand raised then dropped “Thank you very much Dean, you and your little man attitude slipping me back into swearing detox.” His voice moved up in anger. “Picking on me like you used to. Getting me to fuckin swear all over again. Fuck. I did it again. And . . .” Frank blasted. “Do you know how long it’s been since I have been pissed off like this!” Frank let the silence of the room sink in. And then . . . he smiled. “Too long.” He sat back down. “Thank you.” He swiped up the bottle and poured some into Dean’s glass. “Here, have another drink for me.”

With a smile, Dean did.

^^^

*‘God, she’s in . . . she’s in . . . she’s in the bathroom again.’* Dean rubbed his eyes, even his thoughts were slurred.

“What was that?” Ellen called for the bathroom.

“Huh?”

“You said something.”

“I thought . . . shit. I thought I thought it. No. I said something.”

“Dean? What?”

Grumbling, notebook in hand, Dean stood up from the couch. He swayed back and forth then bumped into the coffee table. There was a slight delay between the bang and his agonizing. “Ow.”

“What are you doing out there?”

“What are you doing in there?”

“Bathing.”

“I’m working.”

Ellen’s giggles came through. “Working? On what? You’re drunk.”

“I am not. I was working on this.” He held up the notebook and laid it on the night stand. “I was thinking that we should get Joe into the clinic for a complete . . . complete . . . um.”

“Physical work up.”

“Thanks. Yeah. See. If we die in the next couple years, you know, Joe. He blows us off every year for his physical. Let’s get him in, see if there’s something wrong and get a jump on it. That way we don’t have to lose him.”

“Put the notebook down, Dean. We’ll discuss this when you’re sober.”

“I’m sober. I just had too much too drink. I’m still thinking clearly. Sort

of.” He sat on the edge of the bed.

“I told you to slow down.”

“Frank did it. My glass never got empty.”

“I’m glad you stayed all night.”

“El. Tonight, I had a really good time. I really did.” Dean said.

“Dean, wasn’t that funny the way Council looked when Frank swore.”

“I loved it.” Dean lifted the alarm clock, tried to set it, watched it go out of focus, then gave up. “Come on, El. Get out of the bathroom.”

“I’m done. I’ll be out in a second. And too bad you got drunk.”

“Why?”

“Now, you won’t be able to perform. See . . .” She sighed dramatically loud. “Missed your chance. I was going to make love to you tonight.” Snickering as she tied her robe, Ellen shrieked when the door to the bathroom opened. “Dean.” She laughed his name.

“I’m tired of promises. It’s been twenty-two years . . .” He laughed. “Since we slept together. Wifely duty time, El.”

“Dean. No.” She stepped back and screamed again when he lifted her up. “Oh, God, you’re gonna drop me. You’re drunk.”

“I’m in control.” He carried her to the bed and plopped her down.

“Dean.”

“Shh.” He sat on the edge of the bed with an ornery smile. Tilting his head, he peeked under the edge of the robe. “Good. You’re naked.” He reached for her belt.

“What do you think you’re going to do?”

“Days, El. Days you been telling me. We’re gonna be together. So, right now . . . I’m literally . . . binding you to your word.”

Ellen let out a slight scream hinted with a laugh when Dean tied her wrists together.

Grinning, Dean took the other end of the belt and tied it to the bed post. “Hold that thought.”

“Oh, my God.” She watched him get off the bed. “Where are you going?”

“No outside interference.” he walked to the door and lifted the ‘do not disturb’ card. He opened the door, put it on the knob, then latched the door. In his walk back to the bed, he took off his shirt. Undoing just the top button to his jeans, knee first Dean climbed on the bed, bent up Ellen’s leg and slowly lowered his body to hers. After brushing his lips against hers, face close, he smiled.

“Oh, you think you’re real funny.” Ellen pulled at her bound hands. “Bet me any money, just about right now you’re gonna pass out and leave me

## Druga-Johnston/The Aragon Window

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. . . Dean?" Her eyes shifted down to Dean's head that fell to her chest. "Dean." She called him. "Dean. Oh, great. Just great."

Quickly, he lifted his head with an ornery boyish smile. "Kidding." Reaching up to untie Ellen's hand, Dean began to kiss her.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Shifting his eyes, hand hovering the mini tape recorder, Dean spoke in a soft, hiding voice. "Successful levels of absorption were achieved in the creation of the artificial wombs. We hope now, eight days into this 'save the world' project, that we can get the artificial tissue of the wombs to flourish enough to implant. For some reason . . ." Dean peered down to the long case of wombs. "Levels of fluid keep dropping making absorption impossible, and creating a scientific equivalent of a typographical error in an experiment that should be stages ahead." With a breath, he depressed the button, and ejected the tape.

Lancing, view over Dean's shoulder watched closely. "What exactly do you do with those tapes?"

"Take them back to the hotel and review. Then I erase them and use it the next day. One tape was all I had on me when I came through. It helps to refresh my mind for the next days work." Dean faked annoyance. "Gees, if you were a man of science you would know this." He walked over to Ellen and handed her the tape. "Here, place this in your purse for me until tonight."

"Absolutely." Ellen took the tape, moved to her purse and unzipped it. Eyes checking to see where Lancing was, Ellen slipped the tape into what she and Dean started calling, the Beginnings file, the lining of her purse. "Done."

A single knock on the lab door brought in Frank and Luke.

"Dean." Frank spoke. "Can I steal you for a couple hours?"

Ellen turned around with a smile. "Where are we going?"

"Um . . ." Frank hesitated. "Not you, El. It's not safe. I thought maybe Dean wanted to do a real life try out of his Leps ammo."

Dean looked in debate. "Really, Frank. I'm kind of busy. Let me know how it turns out."

"Come on, Dean." Frank tried being persuasive. "You made this. Don't you want to see if it works. There's a colony of them about a hundred and fifty miles from here. We'll fly out. Let's go." Frank gave a motion of his head.

Dean looked at Ellen. "You need me here, right?"

"Don't be silly." Ellen replied. "Go. It'll be fun to get a bird's-eye view of the future. Billy's here. Right, Billy?"

"Right." Billy smiled. "Go."

Dean just stood there. He tapped his hands on the counter a few times then nodded. "All right. But wait." He held up his hand and walked over to

Ellen. "Listen. This may be it."

Wondering why he was whispering, Ellen lowered her voice as well. "What is it?"

"I may not come back. Think about it. You can't go. It's not safe. They very well may be knocking me off in some sort of accident all to keep you here. So . . ." He kissed her. "If I don't come back. I love you." Exhaling a nervous breath Dean walked over to Frank. "Ready."

"Good." Frank lifted his hand in a wave. "We won't be long."

Waiting until after Frank and Dean had left, Billy made his way to Ellen. "What's wrong with him?"

"Oh." Ellen giggled. "He thinks they might try to kill him in order to keep me here in the future."

"He's afraid of that?"

"Yep."

"Hold on." Billy darted out of the lab. "Wait." He called to Dean and Frank as they walked down the hall. "Dean, I'm mean, father," He caught his breath. "I need the increase levels for the final ingredients in the acceleration formula."

"Bill." Dean looked oddly at him. "Final ingredients? We have to implant first. It can wait."

"Yeah, but . . ." Billy shrugged. "You never know. What are they?"

Smug Dean looked at him. "Guess. Or wait for me." he turned around, hoping that may secure his life, and he walked down the hall with Frank and Luke.

Billy laughed.

^^^

Loud was the helicopter noise, and Frank held the earpiece to his radio close to his ear. "Yeah." He spoke loudly. "Thanks, Bill. Got it." He removed the radio headset and peered over his shoulder to Dean who sat directly behind him. "Dean!"

"Yes."

"Why are you huddled and strapped in the corner like that?"

"I don't know, Frank. I know the way you used to fly. I just don't want you to make a wide turn, flip the bird on it's side, have the door flop open and I fly out."

Lancing looked curiously at Frank after Dean's long thought out explanation.

"You mean like this?" Frank asked as he tipped the bird.

Dean shrieked. "Yeah. Real funny, asshole."

Calmly, Lancing turned to Frank. "I realize that the prankster in you sir is coming out over Dr. Hayes. But please, not at the expense of my stomach. My sanity this past week is twisted enough."

^^^

"Man." Frank shook his head as he moved in a good walking pace ahead of Lancing and Dean. "Both of you look white."

"Thank you." Lancing said to Dean.

"For what?" Dean asked.

"This." With a point of his hand, Lancing indicated to Frank. "A mild mannered man has resorted to juvenile tactics because of your badgering."

"This is nothing." Dean said. "He's still mild to me. In Beginnings, whenever I would ride out at the crack of dawn to the mobile, Frank would chase me in his jeep, pull me over and cite me for speeding and not having a license and registration. We didn't even have motor Vehicle laws. He has a sick sense of humor."

"Had." Lancing corrected.

"Has. You don't lose that no matter how old you get."

"Had." Argued Lancing. "And . . . sir, how much further up this hill are we walking?"

"Um . . ." Frank stopped and looked around. "I think this is good enough. Don't you, Lancing?"

"Yes." Lancing nodded.

"Good." Frank pulled out his revolver. "Dean. It's been real nice knowing you, but we can't have you around much longer." He aimed, stared serious for a second, then laughed. "Got you. O.K." He let out a breath and started to walk again. "A little bit more."

Nodding with a look to kill, Dean turned to Lancing. "You were saying?"

^^^

"Sulking." Ellen explained to Billy and Frank. "And he has every right. You two were mean to him today. Not . . ." She pointed her coffee spoon at Billy. "Not like you aren't all the time to him."

"Come on." Billy disagreed.

"No." Ellen shook her head. "And like it or not, sorry, Frank. Dean is your father, Billy. You really should be nicer to him and treat him with

respect.”

“I’ll tell you what.” Billy said. “I’ll make more of an effort. I promise.”

