

# **OUSTING OF PHINEAS**

By  
JACQUELINE DRUGA-JOHNSTON



## CHAPTER ONE

November 15<sup>th</sup>  
Beginnings, Montana

It wasn't Robbie Slagel's nine years in the Army that gave him the ardent ability to create a baseball size explosive device capable of wiping out half a city block. It was his years in Beginnings and the dementia of family blood, coupled with the time and the freedom to practice until perfect. The only thing that Robbie knew, was that the device was never tested as a whole. His calculations were always lessened for safety's sake. Blast more than fire was its virtue. Theoretically, when properly detonated, one 'slam bomb' as he called it, would physically clear a path of anything immediately around it. In theory. And Robbie prayed with everything he had, *that* theory was wrong.

One spark, in thirty seconds from the detonation unit, if Robbie failed, would be the kind of theory test he never wanted to see. The bomb couldn't be moved once the clock started ticking, and it had. Though he didn't set that bomb and place it in the warehouse, Robbie felt it his responsibility to stop it. He created it, he designed it. He knew it. And much more than just *his* life depended on it. The lives of those trapped in the metal structure, hung in the balance. As he worked, Robbie tried not to think of the door that his brother Hal desperately tried to break down.

Hal's body weight and determination was his weapon against a door locked from the outside. Beckoning cries from the others in the room fed him. Back Hal would charge, then full speed ahead ramming into that door with everything he had.

All the others could do was watch, pray and stay close, waiting for the opening. If anyone could break it down, it was Hal.

Elliott Ryder stood back some and to the right waiting with Henry, Danny and Hector, like a four man human plow, to shove the others through when the bright of the sun outside called their freedom of release. But it didn't matter. In a way they were grouped. The four women inadvertently, in a chivalrous move were shifted as close as possible to the door without hindering Hal.

Ellen's arm extended back between the bodies of Jenny and Trish in a desperate reach to touch Dean. Jason Godrichson's tall body blocked Dean and hindered her from seeing him. But she felt him, her fingertips barely gripping with hope to those of her husbands. '*Come on Hal. Please. Please.*' Ellen prayed in her mind.

The perseverance of brothers. Hal on one side, Robbie on the other.

Robbie focused on that bomb and the screws he worked to pull out of that unit to stop the detonation. Jess Boyens, stayed close. Support, friendship, whatever the reason, he wasn't leaving Robbie's side.

*Fifteen seconds.*

The final screw came out and Robbie lifted the lid. "Were in."

"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.*

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, whipping his arm down, grabbing hold of Robbie's, and in a charge, yanked him to his feet.

"Jess. It's too late." In his run Robbie yelled.

*One second.*

**BOOM!**

^^^

Along with the vibration of the floor, the window in Joe Slagel's office shattered with the close proximity explosion. He shielded his head dropping the paper he held.

Frank spun, hovered in protection of the flying glass and reached for the door of the office flinging it open and racing out. He looked for the sound, his dark eyes peering in horror at the rain of debris that fell in large pieces nearby. "Oh my God."

"Where!" Joe cried out as he flew from his office.

"Warehouses!" Frank took off running. "Call for units. Now!"

Right behind his son, radio to his mouth, Joe moved at his top speed. "I

need fire units one and . . . no.” He saw the smoke. “Better make that all available men report with equipment to the warehouse sector. Stat.”

^^^

Dean’s bearings were lost for only a moment just after he landed hard to the ground. He heard the loud crashes of metal of the warehouse fly and land around him, but his focus was on his fingers and the sensation he last had of touching Ellen. Dean stood up.

Panic.

“Ellen!” He called, the ripping of the fire behind him drowning him out. It looked like night the way the smoke blocked out the sky. But it light enough to see the layers of metal and wood scattered about. “Ellen!” Dean didn’t see her. Hear her. Immediately, calling out, he begin lifting and tossing debris. “Ellen!”

From under a piece of metal, Elliott Ryder stood. He heard the call of Ellen’s name and the desperation that it was delivered. He saw Dean looking. In fact, at that very second, Dean was the only one Elliot saw standing amongst the thick layer of dirt and destruction that had blanketed around.

With a cough and choke, Hal rolled over and rubbed his eyes. If he didn’t hear Dean in the distance some, and the sound of flames ,Hal wouldn’t have realized how far he was thrown. He lifted his head to see, he was about twenty feet from the warehouse. “Oh, my God.” Hal whispered out as he stood up cringing when a sharp pain shot through his leg. He saw the smoke that billowed, not warehouse seven, but the one next to it. Warehouse seven was a few sticks of a frame remaining. Blown away from the inside out. Despite any pain, any fog in his consciousness, Hal charged forward.

Frank arrived. His body froze when he did. The last thing he expected to see was that there were people near the explosion.

“Frank.” Dean rushed over to him “I can’t find her. I can’t find Ellen.”

Before Frank could respond, Dean had flown off again and he saw his men and much of the community racing toward the scene. “Everyone! Start checking the debris!” He moved to help look and saw Hal.

“Frank.” Hal ran, looking as desperate and lost as one man could. “I thought I got us out.”

“Us?” Frank felt his body shuddered. “We have people buried here!” He ordered out. “Let’s start looking.”

Just as Hal, steeped to help execute Frank’s order, his head turned to the left to see through the destruction of warehouse seven, warehouse eight was ablaze. A huge blast hole in the side of its wall. “Oh, my God.”

“What?” Frank asked.

“Robbie.” Hal charged forward running through the remnants of warehouse seven.

There was hesitation in Frank. Where to go, what do to. He looked around at the magnitude of hands, including his father, that searched quickly through the pile of debris. Seeing Hal run alone, that was where Frank knew he had to be. Into what was left of warehouse seven Frank saw the reason for all the dirt. A crater, ten feet deep, and eight in diameter graced where the end of the warehouse once was.

“I found Jess!” Hal called out from warehouse eight.

Going in to help and ready to step through the blast hole, had Frank not turned his head to the left from the heat, he wouldn’t have seen him. Robbie. “I found Robbie. You get Jess. Oh, God. Oh, God.”

Not far from Frank, Robbie was. On the far corner of warehouse eight . . . literally. It was evident by Robbie’s position that he had been picked up and thrown by the force of the blast. Hurlled in the air, outward, landing and getting pinned high up, between the edge of the structure and the huge piece of wall, that not only hid him from the chest down, but held him there.

“Robbie.” Frank examined the metal that had him pinned

Robbie’s head hung forward and toward his shoulder.

“Hey.” Frank, fearful, lifted his hand to Robbie’s neck.

Robbie opened his eyes slightly. “Frank.”

“Thank God. I’ll get you out. I’ll get you out, little brother.” Frank felt the wall behind Robbie. It was hot, but not burning, and Frank had a few seconds. He didn’t know how badly Robbie was hurt. Before he freed him, he had to assess. Lifting the metal wall some, Frank looked, stopped and replaced it.

Robbie’s cry of pain was weak.

Frank blinked long then went to Robbie’s other side, whipping off his belt as he did. “One second. Give me one second.” Belt in hand, Frank hurriedly placed the belt around the top of Robbie’s right arm, only an inch or so from the shoulder, and Frank, secured it as tight as he could. “Ready?” Frank asked. It had to be done fast and almost in one move. He slipped his hand through and secured Robbie as best as he could. Then with the wedge of his body weight, Frank shoved out that piece of wall, leaned into Robbie and let his brother fall over his shoulder.

He had to get Robbie help.

Barely did he have Robbie, and Frank turned full speed and raced to where Dean was.

The small tiny cry for help was so muffled, Elliott couldn’t distinguish who it was. It was buried beneath the calls out of those who searched the rubble not far from him.

“Help.”

Located. Elliott saw the piece of roof that appeared to cover someone. He raced to it and lifted it. He saw the red of the hair tainted with blood. "Jenny." He reached down for her and Jenny moaned. "I'll get you . . ." Moving Jenny, Elliott stopped.

How many were still unaccounted for, Joe wondered as he made his way over to where Dean was with Jess.

Jess was burned bad, mostly on his back. Dean shook his head in his assessment. "Get him to the clinic," He instructed Dan from security. "Stat. Tell Melissa I said to get him on antibiotics, and sedate him heavily. I'll deal with as soon as I can."

"Got it." Dan replied then looked for aid.

"Dr. Hayes!" Elliott called in the distance.

Dean looked as he stood.

"I found her!" Elliott yelled. "I found Ellen. She's fine. She's under Jenny Matoose."

Joe sighed in relief and looked to a grateful and smiling Dean. "We have Godrichson, and Henry still not accounted for."

"Dean!" Frank charged forward with Robbie over his shoulder. "Dean!"

Joe's heart dropped and he immediately took off his shirt in the race to his youngest son. "Dear God."

"Dean." Covered in blood Frank was, Robbie's blood, as he laid him down. "He's gonna bleed to death."

Taking Joe's shirt, Dean, with a sick feeling to his stomach, added the extra pressure needed to what was left of Robbie's right arm. A clean cut, four inches above the elbow took off his limb. "We seal this. And do it now. He could die on the way to the clinic." Dean looked at Joe who knelt by Robbie. "It's your choice. I'll repair the damage I do later, but I have to stop this bleeding."

"Do it." Joe said with a nod and he laid his hand upon Robbie's head. "Hurry." Closer to Robbie, Joe moved, eyes focusing on him. He leaned in a hover over his son, hand on Robbie's cheek, lips close to his ear. "I'm right here. Don't you go anywhere on me. You hear me."

"Dad." Robbie shivered out his name.

"I'm right here."

Hal's heart sunk when Dean showed him the still smoldering piece of wood.

"Hold this." Dean told Hal, then bent down to Robbie. "Frank." Dean's eyes raised. "I need your reminder flask."

From his back, pocket, Frank pulled the smallest of flasks out and handed it to Dean.

Dean uncapped it.

Ellen's inability to walk straight was cured as she turned the bend and saw Dean by Robbie. "No." She flew to where they were.

Dean heard her frantic cries as he poured the contents of the flask over Robbie's arm. "Elliott! Keep her back.!" Dean tossed the flask. "Hal." He held out his hand for the wood.

"No!" Ellen screamed.

"Hold him Joe." Dean instructed. "Hold him tight."

Moving under Robbie's head, Joe slipped a hold around Robbie. Cradling his trembling son who twitched out of control in shock. "It's all right." He buried his lips to Robbie, holding tighter. "It's all right." As much as he could, he held on to him, and then Joe prepared.

"Frank." Dean said. "On my call, you do undo the tourniquet."

Frank only nodded and secured his fingers in a 'ready' mode on that belt.

Seeing what was about to entail, Hal turned his head to the right. Frank's eyes closed.

Dean took a deep breath, bringing the hot burning wood forward. "Now, Frank!" Off when the belt, and an agonizing sizzle seared out when Dean brought the piercing wood to Robbie's injury.

Head flinging back, Robbie's back arched violently almost out of his father's hold as he cried out a wail of pain that reverberated through every single person around.

In the silence the cry brought about, an uncontrolled heartbreaking sob muffled from Joe within the clutch he had on Robbie. He didn't want to let go and his father's anguish for Robbie intensified as Robbie convulsed more. How long would it take, Dean seemed to hold that wood to his son's arm for an eternity, but Joe knew it was only seconds.

"A little more, Joe." Dean worked, wanting to just close his eyes to the sounds of Robbie's pain. "Hold him. He'll . . . he'll pass out in a second."

With, *'My God, stop this'* raging through his mind, Hal looked down to Frank. How in control Frank was, just watching, not flinching. Wishing he could feel how Frank looked, Hal knew he couldn't. He also knew he couldn't watch anymore, and he stepped away and to Ellen. He said nothing, didn't ask for permission, he just took hold of her from Elliott, and needing something to hold onto, he found it in Ellen. To his chest he brought her, taking relief in her arms that clung to him as well. Hand gripping the back of her head, Hal's eyes moved back to his little brother.

Robbie passed out.

"Done." Dean tossed the piece of wood and dusted off his hands. He reached to check Robbie's pulse. "We have to get him to the clinic." He looked over his shoulder and spotted a jeep. "Frank, can you carry him fast to that."

"Absolutely." Without hesitation, Frank slipped his arms under Robbie. He looked once to his father before he secure his brother, and lifted him at



the same time as he stood.

Turning just after he stood, Dean finally got the chance to breath out his alleviation at the sight of Ellen.

Hal slipped from the embrace. "I . . ." He pointed to the jeep where Frank was laying Robbie.

"I'll be right there." Ellen told him then felt the hand on her shoulder. Turning around she saw Dean, and without hesitation, Ellen went directly into his arms.

Dean held her. "Are you all right?" Feeling her nod, he stepped back and laid his hands on her face. "O.K., can you handle this? I know it's Robbie, but I need you with me on this one? Can you?"

Ellen's slid her hand to Dean's. "Let's go." She turned with him and headed toward the jeep.

Joe felt as if all his strength had left him. He stood slowly, knowing where he had to be. But getting Robbie there first, along with Dean and Ellen, was most important. He watched the jeep, without delay speed toward center town. Ellen and Robbie in the back, Frank and Dean up front, Hal following on foot.

He was the leader, and he had to remember that at that moment. Joe knew he had to regain his composure. How could he? His mind was not only on the devastation that occurred, but on his son and the missing people from the warehouse, still buried under the debris.

"We found Henry." A male voice said behind Joe. "We have to bring him to the clinic. He's alive. But unconscious."

"Um . . ." Joe blinked and nodded. "I'll be right there." He looked at the Beginnings' security man who walked off. Mark was it? Joe wasn't sure. And then he saw Elliott, sifting, like the others through the debris. Elliott Ryder would be his salvation. "Elliott." Heavy his words were as Joe called out and walked to him. "Do you know how many . . ." Joe searched for the words.

"Three left unaccounted for." Elliott answered. "No casualties, yet."

"Can I ask a favor. Can you . . ." Joe rubbed his eyes. "Can you take charge here. My mind . . ."

"You don't need to ask. Go." Elliott nodded. "I'll keep you abreast."

"Thank you." Joe reached out giving a firm squeeze to Elliott's arm before turning and walking away. He only wanted to get to that clinic. Perhaps once his mind was put to ease about Robbie, he could clearly concentrate on what had happened. And Joe didn't only have Robbie on his mind, he had the others that were injured as well. How many? How badly? The only comfort there was in the whole mess, was they hadn't lost a life. And as long as it stayed that way, they were 'one up' on the tragedy.

What was it about the call of his name from Mark, that made Joe stop? It wasn't excited, panicked. In fact, it had no emotion to it at all. And *that* scared Joe. Slowly he looked back to see Mark.

“Joe.” Mark gazed up. The look on his face all but said his findings weren’t good.

*Who was it?* Was the first thought that came to Joe’s mind as he back tracked and made his way to Mark.

Mark swallowed heavily. “I’m sorry.”

Joe slowly bent down to see. His gut gnawed with a sickening feeling and his eyes closed. They no longer were ‘one up’. Beginnings was ‘one down’. And ‘one down’ a very good man. Laying on his side, his body showing the effects of the explosion that killed him, was Jason Godrichson.

## CHAPTER TWO

The pop was loud in the waiting room of the clinic and it caused a pain that made Hal want to grunt loudly. But he didn't. He clenched his jaws tightly and took relief in the pain that disappeared quickly.

Holding the arm brace in his teeth by the strap, Frank removed his hands from Hal's shoulder.

"Thanks." Hal told him.

"Give me that." Frank laid Hal's arm in the brace.

"Frank I don't need . . ."

"Yeah, you do. If you don't keep this thing secure, at least at first, forget about a range of motion in swinging that fuckin sword."

"Thanks." Hal watched his brother secure the arm brace.

"You need them to check out your leg." Frank told him.

"I'll be fine. The others should be first."

With sadness, Joe entered the waiting room, calling out a single word that said it all to his sons. "Boys." In a deep nostril inhale, he took a step to Frank and embraced him. Then after, before saying anything, he embraced Hal. He exhaled loudly with a slow run of his hand down his face. "Jason's been killed. We just found him."

Frank's head turned with a slow shake. "Man."

"Dad." Hal laid a hand on Joe's back. "I am very sorry. I know you two were friends."

"He was a good man." Joe placed his hands in his pockets. "A very good man."

"How's it going out there?" Frank asked.

Joe just shook his head. "I left Elliott in charge."

Hal nodded. "Good choice."

"Capt. Slagel." The call of Hal's name was made in the waiting room.

Hal looked up. "Blue." New Bowman's doctor stood in the doorway.

"They got me here as soon as they could." Blue said with a shake of his hand to Hal. "What happened to your shoulder?"

"Threw it out." Hal answered.

Frank interjected. "Tell him to get that leg looked at. I think it's broken."

"Broken?" Joe questioned. "He's standing on it."

"Dad, I'm telling you." Frank said. "It's broken. Tell him."

"Hal."

"In a minute." Hal looked to Blue. "They really do need you now. The Doctors Hayes are with my brother. And the rest of the small staff is very busy."

"Just tell me where to go." Blue stated.

“Patrick said he’d be in an examining room. Find him. He’s a health aid here. Just into the hall and to the left. Can’t miss it. Thank you.” Hal told him.

Blue backed up in a hurry and followed Hal’s directions.

Another heavy sigh came from Joe and he looked at his watch. “Anything on Robbie yet?”

Frank shook his head. “Ellen promised she would come see us before doing anything else.”

“What a mess.” Joe walked with the heaviest of slumps over to the couch and not only with his body, but his soul, he seemed to sink into the cushion.

~~~~~

A clank on the tray of the instrument Dean used to cut the bandage with, was Ellen’s signal that it was over. Slowly she lowered her face mask and walked to the head of the operating table to Robbie. She leaned over him, kissing him softly. “You did good.” She whispered in his ear.

Dean looked up from his supplies. “As soon as I clean up, I have to head and relieve Johnny on Jess. Can you help handle the others. I’ll probably be in with Jess for a while.”

“Yeah. It shouldn’t be too much. You heard Patrick. Blue arrived.”

“Good thing.” Dean moved to the sink. “Of course, Patrick wouldn’t give us a progress update on anyone. Which tells me something bad happened.”

From her view of Robbie, Ellen looked at Dean. “Why do you say that?”

“If all was fine. Why wouldn’t he just say it.”

“Did we do this Dean?” Ellen asked looking down to Robbie. “Did we?”

Dean’s heart sunk with that question. “No, Ellen. We didn’t. Imagine if in two weeks, we didn’t know that a bomb was there. That letter would have been a reality.”

“It can still happen.”

Shaking the water off his hands, Dean grabbed a towel. “I highly doubt that. They failed. Now whoever did this is in the light. They won’t try again. Nothing this big.”

“Swell.”

A brief second was taken by Dean to watch Ellen so sadly look down to Robbie. “El. You better go tell Joe how he is.”

“How is he Dean? In your opinion.”

Dean took a deep breath. “In my opinion, Robbie Slagel is a very lucky man. The next twenty-four hours are crucial. But I am hopeful. I want to

keep him out for the remainder of the day, give him that edge.”

Agreeing with a nod, Ellen kept her eyes on Robbie. His eyes closed, a peaceful look upon his face. “I can’t believe this happened to him.” Her hand reached to his face.

“Well, this grief all of you are feeling for him, it’s very founded, but he can’t feel that from you. He’ll have enough of his own to deal with.”

“I know.”

“What we just did, El.” Dean moved to her. “We only made sure he was sealed up and bandaged properly. Sadly, this is only round one. And that horrible scene we witnessed this afternoon . . .” He laid his hand on Ellen’s shoulder moving into her with comfort. “It’s going to seem minuscule to Robbie in the wake of what he has to face.”

^^^

Frank pretty much kept the same position in the waiting room. Arms folded, a lean against the doorway, waiting and watching for Ellen to come down the hall. He knew, like his father, he couldn’t think of anything until he heard about Robbie. He lifted from that lean when Hal limped in, wearing a pair of blue hospital scrubs. “Where are your clothes?”

Hal rolled his eyes. “Blue wouldn’t let me keep them. He said not until he checks out the x-ray.” He stepped to Frank with a low voice, and eyes focused on Joe just sitting there. “How’s Dad?”

Frank widened his eyes. “I haven’t seen him like this ever.”

“It’s Robbie.”

“True.” Frank agreed.

“And we all know . . . Elliott.” Hal looked up.

“Of course we do. What the fuck does he have to do with it?” Frank asked.

“Asshole.” Hal smacked the back of his hand into Frank’s arm, then pointed. “Elliott.”

Joe stood up when Elliott walked in the room.

Elliott looked about the faces of the Slagel men. “Anything on Robbie?”

“Not yet.” Hal answered. “What’s going on out there?”

“We sifted through.” Elliott explained, keeping his eyes mostly on Joe. “Seems mostly head injuries from the blast. We found Trish. Head injury. We think a broken leg, not sure. They’re bringing her in now.”

“What about . . .” Joe hesitated to asked. “What about Josephine?”

“You aren’t going to like this.” Elliott said.

“Christ.” Joe closed his eyes.

Elliott continued. “She was home.”

“What?” Joe looked up. “Home?”

“Home.” Elliott repeated with a tossing up of his hand.

Hands on hips, Frank just glared in confusion. “Wasn’t she in that

warehouse.”

“Oh, yeah.” Elliott nodded. “And that’s what started me thinking. I was trying to position everyone in my mind where they were. And I remembered her being right by the door. There was a lot of confusion, but I had a hunch that she ran out when the door opened. So I went down and checked. Sure enough. She was home. Drunk as could be. She said, she ran and kept on running.”

Joe grumbled. “Why didn’t she come . . . never mind. It’s Josephine. At least she’s all right. Hal, what the hell happened at that warehouse.”

“Dad, it’s a very long story to get into.” Hal explained. “And we will, when with a clear mind we can all sit down. But basically, we were in there . . .”

Ellen’s voice interrupted in her walk into the waiting room. “And we would have all been dead had it not been for Hal. He’s responsible for saving us.” She walked up to him and hugged him. “Thank you again.” She moved to Elliott. “Thank you for finding me.”

“Ellen.” Joe spoke up. “How’s Robbie.”

Ellen turned around. “Robbie is . . .” She exhaled. “He’s doing better than we expected. It looks good.”

Joe closed his eyes in relief. “When can I see him?”

“Now, if you like. But . . .” Bodily, she stopped them from leaving. “Don’t try to wake him. Just say a quiet hello and let him rest. We need him sedated. He’s in room 57.”

Nodding, Joe laid his hand on Ellen’s cheek and kissed her. “Thank you. Let’s go boys.”

Frank slid his hand over Ellen’s face as he walked by her. But before Hal could limp out the door, she blocked him. “Not you, Hal.”

“Not me?” Hal asked.

“Not you.” Ellen told him. “You have to get to exam room three. It’s open . . .”

“But . . .”

“But nothing.” She pointed. “You have a broken leg.” She backed up. “Elliott, get him off that leg please.”

Hal stood speechless watching Ellen leave. “Great. Just great. A broken leg.” He started to walk to the hall.

“Captain. Ellen said to get you off that leg. Shall I carry you now?”

Hal paused and glared back, then after a grumble, he limped off.

^^^

Pieces of metal, glass and wood wove outward and deeply in the flaky charred flesh of Jess’ back. Johnny Slagel was disgusted. He couldn’t sniffle, he couldn’t cough. He couldn’t even talk for fear of spreading germs. Not at

that moment, as he removed the tiny pieces of debris. Not that he cared if Jess got an infection, but Melissa was there, monitoring his vitals and dabbing the blood that seeped out from every small chunk.

His plan had failed, and even if he wanted to, something that grandstand couldn't be tried again. If he had the communications means, what Johnny preferred to do, was just call George, and get the hell out of Beginnings. But he was stuck even longer, and laying incapacitated and useless to him was one of his insider team. He knew he was back singling them out again, the suspects, most importantly Hal. And Johnny had already set that plan in motion to bring him down. Even if Hal wasn't the one who killed Bev, in Johnny's mind, Hal was just a big asshole who deserved every ounce of torment he received.

"Johnny." Dean's voice called over the speaker in the operating room. "I'll replace you. Can you step into the hall."

Thinking, *'Thank fuckin God'*, Johnny nodded to Melissa and stepped back from Jess. He couldn't even remove a glove or mask until he went into the wash area first. And he did, quickly, wanting to just get on with the day. But he knew Dean was going to give him some lame job like checking for infections or bandaging heads.

"How's my uncle." Johnny asked with slighted concern when he met Dean in the hall.

"Holding his own." Dean told him. "I need you to assist Ellen and Blue."

"Absolutely." Johnny said. "No problem." His mind cringed. "What do you need?"

"Ellen and Blue are checking out head injuries. I know you haven't done this often, but I have faith in you. Can you set Hal's leg?"

"Excuse me?"

"He broke his leg."

"Sure. I'll set it."

Dean laid his hand on Johnny's arm. "Good. And uh, Johnny . . ." Dean paused before going in the wash are. "Hal's adrenaline is probably slowing down now. He's gonna feel that break. So be gentle. OK?" He slipped through the doors.

Sadistically, Johnny grinned.

^^^

Dr. Blue checked the intravenous, mostly saline fluids, going into Jenny's arm. He turned and looked at John who stared at Jenny, one arm crossed over his waist as he bit his nails. "Your wife will be fine. She has a concussion and is resting. That's for the best."

"What about the baby?"

Heavily Blue walked to John. "Mr. Matoose . . ."

"No." John closed his eyes.

"I did all I could. I even interrupted Dr. Hayes from his procedure. But your wife, the baby, had already . . . I didn't detect a heartbeat, and the ultrasound confirmed the baby had died in utero. I'm very sorry." Pausing behind John, Blue laid a hand on his shoulder then slowly walked out.

To the bed, John stepped. His hands gripped the bottom of it as his head hung low. "Jenny, you are not going to be able to handle this." He shook his head. "I have to find Ellen. *She* has to be the one to tell you when you wake up." Walking to his sleeping wife, John leaned over and kissed her gently, then running his hand down her face, he slowly walked from her room.

He wasn't in that hall very long, trying to get his bearings on where to go when he saw Johnny in an upbeat stride walking down the hall. Johnny gave a flash of his eyebrows in his passing and that sent warnings signals off to John.

About to follow Johnny, John stopped. *No.* John told himself. *What are you thinking? You don't know what caused that explosion* He chalked it up to his emotions that were searching for answers. But why did Johnny Slagel make so much sense. John knew Johnny wanted the investigation over with as soon as possible. He knew he had it out for his Uncle Hal. But even with Johnny's nineteen year old demented, 'I can do no wrong' way of thinking, would he go that far? With the thought of one name, John Matoose answered that question as no.

That name was Robbie.

For as much as Johnny hated Beginnings, John Matoose couldn't think of a valid reason or indication Johnny had for hating Robbie. And with that reasoning alone, John, for the time being, put the thought that Johnny was responsible, out of his mind.

^^^

Henry only nodded. Laying in bed, covers to his waist, his chin sported a bandage and his face looked so drawn as he just stared out. Not at anything, not even Ellen or Hector.

"You go home tomorrow, Henry." Ellen told him. "We just want to watch you tonight. Understand?"

Henry nodded again.

"We didn't see anything on the ct-scan that indicated a concussion. Then again you were unconscious so we are giving that as the diagnosis. Pretty much everyone has that diagnosis until tomorrow morning. When we can run a second series of tests. OK?" She grabbed his leg. "I'll check on you in a little bit." She started to walk.

"Was Jason the only one?" Henry asked sadly.

Ellen stopped, her lip quivered before she turned back around. "Yeah,



we lost Jason.”

Tight, Henry’s eyes closed. “How’s Robbie?”

“Holding on.”

“God.” Henry whispered out. “I can’t believe that happened to him. I can’t believe any of this happened. I’m really sorry. Can you tell Joe I am really sorry.”

“I will, Henry. Get some rest.”

“Ellen.” Hector stood up from the chair, stopping her before she left the room. “Can I talk to you.”

“Sure. In private?”

“Nah. This is fine.” Hector looked back at Henry. A little bruised, but Hector, physically was fine. “Um, this may be a really odd request. But, seeing all that happened, I know Josh is with the kids. I also know you and Dean will probably be here all night. I just thought, I was wondering . . . would you like me to take Nick tonight?”

“Oh, Hector that is a lot to ask.”

“No, really.” Hector shook his head. “It isn’t. I want to. I understand if you’d rather not have me . . .”

“No. That’s not it.” Ellen waved her hand out and then slipped into thought briefly. “You know what? Frank doesn’t need to deal with a baby. Not tonight. Yes.” She breathed out her answer. “If you could, that would be great.”

“I’ll pick him up in a few minutes.”

“Great. Thanks.” Ellen looked around Hector to Henry. “See you later, Henry.” Getting only a wave, Ellen gave a smile to Hector and walked out. Elliott was waiting in the hall. “Waiting for me?” She asked him.

“Actually, yes.” Elliott spoke. “I need to know if you got my note.”

“Yes.” Ellen responded. “And I have told everyone that’s conscious.”

“Good.” Elliott said as he walked with her. “Because, I know, it may have been pushing any authority I have in Beginnings. But Mr. Slagel has a lot on his mind, all of you do. And . . . there’s no one to make the call. I just thought, the only ones who knew it was deliberate were those of us in that warehouse. Keeping it under wraps, until Joe decides what to do, is best.”

“No one will say anything We don’t want a panic. That’s the last thing Joe needs.”

“And . . .”

“Elliott.”

“Yes.”

“Stop.” Ellen held up her hand. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. Why?”

“Um, you were in that explosion perhaps? Not hurt?”

“No.” Elliott shook his head. “Actually, I feel fine.”

“Good.” Ellen picked her pace again.

“Going to take care of the Captain?”

"No. Johnny is. He's with Hal now."

Elliott stopped walking.

Ellen noticed she moved alone, pausing, she peered behind her. "Elliott? Something wrong?"

"Is that wise?" Elliott caught up to her. "I mean, the Captains leg is broke. What if it isn't set properly?"

"Elliott." She chuckled. "Johnny isn't going to set his leg wrong. God, do you think he wants to ruin Hal forever?"

"Yes."

"What?" Ellen asked.

"I mean, I mean, Johnny's young. Not on purpose."

"Hal will be fine. I believe Johnny, because he knows how physically active Hal is, will take extra special precaution. And . . ." Ellen winked. "I bet you he even hooks hm up with a killer pain medication."

A peep of a shriek escaped Elliott.

"Elliott?" Ellen laughed. "What is wrong with you?"

"Could you just do it. Could you? You or Blue, one of you. Please?"

Ellen let out a slight huff. "All right. You're being a mother hen. Can I just check on . . ." She pointed to a room down the hall.

"Now. Please?"

Tossing her hands up she changed her direction. "Only because I like you."

Elliott didn't let the sigh of relief show. Perhaps he was overeating, but to Elliott it was better to be safe than sorry. When it came to Johnny and Hal, Elliott didn't trust anything that transpired between them.

^^^

"Uncle Hal." Johnny smiled snidely as he walked into the examining room.

Hal plopped backwards. "Christ."

"You don't look happy to see me." Johnny shut the door. "Hear we have to set that leg." He walked to the table. "Hurt much." He laid his hand on it and squeezed.

Hal clenched his jaw as he sat back up. "I'm fine."

"Thought so. But just incase . . ." Johnny pulled out from his pocket a syringe. He tapped it. "I have some pain medication . . ."

"No." Hal told him. "In fact, I don't need my leg set. I'd rather have Frank set my leg. I stand more of a chance of it being done correctly."

"Do you doubt my ability?"

"I doubt you, Johnny."

Johnny stared at Hal. "You look pretty pathetic Uncle Hal. Trying to come off tough." Johnny snickered. "Broken leg. Messed up shoulder. Can't pull of those idle threats so easily now, can you?"

"I don't make idle threats, Johnny. What I said to you, I meant."

Hands on the table, Johnny leaned into Hal. "You better think. Think real long about those threats. You never know what someone has on you."

As if Johnny bothered him, that was the look Hal gave him. "Back away. Now."

With a smug smile and shivering, 'oh'. Johnny laughed and moved back. "Shame about Uncle Robbie isn't it?"

Hal just looked at him.

"I hear he's going to be fine though." Johnny reached for the tray and pulled it closer. "Well, as fine can be. Shame." Johnny shrugged. "Oh, well, we all can't be perfect Slagels now, can we?"

The speed in which Hal's arm moved made a noise as it cut through the air and his hand landed hard on Johnny's throat. Lunging with everything he had, Hal leaped from that table, fingers gripping Johnny, and full speed he charged across the examining room, slamming Johnny into the wall. Face close to Johnny's face, Hal's voice graveled. "I warned you . . ."

"Get your hands off of me." Johnny's hands reached for the choke grip Hal had on him. "I said . . ." Johnny started to lose air, feeling Hal's fingers press harder into his neck.

Hal's eyes glazed over as they pierced a stare into Johnny. "If it is your intention to start a war, little boy. You just started one with the wrong person." The 'warning knock' on the examining room door caused Hal to release Johnny and step back just as the door open.

"Hal." Ellen smiled. "You really shouldn't be on that leg. On the table." She pointed then saw Johnny facing the wall. "Johnny? You all right."

Hal answered a little snide. "He's upset about Uncle Robbie."

"Aw." Ellen walked to him and ran her hand down his back. "He'll be fine. Why don't you go see him. I'll take care of Hal."

Without looking at Ellen, Johnny nodded and walked to the door. In his leaving, he turned some, saw Ellen's back was to him and he gave one glare to Hal before walking out.

"So." Hal hopped up on the table. "You're going to set my leg."

"Yep and good thing too. Johnny's was going to use white."

"Good Lord, Ellen, isn't that the color of a cast?"

Ellen giggled. "Hal, please, you deserve a better-looking color. Pick one."

"Why don't you." Hal smiled at her.

"Really? Any color?"

"Yes, Ellen."

"Thanks. I needed an 'up' right now."

"Glad I could help." Hal swung his legs up to be in a laying position. His eyes widened when he saw Ellen pick up the syringe Johnny had laid there. "What are you doing?"

"Pain killer."

"No." Hal held up his hand. "No, thank you."

"Are you sure? I don't know what Johnny put in here, but I'm sure it's something strong."

"I as well. But . . .no." Hal shook his head. "No pain medication."

"Aren't you brave." Ellen set down the syringe. "No drugs and . . . I get to pick your cast color."

With a grumble of worry, Hal closed his eyes and laid down completely, preparing for the worst.

~~~~~

If given a choice, what would Jason Godrichson had chosen. That thought ran through Frank's mind so much as he muddled his way in the after-destruction up by warehouses, six, seven and eight. Would Jason, and all that he did for Beginnings, had wanted that time machine powered back up for a single warning to himself? Knowing Jason, Frank figured he probably would.

It was heartbreaking even for Frank. The thought of all that went down not a few hours earlier right where he stood. He was grateful to Elliott for thinking, because surely, he himself was not. If the explosion was a product of foul play, all those hands volunteering to dig through and help out weren't going to help the mass hysteria that hit Beginnings with the thought that someone in their home had gone bad.

Details of the explosion had to be kept under wraps. Frank was certain the explosion was intentional. But what bothered him the most was the explosion almost took the lives of every single suspect in the Bev Hadly murder investigation. He didn't need to be a budding Einstein to see through that act. The only reason to eliminate Bev's killer would be revenge or retaliation for the society. And if the person or persons went so far as to cause a massive explosion, in Franks mind, they probably wouldn't think twice about trying something else. And the more the murderer was revealed, the more a target they became. That bred fear in Frank, because he knew exactly who killed Bev.

Whoever did it, would be found out, he was certain, because he would find them himself. And after he received news that Robbie had made it into a safety zone, then Frank knew he would have a clear enough mind to forge ahead in the investigation of the explosion. An investigation that zoomed in priority, even above the Bev murder. Jason was dead. In Frank's heart and mind, and he was certain, in everyone in Beginnings' Jason ranked higher than Bev Hadly ever could.

Frank walked carefully through the debris. He'd sift through it himself with a select group of men the next day. There would be no cleaning up of the area, not yet. Jason's entire body had yet to be found.

Perhaps that was why Frank was there alone. Looking on his own.

Hoping to find the remains. In a sense, give Jason a little dignity in his passing. But the evening hours that darkened the sky, made Frank's search difficult. The only thing he found was that 'reminder flask' And he picked it up from where Dean had thrown it.

In a squatting position, Frank looked at that flask. Tiny, and all Dean's idea. A palm size flask always filled with moonshine, always available for Frank to drink from. But before he did, he would have to look at the pictures, small and pasted all over that flask. They were of everyone Frank loved. Ellen, the kids, his father, Robbie, and even Hal.

Frank chuckled at the label Dean had made and used eight or nine strips of tape to secure it. Simple words, 'look who your drinking effects' screamed at him every time he pulled out that flask. Frank put it in his back pocket as he stood up. He needed to keep that flask, not so much for sentimental reasons, but for the straight simple fact, at that moment, Frank needed a drink. Having that on him was the best deterrent.

It was time to move on, Frank had spent enough time up there alone. The sight and smell of the area made him sick. He knew what he had to do. Go back home and hug his kids in gratefulness that he had them. Then he'd go to the hospital and look upon his brother with gratefulness, that after all that transpired, Robbie was still alive.

### CHAPTER THREE

The mug of stew wasn't bad, and Joe was glad that Gemma thought enough to drop it off at the clinic for him. He actually didn't realize how hungry he was until he started eating it. He clanked the spoon down into the empty ceramic mug and set it up on the night stand by Robbie's bed.

Pulling his chair closer, Joe rested his hand on Robbie's leg and just watched his youngest son sleep. He felt helpless, and what Joe really wanted at that moment, to help him through the hard time he was facing, was Andrea.

What he wouldn't give to have her by his side. Holding his hand, holding Robbie's. Her confident way of always conveying the 'Good Lord' would do this or that, was so desperately need at that moment buy Joe.

Not that Joe didn't trust Dean, he did. But there was nothing, in all the years in Beginnings, like Andrea's medical opinion. Most of the time her opinion was medically founded. But there were those times when Andrea discarded what the textbooks said and diagnosed her own thoughts by gut instincts. Didn't matter which route she chose to inform, no one ever doubted her. She was Andrea.

"Dad." Hal called his name softly.

Wishful thinking made Joe look to Robbie first then he looked at the door where Hal was walking in with crutches. "Hey. How are you?" Joe asked him.

"Ready to kill Ellen." Hal said. "She set my leg."

"Well, Hal, a broken leg has to be set or . . . or . . ." Joe's eyes widened. "Christ Almighty why do you have a hot pink cast."

"Ellen." Hal grumbled and leaned his crutches against the wall. He grabbed a chair and pulled it near Joe. "I figure I'll kill her."

"She did this for Frank you know." Joe said keeping his voice soft. "Maybe not intentionally but . . . yeah, scratch that, she did it on purpose. Can't blame her though."

"Can't blame her?" Hal asked in a whisper. "How in God's name can't you blame her."

"It's funny. We all needed some sort of smile right now."

"At my expense. Thank you." Hal exhaled. "How is he?"

"Still sedated. Dean said he's got him under good. We probably could bring Frank in here to yell and Robbie won't wake up."

"Then maybe you should go home and get some rest."

"No." Joe shook his head. "No-no. I don't want to take a chance of him opening his eyes, being alone and facing the fact that he lost his arm. I want to be here. I will. I'll tell ya, Hal" Joe blew slowly from his mouth. "I just feel so . . . so powerless. I don't have Andrea. I just lost my best friend. And my

youngest son, though alive, is far from out of the woods.”

“I’m sorry.” Hal reached out laying his hand on Joe’s. “Is anything I can do.”

“You already are.” Joe brought his hand over Hal’s. “You know what this night reminds me of?” Joe looked back to Robbie. “When Robbie had rheumatic fever.”

Hal nodded in remembrance.

“They told me that night, if Robbie’s fever didn’t break, chances were he wouldn’t make it through the night. Nine years old he was. And I stayed by his bed, and I swear I prayed more that night than any night in my entire life. I pestered the hell out of God. And Robbie pulled through. And I have no doubt he’ll pull through now. But it’s Robbie. There’s something about Robbie that’s different.”

“If I were Frank . . .” Hal winced. “I probably would say you always liked him more.”

“If you were Frank.” Joe smiled as he watched Hal wince again. “I would tell you, you were probably right.” He smiled. “But . . .” With an exhale and a stretch, Joe sat back in his chair. “We know the truth. I always loved you boys all the same. And I liked each one of you more than the other for different reason. Does that make sense?”

“No.” Hal shook his head.

“See. There was a reason that each one of you boys shined in my eyes in your own way. Jimmy was so smart. You Hal, you are just like me. But more than that, you’re determined. You have the determination to do whatever you want to do. Frank . . . Frank always made me laugh because he was so goddamn dumb. Still is. But Robbie . . .” Folding his hands, Joe leaned into the bed. “He always was innocent. Christ, even now. Even when he gets himself in trouble, all I see is that ten year old kid with messed up hair and that cute little grin.”

“That’s because he’s a thirty-something man with messed up hair and a cute grin.” Hal nodded. “And still innocent. He has the best heart.”

“No.” Joe shook his head. “You’re all equals on that one. You all have good hearts.” he took a deep breath. “I need a cigarette.”

“Why don’t you go get one.”

“Maybe I will.” Joe stood up and walked to the door. “Hey, Hal. When you heading back to New Bowman?”

“As soon as Elliott finishes up for Frank. He’s shifting the security schedules around or something. Why?”

“Well, when I’m getting that cigarette I need, I thought I’d walk by and get the other son I need. Mind hanging out with your family for a little bit?”

“Not at all.”

“Good.” Joe moved to the door and stopped again. “Oh, and Hal. Before Frank gets here, you might want to cover up that cute pink cast.”

“Shit.” Hal hunched with the reminder of why he was aggravated when

he entered the room. Standing up, Hal hurried to find a blanket or something. He knew it eventually wouldn't work. Frank would discover the cast, and sadly, Robbie would miss a 'Frank ridiculing Hal' moment, he would had basked in.

^^^

Pouring Dean another cup of coffee, Ellen's mind took off as she glanced around the room at the clinic she and Dean discovered. A coffee pot, toaster over, mini fridge. In the room, three round tables were set up, all with reading materials set about them. "Dean?"

"Hmm?" Dean reviewed one of the many charts he had on the one table.

"How many nurses and workers do we have at the clinic?"

After a blink, Dean looked up. "Registered workers or 'on average' daily workers."

"Stop being so anal. About."

"Not including us, six. Hard to say, right now, need more. Why?"

"Because this room reminds me of the Joe park."

Dean laughed as she set down his coffee. "Why is that."

"It's inane. A lunch room or lounge for this clinic?"

"Well, with New Bowman, and all those digestive problems with the men Frank brought, we've been busy. Staffed more." Dean shrugged.

"You don't suppose we didn't know about it because no one wanted us in here, do you."

"No. It has to be new."

Before sitting down to join Dean, Ellen leaned over and kissed him. "You look tired."

"So do you."

"I am." She sat down.

"So am I." Dean gathered the charts. "Did you want to go home."

"No. I can't. I promised John I'd be 'ready available' for when Jenny gets up, and then I want to be there with Robbie."

A sudden 'squeak' in the room caused them both to look up with surprise at the late night intrusion.

Frank, who skid to a halt, looked just as shocked to see them. "Hey."

"Frank?" Ellen smiled. "I thought you left the clinic awhile ago."

"I did. I'm back. I couldn't sleep." He went over to the coffee pot. "What are you guys doing in here?"

"Working." Ellen answered. "When we found it tonight, we thought it be a lot more comfortable than the lab."

The coffee pot nearly fell from Frank's hand. "You found this place tonight?"

"Yes. It's new." Ellen said.



"No, it's not." Frank walked to the table. "It's been here forever."

Ellen gasped with a swipe to Dean who was engrossed in his work. "See. I told you no one wanted us in here. They hid it from us."

"They did not." Frank sat down with them. "They probably assumed you knew, How the fuck you two can live in Beginnings for eight years and not know the clinic had a lunch room, is beyond me. And why is Dean being rude?"

Dean answered as he stayed focused on a chart. "Dean's not being rude, Dean's working."

"Oh." Frank sipped his coffee. "El, you look way too tired. Why don't you come back to the house with me. We could . . ." Dropping his voice to a whisper, he leaned to her. "We could sleep together."

Up raised Dean's eyes. "I'm right here Frank."

"Oh, yeah. Forgot. Sorry." Frank sat back. "But, that isn't what I meant. I meant sleep. El?"

"I can't." She shook her head. "I really have to stay. Dean's going home soon though."

"As in, Dean will fill in for you?" Frank asked.

Dean lifted his eyes again. "Frank."

"No, Dean don't ask." Frank held up as hand. "You may be the same size as Ellen, but you aren't going to cut it. Sorry." He finished his coffee and stood. "I'm heading back, check on Robbie and head back to the house." Placing his hand on the back on Ellen's chair, Frank brought his lips to her forehead, held them there for a moment, then kissed her quickly. "Night. Oh hey, tomorrow, make some time you two, me and my Dad have to talk to you."

Ellen nodded. "Night, Frank."

"Night." Frank backed up. "Dean."

"Frank."

"Frank." Ellen called stopping him. "Are you all right?"

Frank paused in the doorway and he slowly turned back around. "No." He said very seriously. "I'm . . . I'm a mess. I'm trying to be in control for my dad, strong for Robbie, while staring at the pieces of a fucked up situation that blasted Beginnings. It's just turning into a long night. I can't stop thinking about what happened, I can't stop thinking about my little brother, and I can't stop thinking about that drink that would help to ease it all. And . . . and . . . I am sorry I just rambled on like that. I'm not myself. Get back to work." He nodded. "Night."

Out of the doorway, Ellen watched Frank move and she turned to Dean who stared at her.

"El." Dean spoke soft. "You're five minutes from here should anything happen, or anyone wake up. Which I doubt."

"You're right." She stood up and kissed Dean. "Thank you. I love you."

Dean only got the chance to grab her hand and Ellen slipped out,

hurrying out of the lounge. He listened to her call out, 'Frank, wait up' and then Dean returned to his work. It was a lot to do, reviewing the charts and planning a course of action to take the next day with each new patient. The work would go faster if he wasn't doing it alone. But it was a choice Dean made to send Ellen home, and in his mind, on a night like they were having, it was the only choice *to* make.

^^^

### New Bowman, Montana

Hal had finally hit the point where he had fallen asleep and forgot all about the fact that he was wearing a heavy cast. But the reminder came pummeling back to him when his cast crashed down to the floor as he swung his legs over to climb out of bed.

It was a late night knock, and that didn't happen often. Hobbled with concern, wearing only a pair of boxers, Hal turned on lights as he made his way through the livingroom and opened the door. "Elliott?"

"Captain." Elliott stepped inside.

"What's wrong?" Hal asked. "It's two in the morning."

Elliott exhaled. "I have some news."

"Please don't tell me it's my brother."

"No." Elliott shook his head. "It's not Robbie. It deals with one of our men. Glen, the head security tracker."

"What about him?"

"He last left his shift yesterday morning, when he failed to show up at midnight tonight, the man he was relieving thought perhaps he had slept in. Time was given and when Glen didn't show, a man was sent to his home. It appears he passed away sometime in his sleep last night."

A sigh escaped Hal. "How?"

"Heart attack maybe." Elliott shrugged. "Dr. Blue is giving a preliminary postmortem exam now. Until we can move the body to have Dr Hayes do an autopsy."

"For a heart attack. Unless something looked suspicious to you. Did it?" Hal asked.

"Not upon first glance. No. It appeared to be he just passed on in his sleep."

"Then why the concern, Elliott?"

Elliott hesitated before answering. "In light of your recent confrontations with Johnny Slagel, and the fact that the Bandana of yours doused with Bev's blood is missing, it just struck me as odd that now your alibi is dead."

Wanting to pull a Frank and say 'fuck', Hal refrained. He promised himself he would stay in control until he had more answers.

^^^

“Nice color cast.” Blue commented to Hal upon coming out of an examining room. “Your choice or Elliott’s?”

Hal kept his demeanor. “Actually I was unconscious when my sister did this.”

“You’re lying, I was there.” Blue handed Hal a folder. “From initial examination, it looked like Glen died of natural causes. Heart attack, aneurism, cerebral hemorrhage. Something to that effect.”

“I see.” Hal exhaled some in relief, looked to Elliott then back to Blue. “Thanks Blue. Sorry to wake you. I’ll have him moved in the morning.” He started to leave.

“To Beginnings, I hope.” Blue spoke up.

“No.” Hal stopped. “Burial. Why would we send him to Beginnings for a death of natural causes.”

“Because you weren’t paying attention.” Blue stated.

“I was too.” Hal snapped.

“Then you didn’t listen to what I said.”

“I did too.” Hal took offense. “You said it looked like Glen died of natural causes.”

“Exactly.” Blue pointed.

Hal tossed his hands up. “I’m lost. It looked like Glen died of natural causes. Where didn’t I pay attention.”

“At the tense.”

“Excuse me?” Hal turned to Elliott. “What am I missing?”

“I believe . . .” Elliott dropped his voice. “Dr. Blue is being dramatic. He said ‘looked’ as in ‘appeared’, not as in ‘is’.”

Blue snapped his finger., “Better wording choice. Thanks Sergeant. Appeared. It appeared that Glen died of natural causes. Then just as I was covering him up, I saw . . . you know what? Follow me.” Blue went back into the examining room.

Hal whispered to Elliott as they followed. “Why couldn’t he say this in the first place?”

“I heard that.” Blue stood by Glen’s body. He pulled what looked like a huge magnifying glass on a stand closer to Glen. “Take a peek.”

Hal walked over and looked. Through the glass Blue’s fingers were huge as they pointed to a small dot.

“Had it not bled, it wouldn’t have left a mark noticeable enough to see.” Blue explained. “That Captain, is in injection site straight into the sternum.”

“He was killed?” Hal asked.

“Could be. That’s my guess.” Blue removed the magnifying glass and

covered the body. "We won't know for sure until Dr. Hayes runs some tests on the blood samples and examines the body. I'm gonna pull the samples now."

"Blue this is under wraps." Hal instructed. "Until we get confirmation from Dr. Hayes, you say nothing. But . . . I want your documentation of this examination and your initial guess. I want it sealed, dated and immediately brought to Judge Grace. Tell her to note when you gave it to her. Got that."

"Yes." Blue nodded.

"Thanks." Hal limped to the door. "Elliott?"

After nodding a goodnight to Blue, Elliott followed Hal out and pulled the door closed. "The wheels are turning."

"Absolutely." Hal agreed. "If this was a murder. Then whoever did this had the medical knowledge and accessibility to the means to pull this off. Which means they work at the clinic. Which means . . ." Hal saw it. It was a look on Elliott's face that all but said, 'um, I don't know about that'. It irritated him. "What? What? What is that look for?" He blasted.

"Don't get angry."

"Go on." Hal huffed out.

"Correct me if I'm wrong but didn't Bev Hadly have the means to administer a comatose style drug to John Matoose in the clinic. I don't think she worked there."

Hal winced and swung out his hand into Elliott. "You had to ruin my moment. Didn't you."

"I'm just saying, the society equips their people. Your father and others know this. Just because a person is killed by medical means, does not mean that a medical profession did it."

"Do you have to think of everything?"

"No." Elliott said serious. "I could let you think that you know who did this. Which . . . you are probably right. I am just taking a outside look. How would you prove it?"

Hal grew frustrated. "He had the means and the motive. He would be the only one. If he was in New Bowman then . . ."

"Traffic between the hours of ten P.M. and one AM is heavy. Tracking only registers those coming *in* after midnight. If he was here already." Elliott tilted his head with a raise of his hands. "This is an eggshell situation. You know this. Don't let emotions get ahead of you. For as much as your gut is screaming to you. You can't point fingers. This is more than just a trusted individual in Beginnings, this is your family. Your nephew may have had the means, but really Captain, what is his motive?"

"You know what his motive is. Glen was my alibi. He's setting me up for Bev's murder."

"Again . . ." Elliott played the devil's advocate. "For what reason. You're his uncle. His blood. Who was Bev. There's no established connection between her and Johnny. None. And as far as him setting you up. You

handed him the bandana. You pretty much started that ball of wax all on your own. He's just securing it."

Hal's lips tensed up and released in words that didn't come out as he stared at Elliott. With a point, Hal opened his mouth and closed it again. After a nod, he turned with a huff. "I hate you." He limped across the room to the door. "Goodnight, Elliott."

## CHAPTER FOUR

November 16<sup>th</sup>

Frank figured he had to be unusually tired to miss the intruder slipping into the room only after a couple hours of sleep. Normally, he would hear the creak of the floorboards, but instead, Frank found himself face to face with the small Dean look-a-like enemy. And his forehead felt the effect of the small finger flicks Billy delivered to wake him.

Lifting his head some, Frank peered over Ellen who slept with her back to him. On top of the covers they laid, a blanket covering them. “What?” Frank asked Billy.

The facial expression all but screamed ‘attitude’ as Billy raised his eyebrows. “You do realize, it takes a lot of nerve to sleep with another man’s wife in his bed.”

“Get your mind out of the gutter. I’m not sleeping with your mother. I’m sleeping with your mother.”

“Don’t think this won’t go on my list of reasons not to worship you.”

“Like I care. What did you want. It’s not even light out yet.”

“You’re emotionally scarring me by subjecting me to this . . . this lewd behavior.”

Frank gasped in disgust. “Go back to bed. No wait. Go make me coffee.”

“Make it yourself.” Billy folded his arms and spun his little body storming out of the bedroom.

“Man. Attitude, two days ago the kid liked me.”

From her pillow Ellen mumbled. “Dean’s brainwashing him.”

“Oh. That makes sense now.”

“What time is it?”

“Five.”

Without hesitation, Ellen flung the covers from her, swung her legs around and stood up.

“El? What are you doing?”

“I have to get back to the clinic.” She raced to her dresser.

“El, come on.” Frank sat up in bed. “You just went to sleep.”

“I know.” She tossed a fresh shirt over her head. “I’ll sleep later. But right now, Frank. There’s a lot of people going to wake up to a lot of painful realities this morning.”

Frank nodded and threw the covers off of his leg.

“What are you doing? You don’t have to get up.”

“Yeah, I do.” Frank picked his shirt up off the floor. “I have mini Mussolini running around this house. I don’t trust him. Go finish getting ready. I’ll make coffee.”

“Thank you.”

Frank leaned to her and kissed her. “Thanks for sleeping with me last night.”

“I heard that.” Billy’s mouth blasted from another room.

Grunting, and biting his bottom lip with a shake of his head, Frank left the bedroom.

^^^

There was a series of senses that began to awaken Robbie. First the voices, a woman’s and his father’s.

“I’ll see if he’ll eat. If not, maybe later.” Joe spoke in that morning voice, quiet so as not to wake up Robbie.

Then Robbie smelled the coffee, fresh as only morning coffee could smell, and then he felt the slight headache that rested just behind his right eye.

The final sense, possibly not even considered a sense at all, was what brought Robbie into full consciousness.

Reality.

*“I got it!”* Hal’s voice reverberated in his memory.

*“Robbie, let’s go.”*

*“It’s too late.”*

The remembrance of the explosion caused a painful twitch in Robbie’s gut, but not as much as what happened after.

*Frank’* So weak he felt, it took all he had to get his brother’s name from his mouth when Frank found him. Where Robbie was at that moment, he didn’t quite recall. He had lost consciousness, and all feeling in his body. All he knew was that he was all right. He was alive. Frank was there.

He slipped back out of it right after Frank tossed him over his shoulder. Being brought to Dean and laid upon the ground was a blur. Foggy vision hindered him from seeing his father clearly then. He only heard his voice. And as if he just wanted to sleep, that was how Robbie felt. Until, like a shot of caffeine directly into his veins, Robbie was snapped into painful awareness when Dean brought that smoldering piece of wood to him.

With the thought of that action came the reality of the consequences. And Robbie knew any prayer or hope he had that none of it happened, would all be in vain.

He could have used the excuse that somehow they saved his arm by reasoning that he felt it. His fingers, forearm, everything. But Robbie knew better. He knew that he probably would feel that arm for a long time. Despite the fact that it wasn’t there.

Or was it?

He didn’t know. Not for sure that was. Perhaps Dean did pull a miracle. Perhaps he remembered something wrong. With that thinking, he slowly

turned his head to the right, and eyelids separated only a little, Robbie looked. Bandages and then . . . Nothing else.

Robbie's eyes closed and with a predominant pout of his lips, he swallowed the harsh reality.

"Hey." Joe called out softly. "You're awake."

Robbie felt his father's lips touch upon his forehead, and the hand run slow over the top of his head. There was nothing more Robbie wanted to do than not respond. Keep his eyes close, hope he fell back to sleep and woke up later to see it was all a dream. But he knew better. There was no changing it. No turning back the clock. He had to face it.

With the knowledge that he would hit low times, he made a promise to himself, the moment he just had, would be the last he intentionally wallowed in pity. He wasn't going to feel sorry for himself. Not there. Not him.

With a nod and a deep breath, Robbie turned his head upright, and opened his eyes. "Hey, Dad."

Joe smiled as he sat on the edge of Robbie's bed. "I was very worried about you. How ya feeling?"

"In a little pain. Not much." Robbie responded with some grogginess.

"Do you remember what happened?" Joe asked compassionately.

"Yeah. I do." Robbie answered, then his eyes looked wide. "Dad. Jess, the others . . ."

Joe held up a halting hand. "Jess suffered some burns. Bad ones. But Dean says he'll pull through. The others, some suffered minor injuries. Except Jason . . . we . . . we lost Jason."

"Ah man." Robbie's head dropped some. "I'm sorry Dad."

"Thanks." He gave a firm squeeze to Robbie's hand. "I want concentrate on you. O.K.? I need to. So how about letting me."

Robbie nodded, he tried to hide his sadness, but he guessed his father sensed it when he slipped the fingers of his left hand into his father's and squeezed.

"Hey." Joe leaned closed to him. "You're a strong man. Very strong. You'll get through this."

"I know. And . . . and it could be worse." Robbie's voice cracked. "I could be dead. It could have been my legs. My left arm . . ." Robbie looked up. "I'd never form a chord again if I lost that. My hair, it could have been my hair." He tried to smile.

With a slight chuckle, Joe kissed him on the cheek. "You got a lot of people who love you. We're here for you. We'll help you."

"And I'll . . . I'll probably take advantage of you."

"Probably." After a pat to Robbie's hand, Joe stood up. "How about breakfast. The ladies were in bright and early this morning making up nice hospital trays."

"Maybe just the coffee."

"You sure?" Joe rolled the tray over that held his food. He lifted the tin



covering. "Look at that. Eggs. Toast." He took a whiff. "And . . . oatmeal. Mmm."

Robbie snickered sadly.

"A little fork wrapped up." Joe lifted the silverware in the napkin. "Just a few bites?"

"Um . . ." Robbie looked. "Yeah. Maybe just a few."

"Good boy." Joe pushed the cart closer then unraveled the fork. Seriously, he looked at Robbie. "Do you need me to feed you?"

"No, I . . ." The corner of Robbie's mouth slowly raised in a crooked a smile. "Um, yeah. Do you mind?"

"Not at all." He glanced down to Robbie, and like he did so often, no matter how old Robbie was, Joe saw that ten year old little boy. He picked up the fork.

^^^^

Tightly Ellen held on to Jenny's hand, squeezing it with the comfort that she knew exactly what Jenny was feeling. Her mouth was close to Jenny's ear speaking in an emotional whisper. "Just give me and Dean one more month."

Face red, Jenny nodded, clenching onto Ellen.

"I know it can't replace this loss. But my God, won't it be wonderful. One month Jenny. We'll have our babies back."

A long sluggish sniff came from Jenny as she tried to regain our composure. "Thank you for telling me that."

"You're welcome." Ellen exhaled then looked to John who stood at the end of the bed. "Now, I have to get back to work. I'm not going to release you today. In fact, probably not for a few more days."

John shifted his eyes in concern. "Is there something wrong, you aren't telling us?"

"No." Ellen answered. "We want to observe, make sure she doesn't hemorrhage, and though she could get the rest at home, things are going to be a little hectic for you John." She told him. "Mechanics is short again. Danny isn't hurt, but he may after yesterday, take the day off."

John snickered. "Somehow I doubt that. But you're right. It's just him and I. We all know Scott is not a 'go out and fix it' guy."

"We remember what happened the last time Scott left his little desk at Mechanics and tried to fix something important." Ellen looked at Jenny with a nod.

Jenny exhaled. "Oh, boy. Two of the children got hyperthermia in July."

John whistled. "How he got that air conditioner to blast uncontrollably like, we still can't figure out. Give the man little electronics, he's a genius, anything more . . ." John shrugged.

Ellen looked at her watch. "I'd better go. I know Dean has to get some rest and I'm training Forrest for clinic work today. I'll be by around lunch." She started walking.

"Ellen." Jenny called out. "You'll have me out of here before any service for Jason. Won't you?"

"Without a doubt." Ellen gave a nod and walked to the door. Surprisingly, she bumped right into Dean. "Talk about searching me out."

"Guilty." Dean raised his hand and walked with her.

"Going home?"

"In a few. Forrest just showed up. I want to start with him until you get there."

"Where am I going to be."

Dean reached out and stopped Ellen from walking. "Robbie's awake."

After Ellen's eyes widened, she took off running.

A loud 'oh' came from Ellen the second she raced inside of Robbie's room. "Oh, my God." She flew over to his bed, grabbing his face, and she plastered him with a blast of small peck kisses. "I was so worried about you. So worried."

Joe, holding a fork of eggs, moved her out of the way. "Do you mind, Ellen he's trying to have his breakfast."

"You're eating." She stepped back. "That's good. Do you want me to feed him, Joe?"

"No. I got it." He moved the fork to Robbie's mouth. "Open."

"How are you feeling?" Ellen asked.

After he swallowed, Robbie answered. "In a little pain." He gave a half of a shrug. "Not too much."

"We've been injecting pain killer, regularly into your IV." She folded her arms. "Do you need something stronger?"

"No." Robbie shook his head. "I'll let you know."

"O.K., we established the physical part. How are *you* Robbie?"

His lips moved from side to side in a debate he didn't want to show. "I'll be all right. Really."

"If you need anything. Let me know." Ellen told him. "In fact, I'm in the clinic all day."

"Thanks, El."

Taking a chance on getting yelled at again, by Joe, Ellen walked to the bed and kissed him. "I'll check back in a little bit." After he nodded, she took a step back and stared at him with seriousness. "Robbie. I don't want to take a chance on those bandages getting wet. So if you decide you want cleaned up. Tell me instead of Glen, I'll come in and bathe you."

Ignoring his father's grumbling warning of 'stop that', Robbie held back that raising corner of his mouth. "Will you, El. You don't mind?"

"Not at all. Just buzz me when you're ready." She smiled. "Bye Joe."

Joe watched her leave, and he shook his head.

Robbie blinked innocently. "What? Did I do something?"

Joe mumbled something inaudible and brought the spoon of oatmeal to

Robbie's mouth. "Open up."

^^^

Forrest raised his bushy eyebrows as he looked up to Dean in the lab. "Und I am telling you, Don. I am note an Idi-oot."

"Not saying you are." Dean spoke. "Just want to review procedure."

"Don." Forrest snapped. "Ma mund is note de bust rut now. Ma Frund has pissed on. I huff come to de clin-uck to tuck ma mund off things. I con tuck a blood pressure. No?"

"Can you?"

"Don." Forrest grew more perturbed. "Am I or am I note a doc-tear?"

"Are you."

"Ut!" Forrest pointed to the door. "You, Don, are on ma nerves. Ut. Go oon get some slip. You huff duck circles."

"I'm going. I'm going." Dean walked across the lab, stopped, looked back, and then left again. Walking out into the hall, he saw Hector walking in the doors. Oddly to Dean, he was holding Nick.

"Hey, Dean." Hector called. "Glad I caught you. What am I supposed to do with him now? I took him to the greenhouse this morning, but I have a lot to do. Is there a sitter, or what, during work hours?"

"Hector?" Dean had a bit of a snap to his tone. "Why do you have Nick?"

"I took him last night."

"What! You can't just go and take my son."

Unexpected, Frank's voice interjected. "My son."

Dean looked at Frank. "My son. I raise him."

"Henry's son." Hector corrected. "He made him. And Dean, Ellen said it was all right."

"Oh." Dean nodded. "O.K., see ya." Without saying anymore, Dean walked straight out.

"Frank?" Hector looked up to him. "What do I do with him?"

"Hector, you really shouldn't take a kid if you don't know what to do with them."

"I know what to do with the baby. I don't know where to put him while I'm working. Is there a sitter?"

"Nursery." Frank told him.

"Really? Where's that?"

"How long have you been in Beginnings?"

"Three years."

"Three years and you don't have a clue on where the fuckin nursery is. Man." Shaking his head, Frank walked off.

"O.K." Hector looked at Nick. "I'm going to remain calm. Henry's gonna have to wait until we find someone who . . . oh, there's Melissa."

Hector hurried to catch a walking Melissa. “Melissa. Wait. Hey. Do you know where the nursery is?”

Melissa smiled. “Of course, I do. Don’t be silly.” She walked off.

Turning around in the hall, Hector smiled when he saw Josephine walking toward the door. “Here’s our answer. Josephine?”