“Please.” Ellen looked at her watch. “I have to go.”

“El.” Frank grabbed her hand as she stood. “Where are you going?”

“It’s getting late. Dean’s back at the room. I mean, he wouldn’t have dinner, or desert with us. He’s alone. I don’t want him to spend the rest of the evening that way.”

“I understand.” Frank stood up. “See you in the morning.” He kissed her on the cheek. “Night, El.”

“Night. Night, Billy.”

Billy looked up with a smile. “Night.”

Ellen took a few steps to the door and abruptly stopped. “Whoops.” She darted back in. “My purse.” Giving one more smile she paused by Lancing on the way out to tell him his ‘time watch’ was over, but he was welcome to join her and Dean for conversation. Lancing respectfully declined.

“Back.” Ellen announced as she walked into the suite.

Remote in hand, Dean looked up from laying on the couch. “You’re early.”

“Yeah. Thought we’d hang just you and I.” She tossed her purse and it missed the dresser and fell to the floor. Some of its contents spilled out. “Shit.” She hurried over, scooped up the items, including some of the football notes that fell from the lining. She paused, picking up the jam sandwich. “I really should toss this out.” Shrugging she stuck it in her purse and then walked over to the couch. “Dean.”

“What?”

“A hamburger and French fries again. No wonder you’re gaining weight.”

“I’m gaining weight because all I do is eat and lay around.” Dean sat up.

“What’s the movie from the front desk tonight?”

“King Kong.”

“Original or remake?” Ellen sat down.

“Remake.”

“See, that makes no sense. Why would they scavenge the world for good movies to run through the system, and they picked that one. Who knows.”

Reaching over, Dean grabbed her hands. “I’m glad you come back tonight.”

“Thanks.” Ellen smiled.

“Because . . .” Dean lifted the notebook. “I wanted to do our people review.”

With a whine, Ellen sat back. “All right.”

“You’ve been putting this off.”

“Well, it makes no sense.”

“No, El, it makes perfect sense. If some of these people die and we can stop it. Why not try. And . . . if we can’t.” Dean looked at her seriously. “We need to really change the way we are. I mean, stop taking people for granted. Our lives, for that matter for granted. So . . . Shall we do this, and we’ll put it to rest until just before we leave.”

“Yes.” Ellen sat up. “I’m ready.”

Dean stared down to his list of names. “Joe.” He saw the look Ellen gave him. “Next . . . Hal.”

“Vice President, stays in the UWA until then. No interference.”

“Our children. Billy, we know. Alex, living in seclusion. Josh?”

“UWA soldier. Bet.”

“I agree. And Joey is regular military. Nick?”

“Insane somewhere.”

Dean snickered. “What?”

“The route Henry is going, bet me Henry raised him, made him neurotic and Nick cracked up.”

“Good possibility.” Dean wrote down. “Henry.”

“Dead.”

“Dead. Robbie?” Dean looked at Ellen. “El? Robbie?”

“Hating to say this . . . I think Robbie died.” Ellen said sadly. “Possibly in the war with the society.”

“Hating to agree . . .” Dean said no more. “All right. Jason? I said dead. Stroke. Heart attack.” He got Ellen’s agreement. “Danny Hoi.”

“The only Rich man in the country. Lives in Vegas where he started it back up.”

Dean chuckled. “I like that.” He took a moment to write down. “Jenny Matoose.”

“Fine. Living in seclusion, running all the women’s lives.” Ellen answered nonchalantly.

“John Matoose.”

“Dead.”

“I agree. Johnny Slagel?”

“Johnny.” Ellen said his name with a smile. “Bet me he’s some big doctor somewhere. Not a scientist, but a doctor.”

“Teacher.” Dean gave his guess. “Because he probably learned more to



teach than to learn.” He snickered. “Anyone else you can think of?”

“Um . . . yeah.”

“Who?”

“King Kong.” Ellen grabbed the remote. “Ready.”

Smiling, Dean laid his hand on hers. “I know I said this. But this really means a lot you coming back here tonight. And more than to review our list, to hang out, and watch King Kong. Everything. I’m glad we have this time.”

“Time.” Ellen smiled out the word. “And we should take advantage of it. Our lives are on hold back home in our time. And who knows Dean, how much longer we’ll be here. Not much.”

“Not much. A few days maybe of this . . .” Dean kissed her hand. “A few days. Because there is no way the experiment can possibly take any longer.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"After one month, four days and . . ." Dean looked down to his watch. "Three hours." Wearing a suit, hair cut very short and cropped, face a little fuller from the ten plus pounds he gained, Dean faced the Joint Council over the late morning breakfast meeting. "The experiment has finally reached a successful level. We have . . ." Dean shuffled through his notes, then looked to Ellen who was close by in the small diningroom. "El? Where's the . . ."

She handed him a sheet of paper.

"Thanks." He looked again to council. "I wanted to give you an exact figure. We successfully implanted and have growing, thirty-seven embryos. We have preparing now in the lab, twenty-five more artificial wombs, which should be ready for implantation in about a weeks time. And my son, and his staff, have the exact specification to build more wombs with just as much success."

The room filled with the applause of those inside.

Gen. Yokasumi stood up. "I know I speak for us all when I say we ingested our breakfast with great worry about what you had to tell us. You made us wait for good news. We feared the worst looking at the time frame it has taken."

"We ran into some very unusual snags." Dean shrugged. "Things happen."

"We can not express our gratitude enough." Gen. Yokasumi said. "And we look forward to spending free time with you at the reception this evening before you leave us tomorrow." He gave a motion of his hand to the council at the table. "Gentlemen. Shall we finish our preparations?"

Frank stood with the others, and walked over to Billy. After a brief whisper in Billy's ear, Frank gave a reassuring pat to Billy's arm and left with the other members of Joint Council. Lancing stood by the door.

Ellen watched the odd secret passing between Billy in Frank. "Is something going on?"

"No." Billy shook his head. "Well, I need to talk to you." He pulled out a chair and sat down next to Ellen.

"What's up?" Ellen asked.

"Joint Council says they'll approve this. Mom . . ." Billy's voice deepened with sincerity. "I want you to stay."

"I knew it!" Dean stated loudly. "No."

"Dean." Ellen held up her hand. "Billy . . ."

"No. Hear me out." Billy spoke soft. "Not forever. Not for long. Both

you and Dean. Stay. One more month. Just . . . one more month. I'll work, day and night with Dean. Getting to know him on a level other than the experiments. And you, you can go with my father back east."

"Billy." Ellen closed her eyes.

"One month. That's it. One month alone with him. That's all. Can't you do it. Can't you spare one more month. Give this to him." He pleaded. "Please."

Ellen was silent, and she didn't know how much her silence killed Dean. "Billy. I love Frank. But I also love my life. I miss it. I really do. You, your sister, brothers, everything. Even Frank. It's so hard for you guys to understand, but all of that is waiting." She watched his head drop and she lifted it. "I am very proud of who you've become. Know that. But I have to go back and watch you become that."

"But, Mom." Billy's eyes closed. "One month."

Standing up slowly unable to take being asked again, Ellen bent down and kissed Billy on the top of the head. "For as much as I loved being here. I'm . . . I'm ready to go home. I'm sorry."

Billy only nodded.

"I'm sorry." She whispered and kissed him again.

Taking hold of Ellen's hand, Dean walked from the diningroom with her. "You O.K.?"

"Yes." She answered. "I feel bad."

"I understand." Dean glanced back at Lancing who trailed down the hall behind them. "Did you know that was going to be asked."

"I was forewarned this morning, yes." Lancing answered.

"Mom." Billy's voice called from the other end of the hall. "Mom." He ran up to catch them. "Here." He smiled "You forgot your purse."

"Thanks." Ellen took it. "Don't be mad."

"No." Billy shook his head. "You're right. You go back. I want you to stay, but I understand. I do."

"I'm glad." Ellen tossed the purse over her shoulder. "Now, let's not ruin our last day. I think . . . Lancing, correct me if I'm wrong, but thanks to you, we're going to the . . . zoo?"

A stock groan emanated from Lancing.

^^^

It was going to be the last time, he knew in his lifetime, that he would do it. And Dean wanted to make the most of it. Over a month spent in a really nice hotel suite, Dean grew accustomed to something, he would have

loved to do had the world not gone to pot. Kick back at the end of the day and become a couch potato. He called the front desk for the final time to place an order for a movie, and then he reviewed the room service menu. Though he had just eaten, he was going to get one more hamburger, just because he could. Top button to his jeans undone, Dean plopped down on the couch and grabbed the remote. He had resolved himself to a night alone. He wasn't upset about that, he expected that. He wished Billy would stop by, and thought maybe he would after the rest of the lab work was packed up.

Ready for his final evening in the future alone, Dean was surprised when the door to the suite open. Almost saying 'Billy', Dean stood up. "El?"

She didn't even do her signature purse dropping and Ellen slouched in her walk.

"I thought you were going to spend some time with Frank." As soon as Ellen turned her head to look at him, Dean saw it. "What happened."

Emotional her voice peeped out, and her eyes glazed up. "He won't see me."

"You're kidding."

"No." Sadly she shook her head. "He won't."

"El, he was fine with you at the reception."

"I know." She wiped the tear that started down her eye. "And he said he was heading back to his floor, I went. Lancing told me Frank didn't want to talk to me. He wasn't mad. It was just the way it had to be." She stepped into Dean just dropping her head to his shoulder. "He won't see me. He won't. Why?"

"It's wrong."

She lifted her head. "I wanted to see him one more time."

"You will." Gently Dean moved Ellen back from him and walked past her to the door. "I'll be back."

"Dean . . ."

"No, El. He's wrong. How much time out of this past month I gave up with you so you could spend time with him. Give him back some of that time he lost. And he's just gonna abruptly say, no more. What about you? You need this as much as him. I'll talk to Frank." He gave Ellen a reassured look.

"Dean." Ellen reached out and stopped him. "Thank you for this."

He only smiled at her, a smile that told her everything would be fine, and then Dean left.

Lancing blocked the way. "I'm sorry. The President is seeing no one. He's preparing to leave tonight."

"What?" Dean shook his head. "He won't even say anything to me?"

Lancing blinked long and dropped his voice. "Dr. Hayes. This is difficult for him. This parting. Just understand . . ."

"Bullshit." Dean looked beyond Lancing's shoulder. "He's down that hall?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"Frank!" Dean called out.

"Dr. Hayes, please . . ."

"Frank. I'm having a hard time believing this is your doing!" Dean's voice was loud.

"I'm going to have to call security."

"Call them." Dean snapped a view to Lancing them back down the hall. "Frank. I know you can hear me, so listen up. This is bullshit, Frank. You won't say goodbye to Ellen. What? You're just going to disappear into the night? Time in the past may have paused, but we gave up a month of our lives for your world now, and damn it, you should give something back to us. You wanna ignore me? You wanna pretend I'm not talking right now. Fine. You said I have little man attitude, well how about this. You're so afraid I'm going to change time. If you don't come out right now. Right now! The second I step back through that time machine, the understanding you and I were having is over. If this Frank doesn't care, what about the Frank back then. How's he going to feel when I give the understanding to Robbie." Dean heaved out a breath of relief when he heard the door down the hall open.

Denim shirt hanging over a pair of jeans, Frank stepped into the hall. "Lancing. Let him through."

Lancing stepped aside, but stayed behind Dean.

"Dean." Frank spoke soft when they met up. "Maybe if I explain it to you, you can tell Ellen why I . . ."

"No."

"Let me finish."

"It is finished. I won't explain anything to Ellen. I won't. You don't want to say goodbye to me. That's fine. Fuck you I can care less. Know why? I'm going to see the Frank I like anyhow in less than twenty-four hours. But Ellen, Ellen doesn't just like *that* Frank and love him." Dean's words conveyed his emotions and slight anger. "She's loves this Frank too. Every single night she hung out with you. Hours, Talking, laughing. Didn't that mean anything?"

"It meant the world."

“Yeah, right.” Dean scoffed. “You used her.”

“Fuck you.”

“One part of old Frank you kept. The old Frank was a user and so are you.”

“Dean.” Frank spoke strong.

“You know, I was so wrong. And so is Ellen. We aren’t seeing a kinder, reserved Frank. That’s not you at all. Kind? No. You, Frank, are reserved because you have nothing to say. You’re aren’t laid back and in control, you’re just a quiet bitter old man.”

“That’s right. I am bitter. And I have been since I lost her.” Frank spoke deeply. “She took all the life from me when she died. And I don’t wanna say goodbye to her.”

“You never did, did you?” Dean asked.

Frank slowly looked away.

“No.” outward with his revelation, Dean breathed, “You never got the chance. Most people don’t. They don’t get the chance to say goodbye, they never get to say all those things they wanted to. They never get to tell the other person how they truly feel. And you know what?” His voice dropped to a calm one, and Dean stared with intensity and sincerity at Frank.. “You’re blowing it. You Frank, have a chance to say goodbye. The way it should be done. To say everything that needs to be said. Now’s your chance. It will be the last time in your life to do so. Do it, Frank. Do it right. Say goodbye to Ellen the way you always wanted to. It’s that moment that people only dream about. Take it.” Dean whispered with emotional persuasion. “Take it.”

^^^

It had to be water mixing with the ice in Frank’s hand, because Ellen was certain he wouldn’t drink. She slipped quietly into Frank’s room, gave a single glance to Lancing who hung back, then Ellen set down her purse and took a step to Frank.

He faced the window, took a sip and set his water down. “I’m sorry.”

“No. That’s all right.”

Frank turned around and faced her. “I was a little scared, you know. Wait.” He rubbed his eyes. “Scared? Was? No. Am.” He held out his hand. “Look, I’m shaking.”

Ellen grabbed on to his hand and cupped it. “Why?”

“This is very hard for you to comprehend. It has to be. How you miss the kids, me, and everyone else. It’s sort of on the same lines. You’re gonna see me El, real soon. But after tomorrow . . .” Frank swallowed. “I will never

see you again. I lost you once.”

“I don’t want to leave this Frank either. I love this man that you’ve become. Not that I ever doubted you’d be like this.” Ellen stepped closer. “I have to tell you. I’m jealous. All those years we talked about growing old together. *This* Frank is the one I saw in my dreams. *This* Frank is the one I wanted to sit on a porch with. And I’m jealous, that I will never get to have those dreams.”

“You could. But . . . I know you have to go back. And . . . even if you stayed, we’d be at this point again whenever you left to go back for good.”

“True.”

“So.” Frank breathed out heavily. “I want to make the most of this night. Dean . . . Dean said something to me that clicked. And before anything else is said, I have to tell you some things.”

Engrossed on his every word, Ellen never moved her eyes from Frank.

Holding her hand he moved as close as he could to her, bringing their joined hands to his chest. “For all the times we fought, for anytime I said means things to you, made you angry . . . for those times, El, I am sorry. I’m sorry we may have bickered when we should have been laughing. But I’m grateful for the times we made love, when we should have been screaming.” He smiled a little at her. “For all the times . . .” Frank paused when his voice cracked some. “For all the times I never told you, you were beautiful, know that a day didn’t pass where you didn’t shine in my eyes. For any chance, or moment that I didn’t say I love you. Know I always felt it in my heart. I can’t remember a day in my life when I didn’t love you. But . . .” A sigh, soft, carried from Frank all his emotions. “But most importantly. Thank you. Thank you for being in my life. And this man, this man that stands before you, wouldn’t be this man, if it wasn’t for you. You weren’t just a part of my life. You were my life.” Lowering his head to kiss her hand, Ellen pulled from their locked fingers and wrapped her arms around him.

Embrace locked tight, Ellen tip toeing as much as she could, moved her hands to his face and her whisper beat against his ear. “I swear. I swear on my soul, when I get back, I am making so much up to you. I swear.”

Frank didn’t answer he just nodded.

“You’ll think I’m up to something.” She snickered emotionally. “But I’m gonna do it. Thank you for giving this night to me. I needed this.”

“Not as much as I did.” Pulling back, Frank hovered his lips over hers. “I only wish, if it was the last thing I did, I wish I could have this night alone with you. Just one more night with you.”

Embrace releasing, Ellen stepped back from Frank and looked at Lancing who stood by the door.

Lancing couldn't look at them. His eyes moved about the room, then silently he let out the breath he held. Almost creeping, he reached for the door knob. "I'm sorry. I can not allow that." He opened the door quietly and slow. "I think it might be time to say goodnight. My shift . . ." He stepped into the doorway. "My shift is over. Say goodnight to the president, Dr. Hayes." Lancing gave a nod.

Ellen smiled at Lancing. "Goodnight Frank."

Frank closed his eyes in gratefulness. "Goodnight, El."

Lancing stepped out, and quietly with barely a latching sound, the door closed.

Ellen's heart beat so strong. With an almost gasp out, she wrapped her arms around Frank. "I don't want to waste a single second."

Firm, his hand moved up her back, pulling Ellen tight to him. His hand slipped under her hair and Frank brought Ellen's lips even closer. He smiled in his near kiss. "It's been so long . . . I'm not sure I remember."

"Yeah." Ellen teasingly brushed her lips against his. "I'm sure you do. After all . . ." She snickered quietly. "You're Frank."

Frank cracked a smile. "You're waiting for it, Aren't you?"

"You bet." Ellen kissed him again. "Let's try once more. After all . . . you're Frank."

Through his quiet chuckle, he spoke. "I am."

The moment bred a laugh, but only in that instant, and then the moment bred the starting kiss.

^^^

Like a reflex, Lancing's hand ejected up and covered his monitoring pin on his lapel when the door quietly clicked. He hurried to it and held his finger over his mouth when Ellen slipped out.

Closing the door, she shook her head slowly with a smile, then mouthed the words with an expression on her face that said more than the tone of her words could. 'Thank you. Thank you so much.' with a tip toe she kissed Lancing on the cheek, smiled once more at him and walked down the hall.

Lancing watched her nearly make it to the end then jolted when the door opened again. His hand again covered that button and he gave the 'be quiet' look to Frank.

Nodding his understanding, Frank stepped out into the hall. He snapped his finger at Ellen to get her attention. When he saw she kept walking, he snapped it twice then let out a whispering 'hey.'

Ellen stopped and looked back.



## Druga-Johnston/The Aragon Window

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Frank held up her purse.

Laughing at herself, Ellen raced back to get it. After taking the purse, she stole another kiss and mouthed the words 'I love you'.

Without making a sound, Frank returned the sentiment and folded his arms as she walked away. He cleared his throat loudly and chuckled when Lancing cringed. "Lancing, about that sweet roll you snuck for me tonight. I just need to let you know how I will never forget it. Thank you for giving that to me. Thank you." Looking once more to Ellen standing at the end of the hall, Frank waved then went into his room.

Lancing didn't groan or whine, he smiled. And for the first time ever he passed that smile along to Ellen with a wave goodnight to her before she turned the bend of that wing.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

It crept through the separation of the branches in the distance, spearing out daggers of red and orange in an awesome contrast against the still semi-dark sky.

Dean reached for the carafe on the patio where he and Ellen shared a chase lounge. Ellen between his legs, her back against his. "Coffee?"

"Yeah, please." Ellen held her cup to him.

"Do you realize . . ." Dean poured her some. "This is our second sunrise. I'm hoping we did that and the ripple didn't erase it from your mind."

"We did that. Watched the sunrise on the beach in Connecticut, how long ago."