“What.” A hiccup followed her word.

“Do you know where the nursery is?”

“Why?”

“I have to take Nick there.”

“Here.” She held out her hands as her body swayed some. “Give me him.” Her feet exchanged over each other and she stammered a bit. “I’ll take him for you.”

“Um, no.” Hector smiled politely. “That’s all right.”

“What? I’m not good enough.”

“That’s not it. I just would rather. Can you tell me where it is.”

“No!” She snapped and reached for the doors. “Find it yourself.”

“God.” Hector heaved out. “What is wrong with people. Screw it. You’ll just hang out with me.” Adjusting Nick, Hector gave up and headed to Henry’s room.

^^^

### Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

Though he had entertained the thought quite a bit, George Hadly had to stop. The envisionment of Beginnings as the opening to *The Stand*, replayed in his mind. Instead of piss ant scientists laying about, he could visualize Dean Hayes in that cryo lab, hunched over the counter, vomit and blood spewing from his mouth in the after result of a deadly experiment gone haywire. Beginnings residents scattered about their home land, dropping where they were when the ventilation system tossed Dean’s mistake into the air. Silence in Beginnings except for the hint of a noisy breeze that swept through, clanking the gate.

Pleasant.

But it was time to face reality. He had a vested interest in Beginnings, he wanted and needed that communications set up. The society was making progress, and George knew before long, they wouldn’t need the satellite and overseas capabilities that Beginnings didn’t realize they had. He supposed he could forget about it all together. But recent rumors about major plans of defectors in his camps, and the thought of the growing retaliatory forces of the UWA, George couldn’t take the chance of leaving that technology in the hands of a budding army.

They were in a cease fire, but they still were, in a sense, at war.

Two weeks.

It had been two weeks since George had heard anything from Beginnings. First, he attributed it to a malfunction or communications breakdown, which suited him fine. But it was getting to the point that he had to know.

All that he received when dialing the phone was dead silence. No ringing, no connection. Aside from the military aspects, George had personal interest there. Bev and Johnny. And with that, he pulled a lottery.

Six men sat in his office, while George made attempt as well. Each man, including himself had one of the seven Beginnings phone numbers that George knew. And from that small grouping, George gave instructions for them to start from the base number and add one. Hopefully dialing out so much, they may get lucky.

They did.

"Sir." Stewart held up the phone to George. "It's ringing."

Dropping the phone he held, George raced over.

^^^

"Aside from visiting my brother . . ." Hal moved in an awkward limp across his office. "I suppose my father and brother will want to talk to me about the explosion, so I may get held up."

Elliott nodded. "I understand. Everything will be fine here."

"You don't have a treatment you're blowing off today, do you?"

"Nope." He shook his head. "I am treatment free for a week. So . . ." Elliott turned to the sound of the ringing phone. "Want me?"

"No." On one foot, because it was quicker, Hal hopped to his desk. "Probably my father wondering where am." He grabbed the phone and pressed the button. "Yes, Dad?"

"Fortunately." George's crass voice rang over the line. "I am not your father."

"Who is this?" Hal asked with edge.

"Who is *this*? No. Who is this? Who the hell taught you phone etiquette anyhow."

"I will ask again, whom am I speaking to?"

"George Hadly."

"Christ." Hal mumbled.

"Now who is this!" George blasted.

"Captain Hal Slagel, United Western Alliance. What do you want?"

"What do I want?" George had a sarcastic tone. "I'll tell you what I want. Two weeks. Two weeks. What the hell is going on, on that side of the goddamn country!"

^^^

George supposed he should have been happy hearing the news that a accidental fire wiped out most of the communications room, and until repairs were finished, only two phones were operational. The destruction of the communication room *was* good news. But his mind was heavy with something else. Bev and Johnny. They were in there, they were enemies of the state. If they were found out, there was no way George would know. No way he could help them. Short of going to Beginnings and seeing for himself that they were fine, there was nothing George could do but wait. A waiting game player, he was not. His mind started working immediately on alternate ways to check on his people. And he was certain, in time, he would find that way.

## CHAPTER FIVE

"And then he pinged me." Frank, sitting on the edge of Robbie's bed, explained.

Robbie snickered a little slurred and drastic under the effects of the medication that was increased. "That is too funny."

"Wait." Joe held up his hand. "I'm lost. Pinged?"

"Pinged." Frank nodded. "Yeah. He's too little to call it anything else."

"What the hell is pinged?" Joe asked.

"What Billy did to me."

Joe winced. "I know that. I don't know what ping is."

"You know." Frank said.

"No, I don't. What? Did he piss on you or something?"

"Where would you get that?" Frank asked.

"Ping, pissed. It was a guess."

"A bad one." Frank fluttered his lips. "So, anyhow, Robbie." He exhaled. "Then I find out he's making this list of reasons not to worship me."

"He must already worship you, Frank." Robbie said. "I mean, why would Dean be threatened?"

"True."

"Boys!" Joe snapped. "What the hell is pinged!"

"Dad!" Frank yelled back. "Why are you screaming?"

"Because you're aggravating me. You tell a goddamn story that only you two can laugh at."

"You didn't think it was funny?" Frank asked.

"No, Frank. I didn't because I don't have a clue what being pinged means."

"It's what Billy did to me to wake me up."

Joe grumbled. "Fine. Don't tell me."

"Show him." Robbie gave a twitch of his head in a point. "I don't think he'll understand any terminology, Frank."

"Good idea. All right . . ." Frank stood up and faced Joe. "See my fingers?"

"Yeah."

"Pretend they're small, all right?"

"All right." Joe nodded, waited.

Frank smiled. "Ping."

"Ow!" Joe rubbed his forehead. "Asshole." He swiped out his hand with a hard hit to Frank.

Robbie, genuinely laughed. "Frank. Thanks, man. I really needed to smile. Thanks Dad."

A groan escaped Joe. "You would think that. You're high. But . . .Glad I

could help.”

“It did.” Robbie looked up to Frank. “I knew if you stopped by you could take my mind off of anything. Just listening to you talk.”

“I’m wise.” Frank nodded.

“You are.”

“And Frank.”

“Christ.” Joe shook his head.

“Of, course.” Robbie shrugged. “I don’t think anything can top that today.”

With a knock on the open door, Hal popped his head in. “Morning.”

Frank grinned widely. “You don’t think? Check out Hal’s cast.”

Robbie tried, leaning left to right. “I can’t see it, Frank could you . . .”

“Sure.” Frank said.

“Hey!” Hal barked when he felt himself being grabbed by Frank around the waist, carried to the bed and hoisted up two feet from the floor.

“Man, Hal you weigh a ton.” Frank set him down.

Robbie, with a tilted head, tried not to laugh. “Hal, that is um . . . beautiful. The color works.”

“Asshole. There’s something wrong with you.” Hal straightened his clothing, glared at Frank, then grabbed his demeanor and returned his views to Robbie. “How are you feeling little brother?”

“I’m pretty much stoned right now, Hal. They’re pumping me with all kinds of stuff.” Robbie winked. “Other than that . . . I’m doing.”

“I’m here if you need me.” Hal, ignoring Frank’s snicker, walked closer to the bed. “Robbie. I just wanted to tell you. If when you get out of here, if you’d like to spend sometime recuperating in New Bowman . . .”

“Why would he want to do that?” Frank interrupted.

“Am I talking to you?” Hal asked.

“Boys.” Joe warned.

“No.” Frank replied. “I was wondering.”

“Perhaps because I can offer him a peaceful recuperation.”

“Perhaps.” Frank mocked. “You can’t.”

“Why do you have to be like that?” Hal snapped.

“Like what? Hey, you’re the one running around with a pink cast.”

“What the hell does that have to do with anything.”

“Boys.” Joe grumbled.

Frank shrugged. “Not much. But you are.”

“Boys.”

“Pansy.” Frank smiled.

“Dad.” Hal looked at Joe.

“I quit.” Joe tossed his hands up. “I’d yell at you both, but Robbie’s enjoying this too much.”

“I am.” Robbie grinned. “It takes my mind off of things. Go on.” He said. “Fight.”



Sarcastically, Joe shook his head. "Would you like me to run out and grab a few more to add to the confusion." Mid shake, Joe saw him. "Never mind. Ask and you shall receive."

With a sorrowful look on his face, Henry stood by the door. "Hey, Robbie." His tone was soft.

"Henry." Robbie looked up. "How are you."

Henry nodded. "I'm . . . I'm good. You."

"Good." Robbie replied. "Did you want to come in?"

"No. Not now. I . . . just wanted to stop by. Maybe later I will again, if that's O.K."

"Sure." Robbie replied and watched in oddity as Henry left. Before he could say anything else, he caught glimpse of the strangest look on Frank's face. Revelation. "Frank?"

"Henry." Frank whispered out then widened his eyes. "Henry." He spun around and looked at the door. "Henry."

Hal glanced to Robbie. "Are we missing something?"

Robbie raised his eyebrows. "Do you suppose it has to do with, I don't know . . . Henry?"

"Dad." Frank pointed to the empty doorway. "Henry."

"Yeah, so." Joe said.

"No, dad." Frank clenched his jaws. "Henry. Hen . . . ree. Hen . . . ree. Henry."

Hal clapped. "He's mastered the art of articulation. Good job Frank."

"Dad." Frank ignored Hal. "Henry. Dad. I think . . ." He moved to the door. "I think I'll go to your office and clean up that glass now."

"Now?" Joe asked.

"Now, Dad." Frank winked. "And maybe perhaps see if there is a file on your desk that Dean dropped off that no one knows about." He stepped out and poked his head back in. "Henry."

Joe's eyes grew wide. How cluttered his mind was that he had forgotten. "Shit. Henry." He hurried to the door. "Robbie, I'll be back."

"Um . . . O.K." Robbie watched them leave. "Hey, Hal, do you suppose this has to do with that file no one is supposed to know about?"

"One way to find out."

"Could you."

"I'll be right back."

Robbie leaned back into the bed and enjoyed watching Hal not only hop, but hop out with a hot pink cast. With an exhale of his laughter, he grabbed the remote on his bed and looked at the call button. "I think I'll have that bath now." With a relaxing smile, he pressed the button.

^^^

Because he said he would do so, Frank hurriedly swept the glass from the floor of Joe's office into one pile in the corner. Top speed Frank ran up there, grabbed the broom and whisked the pieces of glass aside. He should have caught his breath before picking up the note Dean had left the day before, because when Frank viewed those results again, all of his breath escaped him.

Dramatic he paced. Results in his hand, letting out a gasping 'oh' every few seconds out of lack of anything else to say.

"Frank." Joe opened the office door and stepped in.

The 'oh' was heavy when Frank lifted the results to Joe.

"I know." Joe took them.

"Dad . . . oh." Frank shook his head.

"Frank, I know. With all that happened we totally forgot about this."

"Oh."

"Will you knock it off!" Joe sat down.

"I can't help it. Oh. Sorry." Frank pulled up a chair. "We barely got time to think about this. What are we gonna do."

"I don't know."

"Dean is gonna be so pissed off when he finds out."

From the note Dean had left, Joe looked up. "Dean does know. He's the one who told us moron."

"Oh, yeah. But . . . still. Dean is gonna be so pissed off when he remembers he ran those test. The way Henry came down on him over the Bev thing. Dean was the heavy for that pregnancy."

"I know." Joe grumbled.

"There's no way to bury it."

"Why would we do that?" Joe asked. "We can't. If Dean knows, how long before Ellen knows. If Ellen knows . . ."

Frank just stared.

"You aren't gonna do it?" Joe asked.

"Do what?"

"Finish my sentence."

"Which one."

"If Ellen knows . . ."

"I had no idea where you were going with that." Frank tossed up his hands. "Sorry."

"Figures. No . . . this will come out eventually. If we try to bury it, Dean will get upset. And rightfully so. This really explains Henry's behavior."

"Yeah. No doubt. I mean, I always thought it was odd that Henry was so pissed at her about finding out he was gay. Not gay. He isn't gay. Has gay sex. But isn't gay. Different you know. But . . . I always thought Henry was gay. Maybe it just surfaced or he caught it off . . ."

"Frank." Joe snapped. "Enough."

"Man. Be mad. I was only giving my thought."

"A stupid one."

"Don't you have room to talk." Frank nodded. "You're the one who couldn't finish your sentence and lost your thought."

"What the hell are you talking about now?"

"The 'Ellen knows' thing. You forgot what she knows and expected me to . . ."

"Frank."

"What the hell were you saying she knows anyhow?"

"What do you think, Frank?" Joe quipped.

"I don't know."

"Asshole." Joe slammed his hand. "Ellen knows Henry fathered Bev's baby."

It was not the voice they expected. "Oh my God." Hal said shocked as he walked into the office.

"Christ." Joe closed his eyes.

"Fuck dad." Frank snapped. "You have a big mouth."

So shocked Hal was as he walked closer to the desk. "Is this . . . is this true?"

"No." Frank said.

"Yes." Joe replied.

"Dad." Frank barked. "Stop telling him things."

Irritated, Hal looked at Frank. "God, what is wrong with you."

"No." Frank held up a finger. "That would be *Frank* what is wrong with you'. It's pretty blasphemous to confuse me with Him. But thanks, Anyhow."

"You're an asshole." Hal sat down. "Dad, when did you guys find this out. This is very valuable information to the investigation."

"Probably ten seconds before the explosion." Joe responded. "With all that happened, this slipped our minds."

"What are you going to do?" Hal asked.

"Well . . ." with an exhale Joe dropped the note and sat back. "I will let Henry know first. Try to keep a lid on it during the investigation, but I can't promise. Dean did the tests. Dean knows. Dean will let it out, ethical or not."

Hal nodded. "Dean took the fall for Henry's baby."

"And Henry stayed silent." Joe added.

"Fuckin Henry." Frank interjected. "Does he have a reputation of sleeping with the enemy or what?"

"What are you talking about?" Joe asked.

"Michele."

"Who's Michele."

"She's the one who um . . ." Frank shifted his eyes. "Who um . . . I mean . . . I mean . . . Shut up Hal!"

"What?" Hal tossed his hands up. "I didn't say anything."

"As screwed up as it came out." Joe said. "Frank has a valid point. Henry slept with the enemy. I think after people find this out, I'm not gonna

have to find one new council member, I have to find two.”

“You’re asking him to resign?” Hal asked.

“No.” Joe shook his head. “I wouldn’t do that. But . . . the people may ask of it. He’s second in line . . .” He raised his eyes when he saw Frank’s hand raise. Joe continued. “How can people put their faith and trust in someone, let alone respect . . .” Joe saw the hand wave higher and more frantically. “Respect them as a leader and Goddamn it! What Frank! What!”

“Can I be on council?”

“No” Joe returned to speaking. “So, I think that Henry will make the choice to resign all on his own.”

“Please?” Frank asked.

Hal laughed.

“No.” Joe said. “You can not.”

“That bites.” Frank sulked.

“Yeah, well, deal with it.” Joe told him. “Besides, you have this investigation to work on.”

“So do you and you’re on council.” Frank argued.

“Yeah, but I didn’t see the murderer.” Joe rebutted.

“Neither did I.” Frank said.

“Bullshit.” Joe snapped. “I know goddamn well you did and you’re pissing around with my time keeping it a secret.”

“We missed the window.” Frank insisted.

“The hell you did. Do you wanna be on council Frank?” Joe asked.

“Yes.”

“Who’s the murderer?”

Frank’s mouth opened in a gasp. “That’s a bribe.”

“It’s only a bribe if you know something.”

Hal looked at Frank. “He has a point.”

“Shut up, Hal.” Frank slouched some in his chair. “Can’t help you. We missed the window.”

Hal lifted his hand slightly. “May I say something.”

“No.” Frank snapped.

“Hal.” Joe shook his head.

Lifting his hands, Hal shrugged. “Fine. I won’t say anything. And I was siding with you, Frank.”

“Oh.” Frank nodded. “Go on. Even though I know you’re trying to kick up brownie points for sleeping with Ellen.”

Hal grumbled then looked to Joe who really didn’t see as if he wanted to hear it. “Dad. In Frank’s defense. If he saw the killer, and doesn’t want it out. Why care? Why even bother solving the case. It was Bev Hadly. And I guarantee you not a single soul in Beginnings will bat an eye if you went no further with it.”

“Until the next time.” Joe stated.

“Excuse me?” Hal asked.

"Until the next time some one gets killed." Joe shrugged. "What do we say? Do we tell the person that committed the crime they're out. We can't. We haven't a ground to stand on. If we condone this murder, whether she was a traitor or not, we're condoning the act. This was no accident Hal. This was no self defense. The girl was found slumped over a desk on a letter with a bullet in her head."

"Rule it a suicide." Hal said with a 'so there' attitude.

"All well and fine Hal." Joe came back. "But we don't have the murder weapon."

"Lie." Hal tried again.

"Lie? Lie? Did you say lie?"

Frank lifted his hand. "Dad, is your hearing O.K., because that was a pretty easy . . ."

"Frank!" Joe yelled with a slam of his hand to the desk. "No, Hal we can't lie. No, Hal, we can't sweep this under the rug. A murder was committed. A life was taken, whether no one liked her or not, whether she committed crimes against the community, it was no one's right to walk into her house and take her life!" Joe blasted. "She was pregnant. Pregnant. Doesn't that count for anything? The murderer has to be found. The murderer has to be dealt with. A punishment has to be given, so one way or another, we as leaders send a clear cut message that life is life, and it's never all right to take that life."

Hal sat back with a release of a deep breath. "I'm sorry. Can I ask how you're gonna deal with this punishment?"

"Grace and I sat down and talked. Along with . . . along with Jason."

"Hey!" Frank spoke up. "I'm in on this investigation. Why wasn't I called in on that punishment talk?"

"Wanna know why?" Joe questioned.

"I asked."

"Smart ass." with a shake of his head, Joe continued. "Because you, Frank, saw the murderer. You Frank are protecting them. With you there we would get nothing but a headache and argument from you on the extremes of the punishment."

"Extremes?" Frank questioned. "You can't go to extremes with this."

"Why?"

"Because you just can't. It's not right. It was Bev."

"It was murder!" Joe yelled. "We decided we're putting it to dual community vote. Bowman and us will choose what is handed down. In fact, I will get the sheets out as soon as possible. They will choose the course of action to take. *None* of which will be a slap on the wrist."

"What do you mean, you're gonna kick them out?" Frank asked.

"If they vote for it."

"Fuck that!" Frank enraged, stood up. "Fuck that. You can't kick them out. If that's the case I hope it never comes out who did this!" He stormed to

the door.

“Stop.” Joe called out standing up. “Turn around.” He ordered.

Hal slid down some in his chair with a wince. He knew what was coming.

Curling his finger, Joe called Frank back.

“What?” Frank stood by the door.

“How many fingers am I holding up?” Joe asked lifting his hand.

With a point and a mumble of his lips, Frank counted. “Four.”

“Exactly.” Joe lowered to his seat. “That’s the number you just narrowed the suspect list down to for me.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Frank barked.

Nasal and mocking Joe spoke. “What the hell are you talking about.” He imitated. “I’ll tell you. Your reaction to the punishment tells me it can only be one of four people. Him.” Joe pointed to Hal. “Robbie. Dean or . . . Ellen.”

“Dad.” Frank tossed his hands up as he walked back. “I told you. I didn’t see anyone. We missed the window.”

“Oh fuck you and your missed the window routine.” Joe snapped.

Frank inhaled in his gasp. “Oh, my God.”

With a turn of his head to the side, Hal’s eyes widened as he mouth the words ‘fuck you?’. “Um, Dad.”

“Shut up.” Joe pointed.

“What’s with the attitude.” Frank asked. “You’re pissed at me.”

“Goddamn right. I’m sick and tired of this shit Frank. You’re wasting my time with this investigation.”

“You’re wasting your time period with this investigation!” Frank vocally slammed back. “Instead of looking for one person who killed a traitor, why don’t you look for the person who tried to take out an entire group of our finest.”

Joe’s voice in emotion and volume matched Frank’s. “I would like to Frank. I would like to find this person and give that bombing one hundred percent of my attention. But I can’t. Not with this murder.”

“Fuck the murder.”

Hal interjected calmly. “No. Solve the murder. Do that and you’ll solve the bomber question.”

Both Joe and Frank looked at him.

“Come on you know it.” Hal stated. “This person tried to end the investigation by taking out every suspect. They get rid of the suspect, investigation over. Communications back up. Link to George. Solve the murder. Find your bomber. In fact . . .” He lifted his hands. “I will go as far as to say. Set the bomber up. If, in say two weeks, the real killer doesn’t confess. Find one. Actually, I wouldn’t even let it out that the real killer confessed. I would allow, like with Andrea, this person to proclaim their innocence. Which, while waiting a hearing for review of the evidence, will give the bomber ample time to go after the suspect.”

Joe shook his head. "No. Say for example . . ." His eyes shifted to Frank. "*Robbie* confessed. You want us to name Robbie. Have Robbie deny the murder despite the fact he confessed, all so we can make him a defenseless sitting duck? No."

"Yes." Frank spoke. "Yes. But don't name the real killer."

Joe quickly looked at Frank. "What are you talking about?"

Frank answered, "Here on in. All proceedings will have two faces. The ones the community knows about and the ones only the suspects, you me and Grace, that's it, knows about. Say evidence is overwhelming and we know who the killer is. Behind closed doors, without community knowledge, we face the suspects, we name the killer, we deliver a delayed punishment. We don't let the community know the whole thing is basically over with. We let the community think it's just beginning. Name the suspect, await the trial, await the bomber. When we nab him we can inform the community the Bev thing is done."

"What if the killer confesses instead of us finding him or her?" Joe asked.

"Same thing." Frank said. "Behind closed doors, punishment delivered. Then, we name the front. The front will not be the real killer. The front will know he's going to be a sitting duck and will deny the murder charges adamantly. This will bring out the bomber. Again, once the bomber is had, the real Bev murderer can be released."

"Say we do this." Joe said. "Who? Who would be the front, Frank?"

"Someone capable of handling themselves smart enough to watch their back, and . . . someone with an undeniable excuse for delaying the trial over and over until we get the bomber."

Hal's eyes closed. "Illness."

Joe glanced up. "Elliott."

Frank looked at his brother. "It's perfect. You know it. It can't be better. Hell we can stick him in a hospital bed, what a perfect set up. Because you know this son of a bitch, if he bombed our people he's gonna go after one sick man in bed."

Hal nodded. He had to agree, and he knew Elliott probably would as well without hesitation. But instead of catching the bomber, Hal thought of something else. Frank. How angry Frank was about the explosion. How bitter, confident and determined he was to get the bomber. And if Hal was right on who *he* thought the bomber was it was too ironic. Frank was adamantly protecting a killer for one crime, while unconsciously pursuing his own son for another.

CHAPTER SIX

Dean's fingers touched upon the hard cold flesh of Glen's corpse. With a strict focus of his enhanced vision he zoomed in. "You're right. Injection site." He lifted his head then raised the cover over Glen's body. He looked to Hal. "This could have been missed."

"Thank God it wasn't." Hal said. "So when do you think you'll know?"

"I'll get to the samples as soon as I can. But . . ." Dean lifted his shoulder. "I have to tell you, if it's not of this clinic what killed him, I'm not gonna be able to identify it."

"I understand. I just need confirmed that he was killed."

"I'll do the best I can."

"I appreciate you coming in to do this for me. I just have to get back."

"No problem." Dean said. "I had to come in anyhow, to relive Ellen and wait for Forrest."

Oddly, Hal looked at Dean. "Is Forrest an actual doctor?"

"Who knows. He says he is. I debate that. But . . . he's a capable pair of hands to run things. He's all we have."

"Funny." Hal gave a fake snicker. "I would think after all your training of my nephew he would be an option."

"Johnny?" Dean smiled. "No. Johnny has the knowledge . . ." Dean pointed to his own temple. "But he doesn't have the drive. He can be . . . lazy. But you didn't hear that from me."

"I didn't hear anything. Well . . ." Hal exhaled. "Thanks for your trouble."

"Hal." Dean called out before Hal walked from the morgue. "I'm curious. You don't have to answer but . . . do you have an idea on who you think did this if it was murder?"

"Yes." Hal nodded. "And I believe that whoever injected Glen set that bomb."

"Why would you say that?" Dean asked.

"Think about it, Dean. Kill the suspects. End the investigation. If that doesn't work. Secure a suspect, end the investigation. In my opinion there is another insider for the society. Communication with the society would have to be a must. Communications are down. The way to pull them back up again . . ."

"Find the murderer." Dean finished the thought.

"Exactly. Right or wrong man. Someone goes down. That man there . . . was my only alibi for Bev's murder."

"So you don't believe it was a personal strike against you."

Hal just looked at Dean for the longest time. "Nah. I just think I was singled out as another means to end it."



"I'm sorry."

"I'm not worried. I'm not guilty." Hal grinned.

"Shame, you know . . ." Dean looked to Glen's body. "That the dead can't talk."

Hal gave a 'sort of' grin as he paused in opening the door. "Ah, Dr. Hayes. But they do. In their own way, they find some means to tell us their little secrets." With a wink, Hal walked out.

Thinking, '*O.K., Hal Slagel's being a little cryptic*' Dean began to ponder about the possibility of another insider. And with that thought, came the remembrance of when he last entertained the idea of another society member. Bev's autopsy. He believed, like a little secret, it was tucked away, buried in the best of hiding places. Right with in her. He truly felt with he revelation of the baby's paternity so would come the revelation of an 'out of the blue' name. Someone no one thought about. Though the test didn't breed a society insider, they certainly bred a surprise. And to Dean, it wasn't pleasant. Like the issue of the baby's paternity, Dean had forgotten about the results in the confusion of all that happened. But right there and then, with the memory of the father, Dean, filled with an anger drive, left the morgue.

^^^

"And that's about it." Frank said, standing by Robbie. His hands moving about as he talked. "That's how it will go down."

"So there *will* be a punishment?" Robbie asked.

"Looks that way. What the choices are . . .haven't a clue. It's fuckin stupid. Dad's typing it up now, we'll make copies. Distribute. They have to be back in three days." Frank stepped back, tilted his head, looked and returned to Robbie again. "Forgive me if I . . ."

"No, I bet you're doing good."

"I am. I think. Yeah." Frank wisped his fingers fast in an upright movement. "Good. Done. Wanna see?"

"Please?"

Lifting a mirror, he gave it to Robbie. "What do you think?"

Robbie nodded impressed. "Good job." He handed the mirror back then felt the top of his hair. "I couldn't have done it better."

"Well, not that I'm the hair master. Could you see it . . . Frank's house of fuckin hair." Frank laughed. "But you don't really comb your hair, you just add Hair Hold and pull."

"True. El, had me all combed neat after she . . . bathed me."

Frank grumbled and pushed the table tray aside, sitting on the edge of the bed. "So that's how it's all gonna go down. Unless the person insists they want a trial, they'll be no trial. Only the punishment."

"So what do you think Elliott will say?" Robbie asked. "Will he do it."

"Without a doubt. That's what I think. You know those UWA types.

Fuckin hero wanna-be's. But, little brother." Frank gave a slap to Robbie's leg. "I better be going. I have so much work to do. Do you need anything?"

"Can you stop and tell Dean, I need some more of that pain stuff Ellen was shooting me with all day. I'm uh, starting to hurt."

"Absolutely." With a lean, Frank kissed Robbie on the forehead.

Robbie snickered. "Thanks."

"Hey . . ." Frank pointed as he stepped back. "I love you. You know that."

"Yeah. I love you too, Frank."

At the door Frank stopped. "Robbie. I didn't bring this up, but something to think about when you're just hanging about. Those Slam bombs. How secure do you keep them locked up."

"Come on, Frank. You know the answer to that. Not very. I never thought anyone would get to them."

"Do you recall anyone in the shack?" Frank asked.

"No. I'm the only one who . . ." Robbie looked up.

"What? Who?"

"John Matoose."

"Fuck." Frank turned to storm out.

"Frank." Robbie called him. "No."

Skidding to a loud stop, Frank flung his head back and turned around. "What. You're mistaken?"

"No. He was there. But if you're thinking John Matoose planted that. You're wrong."

"Why do you say that?"

"The slam bombs Frank, are designed, you know to be placed in something, A wall, but not anywhere close to the ground. The bomb in the warehouse was on the ground. If it was the intention to kill us all. Locked door or not. Wouldn't have mattered where we were. It would have wiped us out had the bomb been placed correctly. John Matoose knows how to set an explosive. Whoever did this, hasn't a clue."

"Thanks." Frank nodded.

"There is one thing to look at though."

"What's that?" Frank asked.

"The timer was set and protected correctly. They may not have known about placing a slam bomb, but whoever did this knows about explosives. You've just narrowed down the suspect list."

"Little brother, thank you very much. I'm gonna start that list." With a wave, Frank darted out. A few seconds later, he stuck his head back in. "Oh, hey Robbie. What was that you needed me to tell Dean."

"Pain?" Robbie told him.

"Pain. Got it." Frank left and came back. "Pain?"

"Medication."

"Oh, yeah." Frank laughed. "I thought maybe you wanted me to walk

up and pinch Dean or something.”

“No. But, if you feel like it.”

“O.K.”

Robbie laid back when Frank finally disappeared. He really didn’t think Frank would, but knowing his brother it didn’t come as a shock when he heard Dean yelling, ‘ow, Frank, you asshole’ And with that, Robbie smiled. Laughter certainly did work, even just a little, as a means of medication.

^^^

Rubbing his arm from the hard pinch he took only fueled the aggravation Dean was experiencing. Of course there was a little bit of gratefulness to Frank for doing that. Dean was worked up, ready to go, but made the mistake of making sure all as fine at the clinic before he ducked out for a few minutes. Stopping to check on patients calmed him down. It made Dean rethink about what he was planing on doing. But as soon as Frank pissed him off, Dean remembered, and any debate that came to him about confronting Henry, left. And so did Dean.

Results in hand, focus only on getting to the living section, Dean moved at a quick pace, rehearsing in his mind what he was going to say. How he was going to handle it. There would be no reason to yell or scream, he merely was going to state his peace on how he didn’t appreciate Henry staying silent during all that went down with Bev. Dean ended up being the heavy. Henry could have lifted some of that by just owning up to the fact, that during that time of conception, he was with Bev. But he didn’t. And that was where Dean’s adversity laid.

“Dean?” Henry was just a bit surprised when he opened his front door. “Hey. Making house calls now?”

“We need to talk.” Dean lifted a folder. “Can I come in?”

“Sure.” Henry opened the door wider. “But not too long. I’m tired and I want to get my energy up to go back to work.”

“I see.” Dean stepped inside and closed the door. “Here.”

“What’s this.”

“My problem with you.”

Henry opened the folder and peered lost at the document. “This is medical. I don’t know anything about reading test results.”

“Why don’t you tell me, Henry, what words you recognize on that sheet.”

“I don’t have time for this.” He closed the folder.

Dean flipped it back open. “Tell me.”

With a huff, Henry looked. “Paternity. DNA. Kusakari batch 32.” He shrugged.

“Do you even understand the definitions?”

“Dean, what is your point.”

"My point is Henry." Dean stated calm. "A month ago my life fell apart. I screamed my innocence. My wife left me. Everyone believed I was the only one who could have gotten Bev pregnant. And the funny thing is . . ." Dean chuckled. "I wasn't the one who slept with her. You were."

Closed, the folder went and Henry handed it back."Get out."

"What?" Dean snapped. "No. Don't tell me you're getting defensive."

"What you want me to do, Dean. You're implying I slept with Bev."

"You did."

"I didn't." Henry argued. "I told everyone I stopped at the last minute."

"Oh, no doubt. You stopped at the last minute all right. Right after you ejaculated."

"Fuck you."

"No." Dean waved his hand about. "Don't."

"What do you have to gain by setting me up like this?"

"Henry. Knock it off. I did no such thing. You're busted. It's known. The DNA test don't lie."

"They did about you."

Dean growled. "Keep it up. Go on. You're pissing me off."

"And you're pissing me off, Dean! You had no right to run these tests."

The shock breath was heavy and it slipped from Dean in a form of a laugh. "No right? Henry there's a murder investigation going on. It was brought to my attention that maybe the murderer was also the father. Seeing how I wasn't and Kevin wasn't. Who was. You!" Dean pointed.

"Then that theory is wrong! I didn't kill Bev."

"But you slept with her." Dean kept his focus on a silent Henry. "Still. Evidence staring you in the face, still, you deny it." Dean laughed. "My God. Decency Henry. That's all. Decency. When my life went to hell. When everyone was saying, 'oh Kevin wasn't around, it must have been Dean'. All you had to do Henry was pull out a single shred of decency and say, 'hey, wait, there's someone else in the picture, me.'"

"But the DNA tests showed it was your baby. Why say anything *if* I did sleep with her."

Biting his bottom lip with a forced calm, Dean nodded. "If." He nodded again. "Yeah. Keep going Henry. Don't you think, aside from this . . ." He lifted the folder. "Don't you think your behavior is enough? I mean, she was blackmailing you. About your relationship with Hector? I doubt very much that even *you* would get as outraged over that. No. She was holding over your head that you had slept with her and it she would let it out."

"You're wrong." Henry's words were low and piercing. "And so are your tests."

One more look Dean gave Henry, and it said it all. "I'm not going to argue with you. I know the truth." Dean headed to the door.

"You know nothing."

Dean stopped. "And I have the fetus, Henry."

Henry's head lifted.

"Oh, yeah. I didn't . . ." Dean shook his head. "I didn't look at it. I just extracted the uterus, injected a biopsy needle and took a tissue sample. That was all I needed. But . . . twenty-one, twenty-two weeks, the fetus is quite formed. Small, but formed. In the old world, babies that age survived outside the womb. But he has features. Guaranteed. And if you insist on lying, I'll remove that baby from the womb in my lab, and trust me, there will be no denying it upon view. Unless, now you want to say Danny Hoi slept with her."

"Dean." Henry whispered. "You can't say anything."

Dean's heart dropped upon Henry's admittance. But somehow it angered him that he had to argue so far to get the truth that was so evident. "Only those who need to know, will know. It's not my doing if it gets out." He turned for the door again, but hesitated. "I won't forgive this Henry. It was a coward's move to not say anything."

"I turned around and tried to help you, didn't I?"

"Oh, sure. But do you know how much help you would have been had you spoke up? You would have been the simple seed of doubt in my wife's mind that I so desperately needed. But in the beginning you sat back, you judged me. Didn't it even cross your mind, when she dropped this bombshell, that maybe, just maybe you could have been the father?"

"No." Henry shook his head. "It never did. Not even after she died."

"Why? If you knew the time frame . . ."

"She assured me before she let the news out, that it wasn't my baby, it was yours."

Dean took a long blink. "*Before* she let the news out? She brought it to your attention. Brought up the possibility, before she told anyone and you still stayed silent."

"I didn't think . . ."

"That's right Henry, You didn't think. And that makes it worse. It makes you just as guilty as she was for the deception."

"Don't you think you're exaggerating a little. Going overboard?" Henry asked. "All I did was protect my reputation."

"At the stake of mine. At the stake of my family, my wife." Dean flung open the door. "From this moment on I have no use for you. I never will again. You could drop off the face of the earth tomorrow and I'll care less."

"Do you think that's a huge threat?" Henry said bitter. "Do you think that matters to me?"

"Not right now. No." Dean shook his head. "But it will . . . it will." With his final words, Dean walked out.

^^^

"Those are the terms we decided on." Joe handed Frank the sheet.

"Two ballots per sheet. I'm posting a message up on the board, plus I have people to circulate. Hal's doing the same."

Frank read the paper.

"I need you to find time tonight, or tomorrow to make me about four hundred copies of that."

"I thought you said everyone votes." Frank commented.

"Yes."

"O.K. Correct me if I'm wrong, but between Beginnings and New Bowman there are more than four hundred people."

"Your point."

"You want four hundred copies."

"Yeah. Your point?"

"Not everyone will get them."

"Frank." Joe snapped. "There are two ballots on each sheet. I did it to save paper."

"Oh, O.K., I just thought you guys were repeating options."

Joe closed his eyes for a second. "What do you think?"

"About?"

"That?"

"You used a computer. Good job."

Cringing, Joe tensed up trying not to lose it. "Not my formatting. The suggestion."

"They suck."

"Why do they suck, Frank?"

"Because it sounds so official." Frank said.

"It's murder."

"It was Bev."

Joe grumbled. "I'm not arguing with you, all right." he walked to his office door. "Make those copies. I need them for Ellen to take to New Bowman with her tomorrow."

"Why is she going to New Bowman? To see Hal?"

"What in God's name would make . . ." Joe paused. He remembered. And then, he smiled. "As a matter of fact, Frank. Yes. It's a romantic thing."

Frank's eyes widened. "Dad. You aren't condoning that are you."

"Absolutely. He's your brother. Share." Joe walked out.

"Fuck that." Frank looked to the paper. "And fuck this." He read the words.

Murder in the State of Beginnings will not be condoned. Because of extenuating circumstances, it has been decided that a predetermined punishment will be established for the guilty party. You, as Citizens and peers, are being asked to decide this punishment. When the guilty party is delivered by an overabundance of evidence, and/or, their admission of guilt. The sentence will be handed down without delay.

If the guilty party is determined to have committed the act of murder, with premeditation and malice, the following are the options for punishment:

A. Immediate permanent removal from Beginnings/New Bowman.

B. Removal from Beginnings/New Bowman for a time period of no longer than five years, no shorter than one. No provisions, help, or protection granted. An invitation to return is extended following completion of sentence, with loss of all status and rank within the communities.

C. Removal from Beginnings/New Bowman for a time period of no shorter than two years with limited government provisions, help, protection. Invitation to return after sentence with the loss of all status and rank within the communities.

If the guilty party is determined to have committed the act of murder, without premeditation and malice, the following are the options for punishment:

a. Removal from Beginnings/New Bowman for a time period of no longer than two years, no shorter than one month. No provisions, help, or protection granted. An invitation to return is extended following completion of sentence, with loss of all status and rank within the communities.

b. Removal from Beginnings/New Bowman for a time period of no shorter than six months with limited provisions, help, protection. Invitation to return after sentence with the loss of all status and rank within the communities

The length of removal time, if chosen will be determined by Judge Grace Hawthorn. As harsh as these options sound, it is in protection of you all, that we send a clear cut message, that murder, no matter of whom, will not be tolerated.

Frank was crushed. They couldn't do it. It was unfair, wasn't his father viewing the suspect list. Didn't his father see who was on there? Heavily the options weighed upon him. Especially since, even the best of choices, would send the murderer out of Beginnings for one month. To, Frank, that was one day too long to be away from their home and family.

^^^

Alexandra giggled as Ellen washed the mud from her hair in the tub. It was ironic to Ellen how her daughter laughed, when not hours earlier, the last person she bathed cried. It broke Ellen's heart. Such a front Robbie put up. Strong, carefree, unaffected. But the moment she helped him to undress and positioned him in the tub so his bandages wouldn't get wet, was the moment Robbie broke down.

He apologized to Ellen, for the scene and the breakdown. It took Ellen fifteen minutes to convinced Robbie it was all right, no matter how strong he thought he was going to be, it was all right to let down those walls. And she

promised him he could do so to her whenever he wanted. Without fear of anyone knowing, anyone finding out.

Robbie took her up on that.

"Mommy?" Alexandra called her.

"Huh?" Ellen snapped from the memory. "I'm sorry, sweetie." She shook her head with a smile. "I was thinking."

"Must have been sad. You had a frown."

"Nah, just . . . just heavy thoughts . Medical boring stuff that we . . ." Ellen stopped and jumped when Alexandra screamed. "What? What is it."

"Uncle Frank!" Alexandra shrieked, covering her chest.

Ellen laughed, "Stop that." She looked over her shoulder to Frank who walked in. "Hey. This is odd."

With little enthusiasm, more drawn, Frank spoke. "Thought I'd stop by and see my two favorite girls."

"We're finishing up our bath." Ellen said. "Alex was out making mud angels."

"Really?" Frank smiled. "Can I do that with you next time."

"O.K." Alexandra answered. "But you'll get dirty."

"Hmm." Frank folded his arms. "Do you think Mommy can bathe me too."

Alexandra laughed. "You're silly."

"Frank?" Ellen spoke. "Are you all right?"

"Um, yeah. Fine. Some things on my mind."

"Will you eat with us?"

"Can I?" He asked.

"Sure. I cooked."

"Mommy cooked." Alexandra repeated. "I helped before I went out to do mud angels. It was the first time I played since my accident. Mommy says tomorrow she's taking me to New Bowman to shop. Huh Mommy?"

"That's right sweetie." Ellen scrubbed Alexandra's hair again.

"Mommy says we're girlfriends. She's the best, huh, Uncle Frank."

"Yes, she is."

Ellen reached for the cup to rinse. "We're gonna start to do all sorts of fun girl things now that Alex is older and . . ." She paused when she felt Frank slip down and sit, not only behind her, but very close, almost engulfing. "Frank?" She giggled. "What are you doing."

"I wanna hold you." He said soft.

"Right now?" Ellen smiled oddly.

"Yeah. Right now." After laying his lips to her shoulder in a kiss, Frank reached around her and took the cup to rinse Alexandra's hair and Ellen relaxed comfortably in his hold while he did so.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

Dean was finally getting the chance. Between giving ‘this patient’ pain medication, and ‘that patient’, along with releasing those who adamantly insisted on going home, Glen’s pathology results were on hold. But he had time, and the moment, or so Dean thought.

Her voice was as old and fragile as it always was, but it lacked that certain ‘slurred’ tone. “Skippy.”

Dean only lifted his eyes from the far back counter.

“Hey, Skippy.” Josephine called again.

Dean turned around. “Are you talking to me?”

“Unless the invisible man is in this room, yes, Einstein, I’m talking to you.”

“What’s wrong?” Dean asked.

“I have a problem, why else would I be here.”

“What is it?”

“I can’t sit down.” Josephine said.

“What was that?”

Huffing, Josephine raised the volume of her voice. “I said . . . I can’t sit down.”

“Oh.” Dean nodded calm then jolted when in surprise when he heard her mock him. “Well, Josephine, really, we like to only treat emergencies after certain hours.”

“This is an emergency. I can’t sit down on my stool at the bar.”

“If it’s a hemorrhoid problem, I can give you some cream for . . .”

“Hey!”

“What!” Dean jumped back with her scream.

“Did I say hemorrhoids?”

“You said . . .”

“I can’t sit down.” Josephine snapped. “Christ Almighty bozo, I’m pushing ninety if I had a goddamn hemorrhoid I certainly wouldn’t need your expert medical opinion to tell me that.”

“Then why can’t you sit down.”

“This.” Without hesitation, and without ample visual warning to Dean, Josephine whipped around, bent over some, lifted the back of her dress and dropped her drawers. “Feast your eyes on that. What is it?”

There were several responses Dean could have given at that moment, but he was so far in a state of shock for words to slip out. He stared at the rear, exposed and across the lab from him. He saw where her boney finger pointed, and just as Dean shuddered and was going to ask her to please cover herself, he saw it. “Holy shit.”

“What.”

Hunched over, eyes focused on Josephine's left buttock, Dean moved closer. "Holy shit."

"What!"

"You have a huge . . ."

"Don't even begin to insult my ass."

"No." Dean replied. "Josephine, you have a huge splinter in your rear."

"I do?" Josephine peered over her shoulder. "No wonder it hurts."

"Yeah, I'd say no wonder." Dean arrived, blinked, then focused on the thick chunk of wood embedded in the flesh of her behind. "When did this happen?"

"During the explosion. When I was running. I felt it, Skippy, but I thought I pulled a muscle in my mad dash."

Dean's hand extended and he curled his fingers. "I have to touch."

"You won't be the first. Indulge."

Thinking, 'swell', Dean reached out.

The squeak of the combat boot against the linoleum was the first indication he had entered the lab, the second was Frank's mouth. "Oh, my God."

Josephine waved out her hand. "Go away. We're busy."

"Obviously. I am . . . I am . . ." Frank let his last word drift out with a heavy deep breath. "Appalled."

Dean rolled his eyes and peeked out from behind Josephine. "What are you doing here, Frank?"

"Well it isn't to watch a perverted live porn show, that's for sure. Dean, Dean, Dean."

"Frank!" Dean snapped.

"Isn't elderphilia a crime?"

"What?" Dean asked as he stood up.

"You know, opposite of pedophile, elderphile."

"The term is gerontophile. And she has a splinter in her ass. A huge one."

"Hey." Josephine snapped. "Quit telling my business."

"Hey." Frank barked back. "You're the one with your moon sticking out. Let me see." He walked over to Josephine.

"Fuck you, Frankie." Josephine hurriedly picked up her drawers with a cringe and let her dress fall back down. "Get your own hide to grabble." She faced Dean. "What do we do? I can't keep living like this."

"No." Dean crossed one arm over his waist. "That has to come out. In fact, you'll need anesthesia because the removal will be painful."

"Got ya." Josephine winked and started to leave.

"Hey." Dean called out. "Where are you going?"

"You said I need anesthesia. That's where I'm going. I'm hitting the social hall. See ya when I'm good and numb." With a slight limp, dress stuck a little in the back of her underwear, Josephine walked out.

Frank shook his head. "Man, Dean. Wait until I tell Ellen you were down on . . ."

"Frank." Dean said with a cringe. "Stop that. And why are you here?"

"I came to talk to you about something." Frank had a more serious tone to him.

"What's up?"

"Um never mind. . . Josephine scared it from me."

Dean laughed. "She did not. What is it? It looks serious."

"I thought it was important, and it's not, in fact, it's really nothing, so . . ." He moved to the lab door. "I'm heading off to finish some things."

"Frank?" Dean questioned. "Are you sure?"

"Oh, yeah." Frank flung out his hand. "It was just um . . . about . . . You know, Henry and the thing, so I'll talk to you tomorrow about it."

"O.K. night."

"Night." Lifting his hand in a wave, Frank walked from the lab. Out in the hall he stopped and pulled from his pocket that ballot sheet for punishment. He took a look at it than peered over his shoulder into the lab to see Dean moving about in his work. After a brief moment of debate, Frank folded the sheet and headed down the hall. He remembered in his leaving the clinic, aside from dealing with the issues of the ballot, he had to deal with copies. And since the next day wasn't really that far away, and four hundred copies were a lot to make, he figured, while he had time, he'd get a start on those copies.

^^^

"Hey, Dad." On his way to the social hall, Johnny spotted Frank. "Wait up."

"Hey, John." Frank stopped. "Where you headed?"

"Hall. Wanna join me?"

"Can't. I'm heading to containment to use the copy machine." Frank pulled out the ballot. "Seems . . . seems the decision on punishment for Bev's murderer is going to lie in the communities hand."

Johnny slowly looked up. "Did you guys figure out who killed her."

Closed lips, Frank shook his head. "And it sucks that someone has to be punished for it."

Wanting badly to say, 'yeah, right, fuck you for thinking that,' Johnny didn't. "I know."

"So I have to make copies. For here and New Bowman. Ellen will take them in the morning."

"I guess I will too." Johnny made himself sound as un-enthusied as he could. "I'm taking her."

"Gee, John. Didn't think going somewhere with Ellen was all that bad."

"El? No?" Johnny waved out his hand. "It's just that . . . it's just . . .

never mind.”

“What?” Frank asked.

Souring his face, Johnny took a deep breath., “I hate the thought of running into Uncle Hal.”

Frank blinked. “Uncle Hal? What . . . what is the problem lately with you and Uncle Hal?”

“Don’t know.” Johnny shrugged. “He hates me.”

“No, he doesn’t.”

“Yeah, Dad. He does. He wouldn’t even let me set his leg.”

“You’re kidding?” Frank asked shocked.

“No. He insisted that I was incompetent. Now I know you guys have this image of him . . .” Johnny lifted his hand. “But I’m sorry. What he shows you and what he shows me are two different things. I know for a fact he doesn’t like me.”

“John. Sometimes people don’t hit it off.”

“Well, according to Uncle Hal, him and I will never hit it off.”

Frank gave an odd look. “Why would he say that to you?”

“The truth?”

“Nothing less.”

“Because I remind him of you.” Johnny watched Frank turn his head. “Dad, why don’t you believe me.”

“I didn’t say that.” Frank said.

“You don’t have to.” Johnny dropped his head.

“John. It’s just that, Hal is my brother and . . .”

“I’m your son.” Johnny pointed to his chest. “I just wished someone would believe me about this, because it really . . .” He let out a sad breath. “It bothers me that everyone pictures him as this good guy, and won’t even consider what I’m saying. How does that make me feel? He knows that no one believes me. And . . . and why argue. Why try. I’m sorry.” Johnny, with classroom dramatics, turned.

“John.” Frank gave a lifting nod of his chin. “I’ll keep an eye out on things. But you have to let me know when they happen. OK?”

“Oh, I will Dad. Thanks. I will. Night.”

“Night.” Frank turned and walked to containment.

Watching his father leave, Johnny smiled. But the smile quickly left when he turned around and John Matoose was there. “What?”

John shook his head. “Did you know, when the streets are dead like this, all a person has to do is listen because voices carry in the wind.”

“So do farts but no one bothers hanging out sniffing for them.”

“Aren’t you witty?”

Johnny flashed a grin. “Yeah, I am. Is there something you wanted John, because I could swear, you’re the one who always hates being around me. I try to be your pal.”

“O.K. Pal.” John said with edge. “I wanna know. Did you set that

explosion.”

Johnny laughed “Yeah, right. If I did, I would tell you? No.” He shook his head. “But because I’m that swell type of guy. I’ll be honest. No. Didn’t you hear my Pap? Uncle Robbie store explosives in that warehouse.” Johnny tossed up his hands. “Accident. Sorry. Just . . .” He sighed out. “Too bad Uncle Hal didn’t bite it.”

“You certainly want to take on a lot by going after your Uncle Hal.”

“Going after? No. Taking him down.”

“For what?”

Johnny dropped his voice to a whisper. “Killing Bev.”

“You really believe that?” John said with a hint of making fun.

“Oh, yeah. I’ve seen the evidence.”

“And I told you that was awfully convenient.”

Johnny chuckled. “Why would he set himself up?”

“To bring you down.”

“Well, if you’re so convinced of that, then that means my Uncle Hal is on to me. If that’s the case, you’d better worry. I go down. So do you.” with a smile and a pat to John’s cheek, Johnny turned around and walked off.

The fantasy of pulling out his gun and shooting Johnny right there ended with the remembrance that John was no longer privileged to carry a gun in Beginnings. All trust was lost in him, all faith and with just cause. John only wished at that moment he could have one ounce of that trust back because he would spew forth all he knew about Johnny. But he didn’t have any physical evidence. And obviously, neither did Hal. Because *if* Hal was on to Johnny, and he had enough proof, surely Johnny would be gone. It was a shame to John that he couldn’t just go approach Hal, because he was the power needed to bring Johnny down, and John Matoose could very well be the evidence Hal sought. But the problem in talking to Hal came in the form of one word. Doubt. Not so much of Hal’s intuitiveness of Johnny, but rather of Hal himself. He was a Slagel. There was a river of thickness in the bond of Slagel blood. A river, John was still uncertain he could trudge confidentially to Hal with all that he knew of his nephew.

^^^

Robbie felt it. Warm, almost hot as it hit into his vein and traveling through his circulation system. Like magic, within seconds, he felt a blanket of euphoria overcome him. “Thanks, El.”

Ellen tossed away the syringe. “I know you’re in pain, Robbie. But are you sure, this isn’t a way to cover up the way you feel.”

“El. I’m fine.” He nodded. “Really.”

“O.K., don’t get used to it. This is hospital strength only. What I send you home with will not be as strong.”

“Speaking of which. When do I go home.”

Ellen blinked. “Robbie. Come on . . .”

“No. El. Why do I have to be in here?” he asked. “To watch my bandages. To watch the limb for infections. What?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Well, can’t someone stop by and check on me. This *is* Beginnings, not New York in the old world. I’d rather not be in here.”

Ellen sat down on the edge of the bed. “It depends where home is going to be.”

W

i  
t  
h

c  
u  
r  
i  
o  
s  
i  
t  
y  
,

R  
o  
b  
b  
i  
e

l  
o  
o  
k  
e  
d

a  
t

h  
e  
r

.  
“  
I  
  
d  
o  
n  
,  
t  
  
u  
n  
d  
e  
r  
s  
t  
a  
n  
d  
.  
”

“Jess doesn’t have the luxury of going him yet. If you stay . . .”

Robbie whined. “No.”

“Yes. Denny and Katie are living for a while in New Bowman. Joe has the house. If you tell me that’s where you are going to live for a while. With your dad, and with me and Dean next door, I’ll be confident enough to let you out early.”

“How early?” Robbie asked.

“After I am sure you know the routine. Maybe tomorrow afternoon when we see the chance for infection is greatly reduced.”

Robbie let out a breath. “How do you think my Dad will react to me moving in with him and Frank.”

Ellen’s mouth opened, but Joe’s voice emerged.

“Your father.” He said as he walked in. “Would love it. The house is so empty.”

Robbie blinked and drew up a smirk. “Frank’s there.”

Joe exhaled. “I repeat. The house is empty.” He walked to the bed. “I’d love to have you move in with me for a while. Permanent if you choose. And I’ll even spoil you.” Joe winked. “How’s that.”

“No, that’s . . .” Robbie glanced up innocently. “Well, maybe just a little. Would you mind?”

Joe chuckled. “No, not at all.”

Ellen stood up. "Here, Joe. Sit down."

"You don't have to leave." Joe told her.

"No, I do. Really. I just wanted to give Robbie some meds." She leaned down and kissed Robbie, then Joe as he sat down. "I'll check back in a bit."

"Ellen?" Joe called her. "I thought you were home for the night."

"I was. But, Dean radioed me. He said if I didn't want to miss it, I had to come back."

Not wanting to show his curiosity, Joe couldn't help it. "Miss what?"

At the door Ellen paused. "Josephine has a big splinter in her butt we have to take out. Dean says in actually photograph worthy, it's so monumental"

Joe turned head.

Robbie laughed. "Oh, wow. I would love to see that."

"Robert."

Ellen smiled. "Really? I can ask her to come and show you."

"Nah, that's . . ." Robbie grinned.

"Robert." Joe warned.

"Could you El?" Robbie asked. "That would make me feel so much better."

"Absolutely. I'm sure she will." Ellen smiled. "Night."

Joe looked back to the door and watched Ellen disappeared. He looked back to Robbie who had an 'out there' smile and look on his face. "I know in that stoned state you'll find demented humor in seeing Josephine's ass. But do I need to be subject to that."

"Dad. Yeah." Robbie snickered. "It's monumental."

Joe bobbed his head from side to side. "Well, yes, you have a point."

The immaturity that Dean and Ellen showed was evident in the childish giggling they did. In a hover into each other at the far back counter, they laughed.

"God. El." Dean spoke in a whisper. "It didn't even dawn on me when Frank walked in here. I was in doctor mode."

"I wish I would have seen his face. What was he doing here?"

"He said . . ." The smile dropped immediately from Dean's face when he remembered what Frank told him.

"What's wrong?"

"Um, nothing." He shook his head. "Something just popped into my mind."

"Gee, thanks. I thought I had you're complete attention."

"Always." Dean slipped his hand behind Ellen's neck and began to kiss her.

"What is it about this lab and you?" Ellen asked through his kisses.

A double knock on the archway of the lab door separated Dean and



Ellen. Forrest stood there.

“Don. El-loon.” Forrest walked in. “I um ear for my shift.”

Running his hand over his lip Dean smiled. “Good. And just in time.”

“For?” Forrest asked.

Dean pointed to a staggering, slanted Josephine who stood behind him.

“Ah.” Forrest smiled. “The pick-chair of beauty.”

After a hiccup, Josephine giggled. “Aren’t you the suave one, Tree.” She winked and looked at Dean. “Hey, Skippy. I’m ready. I did my peep show for the Slagel perverts. Yep.” She nodded. “I know what was running through their minds. Good thing I stayed on the safe side of that Robbie’s bed. couldn’t reach out and grab . . .”

“Hey.” Dean interrupted. “That is so wrong that you said that.”

Josephine flipped him off. “Are we gonna do this or, what. I’m toasted. Let’s go.” She twitched her head to the left and fell into the doorway. “See?”

Forrest grabbed her. “Are you ah rut?”

“Just fine, there Tree.” Josephine told him. “Skippy!” She yelled.

Ellen couldn’t look, she laughed and turned her back. “I don’t know if I can assist.”

Dean whispered. “I don’t know if I can even do it. Forrest.” Dean looked brightly. “Forrest, it appears Josephine has a large splinter in her . . .”

“Ass.” Josephine completed the sentence. “Has to come out. Hurts like a bitch.”

Forrest’s eyes widened and, after a quick blush of surprise he smiled awkwardly at Josephine. “You poor woo-man.”

“Yeah.” Josephine nodded. “Can’t sit on my stool. So can one of you wanna-be’s take it out, or else I’m gonna have to run back over to the hall and have a few more.”

Dean looked at his watch. “I really should get home. Forrest, could you?”

“Don. I wooed rather note.” Forrest answer. “Boot, I will if you incest. Et is your clin-nook. No.”

“And I do insist.” Dean smiled. “Exercising of my authority. Ellen? Staying or going?”

“Um . . .” Ellen looked at Forrest and then to a slanted Josephine. “Oh, Dean, visually, this will be a good one.”

“O.K. I’ll see you at home.” He kissed her on the cheek. “Night.” He walked across the lab. “Thanks, Forrest.”

“Do note men-shoon it, Don.” Forrest waved then returned to awaiting Josephine. “Shall we?”

“Absolutely.” Josephine said with a hiccup. “Is the bimbo coming.”

Turning around, and biting her bottom lip to hold in her laugh, Ellen nodded “Yes, I’ll be there in a second.”

“I will prep de pay-shunt.” Forrest led a leading hand on Josephine’s back. “You will brung the soup-plies? Oui?”

“Um sure.” Ellen smiled. “Be right there.” Pretty much Dean had the tray for the procedure all ready. But Ellen stayed behind for a second after they left. Not only did she have to mentally prepared self for the procedure, she wanted to find the instant camera to visually document it. She searched the drawers and finally found it. With a smile on her face, she grabbed the procedure tray and began to head out. She stopped cold in the hall when she looked at the camera. “Shit.” She spoke soft. “Empty.” Thinking ‘film’ Ellen remembered any extra packets were not kept in the clinic lab. After a debate in her mind on whether to seek out film, Ellen decided that the case warranted medical recording for future reference books. With that in mind, she dropped of the procedure tray to Forrest and headed to the stash place to get more film.

^^^

Richie Martin screamed. His words were muffled from under the hood of the copy machine, his lips pressed tight to the glass. “Frank. Stop.” His legs kicked out.

“Richie. Hold it. This is a test.” Using the weight of his leg, he pinned Richie more. “Fuckin button won’t work.” One hand holding Richie’s head, Frank used his free hand to press the ‘C’ button. “Fuck. It won’t. . . . Oh! Shit. I got it.” with a shift of his finger. “Never mind. That was the ‘clear’ button. There.”

With a press of the button and a flash of the photocopier, Richie shrieked. He let out a strangulation breath as Frank released him. “That was . . . it was . . . you messed my hair, Frank.” Richie smacked himself on the top of the head and rolled his chin against his shoulder. “Bas . . . Bastard.”

“Yeah. But your hair looks good. See.” Frank handed him the copy. “And you helped me figure it out. Thanks.”

Richie, with a tilted head, peered at the self portrait. “Yeah. I do, I do look good. Who am I gonna give it to Frank, who? Who do you think? Frank? Frank? Frank?”

“Fuck. What?” Frank had his eyes on the copier.

“Who am I gonna give it to?”

“Um. Hal.”

“Oh, yeah. I like Hal.” Richie smiled. “He’s . . . He’s nice.”

“Dresses like a pansy though.”

“No.” Richie shook his head. It swung out of control. “Hal’s nice. Yeah. I’ll sign it for him. Should I write him a note?”

“Yeah. A love note.” Frank told him.

“O.K. I like Hal.” Richie said. “Robbie too. Robbie’s nice. Joe’s he’s . . . he’s . . .”

“Mean.”

Richie gasped. “No. But yeah, Joe’s mean, sometimes. Yeah. Not all the

time. You're nice Frank."

"I am."

"And . . ."

"Richie." Frank spoke pulling out the ballot. "I have a lot of work to do."

"O.K., I . . . I'll let you go. You're nice. Hal's nice. Johnny's nas . . . nasty. Yuck."

Quickly Frank looked at him. "Johnny's nasty? Why?"

"He . . . He made me, made me, he . . . made . . ."

"Richie." Frank held in his laughter visualizing Johnny making Richie do something dumb. "Go. I have a lot of copies to make. Work on that love note for Hal. Tell *him* all about what Johnny made you do."

"O.K.," Richie nodded fast. "How's my hair Frank? Robbie says always ask." he rolled his chin on his shoulder.

"Perfect."

"Yeah, Robbie's nice. So are you. Hal's swell. Johnny's . . . Johnny's . . ."

"Nasty." Frank nodded with a wink.

"Yeah." Richie walked to the door of Ellen's office. "I'll work on that note."

"Love note!" Frank corrected as Richie left. "O.K." He exhaled. "Now it's time to work." He lifted the lid and laid down the paper." Shutting the lid, Frank found the correct button and pressed. He watched the scan light flash and move, then with a turn of his head to the left he watched the paper copy come out. He checked it, made sure it was good, and set it back in the tray. "That's one." Again, Frank pressed the button, observed the flash move, and watched the copy come out. "Two." with a heavy breath he pressed the copy button again. "Thanks, Dad. This is gonna take fuckin forever." He saw the copy emerge. "Three."

^^^

The song wasn't of his time, or era, and probably Johnny knew it from the amount of times he heard his Uncle Robbie play it. Walking to Joe's office, Johnny couldn't help but reflect on the one line from the song *American Pie*. The line, 'the day the music died' was so fitting for Beginnings and it's overhanging demeanor.

Dead.

Overwhelmed with grief and loss, no one buzzed about. The streets were empty, the guards moved slow. It was like a ghost town and Johnny took advantage of that.

Usually he would have to wait until two or three in the morning to try his routine 'code busting' on the one and only phone in Beginnings. But with things as low key as they were, Johnny went early.

He wasted no time, never did, in retrieving that phone in the dark office.

He didn't need a light, the moon always cast enough and any light would send a sign that he was there.

Phone out, turned on and in his hand, Johnny looked at his list of number sequences to try. *Beep-beep-beep-beep-beep*. Four numbers, wrong code, he tried again. He was determined, and figured, a four digit wouldn't be all that hard to hit. One of those night he tried, he would break it. It was Johnny's lucky night. About the sixth time he broke through. "Yes." He whispered out and immediately dialed. "Ring, please, ring. Yes." He leaned back in Joe's chair. The excitement of the other line being answered caused Johnny to spring forward elbows on Joe's desk, and he grasped that phone for life. His breath out was loud and first. "George. It's me Johnny . . ."

Beep.

Johnny's heart sunk, when so fast that phone was pulled from his hand and shut off. *Who?* He wondered and after a turn on of the light, a creak of the floor boards. he saw.

Ellen.

Slowly Johnny's eyes lifted to her.

Ellen stared. Confusion was all over her face as she held that phone. "What . . . what are doing, Johnny?"

At that second in time, Johnny swore his heart pounded in his ears. He felt hot, his skin trembled. And all that raced through Johnny's mind was how long it would take for him to kill her right then and there. Could he do it with little sound, or would a guard be in too close of range if she screamed.

"Johnny." She whispered out.

"It's not . . . it's not what you think."

Ellen closed her eyes. "Oh my God. Please tell me you aren't an insider for the society."

Right there, Johnny almost laughed. He chuckled inside recanting her words in his memory. Wondering if she was as stupid as his father to even think he would answer that honestly. And he had to wonder, if he said 'no' would she buy it? Johnny swallowed and saddened the look on his face. "No."

"Then if you're not. Then why . . ." Painfully she looked away. "Why were you calling George?"

"You're not going to believe me." Johnny waited for Ellen to say something, she only stared. "See. El." Whimpering was the effect Johnny added. "Oh, God." He buried his face in his hands. "I . . . George called me. He called me a while ago. Called me. El. You know him and I were always close. What was I supposed to do when he called."

"Hang up maybe?" Ellen said.

"I know. I should have. I couldn't. I didn't tell him anything vital. I just talked. And when . . . And when Andrea went down. George called to find . . . to find out." Johnny rubbed his eyes and looked back up. "I told him what happened to her. He was heartbroken."

Ellen rolled her eyes.

"This is stupid. I know, But when I found out Bev was his daughter . . . I just thought he had the right to know she died."

"Johnny." Ellen snapped. "He can't have the right to know. Don't you realize that is why the phones are down?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"But nothing. One simple phone call could have launched us into a war or an attack Beginnings isn't ready for."

"I didn't think of that." Johnny shook his head. "He was so nice on the phone to me. Just like he used to be. We only talked about things we did. Fishing and stuff. And I . . . I . . ."

"Fell for it." Ellen said calmly. "He used you. Can't you see that? Johnny, he was using you."

Johnny covered his face and nodded. "What are you going to do?"

"I want it to stop. O.K.? Just stop trying to contact him. You hear me?"

From under his hands, Johnny smiled. "All right."