"In Dean and Ellen time which would be almost eight years. Or real time, thirty."

"That's a really cool thought." Ellen sighed out. "Of course Dean, we may not have another thirty years to wait to share the next one."

"Let's not. Deal?"

"Deal." Ellen peered out again. How fast the sun seemed to rise over the horizon. "Our last day here, in this time. Thanks for staying up with me."

"Are you kidding. I loved this. And . . ." He kissed the top of her head the played with a few strands of her hair. "I love these little blonde streaks you put in your hair. It makes your whole face look healthy."

"You fought with me the other day about them."

"That's because I like natural Ellen. But these look good."

"I loved your argument to council to allow us to get our hair done. How . . ." Ellen chuckled. "We'll never be missed in our time, and how everyone will just think they never noticed when we actually had our hair done."

"Speaking of our time. Ready?"

"Yes.. Do you want to go first?"

"Sure. I'll talk. If you remember anything I'm forgetting. You fill me in." Dean took a thinking breath. "Bev's investigation. We stuck to the story that we spent the entire night alone in bed together. We're sticking to that. Bev's uterus is in the freezer down in the cry lab marked 'worm infested stool sample'."

"That was really smart on your part."

"I found myself worrying that someone found it while we were gone."

"But no one knows." Ellen said. "Hell, we just walked out of Joe's office."

"No, correction. Thrown out of Joe's office. It was a screaming bazaar in there." Dean recollected. "I was yelling at you. You were yelling at me. Frank was mad at Hal. Elliott was mad at Hal. Henry was condemning you. Joe was having a stroke. Jess and Hector cringed. Jason wasn't there or he'd be doing that sneaky Jason snicker."

"Tee-hee-hee?"

"Exactly. And Robbie, the start of all the confusion . . ."

"Sat quietly looking innocent. Isn't it funny." Ellen commented. "Every ounce of anger we felt. What we were worried about. All that has faded. Those little problems seem moot."

"I'm going to do a lot of resolving. I know that sounds stupid."

"No, not at all. I was thinking the same thing."

"Elliott?" Dean asked as he grabbed her hand.

"He's one of them. I think I'll go back to being that special friend to him, if he'll have me."

Dean laughed. "You don't think he will." He kissed her hand. "Life is so short. And you know what, El. Twenty-two years isn't a long time. We're not here. That's sad. We aren't around. I'm going to try to enjoy every second I have left."

"Everyone assumes they'll be around forever. We know we won't. And that plays a lot into my resolutions. I'm going to try to help Henry so he doesn't committed suicide."

"I'll encourage this father role he's been playing. Maybe that will stop the depression that makes him kill himself."

"If . . ." Ellen said. "He killed himself. We're still guessing. And speaking of being a father."

"Oh, you know it." Dean said with certainty. "I'm putting my all in with Billy. I did something wrong before. I won't again."

"Joe." Ellen whispered out. "I have to tell him how much he means to me. I don't think he knows that."

"Yeah he does."

"I learned last night. It never hurts to tell someone again." Ellen stared out and relaxed into Dean. "All those people. I miss them so much. I can't wait to see them."

"The purse is stuffed, it's pretty much . . . whenever you're ready."

Ellen sat up and turned to Dean. She grabbed his hand. "It's six-thirty. I'm ready now. You?"

Dean grinned. "Yeah. Let's go home."

Standing up, Ellen extended her hand to Dean. "Billy's staying in Frank's wing. Why don't we go wake them. Have one last breakfast and

sneak back home with just a farewell from both of them.”

“I like that.” Using her hand as leverage, Dean stood up with a smile. “Let’s go.”



They freshened up a bit after their all night stint on the patio. Showered, clean and ready. They didn’t want to be a mess when they slipped through the Aragon Window.

“Morning, Lancing.” Ellen said brightly as she approached the wing with Dean. “Are they up?”

“I saw Dr. Hayes getting the paper. I believe he’s in his room.”

“Frank?”

“The president is still sleeping.”

Ellen turned to Dean. “Go get Billy, I’ll wake Frank.”

Lancing shook his head. “It makes monitoring conversation impossible when you two separate.”

Ellen gave a fling of her hand at him and darted to Frank’s room. She knocked on the closed door. “Frank?” She turned the knob. “Hey, wake up.” Softly she spoke in her entrance to the room. “I want to spend some time with you before I leave. God, do you sleep late in your old age.” She walked over to the window smiling at Frank on the bed. “It’s a beautiful hot January day.” She pulled open the curtains to brighten the room. “And you’re missing . . .” Turning to face the bed, all smiles dropped from Ellen’s face. “Frank?” She whispered out seeing him lay on his side, the covers just to his waist. And then . . . her heart sunk. “Oh, God. Frank.” With a rush she had never felt, Ellen flew to the bed. She hovered close to him, looking at his peaceful face. “Frank?” Her hands moved desperately over his face. The warmth of him gone. Gurgling the emotions built in her gut and escaped Ellen in her cry out. “Dean! Dean! Someone!” Her screams were loud, and the pain was so strong in her chest, Ellen whimpered her words. “No.” She peeped out, dropping to her knees. “No, no, no.” her head fell to Frank’s. “No.”

“El, what’s . . .” Over Frank, Dean saw her, her shoulders bouncing heavy. Deep sobs were muffled as her lips pressed hard to Frank. “No.” Dean’s eyes closed and every ounce of his soul, every part of him he thought bred life, hit the floor.

A sluggish snuffle came from Ellen as she only raised her eyes to look at Dean, “He’s gone. Oh, God, Frank’s gone.”

Did his legs weigh a thousand pounds. They felt it. Every step Dean took toward the bed was a heavy one. His heart thumped against his rib cage.

It was something he never expected to see, or to feel. The loss of Frank.

“Mom? Is something . . .” Billy froze.

Still hovering Frank, Ellen looked up. “Billy, I’m sorry.”

Billy’s eyes closed in pain and he swallowed. He cleared his throat and turned his head. “Lancing.”

He didn’t pay mind to the whispers between Billy and Lancing. Hand extended, Dean made it to the bed. His fingers touched upon the side of Frank first and then he dropped to the edge of the bed, sitting close to Ellen. He watched her cry, but felt the loss. He looked at Frank, so still and peaceful, and then to his own hand that laid on him. Rigid were Dean’s movements, he lifted his hand, but like a magnet, Frank drew him. It dropped emotionally back down with a grip to Frank.

Ellen’s soft sobbing, Dean’s heart pounding, and the reality of what had happened became painfully evident, when raising above the quiet noise in the room, Lancing on the phone, spoke with a sad smoothness. “Yes. It’s me. . . .we have a situation. I need you to send some one up here. President . . . . President Slagel has passed away.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

*‘And do you promise to uphold the responsibilities, privileges and duties of the President of the United States?’*

*‘I do.’*

They could have left, but Dean and Ellen didn’t. They stayed long enough to see him . . . Hal. Immediately flown in, Hal assumed the office under conditions he never thought would happen.

He took Ellen’s breath away when she saw him. An incredible likeness to Joe, Hal could have been his father walking in the room. Strong, his face ended up being. His hair, down to the hair line, was Joe’s. Gone was the long hair, the super fit body. He dressed like Joe, walked like Joe, and even held his composure the way Joe would. But even though he placed on that strong exterior, Hal was like a window, Ellen could see right through him to the pain he was feeling.

He witnessed his swearing in. Dean and Ellen wanted to, plus they wanted to be there for him. And just as he was taking Frank’s place as president, with pride, Hal took Frank’s place at the Aragon Window.

Fatherly cupping his hands onto Ellen’s face, Hal looked into Ellen’s eyes. “I wish . . . I wish our running into each other in this time, would have been under much better circumstances.”

“I do too.” Ellen embraced Hal.

“I am so envious right now.” Hal spoke in her ear. “You get to walk through there and see my brother. Tell him . . . even if it sounds absurd, tell him I love him and admire him. I always have since I was a kid.”

Ellen only nodded, she couldn’t speak.

“Dean.” Hal extended his hand to Dean, then embraced him. “You take care.”

“Good to see you, Hal. Good luck.” Dean stepped back. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“It’s all of our loss.” Hal said.

Billy moved back from the computer. “It’s ready.”

“Billy,” Ellen walked to him. “You take care. I’ll see you soon.”

“No. You take care mom. Do things right.” He winked. “Do things right.”

“I know you’re close to Frank. I’m sorry. If you want us to stay . . .”

“Go.” Billy instructed. “Dad . . . we knew, we really knew this would happen. Only, I look at it this way. He died happy. A month ago, if it would have happened, I couldn’t have said that.” He kissed Ellen then ran his hand

down her purse's strap. "I see you didn't forget this."

"She almost did." Dean interjected. "I had to run back and get it."

"Good thing." Billy smiled.

"Bill." Dean walked up to him. "Whatever I did back then in your life that distanced us. It won't happen now. It won't."

"You know what?" Billy smiled. "I really believe that." He looked down to the hand that Dean, extended and Billy ignored it. Instead he embraced Dean. "I love you. That has never been a question."

"I love you." Laying one hand on Billy's face, Dean kissed him on the cheek. "Do good."

Taking a breath, Billy stepped back. "Let's do this and not make it any harder."

Together they stood there, Dean and Ellen. Ellen reached once more to Hal and gave a squeeze to his hand.

"It's time." Billy spoke up.

The Aragon Window illuminated.

Druga-Johnston/The Aragon Window

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HOME

Beginnings, Montana  
PRESENT DAY



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Dean and Ellen felt like creatures from the movie, *Gremlins*, screaming ‘bright light, bright light’ when they stepped into the bright sun of Beginnings. The same bright sun that was there forty two seconds earlier Beginnings’ time, but over a month their time.

Ellen let out a happy scream, jumping up and flinging herself to Dean. “We’re back!”

Dean was just as excited, swinging Ellen around in the embrace, setting her down and getting hit by her purse. “You don’t think they screwed up do you?”

“No.” Ellen ran her fingers through her hair. “Not at all. We’re back.”

His breath felt heavy as he released it. “El. What do we do. Just, I don’t know, go on like we were going to.”

“What did we have written down?” Ellen asked catching the breath of her overzealousness.

“Well . . . I was going to head to the lab and get things together for the expulsion of the Bev fetus. But . . .”

“Dean.” Ellen grabbed his arms. “Let’s not. Let’s go see everyone. I have to.”

“My thought exactly.”

“Let’s go.”

They didn’t just hurry, Dean and Ellen ran all the way to Joe’s office.

^^^

Joe’s chair squealed as he leaned back in it. “Now . . .” He exhaled. “Peace in this office. Let’s move on with . . .”

*Bang!*

*Scream!*

“Christ!” Joe sprang up. “I just threw you two . . .”

Ellen’s long shriek shut Joe up.

He winced with one eye closed and put a finger to his ear shaking his head. “What the hell is the matter with . . .uh!” He thought it was a heart attack, but it was Ellen pummeling him with her body and the tightest of hugs.

“Joe. Oh, Joe.” She kissed him. Then plastered him over and over with tiny pecks. “Joe. You’re the best. So good to see you. Oh, my God.” She got

her breath. "Dean. Look. It's Joe."

"Joe." Dean smiled and walked up to him, he hugged him.

Puzzled but more annoyed, Joe nodded then looked around to everyone that laughed. "What the hell is going on."

"Frank!" Ellen screamed in a spin to him. "Frank!" Her words shivered and she threw herself at him.

"El!" Frank blasted back with a matching excitement and held on tight.

"Frank. I missed you."

"I missed you two."

"Knock it off!" Joe barked. "You just saw her."

Choked up, Dean was when he walked up to Frank. "Frank." When Ellen stepped back Dean stepped toward him. "Frank." Arms around Frank's waist, Dean gave him a hug. "It's . . . man, it's good to see you."

"Fuck, Dean. Get off."

"Right." Dean shook his head. "Frank, El."

"I see."

"And Hal." Dean pointed.

"Hal." Ellen giggled. "You look good." She pivoted in a turn. "Elliott. Oh, Elliott. Don't leave Beginnings until I talk to you."

Holding back a snicker at the odd acting pair, Elliott only nodded.

Dean snapped his finger, "Henry. Hey, make time for me. We need to talk."

"Why?" Henry asked with apprehension.

"Henry." Dean said his name with a chuckle then pulled Ellen into him. "I just need to talk to you. You're important to us."

"Yes." Ellen smiled. "Very. Know that."

"Out!" Joe ordered with a strong point. "I kicked your skinny asses out once. Out!"

"O.K." Dean grabbed Ellen's hand. "We're leaving. Robbie . . ." He pointed at him. "Good to see you. Everyone."

"Out!" Joe screamed.

"We're going." Dean backed up with Ellen to the door. He stepped out with her but stopped. "Oh Frank? I won't take 'no' for an answer. You get your ass to the clinic ASAP, today, I'll make time. We're doing a complete work up and physical on you. Sixty-two years old is too young to die."

"O.K." Frank shrugged. "Thanks."

Dean lifted his hand in a wave.

Ellen popped her head in before she walked out. "And, Frank. Make up with Hal. He loves you very much and he admires you. Has admired you since he was a kid."

## Druga-Johnston/The Aragon Window

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The door closed. All faces were stunned and everyone was speechless.

Joe dropped hard into his chair. "Did Dean look different?" After scratching his head and giving a twitch of disgust, Joe grabbed a cigarette and continued his meeting.

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Smiling ear to ear, Ellen laid her hand on her chest. "Oh, did that feel good or what?"

"It went well. Wanna walk to town."

"Sure." Ellen took a step and stopped. "No."

"No?"

"Dean." She faced him. "Think about it. What if we really die together? I think for the next two weeks we should spend as little time in close range as possible."

"Beat fate?"

"You got it."

"It's a deal." Dean darted in and kissed her quickly. "Wait. What about at home. We have to start working out how we're gonna change the future."

"Our house is big. We'll stay on opposite ends and yell to each other. That way if someone kills you I can run, or visa versa."

"Good idea. You go the short way, I'll go the long way."

"Got it." Ellen started to walk. "We'll yell at each other to let us know our progress of resolutions. Start right away!" She yelled out as she moved.

"I will!" Dean lifted his hand. He watched Ellen get further and further away, and then Dean walked in the opposite direction. He didn't mind taking the long route, aside from needing some exercise, he needed to see home. Because it was good to be back in the Beginnings he knew.

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Johnny's hands clenched warmly to Jenny's as they sat on her sofa. "And you are glowing."

"Oh." She giggled, blushed then tucked her hair. "You don't think I've gained that much weight."

"Jenny. I didn't know you're pregnant. You are carrying it well."

"Thank you."

"And you're so lucky. You are. Denice has shut me out of the baby's life."

"She's said you didn't care."

"I do. I have begged her, Jenny. Begged her. Curt doesn't like me anymore." Johnny shrugged innocently. "Come on, you know me. I have that Slagel family honor. I wouldn't do that."

"I can talk to Denice."

"Could you. Jenny that would be great. Thank you." He kissed her on the cheek. "And I should go."

"Thank you for the visit. And Johnny, any time you want to stop by and talk, or just see the baby when it comes, you do that."

Johnny smiled when he walked to the door. "Thank you again." He left the smile on as he walked out, but lost it when he shut the door. A smug look replaced it when he saw John approaching.

"What the hell you doing?" John asked.

"You can say just making my presence known. She gave me an open invitation."

John just stared. "You're getting at something. What?"

"I told you today. This investigation has to end. Until it does phone lines will not be opened."

"It's a long way from ending."

"I'll find a way. With yours and Jess' help of course."

"Of course. But you seem to think your uncle Hal is the way."

"He killed Bev."

"You want Jess and me to help you do what? End this investigation? With Hal? Won't work." John laughed. "See, this is where your nineteen year old mentality and immaturity shine through. Think about it, Johnny. I never liked your Uncle Hal much, but it dawned on me he's a smart man."

"I have proof."

"Then it's bogus."

"How do you know?" Johnny snapped.

"If you paid attention to other people around you, you would know. He had to set you up. And you're gonna fall right into his trap. I drink at places other than the social hall. Johnny . . ." John gave a swat to his arm. "You're barking up the wrong tree.. Uncle Hal, has an airtight alibi. He was home. A guard proves that." Without saying anymore, John walked into his house.

Johnny actually listened to what John Matoose said. It didn't make sense at first. But after reflecting on the night before, when he and Hal had words in the social hall, the pieces started to fit. And if Hal had indeed set Johnny up to see what he would do, he set himself up in the process. Hal had an airtight alibi? Johnny laughed at that thought. Like a Tupperware container, all Johnny had to do, was pop that lid. Air out. Alibi gone. Hal would go down. But if for some obscure reason that didn't work, Johnny had to think

of another way to secure the investigation's end. He was sure, with thought, it would come to him.

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Elliott just smiled, and then he nodded as well. Hand resting on top of his bandana on the clinic lab counter, he listened to Ellen. He tried hard to interpret what she was saying. She rattled on fast. One word into the next. Sentence into sentence, from one thought to another.

"So." She exhaled. "What do you think?"

"About?"

"What I said."

"Ellen. You rambled insidiously. I haven't a clue what point you were making."

"Life, Elliott. Life is short. For everyone. I like you, I really like you. I want to forget out misunderstanding, and go back to being that special friend. I want my room back that you painted for me at your house. I want to be there for you. What do you think?"

Elliott picked up his bandana. "I think . . . I think I should just say 'thank you' and that I would like that very much. And . . ." he placed on his bandana. "Knowing my luck with word choice, I should leave before I blow this." He bet down to her kissing her softly on the cheek. "Thank you."

"No, thank you."

After smiling, Elliott walked to the door. He literally skid to a stop and turned around with an odd look to Ellen after Frank's blasting . . . 'Fuck Dean! You're suction cupping off my chest hairs' rang out in the halls.

"What?" he pointed. "Is going on?"

Ellen grinned. "We're making resolutions."

Nodding a half understanding, Elliott took a step, stopped at another loud Frank 'ow', chuckled with a shake of his head and walked out.

^^^^

"Sorry about that." Dean wrapped up the wires. "It'll grow back."

"Fuck." Frank sat up on the examining table and rubbed a small bare spot on his chest.

"I have to look closer but . . . preliminary review of the EKG shows your heart is good."

"I could have told you that." Frank tossed on his shirt.

"But I want to watch. Doesn't hurt. OK?"

"OK."

“Oh, before I forget. This is important.” Dean faced him. “El, and I, this very morning, figured out how to kill the killer babies with regular bullets.”

“You’re shitting me?”

“No. We just have to make the covering for the special ammo and there you have it. Now one bullet will take them out.”

“Whoa. Dean. That’s great.”

“And . . .” Dean added. “Got a name for them.”

“You don’t like killer babies?” Frank asked.

“Well, yeah. But they’ll get older.”

“So you want to call them killer adolescents?”

“No.” Dean chuckled. “Try this. Leps.”

Frank looked at him in thought, then walked to the door. He stopped. “Dean. That . . . that is a really cool name. Leps. As in, Lurking Enemy Provoking Slime.”

“That’s it.”

“Cool.”

“No wonder you’re president.”

“No, Dean, I’m Frank.” Frank walked out.

Shaking his head, Dean smiled. “That you are.”

^^^

His face was probably distorted from his hands pressed so tight to his face. If Joe could have escaped, he would have. But like a prisoner, he was trapped in his office and Ellen was the warden.