"If he calls you again when the phone lines are up. You disconnect the call. Say nothing and hang up. Promise me."

"I promise." Making the best snuffle sound he could, Johnny with sad eyes peered up to her. "I'm sorry."

Ellen nodded and folded her arms tighter. "You should go home."

Slowly, Johnny stood up and slipped out from behind the desk. "Thanks, El." He moved to the door and stopped. "Are you gonna say something to my Pap or dad?"

"Not if you give me your word. Look me in the eye and give me your word that this is done with. Ended. No more contact, innocent or not, with George."

Johnny looked at her. Straight in the eye. "You have my word. Never again."

"Then I won't say anything to them."

"Thanks." Johnny whispered. He hesitated again appearing to Ellen as if he were projecting a world of apology when actually he was debating on whether or not to believe she would stay silent. He had the opportunity. They were alone. One lunge, one reach out for her thin throat and Johnny knew, before she could scream, he could snap her neck.

"Johnny? Something wrong?"

Staring at Ellen, gripping that phone, looking so disappointed, Johnny knew her silence, if any, would be short lived. And he decided, so should her life. "I forgot to do something." One step to her was all he took and the door to the office opened. Immediately, the hand that was ready to reach, still extended and laid on Ellen's shoulder. Johnny looked back.

Dan walked in. "What's going on?"

Johnny kissed Ellen on the cheek. "Night."

"Night." Ellen nodded as Johnny left then she looked at Dan,

concealing the phone within the folds of her arm. "Hey, Dan, Johnny walked me up. Glad you're here. You can walk me back." She perked up her voice.

"Oh, O.K., I thought something was wrong."

"No. I was looking for something in the back. Can you wait for me I'll be right out."

"Sure. Go on." Dan said.

Darting to the examining room in the rear of Joe's office, Ellen, inside, stopped to catch her breath. The phone was damp from her sweating hands. She didn't know what to do, she really didn't. She gave her word to Johnny that she wouldn't say anything to Frank or Joe. The situation was bad . . . or was it. Johnny was just kid, there had to be no way he realized what he was doing, Ellen rationalized. But she was still stuck with the decision on what to do. Her body shuddered in a tensed up mode that had her hinging on the edge of tears.

"Ellen." Dan called from the other room. "Hey, are you going to New Bowman tomorrow?"

Ellen's eyes widened. "New Bowman." She cleared her throat. "Um, yeah. Why?"

"If I give you my Danny Dollar card will you pick me up one of those Hawaiian Shirts Ben and Todd are selling. I hear they're going fast."

Ellen's eyes went back down to the phone. Her mind raced and she smiled, *Hawaiian. Hal?* She breathed out, slipped the phone into her coat pocket and stepped out into the office. "Absolutely. I'll get you one of those. Did you know Hal was stationed in Hawaii for years?"

"Didn't know that no." Dan set down the clipboard he was peeking at. "Thanks for sharing."

"Sure." Ellen smiled. "Let's go."

"Did you get what you need from the back?" Dan asked.

"Yeah, I did. And thank you." Ellen opened the door. She did get what she needed in the back, and that wasn't film for the instant camera, it was answers.

^^^

Steward Lange watched the look on George's face as he drifted off again into thought during their conversation. "Sir?"

"Sorry, Stew." George shook his head and sat down behind his desk.

"Did he sound desperate?"

"No. More excited to talk to me."

"Could be they were working on the phones and Johnny wanted to try to grab a chance." Steward guessed.

George shook his head. "Call me paranoid. But I keep thinking someone walked in on him."

"If you're right, then Johnny hung up immediately."

"True. All right." George heaved out a breath. "What do we have out west."

"Furthest would be Minnesota, near Illinois." Steward said.

"Any CME assassins there."

"I'd be guessing . . ." Steward lifted his shoulder. "Thirty, forty. It's a small camp. Fifteen hundred. A scouting post. We only send men out from there. So assassins are only there as guards."

"Even twenty would be enough." George spoke his thoughts out loud.

"Sir?"

"Get a hold of that camp. Tell the CO to gather up about ten, fifteen assassins. Tell him what we take from him we'll replace. Inform him he'll need a two man escort to disperse the CME's. Send the group out and position them, um . . ." George paused to think. "About twenty miles northeast of Beginnings."

At that point Steward was confused. "If you want to attack Beginnings, sir, fifteen . . ."

"Stew. What do you take me for, a moron? No." George shook his head. "I have an idea. Assassins only. Stragglers. One, one day, two the next, one the following. All CME's. It won't look like an attack, that's not what I'm aiming for. I'm aiming for attention. If the first wave of ten or so, doesn't work, wait a few days, start over again. Eventually it'll work. I want to get a call from Joe Slagel. We're in a cease fire and it will be obvious that we aren't breaking that."

"Then why want his call?"

George let out a breath. "So I can inform him that . . . while moving a barrage of CME's, they went haywire and are loose. We'll thank Joe for letting us know, and at that time I will tell him I would like to sit down and further extend the peace talks."

"What peace talks?" Steward asked.

"The ones I want to have."

Panic. Steward panicked. Did he miss something. Had he fallen asleep at one of George's meetings. "When . . . when did we decide that we didn't want Beginnings?"

"We didn't."

"Do we?" Steward asked.

"Want Beginnings? Absolutely." George said.

"O.K." Steward sounded lost. "Don't yell, but when did we decide to extend the cease fire and go into peace talks?"

"We didn't."

With a 'whew' Steward relaxed. "I thought I missed something."

"No." Arrogant. George shook his head. "The peace talks I propose are a crock of shit. I want to meet with Joe Slagel, so I can walk through those gates and see for myself that everything is all right."

"If you'll forgive me. It's quite an extreme. I mean, just wait for the call."

It'll come."

"I think something is wrong."

"If they aren't pulling anything foolish, then they aren't close to being discovered. It's just that it's a big plan to only find out that everything is fine."

"Is it?" George questioned him. "Just take a moment to think. You were a father. So you'll understand this. My daughter, and Johnny, who is like my own kid, they are behind those walls. When it comes to your kids, you'll do anything. Any length. Any risk. If someone is on to them, or things are getting tight, then I have to get them out of there . . . at any cost." George pushed the phone forward to Steward. "Get a hold of our Minnesota camp."

~~~~~

After a wave of Hal's cigarette smoke from his face, Elliott held up his hand. "Now, let me see if I got the straight. You want . . ."

"Did I tell you, Elliott . . ." Hal lifted his mug to his lips, took a 'stalling' sip and brought it down. "Did I tell you Dean saw the injection site?"

One hand on hip, in a 'leaning toward Hal' stand, Elliott nodded. "Yes. Now, back to what I was . . ."

"My God." Hal fake gasped. "You look different, in fact, I would go as far as to say pleasant in your lack of uniform attire." He held up his hand pointing to the jeans and denim shirt Elliott wore.

"I didn't feel like being in uniform for . . . *choir* practice, thank you very much."

"Wasn't that a great idea I had."

"No." Elliott near laughed. "I have every bad singer in New Bowman auditioning for a choir I didn't know we were going to have. And you have changed the subject completely."

"I did not."

"You did." Elliott said. "You ramble off what is going to happen, then when I try to question, you interrupt."

Hal grunted with a whine. "Go on. Say it."

"Let me get this straight . . ." Elliott repeated his earlier actions of lifting his hand. He ignored Hal's rolling eyes. "No matter who Bev's killer is, to catch the bomber, or as we think, catch Johnny, *I* am going to be publically named as the killer."

"Yes." Hal opened his mouth to say more.

"O.K., wait. I'm still going. I will publically boast my innocence and demand a trial, which will never happen, because I will fake repercussions of my illness. And, if need be, I will use my illness as a means to be bedridden, so as to be an easy target for Johnny, to try to kill, or hit with one of those debilitating drugs he has high access to. Right?"

"My God do you ramble."



"Right?" Elliot asked again.

"Yes." Hal nodded. "So . . . you're not going to do it?"

Elliott took a deep breath. "Why do I get the feeling, if I say 'no', that it won't make a bit of difference."

"Oh, but Elliott, it will."

"And I believe that." Elliott shook his head. "Of course I'll do it. What do I have to lose?"

"Your life." Hal grinned.

"Funny."

Because it came without expectance, Hal looked curious at the light knock at the door. He glanced at his watch. "Probably one of your choir boys wanting to know if they made it." He hopped to the door and opened it. "Ellen." He said in shock.

With just as much of a look of surprise, Elliott turned around.

Ellen's words were breathy and nervous. "Hey, uh, Hal. You busy."

"What are you doing here?" Hal asked.

"I stole one of Frank's trucks and drove."

"Good God Ellen it's midnight. Did you come here alone?" Hal opened the door wider.

"Yeah, and that road is really scary." She stepped inside. "Do you know how dark it is at night. I swear it's even more dark when you're driving alone."

"Was there an emergency?" Hal asked.

"Yeah. No," She shook her head with closed eyes. "No. Sort of. I need a favor. I had to see you."

Elliott stepped forward. "Is something wrong?"

Ellen blinked in debate. "Could be."

After a short breath, Hal gave a stern look. "Ellen. Before we get into a game of 'riddle me this' what is it?"

"Did you need me to leave?" Elliott asked.

"No." Ellen shook her head and reached into her pocket. Her heart pounded and her hand trembled as she touched upon the phone. Pulling it out, it hit against the side of her pocket, and fumbled from her shaking hand, flying out and landing on the floor. Hurriedly she bent down reaching for it, and so did Hal.

He saw the twitching of her fingers. "Why are you shaking?"

Gripping the phone, as if for dear life, Ellen stood up. "This is Joe's phone."

"Why . . . why do you have my father's phone?" Hal asked. "Wasn't that locked up?"

"Yes." Ellen nodded.

"How did you unlock it?"

"I didn't. I mean, it doesn't matter." Ellen spoke nervously.

Hal turned his head to Elliot mouthing the words in question, 'doesn't

matter?', He looked back to Ellen.

"Hal." She showed him the phone. "Do you know the code that unlocks this?"

"Yes, I do, but I can't give it to . . ."

"No." Frantically she shook her head and shoved the phone to Hal. "I don't want it." She spoke fast, each word picking up more intensity. "Just change it. Change the code. Just change it Hal. Make it hard. Make it unbreakable. Change it. Change it now."

Hal's hands went to the phone that was pressed hard to his chest by Ellen, in what seemed desperation. "Ellen . . ."

"Please don't ask me." She stepped back and whispered. "Don't ask. Just . . . change it."

"And what am I to tell my father when he can't break the code."

"Has he called here since you were in Beginnings this afternoon?" Ellen asked.

"No." Hal answered. "But . . ."

"Good." Ellen spoke out with a breath. "Good. You'll write him a note saying you changed it when you were in town. Routine security thing. Yeah." She exhaled. "That's what you'll do." She gave a soft pat to his arm then turned. She smiled at Elliott as she walked toward the kitchen. "Hey, Elliot, how are you." She sighed out again. "I need something to drink."

The words didn't need to be said. The same thoughts were unspokenly exchanged in the look between Hal and Elliott after Ellen had left the room.

^^^

Outside of his apartment building, around Elliott, Hal peered to the truck where Ellen sat and waited. "I don't know what to do."

Elliott looked back at her. "Well, Captain, you could exercise your authority and demand to know."

Hal smirked. "Oh, sure. Right away." He nodded and rolled his eyes. "It's Ellen. She'll lie." Again he looked at her. "No. Elliott. I think we both know who she busted with that phone. It's the mother in her doing that maternal protecting thing." He let out a long breath. "But, it bothers her. And . . . she came to me once. She'll come to me again." Laying his hand on Elliott's arm, he turned him. "Get her back home. Owens will follow you to drive you back. Get that phone put back and make sure she gets safely to her door."

Elliott nodded, took a step and stopped. "What about tomorrow and the next day? How do we ensure her safety. Because we both know what he's capable of."

"I know. For tonight she'll be fine. Tomorrow, I'll come up with a way without saying why, to get my brother to have her watched. Get her home, Elliott."

"Yes, sir." Elliott walked to the driver's side of the truck and got in. "Ready?"

"Yeah." Ellen looked back to see Hal standing there. "What um, were you guys talking about?"

"I had to convince the Captain that I was coming back tonight. He didn't think I was."

"Oh." Ellen looked back out the windshield, huddled in her jacket near the passenger's door.

"Ready?" Elliott started the truck, then as he reached for the gears, he stopped when Ellen scooted close.

"Do you mind?" She asked.

"Not at all." Speaking softly, then giving a gentle smile, Elliott kissed her lightly on the forehead, shifted the gear, and began to drive.

^^^

"Frank." Dean said his name with such relief as he opened the front door.

"What's wrong?" Frank asked. "You sounded panicked."

"I am." Dean ran his fingers through his hair. "I can't find Ellen."

Frank blinked. "What do you mean, you can't find her?"

"I can't find her, Frank. She stayed at the clinic to help with Josephine. It seemed to be taking her a while, I radioed, Forrest said she left before the procedure and never come back. That was two hours ago."

"Fuck, Dean."

"I know. I know."

"You have to keep tabs on her. I told you with this bomber running around and . . . wait." Frank lifted his radio headset and switched the channel on the box. "Security, this is an all call. Anyone seen Ellen?"

Dean watched Frank whip the headset off as if it squealed. "What's wrong?"

"They all answered at once." Frank brought the microphone piece to his mouth. "Hold it!" He blasted. "One at a time. Dan, you first . . . yeah. Yeah. Good. Steve what did you . . . yeah. Fuck. Thanks."

"What?" Dean questioned.

"She went to New Bowman." Frank raised his eyebrow. "Told Dan I said she could borrow my truck to go and see Hal. Fuckin Hal. Dean, I'm telling you the affair didn't end. Fuck." He stormed to the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To get her." Frank flung open the door and when he did, he brought in Ellen.

Ellen stumbled as she nearly fell inside.

"El." Dean walked to her. "Where have you been?"

"Yeah, El." Frank repeated with less concern and more edge. "Where

have you been.”

Ellen shifted her eyes.

“I was worried.” Dean said.

“Fuck, worried. I’m pissed. Where were you.”

Ellen held up her hand. “I was in New Bowman.”

“See!” Frank yelled. “Fuck. Did you, or did you not go there to see Hal!”

Dean tried to be calming, “Frank.”

“No, Dean.” Frank shook his head. “El?”

Ellen hesitated. “Yes, but . . .”

“Dean.” Strong Frank spoke. “You deal with this or I will. She’s cheating on us.”

Dean winced. “She is not cheating. God, Frank., Be paranoid.” he turned his views to Ellen. “Are you?”

“No.” Ellen shook her head. “I needed to see Hal.”

Frank tossed his hands up. “At midnight, you needed to see Hal?”

“Frank.” Dean tried to warn.

“El?” Frank badgered. “What was so important that you had to steal my truck and traipse off to fuckin New Bowman to see my brother.”

“I . . . I . . .” Ellen stood up straight and sniffed in courage. “I needed a hug. So there.”

After a brief stare at Ellen, Dean, eyes locked on her, lifted his shoulders and tilted his head. “She needed a hug, Frank. That’s it.”

Ellen crossed her arms and looked smug. “So there.”

“So there?” Frank asked hard. “no, El. No ‘so there.’ I can understand, Dean and his little man arms not cutting it. But I’m six foot fucking three, if you can’t get a big hug from me, you’re not getting one from Hal. Fuck.” He reached for the door. “I was fuckin busy too, Dean. Making me come all the way over here. Thinking something happened to her all while she’s stealing my fuckin truck, to get a hug! I hope you’re happy!” With a slam open of the door, Frank barged out.

Dean reached around Ellen and closed the door.

“Dean.” She whispered. “I’m sorry I made you worry.”

Dean nodded. “I’m going to assume something is up. And . . . .” He held up a finger. “I will assume you’d rather not, at this time, tell me.”

“Would you mind?”

“Is it viable?”

“Very.”

“All right.” Dean stepped to her and hugged her. “I’m glad you’re all right.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“No, we’ll let this go for now.” He backed away and took her hand. “I’m guilty too.”

“What do you mean?” Ellen questioned.

"Come sit down with me." Holding her hand, Dean led her to the couch. "You aren't telling me something, there's something I am not telling you."

Ellen sat down. "What's wrong?"

"A part of why I didn't tell you is I forgot. The other part, I had to put it together in my mind, and calm down." Sitting next to Ellen, he saw her waiting look. "Remember, right before the explosion, I discovered who Bev's baby's father was."

"Oh, my God. I forgot about that. Who?"

"Ready?" Dean asked her and waited for the nod. "I approached him. He adamantly denied it, accused me of setting him up and after argument and argument . . . Henry finally admitted he was with Bev."

"Henry." Ellen's eyes closed. She plopped backwards. "God it makes sense now, doesn't it? That had to be the thing she was blackmailing him with."

"Looks that way."

She sat up again. "Henry?"

"Henry." Dean laid his hand on her knee.

"He had to know." Ellen said in shock. "He had to know that the time frame was right." Ellen watched Dean shrug. "Why didn't he say anything? Why didn't he just come forward during all that shit with you and Bev and say to me, 'El, I could be the father too'?"

Dean lifted his shoulders in a guessing mode. "He had his reasons. All of them weak."

Ellen's mouth bunched up to one side as she shook her head in disgust. "This really pisses me off."

"Good." Dean said.

Ellen looked at him. "Good?"

"Yeah." Sliding his hand to hers, Dean gripped her fingers. "I want to ask you something. You can turn me down, I won't get mad. But in all of our years, I have never asked you to do anything like this. When the Bev thing happened, you had your doubts. And with reason. You didn't stand beside me . . ."

"Dean."

"No, listen." He held up his hand then spoke very serious. "I would like you to support me now. Show you stand beside me. I'm writing Henry Kusakari out of my life. No longer is he my friend, anyone I associate with outside of business, any one I care about. Especially after the attitude he gave me today about it. What I'm asking of you is . . ." Dean hesitated.

"You don't have to ask."

"El." Dean awkwardly smiled. "I don't think you understand. I'm not asking you not to argue with my decision,"

"You're asking me to do the same." Ellen said. "And without hesitation, for me and for you, I am going to do the same."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." Ellen leaned to Dean, kissed him then stood up. "I'm going to go change."

"All right." Dean slipped his hand from hers as she walked by him.

"Dean?" Ellen stopped at the beginning of the hall. "You think you know a person. You think . . . you think years guarantees your faith in them." With solace she spoke, staring out as if dazed. "But it doesn't matter. Does it? You think you're talking to them, when forever they've had their back turned on you. It leaves us with choices . . ." She shrugged. "Take it under control ourselves, or turn our own backs. You know. What do you do? What do you do?"

"El?" Curiously, Dean stood up. "Really. Henry's a coward. His actions aren't worth even dwelling over."

"Is it cowardliness Dean?" Ellen asked paraphrasing for another question in her mind. "Is it? Or is it the fact, that he just could never be trusted and we were fooled all along."

"I think we have to look at the circumstances and history of everything. If a person screws up once, I don't know if that can be construed as mistrusts. But if there's a seeded history of acts. And when you look back you can see them all. Then, yeah, you can say he's not trustworthy. Did I help?"

After glance past Dean, Ellen looked to him with a smile. "Yes, you did. Thank you." As Ellen turned to go to her bedroom she knew Dean didn't quite understand what he answered, or rather *why* he answered the question about. But he did. And for that Ellen was grateful. Aside from heading in the direction of her bedroom, she knew which direction to take with Johnny.

CHAPTER EIGHT

November 17<sup>th</sup>

There weren't that many stupid reports for Ellen to do. She expected the two new survivors to be ready to go. But somehow she had forgotten that the month in the future was only a second in the present. She could hear the copy machine make a copy, then Frank count out. 'One seventeen'. She smiled, looked at him and then finished that last line of the report.

"Hey . . . hey El." Richie came into the office. "Frank."

"Shh." Frank held up his hand. "I'll lose it. Shit. No. Wait. OK. One-nineteen."

"One eighteen, Frank." Ellen corrected.

"Thanks, El."

"No, Problem." She looked to Richie. "What's up?"

"Are you . . . are you going to New Bowman to see Ha . . . Hal." Richie asked with a twitch of his head.

"Yes, I am. Why?"

"Can you give him this." Richie tossed an envelope on the desk. "It's a, it's a note."

Frank looked over his shoulder. "A love note?"

"Yeah." Richie grinned. "Frank said to write, to write him a love note. Yeah. How's my hair?"

"Good." Ellen answered.

"One twenty-four." Frank called out. "Almost halfway there."

"Is it neat?" Ellen asked.

"Yeah, it's, it's neat. Yeah. I'd say see it. But it's, it's sealed."

"O.K." Ellen tapped the envelope. "I'll give it to him."

"Thanks." Richie walked to the door.

"Richie." Ellen stopped him. "Make sure you do some reading today. Dean said if you want that drug to wear off you . . ." Ellen paused. Her mind drifted elsewhere.

*"I'm free!" Richie raced from containment.*

*"Johnny! Stop him!" Ellen called when she saw Johnny approaching.*

"Ow." Ellen jolted when she felt a flick to her head. "Richie, stop."

"You stopped. You stopped talking. You sound . . . sound like me, me. Yeah."

"Just read." Ellen instructed, then slowly began to gather her work. Her mind took off again.

*"What's wrong with him?" Ellen asked Johnny as she watched a diminished Richie in containment.*

*"It's his microchip, El. It's gone bad." Johnny told her.*

Standing up, Ellen's thought were far from that moment. In fact they

swirled back and forth from moment to moment.

*Danny Hoi shut his lap top. "Is that proof enough, El. He doesn't have a microchip."*

*"It's his microchip, El. It's gone bad." Johnny said.*

*"He doesn't have a micro chip."*

*"What's wrong with him?"*

"Christ Almighty. There you are." Joe's crass yell snapped.

"Me?" Ellen jolted.

"No, him." Joe pointed. "Christ Frank, what in God's name is taking you so long."

"Dad, please." Frank held up his hand and pressed the button. His head went to the left watching the copy. "One thirty-one." He pressed the button again. "If you wouldn't have made me make so many copies . . . One thirty-two. . . I'd be done. Fuck this is taking forever. One thirty-four."

Joe blinked long, "Ellen, have you been in here while he made copies like that?"

"Oh, yeah." Ellen nodded. "It's funny. Plus, you know, it's was a great view of Frank's butt."

"What task." Frank exhaled. "Being a sex symbol. Fuck. I lost count."

Ellen looked to him. "One thirty-five."

"Thanks."

She smiled. "I have to go to the clinic. Let me know when you're done, Frank."

Frank only lifted a hand not wanting to lose his count. He had already done that too many times. "One-thirty . . . thirty fuck."

"Frank!" Joe yelled.

"What!" he jumped. "God! Don't interrupt me. I made enough mistakes as it was, and had to start over."

"Start over?" Joe questioned. "You're making copies? How are you screwing up?"

"Like now." Frank shook his head in disgust and tossed the stack on the floor. He pressed the button. "One." He grunted loud.

Joe peered to the floor and to the stack of ballot copies a foot high. "Stop."

"Four. No."

"Frank." Joe reached around and grabbed his hand. "Stop it. You have enough."

"Dad. I said 'four'. Not four hundred."

"Frank, you asshole. What the hell are those on the floor?"

"Mistakes."

"They still count!" Joe barked.

"Dad! Enough! How can they count! I don't know how many are there."



"There's certainly more than four hundred."

"How can you tell? I lost count."

Joe held back, in fact he used a passive voice. "Because, Frank. See. One inch of paper means, um, a hundred copies."

"Whoa." Frank shook his head. "And this whole time I was counting, all I had to do was measure about . . ." he paused to think.

"Four." Joe told him.

"No, wait, that's wrong. No, it's right. Is it?"

"Yeah, Frank."

"Man, you're fast with math. Thanks for telling me now, though. Fuck. I put in eight hours of this shit." He bent down and lifted the huge messy stack.

"For future reference Frank." Joe waved Frank to the copy. "Take a look." He pointed to the keypad using his best explaining tone. "Even though this is an old model see. It can make multiple copies. Up to ninety-nine."

Frank stared at Joe for a second. "O.K."

"You understand? It can make up to ninety-nine copies at a time."

"But I needed four hundred. How would that have helped me." Frank asked.

"Frank . . ."

"I can see if I needed ninety-nine, or ninety eight. Even ninety-seven it . . ."

"Frank!"

"What!" Frank snapped back.

"Never mind. Get that stack together for Ellen to take."

"I am. I am. Man, you're fuckin testy today." papers sticking out of the huge stack Frank walked to the door. "Oh, hey, Dad. Is it all right if I get the containment rejects to copulate these."

"Collate."

"No, copulate. Their copies."

Joe opened his mouth but he stopped himself. He already had a headache starting and it didn't need anymore help. "Um, sure Frank. Go ahead."

"Thanks."

After Frank walked out, Joe, though aggravated, couldn't help but chuckle.

^^^

Perturbed and in a huff, Dean flung open the bottom cupboards under the main counter in the clinic lab. "Out. Let's go. Back to school."

Underneath, Billy sat, huddled up. "I'm not going back there."

"Billy, I will not fight with you over this."

"It's dumb enough when Jenny teaches us. Now we have that old lady and Forrest with his broken English."

Dean stood up. "What do you want me to do."

"I can help you here."

Dean peered down. "If you were bigger then I could use you."

"Dean." Frank's voice called into the lab. "Perhaps the size of it isn't the reason *it* isn't getting used."

Dean looked up. "What?"

"Aren't you talking to it?"

"What's 'it'."

"It." Frank reiterated with a nod.

Dean still looked confused.

From his hide in the cupboard Billy spoke. "He means your penis."

With the utmost look of curiosity, Frank, in a slight lean, walked over to the counter and looked. "Oh." He breathed out. "I thought you gained a new talent."

Dean rolled his eyes and reached down for Billy. "Out. Let's go."

"I hate school." Billy complained. "I don't want to go."

"Dean. Why's he have to go?" Frank asked.

"He's a kid, Frank."

"Yeah, but you can teach him more than any school."

"Unfortunately, I don't have time."

"True." Frank bobbed his head, then snapped his finger. "I got it. I don't have a lot of time, but I can, maybe once a week. Hey, Bill, would you like to learn some different stuff."

Billy looked at his annoyed father then at Frank. "Yeah. Sure. O.K."

"Let's go." Frank took his hand. "I'm taking him, Dean. First he has to change into something militant."

"Frank." Dean called out. "What are you gonna teach him."

Frank pointed to his own temple. "Frank knowledge. My own home school."

"Swell." Dean shook his head.

In a routine 'stop and squeak' of his boot, Frank turned around. "Hey, Dean, if you see El. Tell her the copies are ready to take to New Bowman. Man. I'll never say anything about secretaries again. Fuckin copy shit is hard. Took me eight hours."

"Eight hours?" Dean asked in shock. "How many copies did you make?"

"Um . . ." Frank paused to think. "Seven thousand. Yeah."

Dean's eyes widened. "Seven thousand? Why in the world would you make seven thousand."

"Dean. My Dad said."

"Joe told you to make seven thousand copies?" Dean asked

"No. He said to make four hundred. I screwed up and made too many."

Glutton for punishment maybe, but Dean had to know. "Frank? How did you screw up that much?"

"I don't know. I lost count and ended up with seven inches."

"Of?"

"Uh, Dean?." Frank nudged Billy and spoke with sarcasm. "Copies?"

"Seven inches of paper doesn't make for seven thousand copies, Frank."

"That's what my Dad said. One inch equals a thousand sheets. Or was it a hundred, I don't know." He shrugged. "Same difference. Lets go Bill."

"This ought to be fun." Billy smiled and as he left giving an arrogant smirk to his father.

Mumbling to himself, Dean walked to the medication cooler. "Maybe Billy will rub off on him." Shaking his head at that thought, Dean tried to lift the lid. It was locked. Thinking 'odd', he grabbed for his keys. For as much as he was surprised that the case was locked in the first place, that's how much more surprised Dean was, that his key didn't work either.

^^^

Hand flush to the joint near Robbie's right shoulder, Ellen pushed with all her might. "One more."

With ease Robbie lifted. "El, I hate to tell you this. But if it's to build my strength, it's not gonna cut it with you."

Ellen smiled and sat next to him. "Right now it's more for movement. I'm gonna get Frank to hook you up with some special weights. I don't want the muscle to diminish in your shoulder or biceps. It'll look odd."

Robbie just stared at her. "El. Think about what you just said."

"O.K."

"I'm missing most of my arm. What will look odd?"

"If your shoulder loses definition."

With a shake of his head, Robbie gave a sad smirk. "I look odd period."

"No you don't."

"Yeah, El. I do." He lifted his eyes to her. "I looked in the mirror today. Really looked. God. It's looks pathetic."

"That's only until it heals, Robbie. Then we can get you ready for a prosthesis."

"El, I'm not walking around with a rubber arm. I'm not. It serves no purpose. It'll flop. I'll look worse."

Ellen smiled. "That's not what were gonna do. Dean and I already talked about this. Danny Hoi is brilliant, if he can't construct the insides of a viable arm, then Dean will go personally, with Frank to this institute in North Dakota. They have awesome prosthetics. And, we reconstruct the outside, using the same skin formula we used on Jeff's face. It'll look real Robbie."

"Furry?"

"Probably at first." Ellen winked.

"It won't work though." Robbie said sad. "It'll look good. But it still won't work." He shook his head. "Too bad we can't give me back my arm like Dean got back his sight."

Ellen's eyes met Robbie's and the same thought must have transpired. "Robbie."

"El, you don't think . . ."

"It's really possible. If anyone can do it, Danny can."

Dean knocked before walking in. "El?"

"Oh." Ellen smiled. "Here's Dean. I have to go Talk to him about it." She kissed Robbie.

"O.K." Robbie agreed.

"Talk to me about what?" Dean asked.

"He'll tell you." Ellen said. "Dean, did you see Frank at all?"

"Yeah, you're ready to go." Dean told her.

"That's what I figured once Joe caught on. I'll be back by dinner and remember I have Alex."

"Ellen." Dean stopped her. "Listen, my key won't work to the med cooler. What's up?"

Ellen cringed. "I'm sorry." She reached into her pocket and pulled out her keys. "Here. I broke my old key in there this morning and I had the locks changed. But Dean, um, only you and I are to distribute meds from now on. OK? I want that cooler locked at all times."

"Can I ask why all of the sudden we're doing this." Dean took the keys.

"It has to do with what we discussed last night. Trust." Ellen nodded and waved. "See you guys."

With almost a whistle, Dean blew out and shook his head. "Man, Henry really had an impact on her."

"Henry?" Robbie asked.

"You don't know. Well, I guess, because of your situation, you'll enjoy this. You especially." Dean pulled up a chair to Robbie's bedside, and sat down.

^^^

Alexandra looked so upbeat as she stood at the back of the truck with Ellen, Frank and Billy. "I'm so excited about shopping today."

"We'll have fun." Ellen smiled. "Thanks for your card Frank."

"Spoil my girls." Frank kissed Ellen on the cheek. "And you didn't say what you thought about Billy. Huh?" Frank motioned his head to Billy in camouflage pants and a tee shirt. "I have been waiting forever to put those on him. Gemma made those awhile ago. Good thing he didn't grow." With squealing enthusiasm, Frank snickered. "And doesn't he look so cute in his little headset." Frank calmed down. "Can we dye his hair black."

"No." Ellen shook her head., cleared her throat and whispered "He

doesn't look enthused, Frank."

"Sure he does. He doesn't want Alex to get jealous. Right Bill?"

Billy nodded.

Ellen held back her chuckle. "Just don't teach him anything demented."

"El, I will be the perfect teacher. Have fun in New Bowman and pass those out."

"I will." Ellen saw Johnny approaching. "And Frank, just like you wanted, I'll call you in an hour. So be at your dad's office."

Frank didn't remember that, but just so as not to get in any trouble for not paying attention, he nodded. "O.K., I'll be there. But we have to go." he laid his hand on Billy's back. "Let's go." They started walking. "Stand up straight. Look tough. Put some fear in those eyes."

Ellen smiled watching them walk away.

"Ready, El?" Johnny asked.

"Um, yeah." Ellen reached for Alexandra's hand.

"Ellen." Henry's voice carried to her.

Ellen looked at Johnny. "Could you wait in the truck."

Johnny shrugged. "Sure."

"El." Henry caught up to her. "I need to know what this is." He held up a folded piece of paper.

"Alex, go wait in the truck." Ellen waited until Alexandra left. "I thought it was self explanatory, Henry."

"It's bullshit, El. We're friends."

"Were." She stated. "Not anymore. And I have to go."

"Ellen." He reached out and grabbed her arm. "We have a son. How do you suppose we not be in contact if I need to see him."

"I suggest you find a good middle man." She moved to the passengers door of the truck. "I like Hector. I'll deal with him." She slipped inside.

Henry stood there and watched the truck move. "Fuck." He shook his head in disgust. Then, without thinking, without realizing what he would start, Henry crumbled the note, tossed it and walked away.

^^^

Hal was preparing his own speech, not that he had to, but since his entire class was writing a new Gettysburg address, he figured, he would too. He had the great opening, after numerous attempts. Right on the tip of his brain, ready to travel down his arm to his fingers, Hal smiled. And then, Hal winced.

"Captain." Elliott whispered from the classroom door.

Hal clenched his jaws, rumbled a grunt and stood up. "What?" He whispered walking to Elliott.

Elliott waited until Hal made it into the hall. "I spoke to them."

"Oh." Hal nodded with sarcasm. "So they're rested enough to speak to

us.”

“Captain the scouts didn’t return until after dawn.”

“I don’t care, Elliott. They could have waited to sleep. What did they say. Did they find anything.”

Elliott handed Hal an envelope. “For you.”

“What their writing me notes now?”

“Not them.” Elliott stated. “It appears that is from the leader of a small town north Texas.”

“You’re shitting me.” Hal smiled and opened the envelope. “An allied rebel force perhaps?”

“Um, no.” Elliott shook his head. “Our scouts said, no.”

“Hold it.” Hal stopped opening the letter. “They find a town. With people. Civilized. I get mail. Mail Elliott and it has to wait until they rest. Oh, wait. Wait until the summer and I send them to Arizona. What all did they tell you.”

“Basically, that they discovered this town by following what seemed to be civilized men, making a ‘book’ run.” Elliott shrugged. “The town welcomed them. Fed them, put them up, listened to what they had to say.”

“How did they escape the society raids.”

“They didn’t.” Elliott said. “They basically are people that kept banning together after running from the society. One group gets hit, they move on, run into a similar, join up. Right now, they are secluded and have guards.”

Hal smiled. “That’s encouraging. At least they can protect themselves.” Finally Hal returned to opening the letter.

“A lot of men. Of course. But the median age is older. Not many young at all. Trevor says he can’t recall seeing anyone under the age of twenty.”

“Did we get a population?”

“Four twenty.”

Hal whistled. “I’m curious to how they survive. Farming?”

“In house.” Elliott explained. “Similar to how we did. Greenhouses, climate control. We all can’t have perfect farm land like Beginnings. It’s the only way to ensure continuous growth. Plus they haven’t bothered getting power up and running. Oh!” Elliott snapped his finger. “Bonus.”

Hal looked up. “Bonus? Bonus, Elliott?”

“Yes. They seem to have an overabundance of . . . Livestock.”

“Yes. Steak.” Hal grinned. “If we can get them to barter.”

“We may not need to. See . . .”

“Elliott.” Hal widened his eyes. “Why am I even bothering to read this note if you are going to inform me of everything.”

“Sorry. Go on.” Elliott took a step back.

“My, God.” Hal spoke as he read. “To date they have acquire thirty society defectors. Did you know that?”

“Yes.”

Hal grunted. “Is there anything in this note you don’t know?”

"No." Elliott said. "Our scouts got to read it prior to it being placed in the envelope. They told me it all."

"They read my mail?" Hal seemed so offended as he continued reading.

"Captain, what are you going to do."

"Well." Hal folded the note and returned it to the envelope. "It's not my call, if it was, we know what I would do."

"Of course. Do it and worry about consequences later."

Hal smiled. "But we are a province of Beginnings. And with that, we have to present this to them. I don't see my father saying 'no'. This gentleman gives a paragraph full of assets they could be to us. And in a budding war with a mega Society. We need all the men we can get."

"O.K." Elliott nodded. "What are we gonna do with them."

"We'll worry about that later. Right now, back to my Gettysburg Address." Hal walked to the class room. "Let me know when my niece arrives."

Elliott nodded as Hal left. "Of course." He said sarcastically, turned and started to walk down the hall. "We'll worry about four hundred, not four, four hundred men later. Why not?" Elliott walked from the school.

^^^

"Ideally . . ." Backwards on a chair in Robbie's room, Danny spoke to Dean and Robbie. "We would find a prosthetic already constructed. I could manipulate. Dean, you could manipulate, and we could conceivably have a very realistic body part. I've seen what you've done with that skin on Jeff's face. Aside from the fur, it looks good. Pigment is off a little."

"We're working on that." Dean smiled. "However, worse case scenario with appearance is Robbie will have an arm that will be a shade or so off."

"I could live with that." Robbie said. "Really, I could. Can it be done Danny."

"Hey . . ." Danny lifted his hand. "We made Dean see. And really, Robbie. Prosthetics had come along way when the world ended. The only thing they didn't have down was the skin tone and look. But mobility . . ." Danny whistled. "Animated prosthetics is what they were called. How they worked was the main chip was located in a joint. The sensors were connected to different muscles in the upper extremity and with a flex of one muscle, your fingers moved. That's how they worked. Battery charged and operated. Then you had what they called the 'hot and cold'. Little heat sensors in the fingers tips connected to a message system that connected to the nerves in the remaining portion of the limb. I want to combine both. My concern lies with the skin though. That's the reason they didn't have something more realistic. How are you going to preserve real skin without it rotting, Dean."

Robbie cringed. "Rotting skin."

Dean held up his hand. "You would just have to leave us about two

inches of room. The skin would be like a glove over the arm. Artificial arteries and veins would connect to Robbie's real ones."

"So while doing all that, you'd connect the sensors to the nerve endings?" Danny asked.

"Yes." Dean nodded. "I've not done it so I say we do about three arms."

"Sounds good." Danny agreed. "Robbie?"

"When do you go into my brain?" Robbie asked.

Dean answered. "I'd like to do that first. About a week or so before we do the arm. That way, after it's attached, Danny can download and you'll be ready to go. With healing of course."

"Cool." Robbie grinned. "How long?"

Danny looked at Dean then back to Robbie. "It'll take a while Robbie. Both Dean and I have our work cut out with this. The microchip for the arm and brain, that's the easy part. It's the arm. If we can't go out and get one, then I have to construct one. So I can't really give you an answer yet."

It didn't bother Robbie, not one bit being unable to get a definite on when he'd get his new arm. He was getting one, that was all that mattered. There was alight at the end of his tunnel, and that would make the physical struggles he would entail, a lot more tolerable.

^^^

"Oh, wow, cool." Billy said with enthusiasm as he took off running.

"No, wait." Frank stopped him before he stepped into the roped off blast area of warehouse seven and eight.

"Will I get in their way?" Billy asked, pointing to the five men cleaning up.

"No. I just want to make sure you walk on the safe path."

"The safe path?" Billy asked. "So I don't get hurt."

Sounding so teacher-like, Frank explained to Billy. "No. Jason Godrichson is still hanging about up here. Well, I mean, left leg, left arm, right hand, his one ear and miscellaneous internal organs. So out of respect for Jason, we don't want to just tromp anywhere. The safe path is where we know for sure, he isn't. Understand?"

"Oh. Sure. Can we go through?"

"Absolutely." Frank lifted the rope. "Safe path." He pointed.

"Got it." Billy walked the narrow path, turning and looking as he did. "Awesome. My mom and dad survived this?"

"Yep." Frank nodded. "Unbelievable, huh? They were really lucky. Them and everyone else. They could have ended up like Jason, all over this place."

"This is the coolest day so far."

"We've only been at it a half hour."



“Still, I mean we went to containment. I was never there. Meeting Bub the lobotomized savage was fun. Did he really used to eat people?”

“Absolutely. Breakfast lunch and dinner. You’re dad fixed him. Neutered his appetite by axing out his brain.”

“Cool. This is better than school.”

“I’ll make you a deal.” Frank squatted down to Billy’s level. “If you go to school. Don’t cut out. One day a week, you can do his with me. Deal?” Frank held out his hand.

Billy’s little hand got lost in Frank’s. “Deal. What now?”

“Rounds. Boring stuff.” Frank shook his head. “But, get on that radio and inform security that’s where we’re heading.”

“Got it.” Pulling the microphone of his headset close to his mouth, like instructed, Billy called out his orders as he took the safe path passage through the blast area. He was having so much fun already, that he promised himself, as soon as he got home, he would erase at least three things off of his, ‘reasons not to worship Frank’ list.

^^^

“He assured you?” Elliott asked Hal as they walked down the street.

“I trust my brother.” Hal replied. “I mean, I merely mentioned us as suspects being targets and maybe Ellen, and he went off on me. Telling me ‘what did I think? He was a fuckin idiot? Of course he was going to have her watched. So I believe he will have her with someone safe.’”

“Think again.” Elliott stopped walking and motioned his head to the truck.

Calmly Hal watched Johnny step from the truck. “My brother is a moron. Son of a bitch.” As fast as he could, he made it to them.

“Uncle Hal.” Alexandra raced to him.

“Hello, Sweetie.” Hal lifted her. “I am so glad you came here today.”

“I get to see you. Elliott . . .” She waved to Elliott. “Play with Katie, and me and mommy are gonna shop before she sees her patients.”

“You’ll have fun.” Hal said.

“Uncle Hal.” Alexandra laid her hands on his cheeks. “You’re the best. Can I have your Danny Dollar card.”

“Oh, Absolutely.” Hal set her down and reached into his pocket. He handed it to her.

“Thank you.” Alexandra turned around, looked at Ellen and winked.

Ellen grinned. “Hal, you didn’t have to.” She kissed him on the cheek.

“Don’t use my Danny dollar Card, Ellen. In fact. Shop now. Elliott will escort you.”

Ellen looked at Elliott with a smile. “I think I’d like that.”

Elliott nodded as he walked by Hal. “Thank you, Captain.”

Hal’s focus was steady on Johnny. He saw nothing else but him as he

made his way to Johnny.

Snide, Johnny shut the truck door. "Uncle Hal." Johnny laughed. "Look at you trying to come across really tough and threatening. Let me let you in on a little secret." Johnny winked. "The pink cast totally takes that away."

"Glad you find enjoyment out of that. Now . . . get back in the truck and go home."

"Nope." Johnny shook his head. "I have to wait for Ellen."

"Ellen has a full day. I will see her home when I visit my Dad. So there's no reason for you to stay." Hal flashed a grin. "Bye." He turned.

"Uncle Hal." Johnny walked to him. "I have a note from my Dad." He handed it to him.

"You dad is sending me notes." Hal took it and opened it. He chuckled. "*Hal, don't pick on my kid.*" Hal shook his head. "Telling Daddy. What? Is he buying this innocent act."

"Oh, yeah. And he's buying the 'Uncle Hal's a real prick' act too. But then again, it's not an act. You are. And he says, if you pick on me, he'll kick your ass."

"Being juvenile now, Johnny." Hal smirked. "I should expect as much. You are a child. But, just to be on that juvenile level. Your father kicking my ass? I highly doubt that."

"You don't think?"

"I'm not going to go back and forth with you on this." Hal told him.

"Don't have to. I'm sure I'll see it. Won't be long until you and my father go head to head."

All arrogance and smirks left Hal's face. He dropped his voice and leaned into Johnny. "Do not play me against your father. Don't."

"Get off my back and I won't."

"You haven't a clue what me being on your back is. If I was, you'd know it."

"As if you aren't now. Badgering me . . ."

Hal laughed. "Badgering you? Would you like, Johnny, for me to badger you? I have yet to come down on you. *Yet.* But I will."

"You have no reason." Johnny grveled his voice.

"And you had no reason to have the key to my father's phone. You had no reason to put the bottle back into my brother's hand. There's no reason other than deception for this arrogant, infantile, sadistic, projectile behavior. And most of all, right now, you have no reason to be in my town. . . . get out." Hal took a step back and turned.

"I heard your alibi . . . died."

Hal stopped cold.

"Your only alibi." Johnny sighed, shook his head and opened the truck door. "Oh, say, *Uncle Hal.* What um, ever became of that bandana of yours."

Hal walked back to him.

Johnny continued with a whispering taunt. "You know the bandana.

The red one with the little captain bars on the flap. The one with blood smeared all over it. Be a shame, with your alibi dead, if that bandana suddenly showed up.” Johnny got in the truck. “Bye.” After starting the truck, and a reach out to adjust the mirror with the extension of his middle finger, Johnny drove off.

## CHAPTER NINE

“Ah.” Frank exhaled deeply as he held out his arms. “The back gate region. I’m sure you’ve heard stories about his place.”

“No.” Billy shook his head.

“No?” Frank asked shocked. “You’re kidding me. That sucks. Take a look Bill. It doesn’t look like it. But many of exciting things happened back here, not too mention numerous accidental electrocutions.”

“Really?”

“Oh, sure. See. The road way makes this place very accessible for wanderers, savages when we had them, animals. You name it. So routine, and numerous checks on this region per day are vital. We have to check, make sure it’s secure, look at the beams, and you know, kick off the carcasses of any dead animals fried and stuck to the fence.”

“So it isn’t always boring up here?” Billy asked.

“It has its moments.” Frank sighed out, then lifted his head. “Hold on. Radio call.” He dropped his voice to a whisper. “You may want to monitor this Bill, and take mental notes.”

Billy nodded.

Frank lifted the microphone. “Yeah, Mark, what’s up.”

“Frank.” Mark called out. “You aren’t gonna believe this. We have a SUT in the back gate region.”

“A SUT?” Frank asked. “As in one.”

“Yep.”

“How many other intruders?”

“None.” Mark answered. “Just one, steady and making his way to you.”

“One?” Frank questioned with doubt. “That’s hard to believe. Are you sure it isn’t Dean. He has that chip and he fuckin sets it off as a SUT every time he goes bunny hunting.”

“Not, Dean. I checked.” Mark replied. “Fifty-five feet Frank. Only one.”

“How about *our* SUT stock.”

“All accounted for. He’s not ours. He came in about a mile ago from the northeast.”

“O.K. Thanks.” Frank told him and lowered his headset. He looked to Billy. “Now Mark handled that perfectly. Because it’s odd for their to be only one SUT, Mark checked all options before alerting me to the danger.”

“A SUT?” Billy asked.

“Yeah, like your Dad. Has a microchip, only the Society SUTs are trained to kill and only kill. Though some have been domesticated.”

“Is that him?” Billy pointed.

Frank looked. “Yes. See he’s wearing a Caceres Society Uniform. Notice the far off zombie look in his eyes. Do you see it?”

“Yes.” Billy said.

So calm Frank spoke. “O.K., now if he were in a pack, we would automatically assume he was dangerous. But since he’s alone, we don’t know. We have to wait for a sign.” Frank watched the SUT as he explained very placating. “All right. He’s raising his weapon, clear cut sign he’s a threat. Now we . . . eliminate that threat.” In a sequence of smooth movements, Frank reached to his shoulder harness, pulled out his revolver, shifted the chamber, extended his arm and fired.

The precise head shot caused a bursting cloud of blood that sprayed everywhere, and then the SUT dropped.

“O.K.” Frank put his gun away. He looked down to Billy who just stared out. “Any questions?”

^^^

“Home, sweet, home.” Joe opened the front door to his house.

Robbie stepped in first. “Man, it still feels funny coming here without Andrea.”

“Tell me about it.” Joe closed the door and set down the bag he carried. “Did we get enough from your house?”

“Yeah . . . Dad? How come . . .”

“Anything you need? Hungry?” Joe walked to the kitchen.

“No. Dad? How come . . .”

“I have the bed all fixed for you. You look pale, Robbie. Did you want to lay down.”

“No.” Robbie walked toward the kitchen., “Dad, how come . . .”

“Son of a gun.” Joe smiled. “We still have chicken in the freezer. How about chicken tonight. We’ll have Hal come by, Frank . . .”

“Dad.” Robbie interrupted then spewed out his question as fast as he could. “How come I didn’t know about Henry knocking up Bev?”

Joe cringed. “Robert. I listened to you bitch the entire time we were at your house. I am not gonna listen to this anymore.”

“Why was I the last to know.”

“You’re not.” Joe said. “In fact, you’re one of the only to know. So feel privileged and quit bitching.”

“But, it’s such great news.”

“Excuse me?” Joe asked.

“Yeah.” Robbie grinned. “Henry’s such a fuckin prick. I love it.”

“Robert.”

“Pap!” Billy screamed loudly and excited as he raced into the house.

Wondering what brought on the odd occurrence of Billy sounding happy, Joe walked to the kitchen doorway to see Billy run in, with Frank behind him. “Why is this kid dressed like a militant guerilla.”

"Dad." Frank laughed. "He's dressed like a militant soldier. Please."

Joe rolled his eyes.

"Pap." Billy caught his breath. "You'll never guess . . ." He stopped and looked at Robbie.

"What's wrong?" Robbie asked.

Billy gazed up to him. "You look different. Pale. Are you sick?"

"A little yeah." Robbie nodded.

"When's the last time my Dad did a blood count on you?"

Robbie shook his head. "I don't know."

Like, Dean, Billy did a single 'up' nod of his head, "So um, what happened to your arm."

"Lost it in the explosion." Robbie answered.

"Is my Dad gonna give you a new one. He grows body parts you know in his lab."

"Yep."

"Cool. Anyhow . . ." Billy returned to Joe. "Pap." He smiled.

Joe pointed to Billy as he looked to Frank. "Why is this kid so goddamn happy. Oh, I get it. He's not in school."

"Yeah, he is." Frank argued. "Frank school."

"Christ."

"Pap. Guess what?" Billy said excited. "We saw a SUT at the back gate."

Quickly Joe looked to Frank. "A SUT?"

"One." Frank held up his finger. "No more, Just one."

Robbie questioned. "One lone SUT? That's odd."

"Boring too." Frank rolled his eyes.

"No." Billy argued. "It wasn't boring. Pap, you should have seen how far out the blood splattered when Uncle Frank shot him in the head. One shot, that's . . ."

Joe shrieked. "Frank!"

"What!" Frank jumped back. "I had to use one shot, please. You can't use less than that."

"You . . . You . . ." Joe stumbled for the words. "You shot a man in the head in front of this kid. Robert, stop laughing."

"SUT." Frank corrected. "Not man."

"He's a human being Frank." Joe barked. "And you can't shoot a goddamn human being, microchip in his head or not, in front of a seven year old kid."

"Why not?"

Joe tensed up and held back from screaming, but his voice was still extremely loud. "Because you just can't!"

"He didn't seem to mind." Frank said.

"Frank . . ."

"Besides, what choice did I have. He was aiming at us. I didn't have enough time to say. Billy cover you eyes."

"Where were your goddamn brains?"

Through his snicker, Robbie mumbled. "We know where the SUT's brains were."

Frank laughed. "That was funny."

"Yeah, real funny." Joe shook his head. "You're missing my point."

"No, Dad." Frank said. "You're missing the point."

"And what would that be?" Joe asked sarcastically.

"There was a SUT. A . . . SUT, at the back gate. Now when's the last time we saw one of those. Aside from Dean running around."

"And me soon." Robbie interjected. "I'm getting a microchip to work my bionic arm."

"Oh, my God." Frank swung his views to Robbie. "No way?"

"Yep." Robbie nodded proud.

"Will you be really strong like the Six Million Dollar man?"

"Frank!" Joe yelled. "Get back to the SUT."

"I can't." Frank yelled back. "I shot him and moved him already. Killer babies are having lunch right now on him. Man . . . He started laughing and looked to Robbie. "Bill and I weren't in the killer baby region five minutes, those things smelled that flesh and . . ."

Joe reached out, took hold of Frank's chin, and turned his face to only look at him. "Tell me, you didn't take Billy into the killer baby region."

"Dad, if I didn't take Billy to the killer baby region, what else was I supposed to do with him when we drove up there with the SUT in the jeep."

"I give up." Joe let go of Frank's face.

"No. See Dad." Frank took a calming approach. "When I said, 'what else was I suppose to do with him' that wasn't a trick question or joke."

"I didn't say it was."

"But you gave up." Frank stated.

"On you, asshole."

"Why are you calling me names. Do I deserve that?"

"Yes!" Joe snapped. "If you weren't so goddamn dumb!"

"Me!" Frank's voice matched in volume. "I'm not the one who thought I was giving a trick question. Seemed pretty clear to me I was making a fuckin statement. Robbie, didn't it seem clear to you." Frank looked down when he felt the tug on his pants. "Yes, Billy?"

"Uncle Frank." Billy pointed to Joe. "A man of his age should not let his blood pressure get to the point it is now. He could have a stroke."

"Very good." Frank smiled and looked at Joe. "Did you hear that. He knows the signs of a stroke."

"I'm glad *he* does, Frank." Joe shook his head. "Now . . . let me state this in *idiot* terms." He slowed down his speech. "Can we. . . talk . . . about . . . that SUT . . . now."

"Yes . . . we . . . can." Frank replied.

Through Robbie's annoying childish laughter, Joe, impressively, stayed

calm. "Frank, slip into Mr. Military mode, right now. O.K.?" Joe waited for a nod. "Now. Why do you think we saw a SUT . . . uh-uh-uh." Joe stopped him. "Do not say 'because he was there'. Do you think he was a straggler from a bigger group? Possibly a hint of a bigger hit."

Frank was in debate. "Hard to say."

"May I?" Robbie asked.

Joe held out this hands. "By all means."

"One SUT. It seems pretty clear cut to me." Robbie stated. "We are in communications limbo. We know there is another insider in Beginnings. Now . . . It's been what? Two weeks since George has talked to them. He's getting worried. He needs to know things are fine. Why else would he call Hal. He's trying to get in touch with you. What better way then to start sending little hits. You call up, you say, 'hey George, what the fuck, I thought we were in a cease fire'. And he's hoping through that little communication, to get something from you."

Impressed Joe looked at Robbie. "Did you just think of that. That is really good."

Robbie smiled. "Thanks. But . . . I think we should expect more hits. Little ones. Nothing major yet. Don't call him."

"Frank?" Joe turned to him. "Can you handle it?"

Frank fluttered his lips. "Please. But I hope he sends more than one next time. One's too easy to take out. And . . ." He checked out his watch. "We have to go Bill. We have rounds to make in town. Check keypads."

"O.K." Billy was glad to get moving again.

"Frank." Joe stopped him. "Nothing demented. You hear."

Frank gave a thumbs up and opened the door for Billy. "Hey, that was your first strategy meeting. What did you think?"

"A little loud and confusing."

"That's my Dad. He always does that at every meeting."

Robbie bit his bottom lip after the door closed. He glanced at Joe. "Hey, Dad, did you ever notice that right after Frank leaves a room you get that feeling you just stepped off an amusement park ride?"

Joe just grunted and walked back into the kitchen.

^^^

The envelope. Hal waited until he saw Alexandra over to where Katie lived, made sure Ellen had returned his Danny Dollar card and then he opened that letter from Richie. It was folded, and Hal could see the semi-sloppy handwriting on the back. But before he read it, he checked out the self portrait of Richie stuck in the copy machine, autographed, of course. After initially getting irritated with Frank for blatantly abusing office equipment, Hal couldn't help but laugh. Poor Richie. Then in his chuckle he turned over the paper.



*Hal. This is a love note. I love you. You are nice. And swell.'*

Thinking, *'Asshole, Frank, what the hell are you making him do now?'* Hal was just about to stop reading the note to save it for when he really needed a good pick me up, and he saw it. Not that Hal was particularly in a bad mood. But a smile was a smile, and what Richie had to write, certainly bred a smile on Hal's face that would last him a really long time.

^^^

There was something sadistically highschool like that Ellen enjoyed about eating at the mess. She had to give it to Hal for having it. He trained the men so much, schooled and worked them, at least he could do was take away the burden of preparing their own meals. Of course, Ellen truly believed it was Hal's lack of wanting to cook for himself that produced the installation of the mess.

Ellen often wondered if New Bowman ever became a budding community of even more people, would the mess hall continue? She figured it would, since Joe's long range plans were to keep the families inside and protected within the walls of Beginnings. And the single men and soldiers lived elsewhere.

She made it into the hall for what was called the 'second lunch'. Everyone was assigned a lunch and dinner shift. Breakfast was 'come when you please' and more on the go. The line extend long, but she had time. Ellen wished Alexandra would be there to eat with her, but she knew the importance of her and Katie spending time. Katie needed to be around other children, since there weren't any at all in New Bowman.

With a sniff, hands behind her back, Ellen leaned into the soldier in front of her. "What's for lunch?"

Almost surprised, he looked back. "Dr. Hayes, Ma'am. Oodles of Danoodles."

"Oh, I love those. We don't have those in Beginnings yet. I'm hungry."

"Then please . . ." he held out his hand before him. "Gentlemen." He spoke up. "Please allow Dr. Hayes to obtain her lunch ahead of us."

Ellen giggled when all activity stopped, silence entailed, and they stepped more to the side for her to make her way forward. "Wow, this is great. Thanks guys." She made her way to the front of the line and happily watched the cook, dish out a helping. In her reach, she felt her arm gently stopped.

Elliott whispered in her ear. "Would you consider me extremely forward if I told you I wanted to steal you for a little while, and I prepared lunch at my home."

"Absolutely." Ellen turned around. "You are forward. But, if that's an invitation. I accept."

Elliott smiled, and still holding her arm, walked her through the line.

"Gentlemen, thank you for being considerate." He announced as he passed them.

"They were so polite." Ellen said as she left the mess with him. "Do you think we'll ever have a mess hall in Beginnings?"

"They should. Really." Elliott explained, walking with her. "Do you realize in Bowman we have six times more people and . . . we only use twenty percent more food than Beginnings. Of course rationing food is not really a problem. Not yet."

"Do you think it will be."

"Ellen, it should never be. Even in contained communities such as ours, Beginnings doesn't utilize its full capacities. And, we have an entire country at our feet that we will get back."

"So patriotic."

At his home, Elliott opened the door for her. "I'm glad you didn't mind coming here."

"No, not at all." Ellen stepped inside. "Pasta?" She asked when she caught whiff of the aroma. "Thank you for this."

"Ellen. I have to confess it's selfish. I just needed to spend some alone time with you. We're not seeing each other as much, and it will be even less now that Beginnings has lost Dr. Godrichson."

"You're right. I'm going to have to make some time."

"Don't do that for me."

"No, for me."

"Elliott." With the opening of the front door, Hal called out. "Oh. Ellen. You're here." He slipped Richie's note into his back pocket. "Should I have knocked?"

"Yes." Ellen told him.

Hal reached back to the open door, knocked then closed it. "They said at the mess you were here, Elliott."

"Is there something wrong?" Elliott asked.

"No, I just wanted share . . . Richie wrote me a love note. Ellen? Did you read it?"

"No." Ellen answered. "He had it sealed. Why? What did it say?"

The closeness of their friendship that spanned a good many years, gave Hal the keen ability to look at Elliott briefly, and convey so much through a single glance. He reiterated his views to Ellen. "Not much. He loves me."

Ellen smiled. "Richie is funny like this. But I miss the old Richie."

"Yes." Hal exhaled. "It's sad. Will he come out of it?"

"Sure." Ellen nodded. "Dean says, hopefully, with mind exercise he will. And time."

"I'm curious." Hal folded his one arm over his waist. "Didn't he say to you that Bev injected him?"

"Richie wouldn't have know." Ellen answered. "Everything that first week is gone from his memory. It'll come back once he recovers."

“Good thing Bev is gone, or else she would ensure that didn’t happen.” Hal smiled. “Right?”

Slowly Ellen’s eyes lifted. “Hal, um. Speaking of Richie.” Her voice had a little nervousness to it. “You know, Dean did say he should exercise his brain. I don’t think I’m doing that. I mean, I’m not. What do you think the odds are of protecting, I mean, keeping him here and helping him. Make him a pseudo UWA soldier until he’s healed.”

Peacefully and assuredly, Hal looked at her. “Ellen, we would be happy to take Richie under our wing. In fact, I have a couple privates I can room him with. We set him all up. What do you think, Elliott?”

“I think it’s a great idea.” Elliott replied.

“Thanks.” Ellen nearly sighed out.

“Maybe . . .” Hal lifted a finger. “We can even get Elliott to place him in the choir.”

Elliott closed his eyes in a slight cringe, and shook his head to Ellen when he heard her start to question.

“What smells good?” Hal asked.

“Pasta.” Elliott told him. “I thought, Ellen and I could have lunch here. It’s more private.”

“Great idea. I’m starved.” Hal walked to the diningroom. He looked at Elliott and Ellen just standing in the livingroom. “Let’s eat.” He pulled out a chair, sat down and grinned.

With a shake of her head and a mumble, ‘he’s such a Slagel’, Ellen sulked her way with Elliott to the diningroom.

^^^

“I just want to go home, John.” Jenny laid on her hospital bed looking exasperated as John worked massage therapy on her calves.

“Jenny, you know I am so busy with Mechanics. I wouldn’t be able to take care of you. Tomorrow or the next day Dean said.”

“It’s awful. What an awful day.” She whined and looked out the window. “It’s sunny and I’m stuck in here.”

John smiled. “It isn’t all that bad.”

“It is when you thrive on Community reaction. And I’m missing it being stuck in here.”

“What do you mean?”

“You haven’t heard. Oh.” She grinned. “It hasn’t rolled around yet. Good. I’m not missing much.”

“The ballot for punishment?”

“No.” Jenny shook her head. “The news. Gemma said Ellen is so upset about it. Oh, my God, wants to disown him and everything.”

In confusion, John shook his head. “I’m lost.”

“Dean found out the truth behind Bev’s baby’s father. Since it wasn’t

Kevin or him. What a smart move. None of us even thought about it.”

“When did this come out?” John hid his smile.

“Today. I expect a community uproar.”

“Me as well.”

“Yes, can you believe he did that. Not only did the pig sleep with Bev, he let poor Ellen believe Dean did. Bastard Henry.”

John let go of Jenny’s leg in shock. “Hen . . . Henry?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “From Ellen’s mouth. Well, in a note. Gemma told me all about it.”

“Henry was Bev’s baby’s father?” John repeated. “Shit!” He jumped up. “Son of a bitch. Goddamn it. Jesus Christ. I can’t fuckin believe . . .”

“John.” Jenny gasped out. “Language. Please. I know this is upsetting and all, but still.” She widened her eyes. “We’re taking it a little personal, aren’t we?”

“It’s just . . .” John shook his head in disgust. “Henry of all people. Damn it.”

“Language.”

“Sorry.” John sat back down and continued at her legs.

“Did you get your ballot?” Jenny asked.

“I didn’t fill it out. I figured I’d wait until the ten days was up.”

“Funny.” Jenny spoke near daze. “Me, too. I think we all are. I mean, we don’t want to see the person punished like this. But I understand what Joe’s trying to say. It still won’t stop me from sneaking out or trying to get food to wherever they send the killer. Even if it is Henry.”

“Do you think that’s who did it?”

“Oh, yes. Especially with this pregnancy news. A little lower John, please, thank you.” Jenny let out a breath. “It angers me though. I still think the Bev murder should take second fiddle over finding who set that bomb in the warehouse.”

“It was an accident. That’s what Joe . . .” John saw the look on Jenny’s face.

“I wasn’t suppose to say anything. I swear.” Jenny held up her hand in a nervous panic. “You can’t open your mouth, John. Don’t do it.” She beckoned when she saw the anger build in John. “Making the person think they got away with it is the only way to trap whoever it was. Please don’t say anything. They entrusted us.”

“They plan on trapping the person.”

Jenny nodded. “Promise me. This can’t get past the suspect list.”

“I promise you it won’t get past the suspect list.” The rage John felt had to have shown on his face. Confirmed. Someone tried to kill his wife, and he knew exactly who that someone was. If that someone was anyone other than Johnny Slagel, John was certain, even with zero trust, his word would be somewhat useful. He had some knowledge, first hand, of things Johnny did. And John had to wonder, was his silence as much of a crime as when he *did*

help George. Vital he could be. It was so much the chance he needed to make amends to his home. Speaking up, and taking a chance was what John had to do. But he had to speak up to just the right person.

## CHAPTER TEN

The feelings that stirred inside of Joe were similar to that one day. When Robbie was twelve years old he received a half a dozen staples in his head when Hal accidentally tossed him through the window in a pseudo wrestling match. A little dizzy, out of it, but Robbie had to be home alone. Joe had no choice. The case he was working on at that time didn't allow for time off, and he couldn't leave Hal with Robbie. Joe overheard them discuss way too much the outcome of what would happen if the staples were removed prematurely.

So he called Robbie every half hour. He felt like the worst parent in the world leaving his ill child home to fend for himself even though Robbie was old enough. Just like the current situation. Robbie was an adult, yet he needed assistance and Joe had to work.

Joe's mood was not the best. Having dealt with Frank in a brief meeting, and then intending to go to his office for his routine call to Hal, only to find out the rest of Jason's body was discovered.

It made Joe sick, and it made him sad all at the same time. Who really did he have other than his kids? In actuality Joe had no one in Beginnings he could talk to on the same level, have a drink with. Not that their weren't a ton of people he'd love to hang about with, but it seemed, and it wasn't through Joe's doing, that the people of Beginnings kept their distance, as if he were untouchable.

With Jason gone. It would make for some lonely evenings.

How long had Joe been gone, as hour maybe. Robbie sounded a bit perturbed when Joe radioed the second time. But Joe justified that as he wanted to share with Robbie the news Hal had. A new town. Far away, but full of people. The details of which would be shared later. Hal gave the numbers, told of the leader's request of wanting to join, told Joe that he and Elliott had it all worked out and not to worry about.

Joe worried. Hal hadn't thought it through. His son only saw the numbers, as he always did. Joe supposed after a few days, and a lot of Elliott logic, a viable plan of moving the town and settling them as a colony of Beginnings would be presented. He'd wait. He had a lot of other things on his mind.

But they were things, he could think about at home. Gathering up his cigarettes, Joe locked the phone away and stood. He didn't get very far, Henry knocked on the door and walked right in.

The look on Henry's face was the least of what projected the tension that flowed into the room with him. Feeling that, Joe sat back down. "What's up, Henry?"

Henry shut the door less than gently. "This is bullshit, Joe."

"Haven't a clue what you're talking about."

Henry's hair flung as he shook his head in disbelief. "I think you do."

"I won't presume to know. Tell me."

"Fine." Henry held up his hand. "First, it was bad enough that Dean went behind the investigations back and did a paternity test . . ."

"Whoa-whoa-whoa." Joe stopped him. "Why would you say he went behind the investigation's back. How do you know we didn't ask him."

"Because it wasn't important to the case."

"You don't think?" Joe asked with edge. "I can't believe none of us thought of it. It is very important to the case, Henry. I think you disagree because you, well, you know."

"And that's well in fine that you're aware of it, and Frank, he's part of the team. Dean. Yeah, he did the test. But I think it's bullshit that everyone in this town knows." Henry's voice raised with emotions. "Dean and his games. Making me pay. He started it."

"Henry . . ."

"No. It shouldn't have been spread about. It's wrong! It's my business. I have people looking at me. Saying things. Telling me I was wrong for what I did to Ellen and Dean. I got three letters so far asking me to resign."

Joe tried to be reasonable. "Henry, I believe you are responsible for beginning this whole mess."

"No!" Henry yelled. "No I'm not. And you know what Joe, what I did wasn't all that wrong. And I don't deserve to be verbally crucified when I walk down the street! It's vicious, and who ever started this whole mess, did it intentionally."

"I don't think so." Joe shook his head. "I believe it was an accident."

"Oh, you would say that, wouldn't you?" Henry snapped. "It's an accident to tell everyone? It's an accident to get people roused up? It's an accident to ask them to hate me, to want my resignation of everything. It's no accident, Joe. And I'll tell you what. If she wanted a war, your fuckin daughter just started one." Henry spun to the door.

"Hold it right there!" Gone was Joe's calm as he lifted from his chair and walked to Henry. "First off. If I ever hear you talk about my daughter like that again, I'll personally nail your skinny ass, Henry. You're wrong." He stated with a strong point.

"She's wrong."

"You have no one to blame but yourself! No one!"

"All because I slept with Bev!"

"No! All because you litter." Into his front pocket Joe reached, and with an extension of his hand to Henry's chest, he slammed a crinkled note to him. "Recognize that? She wrote that to you. I intercepted that note up in plastics Henry. After looking into it, I found out, that some discovered that crumbled on the street. Now . . ." Joe lowered his voice. "If you tell me, Ellen crumbled that up and threw it away, I will take back what I said. Did she."

Henry looked at the note. "No."

"The next time you want to rant and rave that you're the victim, make sure you're not your own antagonist." Joe said no more, he reached around Henry, opened the door and walked out.

^^^

If John Matoose would say to himself, '*OK, I don't think I have ever been so nervous*' he would be lying, but he was close to that point. The chair was wooden hard and his fingers tapped to each other in their fold over and over again. A principal's office was what it looked like, books, two big windows a large oak desk. Very clean, even the ashtray had only one cigarette butt, and the remnant of ashes of that, were swept to one neat corner.

How long did he sit there? It was John's own fault. He went there and said he didn't mind waiting. Was it as long as he thought? Or was it his nerves? He heard the voices, undistinguished with the footsteps of the wooden stairs not far from the door that was open. But as soon as he recognized the one voice as Hal's, John swore his stomach flopped and went out of control.

"I'd appreciate that. Thanks." Hal said in the hall.

John sat up, kept his eyes forward to Hal's chair and cleared his throat.

"Well." Hal's voice finally entered the room.

John closed his eyes when he heard the door close.

"I don't believe you and I have ever had a conversation."

John shifted his eyes to Hal's large hand that extended down to him. He shook it and nervously smiled. "No. We uh, haven't."

"Always a first." Hal walked around his desk and sat down. He let out a slight sigh of relief. "You know, you don't think much of having a cast. But I'll tell, they're heavy." Hal smiled, pulled out a cigarette and leaned back in his chair. "Sgt. Owens told me you needed to speak to me. What can I do for you."

"I . . ." That was all John got out. He had to stop to clear his throat. "I don't know what to call you. Hal or Capt. Slagel."

"Hal's fine."

"Hal. Do you know about me?" John asked.

"In what respect?" Hal asked.

"About my former connection to the society."

"Ah." Hal took a hit of his cigarette. "I believe so, yes."

"I've known your family for a good many years. Since the beginnings of, uh Beginnings." John paused to try to collect the words. "I haven't known you. They're, I'm hoping, since you, I'm . . . I'm hoping for confidentiality by coming to you."

Hal tilted his head and lifted his hand. "Absolutely."

Silence. John stared. He watched Hal bring that cigarette to his mouth,



curving his index finger over it so near to his mouth. He looked at the face, the lines on his forehead, and even though younger, all John saw was Joe.

“John?”

John shook his head once. “You know what? I am sorry for wasting you time.” He stood up.

“Mr. Matoose. You came here for a purpose. You asked for confidentiality. I have given it.” Hal stood as well.

“That means from your family too.” He saw the look Hal gave him. Frightened, John hurried to the door. “I’m sorry. Forget it.” Another step to the door, and with a beating heart, John turned around and he spewed out fast. “I know, I’m not supposed to know that you guys are looking for another society insider. I think it’s your nephew you’re looking for.” John opened the door.

“Stop.” Hal ordered strong and walked over to the door. His hand reached out and closed it. “Repeat that.”

John closed his eyes. “I think . . . no.” He exhaled. “I know it’s your nephew Johnny.”

“You know this for a fact?” Hal asked.

“I don’t expect you to believe me. I don’t. I know my reputation.”

“You know this for a fact?” Hal repeated the question. “How?”

“He’s been blackmailing me into helping him.” John spoke soft. “He set the bomb, but I don’t have physical proof of that. He tried to kill you because he thinks you killed Bev.” John lifted his eyes to try to see some sort of expression on Hal’s face.

Calm, Hal nodded. “I see.” Slowly he turned, took a step to his desk then Hal stopped, and with youthful enthusiasm hardly shown, he drew in his fist with an excited. “Yes.” Adding just a twinge of a body dance.

“Hal?” John was confused.

“Oh, yes.” He clenched his jaw. “This is my lucky day. John. Sit down.” Hal motioned to the chair. “First Richie, then you.” He walked around and sat down behind his desk with a huge grin. “You and I have a lot to discuss.”

John breathed out every ounce of nervousness he had. And the moment he sat back down and looked at Hal. He knew he had made the right choice.

^^^

Hand holding the letter, Henry’s entire body leaned into the door to close it. “Another one.” He whispered out and turned around to face the livingroom and Hector.

“Are you sure?” Hector asked.

“Positive. I don’t need to read it. I mean, they’re not slipping them under my door, they’re hand delivering them, stating their intentions as they do.” Henry dropped the note on the sofa table. It landed on a stack of letters. “What am I gonna do? Was it that bad? Did I do something that horrible?”

After a hard blink, Hector stood up. "It depends on what you're referring to. Sleeping with Bev? No." he shook his head. "Hiding it? No." Another shake of his head. "Watching your friends' marriage fall apart when you knew if you opened your mouth you could help, even just a little . . . um. Yes."

"Thanks."

"You asked."

"Did you have to be so honest?" Henry walked over to the sofa and plopped down.

"Henry, I told you awhile ago, if it came out that you slept with Bev in that 'pregnancy' time frame, you would be in for a shit load of hurt."

"But that's not the reason everyone is writing those letters." Henry said. "It's because I slept with Bev. That's why. I didn't know she was the enemy when I did it. I didn't. They have no right to judge me, none. It pisses me off. What about Kevin. What about the others she serviced, huh? What about them. I don't see the women of the community and other 'holier than thou' individuals asking them to quit their jobs."

"You my friend, have a valid point. But . . ." Hector lifted a finger. "None of them are on council. None of them run a 'trusted' division, and not one of them is second in line for leadership. And you're wrong." Hector dropped his voice as he sat next to Henry. "You are very wrong. It's not just because you slept with Bev that they want your resignation. It's for the hiding. It's for the lying. It's for the betrayal. And whether you believe it or not, you betrayed your friends by your silence. Now . . . Think about it. Trust in a leader is a very big thing. Can they trust you? If your close friends can not, how can they?"

Sulking was the expression Henry gave. "What am I supposed to do?"

"What they ask. A good leader always does."

"Quit?" Henry stood up. "Resign from council. Pull back as head as mechanics. Give up all authority in Beginnings? Bullshit. I deserve better."

Henry's words etched at Hector. "And why is that?" He asked with edge. "Why do you deserve better? Why do you deserve to have the mistrust overlooked and forgotten about?"

"Because I am an original. I started this place." Henry pointed.

"And that is so wrong!" Hector shook his head in disgust. "So what, you broke ground here. Got things up and running. Hate to tell you Henry, that was years ago. And a lot of us have been here for years. And we worked hard and have kept this place running. *We* didn't have our own housing handed to us. *We* didn't get a leadership position handed to us. *We* didn't automatically get 'head of this' and 'head of that'. For those of us who are in authority now, let me tell you, we worked for it and earned it."

"And you're saying I didn't?"

"No! I'm not saying that." Hector argued. "I'm saying just because you were here longer, and you are labeled an original, doesn't make you better."

And that's been your problem ,Henry. Wanna know why you have minimal friends. Why the letters asking for your resignation poured in so fast? You have placed your self above everyone for so long that you thought you were untouchable. You're not God, Henry. You're a resident of Beginnings who made a mistake and in everyone's eyes abused the authority. Admit your error, accept the consequences and move on."

"Then what?" Henry shook his head. "No. I won't do it. I'll fight."

Hector calmed down and nodded. "For what? To keep your position? To keep your council spot. Sure. Fight. What's that gonna give you. The respect back of the people. Will it give you their trust again? No. The only way to do that, is to start from scratch. Work hard. And earn it back."

"But what is that going to make me, Hector?" Henry asked.

Peacefully Hector smiled. "Like everyone." He took a step closer to Henry. "Not a failure, not a loser but finally . . . one in the majority."

^^^

Johnny's head pounded. He swore he had reached the point of no return with his anger. If it wasn't one thing, it was another. First, the news that Henry had actually fathered Bev's baby. That cause an outrage that made him wish he had a viable reason for beating the hell out of Henry. But those out of control feelings subside when Johnny took that walk to his grandfather's office. The walk cooled him down and made him realize that Henry being the father worked in his favor. Because had Johnny truly held the paternity awards, he would have been screwed.

Calm, and ready to call George, Johnny's head throbbed again and his rage increased when the passcode he figured out was no loner accepted. Thoughts flying off the handle with his barreling back toward town, Johnny once again, calmed down when he took a moment to think of another reason aside from Ellen for the code being changed.

When routine security measure came as the justification, Johnny felt better. Until he stepped into te clinic and tried to access the strong pain medication for his headache.

Locked out. His key didn't even fit in the opening.

The banging of his fist against the cooler in his frustration rang out loud in the empty clinic, and alerted Melissa who was walking down the hall.

"Johnny?" She stepped into the lab. "Everything all right."

Surprised, Johnny lifted his head. "Um. Why am I locked out of here."

"Everyone is. Dean and Ellen orders." Melissa shrugged. "What did you need."

"I have a killer headache."

"Oh, I have something at the nurses counter. Want me to get it."

"Sure." Johnny nodded. "Thanks. Oh, hey Melissa?"

Melissa stopped. "Yes?"

“What are we supposed to do for access to this at night.”

“Dean and Ellen will leave a supply. If there’s an emergency, really we should call them anyhow, right?”

“Did they leave anything super strong in the supplies tonight?” Johnny asked.

Melissa looked at him with an apologetic smile. “Not yet, Ellen’s supposed to come back. She’s fiddling with something down in the cryo. But I’ll get you something right now.”

“Thanks.” Johnny nodded and faced the cooler again. The locked cooler, the changed passcode. Was it all a coincidence, his paranoia, or was it . . . Ellen? With the thought of her, Johnny headed to the cryo lab.