“And then . . . remember when I was twenty-three . . .”

“Are you retaining water?” Joe asked.

“Huh?”

“Water. You know?”

“No. Why?”

“Your face is puffy.”

“Oh.” Ellen touched her cheeks. “I gained nine pounds.”

“Since when?”

“In your time?”

“What the hell other time is there. No, Christ Ellen, eastern standard time.”

Ellen giggled. “That’s funny. Anyhow . . .”

“Ellen, where are you going with this?”

“Joe, I am trying to tell you about all the things you’ve done for me that

I appreciate.”

“Good. Thank you. Go.”

“But Joe.”

“Ellen.” Joe winced. “I know. Go.”

“Are you sure.”

“Positive.” He waved. “Thank you for sharing.”

“O.K.” She stood up.

“And watch that salt intake.”

“All right.” She moved to the door but it opened. “Whoops.”

Dean stepped in and immediately Ellen jumped back.

“El. I’m sorry are you not done?” Dean wondered.

“Finished. Your turn?” She asked.

“Yeah.”

“Good luck.” Keeping a distance as she passed him, Ellen walked out.

Joe watched Dean get comfortable. “Something you need, Dean?”

“As a matter of fact Joe. Yes. First, eight years ago when I first met you.”

Joe gave up, with a whine he lowered his head to his desk.

^^^

Hal hated to be abrupt, but he really wanted to leave. “Ellen. Please.”

“But listen to me.” She beckoned. “You have to make up with Frank.”

“I will. It will pass. Trust me. O.K.?” He gave a pat to her cheek and hesitated. “Your face looks dark.”

“It called a sun tan.”

“It’s November.”

“Tanning bed.”

Oddly Hal looked at her. “Where in the world . . . never mind. I suppose I’ll find out where Danny Hoi put them.” He tried to make it to the jeep where Elliott sat. Ellen tugged his arm. “For the love of God, Ellen, what now?”

“The city name.”

“Freedom City. Yes, I’ll speak to my father.”

“It’s a good name.”

“Of course.” Hal walked to the jeep. “Bye.”

“Hal.”

“Ellen, please,” He reached his wit’s end. “What else is there to tell me? Make up with Frank. Freedom City. Mentor Denny. Don’t cut my hair. Watch my weight. May I please . . . please go home.”

“O.K.” Ellen nodded. “I just needed to tell you those things.”

“Thank you.” Like the name Ellen wanted New Bowman to be, Hal felt Freedom when his rear finally rested in the jeep. He looked at Elliott who laughed. “And you wanted her back in your life.” Not wanting to take the chance of being chased down again, Hal threw the jeep in gear with a jerk, and drove off.

^^^

Henry was perplexed as he sat staring up lost at Dean. Was Dean on drugs? What was he rambling on about? And to Henry, Dean looked different. He spent more time trying to figure out what that was instead of listening to him.

“We feel the pain of loneliness, Henry.” Dean said. “Don’t go there. Share it with me and Ellen. We’re here. And Nick. Nick is so fortunate to have you as a father. Don’t give that up. I’ll help you. When the pressure gets to you. Come to me. Don’t think about suicide.”

“All right.” Henry still stared. *What was it. What was different.*

“I know you have some things that you want kept a secret . . . no.” Dean held up his hand. “Whatever it is, I won’t say anything. I want to be that confidant. That trusted friend. I want you to live long. A long life. You’re healthy.”

“I got it!” Henry snapped his finger and stood up. “You got your haircut.”

Yeah.” Dean ran his fingers through his hair.

“That’s a really nice haircut.” Henry moved to the door of his office.

“Henry. You understand what I said?”

“Yes. And thanks.” Henry walked out. “A haircut.”

Dean exhaled. He felt good about his speech. Things were going in his list of resolutions better than anticipated.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Little Billy rolled his eyes as he sat at the diningroom table with Dean. “Why are you two yelling back and forth?”

“It’s better this way.” Dean answered, holding Nick. “Keep writing the essay on reasons why not to worship Frank.”

“Are you sure I get a day off of school?”

“Yes.”

“And you aren’t making me do urine samples, right?”

“Right.” Covering Nick’s ears, Dean communicated with Ellen loudly. “Go on! What were you saying!”

“I made it through my list! But I got nothing done today!”

“Me either! That’s why I’m going to the lab tonight! Maybe get that little worm project done.” Dean looked at Billy’s gasp. “How did everyone react to you!”

“Well aside from getting comment about my face being full . . . fine. Except Josephine! She spit at my feet and cursed me!”

“She was drunk! She did the same to me.”

“God.” Billy whined. “Stop this. Aren’t you leaving?”

“Yes, soon.” Dean waved him off and continued talking to Ellen. “Be careful what you say and show Frank!”

“I will. I’ll walk on eggshells. Don’t want to be considered insane!”

Again Billy rolled his eyes. “And yelling across the house is normal?”

“Do your essay.” Dean stated

“Dean!”

“What!”

“How are we going to do this tomorrow! We want to review our football notes while the kids are sleeping!”

At his loudest, Billy stood up. “Can I make a suggestion!” He walked into the living room and opened up an end table. He pulled out two small white objects and handed one to Dean. “Plug this in.” He walked away and down the hall to where Ellen sat by the bedroom door. “Plug this in.” Huffing in his little stride he headed back to the diningroom and plopped down in his chair. “Talk.”

Dean smiled as he held the object. So impressed he was. “Good thinking, Bill. Two way baby monitors.”

Billy just smiled back, but it was forced. He picked up his pencil and returned to his essay on why he shouldn’t worship Frank. It would have been easier at that moment for him to write an essay on how annoying parents

## Druga-Johnston/The Aragon Window

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could be. On that, he could go pages.

^^^

## New Bowman, Montana

For as empty as the social hall was on a weekday night, that was how crowded Hoi-Hoi on the Range was. No wonder, Johnny thought, some of the men flocked to go to New Bowman. It had an old western saloon motif, the diningroom separate from the actually bar. But Johnny didn't go there out of curiosity, to dine or to drink and socialize. Johnny went there for Glen. A trusted UWA soldier near promotion. He was in charge of the tracking division and he was the one that recorded Hal's entrance back into New Bowman the night that Bev was killed. Paper documentation in handwriting could be changed, but a man's word, let alone a trusted man's word, went a long way.

Glen was a nice guy. Kind of on the heavy side. He smoked and coughed a lot, but on that night, Glen was drinking a lot. It was totally understandable, he was about to start his weekend during the week. Two days off and Glen wanted to relax. Johnny learned all that from talking to Glen and the group of guys. Laughing with them, listening to Glen's stories. Getting irritated at the redness of Glen's nose. But like all good things, Johnny made it perfectly clear, his good time with the guys from New Bowman had to come to an end. He had to work, it was getting late, and Johnny having too much to drink, had to catch that last Dan-Tram out. So with a wave, and a sloppy goodbye, Johnny left Hoi-Hoi on the Range.

The only thing was, Johnny wasn't drunk and he had no intentions of catching the tram. Johnny was there for a purpose, and for that, he found a dark spotted and waited.

^^^

## Beginnings, Montana

"Can you adjust the fire, Frank?" Ellen asked softly.

"Sure." From laying on his side, Frank moved to the fireplace Joe swore would only be used for decorations, and he adjusted the flame higher on the kerosine lantern. "How's that?"

"Better."

"So." He made his way back. "What did I do to deserve this evening

alone with you?”

“You died.”

“Aides from that.”

Ellen brought her tea to her lips. “I think Dean has been over killed on me. Not that he didn’t enjoy the time together in the future, but a month alone was a lot.”

“You said you spent a lot of time with me.”

“Every night.”

“El, I have to know.” Frank propped himself up on his elbow.

Ellen knew what was coming. She covered her eyes with her arm and whined.

“Come on.” He pulled her arm down. “Tell me. How did I do as an old man.”

“I don’t know.”

“You said we made love.”

“Frank . . .”

“We didn’t make love? What, did we just have oral sex?”

“Frank.” Ellen laughed. “We made love.”

“Did I suck? I’m surprised I could even . . .”

She covered his mouth with her hand. “We were together. I don’t judge how good or bad you are, because I just love being with you.”

Smiling, Frank leaned down and kissed her. “I have to thank Dean for letting us hang out tonight. I didn’t think he’d let us after his getting pissed this afternoon that we slept together.”

“But that was over a month ago to me and Dean.” Ellen leaned up some. “Frank. Thank you for believing me.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“I mean, it sounds so far fetched.”

“El. You’re talking to me. I’ve been there, trust me.”

“I have something for you.” She reached into her back pocket. “Near the end, we went on a lot of sight seeing. I stole this from Billy.” She handed it to Frank. A picture.

It fell from Frank’s hand at first, and then Frank lost his balance some on his elbow. He laid on his back to view it more securely. “Oh, my God.”

“That was taken at the Freedom City Flag staff.”

“Center of New Bowman.”

“Yep.” Ellen peeked at the picture. “Me, you, Dean and Billy.”

“Oh, wow.” Frank smiled as he stared. “Look at Billy. And me.” He shifted his eyes to Ellen. “I look good for an old guy.”

“Yeah, you do.” She whispered out a compliment. “Hot.”

## Druga-Johnston/The Aragon Window

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Frank chuckled.

“What do you think, now?” Ellen asked.

“I think I learned something I never thought was possible.”

“What’s that?”

“The truth.” Frank nodded as he looked at the picture. “That the camera really does add fifteen pounds. Man, look at Dean is he round or what?”

From his fingers Ellen snatched the photo with a laugh. Frank exaggerated a lot, but Dean did look a little heavier than he was. Attributing that to the super short haircut, and hoping Frank was being nice by saying she didn’t look heavy, she handed the picture back.

^^^

## New Bowman, Montana

Sleeping,

Passed out perhaps in his drunken stupor, exhaustion. Either way Glen laid on his back out of it, snoring, one arm raised above his head and in his own slumber world. The one thing that was nice was the amount of trust there was in New Bowman. No one locked there doors. Johnny slipped right in.

He stood in Glen’s bedroom quietly, in the shadow cast by the moonlight. Watching and waiting. He wondered if Glen would feel it. He supposed he would seeing that the only way to administer Dean’s cardiac accelerator was directly through the sternum.

Syringe in hand Johnny walked to the bed lifting the extra pillow. He reached down gently to Glen’s chest and felt for his spot. Thumb on the plunger, Johnny raised the syringe.

Glen woke up.

Johnny smiled, placed the pillow over Glen’s face to muffle the scream and with everything he had he slammed the syringe into the sternum of Glen’s torso.

A wail of pain muffled and shrill came from Glen but only for a second. His body began to twitch and convulse, and just for the hell of it, Johnny removed the pillow.

Glen gasped for air in deep heaving breath’s. His face turned red and his arms shot out to the sides. Like they were playing air piano, Glen’s fingers tapped about until they reached for the last bit of his life, then Glen stopped moving.

Over the wide eyed Glen, Johnny fixed the covers and made him look as

## Druga-Johnston/The Aragon Window

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if he were asleep. He slipped the syringe back in his pocket and started to leave the room. Heart attack. No questions would be asked. Glen was an overweight, smoker who was in his forties. And though New Bowman lost a good tracker, something better occurred. Hal Slagel lost his alibi.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Beginnings, Montana  
November 15<sup>th</sup>

They had separated them in a ‘one for you, one for me’ fashion. And little did they realize how many of those footballs notes were actually tucked in the lining of Ellen’s purse until they had piles before them. Sharing coffee together in the early morning opening of those notes, Dean sat in the diningroom, Ellen on the bed.

“How do you want this filed?” Ellen spoke into the baby monitor.

“First do it by date. I know I dated them.” Dean replied then mumbled.

“We should have noted more on the outside. We have a thousand different subjects.”

“I know. Just separate it by date, then we’ll separate by subject next.”

“Really what we should do, Dean, Once we get them all organized, type them up.” Ellen suggested. “Bind them, it’ll be a lot easy.” She unfolded notes and in her reach for another one, Ellen stopped.

“And, we can also keep track of all the things we averted.” Dean looked curiously to his pile. “I mean, think about it. How . . . what is . . .” He picked up a football note and opened it. “Oh shit.”

“Dean.” Ellen spoke in a daze. “Hold on, I found something.”

“Me, too.” There were three things that had caught Dean’s eyes and made that football note look different. One, it wasn’t on notebook paper. Two, it wasn’t dated on the outside fold. And three it was thick. It ended up being two sheets of paper folded, and Dean’s hand sprung up to his mouth when he read the note . . . from Billy.

*–‘If your eyes are upon this, then I succeeded in the task me and my father set out to do. I want to apologize first for keeping you in the future. I know obstacles and mistakes held back an experiment that should have been finished. However, I knew if I caused mishap, and the experiment took longer, the more relaxed the watch would be, therefore increasing my chances to get you this note. The reason why will be obvious especially after you read the attached list. It had to be done. We had to try to stop it. We pray that you do. There are so many ways to do so . . .’*

Ellen’s hand trembled as she held the two pieces of paper that she had just unfolded. She lost her breath as she continued to read the words *Frank* had written. A note he had slipped into her purse. A plan he and Billy had worked out, in hopes that one of them would succeed in getting her and

Dean the warning. In Ellen's hands, was Frank's achievement.

*'At first we thought, just Dean and Ellen. Then we decided, we not go with the whole ball of wax' Frank's words said. 'On November 29<sup>th</sup>, in the year that you read this note, the Bev Hadly investigation is in full swing. My father suggested a series of group suspect meetings. It is during the first meeting, an explosion takes from Beginnings, the lives of every single person on the attached list. Including yourselves. I wish I could tell you who it is that does this, but I can not. If you stop this person ahead of time, you will stop a good deed that they do not long from now, and that will ripple time just as tragically. There are other ways to divert this nightmare. Find a way. For when all of you die, that was the day, that Beginnings passed away as well.'*

Down went her hand still clenching the note, and Ellen sped from the bedroom. "Dean!"

"El." Holding Billy's note Dean charged down the hall. They met mid way. He held his letter "Check this . . ."

"Look what I found." Ellen lifted up her note.

"Billy must have put this . . ."

"Frank put this in my purse."

Dean stopped. "Frank left a note? What does it say?"

"Dean. Dean we die. You me, a whole lot of us on this list. We die in an explosion." Ellen said panicked. "Wait." She looked curiously. "We didn't have that one on any of our guesses. Look at all these people." She handed Dean the list.

He compared it with the one Billy sent. "Same."

"What are we going to do?" Ellen asked. "We have to stop this."

"And soon." Dean took a breath. "Warn people. Warn everyone. Obviously someone wants one, if not all of us dead."

"We'll get everyone together as soon as possible, show our evidence and maybe as a group we can think of what to do. We have two weeks."

"Yeah, but let's not wait. Let's do this today. I have to go to New Bowman to distribute meds. I'll tell Hal and Elliott to be here. You get a hold of the rest. Tell them . . . tell them, Joe wants us together."

"Good idea. Everyone knows he's going to do one of these meetings that kills us. Dean, do you think they'll believe us?"

"Let's hope." Dean looked down to the long list of names headed 'death list'. "Oh, God, let's hope."

## Druga-Johnston/The Aragon Window

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### DEATH LIST

Dean Hayes

Ellen Hayes

Robbie Slagel

Henry Kusakari

Jenny Matoose

Hector Ramirez

Jess Boyens

Danny Hoi

Trish Koenig

Josephine

Jason Godrichson

Elliott Ryder



## CHAPTER THIRTY

Johnny lifted his hands in confusion at the array of folders spread before him on the cryo lab counter. “Is Dr. Dean nuts?”

Ellen shrugged. “He says he needs those reviewed in the computers. He has me doing stupid shit too, and I have important things to tend to.”

“I’ll be in this cryo lab all day.” Johnny complained. “I have forensics to do for this investigation.”

Ellen looked up brightly. “Johnny.” She walked to him. “Wanna hold off on this work for a few minutes?”

“Sure. Why?”

“I can use your help. Can I trust you?”

“Absolutely.”

“All right. Dean and I are trying to get all the suspects together. And . . . seeing how you’re on the investigation team, you’ll be able to spread the word to them and they’ll believe Joe is setting it up.”

“My Pap doesn’t know?”

“No, it’s a secret.”

Johnny tried not to smile. “Sure. I’ll tell some people.”

“Oh, great. Thanks.” Ellen heaved out a breath of relief. “Two mouths are better than one.”

So happy to oblige, Johnny looked. “Just tell me, who, where and when.”

Ellen did.

^^^

It was perfect. The fetal tissue sample Dean obtained from Bev’s uterus was perfect. The computer beeped and spewed forth the DNA gene sequence of the unborn child. Dean was grateful that he wouldn’t have to do the match up manually. Aside from taking too long, the computer match up sheet would be better evidence. Knowing that he would be the only one in the lab, behind a locked door, Dean programmed the computer to find a match.

He knew it wouldn’t take long, and he hoped it would be done before he had to go to the special meeting in a couple hours at warehouse seven. While waiting for the computer to do its job, Dean went to work on the letter to Joe and Frank that he would attach to those results.

^^^

In what was becoming a typical smug and annoyed fashion, John Matoose walked into the cryo lab. "You rang Master?" He said to Johnny.

Johnny laughed. "Oh, yeah. Hey John." Scratching the bridge of his nose, Johnny lifted a large cage. "Just thought I'd inform you. You know, since you are in maintenance and you're running around. Giving you the head start notice."

"Whatever. What?"

"See this cage?"

"Yeah. It's empty."

"Guess what was in it?" Johnny waited for John's 'who cares' shrug. "One of those killer babies Dean has. Any how . . ." Nonchalantly, Johnny put the cage on the floor. "He got out. Running amuck somewhere. And thought you'd keep your eye out. Hate to see it show up at the . . . I don't know, what's Uncle Robbie call it? Oh, yeah. His TNT shelter. Hate to see it show up there, heard Uncle Robbie is working on perimeter traps all . . ." Johnny snickered when John Matoose flew from the cryo lab. " . . . day." With a breath of his arrogance, Johnny shook his head. "Man." He picked up the cage and headed to one of the back rooms. He stepped inside and looked at the chained up killer baby sleeping heavily under sedation. "I love setting people up. Hey you." Johnny kept his distance from the baby as he spoke to it. "Time to put you back."

^^^

It took him about six times whistling it in his walk, but Robbie finally put his finger on the tune that was stuck in his head. The theme from *Maverick*, why he even knew that was beyond him. Checking his clipboard in his movement to his shelter, Robbie made a mind priority list of what he wanted to accomplish before that meeting in warehouse seven his dad had called.

Stepping inside his TNT shelter, Robbie stopped when he nearly walked into him leaving. "John."

John Matoose looked frazzled. "Hey, Robbie."

"What are you doing in here?"

"Oh." He let out a breath. "I heard a rumor that one of those killer babies flew in here. I was just checking. Sorry. But . . . all clear."

Giving an odd look to John as he left, Robbie shrugged and closed the

door to the simple shack. Moving to the table Robbie deemed his desk, he paused to close the lid to one of his explosive boxes. Not thinking much about it, Robbie sat at his desk to work.

^^^

Dean checked out the time with a loud, ‘shit.’ he was really hoping to have the paternity test result before he had to go to the meeting, but that didn’t look like it was going to be a reality. Pacing faster may have helped that gut he had acquired, but it didn’t help the computer match up any faster. Taking off his lab coat, Dean walked to the computer to put it on pause until he returned. He heard the signal beep.