~~~~~

Like a crack addict seeking her fix, Ellen’s entire mood changed the second she walked into the cryo lab. “I am here.” She actually smiled, and enjoyed the bad aroma that flowed through the lab. It seemed like forever since she had been down there. Dean stopped by only to feed the hybrids. She only hoped that their work down in the cryo lab wouldn’t be put on hold for very long.

She heard the scuffling of the deformed foot smacking against the cage and it made Ellen smile. “Hi.” She sang her word walking over to the failure cross of a rabbit and a squirrel. “Did you miss me? Yeah.” She bent to the cage. “Haven’t seen me huh?” She sniffed. “Oh.” With a turn of her head, three cages down she saw the reason for the stench. “Well, looks like Dean missed one this morning.”

“Ellen.” Johnny called her name upon walking into the cryo lab.

Her eyes stared forward for a moment and then Ellen turned around. “What’s up, Johnny?”

“We need to talk.”

Maybe Ellen was paranoid, but she had to wonder why Johnny as seeking her out, late at night and down in the cryo lab. “Actually, I have to get up top.” She started to walk.

“No.” Johnny extended his arm stopping her. “We have to talk now.”

“Sure.” She placed on a fake upbeat demeanor.

“Two things.” Johnny’s voice was stern. “First. The medicine cooler. Why am I not allowed in there anymore?”

“It’s not just you, it’s everyone that isn’t me and Dean.” Ellen stated calmly. “Blame Henry. He totally zeroed out Dean’s trust in people. In fact, Dean said, you don’t know who to trust anymore.”

“Are you sure Dean said that and not you.”

Ellen just looked at him. “I have to go.”

“The phone.” He pulled her back. “The passcode is changed.”

Almost too arrogant, Ellen shrugged. “Gee, I don’t know. Why would

you know the passcode's changed Johnny, if you weren't breaking your promise and using the phone again." Trying to get by him, her arm was abruptly grabbed. She shifted her eyes to his fingers. "Get your hand off of me."

"I don't think you understand."

"No." She said strong. "I don't think *you* understand. I will go to your father."

"And what?" Johnny laughed. "Tell him I tried to call George. Do you think he'll believe you?"

"Absolutely. In fact, you know, I'm not pissing around with you. I'm going to him now." She tried to pull away.

"You'll do no such thing." Johnny snatched her back to him hard, sprung out his hand, and clenched a fist full of hair, yanking her head back. "Listen to me. You won't say shit to anyone. Not yet. Not until I am gone."

Ellen struggled. Johnny pulled so hard, her feet nearly lifted from the ground. "If you want out . . ." She fought, but the arching of her neck cut off her air and words. "Leave."

"I can't." He brought his face closer. "I need to call George. Until then. You will keep you mouth shut. Open it, Ellen. Go on. Go to my father. I'll kill him."

Ellen's heart sunk, her face tensed up. "You'd never get the chance."

"You don't think? He trusts me. How easy it would be to just take advantage of that. You don't think I can Watch me. And . . . Just so don't get any funny ideas. I'm not the only one in Beginnings. If I go down, don't think for one second my people don't have the means, the opportunity or the orders, to take out, I don't know . . . one of your kids."

Ellen tried not to show her fear, but a slight whimper of panic slipped out.

Johnny's fingers intertwined and pulled harder on her hair. "Who would it be, Ellen? Too many people that you love. Who all would be protected."

"If you're so worried about me, why don't you just kill me." Ellen's words were tense.

"Nah. I'd rather make you suffer." On his last graveling word, Johnny with all of his might, whipped out his hand, and released Ellen. She sailed across the lab, smacking side first into the counter. Her hands slid across the top trying to get her balance, but in a futile reach, she knocked over an empty cage and fell hard to the floor.

Johnny lunged at her.

Mid thought of 'why can't Ellen ever be where she's supposed to be'. Frank heard the crash from the cryo lab. "Ellen." He called out running that way.

"Frank."

"El." He barged inside and upon first view, didn't see anything. "El?"

"Dad." Johnny called out. "She's over here."

Frank raced to the other side of the counter. Ellen was on her side, laying on the floor, and Johnny squatting by her. "Oh, my God."

"She fell dad." Johnny shook his head with concern.

"El?" Frank reached to her. "Sweetie."

Ellen let out a single sob.

"El?" Frank lowered closer. "Do you need me to help you to the clinic?"

"No." She whimpered out. "I'm fine. I just . . . I just fell."

"Yeah, Dad. It was odd." Johnny interjected. "We were talking. She was laughing. She turned and tripped. Then again, she did say she was feeling dizzy."

"Dizzy? Here." Frank took hold of her arm, supported her back as he lifted her. "Are you hurt bad?"

"No." She shook her head. "I'm fine."

"Why were you dizzy?" Frank asked as he helped her stand.

"I . . . I wasn't. I tripped over my own two feet."

"That's not true Dad." Johnny folded his arms. "She didn't eat all day. She was so busy."

Ellen shifted her eyes from Frank to Johnny.

"El, that's not good." Frank told her. "It's a good thing Johnny was here. Can you imagine if you would have hit your head, or worse?"

A hurt breath escaped Ellen. "I'm fine." Holding her side and walking with a slight limp, Ellen headed to the door. "I just want to go home. I just want . . . to go home." Slowly she left the cryo lab.

"El. Wait up." Frank called out, took a step and stopped right before leaving. "John, thanks."

It was the epitome of snide, the smile that crossed Johnny's face. He let out a pleased sigh as he turned to leave the lab. It was fin, but really, he had to think about it. Did he want to take the chance, any chance that Ellen would open her mouth. He answered that with 'no'. Like she said, he could do the honors and just . . . kill her. But it would have to be an accident. Putting himself in the mind-set to figure something out, Johnny reached for the main light switch in the lab. Mid finger extension, Johnny stopped. He looked at the switch again, smiled in revelation, shut off the switch and walked from the cryo lab.

^^^

Dean almost had it. He was almost there. One more patient's records and he would be all caught up with clinic stuff. That's what he needed to do. Get ahead so he could justify spending time in the cryo lab on his experiments. He did have to hand it to Forrest. Everything Forrest did, he logged not only in the chart, but in the computer system as well. And, to Dean, he actually sounded as if he was a doctor at one time. A part of him

really didn't buy it, but since Forrest was relieving the pressure at the clinic, and he hadn't overdosed or killed anyone yet, Dean wouldn't say anything.

Hector's chart was last. One of the easiest and that was why Dean placed it in the final position. In his home office, Hector's chart opened, Dean lifted his hands from the keyboard when he heard the front door.

He smiled, ran his fingers through his hair to straighten it some, and sat back in his chair. He watched the door and waited for Ellen. Figuring the kids were asleep and he hadn't seen her all day, he could get pretty far with the neglected husband bit.

Dean waited. Nothing. The front door wasn't that far from his office. No Ellen. He didn't hear her run to the bathroom. He wondered why she didn't come to say 'hello', she always did. It was a given.

With concern he stood and walked from behind his desk and out of his office. The livingroom was empty and he didn't hear a sound. Concerned maybe it wasn't Ellen, Dean headed to the hall and he saw her. In the bedroom, climbing into bed.

"El?" He called softly walking to the bedroom. "Hey? Are we fighting and I don't know."

Ellen didn't look up, she slipped into bed. "No. I'm sick, Dean."

"What's wrong?" he hurried to the bed.

"Just . . . Just sick." She pulled the covers over her shoulder.

"In what way sick? Headache, stomach, cold . . ."

"Dean. Stop. I'll live. I'm just not feeling well." Barley did her face peek out of the covers. "Can I just go to sleep?"

"I'm sorry. Yeah." He bent down and kissed her. "You're not fevered, are . . ."

"Dean." She sighed out. "Please. Stop being a doctor, just be a husband and leave me alone."

"O.K. All right." He kissed her again and stepped back. "I love you." Dean listened. He caught it, a muffled 'love you, too' and that made him feel a little better. It confirmed that she wasn't *all* that mad at him. But she had to be mad about something. He felt it. And Dean was certain, if he thought about it, he would figure out what it was he did. It definitely wasn't too bad or else Dean would have felt the wrath. Grateful he got off the hook easy, Dean took advantage, and left before Ellen changed her mind.

The second the door closed, Ellen turned, and not only buried her face into the pillow, she buried the sounds of her crying as well.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

November 22<sup>rd</sup>

And people called *him* dumb. Frank had to hold back his laughing, he was doing a sneak attack. Not much of one. North of the fields, about thirty yards west from the killer baby region. Which, Frank had to admit, it was very convenient being that close to the killer babies. Of course he had to wonder if the babies would smell *him* instead. After all he was the meaty guy. But the killer babies had found their home, expanded it some, but with the exception of every once and awhile when they'd do a leap and fry at the fence, they kept a distance. Short, but still a distance from Beginnings. That alone confirmed Frank's belief that they could be trained. They marked it their territory. And there were a lot. If it wasn't for Dean's semi-logical explanation that the society kept dumping the rejected mutant children near Beginnings. Frank would swear they were reproducing. They fascinated him. And in a demented way, he enjoyed watching them develop along. From killer infants, to babies, and well on their way to being killer toddlers. He awaited the day when they became killer adolescents, teenagers and adults, and were more of a challenge.

Of course to Frank, having the killer babies in that region really helped the environment. They killed about three deer a day, and from what Frank saw about the country, the deer population was out of control. He guessed the hunter in him admired the killer babies for that.

But the big bonus to having them was the very reason Frank stood, just before dawn, in the woods.

A SUT.

The 'twenty-four, seven' head of security guy, Frank called himself. Realistically, with the Hoi tracking system, anyone, even Dean could take out a single SUT without any problem. But Frank wanted to do it. Not only did he feel it was his responsibility, but his fun was limited in Beginnings. And because they went together so well, like arts and crafts, Frank viewed the SUTs and killer babies as sort of his hobbies.

He received the predawn radio call from tracking. The position and speed the SUT entered was perfect. Not that far from his home, and it gave Frank enough time to not only brush his teeth, but put a pot of coffee on to be ready for when he returned.

He positioned himself in the path of the SUT, back against a tree. To Frank they were the epitome of their name, Stupid Uniformed Targets. They had one direction, one purpose and the course of either never changed. He supposed he could have tromped out in the way of the SUT a hundred yards or so early, took him out and returned home in no time. But Frank enjoyed his cigarette, and he was close enough to the killer baby region to catch an ear



glimpse of them. Though it was dismissed by everyone as his own demented imagination, Frank argued up and down and swore the killer babies were singing. In their own gurgled way, but singing, and Journey songs none the less. Everyone but Robbie laughed at Frank. He didn't blame it on Frank's imagination, he blamed it on Frank. And the true test of Killer baby communication—in Robbie's theory—would be when they started gurgling the word 'fuck'.

Closer.

Head bobbing a little to what he thought was a bad killer baby rendition of 'Don't stop Believing', Frank smiled. The footsteps were near, cracking against the ground loud and steady. He timed it, he listened, he knew.

And though it wasn't much of a challenge, it was still a SUT victory. Knowing when the SUT reached the exact point Frank wanted him to be, revolver extended, Frank rolled his back around the tree and landed barrel point blank to the SUT's temple. "Hold it."

The SUT shifted his eyes to Frank, and then he lifted his rifle.

Frank laughed. "Oh, man. You're gonna try to shoot me. I have a fuckin gun to your head." He chuckled at the pumping of the SUT's rifle chamber. "No wonder they named you. Stupid Uniformed Target. No. Wait. I did." Frank shrugged. "Whatever."

*Bang.*

^^^

Never did Joe get up in time to enjoy the coffee Frank made while it was still fresh. It was an entire pot, untouched. He poured himself a cup, lit a cigarette and set his mug down before his usual spot at the diningroom table. Joe wondered if Frank had gone back to sleep since he didn't hear the shower or see Frank. Stepping to Frank's closed bedroom door, Joe debated on going in and waking Frank up. Deciding it would be more enjoyable to watch the rare occurrence of Frank scurrying because he overslept, Joe headed back to the table. He paused before sitting. Though it was earlier than usual for him to be awake, Joe had to check to see if the Hoi Review was delivered yet.

Still a little groggy, Joe opened the front door and without thinking, bent over for the paper. His head didn't make it too far, it slammed right into Frank. "Goddamn it."

"How the fuck did you miss me?"

Grumbling, Joe stepped back rubbing his forehead. His hand slid slowly down when he saw Frank. Blood smeared across Frank face in a splatter pattern. "SUT again?" Joe asked.

"Yep. But just one." Frank stepped inside. "I'm gonna grab a shower. What are you doing up?"

"Having a breakfast meeting with Hal. And being a masochist right now,

do you wanna come?”

“Nah.” Frank started walking toward the hall. “You know what? Yeah. I will. Here.” He tossed something to Joe. “Can you put that on the table so I don’t forget to put it with the others.”

“Sure.” Joe nodded. He wanted to get his paper, enjoy his coffee and cigarette and mentally prepare himself for a breakfast with Frank and Hal. Just as he turned for the door again, he looked down to what Frank had thrown him. A patch with a gold ‘CS’ intertwined in the middle. Seemingly ripped from the cloth it was attached to. “Christ, he’s collecting kill souvenirs now.” Shaking his head at his son’s dementia, Joe tossed the patch on the table and went for his paper.

~~~~~

How long had it been since Ellen used a curling iron on her hair? Quite some time, and she really didn’t feel like doing it then. But she had to. Her usually flat hair would have just laid over the bump on the side of her head and the last thing she wanted was for it to be seen.

What was she thinking? She didn’t want to be obvious, she just wanted to alert. A typed note. That was all. Not even a single name was mentioned in the little note she left Joe with his phone. Just a simple message telling him the insider had tried to break the code. Ellen never would have thought Johnny was back on the code breaking trail again. She found out not only did Johnny never give up, Johnny had a sadistic streak in his temper.

It was the day before and her head still hurt. How angry Johnny was when he found the note. What was it he hit her on the side of the head with? His hand? A cup? She didn’t recall, all she knew was that her balance was thrown off with that hit. Again she landed hard and again all she wanted to do was scream out ‘Frank.’

Why was she so afraid? More than anything Ellen wanted to open her mouth. Run to Joe, Frank, Robbie, Dean. Anyone. But every time she got her nerve up to do so, the fear of not just Johnny, but the other insiders he spoke of, raced through her mind. She only could pinpoint Johnny, and when she did that, she would open up her children’s safety to harm. Until Ellen figured out who all the insiders were, she would stay silent.

It was funny to Ellen, she never realized that she actually trusted people. Had she been asked prior to learning the truth about Johnny, Ellen freely would have told anyone, that trust was something she did not have. The meaning of mistrust was abundantly clear to her with each new passing day. She limited conversations with everyone. There were very few people that didn’t breed doubt in her. If Johnny, her own family was an insider, then anyone could be. No one was above some suspicion, not even Dean. It was starting to get the best of her, and Ellen fought with diligence to keep that distrust within the borders of reality instead of the realms of paranoia it

hindered on.

She set the curling iron down so as to tease a section to create a hair puff that would mask the lump. Pausing to take a sip of her coffee, thoughts swarming, Ellen brought the mug to her lips when a knock happened on the bathroom door. Dean's soft call jolted her so bad, the mug slipped from her hand and crashed into the basin.

"El?" Dean knocked agin and opened the door.

Why Ellen thought she could pretend she didn't break the mug, was beyond her. Her mind was so frazzled, she wasn't thinking. She smiled at Dean as she curled her hair again. "Morning."

"Are you . . . all right?"

"Sure. Why?"

"I heard a crash." Dean looked to the sink. "You broke your mug."

"I did?" Ellen looked down. "Oh, I mean. I did. Yeah."

"El? Why are you curling your hair?"

"To look good." Before Dean could ask her why, Ellen figured she'd cover that base. "I'm going to New Bowman today."

"No you're not."

"I'm not. Oh, you're right. I'm not. I'm going to see Elliott. He's coming into town today for a treatment."

"That was yesterday. I don't think Elliott's coming."

"Sure he is." Ellen nodded.

"O.K., then. Look good for Elliott." Dean stepped back. "Did you want coffee?"

"No I have some thanks."

Dean paused then just pointed to the broken mug.

"Oh." Ellen giggled. "Forgot. No, I'll be right in for breakfast."

Dean nodded. "O.K. Are you sure you're all right?"

"Fine. Thanks for asking." Ellen kept it on her face. The smile. It hurt to do so, her muscles were forced to move upward. And the moment Dean left, she shut the door, lost the smile and let every ounce of her being, just sink.

^^^

"Sorry for getting you so early, Elliott." Hal smiled when Elliott handed him a mug of coffee.

"No, quite all right. I understand." Elliott stated.

"I just like to be prepared completely when I have a meeting with my father. He deserves to be able to meet with someone that can stay on the subject." Before sitting down, Hal looked to the knock. "Are we expecting someone?"

"No. But yes." Elliott looked over his shoulder. "Come in."

Richie poked his head in. "Hey, El, El, Elliott. Ha . . . Hal." He caught

his breath. "I saw . . . saw you and hurried. Did you forget me?"

"No." Elliott told him. "I have a meeting with the Captain. I would have come for you later."

"I'm wearing my, I'm wearing my uniform." Proudly Richie stood straight, rolled his chin over shoulder and patted his own chest. "You like, like Hal? Whoops. Sorry. Cap Captain now. Huh?"

"Yes, Richie." Hal nodded. "And I like." He whispered to Elliott. "Do not tell me he has a real sword in that case."

"Nah. Plastic practice one."

Hal winked then smiled at Richie. "You look official."

"Captain. Would you like me to take him from here?" Elliott asked.

"No, we'll ignore him. He can stay." Hal walked around his desk. "Richie come in, we're going to have our meeting so be quiet."

"Sure. Wow." Richie quickly looked around the office. "This is, this is like a museum. A museum. Wow. A civil war place. This all yours, Hal?"

"Yes." Hal answered and sat down. "So, anyhow, Elliott. Scouts."

Richie interjected. "I was in the scout, scouts. Yeah. Six years. Got, got kicked out. For . . . for swear, swearing. Shh." Richie turned his back and walked to the bookshelf.

Elliott took advantage of the silence. "Scouts should be hitting the town in Texas now. Go over some of the moving strategy with them. And we expect the Canadian scouts back some time today."

"With good news. We hope." Hal said.

"Hey!" Richie called out. "It's not here. Gone with the Wind. Is it. I don't see it."

"Keep looking," Hal instructed then returned to Elliott. "My sister."

"Three-three" Richie interceded. "Three thousand six hundred dollars. Plus, plus penalties and interest yeah."

Hal stayed calm. "I thought you said he was getting better."

"His roommates told me that." Elliott shrugged.

"Duke and Luke." Richie snickered. "Duke. Luke. Luke. Duke. Rhyme." He laughed again. "Duke. Luke. Puke. Fluke. Loot. Shoot . . ."

Hal opened his mouth to speak to Elliott.

"Bang!" Richie yelled out. "Sorry. Caught. Caught up. Books." He pointed to the shelf. "Oh wow."

"Anyhow." Hal continued. "My sister."

"She's not said anything to me." Elliott spoke. "I've beat around the bush. Nothing. She's been quiet. I asked why, she says. Henry."

"Bas . . . Bastard." Richie twitched his head. "Henry's a bastard. Frank's cool. Yeah. Frank's cool. Oh. Wow." Again Richie pointed and moved across the room.

Hal grumbled. "Let's present to my father about her switching with Blue. Having her work here for a while since our patient count is low and the females will only see her. Move Blue to Beginnings."

"Trumpet!" Richie called out as he indicated to an instrument on a stand.

"Bugle." Hal corrected. "And very old. That's from the civil war." back to Elliott Hal went. "What do you think of that angle?"

"He's picking it up." Elliott nodded.

"He's fine." Hal waved out his hand. "My angle."

"It may or may not work. It's a great idea . . . he's coming near you Captain."

Hal shook his head. "Ignore him." He whispered. "You were saying?"

"I was saying it's . . ." Elliot slouched in his chair and leaned his head into his hand. "It's a great idea. Especially if she knows about him. She may feel safe. Open up. Plus . . ." Elliott slumped more. "Protection wise, and away from him would . . ."

"Elliot." Hal snapped. "Sit up."

"I'd rather not." He prepared to cringe. "Richie is . . ."

"I told you." Hal widened his eyes. "Do what I'm doing. Just pretend he isn't here."

The long and loud bad note blared from the antique bugle two inches from Hal's ear. Hal's eyes closed.

Richie snorted a laugh. "Pret, pretty good huh?" He blew it again. "Reveille!"

Elliott sat up, yet, out of politeness hid his smile. "You were saying, Sir about pretending what?"

Just before Hal grunted, the bugle blasted again.

^^^

The debate went back and forth in Johnny's mind as much as the days Ellen or Dean were in the cryo lab. He gave great thought to his final decision. Weighing the odds, the chances. And even though Johnny enjoyed the torment games he was playing with Ellen. It was time to stop them. Not that he didn't have a lot more planned, it just grew risky with each day that went by.

If only the phones were up, or he'd break that code. He'd call George, set up his transportation, bide his few days time and then leave. He would even spare Ellen's life. But since an escape from Beginnings was far from sight, Johnny forged ahead.

A perfect accident. A perfect set up. He just needed the perfect day. And when he found out that Dean would be in surgery all day, with the hybrids needing fed, there was only one person to do it . . . Ellen.

If was safe to assume, she would be the only one in the cryo lab. Since no one else aside from him or Dean went down there.

He planned his set up, he put it in motion, and he awaited, literally the execution of it. And just to cover the accident portion of it, he paid a small

visit to mechanics. Johnny had to go early, Danny Hoi and Henry were such early birds, slipping in a requisition without them seeing who did it would be difficult. But he managed it. The door was open, bin partially filled and Johnny slipped the proof of accident to the bottom of the pile.

No one saw him. Until he walked out.

John Matoose stared in wonder at Johnny, as he watched unseen, Johnny slip quietly out. He knew something was up. It was too early for Johnny to be up there for a valid reason. Waiting for Johnny to move on, John headed into the mechanics building.

What could he have done? Went through John's mind. What was he up to? Everything looked fine. It could of been innocent. But knowing Johnny Slagel, John would keep his eyes and ears open, check every corner of Mechanics, and rule no possibility out.

^^^

It was a big deal to Jess being moved from his stomach to his side. It surprised him to find out that he was almost suspended, face down for a week. Had he been aware, he didn't know how well he would have taken to that, being that he definitely wasn't a stomach sleeper.

The pain wasn't too bad. His recollection of the time he spend in limbo, was all of a few voices and pain making it into every single dream he had. The explosion could have happened the day before, for as fresh as it felt to him.

He was a little groggy, but Robbie's voice in the hall, with that child like excitement, saying, 'you're kidding? He's up?' Made Jess smile.

"Hey." Robbie grinned, walking into the room wearing a black leather jacket.

"Robbie." Jess said with a raspy voice and smile, reaching up and shaking the extended left hand Robbie held to him.

"You don't look bad." Robbie smiled and pulled up a chair.

"I hear it's not all that great of a view if you're behind me."

"Jess." Robbie let out a slight ornery snicker. "That doesn't bode well for you."

Jess laughed. "So, uh, what happened. Dislocate your shoulder? Break your arm." He motioned his head to the dangling sleeve of Robbie's jacket.

"Nope. Lost it."

"Get the hell out of here." Jess shook his head in disbelief.

"No. Seriously. It's gone." Standing up, Robbie unzipped his jacket and slid it off.

"Oh, my God." Jess' mouth moved but he didn't say anything,

"See?" Robbie tossed the jacket over the chair and sat back down. "I hid it on purpose. Didn't want to shock you. I was here a lot, but you were sleeping." He shrugged.

"Robbie . . . I'm sorry."

"Nah. That's OK. I'm getting a bionic arm."

"You're kidding?"

"Danny Hoi's gonna make it," Robbie said nonchalantly. "Dean's gonna make me a SUT. Sort of. I'll be ready to go. They'll make the arm look real with that skin him and Ellen grow. Probably the same stuff I heard their gonna put on your back."

"You mean the stuff that sprouts rabbit fur?" Jess asked.

"Yep. It'll give new meaning to whenever you shave your back." Robbie nodded, then exhaled. "I'll tell you, Jess, we're a good pair. Aren't we."

Jess gave a slight moan in agreement.

"Me with no arm. You with no skin." He whistled. "If we had problems getting laid before . . ."

Jess couldn't help but chuckle. "Hey, Robbie? Um, you're in really big trouble. You lost your right hand."

"Tell me about." Robbie flashed his eyebrows. "A lifetime acquired skill, out the window. But . . . like everything else I'll adjust. Practice makes perfect."

"You can look at it as making a new friend."

Robbie smiled upon Jess, then turned serious. "We're joking. But we're lucky. We should have been dead."

"Yeah. We're also lucky whoever set that didn't know what they were doing. Wouldn't had made a difference if that door was opened or closed."

"Wouldn't have made a difference to my Dad or Frank if it was set properly either. They were in his office. I didn't tell them that so, you know, don't let them know they were almost particle board too."

"So everyone survived?" Jess asked.

"No. Jason didn't make it." Robbie said sadly. "We buried him yesterday. I couldn't figure out how he died. I really couldn't figure it out. We were right there, you and I. He was with everyone else at the door."

"He stepped back, Robbie. Don't you remember?"

Robbie shook his head. "No. You do?"

"Oh, yeah. When we turned to run, I can still remember seeing him step back as if to let the others through."

"Do you remember the explosion?" Robbie questioned. "I don't really. I mean, you grabbed me, everything was a blur and bang. The next thing I know Frank was there."

"I remember running when the bomb went off. The ringing in my ears hurt. I flew backwards." Jess said. "That is still fresh to me. After I landed, until last night, I lost everything."

"Hal pulled you out of the burning warehouse." Robbie said. "Wanted to let you know that. I'm proud of him. But don't tell him I said so, Frank will get mad."

"I won't." Jess smiled. "So . . ." He said with an exhale. "Bloodied but

not beaten. What now?"

"Now. Now we stay silent about it being set deliberately." Robbie explained. "No one is to know until they trip this person up. The story around the community is I had explosives in there stored and the change in temperature fucked with them."

"Do they know who did it? Have an idea?"

"Nope. Just that he or she is an insider. I mean, hey, they went after the suspects. I guess wanting Bev's murderer to pay, end the investigation and so forth . . ."

Jess slowly lifted his head in attention.

Robbie continued. "But I really believe they'll get him. I'll tell you, Jess. I haven't a clue who it is, but I hope they fuckin really pay for what they did."

Jess just stared. Robbie and the others didn't have a clue who did it, but Jess certainly did. And in hearing Robbie's words of wanting the bomber to pay, Jess had to wonder, if when Robbie found out who the society insider actually was, would he still feel so passionately about handing out justice.

^^^

Joe actually thought he had his days wrong and it was Sunday judging by the amount of people that were buzzing about town when he arrived back from New Bowman. That was, until he looked at his watch and remembered he had an early day. Of course, tagging Frank along made the simple hour or so trip seem like a week. Not often did Joe think it, but 'poor Hal' kept racing through his mind.

So prepared Hal was with his little notepad of information. A list. A simple list he intended to read over to Joe, briefly discuss and then enjoy breakfast. Frank hindered that as usual, and Richie with the bugle didn't help much either. How Hal kept his composure was beyond Joe. They finally got to the bones of the meeting when they were graced with silence after they convinced Frank it would be heroic to take Richie bowling.

Joe enjoyed the time with Hal. Frank even seemed grateful for the chance to bowl, telling Joe he had a blast. Richie, on the other hand, didn't seemed all that pleased with the outcome of his and Frank' early morning trip to the alleys. He seemed different to Joe, more quiet afterwards. Dazed and confused. Joe attributed that to the large bump on Richie's forehead. The one he got when he decided to walk up behind Frank, when he was winding back to throw the ball.

Clocked, Richie ended up getting. And though it really had to hurt, it bred a pleasant feeling of chuckling in Joe every time he thought of it.

After informing Frank to stay clear of him for at least a couple hours, he went into town to make a sweep of things, only to discover no one was really working yet. So Joe headed to his office. He should of gone there right away, perhaps it was a subconscious thing that made Joe want to do community



rounds first. But he was stuck. It had to be done.

The explosion happened just over a week before, and had it been just an accident with little repercussions, Joe would have buried the incident and moved on. But, unfortunately, Joe had buried his close friend not even twenty-four hours earlier. Almost over, with the exception of catching the culprit who did it. That would happen, Joe was certain, as soon as they named the killer. Smoke screening the bomber out into a trap.

There was also something else pressing that Joe had deal with, an issue he put off, and in waiting to handled, the problem literally doubled.

Joe was leader in a growing community. But he was a leader alone. Jason, a fellow council member was gone. His replacement was needed. And then . . . came Henry.

It bothered Joe more than he thought losing Henry not only on council, but surprisingly, as head of Mechanics as well. Wanting quietly, at Henry's own request, to slip from authority, from any lime light, and try to start anew.

Joe respected that decision. But complying completely with starting anew, Joe couldn't do. Henry was mechanically brilliant, and though out of head of mechanics position, Henry had to work in that division.

As far replacements, new council members, Joe knew who he wanted. And as he sat at his desk, he had already distributed the 'invitation for position' to them in the form of a letter. He also had a plan that incorporated a slight change. There was too much going on in Beginnings with Bev's murder, the bombing, the insider. And not a single person—as if they were all waiting for the last minute—turned in their punishment ballots. So in order to keep the change and switch of council simple, Joe decided to post a message, in Beginnings and New Bowman. The message would inform of the slight new changes he had in mind, the names of the new council, and the reason Joe chose them. He also had mentioned in his message, that the appointing of council was temporary and would become official, if after one month, he received no disapproval from the communities. If that was the case, the decision would go to a general election. Joe hoped his choices would be accepted, he made them with the best interest of the communities in mind and in heart.

He read over the message he would post. The document he worked typing up the night before. From the document he barely lifted his eyes when the door opened. "I thought I told you to keep away from me." Joe returned to reading, then gazed up again when he noticed Frank looking about. In the closet, the examining room, beside the file cabinet. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Who were you talking to?" Frank asked.

"You." Joe set the paper down.

"When did you tell me to stay away from you?" Frank pulled up a chair.

"About a half an hour ago."

"No you didn't."

“Frank.” Joe had a slight snap to him. “Yeah, I did. What was the last thing I told you?”

Frank paused to think. “Oh. Yeah. To stay clear.”

“Ok.” Joe nodded.

“I did. I am.” Frank pointed to his temple. “Sharp as always.”

“Christ.” Joe rubbed his eyes.

“No. Frank.” He laughed at his own humor.

“Frank!”

“What!” Frank leaned back in the chair. “Fuck. Yell at me. What did I do.”

Joe grunted. “Stay clear meaning . . .”

“Dad. I know what ‘stay clear’ means. Focused. Sharp.”

“No, I meant stay clear . . .”

“I am.” Frank interrupted. “Did you think I was gonna have a problem.”

“No, Frank, I . . .”

“I’m a little tired.” Frank tilted his head. “Not much. I’ll be fine.”

“No, Frank, you asshole.” Joe lost it. “I meant stay clear of me. Of me. Stay clear of me!”

Frank just blinked. “Oh, my God. You’re hurting my feelings. What did I do.”

“What? Do you want a list.” Joe looked at his son and couldn’t believe he saw the expression on Frank’s face that all but said, ‘yes, please’. After a grumble, Joe rattled off in an irritated mode. “You hit me in the head with your big body this morning, got blood all over my tub, hit Richie in the head with a bowling ball . . .”

“Wasn’t my fault.” Frank lifted a hand in defense.

Joe ignored him and kept going. “Complained continuously about Hal’s mess hall food . . .”

“It sucked.”

“Interrupt my meeting.”

“It was boring”

“Why did you come Frank?”

“You asked.” Frank shook his head and stood up. “You tell me to come. Tell me you want to bond with me . . .”

“I said no such thing.”

“Did too.” He walked to the door. “And then, not only after I rid the community of a SUT. A dangerous, murderous, assassin, stop Richie from blowing that fuckin bugle all through breakfast. Which, mind you, was more of a distraction than my bitching about runny eggs. And then I come here, because you said you weren’t feeling good, I come here to see how my father is and what happened . . . You make me feel really bad and tell me to leave you alone.” With a dramatic sigh, Frank moved to the door. “I’ll leave.”

“Frank.” Joe called out softly. “Listen, I’m just in a bad mood. I’m . . .

I'm sorry."

"I'm the oldest. I understand. You have to take it out on someone. Hal's thin skinned. Robbie doesn't have an arm, who else do you have." Frank opened the door. "I'll check back later."

"Thank you." Grateful that Frank made the 'Robbie not having an arm' comment, or else he'd feel really guilty for going off on him, Joe returned back to his work.

"Oh, Dad?" Frank popped his head back in.

"Yes, Frank."

With a point to his temple, Frank winked. "Clear." he nodded once, then pulled the door closed.

Joe wanted to get back to his work, but at that second, all he could do was blink as his mind reverted back to the day Frank was born. Arguing once again in his mind, DNA match up or not, there had to of been some sort of switch up that day at the hospital. There had to be.

^^^

"Yesterday, three." Danny Hoi, sitting on the end of a work bench in Mechanics, shook his head with a smile to Scott. "Today . . ." He lifted then dropped a huge stack of requisitions. "What the hell did everyone do yesterday. Break things on purpose. John?" He looked to John Matoose who was gathering up the tools. "You all right with that."

"Sure." John tossed the bag over his shoulder. "Did you want me to take any of the other ones."

"Nah. That conveyer belt is going to take most of your morning. Just check back with Scott when you're done."

"Will do, Danny. See later." Opening the door, John paused to let Henry in. "Morning, Henry."

"John." Henry set down his bag with a breath out. "Hey, Scott. Danny . . . sorry I'm late. I slept in."

"Nah. Just in time. Take a look." Danny pointed to the reqs.

"Big? Little?" Henry asked and moved to the table.

"A ton of little ones. A few that I think should warrant immediate attention. I divided them up." Danny lifted to the first stack of clipped reqs. "Yours. I figured you could put yours in order. Mine . . . even with what I have in mind, the vent at the school and firebox at the bakery might have to wait until this afternoon."

"May I?" Henry asked.

"Be my guest." Danny pushed the stack to Henry.

Henry flipped through. "O.K., this sounds big." He picked up a requisition. "But it's not. Really. Yeah it's labeled security, but right now, it's the day care key pad. Hap is in there. He's better than any security system. He doesn't use it and . . . this one." He handed the req to Danny. "You have this

way too far up the order.”

Danny looked. “It’s the cryo lab. I thought all clinic received immediate attention.”

“Usually, yeah.” Henry smiled. “But, the switch is loose on the main light switch. Me? I’d call El, see when she plans on going down there. They may be busy at the clinic and she might not have to hit that lab until late today. Which would give you more time.”

“Thanks, Henry, I’ll radio her.”

“Sure.” Henry pointed backwards. “I need to get a tracking sheet from my, I mean, your office before I head out.”

“Go on.” Danny watched Henry leave then noticed Scott staring. “What?” He whispered.

“Don’t you feel like . . .” Scott shrugged. “Really bad taking his job?”

“I didn’t take his job. He quit. Joe gave it to me. I’ll give it back if he wants it.”

“I’d feel like a heal.”

“Stop it.” Danny shook his head, then looked up when Henry returned.

Henry handed Danny an envelope. “This was on the desk for you, did you see it? That’s Joe’s handwriting.”

“Mail?” Danny looked at it. “Wow. I’m cool.” He immediately began to rip it open, pulling the letter out. “Typed.” He snickered and his expression dropped.

Oddly Henry looked at him. “What is it?”

“Um . . .” Danny shook his head. “Nothing. We’d better start.” He slid from his seat on the table.

“All right.” Henry walked to the door. “I’ll check in around ten. Have a good one.”

Danny only nodded a goodbye and when the door closed he picked up the letter again to make sure he read correctly. So official it sounded. *“Danny, with of all that you’ve done, your accomplishments, too numerous to mention, have made you a vital member of this community. Because that, I would consider it a privilege if you would serve on council . . .”* With a flutter of his lisp, Danny exhaled. “Oh, brother.” He handed the letter to Scott.

Curious, Scott took it and read it. He looked to Danny. “Heal.”

^^^

Standing straight, and speaking officially, Hal read from Joe’s letter. *“And also with the efforts you have not only put in with the building of a vital community such as New Bowman, your interaction with Beginnings would, in my opinion, make you a strong bridge voice between our towns. I would consider it a privilege, Sgt. Ryder, if you would serve on the Main Council.”* Hal folded the letter. “Well.” He handed it to Elliott. “I’d say quite the honor bestowed on you, Elliott. I was a little dejected at first when my father told me of this, that he didn’t consider

myself for the position. But, then again, I am the leader of New Bowman.”

Elliott’s head spun. “I don’t understand.”

“Shall I call you Frank?” Hal asked. “You’ve been asked to serve on council. In fact, he wants us there this afternoon.”

“Captain, this is my home, my authority lies here.”

“And it still shall.” Hal explained. “We need to finally make Owens official on our council, but, you will serve on both. My father’s council is the main branch. A Bowman voice is needed. Plus, things are being a little restructured with the new town joining ours. I’m not exactly clear on what that will be. We’ll find out later.”

“What about . . . What about the fact that I am to smoke screen as the killer?” Elliott questioned.

“Who knows.” Hal shrugged. “I guess he’s going to use someone else. He is . . . I, on the other hand, still may utilize your weakened state as a trap if need be.”

“Great.” Elliott said with little enthusiasm.

“You will do this, won’t you Elliott?”

Elliott hesitated. “I don’t think I am qualified.”

“Bullshit.” Hal shook his head. “I think you know you are. You’re loving it, Elliott. I can see it.” He spoke snide. “That little competitive monster in here . . .” He poked Elliott in the chest. “Is screaming, ‘ha-ha, I’m on council and the Captain is not’.” Hal winked.

“There’s something not right with you.” Elliott watched Hal move to the door.

“Congratulations, Elliott. Let’s take a ride to Beginnings.” He opened the door. “Oh,” Hal stopped. “One other thing my father failed to mention in that letter. It’s requirement . . .” before speaking, Hal took a breath, then spoke rapidly. “That you must have composed ,both lyric and music, by next Thursday, a Beginnings National Anthem.” Hal walked out singing his own words to America the Beautiful. *“Oh beautiful, and not too big. It lies beyond a fence . . .”*

He was just about to look at the letter for himself and then slowly Elliott turned his head to the Hal’s singing.

*“Where demented men, like Frank protect, and lack all common sense . . . .”* Hal popped his head back into the office. “That was pretty good, huh?”

Elliott only chuckled and began to leave the office. However, if in fact there was some truth in what Hal was saying, Elliott would make sure without a doubt Joe knew and heard Hal’s rendition.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

It was never built to be a means of security, more a decoration. The white picket fence that surrounded the section of Beginnings where those who had passed on were laid to rest. It probably, by normal mechanics standards, didn't warrant being fixed first, but to Henry, it was out of respect to handle it immediately.

The small gate that was the same height as the rest of the fence, no taller than four feet, lay on hit's side off the hinges. It hadn't been erected long, but a storm, brief and strong, had swept through Beginnings the night before tested the gates strength. The gate lost.

Had the gate lost even an ounce of it's paint, with the way it creaked in the slight breeze, it would have seemed so much like a horror film. Something like *Pet Cemetery* and often when Henry went there to pay respects, he thought of that story. He found himself looking around for that spooky little boy.

Setting down his tool bag, and squatting to the gate, his eyes caught glimpse of it. The dirt of Andrea's grave, still in a mound, still lose, so fresh. He thought in the wind that brushed by his ear he heard the whisper of her voice. But it was Henry's heart, missing her badly. Andrea had been such a strong part of Beginnings, Henry could not have imagined how much hurt went along with losing her. He swore he changed for the worst the moment Andrea left his life. She was like the mother of the community. Always providing the comfort and wisdom needed. And she had that keen ability to shoot the guilt factor straight into a person's soul like only a mother really could. More than he let on or showed to anyone else, things bothered him. On the outside he calmed down since the news about Bev ravaged through Beginnings, but on the inside he was screaming.

Before fixing that gate, he stepped through the fence and walked directly to Andrea's grave. After staring at that mound of dirt, Henry plopped down for a seat. Even though he'd have to pretend to hear her responses, in his heart and mind, he would engage in that conversation he so much needed with Andrea.

^^^

In comparison to the amount of time Dean used to have, he only had moments to complete his work before having to go back and continue his skin scrapings on Jess. He had hoped that he and Ellen would have been reasonably caught up in the clinic so as to allot them some free time to work in the lab. Under normal conditions, with the patient amounts in New Bowman and Beginnings, 'catching up' wouldn't have been a problem. But

since the deliverance of the assisting medical hands of Forrest, Dean was left to ponder if Forrest was actually a doctor or a vampire. Because to Dean, he seemed to have a sick infatuation with taking blood from anyone for anything. Josephine's ingrown toenail did not warrant a complete white blood count to see if she had an infection in her body.

Getting work up orders situated for Ellen, Dean looked up and to her as she stood across the lab getting ready to prepare slides. At first he thought it was his imagination, but as he listened more to the soft sounds of her singing, he caught the tune and realized it wasn't. "El?"

"Huh?" She answered, her back still to him.

"Are you singing Barry Manilow?"

"Um . . ." Ellen peered up to think. "Yeah, I am."

"Why?"

"I don't know. What does it matter?"

"Barry Manilow? Of all people." Dean shook his head and walked to her. "It's very out of the blue. Do you mind stopping. The last thing I want is a Barry Manilow song stuck in my head all . . . whoa-whoa-whoa." Dean hurriedly reached out and snatched Ellen's wrist as she lifted a dropper of blood over a slide.

"What's wrong?" Ellen asked.

"You weren't looking." Dean literally carried her hand back to the tube that she took the blood from. "Check out the slides."

Ellen looked down at them. "O.K., I have them spread on the counter."

"Try this again. Look where you got them from."

"The box."

Dean grunted. "El. Look at the box."

"Is there a point to this Dean?" She said with aggravation. "Because I'm not in the mood to play this stupid ass game."

"Then pay attention." He snapped "Because you nearly wasted every skin sample I took from Jess. Look at the box again."

Ellen did. "Oh, my God."

"Yeah." Dean lifted the small lid with large black words on it reading 'USED: Jess Boyens.' "How did you miss it?"

"I . . . I don't know."

"I'll tell you." Dean had edge. "You weren't paying attention. We don't have time for screw ups, El."

"Don't talk down to me. I'm not your flunky."

"Don't act it."

"Fuck you." Ellen barked.

"What . . . what was that for?" Dean asked.

Scoffing, Ellen laughed. "You're yelling at me."

"I am not." Dean raised his voice.

Muffled, and in the distance, Billy's voice spoke up. "Yes. You are. Leave her alone."

Just as Dean turned to the voice, he saw Billy roll out from his hiding spot under the main counter. "What the hell are you doing in there?"

"Now you're yelling at me." Billy stood up and straightened his clothes. "Don't take your bad mood out on us."

Ellen nodded. "Thank you, Billy."

Frazzled, Dean's head went from Ellen to Billy three or four times before he actually squeaked out the words. "Get your ass to school."

Billy gasped. "No. It's my home school day. I'm supposed to be with Uncle Frank. But Pap said it has to be limited since he shot that SUT in the head in front of me."

"Pap has a valid reason then." Dean nodded.

Billy rolled his eyes. "Protecting me from the truths of the world isn't going to help me face reality when I'm older. I should be allowed to go all over with Uncle Frank. Now I'm stuck going around town. Even though he's funny, he still can't kill anyone in town."

Ellen's head tilted. "He has."

"El." Dean snapped a view at her. "Bill." He pointed to the door. "School."

"Why can't I go to school in New Bowman. Uncle Hal said there's classes there I can take."

Dean faced Ellen. "Why do the Slagels have this desire to teach my child."

"Maybe, Dean." Ellen said sarcastic. "They can teach him more than Jenny. Not that she doesn't do well with normal children. And not that Billy isn't normal. He is, or would be if he were thirty-five."

Billy smiled snide. "And you should let them teach me, since you won't. Even Uncle Robbie said he'd teach me something. He's going to show me how to read music. Then, again, Uncle Frank said don't count on it since Uncle Robbie doesn't have an arm. What that had to do with it, I still don't know."

"School." Dean pointed.

"How about Mom?" Billy asked. "Can't she take me to feed the hybrids again today. We did the other day, please. They're cool."

Dean nodded. "That's fine. But Mommy's not going to feed them until later this evening. I need her now."

"What?" Billy said shocked. "She said they can't be fed after twelve, they could die."

Ellen interjected her point. "Well, Bill, your father doesn't seem to care about that."

With offense, Billy looked to him. "That is wrong. You just let them die? No wonder Uncle Frank calls you sick."

"Quit praising Uncle Frank like he's a hero." Dean barked then looked at Ellen. "Don't say it." He swung back around with yet, another firm point to the door. "School. Bill. School."



“Fine. Dad. Fine.” Billy turned around. “You’re being irrational anyhow.” Arms folded tight, and with a load of attitude, Billy stormed off.

A lifted finger and opened mouth was the position Dean held as he stared speechless at the door. After the shock factor Billy wore off, he turned around and marched back to his work. “You know, I’m really going to start encouraging that child to play with toys.”

^^^

Johnny had to look serious as he read the notification posted in the glass covered board by the ‘Joe park’. But inside, Johnny laughed. He understood the decision on Danny Hoi, actually he had to give credit to his grandfather for that choice. And yes, the communities needed joined, hence the ‘never does anything wrong’ Elliott Ryder. But his father. Johnny had to laugh and wonder what Joe was thinking by appointing Frank allocated Council. Because he was at every meeting anyhow, that should a council member leave, quit or not be there, Frank had council authority to fill in.

It really brightened his day.

“What so funny?” Dan from security asked thinking maybe Frank had posted another one of those dirty jokes.

“Um.” Johnny cringed. He didn’t realize he was laughing out loud.

Dan peeked at the board. The smile dropped. “Hey, there’s nothing funny here. I thought Frank had a dirty joke up again.”

“No. But that’s what I was thinking of. The Monkey one.”

“Funny.” Dan snickered. “Council choice is good though. Hey, do you know anything about Dean letting Billy go by himself to the cryo lab to feed animals?”

“Dean wouldn’t do that.” Johnny shook his head. “Not his lab. No way. Had to be a rumor”

“Shit.”

“What?”

“I just saw Billy going down the ladder. I stopped him. But he said his father . . .” Dan spun when Johnny flew by him. “. . . said.” he finished his sentence then exhaled. “Well, thank God someone stopping him. I didn’t want to be the one to hit that creepy Dr. Frankenstein world.” Dan shuddered at that thought then faced the board to reminisce about fine Frank jokes gone by.

Had Billy been wearing a little lab coat he would have looked like a miniature Dean moving down the tunnel of the cryo. His focus ahead, showing no fear of the dark tunnels. And he complained, out loud, the whole way there.

“They are life. That’s a shame. If he didn’t make them deformed already. Now he wants to starve them. That just isn’t right.” he arrived at the cryo lab

door, and on tip toes, he reached up and pressed in the four digit code he learned from watching his mother.

*"Oh, my God."* Was the thought that raced through Johnny's mind when he heard the buzz of the security door. Anyone else, he would have deemed it an accident, but not Billy. Not a kid. For as much as Johnny threatened it wasn't his intention and he took off running.

Hands on hips, Billy looked at the light switch far above his head. "Swell. How does my father reach this?" After a grunt of disgust, Billy jumped and missed. He shook his head, took in a breath of determination and tried again. "That's it. I'm doing it this time." He backed up into the dark lab a few feet and took a running start. Little shoes pounding against the hard floor, about two feet from the light switch Billy leaped out. Just as his hand extended, hard went an arm around his waist and his body was lifted then swept almost violently from the switch as his tiny finger barely touched it.

The spark was as loud as it was bright, and Johnny felt every ounce of the electricity that surged a jolt that shot through Billy into him and sent them both flying across the lab. Johnny landed hard on his back with Billy tight into his arms. He took a moment to catch his bearings, and then his hand reached around a still Billy. "Bill." He spoke in fear. "Bill." He felt for a pulse.

Billy twitched. "Huh?"

Johnny closed his eyes in relief. "You're all right."

"Whoa." Billy twitched again. "That must be what Uncle Frank was talking about when he touched that fence."

Johnny let out a nervous chuckle, and with Billy still in his arms, he stood up. Even though everything seemed fine, to sure, Johnny took Billy out of the lab to get him checked.

^^^

"Dean, I'm fuckin telling you." Frank felt as if he were watching a ping pong match the way his head went from left to right watching Dean move about the lab. "El. Tell him."

"It's true, Dean." Ellen stated.

Dean stopped cold. "No way. There is no way Joe would do that."

Frank assuredly handed Dean a paper. "Read it and weak."

"Weep." Dean corrected and took the paper.

"What?" Frank asked.

"Weep, as in cry." Dean explained as he opened the paper. "You said read it and weak. It's read it and weep."

"Why would I want you to cry?" Frank asked.

"Forget it Frank." Dean shook his head. "Oh, my God. He is allocated council."

Proudly Ellen sighed out. "It's a sign of the future."

"I'm president then, you know." Frank nodded.

"You also die of a massive coronary in your sleep at sixty-two." Dean gave the letter back.

"So. If I die at sixty -two I still have half my life left. That's not bad."

Dean paused. "Half your life? Frank, how old do you think you are."

With a wink to Ellen, Frank smiled. "Thirty."

Dean laughed. "That's good. Thanks. What a day. You think you're thirty. You're on council and Ellen is singing Barry Manilow songs."

Frank looked at Ellen. "Barry Manilow. That's fuckin odd El. It wasn't Copacabana was it?"

Ellen shook her head. "No. Mandy."

"Oh. That's a little better." Frank stood up and shoved the letter in his pocket. "Did I tell you guys the killer babies were getting better with their choir. I think they were doing '*Open arms*' this afternoon, not sure. I think." Frank shrugged and ignored the odd looks he received from Dean and Ellen. "Anyway, I'm out. Set some SUT traps." As he turned around, Frank's expression dropped when he saw Johnny holding Billy. "What's wrong?" Frank rushed to the door.

Dean spun and flew toward Johnny. "What happened?"

"He's fine." Johnny explained. "But could you check him out. He got shocked pretty bad."

Taking Billy from Johnny's arms, Dean questioned. "How did he get shocked?"

Billy answered in the exchange. "He saved me. I was reaching for the light switch and he grabbed me just in time."

Ellen, who was silent, stepped forward. "How did you know to grab him?"

Johnny exhaled. "I was checking hybrids last night and I saw the light switch. I put the requisition in this morning for them to fix it."

Dean looked at Ellen. "Remember, Danny radioed about that. He told you not to touch it until he fixed it."

Ellen nodded. "Yeah."

Frank reached out with a pat to Johnny's back. "Good job. Excellent, excellent job. We're proud of you."

"Yeah." Dean breathed out with gratefulness. "What would have happened had you not been there. Come with me while I check him out." Dean walked from the lab with Billy, and Johnny followed.

Stepping from the lab, Frank stopped and looked back at Ellen with curiosity. She stared out as if in thought. "El? You coming?"

"In a second."

"O.K." Frank nodded. "Wasn't it a good thing Johnny was there."

"Yes." Ellen whispered out as Frank left. But somehow, even though Johnny saved Billy, a part of her was too suspicious to be grateful.

^^^

On a fresh clean slide, Ellen watched the droplet of blood plop down as if it were the first time she had ever seen it. The bead grew into a small circle, and she lifted another slide in preparation to make a smear. Engrossed in the process, she never heard Dean walk in the lab.

"Our son is fine." Dean spoke close and right behind her.

The surprised of his voice made Ellen fumble with the slide and the slight squeak of glass against glass made her shudder. "Dean." She whined his name.

"Ellen." He took hold of her arm and turned her to face him. "Did you hear me? Our son is fine."

"I know that."

"How?" Dean asked. "How? He was shocked. You never came back to the exam room."

"Frank was there and so was . . . Johnny."

"Since when does a crowded room take precedence over our son?"

Ellen nodded. "You're right. I wasn't thinking."

"You've been doing that a lot. Is everything all right? Is there something you aren't telling me?" Dean questioned with concern.

"No."

"I'm heading back to the exam room, situate Billy, then I have to get back to Jess."

Ellen debated, then before Dean left the lab, she charged to him. "Dean. Wait. Please."

"What?" He turned around.

After a long stare that seemed to irritate Dean, Ellen took a breath. "I need to talk to you."

"Go on."

Ellen shifted her eyes to the hall then dropped her voice to a whisper. "What if it's Johnny?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The bomber. The insider who . . ."

"What?" Dean said with a laugh. "No."

"Dean . . ."

"Ellen, that's ridiculous." He shook his head. "Is this why you wouldn't go to the examining room. That's wrong. He saved our son's life."

"Exactly. Think about. How did he know Billy would get shocked. Huh?"

Tightly closed lips, Dean stared for a second then nodded. "He filled out the req, El. He saw it."

There was nothing more Ellen wanted to do then to blurt out the truth.

But she couldn't, so she opted to give Dean food for thought. "Dean, think about the letters from the future. Remember? Frank and Billy both said they couldn't tell us who tried to kill you and me because this person does something really good."

"Think about what you're saying. O.K.? Just think about it." Dean took a calming approach. "Frank and Billy didn't want to tell us the bomber was Johnny because Johnny saved Billy from an electrocution . . . he caused ? No. If your theory is correct, and Johnny's the one that set the explosion, if he rigged the light switch, why wouldn't Frank and Billy know about that. All they would have to do was name Johnny and the rig of the light switch would of never occurred." He shrugged. "And you know, instead of staying back here, thinking of accusations, you should be thinking of a way to thank Johnny. All right? This mood . . ." Dean's hand moitned at her. "This mood of yours lately . . . it's worrying me. You're quiet. You're nervous. You've been making mistakes left and right . . ."

"No, I haven't."

"Yeah, El." Dean said. "You have. I haven't said anything. But three of the work ups you did for New Bowman last week were registered wrong. Elliott's treatment. You had the therapy way too low. That's research. That's vital. Come on . . ." Dean stepped back and spoke softly. "Get it together."

Ellen exhaled, her eyes beaded in a stare as he left and all she wanted to do was scream at him, 'You fuckin insensitive asshole'. In her frustration, hand holding back her bangs, she turned from the door and clenched her fist.

"What are you doing, El?" Snide Johnny whispered as he walked into the lab.

Ellen turned back around.

"You didn't think I heard?"

"Did you do it?" Ellen walked to him. "Did you?"

"Do what?" He snapped.

"Set it up. Rig that light switch."

Johnny's jaw twitched back and forth. He leaned into her. "You ungrateful little bitch. I saved your kid's life." He backed away.

"Did!" Almost on the edge of insanity, Ellen's voice raised. "Did you do it!"

Johnny only glared and walked to the lab door. He stopped, looked back and smiled. He whispered soft. "Not on purpose. But you can consider it a warning."

It took a moment for Ellen to control her heart after he walked from the lab. Then, after feeling a rage build inside her, she bolted from the lab. She spotted Johnny walking out the clinic door, and then, top speed, and releasing a gut supported growl of her anger, Ellen charged forth at him.

With a scream that carried all the way down the hall, Ellen lunged through the doors, hit the top step of the clinic and leaped on to the back of an unsuspecting Johnny. Her one arm wrapped around his neck, her legs

around his back, and her free fist pounded, fast, over and over into his head.

Hal and Elliott heard it about the same time that they spotted Ellen attacking Johnny right before the clinic. They both stopped. Hal smiled as he watched Johnny turn left to right, trying to shake Ellen from him. "Well." He cleared his throat and dropped his voice to a whisper as he leaned to Elliott. "I guess we don't have to wonder anymore if Ellen know about Johnny."

"Uh-oh." Elliott pointed as Frank and Dean flew from the clinic.

Johnny struggled, moving his body around and around while Ellen still clung to him as if he were a rodeo ride and Dean kept reaching out and missing.

"Get her off of me!" Johnny reached up blocking the blows she delivered.

They were hard emotional breaths Ellen let out with every strike she tried to make.

"El." Frank grabbed hold of her waist. "Let go!"

After folding his arms inquisitively, Hal lifted his chin. "This is entertaining."

"Christ." Joe's voice complained as he moved by Hal. He stopped. "Why aren't you doing anything?" He asked Hal.

Hal lifted his hand. "I find it best if you let people resolve these matters on their own. Obviously Ellen has a dispute with Johnny."

"Asshole." Joe shook his head and raced to the commotion.

Hal exhaled. "It was fun. Three seconds it will be over." He told Elliott.

And Hal was right. A single, loud blast of "Knock it off!" slowed things down, but when Joe screamed out, "Ellen, get your goddamn body off of my grandson. What the hell is the matter with you!" Caused a shock in Ellen, that loosened her grip and allowed Frank the chance to lift her from Johnny.

Upon being set down to the ground, Ellen swung out fiercely in frustration and nailed Frank in the gut.

Frank grunted with partially widened eyes. "What the hell did I do?"

Dean took hold of Ellen's arm and tried to get her to face him. "Ellen, why were you going after Johnny?"

With an almost crying short grunt Ellen swiped his hand away hard.

Frank tossed his hands up. "Is there anyone else you want to take a shot at El? There's Hal. Hit him!"

Piercing, loud and in typical fashion, Joe whistled. "All right! What is God's name is going on!"

Ellen, out of breath, pointed at Johnny. "He . . . He . . . he . . ."

Through clenched jaws, Hal beckoned. "Come on Ellen. Say it."

"He . . . he . . ." Ellen saw all eyes upon her. Then her arm dropped and her eyes closed.

Hal winced. "Son of a bitch."

Joe stepped to Ellen. "He what?"

"Yeah, El," Johnny said. "I what?"

"Johnny." Joe warned.

"No Pap. She went after me. My fuckin ear is bleeding." He touched his earlobe.

Still in the background, Hal shook his head in his private commentary to Elliot. "Poor baby."

Johnny looked at the blood on his fingertips. "You know what, El? Why don't you tell everyone why you went after me. Huh? Tell them."

"Ellen?" Joe questioned. "What happened?"

Ellen only looked to Johnny and shook her head. "I . . . I . . ."

Johnny finished her sentence with a hard edge. "She doesn't remember doing it. Do you, El? How long did it take you to realize what you were doing? Huh?"

Ellen looked up at him.

"No." Johnny held out his hand. "No more. I will not cover for you anymore. I can't. It's getting out of hand. I've covered long enough." Pleased at the confused looks he was getting, Johnny faced Dean. "Ask your wife about the Anthium. And if you don't, then it's own damn fault when she blacks out and does something out of control." In his best presentation of anger, Johnny marched off.

It's was Elliott's turn to commentate as his eyes stayed on Johnny. "I think that is our clue to 'up' the watch on her."

"We have to get her in New Bowman. We have to." Hal stated with concern.

Frank saw Dean moving to Ellen and he tugged him back. "Dean." He whispered. "What's Anthium."

Dean just wanted to talk to Ellen. His head shook as if he were trying to shake off Frank. But he responded quickly. "A behavioral control drug. Lots of side effects if you don't need it. One of them . . ." He stepped from Frank toward Ellen. "One of them, extreme erratic behavior. El?"

Encircled Ellen was, and she felt the suffocation of Dean , Frank and Joe as they engulfed her waiting for answers. Her face dropped to her hands.

"El?" Dean spoke soft. "Are you . . Are you taking Anthium?"

Her fingertips slid slowly across her face pulling her eyes as she raised them again. She glanced at Joe, Frank, then finally Dean. She couldn't believe he asked her that and her words of confusion showed it. "Wh . . . What?"

Dean repeated the question with concern. "Are . . . you . . . taking . . . Anthium."

In disgust, Ellen's mouth parted. Not only was Dean asking her that, but he was speaking to her like an idiot. Both fists clenched, Ellen, to push away her freedom from the circle, pummeled her hands into Dean's chest as she screamed her loudest. "Fuck you!"

Frank saw it, and he ejected his hand forward to catch a stumbling back Dean. "Got ya." Frank nodded. "Man, she hates you."

Dean could only, in shock, watch Ellen storm off.

Hal stayed away from the action long enough, he took a step, but with a motion of his head, spoke to Elliott. "I think you should . . ."

"My thoughts exactly, Captain." Elliot followed Ellen, while Hal joined the others.

He spotted her making her way around the bend out of center town and toward the main road. "Ellen." Elliott ran to catch her.

Ellen kept up her pace.

"Please don't make me run after you. I'm not feeling well at all today."

Ellen stopped, folded her arms tight and turned around. "You're sick?"

"No." Elliott caught up to her. "But I knew that would make you stop."

With a huff, Ellen shook her head. "You're hanging around Hal too much." She started to walk again.

"Ellen." Elliott took hold of her arm.

"No!" She screamed out, spinning from his grip. "I am not using that drug!"

Elliott blinked and still stayed calm. "I know."

"Oh, God." Ellen's trembling hand went to her eyes.

"What's wrong. Talk to me." Elliott spoke soothing, reaching up and removing her hand from her eyes.

"I can't. I can't. I just . . . I just want to walk."

"Can I walk with you. Maybe we can talk about other things. Take your mind off of what happened." Elliott tried his hardest at her. "I could share the choir try out stories with you."

Ellen closed her eyes with a smile.

"Richie was wonderful."

There was a slight delay then Ellen chuckled. "Let's walk." She pointed her head out to the road.

"Not to upset you but . . ."

Ellen slowed down her walk and prepared, Elliott or not, to lose it on him.

"I just . . . I just wanted to let you know. And don't tell anyone. But the Captain and I really enjoyed the hardcore match up on the street." He smiled. "We found it quite entertaining and were impressed that you drew blood."

"Oh, Elliott." Saddened, Ellen sighed out and her head lowered a little. "I'm lost." She spoke as if every ounce of her strength had been expended. "I just feel so lost."

Silent Elliott drew into her. He spoke no words, asked no questions. There was an established line of trust between him and Ellen already, and if she wanted to widened it by opening up, she would. Badly, Elliott wanted to give Ellen the direction she sought. But he couldn't. He could only be the chest for her head to fall into, and a bodily safe haven she so desperately sought at that moment.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

There was something not right about when Henry peered down to his watch and saw the time of four PM. It was Friday and he was done working. Not that he usually didn't finish up early on Friday's, but four o'clock was a bit much. The list of requisitions in Mechanics was easier and smaller, and the day ended sooner without the division leader responsibilities hanging over his head. He never realized how much time he spent at the end of the day, going through the reqs, then personally double checking some of the more important repairs until he no longer had to do them.

His worn and trusted tool bag hung over his shoulder as he made his way home. He saw the note, folded and attached to his door, before he even opened the screen door. Taking it down, Henry read it. *Working really late, we have a batch of tomatoes that seemed to ripened overnight. Poor canning. I'll stop by after to see if you're home. Maybe we can finish that Wrestle Mania tournament. Hector.'*

Thinking, 'oh, sure, where else will I be.' Henry folded the note.

"Hey, Henry." A male voice called him.

Henry looked over his shoulder before going in the house to the bulkier short man who made it a point to stop in his walk to say hello. "Hey, um . . ." Two years. Two years that man had been in Beginnings, worked plastics and Henry searched for his name. "Um, Buzz. How's it going?"

"Good. Good. Hey, Henry, Hector says you kick ass at darts. A few of us are heading into New Bowman tonight. A new dart league is starting at Hoi-Hoi on the Range. Roger, Theo and I could use a forth. You interested?"

"Not tonight. I'm kind of tired from work and all."

"Oh." Buzz nodded. "But what about joining the team. We can sub for you tonight if you're just too tired."

"Nah. But thanks anyway."

"Sure." Buzz said. "Not a problem. They'd didn't think you'd do it, but I thought I'd ask anyway. Have a good night, Henry."

Henry reached for his door knob and stopped. He looked back to see Buzz walking away. "Um, Buzz?"

"Yeah."

"What time are darts tonight?" Henry asked.

"New league sign ups start at eight. Games are starting at ten. Why?"

"Can you um, sign me up and I'll get there by ten."

"Oh, sure. Absolutely. That'll be great. See ya then." He took a step and turned back "Henry, don't eat. I hear they have a killer menu there. Payday you know. We can splurge a little."

"I'll keep that in mind. Thanks for asking." Walking into his house, Henry thought about payday. That was one thing, with the exception of the amount, that wouldn't change. Danny Hoi handled payroll for Mechanics.

Shutting the door, Henry walked into his home without thinking and in his walk, nearly toppled over when he moved straight into the empty baby walker. His foot got tangled up into it and he spun some before he caught himself.

Getting ready to push it aside, Henry paused. He crouched down to the empty baby walker. How long had it been since he had Nick? Two days. Hector had been so busy, Henry realized he didn't see his child because of that. Since the wide ravine that happened between his relationship with Dean and Ellen, Henry didn't have the nerve to pick up his own child. How sad it dawned on him. If Hector didn't get Henry's child, Henry didn't see him.

There was a certain silence in Henry's home that never seemed to be there before. Perhaps it was because Henry was never there. And since his double resignation, Henry found himself home more than he wanted to be. And he also found himself swimming in the reality that Number 7, First Avenue, was just a house. A structure. It wasn't and never would be a home. How could it be when he was alone?

Standing up wanting to shake his moment of self pity, Henry's eyes caught glimpse of that baby walker again. He smiled at the picture in his mind of Nick in there. How the last time Nick was there, Hector had made meltable cookies of sorts. The type that Nick could eat on his own, have them melt in his mouth so he wouldn't choke. Nick played with them more than ate them. They were late bringing him back to Dean and Ellen's because they spent a half an hour digging cookie out of Nick's nose, ears and various other body creases.

The laughter. How hard Henry laughed at that moment over something so simple and silly. A messy baby. *His* baby. Right there and then, in the midst of that one recollection, Henry knew he didn't have to live in silence everyday. If he did, it was his own doing. And just like he overlooked that walker when he walked in, he overlooked something else. Unlike before, unlike so many others, *he* had a choice in the matter.

Would it be the right choice? If he made it, it was not something he could take back. The idea pummeled him fast, there was no debate. Henry's life had already changed so much, that the change he pondered would be the first one for the better.

With his nerve up, and the idea strong on his heart, before Henry could coward out, he left his home in the first step of implementing it.

^^^

In the meeting of minds, George's was elsewhere. He'd raise his eyes as if he paid attention, but his thoughts were trailing off over and over.

"Defectors may be a problem." Sgt. Doyle walked around the table dropping information to George and the six men seated there. "Our mathematician estimates that we could suffer up to twenty percent defection

before it's all said and done with. We have rumors that teams of defectors are plotting to leave in many of our camps. Again, rumors. Thing is . . . we've hit the year mark. We've been preparing, getting things together, building our strength. Numbers are on an 'up', but, those who don't quite like or understand are saying, 'All right. I've given it long enough. I'm out of here.'"

"So we're looking, if twenty percent defect, two, three thousand." Another man asked.

"Could be." Sgt. Doyle answered. "It really isn't a lot. There's a lot more than that still out there. We'll get them. But do we really want two thousand men to defect. How many of those will go to the other side."

George grumbled and waved out his hand. "We're worrying too much about this." He shook his head. "We have an ocean that separates us from a whole other world. What is their strength? We don't know. I think that's where our priorities should lie. And what are the thousand or so defectors gonna do? All go to Beginnings. I highly doubt that. They'll wander, they'll suffer and they'll return to . . ." His eyes lifted when the door opened and Steward walked in. "Excuse me. Keep going Sgt. Doyle." George instructed as he stepped to steward. "Anything." He asked in a whisper and pulled him out into the hall by the room.

Steward kept his voice low. "That arrogant Captain Slagel answered. Then when he realized it was me, he pretends he's a answering machine."

"God, there all assholes aren't they?" George asked.

"Not all." Steward raised his eyes.

"Nothing yet from Joe about our CME's?"

"No. But they're only trickling in. He may be thinking it's just a fluke. Some got lost."

Heavily George sighed out. "All right. We need to start working on a rescue operation. Find a crew, find a place, find a plan. Something we can initiate upon demand and have ready to go."

"For when?" Steward asked.

"For whenever Johnny breaks through again. I'm not pissing around anymore. When he calls again, I want to have a date, time and meeting location to give that boy, so him and my daughter can get the hell out of Beginnings."

"You mean, for example, to be able to tell him 'Johnny, you and Bev, be at so and so, at such a time, in four days.'"

"Exactly. Can we put it together?" George asked.

"Consider it done." Steward replied then glanced to the meeting in progress. "Did you need me to stay."

"No. I need you on that. Just get it together, give me a piece of mind."

"Got it."

George gave a 'thank you' look when Steward walked down the hall, then, even though he didn't want to be there himself, mind or body, George returned to his meeting.

^^^

“Elliott, this is ridiculous.” In the women’s quarters of containment, a place not used for quite some time, Ellen watched Elliott take a pair of jeans from a duffle bag and lay them on a bunk. “Go to Joe’s. My house. Robbie’s house. Anywhere but here. You won’t get any rest. Dinner here is in a half hour, then they do the hokey pokey forever.”

Elliott snickered. “The Hokey Pokey?”

“Yeah, you know . . . Left foot in, left foot out.”

“No. I know what it is. Is doing the dance some sort of therapy?”

“No.” Ellen shook her head. “Richie started them and they’ve made it their new after dinner hour thing to do. Besides, Bub is really funny. So you see? You won’t get any rest to pull a night shift.”

“I’ll be fine in here. I’ll shut the door, won’t hear a thing. Besides. My men brought in the four new survivors. I’d like to be available should anything go wrong. I’d feel responsible.”

“Elliott, I am the survivor queen.” Ellen told him. “Trust me. They weren’t a bad batch. You need to get sleep.”

“Yes, I do, Ellen. And I’ll get it here. But you have to let me.”

“All right.” She moved to the door, then looked back. “For today . . . thank you very much.”

Elliott winked softly then smiled.

As Ellen stepped from the women’s quarters, pulling the door closed, she heard the buzz of the security door. And surprise to her, Henry walked in. She nodded politely a ‘hello’ then walked to her office.

“Ellen.” Henry called to her. “Do you have a minute?”

She slowed down. “Only a minute. I have to help get dinner ready for the crew.”

“I understand.” Henry followed her in her office. “I appreciate any time.”

“Sure.” Ellen sat down behind her desk. “What’s up?”

In nervousness, Henry cleared his throat as he pulled up a chair. “I heard you were in a big fight in the . . .”

“What did you want Henry?” Ellen stopped him.

“Nick.”

“Oh. Dean’s home, just go get him.”

“No, El. I don’t think you understand. I want Nick. Want him. I want to raise him, Have him live with me.”

Ellen slowly looked up to him. “No.”

“No, see, El., that’s not right.”

“What isn’t right about it? He’s my son.”

“He’s my son too.”

Ellen laughed. “Yeah, part-time or whenever Hector comes and gets

him . . . no.” She looked back down to her papers.

“It’s not fair, El. You have a bunch of kids.”

“And I’m suppose to just let you have Nick, because I have enough?” Ellen questioned. “It doesn’t work that way, Henry. You have to want to be a parent. Want the responsibility. Nick has a family at my home.”

“And I want a home.”

“You have one.”

“No I don’t. I have a house.” Henry said. “You can see him anytime you want. Anytime. I’m not asking you to give up rights as his mother. I am asking you to give me rights as a father. I want him to live with me. I want that chance. I won’t fight you over him. That’s not fair to you. I’ll do it right. Or at least learn to do it right. I just want him to know who is real father is, and not just by looking at me. I want him to know because I was always there for him. Like my own father was for me.”

“Do you not like the way I am as a mother?” Ellen asked.

“Ellen, this isn’t a personal strike against your motherhood. This is a plea because I have nothing. Nothing. But I can’t say I have no one. Because that’s not true. I have Nick.” Henry sat in Ellen’s silence, then he stood up. “Thanks for hearing me out.”

“Henry.”

At the door, Henry stopped. “Yes?”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Really?” Henry asked. “You’re not just pacifying me are you? I mean if you mean ‘no’, tell me, I don’t want to get my hopes up.”

“I’ll really think about it. I . . . I let Frank have Brian. It worked. At the very least, Henry. You’ll have him more. But as far as having him altogether. I’ll let you know.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“Henry . . .” Ellen exhaled as she stood up. “For what it’s worth. I am very sorry that things have changed so drastically for you.”

Henry shook his head. “I made my own bed. No pun intended.” He winked. “But . . . it’s different. I’m adjusting. I’m sure the focus will widen some more, but already I am seeing a whole different view of Beginnings.” His hand tapped on the archway of the door. “I gotta go. Thanks again.”

Through her nostrils, Ellen took a deep thinking breath and sat back down at her desk. She lifted a pencil to finish off reports before dinner and she heard the single knock. She looked up. “Bub.” She smiled at the lobotomized savage. “Yes?”

His mouth opened as if it were a strain and with a point into her office he let out a communicative moan.

“Sure. Go on.” Ellen told him.

With a squeal that resembled a ‘thank you’ Bub walked in to the office and straight to the copy machine. He lifted the lid, placed his head in there, and at the same time pressed the button.

Ellen watched, leaning back in her chair. She smiled when Bub lifted the photocopy of himself so pleased, nodded at her and walked out of the office. She supposed he was taking that to a new survivor. And then the whole situation just astounded her. That one lobotomized savage named Bub learned to use the copy machine so much faster and easier, then one Security guy named Frank.

^^^

It was a gift. The ability Joe had. As a parent he knew. If Robbie was a window, it didn't matter how dirty his pane of glass was, Joe could see right through him. Inside, and all that was wrong.

A breaking heart. Joe knew it, saw it and he felt it. In an unusual spot for him at the hall, Joe sat at a table, a bottle before him and a partially filled glass. It was early and he supposed that was why Robbie was there. Very few people showed up on a Friday before nine or ten. Because nine or ten was when the Starters, stopped their pre-show practice and actually started to play.

Joe watched his son on the stage that *he* built. The stage he created, loved and graced every Friday night. Robbie sat on a bar stool, his guitar over his shoulder. The look of pain on his son's face could have killed Joe. One left hand held the neck of the guitar and he hit his fingers against the strings in the form of chords in an attempt to play a song without his strumming hand. Any song. Each time, Robbie would progress the chord pattern just a little further. And Joe would beckon in his mind for Robbie not to get frustrated. Trying to convey to Robbie, 'keep going, you'll get it. I know you will' But every time Robbie made a mistake, his face showed more distress.

Joe knew what was going through Robbie's mind. Robbie sat on that stage hoping that some sort of miracle would allow him to do the one thing he loved most . . . play his music. Joe wished he could say something to Robbie for encouragement. Something other than sounding like a father. But Joe had no musical ability whatsoever. He even had a hard time adjusting to the switch over from eight track tapes to cassettes. But there was nothing Joe could say. He couldn't tell Robbie to 'try this, or that'. Joe couldn't but . . . Paul could.

"Hey, Mr. Slagel. Got a front row seat, huh?" Paul said and smiled as he walked by Joe to the stage and set his case down. "Robbie. Good to see you." Paul popped open his case.

"Hi Paul." Robbie lifted the guitar over his shoulder. "Do good tonight."

"What are you doing?" Paul removed his bass.

"Gonna go . . . you know, sit out there."

"Why?" Paul asked. "Not feeling well?"

Robbie gave a sad snicker. "You're kidding, right. Paul, um, I can't play

with you guys. You may not have noticed, but I lost my arm.”

“Really?” Paul smiled. “Oh, yeah. I see.”

Robbie laughed. “Thanks.”

“So your throats sore then.”

“No. Why?”

“What’s your arm got to do with singing?” Paul asked. “You sing thirty out of forty some tunes tonight. Man . . . I can’t pull it.”

“Paul I don’t . . .”

James, the other guitar player approached the stage. He was as upbeat as Paul. “Hey. I hear a few of the women from the house of Lesbians are stopping by to hear us tonight.” He set his case down. “Did I tell you Danny wants to book us at Hoi-Hoi on the Range?”

Paul smiled. “No shit? Cool. Robbie, ain’t that cool?”

Robbie took a shivering breath. “Um, sure.”

James pulled his guitar out. “I have to tune up. Robbie, you feel up to trying that new song?”

“I’m not gonna play tonight.” Robbie shook his head. “I can’t. Sorry.”

“Fuck.” James looked at Paul. “I can’t sing. Can you carry it Paul?”

“Guess I have to. But I don’t know the new tune.” Paul looked at Robbie. “Can you at least go over it with us.”

Robbie nodded. “I’ll sing, but I can’t play the guitar part.”

“No. You can’t. That would be tough.” Paul stated then handed Robbie the bass. “This will be easier.”

Oddly, Robbie looked at Paul. “What are you, nuts? You want me to play bass. Paul, I couldn’t play guitar.”

“Yeah. Playing a guitar with one arm takes practice, and you know you could be limited until you make adjustments. Takes time. But playing a bass with one arm, takes strong fingers. It’s an easy one, Robbie. Try.”

“I’ll screw up.” Robbie took the bass.

“Then . . .” Paul shrugged. “You screw up. What difference does it make. You’ll still be playing and singing. That’s what’s important. Let’s go over that progression.”

James finished his tuning. “What key?”

Paul shook his head. “Asshole. You wrote it.”

Joe watched. So apprehensive Robbie looked. But something happened. Ease. Not that playing the bass was easy, but it certainly seemed as if it was in comparison to the attempt Robbie made on the guitar.

“Hi Joe.” The young male voice said.

Joe saw the UWA uniform pants first then he sat up straight when he looked at Denny. “Holy Christ, look at you. You look good.”

“Thanks.” Denny grinned and took off his bandana. “Oh, wow. Robbie’s playing. Cool. I love this song. See ya.” Denny took off for the stage. “Hey, hold up guys. Stop.”

The music did.

Denny slid behind the drums, grabbed his sticks and warmed up for a second.

Joe cringed. He hated the banging Denny did. But the banging turned into a few clicks of his drumsticks, and that in turn produced the beginning of the song. Joe sat back and relaxed. About that point on a Friday night, when the music started, Joe would leave. But he didn't. And wouldn't. Not that night. He had a front row seat and he was going to watch his son. A smile, genuine crossed Robbie's face and it hit directly at Joe's heart. Joe had heard Robbie play and sing many times before, but he swore at that moment, he had never heard Robbie play or sing better. And with a full feeling new pride in his son he had never felt, Joe watched Robbie.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

With such a rush of urgency, Hal flew into Mechanics. “Danny.” He said abruptly.

After being a little shocked by the sudden intrusion. Danny looked questionably at Hal. “What’s wrong?”

“My, God. You are not making a very good impression as new head of Mechanic and council.”

Danny chuckled. “Is this a joke.”

“I wish. My father has been radioing you for forty-five minutes.”

“My radio is on.”

“Then it’s not working or my father’s isn’t. He’s pissed.” Hal whistled. “Said to me to come and get your wiry ass down there . . . now.”

“All right.” Danny stood up. “I’ll finish this when I get back.” He set down what he was working on. “Hal. Did your dad say what he wanted.”

“No. Just that it was important.”

“Thanks.” Not seeming in any hurry, Danny walked out of mechanics.

“Christ.” Hal rolled his eyes and looked at his watch. He grew excited when the door opened.

John Matoose walked in. “Danny must be tired. He was moving slow.”

“Why is he working so late?” Hal said aggravated. “My God.”

“Henry always did.” John walked to the counter. “We’d better hurry.” He pulled forward the bin. “I know I saw it . . .” He flipped through the papers. “Good. It’s not filed. Here.” He handed it to Hal. “Make a copy of this req while I look for the light switch.”

“You don’t think Danny threw it out, do you?” Hal asked as he walked to the small copy machine.

“Not yet. We have to scrap things completely for parts.” John lifted a box and began to rummage through. “Sorry, you’re late getting back to New Bowman.”

“Not a problem.” Hal made copies. “I’ll catch the next Dan-Tram.”

“Found it.” John pulled the unit out and immediately began to examine it.

“Well?”

John smiled. “Just as we thought. Rigged. See this wire here. It’s a trip. So evident. But then had it worked completely, it would have just blown the box and we would have never known.”

“And Ellen would have been dead.” Curiously Hal looked at the switch. “Why didn’t Danny see that?”

“Why would he looked to see if it was rigged?” John asked. “He wouldn’t. But this doesn’t help us. Had Danny found it, yeah, it would have. But if we turn this into Joe, who’s to say it wasn’t Danny or someone else

that rigged it.”

“True. But . . . alone it may not be much. But when the whole picture comes together, it will mean a lot. That and this.” Hal held up the copy of the req.

“OK, so what now?” John asked.

“Now, very snide, you’ll tell Johnny he owes you. Tell him you discovered the rig and got rid of the box to cover your ass as well. Get some trust brewing with the boy, John.”

John grunted. “Swell. And what about Ellen. Did you convince her to move to New Bowman.”

“No.” Hal shook his head. “But I’ve got Elliott in Beginnings for a little bit. Stating his health and those new survivors as reason.”

“It’s a shame she just can’t go to Frank.”

“It’s his son, John. Would he believe her?” Hal asked.

“Yes. He’d believe Ellen.” John said assuredly.

“Does she have enough proof? Like with Andrea, an entire case will have to be built because I firmly believe my nephew won’t go down without a fight.”

“And the sad thing is.” John interjected. “It has to not only be solid that he’s an insider, but solid proof he’s the last one in Beginnings. Johnny Slagel may be tough enough to say, ‘I won’t go down without a fight’. But he’s too much of a coward to go down alone.”

^^^

Not that he had anything better to do, but Frank wanted to sleep. It just was one of those nights that he wanted to get to bed early for once. He planned on it. His father and Robbie weren’t home. The house would of been quiet had it not been for Dean and his stopping by every fifteen minutes.

Finally, enough was enough, and Frank gave in. Ellen’s ignoring of Dean’s radio calls, her refusal to go home, wouldn’t had bothered Frank had Dean didn’t.

Angry that he had to get dressed and tromp into town, Frank’s emotions fueled more the closer he got to containment. The saving grace for Ellen was the fact that upon getting ready to enter containment, Frank heard the sound of music from the social hall and with it, his brother’s singing.

That calmed Frank down enough not to really explode when he saw Ellen. Though hearing the laughter of her and Elliott as he walked down the hall of containment started that charge all over again.

“El.” he said stern as he turned into her office.

Sitting behind her desk, Ellen looked from Elliott to the door. “Hey, Frank.”

Serious Frank was as he stared at her. “It’s eleven thirty. Go home.”

Ellen just blinked. "I'm busy."

"You're fuckin sitting here talking to Ryder. I defended you every single time Dean came to my fuckin house telling me you were blowing him off. I said you were busy. You're not. You have a husband who is on my fucking nerves and a family at your house. Get there."

Elliott's eyes shifted from Frank to Ellen.

Ellen looked at Frank calmly. "I don't you should really worry. I'm fine. My kids are probably in bed. And Dean is gonna deal with it."

"Dean *is* worried, El." Frank said.

"Then Dean should have been concerned when he asked if I was using drugs."

"Yeah, well, it's a little more than that." Frank snapped. "I think you know. You and everyone else who's on that suspect list is a target right now."

"I'm fine." Ellen said stern.

"And I'm not fuckin chasing you around anymore." Frank told her.

"You don't have to. I'll leave when I'm ready."

Frank looked away, bit his bottom lip and in a mean calm glared at her. "Why are you fuckin arguing with me. There is no argument here, El. You'll leave now. I told you once. If I have to fuckin pick you up and carry you . . ."

"Frank." Elliott only said his name as he stood up from the chair. "Don't . . . don't talk to her like that. I'll don't think . . ."

"You don't think?" Frank flared. "Ryder . . ." He squealed his voice loudly with his anger and a point. "Sit you fuckin ass back down and stay out of this."

Elliott blinked but stayed calm. "Who . . . who do you think you're talking to."

After looking dramatically around the room, then shrugging, he returned to Elliott. "I'm not in a pleasant mood Ryder."

"Obviously." Elliott said.

"So don't *even* begin to te me you're giving me shit about my business. I told you . . ."

"I know . . ." Elliott interrupted him. "What you told me Frank. I also know *how* you told me. I'm not a flunky. I'm not a peon. Don't talk to me that way. I won't deal with it."

"Do you think I care?"

"Nope. Not at all." Elliott shook his head. "But I do. I never did anything to you that would warrant that tone you just used. I'd appreciate if you didn't use it again to me. And more so, I'd appreciate it if you didn't speak to Ellen like that."

Hands on hips, Frank rolled his eyes. "Yeah, whatever. You know, it's a good thing for you that you're a dying man or . . ."

"Frank!" Ellen blasted as she stood up.

"What?" Frank asked. "He is."

Ellen's eyes closed. "Oh, my God. Elliott." She turned her head to him.

“I’m sorry.”

Elliott hid a partial smile and shook his head.

Confused, Frank looked. “Why are you apologizing to him.”

Ellen snapped her view at Frank. “Because you’re rude.”

“I am not.” Frank said offended, “How am I rude? He’s the one that’s rude. I come in here, to try to get you to come . . .”

“All right!” Ellen screamed out of control. “All right!”

It was slow blink Frank gave her just before he rubbed his ear. “Was that necessary? I was merely . . .”

“Shut up Frank. I’m leaving.” Ellen snapped and walked around the desk. “Elliott, thank you. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Night, Ellen.” Elliott ran his hand down her arm as she walked by him then out the door.

Frank looked back at Elliott “See, Elliott, all that chivalrous shit. It didn’t get you anywhere.”

Slide Ellen tapped Frank on the chest. “You don’t think? I like him right now a hell of a lot more than I like you.”

“What? What did I do?”

Ellen grunted, spun and stormed down the hall.

“Hey, El. Wait up.” Frank trotted to her. “Wanna stop at the hall. Robbie’s playing.”

Hand extending to the keypad, Ellen stopped. “Robbie’s playing?”

“Singing. I don’t think he can really play. He doesn’t have an arm, you know. Anyhow . . .” Frank said “I heard him. What do you think?”

“I thought you said Dean was worried.”

Frank waved out his hand. “Fuck Dean. Want to?”

“Robbie playing?” Ellen smiled. “You know what? Yeah. Let’s go.” She hurriedly punched in the code and opened the door.

Arms folded Elliott leaned with a smile on the door of Ellen’s office. Watching Ellen and Frank truly reiterated how right the Captain was all those times he forewarned that—for the sake of mental survival—to avoid ever getting into any type of vocal confrontation with Frank. Right or wrong, no matter how strong one was, against Frank there was no competition. Frank’s stupidity was his vortex. and like a tornado, he had the keen ability, every single time, to turn everything around.

^^^

Hal wasn’t one to wear a coat, but the temperature had dropped drastically and suddenly that during his night round to ensure all was fine in his town, he had to stop at his home to retrieve one. He thought of how much faster he would do his rounds when the cast on his leg was off. For that Hal counted down the days.

Two MP UWA soldiers, stopped and saluted as Hal, hands in his coat

pocket, walked toward them.

"Gentlemen." Hal nodded. "All quiet tonight?"

"Yes, sir." The one answered. "Big first night of the new Dart league starting. Pretty wild at Hoi-Hoi on the Range."

"I can hear." Hal replied referencing the noise that carried from a block away. "No complaints?"

"None." The soldier answered again.

"I'll stop by and see how things are. Carry on." Hal instructed and walked a little further. He accepted the salute of another soldier who was coming from an apartment building located over a former hardware store. The soldier walked on, but Hal didn't. He knew where the soldier was going. To begin the midnight shift in Tracking. Glen's old job. And with the watching of the new tracking supervisor, Hal remembered what Dean had told him not two days earlier.

*"Definitely some type of foreign substance around the breastbone." Dean explained. "There was a residue. I tested it. It isn't anything we have in the clinic. Nor is it anything the computer recognizes from the old world."*

*"Society?" Hal questioned.*

*"Has to be."*

Dean's results didn't give backbone to the fact that it could of been Johnny. Hal wanted badly for the drug that killed Glen to be something only someone familiar with the clinic and the medications there, would use. But Dean did confirm Glen was murdered. Hal was left to wonder how upset his father was going to be when he found out Hal not only suspected, but failed to tell him of another incident of foul play.

Hal would. Eventually. When he presented his entire case against Johnny. Until then, a lid was placed on Glen's death. The more Johnny got away with, the sloppier he would become, Hal was certain.

If the noise level on the street was a good indication of just how loud it actually was inside of Hoi-Hoi on the Range, Hal knew any extended stay would cause that blockage feeling in his ear, as if he sat and listened to Robbie's band for hour upon hour. Hal had no plans to stay long. He just wanted to get there, go inside, check on things, attend to a matter, and then he'd be off.

"Beer please." Johnny smiled to the bartender as he leaned on the bar. His snide grin carried to John Matoose. "Hey, John. Wow. How ironic huh? We're on the same dart team."

John slowly turned his head. "I'm overjoyed. Hey, I heard you got your ass beat today."

Johnny took his beer from the bartender, glared at John and started to leave.

"Suppose she knew you rigged that light switch?" John asked.

Johnny stopped and returned to the bar. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Don't play arrogance and dumb with me. Thank me."

"Thank you?" Johnny laughed. "For what?"

"I got rid of that light switch." John inched closer to Johnny and dropped his voice. "Seems the current that shot through that box wasn't enough to take out the evidence of the rig. You made the mistake of admitting to that req."

"So why'd you get rid of the box?" Johnny asked.

"Two reasons. One, I know you. You'd find a way to cover your ass, and I take very serious your threats that if you go down, so do I."

"John." Johnny smiled. "You're catching on. What's the second reason?"

"Everything was all well and fine with the fuckin little bitch until that explosion." John picked up his drink. "Then she starts throwing my society past in my face and tells me she's on to me."

"No, shit." Johnny couldn't have looked more pleased. "I wonder who else she's accusing."

"I can name about three or four, but I wouldn't approach them if I were you."

"I'm not that dumb."

John Matoose fluttered his lips.

"This is good. Really good."

"So why Ellen?" John asked.

"Haven't a clue what you're talking about."

"Come on Johnny I covered your ass." John took a drink and set down his glass. "You think I'm gonna open my mouth? Please. If they even suspected I was an insider there would be no doubt when they found out I knew about you and never said anything. I'm screwed now."

"True." Johnny shrugged.

"So, why don't you tell me. Why did you rig that box. It has to be either her or Dean."

Johnny hesitated. "Her." he said with a nod. "You can say she suspects me."

John snickered. "It's Ellen. She has a big mouth. She's the one that blackmailed me and drove me nuts. Put pictures of me and George's face pasted over Jenny's. Why hasn't she opened her mouth."

"Who knows. Scared maybe. Who's gonna believe her?"

"Everyone."

"Ha." Johnny said sarcastically. "I highly doubt that. And they won't especially in about a week or so."

"Better be careful next time you try to take her out."

"There won't be a next time. Don't need it."

John's attention was caught. "Why not?"

"You'll like this. Because it will help you." Johnny snickered. "She's

insane. Or at least everyone will think.”

“You’re insane. There’s nothing wrong with Ellen except she goes overboard.”

“Exactly. And she will go overboard.” Johnny laughed. “Trust me. In fact, I could probably use your help.”

“I helped you enough. Don’t ask me.”

“John, you don’t have a choice. I’ll pull the plug . . . literally.”

Engulfed with rage John felt at the insinuation Johnny slyly made about the freezer case. “I’m not doing your dirty work.”

“Yeah, you will. But on some stuff you can’t. This is brilliant. Brilliant. And like always . . .” Johnny sighed out. “I already laid the ground work.”

“I don’t want to know.”

“I won’t tell you anyhow. But . . . I will let you know when your part comes up.”

John stared at Johnny, but the view of him was broken when Hal’s body slipped between them.

“Mr. Matoose.” Hal said, “I see you have found pleasant company to keep.”

John faced forward and lifted his drink.

After looking back at Johnny, Hal leaned into John more making sure his voice was at a whisper but loud enough for Johnny to hear. “I have told you, I know about your past. You don’t fool me. I’ll be watching you, especially when you’re in my town.”

John stood up and set down his glass. “I believe my turn is up.” He walked away.

Nasal, high and whiney, Johnny spoke through his immature laughter. “Better watch out. You’re in my town.”

Raising one eyebrow, Hal turned around to face Johnny. “Excuse me?”

“Can you be anymore of an asshole Uncle Hal. What do you think you are? God? Man, and I thought my fuckin father was an ego trip.”

“My God, Johnny. It warms my heart how endearing you speak of Frank.”

“Oh. Yeah. Let’s run to my dad’s defense.”

“In a heartbeat. He’s my brother.”

“Wow. Aren’t you just the heroic UWA leader.” Johnny finished his drink. “You act the part. Picking on innocent people like John and myself to bully.”

“Innocent?” Hal chuckled. “Johnny, you’re about as innocent as . . .”

“You?” Johnny finished Hal’s sentence.

Hal with a smirk, looked away. “Are we going to accuse me of something.”

“I don’t need to accuse you. I know. And I will bask when I watch the great Leader, Capt. Hal Slagel fall to the punishment everyone is voting on now.”

"Punishment? For Bev's murder?" Hal questioned.

"Yeah. Alibi's dead. Then there's than bandana."

With partially closed eyes Hal shook his head. "I know of no such bandana. And Johnny, if you held such a powerful thing as the evidence of my so called guilt, I truly believe you would have used it by now. No." Hal shook his head. "I think *if* you had it, you screwed up and don't anymore."

"You don't think?" Johnny stood up.

Tight and closed mouth was the smile Hal flashed first. "You're bluffing."

"Call it. Go on."

In close, with such a taunt, Hal leaned his face to Johnny's. "I call your bluff. Do it."

The corner of Johnny's mouth raised in arrogance. "You're on." He exhaled and sat back down. "When the time is right."

Hal laughed. "When the time is right?" He started to walk and gave a hard swat to Johnny's back. "This ought to be good."

Johnny's eyes fluttered as he watched through the corner of his eye, Hal walk out. Right then and there, Johnny wanted to leave the bar, go back to Beginnings, and turn in that bandana. But like a well choreographed dance, it all had to be perfect. Desperation had to hit the investigation first before the evidence would be so welcomed that there wouldn't be any doubt. And that was when Johnny would turn in the evidence, and that, like Johnny promised Hal, would be when the time was right.

^^^

"Insane?" Hal, in his livingroom, spun in question to John Matoose.

"That's what he said." John explained. "But he confirmed she suspects him. He didn't come out and say what or if she knows for sure. And he rigged that box. Confirmed that."

"Insane?" Hal repeated in shock.

"That's why he said he won't kill her. And why no one will believe her."

"But insane?" Hal shook his head. "How in God's name can he make people think Ellen is insane."

"Um, Hal. I'm no expert in psychology. But if Ellen attacked and freaked out on Johnny in the middle of the street, that's a pretty good ground work laid."

Thinking about the street incident, Hal snapped his finger. "He said something about a drug. She adamantly denied using it to Elliott. A . . . Anthium? Know it."

John took a moment to think. "I'm not sure. I could be mistaken. But I think that's a behavior drug they use at the clinic for the insane ones. Like lithium."

"Can you find out about it. Everything you can."



"I'll see what I can do. But ask Robbie. He would know."

"Good idea." Hal said.

"You don't think she's using it, do you?"

"Good Lord no." Hal sounded insistent. "But Johnny could be. Against her. And if that's the case, he already started doing so."

^^^

There was a lot of guilt Dean experienced, and he found it hard to believe that he actually fell asleep. Ellen was his wife, and he shouldn't have thrown that responsibility on Frank. Two in the morning he finally brought her home, after hours of searching, following around the clues of her trail as if it were a game of 'where's Ellen'. And then when Frank found her he couldn't convince her to go home. Dean was grateful that he did, and he promised Frank he would make it up to him for all the sleep he lost.

Ellen went straight to bed. Said nothing to Dean. He supposed that questioning her about the drug had something to do with it. In fact, he knew. Frank confirmed that in one of the numerous radio progress reports he gave Dean on locating Ellen. Dean only wished *he* could have radioed Frank but since Frank's radio wasn't working, Dean had to settle for when Frank used the social hall radio. It was loud at the hall but he was able to make out Frank's reports. A lot of times Dean told him to forget the search and come back. But Frank was insistent and it paid off.

He brought Ellen home.

Apologies to hand out were plentiful, and Dean wanted to start with Ellen. Though early, a fresh day would give him a fresh start. Perhaps wake her, make her breakfast and spend time he needed with Ellen.

Back sore from sleeping on the couch, Dean braved the darkened bedroom, turning on the bathroom light for some brightness in the room.

Ellen snuggled on her side close to the edge of the bed, and Dean slipped in beside her. Slow and close he spooned up next to her. "El." He whispered then kissed her neck softly. "El?"

A grumble came from Ellen and she flipped herself on her stomach, raised her arms and buried her head under the pillow.

Just as Dean tossed his hand up in defeat, he noticed it. Her shirt had lifted some in her fit. And had the bathroom light not been on he would never have seen it. On her side, more toward her back was what looked like a huge bruise.

Dean blinked several times. He focused to see it, but the dark of the rest of the room inhibited it. Reaching over to his side of the bed, he lifted the lamp from the night stand, placed it on the floor and turned it on.

Dim, but Ellen's back lit up. Thinking, 'shit', Dean reached to her. Slow, trying not to wake her, he lifted her shirt more. Every ounce of air escaped

him when he saw the multitudes of bruises on Ellen's back.

"Dean, cut it out. I'm not in the mood." Ellen snapped, pulled the covers over her shoulder and rolled back on her side in a tight ball.

Ellen covered up, she hid them again, but it didn't matter. Dean saw the bruises. A warning flag went up inside of him, and the suspicious injuries on Ellen's back confirmed something was wrong, and if she didn't tell him the truth, he would find out for himself.

^^^

"It's five in the fuckin morning." Frank griped as he walked with Dean toward town.

"I know."

"Five in the fuckin morning, Dean. Do you know what time I went to bed?"

"Yes, Frank, I do. I'm sorry."

Frank huffed. "You're like the fuckin worst person to have an understanding with. Do you realize you have me doing all your spousel dirty work. I yell at her for you. I chase her. Find her. Bring her home. All while you look like the fuckin good guy."

"No, I don't Frank. I never look like the good guy. That's why you can get away with the dirty work. You'll still smell like a rose."

"True." Frank bobbed his head.

"And this is important. This isn't neurotic." Dean stopped walking. He sounded frazzled. "This is so serious."

"What's up?"

"Ellen goes after Johnny right? For no reason. It makes no sense. It really doesn't. And Johnny rattled off that really obscure reason about the drug?"

"Which you bought." Frank said.

"No." Dean corrected. "I only asked. Anyhow . . . when I woke up, I thought I'd make up with El about it. So I slipped into bed . . ."

"Dean." Frank stopped him. "I don't want to hear your little man perverted stories."

"Shut up, Frank. Listen. I slipped into bed. When she turned away from me . . ." Dean paused in irritation when Frank laughed. "When she turned away I saw them. Bruises. A ton of them all up and down her back."

Frank froze. "Fuck. Someone's been beating her up? Fuckin Elliott Ryder. I'm killing him."

"Frank. No." Dean grabbed his arm. "I think we should talk to Johnny."

Slowly Frank turned back around. "What do you mean?"

"Johnny was the one who brought up Anthium. Johnny knows. Anthium, Frank. If you don't need it, it causes opposite side effects. We use it to calm patients in containment. If they don't have a chemical imbalance,

after taking Anthium they certainly will look like they do. There's a lot of side effects, but one of which occurs to anyone who takes it regularly or in high volumes. It weakens the epidermis and dermis layers of the skin, the blood thins some, slight hemorrhaging under the skin occurs with ease."