“Yes.” He clenched his fist and ran the rest of the way there. He looked at the flashing message. ‘Match found’ and then the glee of the moment vanished when Dean saw who the father was. “Oh, my God.” Not having time to dawdle over the shocking news, Dean hit print and flew to the other computer where the letter to Joe and Frank was complete. Complete that was, with the exception of the baby’s father’s name. Dean, with trembling fingers filled in that single blank. Two copies he would make. One for his records, the other for the investigation. Knowing he could spare the few seconds, he grabbed a folder while the documents printed. He’d place the letter and results in that folder, then before he heading off to the ‘warning’ meeting, just in the event something would happen, Dean planned to leave those results on Joe’s desk.

^^^

Jason Godrichson, cigarette dangling from his thin lips, paused in the doorway to warehouse seven. He gave a queer look to Ellen who stood by the door. “Why are you playing hostess?”

“Joe asked.” Ellen answered.

“Uh-huh.” Jason nodded and peeked inside. He looked at the people who sat in a circle of chairs. “Where’s Joe?”

“He’ll be here. Go inside.” Ellen gave him a slight push.

Huffing out some irritation with his cigarette smoke, Jason stepped inside.

Ellen looked at her watch. “Come on, Dean.” She spoke soft. “The longer this takes the less secret this will . . .” She smiled when she saw him running her way.

“Sorry.” He said. “Everyone here?” Dean caught his breath.

Ellen pulled out the list, looked into the warehouse then back to Dean.  
“All here.”

“Good. Let’s do this.”

“Dean. What took you so long?” Ellen asked.

“El . . . Bev’s baby’s father. Wait until I tell you. But this is more important.” Taking hold of Ellen’s arm, Dean led her all the way inside.

The door to warehouse seven closed.

^^^

Joe let out a taunting moan as he stepped in his office with Frank.  
“Christ, and you believed her?”

“Dad. Why not?” Frank shut the door. “Why would she lie?”

“I don’t know. But it sounds unbelievable.”

“Not as unbelievable as this.” From his coat pocket Frank pulled out the picture Ellen gave him from the night before.

If Joe didn’t know the impossibility Beginnings still had of developing a good picture, he wouldn’t have believed what his eyes laid upon. “My God.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Did she say why Billy came back and snatched her up.”

“No.” Frank answered. “She was very vague. A mystery.”

“Yeah, like the mystery of how people got the idea we were holding a group suspect meeting today.” Shaking his head while still looking at the picture, Joe sat down. “There has to be a reason why . . .” His eyes caught glimpse of the folder on his desk with the huge black lettering that read ‘Joe, Urgent!’ “What is this?”

“Open it.”

“Thank you Frank. I didn’t think of that.” Setting down the picture, Joe flipped open the folder. “Christ.”

“What?”

“Christ.” Joe lifted the letter.

“What!”

“I don’t believe this.”

“What!”

“Will you hold your goddamn horses!” Joe blasted. “Listen to this. From Dean.”

“A letter from Dean? What? Is he resigning?”

“No, Frank. Listen, you idiot.” He cleared his throat and began to read.  
*‘Joe and Frank. I know you may get angry for this, but I feel it was something vital in the investigation that you overlooked. Enclosed is the proof. A removal of Bev’s Uterus was*

## Druga-Johnston/The Aragon Window

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*done secretly. Since I was not the father, and Kevin was concluded to be out of town, the paternity, I felt played importance. I'm sorry, Joe but the baby's father is . . .*" Joe handed the letter to Frank.

His lips barely moved when he looked down to the name. The stock word slurred from his lips as Frank dropped to the chair. "Fuck." He closed his eyes for a second before reading the letter again. "I can't believe this. The father of Bev's baby was . . . Henry?"

^^^

All thirteen of them gathered in warehouse seven. And Dean and Ellen seemed to stand center of a wave of ridicule. How long did Dean try? Ellen for that matter. Almost an hour had passed and still no one wanted to buy it. Ellen only wished she had the picture as a back up proof. But she had given it to Frank.

Robbie didn't say much. He kind of chuckled and enjoyed the break whether founded or not.

"Please." Ellen held her hands out to everyone. So at a loss she felt, wanting desperately, like a child to cover her ears. "Listen."

"I'm sorry, El." Dean told her quietly. "I am really sorry. But it was worth a shot."

"I can't believe they think we're joking." Ellen said.

Henry overheard this. "And why not? El, this sounds so . . . so stupid."

Hector, not wanting to sound snide, tried to give his feelings. "And what proof do you have. Notes your own hand took. A picture Danny Hoi could have doctored up."

Danny stood up with a firm point to Hector. "I resent that. If there is a photograph of sixty two year old Frank. I didn't create it."

Jess shook his head. "This is a Danny and Ellen practical joke. What about the coin. Your face is on it."

"I obviously made an impact on the future." Danny said. "I did not. Did not create that coin."

His arms unfolded and when Hal spoke, he seemed to silence everyone. "I have a question. Just . . . just a simple one." he tapped his finger on his lips. "There are twelve people on that death list including yourselves. There are thirteen people in this room. The reason for the difference in figures, is because I am not on that list. Why, Ellen, why in God's name am I here?"

"You're Hal." Ellen spoke like a child. "You could help. Everyone always believes you."

"If . . ." Jason Godrichson spoke up. "If I may just interject." He sat crossed legs in the chair, one arm draped across his waist while the other held his cigarette. "Let's just say Ellen and Dean are being very serious. Say there is a photo. The coin is real. They went to the future for over a month. Now . . . they have warned all of us, excluding Hal, dies together. When does this happen, Ellen?"

"Two weeks from today."

"How?" Jason asked.

"I told you. The first group suspect meeting of Joe's."

"I see." Jason nodded and hit his cigarette. "Isn't this the first group suspect meeting?"

Ellen snickered. "No. It's a fake one."

"Really." Jason said calmly. "When, Ellen, just when do you ever know any of us to all be in the same room together?"

Robbie's loud, 'shit' rang out as he jumped to his feet and raced to the door. His hand tried the knob that wouldn't budge. "Shit. It's locked."

At that instant, squealing chairs and vocal worries filled the room.

Hal rushed over. "Maybe it's stuck."

Robbie shoved on the metal door. "No." He grunted as he shoved again. "I think it's secured from the outside."

"Damn it." Hal turned the metal knob as everyone hoarded behind him pelting him with questions.

"What's going on." Trish asked with panic.

"I'm sorry." Ellen said.

"Did someone trap us in?" Danny asked. "Should we all try?"

"Can't it open?" Hector asked. "It has to be a mistake."

Dean grabbed on to Ellen. "Please tell us we didn't just cause this."

Henry, with anger faced them. "You did! I can't believe how stupid you are."

"Fuck you Henry!" Dean screamed. "We were trying to help!"

"By what!" Henry yelled back. "Killing us!"

"Knock it off!" Hal blasted. "Fighting isn't going to help. We have to get this door. Now let me think." Hal said trying to block out the questions and noise.

"Robbie!" Jess called out in a horrid cry over the noise.

Silence.

Robbie zoomed a focus view to Jess who was huddle in the corner in a squat with Elliott.

Jess looked up with panic. "I found it. It's one of yours. We have a minute."

Amongst the screams, Robbie's heart sank. His ears filled with blood. "Hal, keep trying that door!" If he had wings he would have been flying across the warehouse to that corner. Tossing chairs out of his way, passed Josephine who sat calmly. He dropped to the floor by Jess. "It's time activated." Robbie touched his fingers upon it.

*Fifty seconds.*

Robbie shook his head. "It's pass code protected. Elliott. Grab Josephine, get her by the door. And help Hal."

Elliott took off as instructed.

Jess looked at Robbie. "What are we going to do."

"I'm going to try to stop this. You go help Hal."

"No. I'm helping you."

Hal stepped back from the door. "Clear away." With a full sped bull charge he rammed shoulder first into the door. Nothing. Hal stepped back in a hurry and tried again.

*Thirty-eight seconds.*

Robbie tried to calm his hands, it wouldn't help if they shook. Turning the screw to the detonation device, Robbie hurriedly to try remove the lid.

"Thirty-seconds." Jess informed.

"Almost there." Robbie took out the second screw and moved to the third.

"Twenty-five."

"I'm hurrying Jess, I'm hurry." Out went the screw, Robbie went to the fourth.

A loud grunt of pain came from Hal as he seared into the door again.

"Captain. "Elliott called out. "Want me to . . ."

"No. I'll get this" Hal said with determination. And with a look on his face to match his will, Hal charged that door again.

*Fifteen seconds.*

Lid off. "Were in." Robbie said.

"Do you have cutters?" Jess asked.

"I have to take them off."

"Carefully." Jess told him.

*Twelve seconds.*

"There isn't enough time." Robbie wiped the sweat from his brow, His fingers moved to the wires.

"You can do this." Jess looked at him with hope. "I know you can."

"Get by the door, Jess." Robbie ordered.

"Here, there. Does it matter?"

*Eight seconds.*

## Druga-Johnston/The Aragon Window

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The ricocheting of Hal's smashing into the door only caused the panic cries to increase in intensity and volume. Pleading at Hal to hurry. To do it. To get them out. The magnitude of confusion and hysteria only made Hal try harder He wasn't giving up.

Neither was Robbie.

*Six seconds*

"Jess." Robbie whimpered out. His fingers on the right wire. "Almost there."

"Come on." Jess beckoned.

*Four seconds.*

Robbie's moan was painful as his fingers pulled. "No! It's soldered."

*Three seconds.*

The crack of the door rang out along with the screams. "I got it!" Hal cried out.

"Robbie let's go!" Jess shouted.

"Jess. It's too late."

*One second.*

**BOOM!**

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