Frank just stared.

"You're lost."

"Completely."

"O.K." Dean held up his hand. "In laymen's terms. If you take Anthium, you will bruise very, very easily. The severity of it depends on the doses and frequency."

"So you don't think someone is beating her up?" Frank asked.

"If Ellen is taking Anthium in high doses or frequently, she could casually walk into a wall and look like she fell off a train. Along with predominant bruising, some of the other side effects are; loss of appetite, lack of concentration, nervousness, fits of unprovoked rage, mood swings, periods of blackouts. All of those, with the exception of the blackouts, we have been seeing Ellen exhibit the past week."

"O.K., I'll give you that. But . . . mood swings, nervousness, anger, lack of concentration, *bruising*. Dean, if Ellen is being abused, and she's hiding it, wouldn't she be showing the same symptoms."

"Valid point."

"Thank you." Frank nodded.

"But who the hell would be beating Ellen?"

"Elliott Ryder."

"Stop it, Frank." Dean said disgusted. "Elliott is not abusing Ellen."

"My brother Hal."

Dean grunted and started to walk.

"You?"

"Knock it off."

"You know, this really explains why she wouldn't sleep with me last night."

Dean stopped and turned around. "What do you mean?"

"Dean." Frank snickered. "Fool around? Have intimate relations. Get . . ."

"Frank." Dean cringed. "I know what that means. What do you mean she wouldn't sleep with you last night?"

"I tried." Frank explained. "We messed around for a long time but as soon as I tried to get her . . . her . . ." Frank noticed the glare Dean gave him. "What's wrong?"

"I thought you said it took you hours to find her."

"Did I say that?" Frank looked up to the sky. "No. It did take me hours to find her. That wasn't last night I was trying to . . ."

"Frank. Stop. You lied to me to cover up that you were trying to sleep with my wife."

"You share her with me, Dean. I'm allowed as long as I don't tell you. That was my way of not telling you."

"Lying?" Dean asked.

"But it's good it came out. You should know."

"Why . . . why should I know?" Dean asked sarcastically.

"Because, if she's not sleeping with me, she's either hiding her body from me, or sleeping with someone else, like Hal. Right?"

"Wrong." Dean shook his head. "I'm her husband. How do you know she didn't sleep with you because she's been sleeping with me?"

"Has she?"

Dean hesitated. "No." He ignored Frank's taunting 'ha'. "But that's beside the point."

"Yes it is. Unless she's sleeping with Hal. Fuckin Hal."

"Frank." Dean lost it. "She isn't sleeping with Hal. It's the bruises. The bruises. God!" Dean started walking again.

"Where are you going?" Frank hurried to catch up to Dean.

"Containment. If Ellen is taking Anthium she has an ample supply at her disposal. And if she's taking them from there, we can find out."

"How?"

"Basic math." Dean approached the containment door.

"Oh, yeah. My forte." Frank followed Dean into the building.

It was a slight startle to Elliott who ate an apple and read while sitting in the diningroom, when he heard the security door buzz. He looked down to his watch, then up just in time to see Frank and Dean walk by. "Gentlemen?" He called out.

Frank back tracked with a far lean back of his body and peeked into the diningroom. "No, it's just us." he gave a thumbs up.

Dean shook his head. "He was talking to us."

"Oh."

Elliott stepped out of the diningroom. "Is something wrong?"

"No." Dean answered then showed him a clipboard. "I'm doing a med supply check."

"All right." Elliott nodded then turned to go back in the diningroom.

"Yeah and he needs me with him." Frank stated to cover his tracks.

Dean rolled his eyes.

Curious, Elliott looked at Frank. "Why?"

"Why what?" Frank asked.

"Does he need you with him?" Elliott questioned.

"Who?"

"Dean." Elliott responded.

"What about him?"

Elliott turned and went back into the diningroom.

Frank tossed up his hands. "O.K., so don't tell me what you wanted to

know. Come on, Dean.” Frank started to walk down the hall to Ellen’s office. “Man, fuckin Elliott. He’s got a problem. Don’t you think. And I’m not talking about his dying thing. Which, have you told him?”

Slowing down as he entered Ellen’s office, Dean looked at Frank. “Have I told Elliott he’s sick?”

“No. Dying.”

Dean shut the office door. “Of course not.”

“Dean, that’s not right. You should tell him. He needs to know.”

“He’s not dying Frank.”

“Oh my God.” Frank gasped. “You said.”

Grunting, Dean spun to him. “I mean, he’s not going to die if I can help it. And why are we talking about this.”

“Because Ellen acted all shocked when I . . . never mind. What are we doing in here.”

“Check this out.” Dean set down the clipboard.

Frank looked at the board laying on the desk.

“Frank?” Dean stood before an open cabinet on the wall. “Over here.”

“Huh?” Frank snapped his view from the clipboard. “Oh. I thought you meant the clipboard. Sorry.”

“Here.” Dean lifted a pill bottle. “Four people in here get Anthium twice a day. That’s eight a day she is to give out. She took a hundred Monday morning from the clinic. Full stock.” Dean grabbed the chart off the inside of the cupboard door. “According to this, she’s given out five days worth. That’s forty. Counting these should say . . .” Dean opened the bottle and dumped out the pills. He started counting them. “Shit. There’s forty-four.”

“Oh, man.”

With an exhale Dean counted the pills again. “Tell me about it.”

“Someone didn’t get their medicine. No wonder these people are fuckin gone.”

Stunned, Dean looked up. “What? Where are you getting that?”

“You said.”

“When?”

“Just now.” Frank pointed to the pills. “She took a hundred. You said she should have given forty. There’s forty-four.”

“Remaining. Forty-four remaining.”

“O.K.”

“There’s sixteen unaccounted for.”

“Wait.” Frank closed his eyes and moved his fingers about it. “Oh, shit.”

“See?”

“She’s really screwing up. There’s sixty pills left?”

“No forty-four!” Dean snapped.

“Dean! Make up your mind! Is there sixty or forty-four!”

“Forty-four plus sixteen unaccounted.”

“Dean! For a scientist, you suck at math. Forty-four plus sixteen equals .

..”

“Sixty. I know.”

Frank tossed up his hands. “So why are you arguing with me.”

Both of Dean’s hands slapped hard to his own face. “Oh, my God, you’ve managed to confuse *me*.”

“Math can be confusing.” Frank took on an explaining mode. “However, I think being a man in your position, you should brush up . . .”

“Frank.” Dean stopped him before he went on any further. “Pay attention. Ellen came to the clinic Monday morning to refill her stock. I wrote down she took a hundred pills. To date, meaning, up to this very moment, she has given out forty pills. Are you following me.”

“Yeah, it’s a word problem. Go on.”

“Good.” Dean nodded passively. “All right. If Ellen gave out forty pills out of a hundred, how many should be left?” He asked, then waited. And waited. “Frank? Forget it. Sixty. She should have sixty pills in that bottle. Are you still following me.”

“I’m with you.”

“She only has forty-four in the bottle. Sixteen pills are missing.”

“Did she drop them?” Frank asked.

“Forget it.” Frustrated, Dean gathered up the pills and returned them to the bottle. “You aren’t getting it.”

“Yes I am. And this has nothing to do with math. You’re missing pills. Why are you so quick to think she’s taking them.”

“Why are you so quick to think she’s not?” Dean came back.

“Because it’s just not Ellen. It’s not.”

“I know this. I do. But I am looking at it from a doctor’s view point now. Ellen has been disorganized, nervous, making mistake after mistake in the clinic. She’s short tempered. Her back was extremely bruised, yet she’s showing no signs having the pain of those injuries. Pills, Frank, they’re missing.”

“O.K. supposing you’re right.” Frank lifted his hand. “What do we do?”

“Nothing.” Dean locked up the cupboard.

“Whoa. Wait. You went through all this convincing and sneaking and we aren’t gonna do anything?”

“What can we do?” Dean questioned. “You tell me. You’ve been there. How can we get her to stop if she doesn’t admit or want to give up the problem.”

“We don’t.” Frank said in defeat.

“Exactly. So, we watch her.” Dean explained, “We monitor like this. Every day to try to see how much she’s taking. We can try talking to her. But that’s all we can do for right now.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do.”

Dean started to leave the office and stopped. “There’s one other thing we can do. We can thank Johnny for opening his mouth. It may have caused

problems for those two right now, but in the long run Ellen will end up thanking Johnny.”

“Just think . . .” Frank said, “How long would it of gone without us even suspecting. Thank God, Johnny knew.”

With a heavy breath, Dean nodded in agreement. “Thank God for Johnny.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

December 2<sup>nd</sup>

A cup of coffee and a petri dish. To anyone else, it would have been a odd combination to see first thing in the morning. But to Ellen, it was a peace offering. The coffee was fresh and hot, the house was silent, and she lifted the petri dish peering down to the ten spots of mold inside. It didn't look real to her, and it made her wonder if Dean had begun a new fungus series.

The soft clearing of a throat made her look up.

Dean leaned against the door way of the kitchen. "I'm ready to start breakfast for you. I thought you and I could eat before the kids wake up."

Ellen set down the dish. "I'm not hungry."

"Is it me, the mold, or both?" Dean questioned.

"Everything." Ellen leaned to the table and looked at the dish. "Dean? What growth this?"

With a chuckle, Dean joined her at the table. "Actually it isn't a growth. It's fake."

"I knew it. Are you testing me?"

"Nope. Not at all. See those ten spots. It's a symbolization."

"Of?" Ellen asked.

"The ten days of silence. Things are dark right now between us. There's no fresh conversation. And you and I both know when things are dark and air is stale, sometimes things are produced that you just don't want. Hence the symbol of mold."

Ellen smiled slightly. "That's really sweet."

"I thought so. Ingenious in my own way." Dean winked. "El . . ."

"Dean." Ellen turned to face him. "Before you say anything. Do you know why I'm not talking to you much?"

With folded hands, Dean nodded. "Yeah. Yeah I do. The Anthium."

"You're accusing me of taking it."

"I've not done that. I only asked you."

Ellen huffed and turned her head away.

"You haven't denied it. Ellen, come on., you know the symptoms you're giving me. What would you believe if you were me?"

Slowly Ellen shrugged. "Just understand . . . I'm going through something right now. Bear with me, Dean. I'm having a hard time."

"Can't you tell me what it is? El . . ." He laid his hand on hers. "I want to help you. I'd do anything to help you. Please?"

Ellen's eyes shifted to Dean's. "Can you just give me the benefit of the doubt. For a little bit longer."

"I wish it was that simple. I'm worried about you. Your actions,



behavior, weight . . .”

“Dean.” Ellen closed her eyes. “Forget it.” She started to stand up.

“No. Wait.” Dean stopped her. “Listen to me.” he dropped his voice. “I have been with you and stood by you through a lot. A lot. I’ll stand by you through anything. Know that. If you’re having a hard time I guess . . . I guess me badgering you all the time and coming down on you isn’t helping.”

Ellen shook her head.

“Can I try to at least take your mind off of whatever it is?”

Ellen saw the slight smile on his face. “What’s going on?”

“When’s the last time you checked on our growing embryos?”

“I thought they aborted.”

Dean shook his head. “We have one viable, genetically altered rabbit fetus. What do you say . . .” Whispering and seductive Dean spoke as his fingers trailed over her hand. “You and I, tonight, get Frank to watch the kids. And we’ll go down to the cryo and implant that fetus into the surrogate rabbit.”

Ellen looked in debate. “That does sound nice.”

“Just you and I, alone in our world. We can use the time together in an environment we both love. How long has it been since we dedicated an entire evening to our work.”

Ellen shrugged. “A while.”

“What do you say?”

Exhaling, Ellen looked at Dean. “Yeah. That sounds really nice. I need that.”

“Thank you.” Dean kissed her. “Now how about needing breakfast?”

Ellen nodded and as Dean stood up, she pulled forth the petri dish. She smiled as she stared down to the mold. How much it meant to her. As Ellen held that dish and stared to the spots, she stared at her days of silence. In actuality, Ellen had been silent to Dean longer, he just didn’t know. But what made Ellen feel better than getting that mold, was Dean’s attitude. He had to know something was going on. He had to. There was no way he was buying her having a drug addiction. His badgering was only his way to get her to open up. With that thought, Ellen had another. If Dean was trusting her about not using the drug, then perhaps that night, when they were completely alone, it would be time to trust Dean and tell him all about Johnny.

^^^

Usually when Sgt. Joshua Owens was in Hal’s office, it was to get instruction, fill in for Sgt. Ryder, or drop something off. Having meetings with the Captain usually incorporated all of the ‘officers’ in the UWA and it had to do with strategy or training. Barely was it one on one. “That can’t be good.” Owens stated and pointed to Hal’s leg.

Hal looked down. “It feels fine.”

"Should that cast have come off so soon? I mean taking it off yourself. I, uh, don't know Captain." Owens shrugged. "I broke my leg in the sixth grade. I recall it being two months . . ."

"Four weeks." Hal stated. "Blue said it had to be on four weeks. It was a very hairline break."

"Has it been four weeks? I don't . . ."

"Owens." Hal took a breath. "Have you ever wondered why you and I never had a personal meeting?"

"Funny you brought that up. Yes."

"This is why." Hal sat on the edge of his desk before Owens. "I've known you since I recruited you into the Army a long time ago. Recall?"

"Yes, you tricked me."

Hal was aghast. "I did not. I was honest. And, did you not end up in Hawaii with me?"

"Yes, sir." Owens nodded.

"There. Had you not been there, you would have succumbed to the plague because you wouldn't have been privileged to the experimental drug. So, come to think of it, you really owe me your life."

"I guess I do."

"Good. Now that we have that settled. You know why you're here, correct?"

"Sgt. Ryder mentioned something about a promotion?"

Hal winced. "No. If I were to promote you that would bring you up in rank. I should really do that just to spite Sgt. Ryder for being so overly dramatic."

"I'm not getting a promotion?" Owens asked. "I thought I was. I've been a valid part in the movement and . . ."

"I know. I know." Hal interrupted. "This meeting is about the promotion you already have."

Owens blinked in confusion. "Excuse me?"

"Yes. See, this afternoon will be the first official meeting you attend at Beginnings and I wanted to go over some details prior."

"I'm going to a meeting in Beginnings?" Owens asked.

"You've forgotten?"

"Did I know?"

Hal grunted. "Yes. I told you two days ago." He made himself so perturbed. "This is the exact reason you've never attended before. You never remember. How long have you been on New Bowman's council?"

"We have a council?"

Again, Hal grunted. "You, me and Sgt. Ryder."

"Really? And I'm on it? Why didn't I . . ." Owens stopped. He saw the look the Captain was giving him. He was being questioned about something he should have known. It sounded like such an official status being on council, that if Owens wanted to keep the position, he had better stop being

so absentminded. Or at least acting as if he were. "I believe I have been on council for some time."

"Yes, you have." Hal spoke passive. "Good. Now we can move on to the point of our meeting. I believe we can start without Sgt. Ryder. Since we've done that so many times." Hal nodded. "The reasons." He raised his head to the knock at the door and then looked at his watch. "Come in," Just as Hal slid off his desk, Sgt. Danny Lewis stepped inside with a salute.

Closing the door partially, Sgt. Lewis gave a cordial nod to Owens and walked in. "Scouts arrived back early. He's in the hall."

"Excellent." Hal said with excitement. "This is a surprise. He can settle prior to the meeting. Are all arrangements made?"

"Absolutely sir. Since the Hoi-tell is not quite done, I've secured a room with Privates Duncan and Higgins. They have one of the tidiest and closest homes to town."

"Very good thinking. Very good." Hal complimented. "Quickly in one sentence, prepare me."

"Not the leader, a trusted advisor who helps the Texas town run smoothly. I believe he's agriculture."

"Anything I should be forewarned on?"

Sgt. Lewis took a second to think. "No. Shall I get him."

"Please." Hal straightened his appearance and gave a motion of his head for Owens to stand. Sgt. Lewis opened the door again and in walked a thin gentleman of average height. Pushing forty, he wore his hair in a 'cowboy' long style and looked like something from the old west as well.

He took off his hat when he stepped in and extended his hand to Hal as he spoke with a deep Texan accent. "Sir, heard a lot about you. Haven't seen much, but I'm impressed of what I have seen of this place so far."

"Thank you." Hal shook his hand. "I'm Capt. Hal Slagel."

"Warren. Warren Baydy."

Slowly Hal reiterated just to be sure. "Warren . . . Baydy?" He shifted his eyes to Lewis. "My Sergeant didn't inform me of that."

"Oh." Warren chuckled. "No, that's actually my name. B-a-y-d-y. Baydy. Not like the actor."

"I see." Hal nodded to Lewis. "Sgt. Lewis could you secure Mr. Warren Baydy's bags at his accommodations. And find Sgt. Ryder, my God, can the man be on time for anything." After Sgt. Lewis affirmed the request and left, Hal held out his hand in introduction toward Sgt. Owens. "Mr. Baydy, this is our third council member of New Bowman. Sgt. Joshua Owens. Sgt. Owens meet Warren Baydy."

Warren extended his hand then turned his head suddenly, when with dramatics, the door flung open.

"All right." Elliott spewed forth in annoyance and holding a piece of paper he lifted his hand. "What is the meaning of . . . of." he moved his eyes to the stranger. "Excuse me."

Clearing his throat, Hal smiled awkwardly. "And making an impeccable initial impression is my first Officer, Sgt Elliott Ryder. Sgt. Ryder, from the Texas town meet Warren Baydy."

Elliott reached to shake Warren's hand and chuckled. "Warren Baydy? From the Texas town?" After the handshake, views on Hal, Elliott nodded in disbelief. "Mr. Baydy you'll get along very well in Beginnings. There's a Julius Caesar in Containment now."

Hal almost died. "Mr. Baydy, I apologize for my former first officer's remarks. You see we and Beginnings deal with a lot of . . ."

"No need." Warren interrupted. "We have them too. The stragglers that take on famous names. Heck, we had Rev. Jesse Jackson. The guy talked so smooth and preached so well, we would had been fooled had he not been Hispanic like yourself, Sgt. Ryder."

*Hispanic?* Elliott looked at Warren confused. "Sir, I . . ."

Hal leaned to Elliott with a whisper. "You have been saved. Do not correct the man."

Elliott smiled. "I am so glad you understand. I apologize for the insult."

With a look of relief, Hal glanced to Warren. "Mr. Baydy, Sgt. Owens will keep you company for a moment, will you excuse us?" Hal took hold of Elliott's arm. "Sgt. Ryder." Calm Hal opened the door, stepped into the hall, waited for Elliott and then with a close of the office door he spun. His voice stayed low but the intonations screamed aggravation. "What in God's name were you thinking? Do Dean and Ellen have you on some sort of experimental drug. That was not like you."

"He's early. How was I suppose to know he was in there?"

"Good Lord, Elliott, try knocking."

"I was upset about this." Elliott handed him the paper. "Are you lacking the nerve to tell me, or did you just not want to hear me bitch?"

"Me? Lack nerve. Bite that tongue. No, in leu of your recent behavior, cut it the hell off." Hal reviewed the note. "And I have been busy. I intended to speak to you later about this."

"Do you understand what you are asking me?" Elliott questioned.

"Oh, absolutely. Are you, or are you not concerned for Ellen?"

"Yes, very much so but . . ."

"Were you, or were you not . . ." Hal ignored Elliott's rolling eyes and sigh. ". . . were you not the one that came to me just yesterday stating, she is getting too withdrawn, we must pull out all measures to get her in New Bowman indefinitely."

"Yes, but . . ."

"This." Hal waved the letter. ". . . is the measure we will take. You were failing to convince her. I was failing. This will do it." He gave the letter back.

"A-ha." Elliott nodded calmly. "Let me just get this straight. You want me to approach Ellen, tell her I am certain my time on this earth is limited. And it is my strongest desire that she leave her husband so I may spend my

final days alone with just her.”

“Oh, quit being so melodramatic. It doesn’t say that.”

“Captain, you have here for me to convince her to leave her husband by playing on her compassion and guilt over my terminal illness.”

“Yes.”

“I will do no such thing.” Elliott handed the letter to Hal. “No.”

“No? No? I believe Elliott, you will.” Hal smiled and placed the letter in Elliott’s hand. “Or you’ll do something to that effect.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Then, not a problem. You refuse.” Hal smiled with a sigh as he reached for the door. “I think I go meet with Owens right now.” He paused before heading into the office. “Did I tell you he’d make a wonderful first officer.”

Elliott shook his head, speaking to himself as Hal disappeared into the office. “He wouldn’t.” After looking down to the letter again, Elliott grunted. “He would.”

^^^

Steward Lange’s hand came down hard to George’s desk. “Begging your pardon, but this is too extreme. I must advise against it.”

“You’re not thinking about what I said.” George stated.

“I heard.”

“So did the others.” George stood up. “They agreed.”

“They aren’t thinking.” Steward’s eyes followed George as he paced. “I have the rescue operation in progress. As soon as we hear from Johnny, we will tell him to give us four days. That allots the time for travel and trouble. He will meet one man at . . .”

“I know.” George interrupted. “But when will we hear from him? One month, Stew. It has been nearly one month. And all I got was a single call that consisted of a mention of my name.”

“And you think pulling an attack on Beginnings is the way to get him out?” Steward shook his head. “We’re in the throws of building. Trying to accomplish an overseas movement. Right now, that side of the country isn’t worth our time. We out man them. Out power them.”

“Then what are you worried about?” George asked.

“You don’t think they know how many men we have?” Steward stated with seriousness. “They do. We send a few hundred. Clearly they aren’t stupid. They are going to know it’s a ploy of some sorts.”

“Exactly!” George pointed. “I want them to. At first it will appear as an attack. We will move them in, form a front line, hold a position. We will not fire. I’m certain Joe Slagel will call because it will seem odd to him. At which time, I will inform him it was an attention grabber to set up peace talks. And then I move my men out.”

“And it is your hopes that this peaceful, fireless exchange will be the

calling card for Johnny. That he'll see this as a diversion and make his way to our men somehow."

"Absolutely. Wouldn't you?" George asked. "We are in a sound cease fire. I attack without shooting? Johnny is smart. He's gonna see the retreat of our men as a ride back here for him and Bev. And if not. Peace talks set up on that side of the country. I'll get him out."

"Do you think Joe Slagel actually buys the fact that you want peace with him?"

"Why wouldn't he?" George replied.

"Because you have made it abundantly clear that you want Beginnings." Irritated by how smug George was being, Steward let out a huffing breath. "And you're shipping this barrage out from Minnesota?"

"Yes." George, calmer, sat back down.

"You realize, insiders report the highest rumors of possible defectors there."

"There are fifteen hundred men at that small camp. I'm sorry, Stew. I need five or six hundred of them. I doubt they'll all be defectors. Besides, who is responsible for heading up training, and organization of our army?"

"Sgt. Doyle."

"Would you consider him loyal?" George questioned.

"Very."

"Where is he now, Stew?"

Pulling up a chair, Steward slowly sat down as he answered, "Minnesota."

"I sent him there last week for a reason. He will be able to spot and pick the best of the bunch. He'll prepare the movement for tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? All right. What happens if Johnny calls before then?"

"Then . . ." George leaned back in his chair. "We call it off and follow your plan."

Steward accepted that. And somehow he wished they were following his plan all along, because he didn't have a good feeling about the simulated attack. To him it was an invitation to something, to what, he didn't know.

^^^

The Anthium were laid out in a row and Ellen counted them as she tossed them into the pill bottle again. Snickering in disbelief, she capped the bottle as she spoke to herself. "I see I took three yesterday. Unbelievable." She turned to the open medicine cabinet in her office of containment and replaced the bottle in there.

Hal knocked on the archway of her door before he and Elliott stepped inside.

After shutting the cabinet, Ellen turned around. "I thought I smelled

you two.”

Hal looked at Elliott. “Smell? We smell?”

“Good. You smell good.” Ellen corrected as she walked to Hal and kissed him on the cheek. “You wear cologne. So . . .” She smiled. “This is a surprise. What brings you two here.”

“Thought we’d stop in to say hello.” Hal replied. “Waiting on a meeting with my father, he’s giving Sgt. Owens a little tour. You know . . .” Hal looked quickly at Elliott then back to Ellen. “Sgt. Owens my first, I mean, whoops. My second officer?”

“Yes.” Ellen answered. “I know him.”

“He and Warren Baydy are with my father getting a small tour.”

Ellen blinked. “Hal. I know survivor process is new to you. But really, I get them here before they wander around the community. But . . . not a problem.” She walked around her desk. “I’ll start the paperwork now. Obviously if Joe’s giving him a tour he isn’t dangerous.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Hal asked.

“You said Warren Beatty is in town. He should get along quite nicely with Ethel Merman and Julius Caesar.”

“See.” Elliott pointed to her. “I’m not the only one.”

“Ellen.” Hal stated. “Warren Baydy is his actual name. He is from the Texas town. Lord, do you two deserve each other.”

“Really?” Ellen asked oddly. “I wouldn’t believe him.”

Elliott nodded pleased. “Ellen, do I look Hispanic to you?”

Hal shook his head. “Elliott, get over it. Yes. Yes you do. Immigrant Hispanic. Illegal Alien. How many time do I have to tell you. Ask Ellen.”

Ellen laughed. “Elliott, I can’t answer that. I never noticed.”

Hal was shocked. “Never noticed? My God no wonder the man feels painfully neglected by you.”

“Captain.” Elliott gasped out.

“Elliott?” Ellen looked at him. “Am I making you feel neglected.”

Hal spun fast toward the door. “Was that *Owens*?”

After a glare to Hal, Elliott answered. “Yes.”

“And . . .” Hal continued. “Really, to make it up to him, he feels you should leave Dean. Leave him. Like that.” Hal snapped his finger. “New Bowman is such the better place to live. Elliott feels he could offer you and the children a wonderful environment. Not to mention a yard that has no perimeter fence.”

Ellen couldn’t help but laugh. “Elliott didn’t say that.”

“He did.” Hal reiterated. “Didn’t you Elliott, just say that this morning over breakfast. You want to snatch her away from her little husband.”

Elliott’s mouth just hung open.

Hal grabbed his ear and tugged. “Ellen, remind me to have you check for an ear infection. I swore I heard *Owens* again.”

The grumble was light that Elliott let out just before his ‘yes.’

"Ah, young love. Let's go Elliott." Hal gave a pat to Elliott's back. "Ellen, I'll see you later." He headed to the door.

Ellen's head spun. "What is going on with you two?"

Elliott looked back. "I'm killing the Captain later today if you care to watch."

"Come Elliott." Hal called. "I spoke your thoughts. No need to be embarrassed."

Ellen stepped into the hall to follow and snickered, when Elliott, walking backwards, tossed his hands up. Then Ellen saw. "Hold it!" She raced forward just as Elliott buzzed opened the door for them. "Hal!" She snapped.

"Ellen, whatever it is I'm sure we can discuss over dinner tonight." Hal moved to the main door. "When you move to New Bowman."

"Where the hell is your cast?" Ellen asked.

Hal paused. He checked out the snide look Elliott gave him, then sorrowful he shook his head. "Elliott took it off"

"Elliott." Ellen spoke soft. "Really, you can't do that. It needed to heal."

In what Hal thought was a saving grace, he tugged Elliott through the front door of containment and poked his head in. "He meant no harm, Ellen. And think about that divorce proposal presented to you."

Forgotten about as if he wasn't there, Scott peered from the front security desk. "Divorce proposal."

"Don't ask." Ellen said. "Something is up with those two. Oh, hey Scott." She retracted her steps. "Can I see the sheet?"

"Sure." from the bottom drawer Scott pulled out a clipboard and handed it to Ellen.

"Thanks. You aren't telling anyone about this, right?"

"Not a soul."

"Good. I don't want anyone to know that we're keeping track of when and who comes in here." Ellen actually felt kind of better after the confusing visit from Hal and Elliott. Smiling, she lifted the mock supply requisition to peer underneath. The smile fell and the first thought that raced through her mind was that perhaps the divorce proposal wasn't that bad of an idea. At seven-thirty in the morning, not long after their intimate breakfast, Dean stopped by containment again. Before she let the rage hit her, or she became too upset, she decided if Dean was giving her the benefit of the doubt, she would give him the same. There had to be another reason aside from him checking up on her. There had to be.

^^^

In the northeast region not far from the fields, Frank, Dean and Robbie perched upon lawn chairs, staring out as if they were having a backyard winter barbecue.



“Shh.” Frank held up a finger. “There. You hear?”

Dean smiled. “Well, I be damned. AC/DC.”

So offended, Frank scoffed. “Fuck you. Why the fuck would I be singing AC fuckin DC. It’s Journey, asshole. Robbie aren’t they singing Journey.”

Robbie smiled. “Open Arms.”

“Se, Dean?” Frank nodded. “They mock me. Watch.” He stood up, cupped his hands over his mouth and shouted loudly. “Fuck!”

At first there was silence, then after a short delay, in unison a gurgled single syllable sound emerged from the killer baby region.

“Do I not have the touch.” Proudly Frank said. “I’m their God. I’m telling you, they fear me, respect me.”

“You’re the Frank-clops to them” Robbie smirked. “Like the cyclops monster.”

“I am.”

Laughing, Dean grabbed his coffee and stood up. “As much as I enjoyed this mid morning break. I have to get back to work. Robbie good luck today.”

“Thanks, Dean. It feels good to be back.”

“Dean.” Frank spoke up before Dean left. “Did you stop by containment this morning?”

Curious, Robbie looked at Dean. “What’s going on at Containment.”

Dean ignored the question from Robbie and only looked to Frank. “Yes.”

“And?” Frank continued.

Through clenched jaws, Dean gave warning. “Frank.”

“What’s going on?” Robbie asked again.

Dean cringed. “Yes, Frank.”

“Yes what?” Robbie wanted to know.

“Son of a bitch.” Frank shook his head in disgust, “I was hoping . . .”

“Frank.” Dean warned.

“Hoping what?” Robbie continued, “What’s going on? What’s the secret.”

“Exactly.” Frank interjected. “A secret. We don’t want you to know.”

“Know what?” Robbie questioned.

“That El has a drug problem.”

“Frank!” Dean yelled. “Goddamn it!”

“What?” Frank lifted his hands. “It slipped.”

Robbie laughed. “O.K., if you guys don’t want to tell me, Don’t.” His smile fell fast when he saw the expression of Frank and Dean’s face. “You guys are joking right?” he looked at them again. “Oh, my God, you’re not.” In disbelief Robbie shook his head. “El, does not have a drug problem. What’s wrong with you two for even considering that.”

Dean held up an explaining hand. “Robbie. No one knows about this.

No one. Just me, Frank and the undisclosed source who confirmed it.”

“Dean. You’re wrong.” Robbie said calmly. “I know El.”

“And we don’t?” Dean snapped. “We thought at first it was just a crutch. Now we know it’s an addiction to Anthium.”

“Anthium!” Robbie had to laugh. “El isn’t taking that. I’m telling you.”

Dean tried to remain reasonable. “Her behavior has shown . . .”

“Her behavior is fine.” Robbie cut him off. “She’s been fine with me.”

Frank decided to interjected. “That’s because she babies you. She’s not gonna act different in front of you. You don’t have an arm.”

“Frank!” Dean barked. “Quit that!”

“It’s true. “Frank defended. “He has enough on his mind, the last thing she’s gonna do is worry or talk to him about it.”

Dean’s head bobbed from side to side. “In your demented way you have a point.” He looked to Robbie who just smirked in disbelief. “I know you don’t want to believe this. We didn’t either. But her actions. Demeanor. Weight loss. Bruises.”

Robbie quickly looked up. “Bruises?”

“She’s hiding them.” Frank explained.

A short breath of irritation escape Robbie. “Did either of you two eliminate the fact that maybe someone is doing something to her?”

Frank tossed up his hands. “Who? You tell me who?”

“A survivor maybe.” Robbie said. “You know how she is with them. If she thinks someone at containment can be helped she’s not gonna say anything to you two.”

“But . . .” Dean interrupted. “A survivor? If a survivor is hitting her, would it cause her behavior to go so haywire. Robbie, she’s been taking them. Some days only one., Some days up to four. We’ve been keeping track.”

Robbie’s mouth opened in shock. “Checking up on her? That is so wrong. Really wrong.” After one more look at Dean and Frank, Robbie started to walk off. “She deserves better than this from you guys.”

“Robbie.” Frank called to him. “No one knows. We trying to figure out how to help her. That’s all.” Frank breathed out when Robbie kept walking. “Where are you going?”

Robbie spoke as he walked backwards. “I’m going to get to the bottom of this. And wait until I get my arm back, Frank. I’m kicking your ass for even thinking this shit.” He spun and walked off.

“Way to go, Dean.” Frank shook his head.

“Me? You started this.”

“Did I?” Frank looked out in thought. “Yeah, I did.”

Dean grunted.

“Dean. Seriously. Are we wrong? I mean, I’m thinking we are.”

“I don’t know, Frank.” Dean lifted his shoulders. “If she isn’t taking the drug, yeah. But if she is, and we ignore it and let it go, we’re wrong there too. So what do we do? You tell me.”

Frank didn't know what to tell Dean. His eyes only lifted and watched as Robbie faded from view. And at that moment, as if he were a soldier going off to battle, Frank put a lot of hope in Robbie that perhaps he could be the one that finally ends the war.

^^^

Warren Baydy didn't know how to take the three arms laying on the counter in the communications room where they were meeting. Nor was he accustomed to anyone as upbeat as Danny Hoi. Frightening Danny was to him the way he lifted the arms and rattled on.

"And this one . . ." Danny pointed to the last one. "This is the one that Dean and Ellen are going to cover with real flesh, attach a circulatory system and all. You know . . ." Danny winked. "So it doesn't rot. Nerves and all, this is going to be really cool when I'm done." With a sigh, Danny shook his head. "Too bad the world ended, I'd be rich. The amputees of the world would worship me."

Joe stared as he stood forefront before Warren, Hal and Elliott. "Are you done, Danny?"

"With the arm? No." Danny said. "My speech. Sure."

"Thank you." Joe returned to his meeting. "Warren says his town and equipment can be packed up for the move by mid January. That's a winter move . . ." Joe lifted his shoulder in a shrug. "But they think they can manage it. We'll scout out bigger trucks for that when we do the Christmas runs."

Danny interjected. "Speaking of which. I'd like to post a memo to anyone with a knack for crafts to stop by plastics, fabrics and metals to check on the scraps. Perhaps they can open temporary shops for the season. People are wanting to Christmas shop this year."

In agreement, Joe nodded. "Post the memo and pass the word. Good idea. Put the scraps to use. Now, Mr. Bay . . . Warren tells me those men in his town who are fit enough would gladly train for our army. The rest of his people we'll incorporate in the division where hands will be needed because of the extra population. Danny I need you to speak to Hector. He's pushing his limits heading up farming Division between us and New Bowman, tell him he's going to have to take on a right hand man especially with the new town joining us." Joe received an agreement from Danny then noticed the slight raise in Hal's hand. "Yes, Hal?"

"Back to the training of men. Dad, do you speak to Frank? I really would like him aboard. He was the best at it in the old world."

Elliott answered. "I did, Captain. He has no problem coming into town and picking up the combat and weaponry training."

Hal nodded. "And, what else?"

"Excuse me?" Elliott asked.

"What else. I know my brother. What snide remark did he add."

"Frank stated he was honored and . . ."

"Elliott." Hal abruptly stopped him.

"Fine." Elliott gave up. "He said he knew your pansy ass would fold under the pressure of training for a real war."

Finger extended, Hal calmly nodded and looked at his father. "Did I tell you I was considering Owens as my new first officer?"

Joe smiled impressed. "Good choice. Now . . . before we move out of here, Danny has something he wants to bring up."

"Thanks, Joe." Danny swivelled in his chair and motioned out his hand. "Hence why we're meeting here. Communications. I come in three, four times a day, work on the arm, fire her up, watch activity and make sure we're still running even though phones are down. Joe, we need phones back up. Especially with the move coming. I know . . . I know . . . not until the murder investigation is over and the other thing. But . . . I say. We send me or Henry down to Texas, established lines of communications, direct line to your or Hal. They need it open because of this . . ." Danny reached up and turned on switches. The board was dark except for Beginnings and New Bowman and two simple dots of light there. "I have it filtered right now because, if I don't . . ." Another sequence of switches and the board not only lit up on the whole entire eastern half but alarms went off as well. After Danny silenced them, he stood up.

"Holy Christ." Joe looked at the signals that indicated the communication going back and forth for the society. "They grew."

"Not only did they grow . . ." Danny pointed to the line of five significant lights straight down the center of the United States. "But they are getting awfully close. This is a travel route for our new town. Without ongoing communications and monitoring . . ." Seriously, Danny looked to the group. "You can almost say we are sending them blind, straight through a possible mine trap."

Danny didn't need to say anymore. The visual aspect of the reality was enough.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Everyone seemed fine. Medicated and secured under the watch of one of Frank's men. It was time for Ellen to head back to the clinic, something that grew more and more bothersome to her as each day passed.

After stacking her folders neatly in her desk in case Joe stopped by for a surprise style inspection, she grabbed her keys and stopped. A smile crossed her face when she saw Robbie standing in the doorway of her office. Even the forming of his name caused her mouth to replicate a smile. But it was never fake. Robbie seemed to be the only one that could produce a genuine, 'feel good' smile from Ellen. "Robbie."

"Hey, El. Leaving?" Robbie seemed nervous as he walked in the office.

"Yeah. Have to head to clinic. How's the first day back at work.?"

"Good. I . . ."

"You shouldn't be back." Ellen waved a pointing finger. "But you Slagels. Hal took his cast off, blamed it on Elliott, I knew better." She winked. "What's up?"

"I need to talk to you." Robbie said serious.

"Uh-oh. Are you sick. Something wrong?"

"No and yeah. I'm not sick. Something's wrong." After a moment's hesitation that included a deep breath and a glance to the ceiling to capture some nerve, Robbie looked at Ellen. "Frank . . . Frank and Dean, they're saying you're addicted to Anthium."

It graveled in her disgust. "Fuck."

"El?"

"Fuck!" Ellen yelled. "Great. Just great. You too?"

"El, I wasn't . . ."

"You know what?" She spun hard to Robbie. "You, Robbie. You of all people were the last person I expected to buy it. The last one!" she stormed to the door.

"El, I wasn't . . ."

"You know what!" She stopped at the door. "Here." She threw her keys and they landed hard on the desk. "Take the keys to the meds. Join the party. Count them like everyone else behind my back!" without saying anymore, Ellen raged out.

Robbie took a step and stopped. "Great." He reached down and grabbed the keys placing them in his pocket. "I guess I took the wrong approach."

Ellen's anger blasted her out of containment, across the street and into the clinic. It wasn't subsiding, nor did she think it would when she walked

into the lab and saw Johnny. "Where's Dean?" She asked as she grabbed a lab jacket from the coat tree.

"Who cares." Johnny answered staring at a computer.

Walking by Johnny, Ellen slowed down with a whispering, 'fuck you.' and moved to her computer terminal.

"Someone is a little upset. Not get your fix, El?"

Before Ellen could respond something else caught her attention. Taped to her computer was a note. With a grunt she lifted it off. It was from Dean. *El, not to harp. But watch your typos. I found three errors.* "Swell." Ellen crumbled the note. "Check every aspect of my life you asshole." She tossed the note then looked up, as Johnny laughed in his walk to the back room.

"Watch them errors, El." He said, then disappeared.

"That's it." With the brunt of her emotions leading the way, Ellen followed Johnny toward the back room, but nearly skid to a stop when her eyes caught glimpse of it sitting on the counter. Dean's pocket tape recorder. Lifting it in her stride, she pressed record and stormed into the back room. "Did you do it?" She asked as she shut the door.

"Do what?" Johnny looked for something on the shelf.

Wanting to make sure every bit of his voice was picked up, she stepped close to him. "Did you change what I put into the computer?"

"What do you think. Of course I did." Johnny said snide. "Goes with that drug abuse problem you have, El."

"You know . . ." Ellen crept to him. "Do not think for one second I'm not spilling my guts. I have had it with you."

"And I . . ." With a quick jab in, Johnny grasped a handful of Ellen's hair, and yanked her to him, "I'm sick of your threats." He whispered. "Tell. Take your chance. You think you'll hurt me. Watch out who you end up hurting." Letting go of her hair and pulling back, Johnny only saw Ellen open her mouth to say something, and with the back of his hand he fired a hard shot to the side of her head that send her flying into the wall. He glared once at her, grabbed what he wanted off the shelf and walked out.

Against that wall, Ellen closed her eyes in the pain that radiated through her head and back. It only took a moment for it to subside into another fit of rage for her. Tired of it, and with the thought that it was going to end, Ellen barged from that storage closet. Eyes glued to Johnny who had returned to the computer, Ellen, in a strong storm across that lab, swiped out her hand to Dean's desk, lifted the scissor from the holder, raised her arm high in the air and lunged.

"No!" Dean leaped forward snatching her wrist mere inches before the point of the scissors penetrated an unsuspecting Johnny's back. "Ellen!"

Johnny spun around on the stool and shrieked.

Ellen locked a stare on Dean.

"Let them go." Dean gripped tighter to her wrist. "Let . . . Go."

Ellen dropped the scissors.

"What the hell is the matter with you!" Dean asked out of control. "What were you thinking?"

"I was killing him." Ellen stated calm.

Dean blinked. "You were killing him?" He asked in a mocking calm just before he lost it again. "You were killing him! Wh . . . wh . . ." Stopping himself, Dean held up a hand and brought his rational voice back. "Why?"

"Because he . . ."

"I tried to talk to her about her drug problem, Dean." Johnny interjected emotional, adding that hint of sadness. "I tried to help her."

"Fuck off!" Ellen screamed at him. "Dean. Listen to me. I know you trust me . . ."

"Is that why, El?" Dean asked. "Did you go after him because he asked you about the drug?"

Ellen's eyes widened and then she felt it. It started in her gut, wrenched around a few times, rose into her chest, tightened her entire body, and all she could do in the outrage she felt . . . was scream.

Long, loud, and shrill. One Scream.

Taken aback would have been considered an understatement for Dean. Shocked his eyes followed her as she moved toward the door, took off her lab coat and hung it on the rack.

"Dr. Dean?" Johnny asked sounding frightened. "Is she all right?"

At the door Ellen laughed. It seemed out of control and then with shake of her head in disbelief, she stopped the laughing, looked at Dean and blasted her loudest. "I hate you! With every ounce of everything I am, I hate you at this moment." She turned, stepped, stopped and looked back, reiterating her words louder if even possible. "I hate you!"

Exhaling an 'ah' as she walked down the hall, Ellen couldn't help but think how good it felt to just explode. But she still was upset as she left the clinic and stepping outside didn't ease that.

Like a wall they seemed to be headed directly her way. Frank, Robbie, Hal and Elliott. She knew Hal or Elliott wouldn't say anything to her, but she wasn't in the mood to hear it from Frank or Robbie.

Directly, eyes straight on him, Ellen walked to Elliott. "Elliott."

It felt odd to Elliott, almost if she was purposely singling him out. "Yes?"

"About that little proposition you made earlier. You know what?" Ellen said. "I think I might just leave my husband move to New Bowman and live with you. Thank you." Arms folded Ellen walked off.

"Well." Hal smiled, "Congratulations, Elliott. Shall I start planning the wedding?"

Elliott was shocked. "Captain, I . . ." He couldn't speak any further, the glaring, big brown eyes of Frank's were close and in his face.

"Hey, Elliott." Robbie spoke up. "Can I have the understanding?"

Hal shrugged. "I think sounds fair. Elliott?"

"I . . ." He shifted his views again. "What! What, Frank what!"

"Ah, no." Frank shook his finger. "Don't even be yelling at me. What the fuck are you up to? Did you ask Ellen to leave Dean?"

Elliott lifted a hand. "Frank, let me explain."

"I did." Hal interjected. "I asked Ellen to leave Dean."

"You too?" Frank asked shocked. "What the fuck, Hal. I thought the affair was over."

"Asshole." Hal snapped. "I asked Ellen to leave Dean for Elliott."

"Really?" Frank asked in disbelief.

"Really." Hal answered smug. "She needs to get out of Beginnings for a while. So I made the suggestion. I'm guilty. What are you going to do."

Frank looked at the clinic and started walking that way. "I'm telling, Dean. Let his little ass deal with you fucked up people."

^^^

Alexandra's little arms felt so good around Ellen's neck. She was glad she stopped by the school in her 'cool down' walk. Magic her daughter's arms were. Pure magic. How for the moment they took everything away for Ellen and reiterated to her that there were still bright spots in her life. Her children.

For as much that had happened, ate away at Ellen, isolated her from more and more people, one thing remained certain. She had her kids, and their love didn't hinder on whether they thought she took a drug. They believed and trusted her. They were unconditionally hers. And no matter how alone she felt at times, all she had to do was seek them out. And she did. Every single one of the kids. From oldest to youngest. With the ground beneath her sanity shaking so badly, Ellen needed a fix of stability.

^^^

There was silence following Dean's rendition of what had happened as he, Frank, Hal, Robbie and Elliott stood in the clinic lab.

Frank's eyes transfixed upon the scissors in his hand. "She tried to kill him? Shut up Hal, this isn't funny."

"Sorry, Frank." Hal held up his hand. "She would have only injured him."

"And that makes it right?" Frank asked hard. "No. She went after my son. . . ."

"She went after your son because he started this whole thing." Hal interrupted.

"He was only trying to help her." Frank defended.

"Johnny is a troublemaker." Hal stated firm and matter of fact. "Elliott, let's go."

"Hal." Frank stood up. "What is your problem with my kid?"



Innocently, Hal shrugged. "I don't have a problem with Johnny. Appears Ellen does. Look at that." He gave a motion of his head to the door.

Dean gave his try. "Hal. I was here. Johnny said he only mentioned the drug problem. Ellen freaked, Hal. She freaked on him. On me. It was frightening."

"I would freak too, Dean, if the people I loved accused me of something I wasn't doing." Hal spoke calm.

Dean bit his bottom lip. "I am a doctor . . ."

"You . . ." Hal pointed. "Are her husband first and foremost. Remember that."

"And I can't show concern?" Dean asked. "We have to help her. This can kill her."

Hal breathed out, "Oh yes it can. Help her then."

"We're trying." Dean tossed up his hands. "We can't get her off the drug if everyone refuses to believe she's taking it. That's not helping Ellen. The evidence is undeniable."

"Dr. Hayes." Hal stared at him. "Yes, the evidence is undeniable. It is staring you in the face. And you're missing it." His voice dropped. "You're missing it." Saying no more, Hal walked out.

Frank shook his head yelling out to a leaving Hal. "How are we missing it Hal! We're sitting here talking about it." He flung out his hand in aggravation and watched Robbie walk to the door. "Where you going?"

"Hal's right." Robbie said. "We're missing it. There's something going on Ellen isn't wanting to tell, isn't wanting to let out. I know you guys love her. And I know you're concerned . . ." Robbie paused. "Frank, when you were drinking. We came down on you. You got defensive, man. A lot of shit was happening in your life. But only you could stop that addiction. Buy facing that and the things that caused it. You two are taking the wrong route. If, if by some obscure chance Ellen is taking Anthium, don't you think you can help her a lot more by finding out what it was that made her start taking it in the first place?" With that, Robbie walked out.

In a ringing silence Frank stared at the empty doorway. His hand raised to his eyes and then slowly he trailed his fingers over his face.

Dean knew it. He knew by the look on his face something was up, and something strong was going through Frank's mind. His voice cracked as he softly spoke. "Frank."

A shift of his views and Frank locked a stare on the concern eyes of Dean. Raising shoulders with the deep inhale he took, Frank walked to the lab door, closed it and locked it. "We have to talk."

^^^

It took a while for Ellen to locate Henry, she needed to find him. Not that she minded the walk around Beginnings, but it was taking too long. So

she sought out Hector and he brought her to the generator building where Henry was working. "Isolation." Was the best word Ellen could use to describe what she was feeling without coming straight out. "I suppose, people feel isolated. Alone. I mean, the world ended right?"

From Henry to Ellen, Hector folded his arms and nodded. "Yes. Ellen. For ten minutes you've gone on about anything and everything. Is something wrong?"

"Well . . . yes and no. Not your concern. Why I am here is." She stared at the pair for a second. "See, I love my kids. I loved the children I lost to the plague. My heart broke. But . . . I was fortunate, see? I was given a chance at it all over again. Nothing or no one can replace Josh or Taylor. As I am sure you can relate, Hector."

Raised eyebrows, closed mouth, Hector sadly tilted his head in agreement to the side.

"O.K." Ellen continued. "I had rough day. Well, morning, what a doozy. I hate to think how the rest of it is gonna go. My point. Pissed off I just needed something to take it all away. I went to the school and hugged my kids. Hector, tell me why."

Henry shifted his eyes. "Why can't I answer?"

"I want Hector to." Ellen replied. "Hector know what I'm talking about. Why, Hector?"

"They love you." Hector stated. "No matter what . . . they love you."

With closed eyes, Ellen agreed. "You see it in their face in the morning, when they bring a good paper home from school . . ."

"When they it their first baseball." Hector stared out. "They just look to you and you know."

"Excuse me." Henry waved his hand about. "What's going on?"

Ellen looked at Henry. "A lot os going in your life, Henry. A lot of changes. Mine too. No one knows, but there are changes in my life. But there are things, no matter how much my life changes, things stay constant. My kids. You asked me the other day for Nick. You said I can see him anytime, but you wanted that responsibility of raising him and having him live with you."

Suddenly Hector looked to Henry. "You did that? That's . . . that's really a big step Henry."

Ellen spoke up, "Do you recall the one reason that you wanted him the most, Henry?"

"He's all I have." Henry answered. "He could be the only thing no one would take from me. If . . . if I don't get off my ass."

"I want to spend time with Nick, Henry." Ellen said. "I want him to see his brothers and sisters. I don't want you to think, if there's a problem with him, you can't come to me day or night."

"Are you saying . . ."

"I'm saying . . ." Ellen paused. "I was willing to let Frank raise Brian."

This is Beginnings, how far from my son will I be? You can raise Nick.”

The grin on Henry’s face matched the surprised one on Hector’s. “El.” Henry glowed. “Thank you. When . . . when . . .”

“Today.” Ellen said. “I told Hap you or Hector would be by to get him. But, Henry, day care closes at four. You will have to make arrangements to get him by then, or else let me know. All right?”

“El.” Henry laid his hands on her arms. “I’ll do this right. I promise I won’t try to return him. I’ll do this.”

“I know you will.” Ellen looked at Hector. “And Hector as long as you and Henry are good friends, I’m expecting you to be the logical one.”

“Ellen.” Hector leaned in and kissed her on the cheek. “As much as Henry lets me, I will help.”

“I’m counting on that.” Ellen let out a breath and looked at her watch. “I should go. I want to finish my cool down walk before returning to the clinic. I’ll see you guys.” She moved to the door.

“El?” Henry stepped to her. “Cool down walk? I know we aren’t on the best of terms, but is everything all right?”

“No.” Ellen shook her head. “My life feels like it’s falling apart. However I’m the only one who can keep it together. And . . . other than coming an inch of stabbing Johnny in the back of the neck with scissors, my day has been hell. See ya.” She flashed a smile and walked out.

Hector slowly looked to Henry. “Stabbing Johnny?”

“That’s what she said.”

“Was it me, or did she imply that almost stabbing him was a bright spot in her day.”

Henry thought about it. “Nah. She jumbled her words. That’s all.” He started to return to work and stopped. “Why would she stab Johnny?”

^^^

The nice thing about the generator building area was it was close enough from town to walk to, and far enough away to be deemed peaceful. A big circle around was what Ellen needed to walk. She planned it in her head. She would head through the small wooded area that encircled the generator area to the main road then go back, reluctantly to the clinic. Barely did she emerge and she froze. Leaning against a jeep was Johnny at the tail end of those woods.

He shook his head and walked into the trees toward her. “There you are. Dean sent me out for you.”

“Dean’s an asshole.” Ellen said. “Excuse me.” She tried to get passed him.

“What are you doing out here, El? I hope you aren’t aimlessly wandering in one of your blackouts.”

Her foot kicked up some leaves in her sudden stop. She looked over her

shoulder with a smug and scoffing look to Johnny. "Blackouts are one thing you can't get me to do."

It took only two steps to trot up to Ellen. "You don't think?" Johnny whispered.

Edge of the woods not even six feet from her sight and Ellen made the mistake of stopping in revelation of what Johnny said.

^^^

Dean knew it was in vain, but still, after a hesitating press to the button, he brought his radio to his mouth. "Frank."

Too slow. The radio almost flew from Dean's hand when Frank's blasting mouth came through. "What! What the fuck Dean!"

"I still can't . . ."

"Dean." Frank stopped him. "Listen to me. One more time. She's in Beginnings. Go home."

"I did. She's not there."

"I'm not gonna stop working to go find our wife."

Oddly, Dean looked at the radio. "My wife."

"You think?"

"Frank, look . . ."

"Dean. Over and out. Do you know what that means?"

"Yes." Dean answered.

"Over and out."

Dean looked at the radio. "Frank?" He called in to it. "Frank?" he released the button and waited. Nothing. Three hours it had been since Ellen stormed from the lab. He hadn't seen or heard from her. And despite what he and Frank decided about being the ones to help Ellen, there was a higher source that could get through to her, and Dean left the lab to find him.

^^^

If Johnny Slagel was to give himself credit for anything, it was for being the perfect student. Everything Dean taught him he took in. He may not have ever applied the knowledge, but he had it. One of the first things Dean taught him were the chemistries. The cause and effects of a lot of medications.

Everything known about the drug Drexocel was supposedly in theory. The correct amount given to a hyperactive child would cause the proper effect. The same dose given to someone without a chemical imbalance could cause brain damage. And a little more than the average dose would cause Richie Martin.

Johnny didn't want that. It would draw too much attention and everything would be blown. But Richie had one effect of Drexocel Johnny

needed. Memory loss. For the first two weeks following Richie's injection, he didn't know who he was, where he was or even that there was a plague. Though that knowledge came back to him, the two weeks he ran amuck confused were still gone from Richie.

That was what Johnny sought. Not two weeks, that would be too long. A day or two of confusion to stir things up would work just fine. Plus work in his favor. He wasn't certain if his theorization would hold true but it was worth a shot. He calculated, kept his fingers crossed, and initiated a test of that theory. It wouldn't be long before time would give him the results. To be the results he wanted, Johnny had to wait and hope.

^^^

Before he could say another word, Frank cut him off. "Robbie. Enough."

"But, three hours Frank?" Robbie asked with concern.

Frank let out a huff. "I told you our people are watching out for her. I'm betting she's hiding. You heard Henry, he said she wanted to walk around for a while. She probably got lost. How many times has she done that before?"

Robbie tilted his head. "True. But I . . ."

"Robbie." Frank reached out and placed the revolver in Robbie's hand. "Dean and I will take care of it."

"But I know how you intend on doing that."

"Not anymore. We listened to what you said. We're . . . we're gonna handle it." He lifted Robbie's arm. "And we aren't gonna come down on her again about that drug unless she does something really drastic or dangerous. So relax about it. Deal?"

Half in agreement, Robbie nodded. "Deal."

"All right. Let's practice shooting." Frank clapped and stepped back. "Aim."

Robbie took a deep breath and focused on the target so far away. "I'm a little nervous."

"Please. You've shot left handed a million times. Just give it a try. You miss. You miss. I guarantee you won't miss for long. You're too good. Go on."

Through his nostrils Robbie inhaled. He felt the odd grip on the revolver and tried his best to hold a steady aim. Chamber previously shifted, Robbie, with a 'what the hell' thought, fired.

The panicked scream startled both Frank and Robbie.

Robbie spun to Frank. "That sounded like . . ."

"Ellen." Frank took off toward the target.

^^^

Ten Days. Joe had to wonder where in the instructions, 'Must be turned in to me in ten days' people got confused. Nearly half he had to chase down. But since they were anonymous, Joe had to keep posting memos for everyone to turn in the secret punishment ballot.

Frank was the worst at protecting anonymity. How many did he turn in for others, every single time saying, 'this one isn't Dan's, just so you know. Or this one isn't Steve's.' Who did he think he was kidding. To Joe, the best was when he turned in his own. Laying the wrinkled ballot on Joe's desk stating, 'this isn't mine' while blasting in Frank's unmistakable handwriting, big and bold were the words, 'this sucks.'

But the ballots were stacked up and Joe kept looking at that stack on his desk. He was as guilty as everyone one else. He had those ballots for three days, yet he had failed to take them to New Bowman to have them counted by Grace and the residents at the House of Lesbians.

A part of Joe felt it a waste since the investigation had hit a stalemate. There were no more questions left to ask, no one left to ask them to. He dreaded even attempting a group suspect meeting for fear of rounding them all up for the insider again.

Deep in thought on what to do, Joe peered up from his desk when Dean walked in.

"Joe. I need to talk to you." Concerned Dean approached the desk. "May I?"

"Sure." Joe pointed to a chair. "Sit down."

Dean did. "Joe . . . this is about Ellen. I'm worried about her. I wasn't gonna come to you, but I have no choice. This little disappearance is the final straw. Three hours. I can't find her."

"So I've heard."

Dean blinked. "Why don't you sound concerned?"

"She's hiding from you Dean. Avoiding you. Christ, if you were nagging and calling my name over the goddamn radio every five minutes I would avoid you too."

"No. Joe." Dean shook his head. "See, Frank and I think she is taking . . ."

"Anthium." Joe completed the sentence. "I know what you think. I was there when Johnny made his little announcement as well."

"And?"

"And what do you want me to tell you? She is, she isn't. All I can tell you is what she told me when I asked her. She said 'no' . . ." Joe lifted his hands. "I won't ask her again."

"Why isn't everyone more concerned about this. The drug will, not may, it will kill her at the rate she is taking it. I'm close to locking her up somewhere and forcing her into detox."

"And what makes you so sure she's taking it?" Joe questioned.

"Her behavior for one. The blood test she took."

"You made your wife take a blood test?" Joe asked in disbelief.

"She volunteered. The results came up positive."

"A-ha. And um, how long does Anthium stay in your blood stream. Roundabout figure."

Confused, Dean looked at Joe. "Why?"

"How long?"

"Could remain in the blood stream for up to a month."

"What exactly did you test for. Amount or traces?"

"Um . . . I . . . traces. Where are you going with this."

"After the explosion, Ellen was upset. Did you or did you not give her Anthium to help her sleep?"

"But Joe . . ."

"Did you . . . or did you not."

"Screw it." Dean stood up. "I did. All right. I'm the cause of this all. No one is taking this serious and I'll tell you Joe, one more episode from her, for her own good, I'm taking control. Whether you, Hal, Robbie, or Ellen like it. I'm her husband, I don't want to see her end up dead."

"I think you're over reacting." Joe said.

The insertion of Frank's voice into the conversation was a surprise. "Think again, Dad." Frank stood in the open office door. "We have a problem."

^^^^

Three miles outside of Beginnings on his way back home was as far as Hal made it when he received Robbie's radio call about Ellen. It was vague, but it was enough to warrant Hal turning immediately around.

"That's it, Elliott. I've had enough." Hal stated strong in his walk to his father's house.

"What are you going to do?" Elliott asked.

"What I should have done a long time ago. I'm going to come right out and ask her."

"About Johnny?"

Hal paused and looked to Joe's house. "Yeah. I have to let her know she's not alone. Maybe if I ask her, question her, she'll feel safe enough to just let it out."

"You know what?" Elliott said. "I have to agree."

"Now lets just hope we're right about her knowing about him. Because if we aren't . . ." Hal started walking again. "We'll look like fools."

"Not to mention the bad guys for coming down on your nephew."

Hands tight to the side of her head, sitting in Joe's livingroom chair, Ellen rocked back and forth. "I don't know. I just don't know."

Frank leaned down to her in intimidation. "What do you mean you

don't know, El? You ended up on the firing range."

"I don't know." She shook her head.

"Frank." Robbie stopped him. "Just let her go. This isn't helping her."

Dean huffed out. "Letting her go isn't helping her. El . . . El . . . El" He called her name she wouldn't look up. Stronger he spoke. "Ellen. Do you even know what is happening right now?"

"I just . . . I just . . . ." She sighed out when the door opened. "Hal."

"Ellen." Hal hurried in. "Are you all right?"

"No." She shook her head. "I don't . . . help me, Hal."

Hal hunched down to her level. His eyes raised to Frank and Dean who stood above her. "What happened."

Frank explained with irritation. "She was out on the firing range. She doesn't remember how she got there. She doesn't even remember the shot that woke her up."

Robbie interjected. "She probably does Frank. You and Dean screaming at her is just confusing her."

"The drug is confusing her." Dean barked. "Wake up about it."

"Fuck you, Dean." Robbie snapped back. "You wake up about it. Is this normal?" He pointed to Ellen.

"For someone on high doses of Anthium, yes." Dean nodded.

"What do you know." Robbie shook his head and turned away.

"Robbie." Frank called to him. "Ask her."

"No." Robbie replied. "I won't play these games."

"They aren't games. Fine, I will. El." Frank spoke to Ellen. "El. Ellen!"

Hal glared up. "Knock it off Frank."

"I will not! You and Robbie knock it off. She doesn't remember getting there. She doesn't remember anything about today. Ask her. Ellen, where do you go after you attacked Johnny."

Ellen's mouth puckered up. "I don't know."

Elliott, who stood in the back closed his eyes. He saw it on Hal's face. Hal's intention to get the truth out of Ellen, to talk to her would be in vain, and would go no where right then.

Frank tried again, only stronger. "Do you remember attacking Johnny."

Hal stood up. "Frank. Let her alone."

"Do you, El?" Frank repeated.

"Frank." Hal blasted.

"No!" Ellen covered her eyes.

Dean tossed his hands up. "That's it, Joe. I want her put in the clinic. Remove her from all duty until we get to the bottom of this."

Hal spun to Dean. "You will do know such thing."

"I'm her husband!"

"Who happens to be a moron!"

Frank stepped to Hal. "You think this high and mighty fuckin concern and chivalry shit is the thing to do? Coming down on Dean? She doesn't



remember anything Hal!”

Robbie bit his bottom lip when he saw what the hysterics of the room were doing to Ellen. He lowered down to her side and grabbed her hand. . “Dad. Stop this.” His eyes raised to Joe.

Joe did. One piercing whistle from him brought silence to the room. “Thank you.” He spoke in the silence. “Ellen.” He held his hand to her. “Let’s go.”

Dean’s shoulders dropped in relief. “Thank you Joe.”

Hal stepped forward. “Dad? What the hell?”

Frank pulled Hal Away. “Back off Hal.”

Confused, Robbie glanced to Joe. “Dad?”

Joe only tilted his head. “Boys. Enough. Ellen. Let’s go.”

Ellen lifted her head. “Where?”

“I’m hungry. I have to drop those ballots off at the house of Lesbians. I thought, maybe you’d like to join your father for dinner and a movie in New Bowman. What do you say?”

Her fingers gripped Joe’s so tight as Ellen let out a single sob and stood up.

Joe pulled handkerchief from his pocket. “Wipe your face.” He walked with her to the door. “Hal, can we catch a ride?”

Hal grinned. “With pleasure.” he took a step to the door and stopped when he heard Frank’s mocking ‘with pleasure’. Hal only turned around and grinned.

Watching his father and Ellen leave, Frank knew flipping Hal off would make him feel a little bit better, but it wouldn’t erase the defeat and helplessness he felt at that moment.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A little into it, maybe, but Robbie couldn't be. His mind was elsewhere as his arm was before Danny Hoi. Trying his hardest to decipher the puzzle of Ellen's behavior.

"Pay attention." Danny looked up.

"I'm sorry, What?"

Danny shook his head. "I was giving you instructions. You aren't paying attention."

"Because, why are we doing this?" Robbie looked down to the arm Danny was attaching. "It doesn't look real."

"It's not supposed to look real. Just like an arm. And appearance isn't what I'm going for. Usage, Robbie. This arm was considered an animated prosthetic. I think you'll like it until we attach the permanent one."

"But I look like that bowler guy in that Bill Murray movie."

Danny grinned. "That was funny. All right . . ." He rolled back his chair. "The fingers are open, flexing the biceps should close the fingers. Try it."

Robbie tensed up his muscle and the fingers moved. "Oh, wow, cool."

"See." Danny grinned. "It's going to be a matter of aim and control." Danny looked around the mechanics office. "Um, here." He reached across the counter and grabbed a mug. "Try to lift this."

Robbie moved his arm. "It feels like fishing." He watched as the fingers of the prosthetic touch the cup.

"Aim." Danny instructed.

"Aiming," Robbie grinned.

"Now the control part. Flex and grab."

"Here goes." Robbie flexed, the mug slipped into the palm of the prosthesis and then it smashed.

"Well." Danny tilted his head. "We have to learn control. Leave it on or off."

"Um . . ." Robbie looked at it. "On. I'll practice. But I have to get a glove or something. You know what?" He stood up. "I think I'll show El when she gets back with my Dad."

"That's a good idea." Danny gathered up the tools. "Ellen's not been herself. I've heard some rumors that she has a problem with some sort of drug from containment."

"They aren't rue." Robbie stated. "Something else is on her mind. I just have to figure it out. And I will." Robbie walked over to the door. "Thanks again, Danny." Stepping out Robbie began his thought process. His answers laid in Ellen and that was where he had to begin. But since he couldn't go to her, he decided to go to her world instead.

^^^

"Don't worry about it." Hal calmly told Elliott and John Matoose.

Elliott, with some confusion, had to question. "Don't worry about it?"

"That is what Ellen said." Hal tossed up his hands. "She said don't worry about."

John watched Hal pace about the livingroom. "What exactly did you say to her?"

"I merely told her. I understand. I know she has a problem with Johnny and whatever it is, I would believe her. Trust her. And help her."

"And?" Elliott asked.

"And what? That's it." Hal stated. "Then she said her not to worry line."

John Matoose grumbled. "You didn't come right out and say Johnny was an insider?"

"Um, Captain." Elliott pacified. "That probably would have got her to open up."

"Good God, Gentlemen. This is why I handled it." Hal looked at their scoffing faces. "Oh." He nodded. "So you think I should have come right out and said something. Right now I am about to explain to you, especially you, Elliott, why I run the UWA and you are only third fiddle."

John quickly looked at Elliott. "I thought you were second."

"That's only when the Captain is in his latent stages of pre-menstrual syndrom."

"Ha-ha-ha. 'Mr. Fetch me a maxi-pad.'" Hal quipped.

Amusing, John found the name Hal gave Elliott, but unclear why, he had to know. "Mr. Fetch me a max-pad?"

Elliott interceded before Hal could say anything. "Finish what you were saying, Captain. Why didn't you tell Ellen about . . ."

"A-A-Ah." Hal held up a finger, shook his head, then turned with a ornery grin to John. "You see, Mr. Matoose. Since joining us, it seems our fine women residents at the House of Lesbians, knew to place their dire trust in Sgt. Ryder. So instead of the 'Minstrel Man', Sgt. Ryder became the heroic 'Menstrual Man'. Always, without fail, delivering unto them the protection they desperately sought." Hal winked. "Pretty good, huh?"

John chuckled. "He's kidding."

Elliott shook his head. "I did not ask for the honor. It seems the Captain is forgetting he bestowed that upon me and I got stuck from there on in."

"Ah." Hal exhaled. "Menstrual man. Anyhow . . . back to what I was saying. You two wanted me to blurt out he is an insider. To me, that would have been traumatic considering the fact that my dear sister vaguely remembers a *dispute* with Johnny. That wasn't as bad as the fact that she didn't recall being married to Dean. Today must have thrown her through a loop. Because I'll tell you, speaking to her, or rather trying to, was like dealing

with . . .” Hal stopped cold.

Elliott waited. “Captain? Dealing with what?”

Hal grinned. “Richie. That’s it.”

“What’s it?” Elliott asked.

“Richie.” Hal snapped his finger. “What happened to Richie. That could explain Ellen’s behavior.”

“You think he nailed her with something?” Elliott questioned.

“Most definitely. The calm Ellen running around Beginnings is not the woman everyone is accusing of drug abuse.”

“It couldn’t have been something as strong.” John suggested.

“No. Obviously.” Hal said. “I mean, she’s not twitching, rolling her chin or patting her head. Which wouldn’t bode well for you, Elliott, because that could possibly thwart any romantic intentions. This actually could work in our favor. Ellen is calm now, Johnny should leave her alone. And all we have to do is wait for her memory to come back and we ask her.”

“Then there’s the problem.” Elliott spoke up. “When will that be.”

“I doubt it will be long.” Hal said assuredly. “Until then . . .” He let out a breath. “You, Elliot, can take full advantage of the fact that she doesn’t know she’s married to Dean.” He moved to the kitchen. “I need a drink. Anyone?”

Almost apologetic, Elliott looked to John. “He doesn’t quite think and work like normal people.”

“No. He doesn’t. How could he . . .” John said. “He’s a Slagel.”

^^^

“We should be fuckin Mormons, You know that Dean?” Frank said with disgust as he stood at the livingroom door of Dean’s house.

“What are you talking about?” Dean asked. “I was asking . . .”

“For me to do the dirty work again. Man.” Frank reached into his back pocket, pulled out a notepad and wrote in it.

Dean watched Frank do that. “What was that?”

“Don’t think I’m not keeping track.”

“Of what?”

“All this shit you have me do. Do you realize you shuck your husband duties off on me, all the time and then get pissed because I’m the one getting laid.”

“Frank, I . . .”

“Probably because I’m better.” Frank sniffed.

“Do I need to hear this? No.” Dean said. “And I don’t shuck things off on you.”

“Do too. And you know it. I yell at her. Find her. Deal with her. Now I have to find out what the hell happened to Nick. Why can’t you do that?” Frank held up a fingers silencing Dean. “Because you fear Ellen did

something with him. Quit being so scared of our wife, Dean.”

“Why do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Call her our wife.”

“She is.” Frank stated.

“My wife, Frank. You only have the understanding.”

“But I do all the shit work. Then again, I am the one getting . . .”

“Don’t say it.”

“Laid.” Frank dropped his voice to a mumble. “Haven’t in a while, though. All right . . .” He reached for the door. “You heard of Dirty fuckin Harry., Meet Dirty Fuckin Frank.” He exhaled in his exit. “A hero’s work is never done.”

Shaking his head perturbed at Frank, Dean turned around to see Billy giving such a scolding look. “What?”

“He’s right, you know.” Billy said smug. “Next time Mom shuns any and all affection you try to give her. Ask yourself why.” He turned and walked away. “And you wonder why I keep erasing things off of Frank’s list.”

“Where . . . where . . . is this coming from . . . Billy!” Dean attempted to call out, but stopped himself. “O.K. it’s been a while. But how many could he have erased. He had a ton.” He walked over to the cabinet in the dining area. “Where is it.” He opened the one drawer. “Here. Reasons not to worship . . .” A small shriek came from Dean when he looked at the paper and saw that the list was completely erased.

^^^

“Hey, Frank.” Henry was surprised when he opened the door. “What’s up.”

Frank held up a finger, stepped inside, looked around, saw nothing, then yelled. “Nick!”

The rumbling of wheels accompanied the squeal of delight and out from the diningroom, arms waving fanatically, came Nick.

Frank nodded. “There he . . . Ow. . . Is.” He grunted when the walker rammed into his shin. He looked down to a smiling Nick who reached up for him. “Hey, you.” Frank bent down and picked him up. “Scared, huh? Poor thing.”

Hector, with a bottle came from the kitchen. “Hi Frank.”

Henry was curious. “What’s going on.”

“All right.” Frank said. “Remaining, calm here. I’m gonna try to explain something. You two may not know, because there isn’t a woman in this relationship, but . . . it’s really not a good idea to steal a child. If you ask, you can borrow him. But to take him. No. Understand?”

Henry chuckled. “Take him? I didn’t steal him, Frank. He lives here now.”

"No. He lives with Dean. You can't just take someone's kid."

"My kid." Henry corrected. "And I just didn't take him. Ellen gave him to me."

From explaining to confused, Frank looked. "Ellen gave him to you? As in, she walked up to you and said you can have Nick."

Hector bobbed his head. "Pretty much that's how it went down."

"She gave you Nick. Ellen did?"

"Yes." Henry answered.

"To be clear . . ." Frank lifted his hand. "Ellen gave you Nick . . . for good?"

"Um, yes, Frank." Henry replied.

Widening his eyes, Frank handed Nick to Henry. "O.K. then. That explains it. Sorry to bother you." He walked to the door. "Once more . . ."

"She gave him to me." Henry said.

"Ellen. My Ellen. Dean's Ellen. Whoever's Ellen, gave you . . ."

"Frank." Henry stopped him with a chuckle. "Yes. You should have gone to Dean first. He knows."

Thinking, "*oh, right, Dean knows, he sent me here.*" Frank smiled. "I should have done that. Night then." Keeping his projection of calm, Frank walked out the door, pulled it closed and stood on the porch totally baffled. "Ok." He spoke soft to himself. "She's giving away her children now."

^^^

So demented the cryo lab was. A virtual blanket of secrets down there. Things hidden from the community. And Robbie knew Ellen's radical behavior had something to do with the fact she was hiding something. But what? Was it literally being hid, or was it only in her.

Looking around at the deformed animals, growing skin, former life in jars of liquid, left Robbie to wonder was there possibly anything Dean and Ellen would *have* to hide. Everything was pretty much out in the open. Unless they made a mistake somewhere. But in order for a mistake of Dean's or Ellen's to be covered up, it would have had to be deadly enough to kill someone. And if they did that, that *would* explain Ellen's behavior. Hiding the fact. Not wanting to let it out. Wracked with guilt over her and Dean's diabolical experiment on some poor unsuspecting soul who ended up dying. Lifting his views, Robbie began to peer around the lab. He dismissed the accidental biological death because he couldn't think off hand of anyone in Beginnings who was missing. And there couldn't be a murder without a body. Robbie stopped cold, his eyes first caught glimpse of his reflection in the glass, and then he saw the room beyond it.

The room where Frank worked on Bev's murder investigation. And in viewing that room, Robbie realized not only was there a murder, but a body as well. The body of a woman both Dean and Ellen hated. A woman who

turned their lives upside down, and was still doing so, because every time they had to work in the cryo lab, a remembrance of Bev was right there. In a room beyond a glass wall. Robbie could see how living and working with that would cause tension. A constant reminder of what Bev did to their lives. But would that tension be enough to warrant Ellen's behavior? Robbie had to answer 'no'. Stepping toward that room to look, Robbie looked further into Ellen's actions. And he kept going back to one thing. She was hiding something. She knew something. It was tormenting her, Driving her insane. It was something she couldn't let out for fear of repercussion. In Robbie's mind there was only one repercussion that was big enough to fear. Having to leave Beginnings, or watching someone she loved leave Beginnings for good. Robbie knew only one action could cause the consequences of excommunication from Beginnings. Murder.

Was it guilt that caused Ellen's behavior, or knowledge?. Either or, Robbie had to know. Hoping he could see something Frank or his dad missed, Robbie went into the back room . To him if Ellen didn't kill Bev then she was tormented by the fact that she knew who did.

Same. Exactly the same. The statements Dean and Ellen both wrote out. In Robbie's mind it was the biggest clue of all in the Murder investigation. How did Frank and his father miss it? There was only one reason for the replica statements. One of them killed Bev, and the other one knew. But which one did what? The statements were all there were. He looked at his father's notes on Ellen's that a guard saw her that evening. Henry and Hector spoke with her. Robbie did too, but that was long before the murder time.

No one but Henry and Hector saw Dean until the next morning when he checked into the clinic at seven. So evident his finger pointing was going toward Ellen and that bothered. He didn't want it to be her. Tossing the statement in irritation Robbie lifted it back up with the spotting of his father's notation. It was wrong. Robbie remembered. No one seeing Dean until seven in the morning? That wasn't entirely true. Robbie did. He didn't think much of it at the time, but thinking back with a reflection of guilt toward Dean, it made perfect sense.

*"I'll check over this way."* Robbie recalled himself saying that morning.

*"Close to the fence! I'm not seeing any fuckin killer babies so check for holes!"* Frank yelled from the distance.

*In the wooded area, thin and shallow by what had been named the Killer baby region, Robbie began his search. The killer babies had been throwing things at the fence, and in Frank's theory they were creating a diversion. A diversion they didn't need when a couple hours earlier they had found Bev Hadly dead.*

*Hearing the 'snap', Robbie, lifted his revolver and spun to where the noise came from. "Dean?"*

*Dean stood up. "Robbie."*

*"What are doing here?"*

*"El and I lost our experimental rabbit." Dean shrugged. "Last time that happened, we found him up here."*

*"Well, he may very well be an early breakfast. We might have killer babies in this region."*

*"I'll go then. If you see him. Let me know." Dean dusted off his hands and walked away.*

He dusted off his hand. Robbie didn't think anything when it occurred. Dean was calm, cool, and it wasn't unusual for him or Ellen to have lost some sort of experiment. That very well could have been the true and legitimate reason for Dean's being in that area at six in the morning. Robbie could stand in the cryo lab and question all night, but there really was only one way to find out.

^^^

From peeking out of the window, Dean backed up. "She's out there with Joe, Frank. She'll be here in a second."

"Dean. Remember. Approach." Frank winked with a nod.

"Approach." He agreed. "Will it work?" He headed back to the window.

"It has to. Obviously if double teaming Ellen . . ." Frank smirked. "Hey, Dean."

Over his shoulder, Dean looked. "No."

Frank shrugged. "Sounded cool."

Returning his views to the window, Dean had to give a slight debating shrug of his own. "Here she comes."

"Approach."

"Approach." Dean repeated and darted to the diningroom table with Frank.

The second the front door opened, Frank and Dean burst into laughter as if something hysterically funny was shared between them.

Frank lifted his eyes. "Oh, look who's home. Hey El."

"Hey El." Dean smiled.

Ellen looked oddly at them both. "Everything all right?"

Frank stood up. "Oh, sure. Here . . ." He pulled out a chair. "Sit down. You want coffee?"

"Um . . . sure." Ellen reluctantly answered and sat at the table while Frank went into the kitchen.

Dean smiled at her.

Ellen returned the smile.

"How was your evening with Joe?" Dean asked.

"Very nice. I remembered being your wife." She gave a smiling look to



Frank when he set down her coffee.

"How about that, Dean." Frank joined them. "She remembered being your wife."

"As in . . . you forgot." Dean questioned.

"Yeah, but it was a temporary thing. You know." Ellen nodded.

"Oh, sure." Dean shifted his eyes to Frank, watched him mouth the word, 'approach', then returned to Ellen. "You seem better."

"I am. Good coffee." She took a sip. "What, uh, are you two doing hanging out?"

"Frank?" Dean looked at him. "Would you like to answer that?"

"Absolutely. See El . . ." Frank spoke up beat. "ME and Dean were hanging out. Telling dirty jokes, having some coffee and discussing the fact that you gave Nick to Henry to keep."

"I did?" Ellen asked with surprise.

"I fuckin knew it." Frank stood up. "They were lying to me. And I . . ."

"No." Ellen stopped him. "I did. Wait. Yeah. I did. That's right."

Frank sat back down and saw Dean getting ready to blast out. "Approach, Dean."

"El?" Dean laid his hand on hers. "Don't you think, you know, if you gave away Nick, I should of known."

"I meant to tell you." Ellen said. "But then on the way to do that, I blacked out."

Frank lifted his hand. "There you have it. Totally understandable, Dean. She blacked out."

"But not from the drug." Ellen interjected. "I mean it. I'm still foggy on why. But it's not from the drug."

Frank shook his head calmly. "Didn't think it was. Dean? Did we?"

"Absolutely not." Dean replied.

"All right." Ellen leaned back. "What is going on with you two?"

"El." Frank explained. "We have decided that we aren't going to come down on you anymore. It isn't helping matters. Right Dean?"

"Right." Dean agreed. "And if you say you aren't taking that drug. We're just going to look at other angles for the behavior. Not . . . not that your behavior is bad."

"No." Frank shook his head. "I mean, you did try to kill my son. But . . . things happen. Right Dean."

"Things happen." Dean reiterated. "It could be a number of things. From simple stress to medical conditions such as early menopause . . ."

"Brain tumors." Frank stated. "So you see, El. We just want to help."

"Just want to help." Dean repeated.

"We're Mormons now."

Ellen laughed. "You're funny. O.K., so what's the catch. You two are all of the sudden being the understanding guys. What do you want from me?"

"Honesty." Dean told her. "You tell us if something is bothering you, if

something is going on. That's all."

"And . . ." Frank continued. "We'd like you not to give away anymore of the kids without consulting us. Plus, you know, I personally would appreciate it if you didn't kill my son."

"And on that note." Dean interjected. "Frank and I were discussing the possibility that there is some sort of conflict with Johnny that you aren't talking to us about."

"Maybe he did something, you argued . . ." Frank said. "It got out of hand . . ." He lifted a shoulder in a shrug. "And you don't want to tell me about it, because, well, he's my son. But you can. You have to." Frank softened his voice. "I love you. I can't have you and him at each other's throats. It'll kill me El. And I feel like I'm going to end up in the middle of you two. So, you can tell me."

Ellen lowered her head. "Frank, things aren't that easy."

"Yeah. Yeah they are. Did he say something, do something. Was it big, little, what?"

Dean tried. "We can try to resolve this for you. I know you probably didn't want to pull me or Frank into this. But, in a sense, we're all family. Let's get to the bottom of this and get it over with."

Ellen took a deep breath. "Johnny . . . Johnny, Frank . . ." She stood up. "He's been . . . he's been . . ."

"What?" Frank asked. "What is it? What is he doing?"

"He's been overbearing." Ellen exhaled. "You know, thinking he knows more than me. It's stupid. It's me. I'll solve it."

"Maybe if I talk to him." Frank suggested.

"No." Ellen shook her head. "In fact, don't say anything. I'll resolve it."

"You aren't going to kill him, are you?" Frank questioned.

Ellen chuckled. "No. I think him and I need to sit down and talk. For your sake, we need to do that. We will." She pointed to the hall. "I'm gonna go check on the kids."

Dean waited until he saw Ellen disappear into the hall. "Frank. That was a stroke of genius on your part."

"Didn't I tell you." Frank stood up. "I have to go. I'm meeting Johnny at the hall."

"It went well with Ellen. Thanks." Dean smiled.

"And it was so much better than us double teaming her . . ." Frank grinned as he reached for the door.

"Don't say it."

Innocently, Frank lifted his hand. "I wasn't." He opened the door and looked back. "But, you know, Dean . . ."

"Bye." Snickering, Dean shook his head. He got up to get more coffee and waited for Ellen. Things were off to a smooth start for the evening, calm. And it had been a while since it felt like that in his home.

^^^

"Frank." Coming up from the cryo tunnels, Robbie spotted him. "Wait up."

"Oh, my God." Frank skid to a stop. "You grew back an arm."

"It's a temp. It's dark, so you really can't see it good." Robbie shrugged. "We're trying it out."

"Does it work?" Frank questioned.

"Somewhat. Anyhow . . . I need to talk to you. In all seriousness."

"Sure. I'm heading to the hall. Wanna come?" Frank started to walk again.

"No, Frank. This is really serious."

A few steps taken and Frank stopped. "What's going on?"

"It's not the drug."

"Excuse me?"

"Ellen." Robbie explained. "She's not taking that drug."

"Robbie . . ."

"I know what's wrong with her." Robbie said. "Or at least I think I do. No, I do."

Curiously, Frank looked at him. "What are you talking about?"

"I was really thinking about what could have caused the sudden change in attitude. And you know she's scared."

"Of?"

Robbie hesitated. "What she knows. She's hiding something, Frank and that's the whole reason for it."

Frank started walking away.

"Frank. Wait." Robbie trotted up to him. "I know what it is."

"She's not hiding anything Robbie." Frank said firm.

"Frank. Yeah. And I think I know what it is. We can help her. I believe she's hiding the fact that she knows who killed Bev."

Frank swallowed. "Drop it."

"What?" Robbie asked confused. "What do you mean, drop it. No."

"Robbie." Frank spun hard.

"Frank. I'm not turning her in. I'm not turning Dean . . ."

"Drop it." Frank stared for a moment then grabbed the social hall door. "Drop . . . it now." He raised his eyebrows, flung open the door and stormed inside.

Robbie blinked in bewilderment and confused on what it was he did that caused Frank to snap out on him.

Into the hall Frank raged, taking a seat next to Johnny.

"Hey, Dad. What's wrong?"

Frank shook his head, reached over the bar, grabbed a bottle and

poured a shot in a glass. Without hesitation he downed it with a gasp. "You didn't see me do that."

"No." Johnny innocently shook his head. "I didn't see you do that at all."

But in the doorway of the social hall . . . Robbie did.

^^^

Clarity. With the passing hours the clarity returned to Ellen. And she spent a lot of time thinking of her way of resolving things. She had to. She had been taking the wrong approach with the Johnny situation. An abrupt loud one when a peaceful quite way was needed.

But she needed a chance to put it in motion and she needed that to happen before midnight. She didn't want to slip the sleeping pill in Dean's coffee, but at the rate he was going he would have been up all night and Ellen knew, despite what he said, he wouldn't let her out of the house so easily.

Finding Johnny was easy. Hoping he wasn't with Frank was the trick. She lucked out. He wasn't. Merely walking into the social hall, Ellen slipped up behind Johnny, whispered, 'we have to talk' and then she walked back out.

Outside on the street she waited in the dark corner by containment until She saw Johnny emerge from the hall. He looked around for her and then she made her approach.

Smug he was as he barely looked at her. "What?"

"This is very serious, Johnny drop the attitude."

"Go on." Johnny said. "Make it quick."

"I want to end this."

"You've tried El. I believe scissors were the route you were going to take today."

"No." She shook her head. "End this. For the sake of your father, Pap, your whole family. I want this to end."

"Just like that?" Johnny asked with disbelief. "What? You want a truce?"

"No I want one of two things. Either you stop all connection with the society . . ." She grew irritated at Johnny's chuckle. "Fine. I guess that won't be an option. Or . . . you leave."

"Leave? You mean, Beginnings?"

"Yes. You said you can't wait to get out of here. Leave. Just leave." Ellen told him.

"It's not that easy, El." Johnny said snide. "I wish I could. But where I want to go is three thousand miles away. What do you suggest I do. Walk?"

"Take a helicopter."

Johnny fluttered his lips. "It won't last in gas. Neither will a jeep. Sorry." He started to leave.

"What will it take?" Ellen reached out and grabbed his arm.

"I have to call them. George will arrange for me to leave."

"Then call them." Ellen let go of his arm.

"I was." Johnny snapped. "You stopped that. Now, the code is changed and I'm stuck. And I also want to finish my drink."

"What if I help you?"

"You can't." Johnny continued walking.

"I know how you can call."

Johnny stopped and turned around. "You know Pap's code?"

"No." Ellen shook her head.

"Uncle Hal's?"

"No."

Johnny laughed. "Then you know nothing."

"I know . . ." Ellen spoke up. "How to make a phone call. I do."

"How?" Johnny scoffed. "How can you know and no one else does?"

"Dean does. And I suppose Danny Hoi as well, but he won't admit it."

Slowly Johnny walked back to her. "You know how I can make a call."

"Yes. Without a doubt. And I know where."

After a nod, Johnny moved to her. "Where?"

"If I take you there. You have to promise, no more shit. Nothing. Once you make your arrangements, you go. Just leave. Deal?"

Johnny stared at her. "Deal. Take me to the phone."

"Well, we have to go now. They start keeping track of people coming in there in an hour."

"Excuse me?" Johnny asked.

"Get a truck. Let's go."

"Where?"

"New Bowman." Ellen stated.

^^^

"It's simple." Ellen explained as they drove on the dark road that connected Beginnings and New Bowman. "All the computers are connected. The dial into each other. But in order for it to work, they have to be connected by a viable phone line."

"How does that help me?"

"Every single Danny Dollar computer is programmed to dial only the main terminal. But . . . they work through the phone lines. You go to the basement of one of the buildings, pull out the line, plug a phone line in and bingo."

"And I start dialing the phone and I'll get George?"

"Right."

"Wrong." Johnny stopped the truck. "I can't believe I fell for this." He laughed in disbelief. "First, my grandfather, with the phones down wouldn't

let that Danny dollar system run if he knew there was a chance of that.”

“Pap doesn’t know. Danny won’t admit it.”

“But you and Dean know?” Johnny asked.

“Yes. If the phone lines aren’t down, then they are viable phone lines.”

“It’s a network, El. What do you take me for? An idiot.” Johnny shook his head. “Here. I almost fell for it. I can see it. Me dialing the phone, trying to make a call and you probably have it rigged that Uncle Hal or someone is gonna answer.”

“What? No.” Ellen defended. “You’ll see.”

“No. You’ll see.” Johnny stared at her.

“Johnny I just want this over.”

Johnny smiled. “So do I.”

~~~~~

Johnny always thought the one really cool thing about his father being head of security was the fact that Johnny was privileged to information that he shouldn’t have been. Not that Frank had a reason not to tell him. After all, what would Johnny do with the knowledge that starting at midnight, to check the operations and status of all perimeter beams and tracking, they were routinely and briefly, shut down one at a time.

Prior to that moment, Johnny didn’t care. But standing on the road, outside of that truck, Johnny listened to the sound of the perimeter areas shutting down and going back on. Down the line of the road they went. In sequence and perfect timing. A usual occurrence that worked in Johnny’s favor. Standing there waiting, Johnny smiled at the semi lit perimeter beams before him. It wouldn’t be long before they were down. Even if only for a few seconds, that was all the time Johnny needed.

~~~~~

How long had Robbie been up there? Hours? Flashlight in hand he had encircled the whole area. Looking, searching, for what he didn’t know. But his gut told him there was something up there. It had been a long time since that early morning that he saw Dean in that region, and since he passed the incident off, recalling the exact details of it were difficult.

Deciding, just once more to try, Robbie walked all the way back to the gate of the fence. He imagined what had happened. Getting the call from Tony that night. Having to leave Bev’s house with Frank, because Tony swore a killer baby broke in because he heard . . . digging.

Digging.

Robbie spun fast from where he stood. There was only one path he would have taken that morning into the shallow wooded area, and from where he stood he took that thin path in what he believed was his same pace he did that morning. He spoke in a whisper the same words he did. He

imagined Frank calling back and then Robbie stopped.

Where?

Flashlight shining, Robbie slowly turned to where he recalled he saw Dean. Or at least he thought. Walking over to the spot, Robbie knew he'd feel pretty silly if all he found was rabbit food.

A fallen tree, and a small dip in the landscape. A small break in the woods was seen and so were lights from down in the town. Stepping over the tree, Robbie lost his footing just a little. "This is really stupid of me." He spoke out loud. "What am I doing. What were *you* doing, Dean? It couldn't have been anything, this is out on the open."

Or was it?

Pretending he was Dean, Robbie hunched down some. He turned to look behind him. "Oh, wow." What happened to the break in the trees? The lights from town. From the height Robbie was at, everything seemed masked behind the short brush. He turned around again and peered up the hill. Nothing. He couldn't even see the fence where the perimeter was. Where he himself was standing when he spotted Dean.

Was there really an experimental rabbit amuck, or did Dean think he had found a spot of seclusion to do what Tony heard . . . dig.

There was only one way to find out, and Robbie dropped down to his knees. His positioned the flashlight in the prosthetic arm and he used his left hand to feel the surface of the ground around that tree. The leaves were loose and so was the dirt. His hand moved slowly, easy, feeling for an indifference and he did.

A slight indentation in the even ground brought suspicion to Robbie's mind. Fingers extended, he began to dig into the dirt that moved with ease just under the slightly lifted bark of the fallen tree.

Scooping the dirt, moving it, shining the flashlight, Robbie did. And just at the point he thought it to be useless, his finger felt it. Robbie's heart sunk. "Oh, my God." He whispered and his hand removed more dirt. So afraid, and hoping he was wrong, Robbie felt in that hole. He wasn't wrong.

Dusting off his hand, Robbie reached into his pocket. He pulled out a folded sheet of paper, a report he was supposed to have dropped off at his dad's office. After fanning it open, Robbie laid it in the hole. He placed his hand over the paper, and gripped. All the wishful thinking in the world didn't help when he retracted his hand, brought it into the beam of the flashlight, and saw within his grip, a bloody revolver.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

December 3<sup>rd</sup>

Making love. How long had it been since Dean had made love to Ellen? There he was, he had her right where he wanted her. Her body buried beneath his. His arms wrapped tightly around her. His lips brushing, touching, moving as sensually as his body did. He could hear her slight moans and he fed off of that. It was the only sound he wanted to hear, that and her breathing. Unfortunately there was another.

"Dean." Frank's voice called. "Dean! Come on!"

Dean blinked. *No, no, not now. Maybe if I pretend . . .*

"Dean!"

Dean's mouth lifted from its buried spot on Ellen's neck.

"Dean!"

"Goddamn it, Frank can't you see I'm . . ." Dean lifted his head. The moment he did, the crowd roared. "What the hell?" He took in the sight around him. Ropes? Three of them? Where was he? The white surface, semi-soft, wasn't a bed or a floor, it was a mat. There they were, stark naked, making love in the middle of a wrestling ring. In a glance he looked down to Ellen, she still held the same enjoyable expression on her face. Didn't she know what was going on. "El?"

"Don't stop." Ellen whispered.

"But, El . . ."

"Dean!" Frank called out again.

With in a second Dean caught glimpse of the legs. Wearing black pants, they scooted around him and Ellen. Peering up further he saw the black stripes of the referee shirt that Hal wore.

Hal dropped down, slapped his hand twice to the mat, held up two fingers, stood up and shook his head. "No pin." Hal called out.

"Of course I'm not pinning her." Dean argued. "I'm making love."

"Dean!"

Enough was enough. Where was Frank? To his left Dean looked and screamed. Standing in the corner of the ring, entirely naked, was Frank.

Leaning further against the ropes, Frank extended his hand out. "Come on, Dean. Tag me in. Tag me in."

"Tag you in?" Dean was confused and then Dean . . . Woke up.

With a grunt from a pain that shot up his back and barely opened eyes, Dean grumbled. "Frank. God. See what you and your double teaming reference did to my dream . . .El?" Half out of it, Dean rolled over to face Ellen. "El, you have to . . ."

*Bam.* Hard Dean hit the space of the livingroom floor between the sofa



and the coffee table.

If the dream hadn't thrown him through a loop enough, the scene before him did. Lights still on, notes scattered about, even his coffee cup was right where he left it. "Swell. She didn't even wake me up to go to bed." Entirely too sore for his liking, Dean stood as best as he could. His knees wouldn't straighten, and like an old man, half in balance he made his way to the bedroom. Aside from the fact that every step he took hurt, Dean knew something was wrong before he arrived at the bedroom. And he was right. There was no sign of Ellen.

~~~~~

Cigarette chomping between his lips, Frank flung open the door to tracking with an abundance of zealotry. "Is it a beautiful fuckin morning or what?" He grinned. "What do we have."

Sitting next to Mark, Robbie looked up from the screen he monitored. "Slow and steady. Definitely three SUTs."

"How far?" Frank asked.

"Still far." Robbie replied. "Two miles. How long are you going to wait."

"Well, I could go out now. But I don't feel like chasing them. I'll hang out. Heading in the direction of the back gate this time?"

"You got it." Robbie didn't sound as upbeat as Frank.

"You look tired." Frank commented.

"I didn't sleep." Robbie slouched down in the chair.

"Hey. About last night. I'm . . . I'm sorry I snapped at you. I had a bad day."

"Yeah." Robbie nodded. "I understood."

"Good." Frank gave him a pat to the back. "I see you still have your temporary arm."

"Unfortunately." Robbie looked at it.

"It kind of looks . . ." Frank stared at the rubber of it. "Fucked up."

Mark's mouth dropped open. "Frank, that's rude. It looks . . . it looks good."

Robbie shook his head. "It looks like a rubber arm."

"Maybe if you wore one of those UWA gloves." Frank suggested. "And painted the nails. That might work."

"Might."

The slight crackle of the radio brought Dean's voice into tracking. "Frank."

Frank rolled his eyes and lifted his radio "Dean. It's fuckin six thirty in the morning. What?"

"I have a problem." Dean said.

"It better be good."

"It is . . . ." There was a pause from Dean. "I can't find Ellen."

^^^

Had Ellen not been cold enough to reach for her covers she wouldn't have realized she wasn't in bed.

Her head lifted slightly in confusion as she lay on her stomach surrounded by trees. She grumbled and dropped her head. "Great."

^^^

"Say it, Dean." Frank released the button and waited. Nothing. He spoke into the radio. "Dean. Say it."

"All right." Dean snapped. "Our wife. Our wife. Now will you find her."

"Absolutely." Frank hung up the radio. "All right. I guess it's time to chase those SUTs." Peering once more to the monitor, Frank turned to leave and stopped when he heard the single beep. "What was that?"

"Shit." Robbie looked at the screen. "We have a problem. Fifteen feet from the road. Now . . . Heading to the SUTs."

"What?" Frank hurried back to check on the screen. "What the hell is that. Animal?"

Mark's fingers clicked on the keyboard. "Not SUT. Definitely mammal. A hundred pounds."

"Fuck." Frank closed his eyes. "It's either a fuckin baby deer or . . ."

"Ellen." Robbie finished the sentence.

"Bet me it's not fuckin Bambi." Frank moved to the door. "Just when it was gonna be a fuckin glorious morning. Now not only do I have three SUTs but I have Ellen heading right toward them." He grabbed for the door. "Can anything else fuckin happen?"

Loud. Blaring. Out of control rang the series of beeps.

Mark stood up. "Holy Shit."

Frank's foot jammed down the gas as he shifted the gears of the speeding jeep he and Robbie rode in. "Repeat." He barked out into the radio.

"Six-forty-three. Steady. Slow. Like a wall." Mark came back.

"Bowman. Confirm." Frank requested.

"Bowman tracking confirms. North between the two communities."

"Dad. You hear?" Frank asked.

"I hear." Joe replied. "At armory now. How many men?"

"Move out four specialty teams and call out my guys from the barracks." Frank ordered. "Tell Hal, suit up a good one fifty of his men, Set one fifty more for back up, bring them in North east, we'll come Northwest and meet

... Mark ... Give me a cut off center point.”

There was a slight delay from Mark. “At the direction their headed, I’d say sectors 32 and 33, Frank.”

“Excellent. That’s we’re we’ll meet them. Dad, tell Hal stay radio informed, we’ll meet up there and form a front line.”

“Got it.” Joe answered.

“Roused up John Matoose, Dan, and Johnny. Have them fire up the birds and be ready to lift in a moment’s notice. Inform Hal, take reigns until I arrived. Do not shoot unless they have to. I have to take care of this first.”

“I’m on it.” Joe said.

Frank stopped the jeep and looked at Robbie. “We get her, you grab her, bring her ass back into Beginnings. Can you handle that.”

“Yep.” Robbie grabbed an M-16.

“And we can’t communicate.” Frank jumped from the jeep. “So keep in tune with me.”

“Always.”

“Security.” Frank called out. “Down perimeter beams seventeen on the road.” He watched, waited and listened. With the dismantling of the beam, Frank and Robbie ran through.

“Got ya Frank.” Mark spoke over the radio.

“Do you see Ellen?” Frank asked.

“She’s dead center of you and the three SUTs. Hundred yards both way. Well, now she’s further from you, less from them.”

“Fuck. Keep me posted.” Frank gave a motion of his head toward Robbie. “Let’s go.”

Fast and determined, both Frank and Robbie took off running.

Arms folded tight to her body to keep herself Warm, Ellen walked on the uneven terrain. She complained in a whisper as she did. “Don’t kill me. No.” She complained. “Oh, yeah. I’m suffering from hyperthermia.” She shivered. “Now, if they don’t think I’m insane enough, I have to find my way to the back gate and scream like an idiot until someone let’s me in.”

So their voices wouldn’t be a warning alarm to the three SUTs, Frank and Robbie ran without speaking, hoping that their pounding footsteps and huffing breath wouldn’t carry through too loud in the quiet woods.

“She’s heading right to them. You’ve got twenty-five yards.” Mark announced in Frank’s radio headset. “She should be coming into your view soon. Ellen to SUTs ... twenty yards.”

Frank’s face tensed up and he screamed inside with his determination to reach her first.

“Fifteen yards.” Mark announced.

*“Where is she? Where is she?”* Frank kept shifting his eyes through the

woods. He knew he was on the right track, he just had to spot her before the SUTs did. *Come on Ellen, where are you'*

Hair. Frank saw hair. Ellen's and the tension breath he held was release. If she just kept her path, kept silent he could get to her before she walked directly into the SUTs.

"Running?" Ellen stopped moving, did she hear running. Slowly she turned and looked over her shoulder. She smiled when she saw Frank and Robbie charging over. She wasn't lost anymore. Hand waving high in the air, she started moving to them. "Frank! Over here!"

Frank cringed. Robbie cringed. Ellen had sounded off her location. From behind her, Frank saw them appearing through the brush of the trees, the three SUTs. He knew they spotted her when they raised their weapons. "No!" He charged with everything he had. Hoping against hope that Robbie was with him, Frank did the only thing he could do. The distance was still there between him and Ellen, but it was a chance he had to take. Every ounce of speed and fortitude he had went into that instance, and projecting his body outward, Frank lunged.

The 'Shift-shift-shift' of rifle chambers froze Ellen and wide eyed she peered over her shoulder to catch glimpse of the row of SUTs. A scream didn't even come from her, all she could get out in that instant she turned to run, was one word. "Frank!"

Wham!

Across the front of her body, with the powerful force of his entire two hundred plus pounds, slammed Frank's arm, sailing Ellen backwards right along with him at the same time gunfire rang out. They crashed hard to the ground with a long slide, billowing up a huge cloud of dried leaves with them.

Robbie had dropped down to one knee when he saw the connection of Frank to Ellen. He didn't hesitate, M-16 already placed as best as he could in his left hand, he opened fire on the SUTs.

From his position on Ellen, Frank didn't stop. He rolled from her into a partial stand, swung around his weapon and faced . . . silence. Only a split second's fear accompanied the look over his shoulder for his little brother. Frank's head dropped in relief when Robbie stood up.

Robbie grinned, that smile only he could do. "Am I cool or what? One arm, Frank. One arm."

Frank grumbled, then with a swiping hand down, he lifted Ellen to her feet. "What the fuck are you . . ."

"Frank. Listen I . . ."

"No." Frank stopped her. "I don't have time for this shit. We'll deal with this later. Robbie. Get her out of this region." He brought his radio to his mouth. "Dad, what's our situation?"

"Our men are positioned and moving out the back gate." Joe informed.

“Hal’s on his way, one fifty en route, on fifty back up. ETA four minutes.”

“On fuckin horseback I bet,” Frank caught his breath. “Our infiltrators.”

“Holding a steady direction, and moving at a slow pace.”

“All right, get them to pick up a double time movement, I’m on my way to the back gate, I’ll meet up with them.” Frank rattled orders. “Sound off the community signal to keep everyone in.”

“Not below?” Joe questioned.

“Nah. There’s only six hundred. We have air and ground, it’ll be a fuckin training exercise. I’m on my way.”

Catching her breath, still confused, Ellen watched Frank start to run. “Frank.”

“El. Please.” He spoke as he turned and moved backwards. “I gotta fuckin war happening here babe, and I don’t want to miss it.” Another turn of his body and Frank took off.

All of Ellen’s energy and focus on Frank was gone the moment she turned around and saw the lost look on Robbie’s face. Frank’s shouting that he didn’t want to miss it, only reiterated painfully to Robbie that he had to. “Robbie.” Ellen spoke soft. “I can make my way back if you want to go.”

With a pout, Robbie shook his head. “I don’t think I’m invited to this one. Let’s uh . . . Let’s go.” He laid his hand on her shoulder and started to walk with Ellen. But once more, with a little envy and sadness, Robbie glanced back to see Frank disappearing into the woods.

^^^

In a fast pace that Joe had going since he left the back gate, community sirens blasting in the background, he stormed into tracking. “What do we got.” He pulled up a chair next to Mark and lit a cigarette.

“Still moving in, and moving slow.”

“What in Christ’s name is going on?” Joe watched the long line of beeps on the screen. “I thought we were in a cease fire.”

^^^

A disappointed ‘swell’ was what came from Robbie as soon as he sat in the driver’s seat of the jeep. His eyes shifted from the wheel to the gear shift.

Readying to offer to drive, Ellen didn’t. “What’s wrong?”

“I didn’t think about driving when I’d said I’d take you back.”

“You don’t think you can do it?” Ellen scoffed. “Please? You?”

A half smile came from Robbie. “You’re right. What am I thinking? Slight panic.” He reached around and started the jeep.

Ellen watched him shift the gear then grab the wheel, alternating the use of his hand and incorporating his knee as well until they had turned around

and were headed straight back to Beginnings. "Robbie. I'm sorry."

"For?" He asked.

"This morning. Being out there. I guess you want to know why I was wandering around."

"Did I ask?" Robbie shook his head. "No. You had a really good reason. You and Dean and them damn experiments."

"Experiment?" Ellen asked.

"Yeah. You know." Robbie glanced to her with a wink. "Why you were out here. You didn't want Dean to know. That's why you went out way before dawn."

"Yeah." Ellen said softly. "And um, how did I get through the perimeter?"

"Me. I thought you came back in. My fault." Robbie smiled.

"Robbie." Ellen shook her head. "No. You and I both know that . . ."

"Is the way it went down." Robbie strongly finished the sentence. "That's the way it went down."

"You'll catch hell."

"Better me than you." Robbie gave her one more assured look then locked his eyes back on the road.

^^^

"They stopped." Joe spoke through Frank's headset.

"What?" Frank's running slowed down.

"They stopped. There just hanging tight about a half a mile from our people."

"I'm almost there. I'll keep you posted." Frank started to run again. "Just make sure our birds are ready." Begging in his mind that no action began with out him, Frank headed the rest of the way to sectors 32 and 33.

It was an awesome sight to Frank when he arrived. One that filled him with childhood enthusiasm. Like a see-saw they looked, one end different than the other. A long line, weapons ready belly down all the men laid. Their uniforms may have been in total contrast but their interest were not. UWA on the left, Beginnings on the right, Hal laid center and Frank joined him.

"Where's Ryder?" Frank asked as he checked his clip.

"Bitching like a woman because I made him stay back." Hal replied.

"Why?"

"Someone must take the reigns should I die in battle."

"Yeah, right." Frank scoffed in a low voice. "Gonna rub it in?"

"Oh, you bet."

"This is so fuckin cool, isn't it?" Frank lifted his head over the slight grade and shifted his eyes to the binoculars Hal handed him. "Thanks." Frank peered through. "Oh I see them." He gave them back to Hal.

"Lined up." Hal handed the binoculars to the man to his left. "Doing

nothing. So what do you think?"

Frank reached into his pocket and lit a cigarette. "I think . . . I think we should take full fuckin advantage of this situation."

"Oh, I agree."

"General consensus?" Frank asked.

"Same on my end. Yours?"

"Same." Frank hit his cigarette. "I don't want to wait."

"Me either. So how do you want to do this?"

"Six hindered men, Hal, there are many ways." Frank tilted his head with a smile. "We can take them out by air. But, then again, do we want to disappoint our men."

"I don't want to disappoint mine." Hal smiled. "I say . . . your men brought that heavy artillery. Why waste it."

"Absolutely. Why waste it. Blast a few rounds." Frank shrugged.

"Send them scurrying . . ."

"On our call . . ."

Hal lifted his hand in suggestion. "We move full force ahead."

"Engaging in some fuckin old fashion hand to hand combat. Excellent."

Frank clenched tight to his weapon. "When?"

"Whenever you're ready." Hal suggested.

"I'm ready right . . ."

"Captain." The soldier to Hal's left called. "We have a situation." He handed Hal the binoculars. "Take a look."

Hal gave an ornery grin to Frank. "This could be it." He lifted the binoculars and peered. The smile fell from Hal's face. "Look for yourself."

"What?" Frank questioned. "Don't tell me they backed up."

"Worse." Hal said.

Frank looked. His eyes widened, anger filled him and loud and echoing he blasted, "Fuck!" when he saw waving high, a white flag.

^^^

It pained Ellen. Every single hard word that blasted from Frank's mouth made her wince. Her eyes would close with each word Frank yelled. It was quiet at the breakfast table, Dean and the children eating as if they didn't hear it. But how could they not. Frank only had Robbie in the next room.

"I don't fuckin care. Mistake? Mistake?" Frank screamed. "Whose life . . . no whose lives were at risk because of your mistake!"

Ellen raised her eyes. "Dean? Can't you do something."

So passive, Dean spoke. "What do you want me to do? Frank's correcting Robbie. After all, he left you out there wandering pre dawn looking for . . . um what experiment of ours was that?"

"Dean, come on."

"Fine." Dean stood up, walked across the living room and yelled down

the hallway. "Frank? Can you stop yelling at your brother. You're traumatizing my kids." He jolted when he heard the bedroom door fling open with a bang. He stepped out of the way with the sound of the onward storming footsteps of Frank. "Thanks." Dean smiled.

Frank grumbled. "Are you done with you fuckin Wheatie's Dean. We have to go." He moved to the door. "Oh, and Robbie, before you post your ass back up at tracking. Apologize to our wife."

"My wife." Dean corrected as he grabbed his coat.

"No-no." Frank shook his head. "Don't even go there, Dean. I have witness after witness that heard you this morning." He flung open the front door. "And I'm in no mood for you to be welching. I got screwed out of combat this morning."

When the door closed, Ellen looked apologetic to Robbie, then she glanced to her children. "Guys, can you go get ready for school."

Billy looked up from his cereal. "We already are."

"Well, change or something. Here." She grabbed Joey's hand and tugged him from the table. "Wash him."

"Mother." Billy raised his eyebrows. "If you'd like us to leave the room say so."

"Leave the room."

"Fine." Billy said. "Let's go, Joey."

Joey followed Billy.

Sliding from her seat at the table, Alexandra looked up to Ellen. "Can I go back to bed?"

"Sure sweetie go on." Ellen told her.

Robbie, watching, waited for the kids to leave and he pointed back to the door. "I . . . I really have to go."

"Wait." Ellen stopped him, reaching out. She stepped to him and wrapped her arms around him. "I love you. Thank you."

Robbie smiled and planted his lips to her cheek. "Hey, it's you. I'm behind you, El. I'm on your side. No matter what."

Ellen slowly pulled back from him. "No matter what?"

"No matter what." Robbie winked softly. "Don't think for one second I doubt you, or am against you. O.K.? I'd do anything for you, know that and trust that."

Ellen chuckled emotionally. "Even leave Beginnings with me."

Seriousness struck Robbie's face. "Why would you say that?"

Ellen shrugged. "Just . . . it just, you know, slipped out."

"I understand." He nodded and moved to the door. "And yes . . ." He stopped and looked back at her. "I'd even leave Beginnings with you. No hesitation. You go. I go."

Ellen wanted to fold and cry that instant Robbie left. It took a lot to keep it in. Taking a deep breath, she had to remain in control. She had to fight to keep up the walls of the world she felt barreling down around her.



Knowing it was getting late, she headed to the hallway that led to the bedrooms. “Kids. School.” Se turned into Alexandra’s room when she heard the whine. “What’s wrong?”

“I was just getting back to bed.” Alexandra said laying down.

“Sorry. We have to get you to school.” Ellen sat on the edge of the bed.

“Mommy?” Alexandra sat up. “Why did Uncle Frank yell at Robbie like that.”

“Uncle Frank gets carried away.” Ellen explained. “He didn’t need to yell at Robbie like that.”

“Is it true you could have died today.”

Apprehensively, Ellen nodded. “Yeah. But Uncle Frank and Uncle Robbie saved me. And . . . it wasn’t Uncle Robbie’s fault. It was mine.”

“I’d be sad if you died. Grown ups don’t know. But kids get sad when their mom or dad’s die. Look how sad Devon was when Greg died.” Alexandra said.

“And Katie.”

“What do you mean?” Alexandra asked as she slid from the bed.

“When Katie’s mom died.” Ellen explained, standing up.

“Katie’s mommy didn’t die.”

“Yes, sweetie, she did.” Ellen spoke soft.

“No. I saw her.”

“You mean like a ghost?” Ellen walked to the door.

Alexandra giggled. “Don’t be silly. Ghosts don’t bake brownies.”

Hard Ellen’s heart dropped to her stomach. In that doorway she didn’t move. She had to stop herself from getting caught up in what her daughter said. “Alex, I know she used to make brownies before. But she doesn’t anymore.”

“She did two days ago when I was visiting Katie in New Bowman. When I stayed overnight at her house.”

“You . . . You must be mistaken.”

“Me and Katie helped bake the brownies.” Alexandra rattled. “It was supposed to be a secret, but I can tell you. Right? Anyhow, we tried by ourselves but we made a mess. She saw us and said, ‘Sweet Jesus look at the mess.’ We ran. We were scared . . . Mommy?”

Turned, knees buckled, Ellen held onto the archway of the door to stop herself from falling.

“Mommy?”

“We . . . we have to go. Let’s go.” Ellen tried to control her hyperventilating breath.

“What’s wrong?” Alexandra asked.

“Oh, sweetie, noting.” Ellen hunched down to her daughter’s level. “Thank you. Thank you so much for sharing that secret. I’ll keep it. But it was just what Mommy needed to hear.”

“You needed to hear we tried to make our own brownies.”

Ellen snickered. "Yes. That's what I needed to hear . . ." She stood up straight. "Boys! Let's go! Now! I have to hurry!"

"Mommy?" Alexandra tugged on her leg. "Where are you going? Work?"

"No. After I get you guys to school. Mommy's going . . ." Ellen smiled. "To New Bowman."

^^^

Mouth swishing from side to side, almost in debate, Joe pulled the cigarette from his mouth and dialed the phone. He cleared his throat and brought the phone to his ear. One ring. Two rings.

"Yes?" George answered the phone.

"It's Joe Slagel."

"What a surprise, Joe. Didn't expect to hear from you since you're having phone trouble."

"Cut the shit, George."

George waited with a grin on his face. "What can I do for you Joe?" He asked so snide.

"I have someone here who has to speak to you." Joe handed over the phone.

Curiously, George waited. "Hello?"

"President Hadly?"

"Yes?"

"This is Sgt. Timothy Doyle Eastern Caceres Society Master infantry trainer. It is my duty and . . . privilege to inform you that myself and six hundred forty-two finely trained Caceres Society soldiers have hereby defected to the United Western Alliance." Sgt. Doyle handed the phone to Joe.

Joe took the phone and spoke into it. "And, George. That will be all."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Ellen knew it wasn't what she should have been doing. Working at the clinic, relieving Forrest from the night shift was where Ellen should have been. Not New Bowman. But some things were more important than Forrest's rest. She swore up and down her daughter's secret would remain within her. But, Ellen had to verify that secret. She needed to. Andrea alive? A part of Ellen knew it. She knew it. The lack of mourning alone in the Slagel's hinted her to it. And the wording. No one ever came out and said, Andrea's dead. It was always, "Andrea's gone." It was sanctuary for Ellen when she spotted Katie's home. With everything that was happening, Andrea of all people could help and tell her exactly what she needed to hear.

"Ellen." Katie screamed joyfully as she darted from her house.

"Hey you." Ellen bent down to her. "Where are you off to?"

"Monica at the house of Lesbians is teaching me poetry today."

"Oh, that's nice."

"Can Alex come to New Bowman this weekend with you?"

"I'll make sure I bring her."

"Thanks. I have to go." Katie spoke up beat.

"Have fun."

"Bye!" The little girl's one word rang out loud and long trailing off as she ran about.

Slowly from her hunch, eyes focused on the house Ellen walked the path. Her heart beat so strong. There would be no knocking, no alerting her to the fact that she was approaching. The last thing she wanted was to send Andrea into a hiding.

At the front door, Ellen took a hesitating courage breath, then opened it. Immediately the smell of chocolate pelted her. Brownies. So predominant. So . . . Andrea.

The sound of dishes rattled her way along with humming that was muffled by the sound of running water. Heart beating in her ears, quietly and smiling, Ellen moved slowly down the hall toward the kitchen. Closer the sounds drew, the smells. It was time, Ellen knew it and she stepped into the kitchen.

The humming stopped and the dish dropped from the hand as she spotted Ellen. "Oh." Aggie, a young woman with long brown hair jumped in a startle. "Dr. Hayes."

Ellen couldn't move. "Was . . . was that you humming?"

"Yes. Why? I didn't know you were coming."

Ellen's head shook. "What are you doing here. I thought Miriam cared for the children."

"She does. I help. We're well, close." Aggie smiled. "Did you bring

Alex? You just missed Katie. Boy those two were so funny this weekend. They tried to make brownies on their own. I found such a mess . . .”

“I have to go.”

“Did you need something?”

Ellen backed up. “I’m sorry. I . . . I have to go.”

“Dr. Hayes?” Aggie called out. “Are you all right.”

Ellen stopped in the hall and sadly looked back at Aggie. “I’m fine. I’m sorry.” With heartbreaking disappointment she didn’t want to show, Ellen fled from the house.

^^^

“Wonderful choice.” Todd smiled flirtatiously at Johnny as he folded a bright colorful shirt. “These Hawaiian specialty shirts go like that.” He snapped. “Eight Danny Dollars please.”

“This is the first time I used this.” He handed his card to Todd.

“Then you must have a ton saved up.”

Johnny watched him swipe the card through. “Yeah, I guess I . . .” He speech slowed down when he saw the words on the LCD display of the machine. The words that read ‘dialing’. “Dialing.”

“What was that?” Todd handed the card back.

“It’s dialing?”

“Yes, we call the main terminal.” Todd looked up when the bells of his store rang upon the door’s opening. “Oh, look, Captain Slagel.”

Johnny cringed. “Great.”

Todd wiggled his fingers in a wave. “Hello, Captain.”

Hal kept his focus on Johnny. “Todd.”

“Can I interest you in a wonderful Hawaiian shirt. It would be so you.”

“Not today. Could you . . . leave us.” Hal requested firmly.

Todd was confused. “But my shop would be . . .”

“It will be fine.” Hal stated. “Leave. Please.”

Todd exhaled in nervousness. “I’ll trust you. I’ll be back.” From behind the counter, he smiled once more before dashing from the shop. The bells rang upon his exit.

Johnny turned around with a perturbed look. “Bullying homosexuals now, Uncle Hal?”

A glare was in Hal’s eyes as he locked them on Johnny. “Ellen vanished from her home last night. She was found in the woods beyond sector seventeen.”

“Yeah.” Johnny snickered. “Heard Uncle Robbie forgot she was out there.”

“Funny. But I heard you got in a truck with her last night.”

“You heard wrong.” Johnny said snide.

“I doubt that.”

"Oh, yes. That's right." Johnny said. "You're never wrong."

"I'm not wrong about this."

"What are you implying?" Johnny snapped.

"That perhaps you had something to do with Ellen ending up in those woods."

"That perhaps?" Johnny laughed. "No."

"If I found out you did, I personally will take you . . ."

"You know what, Uncle Hal? Blow it out your ass."

Hal blinked in a fake shock and offence. "Blow it out my ass. Hmm. Blow it out my ass?"

"Fuck off." Johnny shoved by him. "And this little partial threat. It's the last threat you just made. Heard the ballots were counted. The decision will be announced. I'll take great pleasure watching your ousting." He moved to the door.

"Shall I blow it out my ass while I'm frightened?"

Sneering Johnny snapped a view at Hal. "You're an asshole." He flung open the door and stormed out.

"You forgot your shirt." Hal tried to call out. "And . . . your Danny dollar card. Bet, Ellen would love to shop on you." After lifting it and smiling snidely, Hal placed the card in his pocket.

^^^

The flower dropped at the bottom of the cross, then Ellen lowered to the ground right by the small mound of dirt. "What am I doing?" She spoke to the grave. "I'm so desperate. I'm so . . . so lost that I am searching. I'm searching. I should be working right now, getting my head together and I am chasing around a fantasy." She chuckled. "Here I was taking a child's story about making brownies and I misconstrued it into this big masquerade of your death. Like they would let my big mouth daughter in on it." She shook her head. "Yeah. I'm chasing around looking for you. When you're . . ." Her hand moved to the dirt of the mound that had just started to settle. "When you're right here." Grabbing a handful of dirt, Ellen let it fall through her fingertips. Her eyes lifted to the cross with Andrea's name on it. "Or are you?"

^^^

A stroke of brilliancy. Utter brilliancy George thought. It had to be, there was no way a man as loyal as Sgt. Doyle was defecting to Beginnings. One of the reasons Sgt. Doyle was placed so far up the trusted ladder was for his keen insight. And on his own, Sgt. Doyle made the decision to infiltrate Beginnings. George had to hand it to him for coming up with it. He wished he would of thought of it sooner.

When he first received the phone call, George was furious. The

shredded remains of his office after the temper tantrum proved it. But as soon as he calmed down and thought about it, it made perfect sense. Plus, the phone call to the base in Minnesota helped. The CO there informed George he was clueless to what George was talking about.

Nervous Steward looked when he stepped into the office. "Sir?"

"Hey, Stew come in. What do you have?"

Steward hesitated. "Bad news."

Any 'up', any positive to George went out the window. "What is it?"

Slow Steward made his way to George's desk. He tossed down a folder then sat down. "We went to Sgt. Doyle's home. Empty. For a man who was going to be gone for a few weeks, not a stitch of old world clothing is left. Plus, all his photographs and personal items are gone."

"Sentimental attachment." George stated with a 'so there' attitude.

"And we found *that*. Pretty much I figured, for us to find. He knew when he defected we would search his house."

"Sgt. Doyle didn't defect."

"I'm afraid . . . I'm afraid he did." Steward said. "That folder contains copies of all reports of supposed defectors. And he conveniently moved all of the most probable to one location."

"Minnesota."

"Yes. Gathered them together. Waited for his chance. Probably was going to use some sort of routine camp check as his excuse to go out there. But it's all there."

George started to open the folder but stopped. "How does this effect us, Stew?"

"Badly. Can he be replaced? Oh, sure, without a doubt. Yes he was awesome in military strategy. So are others. You. He didn't make any final decisions, we have our panel for that. But . . . what we lost pales in comparison to what Beginnings just gained. Trusted. Key player. Fully informed of our military movements, actions, plans. He knows it all. Put him together with the Slagel battalion, the UWA doesn't need an army anymore."

George scoffed. "You're exaggerating now. So he knows a lot. We're still stronger. And who he is isn't going to mean squat to Beginnings. Not yet at least."

"Why do you say that?"

"After my initial anger, what was my next thought?" George questioned.

"That he did this on purpose. To infiltrate."

"Exactly. Joe Slagel isn't going to buy it. Not yet at least. He'll take whatever Sgt. Doyle says with a grain of salt. It will be a long drawn out process of weaning, before any trust is given. Any vital information relayed to Beginnings is going to be screened and thought of as a trap."

"So you don't believe Beginnings is basking in the gain yet?" Steward asked.

"No. If a key player from Beginnings defected to us, I'd be

apprehensive. Trust me, Joe Slagel isn't dancing a jig yet. We have a lot of time before we can consider our loss of Sgt. Doyle a threat to us. About the only thing Joe may be enjoying is the fact that he added another six hundred men to his army." George sat back in his chair. "I'm just grateful Sgt. Doyle didn't give him the entire camp."

^^^

"The whole camp?" Joe asked Sgt. Doyle with shock.

"Yes, Mr. Slagel." Sgt. Doyle answered. "We only brought the first bit because we weren't sure how we would be welcomed. I gave the CO at the base instructions to play clueless should President Hadly ask about the defection. But he is to take that as his sign to pack up the rest of the camp."

Joe walked with Sgt. Doyle in an area not far from Bowman. Rows of military trucks piled with equipment were parked. "You do realize, I can't trust this. Not just yet."

"Absolutely. We figured as much. That's why we brought the camp with us, supplies and so forth. Also, why we are turning over any and all weapons. We will be very congenial. We only want to hop aboard so to speak." Sgt. Doyle smiled then looked over his shoulder to Frank's yelling.

"Tear off them CS patches gentlemen!" Frank blasted out. "Toss them in the box. We're gonna have a fuckin bon fire."

Joe motioned his head. "Frank."

"I would consider it an honor to meet Frank Slagel. I've heard so much about it."

Joe grumbled. "Frank."

Frank held up his hand then turned to Dan. "I want every single man searched even for the smallest weapon. Everything is to be counted and taken. Got that?"

"Yeah, Frank. What are we doing with it?" Dan asked. "This is a lot of shit."

"Load up the trucks and dump it on my brother." Frank grinned. "Thanks." He then walked to Joe. "What's up?"

"Frank." Joe took on the introduction honors. "I'd like you to meet Sgt. Timothy Doyle. He headed this defection. Sgt. Doyle. This is Frank Slagel."

Sgt. Doyle snapped to attention and saluted Frank. "Sir."

"Excellent start." Frank gave a swat to his arm. "At ease."

Joe continued. "Though Beginnings has its army, and the strict code of ethics of the UWA decision is enforced by their leader, Frank pretty much has the military say so over the whole ball of wax. You can say he outranks everyone in that aspect."

Frank nodded proud. "Doyle. You headed this up?"

"Yes." Sgt. Doyle answered. "You can say I've been wanting to do it for some time. And when the UWA started really hitting our camps, the urge in

me became impatient. My contempt for the society and all that they stood for grew everyday. So I started plotting, shuffling and grouping together those who were rumored to be planning to defect . . .” he had to question, “The UWA division, that is the second calvary?”

Frank rolled his eyes. “Civil war uniform, fashion boots and all. And you don’t just become one of those. Different training aspects, like the old world, Army, Navy, Air Force and so on.”

“Which division would we be joining?” Sgt. Doyle asked.

Joe answered. “Most likely basic infantry. But I suppose, some of your men will want to be official UWA soldiers. Have to tell you. Hal doesn’t take that lightly. Dress. Walk. Talk. Act. Learn. It’s a whole different ball game. The women love it.”

Sgt. Doyle smiled. “I haven’t seen a viable woman in quite sometime.”

“Don’t get your hopes up.” Joe said. “We don’t have many. And speaking of the UWA. Here comes the second in command now.”

Sgt. Doyle turned around to see where Joe was looking. He was taken aback, walking his way was the first real glimpse of what he had only heard rumors about. “Looking at the uniform, I think I may consider this UWA.”

In usual fashion, Frank’s eyes rolled.

Elliott Ryder, in full uniform approached. “Mr. Slagel the Captain said my help is needed.”

“Without a doubt.” Joe replied. “Elliott, I’d like you to meet . . .”

“Sgt. Doyle.” Elliott stated the name. “I recall you from my processing in former Quantico.”

Sgt. Doyle extended a hand to Elliott. “I have to apologize, but I don’t recall the face. I’ve seen so many.”

“I understand.” Elliott nodded. “Mr. Slagel may I speak to you for a moment.”

“Sure. Frank? Can you take Sgt. Doyle and see what else he brought with him.”

“Yeah.” Frank answered. “Let’s go.” He gave a motion of his head to Sgt. Doyle.

Waiting for Frank to leave, Joe faced Elliott. “What’s up?”

Dean interrupted. “Joe.”

“Dean.” Joe turned to him. “I’m talking. Christ.”

“Just give me a second.” Dean looked frazzled. “Am I getting this right. You want every single one of these men to be medically processed as new survivors.”

“You got that right.”

“Six hundred?” Dean asked.

“Yes.” Joe said with some irritation.

“Joe, how am I supposed to do that. Processing these men will take forever.”

“Dean. That isn’t my problem. You’re the medical honcho. You deal



with it.” Joe, taking hold of Elliott’s arm, pulled him aside. “Now, what’s up?”  
“Did Sgt. Doyle tell you who he was? Or rather what he was to the society?”

“No. Why? I figured he was just a trainer.”

Elliott snickered with a shake of his head. “He’s more than that. Much more. He was informed of all society military aspects about as much as you inform . . . say, Frank?”

“Holy shit.” Joe’s eyes shifted in search of Sgt. Doyle. “This could actually be a hell of deal if he’s for real.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

Dan from Security, holding a radio, stepped to the pair. “Joe?”

“What!” Joe blasted. “Christ. Can’t you people see I’m talking. Like a group of goddamn children you are.”

Dan stepped back. “Sorry, Joe. Just have a radio call for you. You really need to loosen up. I’ve been taking these anger management course that Danny Hoi . . .”

“Give me that!” Joe snatched up the radio. “Christ.” He pressed in the button. “What?”

“Joe, this is Scott.” He spoke over the radio. “Think we need you in Beginnings. Got a little bit pf a problem only you can deal with.”

“What kind of a problem?” Joe asked.

“Rather not say over the radio. But there’s a slight situation at the cemetery.”

“What the hell kind of problem could there be at the cemetery? And don’t tell me zombies . . .” Mistake. No sooner did Joe say that, every single person monitoring the transmission over the radio had to inject their concern. Joe pulled the radio away when the numerous questions from varius voice poured over. “Knock it off.” He yelled in the radio. “And quit eavesdropping when you shouldn’t be. I’m handling it.” With a grumble, Joe handed the radio to Dan, excused himself from Elliott and made immediate arrangements to head back to Beginnings. If not only to find out what type of problem was brewing in the cemetery, but because he knew his community so well, he wanted to halt any obscure rumors about an attack of the walking dead.

^^^

Emotional huffs of breath was all Joe heard when he arrived at the cemetery. Of course the sounds with out a source from which they came probably helped explain why he was stopped four time en route to be questioned about the dead rising from the grave.

Perhaps Joe shouldn’t have pacified them with a remark about a Dean or Ellen experiment gone wild in the cemetery, but it was better than telling them the truth. And the truth was Joe knew exactly the reason for the huffing

noise.

Over the dirt that was scattered everywhere, Joe stepped to Andrea's grave and crouched down. Calmly he spoke, peering into the deep hole. "Ellen."

Ellen, on her hands and knees, face tear streaked and muddy, only looked up and continued her digging.

"Ellen. Stop it. Get out of there."

"No." She spoke emotional. "No. I have to find out."

"Find out what?"

"If she's here."

"What are you gonna do? Keep digging until you reached the coffin. Then what? Huh? Open it?"

"Yes!" Ellen blasted.

"Why . . . why in God's name are you doing this."

"I need to know, Joe. I need to know." So desperate Ellen sounded. Her hands moving frantically with the small shovel tossing out dirt quickly.

Slow Joe nodded and kept his voice calm. "Ellen. Andrea is . . ."

"Gone." Ellen looked up at him. "She's gone. Right. That's what you're gonna say isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't we get to see her before you buried her. Why did you guys put this coffin in the ground before her service. And why . . ." She swiped a tear from her eyes smearing the dirt. "Why is she always gone. Never is she dead. Say it, Joe. Say it. Tell me right now Andrea is dead and I'll stop."

"Ellen."

"You can't." Heavy she let out an emotional sigh. "It's not fair Joe. It isn't. I loved her too. I loved her. And my life . . . God, things are happening in my life . . . I'm falling apart. There's no one I can turn to. No one that can help. And I need to talk to her so bad . . . I just need to talk to Andrea. She's the only one that can help me right now." Her fist raised then dropped hard to the dirt. "The only one." Ellen's head lowered. "Oh, my God." She whimpered out. "What am I doing? What am I doing? I've lost it." On her last word, Ellen's entire body fell forward and she began to cry.

"Ellen." Joe reached his hand down touching his fingers upon her back. "Come on."

She only shook her head.

"Ellen., I if have to drop my old ass in this hole, pick you up and lift you out, there will be hell to pay. Now take my hand and get your ass out of this hole. Now." He said stern.

Ellen lifted her head. "You're gonna take me home and tell Dean, Aren't you? Please, Joe. Please don't tell him or Frank. Please don't . . ."

"Ellen just . . ." he wiggled his fingers. "I'm not telling them. Just come with me."

"Where." Ellen took his hand.

Joe gave a tug and help her to stand. “No questions. Just come with me.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY

So many times Robbie used that small case for patch chords. Eight inches by eight inches, small and perfect. And he carried that case, tucked under his arm like he did many times, only he didn't carry chords. Laying inside, wrapped in clear plastic was the revolver he dug up.

All Robbie heard was the voices. How many times on his way back home was he stopped.

*Robbie, is it true your dad found Ellen digging up Andrea's grave?*

*Robbie. What's up with Ellen? I heard she was digging up Andrea's grave.'*

*Was Ellen digging up Andrea's grave or chasing an experiment that rose from the dead.'*

Maybe it wasn't the best idea to lie, but unknown to Robbie he concurred with his father on the experiment issue fueling only more wild fire in Beginnings.

Something had to be done. It had reached the point where Robbie had to step forward to stop the madness for Ellen. Clenching that case for dear life, Robbie, nervous, knocked on the clinic lab door. "Dean?"

In his scurrying about, Dean stopped. "Hey, Robbie. What's up?"

"You have a minute?"

"Not really." Dean replied. "I'm waiting for Johnny and I can't find Ellen anywhere."

"She's with my Dad, don't you know."

"Great." Dean slammed his hand on the counter. "I'm only a third of the way through the new people and she's jotting off somewhere with Joe."

"Dean. She needed to."

"No. She needed to be here. Where the hell has she been all day."

Staying rational, Robbie stepped into the clinic and laid the case on the counter. "We need to talk. Take a minute please."

"Fine." Dean faced him. "What's up?"

"I know what's going on with Ellen."

"What do you mean?"

Robbie grew perturbed. "Her behavior? Her actions. I know what's going on. I know how to help her. And Dean, it's not a drug problem."

"Then what is it?" Dean asked.

"You have to stop this." Robbie's hand laid on the case. "I tried to talk to Frank about it. He got mad. Dean, I think . . . no. I know Ellen knows who killed Bev and . . ."

"Robbie." Dean stopped him. "Ellen doesn't know."

"Yes, Dean and that's the reason for the way she's acting. See . . ."

Robbie reached to open the case.

"Robbie." With attitude, Dean spoke. "I know you care about her. But

she's my wife. It's none of your concern."

"Fuck you it's none of my concern."

Out of control and emotional, Dean's voice blasted. "It's none of your concern! Stay out of it!"

"Fine." With a swipe of his hand, Robbie lifted the case and walked across the lab. "I'll end it for her. Dick."

Dean's eyes closed and the moment Robbie was gone was the moment he turned, dropped his elbows to the counter and buried his face with desperation in his hands.

^^^

A small amount of alcohol doused the glassful of ice that Joe nursed as he sat on Hal's sofa. Cigarette between his fingers, smoke rising, Joe stared in thought and in silence.

"I'm back." Hal announced as he walked in holding a small stack of clothes. "I knew she had fresh items at Elliott's."

"Thanks." Joe exasperated, stood up, took the clothes and walked to the bathroom door. "Ellen." He knocked. "Here."

"Thanks, Joe." Ellen opened up the door, reached out her hand and took them.

Hal waited for his father to return. "All clean now?"

"Yep." Joe placed his hands in his pockets.

"Does she know?"

"Not yet. She will." With a heavy breath Joe shook his head. "After this Hal, I'm . . . I'm packing her up. I don't know what's going on with her. Something is. She needs a break. Needs to get away." He dropped his voice to a whisper. "I'm giving sort of bogus reason to her and Dean, no if ands and buts about it, she has to be in New Bowman for a while. Is that all right with you?"

Every ounce of Hal's insides clenched an excited 'yes, finally', but he remained his cool self and nodded "Absolutely. We'll watch out for her."

"Good." Joe walked to the couch. "Good."

"Dad, listen. About what you are gonna do tonight."

"Hal." Stern Joe halted him. "I don't want to hear it. My mind's made up."

"No. No argument. I wanted to tell you. I think it's best."

Joe was grateful. He needed something positive at that moment even if it was a few words from his son. Because Joe's head was spinning with all that had happened, and despite what his best intentions were, he feared, for Ellen, it may already be too late.

^^^

Frank grinned then trotted to catch Johnny on the steps of the clinic. "Look at you." He opened the door for Johnny. "All official going to work."

"Yeah, have to relieve Dean in a bit. We're swamped."

"So I heard." Frank walked into the clinic with him. "You do real good around here, John. Just thought I'd tell you I'm proud of you."

Johnny slowed down. "Thanks, Dad. Where is this coming from."

"Just appreciation that you aren't as demented as Ellen and . . ." Frank pointed in the empty lab. "Dean. Wherever he is."

Johnny snickered. "Never that demented. I'm going to talk to Patrick. Hey, when I'm done wanna hook up for a drink?"

"I'll meet you at the hall." Frank replied watching Johnny walk away.

"No drinking." Dean walked from the back of the lab and stopped. "Frank?"

"Huh?" Frank stepped inside.

"Why are you wearing flame throwers?"

Frank looked to his left and right shoulders as if he didn't know they were there. "Oh. Yeah. Precaution because I don't know all about them or how to kill them. That's why I'm here."

Confused, Dean looked back to Frank. "Kill who?"

"The walking dead." Frank smiled. "Oh, yeah" He nodded to Dean. "Zombies in Beginnings. Thank you."

"Frank?" Dean had to try his best not to laugh. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Dean. Please. As if you don't fuckin know."

"No. I don't."

Frank huffed. "Walking dead. Zombies." With a tilt of his head, a drop of his chin, a moan and a flutter of his eyes, Frank did a dragging walk across the lab. "Zombies. Get it."

"Frank. I know what a zombie is."

"Good, then you have to tell me. How do they die. Simple shot. Or does it have to be a shot to the head. Can I burn them or won't that kill them."

Dean was lost. His hand lifted up. "Why are you even asking me this?"

"You started it."

"I what?"

"Yeah. You created the first one. Now I need to know all I can. Are they flesh eating and will the victims eventually rise up and be zombies too."

Dean looked very serious at him. "Frank. Stop this."

"Dean I am trying to. I can't do my job if I don't know what I'm up against."

"And you think it's the walking dead."

"I know it is."

"Zombies in Beginnings?" Dean asked. "That I started?"

"Dean. What the fuck. Yes. Now tell me what you know."

"Frank. There are no zombies in Beginnings. I didn't create a new species of walking dead."

"Did Ellen?" Frank asked.

"No!" Dean blasted.

"Dean. Don't do this. Don't lie to me. Own up to it. My men were disappointed the war didn't happen today, their hyped for this. Now give me the truth."

Dean stared for a moment. "Fine. Fine." He gave up. "I don't want a panic."

"No." Frank shook his head.

"You have to find the nesting. If it is multiplying it has to nest before it completely forms into a zombie."

"Whoa."

Dean nodded. "Interesting species. But I wouldn't shoot any of them."

"Why not?"

"Because they can return to normal after you killed the queen. Just tie up the suspected zombies and find the queen."

"Like a bee?" Frank asked to be clear.

"Exactly. Kill the queen. Save the community."

"Got it." Frank winked. "Thanks Dean. And . . . I didn't hear this from you."

Dean smiled and listened to Frank bark out orders on his radio to the special team to equip themselves with nylon rope. Though he hated lying to Frank, he did find it amusing, and the only choice he had if he wanted to return to work.

^^^

Sardonic and gloating, Elliott bobbed his head. "Fifty points, Captain." He wrote down his score. "You suck tonight."

"I suck? Thank you for that Elliott." Hal put down his cigarette and before he could comment on the frantic knock that happened upon his door, Robbie burst through.

"Hal." Sounding upset, Robbie rushed in.

"Robbie?" Hal stood up. "What's wrong?"

"I'm pissed, Hal. No. I'm furious. Yeah, fuckin furious. I want to kill Dean, not in the literal sense, but I do." Robbie shook his head.

Elliott stood up. "Perhaps I should leave."

"No." Robbie held up his hand. "It's all right. I'm tired of it, Hal. I have to stop this for her."

"Who?" Hal asked.

"Ellen. And I'm confused. I'm so confused. I tried to talk to Frank about it. It didn't do any good." Robbie laid down the case before Hal. "Help me, Hal. Tell me what to do. Please, tell me what to do."

Hal sensed he was invited to open the case and he did. With the lifting of the lid his breath escape him. "Robbie."

"Dean killed Bev." Robbie said. "I found that. He killed her. Ellen knows. Ellen's covering. She's losing it because of it. I know. I don't want to turn Dean in, but Hal . . . we have to do something."

"You're right." Hal shut the case. "We will. But what?"

"Talk to her?" Robbie suggested. "Tell her we know. It's all right. She doesn't need to cover for him anymore. Maybe we will?"

"You said you went to Frank." Hal said. "What was his reaction. Did he not believe you?"

"He didn't give me a chance to even say Dean killed her. He told me to drop it. That told me, he already knew. And Hal, he went into the hall and immediately had a drink."

Hal's eyes closed. "You've cornered Frank. That was the reason for the reaction."

"Excuse me?" Robbie asked.

"Frank saw the killer." Hal explained. "In a last ditch attempt Dad sent him through the machine to see who killed Bev. Frank insisted he didn't see. But he did."

Elliott interjected. "Can I ask, Robbie, how do you know it was Dean?"

"I saw him burying the gun. Well, I saw him in the area where the gun was buried." Robbie explained. "I didn't think much about it until I started trying to reason Ellen's behavior. And then it all came to me. They both lied on their statements. They both gave the exact same story. I mean, why do that unless one of them killed Bev and the other knew."

"And you think it's Dean?" Elliott asked.

"Yes." Robbie nodded. "He was burying the gun. Look at Frank's reaction."

"Frank's reaction. Frank's having a drink . . ." Elliott slowed down. "Doesn't spell Dean. You yourself Robbie, said you didn't get a chance to mention about Dean. I know you two probably don't even want to consider this, but . . . perhaps the killer isn't Dean, but . . . Ellen."

"Ellen doesn't have it in her." Robbie defended. "She doesn't."

"And Dean does?" Elliott asked. "Surely a man of his knowledge, should he want to dispose of someone, could find a much easier, less slovenly way that wouldn't spell murder. And maybe Dean wasn't burying it for himself, but rather for his wife."

Hal looked at Robbie. "He has a point."

"No." Robbie was adamant. "No. I refuse to believe it. Ellen wouldn't do it."

Hal shook his head. "Who's to say it was malicious. We don't know what happened. But we should consider, before we do anything, before we open our mouths about this gun. We should really find out which one, fired it." He reached over and closed the case.



Robbie's eyes closed. "You think it was Ellen. Don't you?"

Hal's voice dropped to a whisper. "And I think, deep inside, so do you. Maybe looking at Dean was your way of denial."

Saddened, Robbie's mouth twitched. "I don't want it to be her, Hal. What will happen to her if it is?" He lifted his eyes to his brother. "What are we gonna do."

Assuredly and strong Hal laid his hand on Robbie's shoulder. "Whatever it takes, little brother. Whatever it takes."

~~~~~

Had Joe not been in such a 'down' mood, he probably would have lost it on Frank and his band of merry zombie hunters. But Joe realized he was partly to blame for the mess, and there was some viable humor to the whole situation. So Joe merely told Frank and his guys that he saw no sign of walking dead in the four men they had captured. They were just tired, let them go home and search out near the killer baby region.

Frank and his men, happily did.

To end the long day was all Joe wanted to do. That and go home. He had fallen behind in his simple tasks enough due to the massive defection, but the situation with Ellen set him back hours. There were a few things in his office he wanted to touch base upon, the rest would warrant just an early start the next day.

With all that in mind, Joe went to his office. His first stop inside was the file cabinet and 'In' basket. Joe knew sometimes it was the little things that caused the biggest headaches and he wanted to review the pending migraine ahead of time.

Contents of the bin in his hand, Joe walked to the desk. It was light. Only a few items were in there and Joe was grateful that it wasn't worse.

Joe regretted that thought the second he sat and peered to his desk. He set down the items he had and looked at what had arrived in his absence. He knew, without opening it, it wasn't good. An Envelope, large sat there. Clipped to it was a folded note.

Joe pulled the paper from the clip, opened it and read it. The typed and brief words, 'I can't protect him any longer.' send chills up Joe's spine. Apprehensive, he lifted the envelope and opened it. It was light. And when Joe tipped it he realized though light in weight the contents weighed heavy in meaning.

On his desk, a purging result of the protector's guilt, was the red UWA bandana. And it wasn't so much the color of the bandana or the dried blood on it that made Joe sick to his stomach, it was the glaring, predominant Captain's bars pinned on the edge of the flap.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

December 4<sup>th</sup>

*What was going on?* Dean had to wonder. The first sign of oddness came when he went into the bathroom to shower that morning. It was damp and had that ‘just showered’ feel. Knowing it was difficult enough to get his children to bathe, the early morning shower bandit had to be Ellen.

Ellen up early?

Something had to be wrong. At least she wasn’t wondering about Beginnings aimlessly, he knew that for a fact because of the other paranormal occurrences. The smell of coffee and breakfast. A chain of events that began the night before. Dean didn’t want to question, but he had to. Ellen seemed to have gone through a behavioral metamorphosis over the course of one day.

“El?” Dean whispered her name when he stepped into the kitchen.

After turning off the burner, Ellen turned around. “Morning. Why don’t you sit down, I have breakfast.”

“El. Hating to look a gift horse in the mouth. What’s going on?” Dean asked.

“What do you mean?”

“O.K.” He lifted his hand. “You come home last night. We . . . we talked. Not about anything in particular, but it was a normal conversation. You let me sleep in bed with you. You snuggled up, kissed me goodnight. Told me you loved me . . .”

“I do.”

“But you haven’t said it in a while.”

“All right.” Ellen nodded. “Dean, I had a revelation.”

“Wait. You’re smiling. What’s up?”

“Nothing.” She shook her head. “I just had a revelation that everything will be fine.”

Dean just stared.

“Don’t. Don’t do that.” Ellen grabbed the plates and walked by him. “You’ll ruin my mood by thinking that.”

“How do you know what I’m thinking?”

“I know you.” She set down the plates. “And you’re thinking ‘what am I on’.”

“El, I never . . .”

“Dean, I haven’t said it. But I will. One time. I am not or was I taking drugs. Get it out of your mind. I won’t discuss it again. Sit down and eat.”

With apprehension, Dean did.

Ellen went into the kitchen and brought out coffee. “I know now. Things are gonna be fine. Just fine.” She joined him at the table. “Now,

there'll be some rough spots. But that's gonna be after today. Today is for me. Just me."

"I don't understand."

"I'm taking today to not worry about what has been bothering me. I'm not going to concern myself with it. I will deal with it, head on mind you, tomorrow."

"Can I ask what it is?" Dean questioned.

"You can. I won't answer. You'll find out tomorrow. And guarantee you'll sigh out and apologize up and down for being such a dick."

"A dick? Have you been talking to Robbie Slagel?"

"Robbie?" Ellen giggled. "Why would you say that?"

"He called me a dick last night."

"That's funny."

"Oh. Ha-ha. Real funny." Dean lifted his fork. "Have I really been a Dick, El."

"Yes."

Dean blinked. "All right be blunt."

"It's true. You've confused it with concern. Don't worry about it. I'm going to forgive you one hundred percent." Ellen laid her hand over his. "Why? Because I totally understand why you've been acting like this."

"A-ha." Dean nodded. "You're divorcing me."

"What?" Ellen laughed. "No. Gees. No."

"Ellen . . ."

"Dean." Ellen laid her hand over his mouth. "Eat. Don't worry about it. I'm not. Tomorrow I will. And then it will be fine."

Dean let out a breath as his mouth was freed. Ellen was smiling, acting more normal than she had in a long time. She was assuring him all was going to be fine. He had a hard time believing that. Even with her demeanor on a one-eighty, Dean was overwhelmed with the feeling that he wasn't facing a 'all will be fine' situation, he was facing the calm before the storm.

^^^

"This is totally awesome." Henry spoke with a smile upon his face staring down to the arm Danny was building.

"Thanks." Danny replied. The arm laid on the counter of the communications room. It looked like a metal skeleton. "The fingers do real good. But watch . . ." Lifting a small metal prod Danny brought it toward the end of the arm. "Mimicking the electrode the micro chip will send . . ." He touched the prod on the arm. The fingers curled some. "They aren't bending enough. They won't form a fist."

"Too thick." Henry commented

"What do you mean?" Danny asked.

"Too thick. You've built the structure of the fingers too wide at the

base. If they won't form a fist now, they probably won't bend once Dean covers it with the skin."

"They looked good." Danny commented.

"No, they looked awesome. For a normal prosthetic . . ." Henry shrugged. "Sure. It would work. But you want to make this phenomenal. You want this to be as if Robbie never lost his arm. Look how far you and Dean are going with this. Nerves, blood, so forth."

"What do you suggest?"

Henry took a closer look at the arm. "You can either rebuild the fingers or shave them. I'd suggest rebuilding."

"Any idea on weight and width?"

"Give me your specs, I can do it for you. I can start today sometime."

"Henry, that would be great. Could you?" Danny asked.

"Absolutely." Henry nodded. "I'll let you go. I have to get back."

"Yeah. I think I'll perfect the elbow joint when I'm doing the check."

"Talk to you later."

Danny lifted his hand in a wave, checked out his tools then fired up the communications panel. He turned down the volume some so the beeps wouldn't annoy him while he worked. Of course, the beeps of annoyance were nothing compared to the bizarre questions he received as council member about some sort of walking dead epidemic in Beginnings.

^^^

The envelope that Joe received the night before sat beneath his folded hands. Behind his desk he waited for two people. He had given a lot of thought to what he was going to do, or say. No conclusions would be jumped to until he had some answers.

A single knock brought in Frank. "Hey, Dad. I got your note."

"Sit down, Frank. We'll start in a minute." Joe's mood was not the best.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why are we starting in a minute. Is something going to happen." Frank took a seat.

"No, we're waiting for someone." Joe explained.

"Who?"

"Frank."

"I'm here."

Joe grumbled. "Will you just knock it off and be quiet."

"Is this about the walking dead?" Frank asked.

"No it's not . . ."

"Because I believe I have the situation under control." Frank explained.

"I didn't mean to upset Josephine this morning. Well, I did but . . ."

"Frank."

"You have to admit, she looks like the walking dead." Frank nodded. "Thought we had the queen. We're on to the nesting."

"Frank, will you knock it off." Joe ordered. "That's not what we're here to talk about."

"Then what is it?"

"In a minute."

Frank tossed up his hands. "I think it's been a minute."

Just about the point when Joe was going to lose it, Hal walked in.

A little out of breath from the hurry, Hal smiled. "I was at distribution. They said you needed to speak to me."

"Ah, no." Frank complained. "Please don't tell me your pulling the UWA in on the situation."

"What situation?" Hal asked as he sat down.

"Walking dead." Frank answered. "We have zombies in Beginnings."

Hal reiterated slowly to be sure he heard Frank correctly. "Zombies in Beginnings."

"Yes."

"Good God Frank what else can you possible conjure up?" Hal asked.

"No-no. Blame Dean, he invented them." Frank nodded. "Some SUT brought back to life or something. Flesh eating. They nest."

"Dad." Hal faced Joe. "I certainly hope zombies aren't the reason you brought me up here."

Joe just stared at Hal. "Think about what you just asked me. Then slap yourself for being a Frank."

"Can I slap him?" Frank asked.

"Frank." Joe warned.

"Ow." Hal glared and snapped a view to Frank after receiving the smack on the back of the head.

"Knock it off!" Joe yelled. "This is serious."

"So are the walking dead." Frank added.

"Frank!" Joe blasted. "Not another goddamn word out of you. You hear? Do . . . you . . . hear?" Joe asked. "Frank?"

"You said not another word."

Joe grunted and with a blasting smack of his hand on the desk he stood up. "This . . . this is very serious." his voice dropped to a calm one. "As you both know, in a little bit, there will be a meeting at the courthouse to tell the results of the ballot counting." Joe paced some. "It is my hope, that with the revealing of the consequences, that hopefully, the guilty party will step forward and end this. End this investigation. Put it behind us. Now . . ." He let out a heavy breath. "Right now, to you two, I am going to speak as your father. I knew the moment Frank stepped out of the time machine, that he saw, Despite what he claims, that he saw the shooter. You don't know and love your kid his entire life not to feel the turmoil he is feeling. You do." Joe walked back to his desk. "Even though Frank hid it well on the exterior, it

killed him on the interior. Which . . .” He sat back down. “Told me my son loves whoever it is that committed this horrendous crime.” During the words Joe spoke with deep meaning, his eyes moved back and forth from Frank to Hal. “Loved them enough to lie. To protect them. To cover for them at all cost. Despite . . .” Joe tilted his head. “Despite what Jason Godrichson believed, I know Frank. There are few people he would go to that extreme for. To build such a convincing wall that he never even flinched when the murderer was in the room being questioned. Lying.” He shook his head. “Never flinched. That’s love. To me. It ended up being one of four people. You, Hal. And Robbie for obvious reasons. Ellen, well, that would go without saying why. And Dean. Why Dean?” Joe shrugged. “No matter what my hard headed son says, he respects and loves Dean.”

“But not in that way.” Frank spoke to just be clear on the issue.

Joe remained in control, his eyes took a long blink. “Not in that way. And another reason, the most important reason, is he knows how much Dean means to Ellen. OK.” He exhaled loudly. “Now that my little speech is out of the way. I’d like to get to the point of my meeting.” From under the envelope he lifted the small folded note and opened it. “I received this envelope last night with this note that says. ‘I can’t protect him any longer’.” Joe laid down the note. He picked up a pencil, placed it in the envelope, and slowly he removed the bandana.

Frank immediately looked at Hal with question.

Hal showed not one reaction. He didn’t flinch, or move. Unfazed, cool and calm he remained.

Joe dropped the bandana on the desk. “Is that yours, Hal?”

Eyes on his father, Hal nodded. “Yes.”

“It is stained with blood. A lot of blood. Do I need to run a forensics on this. I will if you want.”

“No.” Hal still remained collected. “No need. You’ll find it to be Bev’s blood.”

At that second Joe felt as if his insides just dropped. Heavy he breathed out and ran his hand down his face. “I want this over.”

“And it shall be.” Hal said then stood up. “I will end it officially at that meeting today. The others who have gone through this investigation, deserve to hear my story and my apology for putting them through this. Will that be all right if I speak then?”

Staring at his hands, Joe only nodded.

“Well.” Hal cleared his throat. “I’ll finish my business in town, and I will see you in Bowman.” He walked to the door, looked back at Joe who stared at him so lost, then with one more look, Hal walked out.

Frank’s view jolted quick from the door to Joe. “Dad.”

“Frank.” Joe lifted his hand.

“But, Dad.” he sounded frantic.

“Not now.”

With frustration, Frank slammed his hands to the arms of the chair as he stood up walked across the office and barged out. “Hal!” he yelled. “Wait up.”

Hal stopped walking and turned around when Frank ran his way. “What is it.”

Hands on hips, every tense muscle in Frank’s face was predominant. “What are you doing?”

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

It was unlike Frank the way he spoke. Breathly and almost too emotional to slip out. “Hal.” He swallowed. “Come on. Why are you doing this? You and I both know you didn’t kill Bev.”

“And you and I both know who did.”

“I can’t . . .” Frank clenched his fist. “I can’t let you do this.”

“It’s the only choice, Frank. You know it. What will happened. So I’m out in the world for a few months. I’ve done that. So I lose my ranking. I’ll get it back. There is nothing of the punishment I can not handle. Can the same be said for the person who committed the act?” Hal shook his head. “No. You know it. And I know it. It is the best possible solution. It will be over.”

“But, listen what if I . . .”

“No.” Hal stopped Frank. “No. My mind is made up.” He started to walk again. “See you in Bowman.”

Frank watched his brother walk off. Hal walked straight, tall, as if he were taking on a battle he knew he could win. But it was fight Hal shouldn’t have been in. Hal was his brother. Frank thought he had it under control with the investigation. Never did he dream that it would come down to such a choice. It literally tore Frank a part at that moment, because he was stuck in an emotional battle of what was right or wrong. And he just didn’t know what to do.



There should of been some guilt for thinking that Ellen was lying to him. But instead Johnny was angry with himself for wasting the day and opportunity.

He wanted to do it before the hustle and bustle of the day. And even though the men of New Bowman moved freely about he streets, the shops weren’t open. And Johnny was well aware of one of the shops that didn’t open until later in the day. Ben and Todd’s accessory shop.

He found an easy way into the store through a back door. Johnny worried less about being spotted than he did about the protrusion in his coat caused by the phone.

Through the back, and into the darkened store front Johnny, low, made his way. He could hear the noise from the streets and with an occasional peek

from behind the counter he saw the men walking about.

The phone cord was taped to the wall as it ran into the unit that dialed for approval on Danny card purchases. Hoping he was right, Johnny removed the jack from the unit and in it, he placed the jack from the phone he held. Hoping it would work, Johnny grinned when he heard the dial tone.

Excitement and enthusiasm took over him and he vowed he wouldn't rattle unnecessarily, just a request to get him out.

"Hello?" Steward answered the phone.

"God, Stew, this is Johnny. Is George there?"

"Yes, Johnny. But in case we lose transmission. Listen. Here's the plan. Two days. Circle Montana. There is a clinic. Be there at noon. No later. Our men will be arriving in Bismark, and a chopper will be sent from there for you. It stop only long enough to pick you and Bev up and get you out. Two days. The sixth, at noon. Can you do that."

"Absolutely. Now listen . . ."

"I'll get George."

"Stew, wait I have to tell . . ." Johnny pulled the phone from his ear. The click and dead sound told him transmission was cut. Was he found out? Did somebody hear? He peered around and saw he was alone. But Johnny, not wanting to take any chances, knew he had better not only get out of that shop, but out of New Bowman, as fast as he could.

^^^

Danny Hoi's heart raced, and his hand laid upon his chest as his other still trembled on the switch that cut any and all phone lines in New Bowman. How long did it take him to recognize the signal and end transmission. It didn't matter, any delay was too long. But before informing Joe, Danny took a second to calm down.

"I'm sorry, Joe." Danny repeated with sincerity. "God, I am so sorry. I didn't think my Danny dollar card . . ."

"Danny." Joe halted him. "It's fine. Now . . . how long do you think this person broke through for?"

"I pulled readout. Twenty-two seconds and I caught it. I should have caught it sooner, I don't know, No, I was working . . ."

"Danny?" Joe snapped. "Stop. You got it. Had you not been there, who knows how long it would have happened. All right. We'll deal with this issue after the proceedings today. There's really nothing we can do about it right now. I have some things I have to take care of before I head out. I need you to work on seeing if you can pinpoint the location in New Bowman that came from. Then . . . Head on out to the new camp. Talk to Sgt. Doyle. See if he knows if George is aware of his daughter's passing, and see if he knows of



any insiders in Beginnings.”

“But I’m supposed to be in New Bowman today.” Danny said. “The suspect thing.”

“Well. I don’t think that will be necessary. You can say, after today, it’s over.”

Slowly Danny looked at Joe. “You’ve figured it out.”

“You can say . . . it’s over.” Joe nodded.

“O.K., what do you want me to do if Sgt. Doyle names someone?” Danny questioned as Joe started walking away.

“Take authority Danny. You’re on council. You’re the man in my absence.”

“I’m the man.” Danny turned his own way to make immediate arrangements to head to the new camp.

^^^

Bon fires blazed to help warm up the frigid December air. But somehow Danny didn’t think the former society soldiers needed the heat. They worked diligently putting together their barracks. Hammer pounded, drills and saws rang out. Every man seemed busy.

He led the way into a tent where rows of bunks were set up and Sgt. Doyle followed him in.

He wore a heavy flannel shirt, jeans and a backwards baseball cap on his head which he took off immediately upon entering the tent. “You wanted to see me?” Sgt. Doyle asked Danny.

“Yeah. Sit down, please.” Danny motioned his hand to a bunk and sat down on one himself.

“What can I do for you?”

“Danny Hoi. We haven’t met.” He extended his hand. “I’m on council in Beginnings.”

“Heard your name from Mr. Slagel, Very nice to meet you. Tim Doyle.”

“Tim. Question. This defection . . . you say it’s on the up and up, right.”

“Yes.” Sgt. Doyle nodded.

“How close were you to the operations in the society.”

“I attended many meetings. I like to think I’m well informed.”

“Did you know George’s daughter was here.”

“Yes. I hope I am not in any trouble for not divulging this sooner. I thought perhaps when the dust of defection settled . . .” He stopped speaking when Danny raised his hand.

“We were gonna ask then. Yes.” Danny said. “Does George know his daughter’s dead?”

“Not to my knowledge, he does not.” Sgt. Doyle answered. “So she was found out and executed?”

“Somewhat. Details at another time.” Danny continued. “Anyone else

you know of?”

“Yes. I know of at least two others. One name. The other identity I wasn’t privileged to.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. But the man I know, may or may not be relaying any information. He’s supposed to just be watching.”

“Excellent.” Danny smiled. “You can give me a name?”

“Yes, sir. Without hesitation.” Sgt. Doyle replied.

Danny was ready.

^^^

Authority. Authority. Danny remembered that when he walked strong, two of Frank’s security men on each side of him. There was no reason to wait for Joe. No reason to even take the slightest chance of not dealing with things right away. He had the name. He needed to secure the situation.

Through the doors of the clinic, Danny marched. In a line the three men were. Their footsteps in synch as they moved down the corridor and stopped at the lab.

“Johnny.” Danny called his name.

Slowly Johnny turned from the counter and looked. He gave a quirky smile when he saw the two security men and Danny. “What’s going on.”

“Seems a new defector gave us a name today.”

“A . . . a name?” Johnny asked.

“Yeah. So since no one is around I needed to inform some one, you’re it, that we will be posting these two men on the door of Jess Boyens’ room. No visitors are permitted until your grandfather has reviewed the situation. O.K.?” Danny asked.

“I’ll pass it around.”

“Thanks.” Danny backed away.

After Danny had left, Johnny released the breath he held, and then Johnny laughed.

^^^

Every suspect, with the exception of Danny Hoi sat in the smaller courtroom. They were silent. Split up, half on one side, half on the other, they faced forward looking to Joe and Grace who sat behind a long table at the front of the courtroom. Frank, hands folded, sat in a chair off to the side.

Joe waded helpless through the silence, thinking of the exact thing he was going to say, or rather introduce. His eyes moved about. Jenny sat with Hector and Henry on the right. Trish sat with Josephine directly behind. Dean and Ellen sat closer to the front on the other side. Elliott, Robbie and Hal a row behind them.

Hal.

Joe couldn't stop looking at his son. Usual arrogance and pride was all over Hal's face and Joe couldn't figure out why. Where was the guilt. The solace. Remorse? Even a little.

It was time to start.

After a look to Grace, Joe stood up. "I think you all know why you're here. The ballots have been counted. The punishment determined. It seems, depending on the circumstances of the crime, our . . . killer. The person responsible for Bev's death, will be removed from Beginnings for a disclosed amount of time. They may return after sentence. But they return afresh. Start all over. All loss of authority and ranking. It is . . ." Joe paused. "It is my hope that this thing ends today. Ends. Sentence officially handed down." Joe shrugged. "Over. For all of you. And I believe that will happen." Slowly, Joe lowered to his seat.

The nervous tapping of Frank's boots against the linoleum carried out like metronome. His hands in folded prayer fashion were brought to his face. His fingers pressed deep to the corners of his eyes. He didn't have to look. He felt it and lost his breath when Hal stood up.

There was a unison of confusion sounds that rang out when Hal stepped to the aisle.

Click . . . click . . . click, the steady stride of his boots hit on the floor as he walked center and stopped. "Dad. Grace." He turned and looked to the others. "First and foremost I must deliver my apologies to you all for the waste of your time and for the stress my deception has placed upon you." He pivoted back around and faced Joe. "It's over."

Robbie's eyes grew wide. "What! No!"

"Robert." Joe warned in a soft voice.

Elliott couldn't catch his breath. "What is he doing. No."

Hal continued. "I'm the guilty one." He pulled from his inside coat pocket the revolver. He walked up and laid it on the table before Joe and Grace. "There you have the murder weapon. I expect my sentence now."

"No!" Robbie stood up shouting.

"Robert!" Joe slammed his hand.

"No, Dad." Robbie argued. "He stole that gun from me!"

"What?" Joe questioned.

Hal spun around, "Robbie sit down."

"I won't. I won't." Robbie shook his head emotionally. "This is bullshit. I had that gun. You took it. What are you doing, Hal. Huh? Look at all you built and you want to give it up as some sort of chivalrous cover up. I won't let you. I won't!"

Frank, head still down, rolled his fingers in gratefulness.

"Robert." Joe spoke stern. "What are you doing?"

"He's covering, Dad. He's covering. Hal didn't kill Bev . . . I did."

*Fuck* Frank screamed in his mind. *What is going on with my brothers?*

"Robbie." Joe stated. "Sit down. It's not gonna work. Only six men wear a red bandana in Bowman. I have one them with Bev's blood on it."

Elliott stood up. "That's because it is mine."

A loud eruption of question broke out in the court.

Elliott spoke. "The Captain *is* covering, Yes. For me. Because of my illness. I am the one who killed Bev."

Hal bit his bottom lip and spun around with a point. "Sgt. Ryder. I order you to sit down right now and retract that."

"I will not." Elliott refused. "I won't let you go down for this."

"Neither will I." Dean stood up. "That bandana is not evidence at all. Bev's blood? Yeah, probably, for some obscure reason Hal came to me for a tube of Bev's blood. He believed there was another insider in Beginnings and he wanted to set this person up. He set himself up in the process."

Hal began to lose his cool. "Goddamn it, people. Can I not confess?"

"No!" Robbie shouted. "I did it."

Jenny Matoose stood up. "Stop the madness. Stop it. Robbie, your brother is covering for me. I am the one who killed Bev. He's covering out of our love."

Hal winced.

After looking at Hector, Henry stood up. "I'm as guilty as Jenny and everyone else. I killed her too."

"Me too." Hector stood.

"Count me in." Trish stood up.

Josephine, with a hiccup and a sway stood. "All of you knock it off. I killed her, Joey. I killed the little bitch."

It was thunderous and roaring the vocal blasting Joe did when he stood up. "Enough!" His arm pointed out heavy. "All of you sit down! Now! Even you Hal, Sit!" Joe waited until everyone sat down. "What the hell do you people think this is? A goddamn three ring circus. This is no joke. This . . . this was murder. I don't know what the hell is going on, who is really covering for who, but I won't stand for it. There is a hall outside this room. Ten minutes. Ten!" Joe yelled . "Get out in that hall like the children you are acting, sit there for ten minutes. And when I open that door back up I better have the real killer come forward. You hear me!" His face turned red as he yelled. "You have wasted enough goddamn time of mine and the community. There are other pressing matters that deserve full attention. Now this will end. It will end! And if I don't get a confession, If I have to find out the real killer, I swear to Almighty God, I'll toss out the mother fuckin ballots and kick the murderer out for good! Now out!" he kept his point. "Out!"

As everyone stood to walk out, Joe sat back down.

"Shh." Grace patted him on the back. "Calm down. Calm. There. Take breaths. Joe." She whispered. "I hear Danny Hoi offers a wonderful anger management class."

Joe only shifted his eyes.

"Maybe not."

The door to the courtroom closed and rang out in the silent room.

Scared and trembling the voice spoke up. "Joe."

Joe raised his head. "Ellen, get the hell out in that hall."

"No." She shook her head and stepped forward. Weakly she spoke, her words showing the sign of her holding back tears. "No."

Frank's eyes widened and enraged, he stood up. "Ellen. Get the hell out of here. Now!"

"No!" She screamed emotionally. "No. It has to stop. It has to. Joe . . ." Her words whimpered out. "Joe I have to say it. I'm the one who killed . . ."

"Ellen." Frank graveled her name.

The door to the court room opened and closed. Dean with a rush ran in. "Ellen. No. Please. No." He ran to her, wrapping his arms around her from behind and pulling her back. "Whatever she said Joe. Don't listen. It's not an act of chivalry. I won't let her take the fall. I killed Bev."

From his hold violently, Ellen spun. "Stop it. Stop it." She grabbed her head.

From his gut, face red, and every emotion in his voice Dean raged. "You promised me, Ellen. You promised me you wouldn't do this. You promised me!"

"I can't go on like this! I can't!" she screamed

He didn't need to scream, Joe's one word brought silence. "Stop." He looked at a standing Frank. "For the last time, I will ask you. I know you saw. Frank . . . who killed Bev?"

Frank swallowed. His eyes shifted from Dean to Ellen, and after locking in a telepathic stare for a moment with Dean, he refaced his father.

"Frank?" Joe questioned. "Did you see the shooter that night?"

"Yes." Frank answered.

"Who was it?"

Frank whispered with a cracking voice. "I'm sorry . . . it was Dean."

Dean's head dropped in relief.

Joe nodded and sat back down. "That will be all Ellen, wait in the hall while I speak to Dean."

Dean wouldn't look at her. Ellen brought her face close to his and whispered. "What are you doing?"

"I love you. That's what I'm doing."

A sob, a single sob escaped Ellen.

"We both . . ." Dean's voice was so whispering. "Love you that much."

"Ellen." Joe said. "Please leave,"

Ellen took in long snuffle through her nose, moved forward a step, stopped and rushed to the front table. "What happened to the note?" She asked rapidly.

Joe's attention was caught. "What?"

"The letter. It wasn't mentioned. The letter Bev was writing when . . ."

"El!" Frank shouted.

"No!" Ellen's hand slammed to the table. "Enough. What happened to the note, Joe? The one Bev was writing when she was killed. If Dean was the one, ask him what was in that note!" Ellen pointed backwards. "Ask him."

Joe looked to Dean. "Tell me."

Dean's views went to Frank for answers.

"He can't." Ellen said. "I can. Bev was writing about another insider in Beginnings. She almost wrote the name."

Defeat. Dean felt total defeat. Emotionally drained and in shock, he reached for a chair and all but fell into it.

Frank slowly sat back down.

Ellen tried, she tried to keep it together, but the look on Joe's face broke her heart. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"What happened?" Joe asked.

Ellen's eyes closed, and the memory rushed forward . . .

*Another phone call, another taunting. But that last call contained a comment about Andrea. How Ellen couldn't trust anyone. Poor Andrea. Bev Hadly hadn't a clue that everyone was on to her. Everyone knew. And to Ellen, the comment about Andrea only sent off warning signals. She waited. Dean asleep. Kids tucked away. And she left her home.*

*The streets of Beginnings were quiet, Ellen didn't even pass a guard. It was so easy to do what she had planned, she only wished she would of thought it through one hundred percent.*

*She sat on the edge of her bed, getting undressed for bed. Ellen peeked through the crack of the bedroom door watching Bev brush her short hair. Her hand trembled as she held the revolver, staring at it with such debate. Nerve up, Ellen walked in.*

"Bev."

Bev screamed.

"Shut up!" Ellen pointed.

"What . . . what . . ."

"Who? Who is the question." Ellen walked closer to her.

"What are you talking about?"

"I know you know who else in Beginnings is working for George."

Bev laughed. "Right. And I'm telling."

"You'll be dead. Bev . . . Hadly is it?"

"Oh, my God."

*"We know. We all know. The game's over. See, tomorrow morning my father will deal with you and kick you out. But, I'm gonna give you a chance to . . . escape. I'll even help you."*

"What?" Bev asked confused.

*"Yeah. Because I can care less about you. You said something tonight. You taunted about Andrea. If anyone knew, you did. Was she an insider?"*

*Bev stared at the gun pointed at her. "What do you think?"*

*"Was she!" Ellen yelled.*

*"No." Bev shook her head. "We set her up."*

*Ellen let out an emotional breath, reached out, grabbed a hand full of Bev's hair and yanked her across the bedroom.*

*"What are you doing." Bev struggled.*

*All of Ellen's rage went into that throw when she tossed Bev down to the desk chair. She kept her aim close on Bev as she reached into the desk drawer and pulled a paper and a pencil. "Write it."*

*"Write what?" Bev shook.*

*"Write it all. Write who you are. Clear Andrea's name and write the name of the other insiders."*

*"No."*

*Ellen clicked back the hammer on the revolver. "Don't think I won't shoot. No one will care about you. We all know who you are. Write it down now." Ellen ordered. "Do it."*

*Shaking Bev grabbed the pen. Her eyes kept shifting as she wrote.*

*Over her shoulder, gun aimed, Ellen watched. "Now about Andrea."*

*Bev wrote that down.*

*"Now about the other insiders."*

*Bev got as far as writing, 'And the other person is . . .' And she stood up. Lunging for Ellen she reached for the gun.*

*Back and forth it went, left to right in a power struggle over the revolver. Ellen felt Bev's grip loosening from the handle and she pulled the gun as hard as she could at the same time she shoved Bev back to the chair.*

*Bang.*

Ellen cried. Her head hung low, her shoulders bounced and she cried. "I'm sorry. I am so sorry. I didn't mean to kill her. I never would have killed her. All I wanted was Andrea's name to be cleared and . . . the name of the insider. I . . . I didn't mean to kill her, Joe."

Joe's hand covered his eyes.

"I didn't mean to kill her." Ellen whimpered.

Dean slowly stood up and made his way to Ellen. He stopped when he saw Frank approach her.

"El." Frank's voice cracked as he moved into her.

"Frank." Ellen raised her eyes. "I'm sorry."

"I would of done anything to stop this moment. I would of . . ." He grabbed onto her. "I would of done anything for you." His huge arms wrapped tight around her,

Ellen, face buried into Frank, felt not only him, but Dean as well he walked up behind her and leaned his body and being into her for comfort. Then, with exasperation of an ending, emotionally, Ellen, bodily weakened, folded.

^^^

A half an hour of time was given, and the other suspects then returned. Quiet the courtroom was as they were all gathered back inside. No one looked at anyone. They all stared forward.

Judge Grace called attention. "We'll proceed." She lifted a sheet. "Dr. Ellen Hayes could you step forward please."

Robbie's eyes closed. He had prayed that Dean covered. His prayers were futile. He felt the comfort of Hal's hand as it laid on his and gave an assuring squeeze.

"Dr. Hayes." Grace said. "You have confessed to this court for the murder of Beverly Hadly. Is that correct?"

"Yes," Ellen replied softly.

"I have reviewed your testimony and accounts of the night and found that the act of murder was not committed maliciously. You do understand that sentence must be handed down."

"Yes, I do. And I fully willing to accept it. I committed the crime."

"Very well." Grace nodded. "Because the health and welfare of the community comes first and because we are desperately short handed and behind in the clinical aspect, I am issuing a suspension on the sentence for one month so that yourself and Dr. Hayes, in the best interest of the community, can place the medical aspect in order. Is that understood?"

"Yes." Ellen nodded sadly.

"It is my obligation Dr. Hayes to inform you, under popular vote of the citizens, that following the suspension, you will be ordered to leave the providences of both Beginnings Montana and New Bowman. You will take provisions of personal items only. Nothing else. You will have no contact, and in no way are you to contact your home. No help to you will be issued. No protection. You will be excommunicated for a period of no longer than six months, no shorter than two. At which time, if you choose, you are free to return." Grace gave a tap of her gavel. "The murder of Beverly Hadly, is officially closed."



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"Obviously, he wasn't the one that made the phone call." Danny Hoi explained to Joe in Joe's office. "Forrest said, because of the series of operations, Jess is out of commission for another month. We won't be able to talk to him at least until tomorrow."

"I see." Joe peered at the information. "Well, the guards on the door were a good move."

"For Jess' protection as well. This other inside may try to get to him now."

"That's why we're publically exposing Jess as Bev's killer. Guard in the room, at the door. He'll be safe and so will . . ." Joe exhaled. "Ellen. And on that note." He closed the folder. "Can I put this in your hands, Danny. Really, I don't want to deal with anything right now."

"Without a doubt Joe. Mind if I use your office for a little bit to finish up some thoughts I want to jot down."

"Help yourself." Joe walked across the office. "Going to the hall tonight Danny."

"Yeah. After all this. Will I see you there?"

Joe whistled. "After I go grab something to eat . . . without a doubt." He opened up his office door and saw Robbie standing there. "Robert."

"Is it true?" Robbie asked. "Did that Doyle guy name Jess?"

"Robbie, walk with me." Joe started moving. "Doyle said that Jess was a deliberate defector. Set up to infiltrate and watch us from the inside. He didn't say whether Jess was doing anything as of yet . . ."

"Maybe he confused Jess with someone else?"

"No. Personally hand picked Jess for the job. We'll talk to Jess tomorrow."

Robbie nodded then stopped. "Dad. One other thing. Ellen."

"Robert."

"Dad. Listen. You can't . . . you can't let them kick her out."

"Robbie, come on." Joe sounded desperate. "Do you think I want that? Do you? No. My hands are tied. She killed Bev."

"Then you can't let her go out alone."

Stopping, Joe dropped his voice to a whisper. "I have no plans on letting her out in this world alone."

"So someone can go with her? Will that get her in trouble?"

"Nope. Grace and I discussed this issue before we even knew who the killer was. They would be able to help Ellen, but they couldn't do so through Beginnings. Whoever leaves with her may not suffer a loss of ranking, but they will have to be gone as long as she is."

"You know I want to be the one to leave with her." Robbie stated.

"I figured as much and I'd be disappointed if you didn't offer."

"So you'll support me on this." Robbie asked.

"Absolutely. One hundred percent but . . ." Joe stopped walking. "I don't quite think it's going to matter. Do you honestly think your brother Frank is going to let her walk out of these walls without him." Joe shook his head. "I look for him to leave no choice in who goes. But that will be after, and only after, he and Dean wade through this very short month."

^^^

*"We tried! We failed!" Frank's blasting voice played in Dean's memory. An argument so fresh in his mind. "So now there is no other choice!"*

*"I will not sit back and watch you make plans to leave, Frank. Not with Ellen."*

*"Who else is there Dean?" Frank asked sarcastically.*

*"Me."*

*"Right. The kids will lose their mother and father for two months?"*

*"What about you?" Dean questioned. "That means they'll lose you too."*

*"Dean, not only am I the only one who can do this, I am the only one who will do this. End of argument."*

*"It's not end of argument. She's my wife!"*

*"And for as smart as you are, it's not gonna mean squat in that world out there." Frank took a second to calm down. "Look. This isn't getting us anywhere."*

*"No, it's not."*

*"We shouldn't . . . shouldn't even be having this fight now. We have a month."*

*"We do. A lot can changed."*

*"Let's just agree on one thing right now. No matter what. She'll be fine."*

*Dean agreed.*

They parted shortly after, on better terms, both needing time to think, cool down, and calm down before joining back up that night. They both needed and wanted to speak to Ellen. And they would, when she returned from the clinic. She told Dean she needed some time alone. To think of nothing but work. Dean projected the air of not having a problem with that. But the truth was, he did. He regretted letting Ellen out of the house, even for an hour, because he knew once she was gone, he'd wish with all his heart for that hour back.

The silence in the house was painful. And Dean found himself actually wanting Frank back. Even if it was to argue, it wouldn't allow him time to think. And the more Dean thought, the more his heart broke.

The picture of him and Ellen was slightly bent between his folded hands as he sat on the edge of the bed. He kept rubbing the end of the photo across his forehead, rocking, thinking, feeling so lost. Remembering so vividly the fateful night that brought them to that point.

*The footsteps. The fast running footsteps awoke Dean out of concern that perhaps one of the children was sick. He jumped from the couch, half out of it, but not that out of it that he didn't see the bloody footprint on the carpet. He had barely made it into the hall when he heard the noise. Breath. Wheezing breaths, fast and emotional. He followed the sounds. Every step he took seemingly from a nightmare. The hall darker toward where his bedroom was. The sounds and sight of his room came into a distorted sideways focus as if Dean were running through the tunnel of some amusement park ride. What had happened. He knew it was Ellen making that noise.*

*He flew into his bedroom. The bathroom light was on, and the breaths and pants were even louder. Scared he ran straight to the bathroom. "Oh, my God." He stepped in the archway.*

*Between the commode and the tub, back pressed tight against the wall, Ellen was. Her hands were raised to her ears, she held tight the revolver and she was covered in blood. She shook. Dean had never seen her shake so badly.*

*"El."*

*Her shoulders raised and fell frantically. Her eyes wide, she looked at Dean. Muscles tense, panic spewed across her face, she spoke through hyperventilated breaths that contained her tears and her fears. "Dean . . . Dean . . . I killed her . . . I killed her . . ." She wheezed out. "Oh. God. Oh, God."*

*"El." He rushed to her.*

*"I didn't, didn't . . . mean it. I swear. I swear. I killed Bev . . . I killed Bev." With an entire body shudder, Ellen's head flung back and she release a gurgling, painful cry as she slid down the wall to the floor. "God, help me." She sobbed. "I didn't mean to do it."*

*At that instant, Bev was no concern, what happened to Bev didn't even matter. All that struck Dean, killed him, was what Ellen was going through. He hunched down to her, before her, reaching out to her. Not knowing what to say.*

*Anthium. That was all Dean had in his house that night. And a half a dose was all he gave Ellen. It calmed her down enough to be rational, but not enough to take away the shock and sadness.*

*"You promised me! You promised me El!" Dean heard his emotional voice screaming in the courtroom. "You promised me."*

*Ellen had stopped crying, more of a blank stare was on her face as she sat in the tub. The trickling water was the only sound for the longest time. Dean had removed all the blood. Emptying the tub, refilling, all while Ellen just sat there, knees bent up, arms across her legs.*

*He brought the wash rag gently to her face once more. "I think we got it all."*

*"Please don't hate me." Ellen spoke dazed.*

*"No, El. I don't hate you." Dean dropped the washcloth. "Don't even think that."*

*"What am I gonna do?" She moved her eyes to look at Dean. "What are they gonna do to me when they find out?"*

*"They aren't going to do anything. Because they aren't going to find out."*

*"What?"*

*"You're not saying anything. I won't let you."*

*"But, Dean. Dean I . . ."*

*"No." Dean stopped her. "No. You didn't do anything. I'll take care of the gun. Your clothes. Everything. But you have to promise me something. Promise me with everything you are that you will never, not to a single soul, ever tell anyone. It doesn't get beyond you and me."*

*"Dean?"*

*"Ellen." He grabbed her hand. "I will do anything to protect you. Give me that promise."*

*"I . . . I promise." Ellen shivered.*

The promise. And Dean had his own. To protect Ellen at all costs. What extremes would he have gone through to keep that promise? Any. He would have carried that burden on his own and faced the consequences of it as well. He had every intention, but a part of him was grateful when Frank stepped into the picture. A night Ellen was in New Bowman. A simple evening when Frank wanted a drink so bad that he sought out Dean to talk him out of it. The evening that produced the reminder flask.

How hard it was for Frank to go to him. Dean knew it, and he knew Frank well enough to know that something other than the simple urge for alcohol was pushing him to that brink.

The pain on Frank's face when he swore Dean to secrecy. It was at that exact moment that Dean realized the undeniable bond of trust between the two men who had been mostly enemies since the day they met. Purge his soul, release the burden, release the desire to drink so much. Have someone carry it with him. Someone that would go to the extremes that Frank himself would go to. That was Dean.

How far into the sentence did Frank get that night?

*'Dean. No one knows this. But my Dad and Jason sent me through the time machine to see Bev's killer. I . . .'*

Dean had cut him off. Frank didn't have to say.

*"Then if you did that Frank. Then you are protecting the killer." Dean said.*

*"With my life Dean. I'm protecting that person with my life."*

*It was unleashing his burden as well. "So am I, Frank."*

They had it figured out. Dean swore they did. How many times did him and Frank discuss every angle, every possibility, every outcome. They swore up and down that should it ever come down to it, without a doubt, Dean was the killer and Frank saw him that night at Bev's.

They bonded on that. They trusted that. They even tried that angle. But they failed. Dean couldn't stop wondering, why Ellen just wouldn't let it go. Why she wouldn't let Dean be named the killer. Surely she had to know if they suspended her sentence to get the clinic in order, Dean's sentence would have been suspended indefinitely. Even if Dean had to leave for a month or

so, it wouldn't have mattered. He would of been able to handle that. What he couldn't handle was the thought of having to watch Ellen leave Beginnings. And if he couldn't handle the thought, how was he going to handle the actual occurrence.

The truth was. He wouldn't.

Crushed. Dean was crushed. There wasn't a part of his body that didn't ache with thought of all that had gone down. He was crumbling inside. There had to be a way for Dean to stop it. To stop any chance there was of Ellen leaving and he had a month to figure it out. He had to do it. Because if Dean had to witness the love of his life leaving her home without him, then he knew from that moment on, nothing would matter. His work would fail. His life would mean nothing. *He* would be nothing but a shell, empty and lost, and he would remain that way until the moment Ellen returned.

^^^

There were a lot of things on Ellen's mind and she had vowed one of them would not be Johnny. She thought she had it all planned out. Take a calming day, fear nothing, then the next day approach Joe.

How much had changed. She far from cruised through the day, and it wasn't calm either. Everyone's demeanor toward her was 'down' as if she had some sort of horrible disease or something. As if she were facing her death. Unless they weren't telling her something, Ellen wasn't going to die. She was merely paying for a crime she shouldn't have committed. Killing Bev, whether intentional or not, no matter who she was, was wrong. And Ellen didn't just take one life, she took two. In retrospect, weighing the scales of guilt, Ellen leaned more toward the innocent child that died at her hands. When did it dawn on her? It didn't until right after they removed Bev's uterus, and then it all barreled down on Ellen. The true crime in the murder. The unborn child. The baby. Henry's baby.

Ellen knew deep down inside of her, *that* played a lot in her decision to turn custody of Nick over to Henry. She took one child from him, she would not withhold another. Perhaps, in some small way, whether Henry knew it or not, it was Ellen's way of making a little bit of his loss up to him.

The turning over of Nick was still fresh, and Ellen supposed once she sat down and talked to Frank and Dean they would understand her logic. Not to mention, why couldn't Henry raise his own child. What *really* gave Frank and Dean the *right* to determine who would be the male role model? Though Henry showed no signs of paternal brilliancy, what was to say, once he realized he wanted to be a father, Henry wouldn't be a great father?

Ellen held strong beliefs that he would.

Henry had changed, in the course of a few weeks before she gave him Nick. He went from a man no one could speak to, to a man who started to smile again. Ever since his secret of Bev was lifted, Henry's whole personality

started to come back. The raising of a heavy burden from his shoulders. Ellen knew all too well, how heavy a secret was to carry.

She carried two.

Maybe it wasn't the best idea to lie to Dean on why she had to leave the house. But Ellen was certain once she returned back home she would tell him the truth. All he did was stare. Frank as well. Shaking their heads, telling her they were sorry. No matter what she told them, they weren't hearing her. They wanted to pity her, themselves, for her having to leave Beginnings. Ellen disagreed. Had it been the old world and she committed the act of murder, in Ellen's mind the punishment would have been far worse than just having to leave the sanctuary of her home for a couple of months. She wasn't worried about it. Really wasn't worried. She was ready to face the punishment. Even if only for her soul.

She had told Dean that she needed 'alone time' to sort out feelings and thoughts, when in actuality, Ellen needed to get away from the gloom Frank and Dean projected, to take hold of the feeling that came upon her.

Peace.

Ellen felt a sense of rejuvenation. It was out. It was told. She no longer hid behind the knowledge that she had taken a life. And despite the front that she put on, there wasn't a day that went by when she didn't think of it, dream of it, feel such a heavy amount of guilt that she didn't think she could live with it. Those feelings, of what she had done, she knew would always stay with her. But they wouldn't be magnified by the fact that she was covering it up.

Ellen could only imagine how she would feel once the secret of Johnny was lifted from her as well. Going as planned, it was supposed to be the next day that she would tell Joe. But Ellen couldn't. She would wait. She had too. Joe, Frank, Robbie, they were feeling the grief of her confession. It would be too much, especially for Joe and Frank, for them to handle just yet. If their hearts were broke over her, how would they feel to find out the truth about Johnny.

A few more days. She could live with that. A few more days.

Grabbing her lab coat off the tree in the clinic lab, Ellen began to slip her arm in the garment when she realized it had been days since she had worked. And with that, came the realization that it had been even longer since she had been in the cryo-lab.

If it was her intention to be alone, to just concentrate on something else, then to Ellen, there was no better place to be than the cryo lab. Leaving the backlog of clinic work for Forrest and Dean, lab coat on, Ellen left for the cryo-lab.

~~~~~

It didn't matter whether he nursed it, sipped it or downed it, Frank was

drinking. Like a magnet Joe's eyes caught that as soon as he walked into the social hall. The hall was particularly loud and crowded and there was a 'up' air about it. Except at the bar where Frank sat. Directly to Frank Joe walked, leaning into the bar next to him. "What are you doing?" Joe whispered.

"Guess." Frank lifted his glass.

Joe slammed it back down before Frank could take a drink. "Don't do this."

"I already have. This is my second."

Joe peered to the other side of Frank where Johnny stood. "Why did you let him drink?"

"Pap. I'm not his father." Johnny spoke soft. "You tell me how to stop him?"

"Frank." Joe tried again.

So sad Frank swayed a view to Joe. "Dad, not tonight, not after today. Don't. I need this. I swear I won't drink again."

Joe turned away briefly and looked around the hall. "What is this, a celebration?"

Frank lifted the glass. "To the end of the murder investigation. Everyone involved is here." He took a sip speaking as low as he felt.

"Where's Dean and Ellen?"

"Ellen." Frank set down is unfinished drink. "She's at the clinic. Dean, well, he's home and that's where I'm heading. To see him." He started to stand up.

"All right. That's probably for the best. I'd rather have you there. I'll see you at home." After getting a nod from Frank, Joe walked off.

Frank lifted his jacket from the bar stool and placed it on. "I'll see ya, Johnny."

"Dad? Why are you hanging out with Dr. Dean tonight. I thought you'd want to celebrate with everyone else."

"I'm not in the mood for celebrating."

"Why?"

Frank let out a heavy breath and leaned into Johnny in a secretive mode. "This is not to get out. Ellen, not Jess, was the one who killed Bev." He stood up straight. "Night John."

Johnny couldn't even respond. He tried with everything he was not to show the anger toward Ellen that fueled within him. And the moment Frank left the social hall, so did Johnny.

Frank may have whispered, and others around too involved to even hear. But not John Matoose, he was listening and he zoomed in on the conversation. And as Johnny walked from the social hall, John Matoose followed with the intention to stay close behind him.

A celebration it was. Joe thought the mood was awful light. Was

everyone *that* glad that the Bev thing was behind? Henry certainly seemed it. Standing with Hector by a table, waiting for their turn to throw darts, Henry laughed. But that wasn't as odd for him as the fact he yelled something jokingly crude to another player.

"Henry. Hector." Joe wanted to say hello as he walked by them. "Having a good evening?"

"Oh, hey, Joe. Yeah." Henry smiled.

"Just being a little cautious . . ." Joe said. "Knowing your history, Henry. Where's Nick?"

"Nick?" Henry questioned. "Nick. Nick. Oh, shit Hector we left him at home." He took a step, stopped, turned back to Joe and flashed a grin. "Gemma's watching him."

"Ha-ha-ha. Funny." Joe shook his head with a slight smile. "Have a good night Boys." Laying a hand on Henry's back, Joe kept walking. He was going to find a table, sit down, listen to Paul play his acoustic guitar. But he spotted Josephine, and the appearance of her sent warnings to Joe. She was different. It was after nine and she wasn't asleep on the bar.

He slid to the stool next to her. "Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all, Joey. Not at all." Josephine slid a bottle Joe's way. "Here, I'll even share some of mine."

"Everything all right?" Joe asked. "You're still semi sober."

"Yeah. That sucks, don't it." Josephine tipped her glass into her mouth. "But. Got a lot on my mind, Joey. Today . . . it's a weighing heavy." She gave a twitch to her head. "I ain't never disagreed with any decision before, ya know. But I got to disagree with this one."

"The temporary ousting."

"That's the one." Josephine poured some whiskey in her glass. "I understand your position on giving law and order. I know, the next time someone gets shot, you want it to be established that it's a crime."

"Well, yes." Joe poured a drink.

"But this is your girl, Joey. This effects you personally. Can't you do anything. Ain't you gonna try to stop it."

"I wished to God I could." Joe spoke soft. "I can't. If I want to fairly run this community, I just can't. And it's breaking my heart."

"Sad." Josephine sighed out. "Sad she's gotta leave. And that only leaves me to wonder . . . ." She took a drink and gasped. "Why couldn't it been Frank."

Joe chuckled. "You know. I don't think you and I have sat down and had a drink like this before. Why is that."

"Never wanted to drink with you before."

Joe blinked. "Can I ask why."

"One word." Josephine nodded. "Frank. Couldn't look at you with respect knowing you helped bring that beast into this world. Dumb bastard Frank."



Joe lifted his glass. "I'll drink to that."

^^^

Since the incident with Billy, there was always some apprehension about turning on the cryo lights. So Ellen perpetually left them on. She announced her arrival vocally the moment she stepped into the lab. Smiling at the bad aroma and sensing the happiness to see her by the thumping against the cages.

"Hello." Ellen waved. "Nothing deadly today. I'll feed you." She made her way to the sink. "Mainly though. I'm here to look at my embryos. I have a child growing, you know. We'll see if he turns out deformed. Dean won't tell me." Reaching over to turn on the sink, Ellen heard the 'bang' against the sink as soon as she leaned. "Was that me?" She giggled, stepped back and looked down.

She saw the protrusion in her lab coat pocket. "Dean must have left something in here." Sticking her hand in, Ellen pulled out the small pocket tape recorder. "Oh, he'll be missing . . ." She stopped and froze. "Oh, shit. Oh, shit." She spun to face the deformed animals as if they understood her. She clenched it to her chest. "I forgot all about this. Do you know what this is?"

"No, El." Johnny's voice, mean, called into the lab. "What is it."

Wide her eyes grew and Ellen stepped to the cages inconspicuously slipping the tape player between two cages. She turned around and faced Johnny. "I was talking to my hybrids. What are you doing here?"

"You did it, didn't you?"

"What are you talking about."

"You killed Bev." He stepped to her. "Don't try to deny it. I know it wasn't Jess like everyone else thinks. My father told me."

"Frank? Told you that?"

"Oh, yeah." Johnny smiled demented. "Nice guy huh?"

"Listen . . . Frank is wrong." Ellen shifted to her right to try to get by him. One step was all she took and Johnny grabbed hold of her. With all of his strength he nearly picked her up and tossed her to the side.

Ellen flew with a slight scream, slamming hard into the other counter. She looked up once, and fast, then gaining her footing she tried to make a run for it.

Out Johnny's hand lunged shoving her back again. "You won't get away with it. By the time they find your body, El. I'll be gone." Fingers extending, quick he grabbed on to her throat, snatched her forward and raised his fist. Ready to pummel, Johnny's fist made it within an inch of Ellen's face, when the shoulder rammed into him spearing him across the lab.

John Matoose landed hard on top of Johnny. Half unbalanced, John

tried to stand, and in his lifting of Johnny, received the clenched fist blow to the side of the face that caused his hands to release him.

Johnny raged to John, grabbing him, lifting him and shoving him. As soon as John began to go after him, from behind Johnny's back he pulled a revolver and aimed it. "Go ahead." Johnny caught his breath and shifted the gun Ellen's way. "Which one of you do you think I'll shoot first? Do you think I care?" he snickered sadistically. "It's over."

John Matoose stood by Ellen. "No. It's over for you, Johnny."

"On whose word. Yours?" Johnny smiled. "You've been working for me. Hers? She's a killer. Jess went down. So will you." he backed up and put the gun away. "I have two more days in this place. And I swear to God, if I even sense I'm going down before that, I will go down shooting, And I won't give a fuck who I hit." Giving one more glaring look, Johnny stormed from the lab.

Ellen saw John Matoose getting ready to chase him. "No." She stopped him.

"What are we gonna do? Just let him walk away?"

"Yes." Ellen turned into the counter and dropped her face to her hands. "You heard him. Two days. Let him go."

"Ellen." John whispered to her. "You're it. You are the one who can bring him down."

"Shooting?" Ellen raised her eyes to John. "You heard him."

"I don't care. Do you realize he could have killed you?"

"It wasn't the first time he tried. You can say I've been taking a lot from Johnny lately."

John closed his eyes. "Open your mouth. Go to Joe. You're proof. Look at your neck." He reached out tilted her head to expose the red mark. "If we let him walk away. Let him leave Beginnings, then we have nothing. No one will ever believe he did anything to you."

"That will never happen." Ellen walked across the lab to the cages. "They'll know about him. I'm not the only proof." She lifted the tape player, pressed rewind, and then play. She let the tape play long enough for hers and Johnny's voice to ring out and then she shut it off.

John walked over and snatched the tape player. "Thank you."

"John?"

"Sorry." He backed up and moved across the lab.

"Please. I'm begging you." Ellen ran to him. "Joe. Frank. They won't be able to handle it right now. Not right now. Please don't go to them."

"Oh." John looked smug. "I have no plans on going to Joe or Frank." He grabbed the cryo lab door. "Lock this or go topside to the clinic." He pulled the door closed and smiled looking down at the tape player.

^^^

From behind his desk, Hal looked worn, his eyes only lifted to John Matoose who stormed into his office. "John?"

John paused before Hal's desk and smiled. "Ellen knows all about Johnny."

"What? Did she . . ."

"He's been going after her every chance he can." A proud smug look hit John's face. "It's over." With a hard 'slam' he set down the tape player. "We got him." His thumb pressed 'play'.

There was speaker noise, possibly the hitting of the microphone against material. The voices were muffled, but they were strong.

*"Did you do it?" Ellen asked.*

*"Do what?" Johnny's voice spoke.*

*"Did you change what I put into the computer."*

*"What do you think. Of course I did. Goes with that drug abuse problem you have, El."*

*"You know . . . Do not think for one second I'm not spilling my guts. I have had it with you."*

*"And I . . . I'm sick of your threats. Tell. Take your chance. You think you'll hurt me. Watch out who you end up hurting."*

*CRACK!*

It could of been the slap heard around the world, that was how loud it rang out and through Hal. Rage was an understatement.

Eyes glaring, Hal rose up from his seat. His hand swiped down in one motion and without saying anything, he snatched up that tape player and barged straight from his office.

^^^

Even though he didn't need it, Hal played that tape over and over in his speeding ride to Beginnings. He let each word fuel him. He rewound and played the slap Johnny delivered, that sound of pain Ellen made and he let it boil every ounce of his emotions to the point he hindered on explosion.

The jeep screeched to a hard loud stop just before the social hall. Hal's eyes were on the door of the hall and he spoke to John Matoose as he moved there. "Stay here. Stay put." his hand reached out and he could have whipped the door from the hinges with the force he flung it open.

The noise was loud, but Hal heard none of it. He saw Johnny sitting at the bar and he made it through the thick crowd as if they were mere steam.

Not saying anything, every muscle in his face hard and tense, Hal's left hand shoved into Johnny's back, while his right reached under Johnny's jacket and pulled the revolver. He tossed it onto the bar and it spun all the way down clearing and breaking glasses and causing an immediate hush. "You'll go down taking no one . . ." Hal gripped the back of Johnny's neck

and lifted him. "No one but yourself."

Literally, Hal carried Johnny to the door of the hall, kicked open the door with his foot and with all of his weight he hurled Johnny out into the street.

Too close the jeep was, perhaps on purpose, and Johnny landed straight into it.

Hal gave no chances. Not a single opportunity for Johnny to rise up. He charged at Johnny, picking him to his feet with one hand, revving back a tightly closed fist and smashing hard to Johnny's face. "Consider that for Ellen." Hal pulled back again and struck. "For every time you hit her. This . . ." Another hit. "Is for her. For what you've done to my family . . . I could kill you now." It was a growl of emotions Hal produced that left his body in a form of a scream as he picked up Johnny once more and threw him to the street.

In the distance Hal's name was called only once, and not even two steps into his second lunging for Johnny, Hal sailed sideways with the weight of Frank's bodily hit.

Both to the concrete the brothers landed in a body over body roll. Strength against strength they fought to free the others hold, only to eject themselves from each other.

Fast to a stand they both rose and like two bulls they charged.

Frank's connection to Hal was first, slamming him hard in the jaw with hit, but he was not without receiving one just as fast.

*Slam!* Hal crashed into the side of the social hall and seeing Frank's charging hand, he ducked.

The denting of the metal, the thunderous connection Frank made, didn't faze him one bit, he grunted once with the hit he took to the gut. Then laying his hands on the side of Hal's face, Fingers gripping, he careen Hal hard into the wall.

Connection for connection, Hal flung back, colliding the back of his head hard into Frank's face.

Frank stumbled back, Hal spun. Another eruption was imminent. The crowd and pleas to stop, didn't matter. The firing of Joe's gun didn't halt them.

It had to be dealt with like a football game.

It took two men on each of them to break up what was escalating into something worse.

Henry and Danny Hoi dove for Hal at the same time Hector and Dan from Security rammed into Frank.

Separated.

Emotional grunts and struggles ensued, until Joe stepped in between his sons. "Knock it off!" He blasted looking left to right. "I'll shoot the both of you. Try me!" he took a moment to run his hand down his face. "Now what the hell is going on!"

Frank's arm swung over Dan's shoulder with a heavy point. "Ask him!" he pointed to Hal. "He went after my kid."

Joe shifted his eyes to Johnny who could barely move by the jeep with John Matoose right beside him.

Hal laughed. "For no reason! Your kid, Frank! Your kid try to kill me, your bother, Ellen, Dean and everyone else! Your kid is the insider we have been looking for!"

"Bullshit!" Frank screamed.

"No!" Hal blasted back. "Do you think I wanted it to be him! Do you? No! But it's true!"

Frank looked at Johnny who sadly peered up. Frank shook his head. "No. For some reason, for some sick fuckin reason Hal. You want to believe this. I'll never believe you."

"Then believe her!" To his left, Hal pointed to Ellen. "Ask Ellen. Ask her, Frank. Will you believe her? She knows., She has known! And for you, she tried to protect him. What did it get her . . ."

"No." Frank shook his head emotionally.

"Ask her!" Hal blasted emotionally again. "Ask her how many times Johnny hit her? Ask her how many times he knocked her out and left her to die! Ask her!"

Released by Hector and Dan, Frank's body trembled in confusion as his eyes locked on to Ellen. "El?" He questioned. "El? Tell me it isn't true. Tell me Hal is lying."

Ellen's mouth tightened up. She looked upon the faces that stared at her on the street. Faces she loved that wanted answers. Joe. Frank. Robbie.

"El?" Frank questioned, his voice cracking. "Tell me. Not my kid, El. Not my kid."

Ellen swallowed every ounce of fear. "I'm sorry Frank. It's all true." On her confirmation, Ellen spun and took off running.

Hal watched her for a second, then followed.

Frank's mouth opened wide. He couldn't move, breathe.

So lost, confused, Robbie just swung a view to Frank then to his father.

Joe squeezed the corner of his eyes, and only gave a motion of his head to Danny Hoi.

"No!" Frank yelled when he saw his men taking Johnny into Custody. "No."

"Frank." Joe held out his hand.

"Dad." Frank tried to get by Joe. "It's my kid."

"I'm . . I'm sorry, Frank." Joe shook his head with sadness.

"Johnny!" Frank yelled out. Such a child Johnny looked to him being grabbed by two men.

"Dad?" Johnny looked back as they pulled him away. "They're lying, Dad. They're lying. Please. Believe me." Johnny begged. "Help me."

Heartbroken. Frank was crushed and felt so helpless as he watched

them take his son away.

^^^

Had Hal not heard the heavy sobs, he would have never of found Ellen between the two warehouses, huddled into a ball on the ground, like she had rolled into a shell.

He dropped down to his knees beside her. "Ellen."

Ellen only cried harder. "I'm sorry for doing this to your family. I'm so sorry."

Hal's arm reached over her arched back. "Don't be sorry, Ellen. Be glad. It's over. For you, it is finally . . . over." Emotions of turmoil building in himself, Hal leaned down to her and with his entire body he gave an embrace that blanketed her entire being. And he held Ellen tightly. "It's over."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

So tight Dean's fingers were clenched that his knuckles were white. He pressed his fist hard to the surface of his dresser. His arms straight, ridged, while his head hung low. Every muscle in his body tensed up and Dean wanted to scream. Scream in pain for Ellen over what he had just heard.

Hal paced slow to him. "I just thought I'd give you the whole story. Just . . . so you know." He laid his hand on Dean's back.

Dean couldn't speak, he only nodded his head.

"I'll get her."

Tight Dean's eyes closed listening to Hal walk out of the bedroom.

Hal pulled the door almost closed behind him and walked to Ellen who stood in the middle of the hall.

"You didn't have to do that, Hal." Ellen told him.

"How much of the truth would you have told your husband?" Hal asked.

"I would have spared him . . ."

"What?" Hal cut her off. "What would you have spared the man you are married to." He dropped his voice to a whisper. "Nothing. He should know everything. He has to know it all Ellen in order to know what you are feeling. Now . . . I think you need to speak to him."

Ellen nodded. "How do you think this will effect you and Frank?"

"For now . . . badly." Hal gave a half smile. "But after he realizes the truth, we'll be back to our normal bickering, hating each other state."

Stepping to Hal, Ellen embraced him. "Thank you for everything."

Hal held on tight. "I wish you would have come to me sooner. I just wished you would have."

"I do too. I love you."

"I love you, too." Hal kissed her long on the cheek then pulled back. "Go speak to your husband." He laid his hand on her cheek. "He needs to speak to you."

Over his hand, Ellen laid hers, then after one more look to Hal, still clenching his hand, she walked toward the bedroom. She took a deep breath before entering the room.

Dean still kept his stand where Hal had left him.

"Dean?" She closed the door and locked it.

His words were hard to understand, Tense, soft, cracking. "If you told me right now, you were done with me. I have no ground to stand on. No argument to give."

"What?" She asked emotionally and moved to him. "What are you talking about."

Dean turned around to face her. His eyes, red, looked to her. "Where

did I fail you?"

"Dean?"

Dean huffed out a breath of his hurt. "A man . . ." He walked by her. "Another man was beating you? Beating you, El. And I didn't know. I didn't see it. Instead I chose to accuse you of taking a drug."

"He made it look that way, Dean."

"I should have known you better. And trusted you."

"And I . . ." Ellen gasped out. "I should have trusted you. I should have come to you."

"You tried." Dean stopped by the bed. "You tried." He shrugged. "I blew you off."

"When?"

"When Billy got shocked in the cryo lab. You tried to tell me. I didn't listen."

"I understood why." Ellen found herself talking to his back. "Dean? Dean, please don't do this."

"I can't even look at you."

"Well, that's tough." Ellen reached out and grabbed his arm. "Because you're gonna have to. You have to face me, because I need you to help me face all this."

"Why would you want me to?"

"Because you're the only one who can." Ellen moved to him. "I love you. And I told you, when you found out the truth, you would feel bad. I wanted to get that out of the way ahead of time because I knew how bad I would feel. Dean." She whispered. "My family is torn apart. Frank and Hal were killing each other on the street. Johnny is about to destroy Frank. Joe . . . poor Joe. You are my stability. And right now, I need that."

"I want to be that." Dean's fingers reached out and touched upon Ellen's face, slowly he brought his hand in and laid it on her cheek. "Where do I start?"

"Do you feel like listening. Because I have yet to talk to anyone about this whole entire mess."

Dean's eyes closed and he leaned into Ellen and kissed her. "Talk as much as you want."

"You may regret saying that, Dr. Hayes." Ellen grabbed his hand and walked to the bed with him. She climbed on it. "Right now, let's just lay here, face each other and just talk."

Dean, slowly but without hesitation, joined Ellen on the bed.

^^^

"Holding?" Frank asked so confused to Joe as they stood with Robbie in the main little office of the holding center. "He's my kid. I'll keep him in my watch."

Joe shook his head. "I can't do that, Frank. I can't. You know what he's



been accused of and you know the rules.”

“But no one is buying this. No one.” Frank argued. “It can’t be Johnny. Come on, you know our family. We’re tight. What would his gain be to turn his back on us.” Frank looked to Joe for an answer. “Dad?”

“I don’t know, Frank.”

“Robbie?” Frank turned to his brother in question. “You’re not agreeing with this, are you?”

“I’m here if you need me, Frank.” Robbie told him.

“Answer my question.” Frank stated.

Joe interceded. “Don’t. Don’t put your brother on the spot like that. Not for you. You know how he is with you. Robbie wants to wait until he views the evidence like everyone else.”

“What evidence?” Frank asked.

“Hal said he has evidence.”

Angry, and Frank’s words carried heavy. “Hal has the word of John Matoose. Oh isn’t that fuckin convenient. John Matoose!”

Joe lost it. “And what about Ellen!” he stepped to Frank. “What about her word Frank. Do you think she’s lying? Why would she lie?”

“What if she’s scared to tell the truth?”

“Scared?” Joe questioned. “Oh, she was scared all right. Scare to death for weeks. You seen her. You saw her actions. It all makes sense now, doesn’t it.”

“But Johnny?” Frank asked. “Dad . . .” He heaved out emotionally. “What am I supposed to do. He’s saying he didn’t do it.”

“I think, Frank, you have to come up with that answer on your own. You’re his father. You do what you think is right.”

“You think he’s the insider.” Frank asked with hurt. “You think Hal’s right and I’m wrong?”

“I’m not saying my opinion on the issue. I won’t. As far as Hal being right? You wrong? Don’t ask me to take sides. Don’t ask me to. I won’t do it.”

At the same time, Frank, Joe and Robbie all looked to the door of holding when it opened and Hal walked in.

Frank, with rage, rushed toward Hal.

“Stop it!” Joe ordered, grabbing on to Frank. “You will not go after him. You understand!”

“What is he doing here!” Frank yelled. “Gloating. Did you come to gloat, Hal?!”

Hal ignored Frank. “Dad, I came to tell you I was leaving. I wanted to say goodnight to you and Robbie and make sure you’re all right.”

“I’m fine.” Joe nodded. “Thanks.”

Disgusted, and angry, Frank mumbled. “Another fuckin notch.”

Hal stopped in his leaving. “Excuse me, Frank?”

“You heard me.” Frank gave an up nod. “Another fuckin notch, in the

Hal's trying to shine belt."

"Grow up." Hal told him. "This is not a personal strike against you."

"You don't think?" Frank asked. "It's my kid."

"Take a look at what your kid has done. I did not do this to hurt you, Frank. I didn't. If that was my intention I would have come forth long ago with my allegations. Now I will not fight with you anymore about this. I won't." Hal shook his head. "You look at me, and you act is if I'm doing nothing but lying."

Frank smirked. "It wouldn't be unlike you, would it. You've lied since day one about anything, just so you can look like the good guy."

"I am the good guy here."

"How did I know that was coming?" Frank asked.

"With all due respect . . ." Hal paused. "Fuck you, Frank."

"No, Hal. Fuck you." Frank's voice raised. "I don't know what kind of scheme you and Ellen have . . ."

"Stop!" From the door, with his outrage, Hal rushed in a 'face to face' stand with Frank. "I don't give a shit what you say about me or to me." His voice graveled. "But you say one thing about Ellen. One thing and you and I will go to a deadly head to head. Now you think about where that mouth almost took you." In a heated stare, Hal's eyes were locked with Frank's. "Think about what you almost implied. Ellen . . . is not lying. Ellen is not doing anything. She was the victim in all this. The victim, Frank. If you forget about that. If you insinuate anything less of her, then you deserve every ounce of pain you will feel when she walks away from you forever." After one more glare, a moment of silence, Hal turned from Frank. He took a step to Joe. "Dad." In a lean he gave Joe a kiss to the cheek, and extended his hand in a squeeze to Robbie's arm. "Robbie." He moved to the door and looked back. "Frank. Goodnight." Hal walked out.

Frank didn't say anything. He drew in a breath that was fueled by confused emotions, turned and went into the back where Johnny was kept.

"Dad." Robbie whispered so lost, staring at his father whose head was down. "Dad. What's happening to our family?"

Slowly Joe looked up and laid a hand on Robbie's shoulder. "Nothing is happening to our family. Or will it. Not if I can help it."

^^^

Dean's lips trailed softly from Ellen's neck across her bare shoulder and they stopped on her arm. He held them there, almost in a hover as his body pressed tight behind her. He closed his eyes and reflected on the lovemaking between them. How long it had been. How the physical aspect of the act was entirely lost within the emotional aspect. Dean swore he could not recall ever making love to Ellen so slow, nor kissing her so much. He couldn't stop kissing her.

“Dean.” Ellen whispered his name with a hint of a chuckle. “Are you seducing me again.”

Dean was snapped from his thoughts. “What was that?”

Ellen rolled onto her back. “I guess not.” She looked up at him. “You reminded me of a teenager tonight.”

“That fast and that bad?”

Ellen laughed. “That nervous.”

“I just . . .” His fingers ran down the side of her face. “I just was trying to record every single moment. I think this was one of those nights I fell in love with you all over again.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” Dean kissed her.

“Hold on.”

Dean plopped backwards with a moan when he watched Ellen roll back onto her side, reach into her night stand and pull out a notebook. “Why do you do that?” he asked.

“So when we’re old, I’ll know just how many times we fell in love.” She flipped open a page. “See, you fell in love with me just in September.”

“Before that?”

“Um . . .” Ellen looked then bobbed her head. “August.”

“God, am I cliché.” He grabbed the notebook, tossed it to the floor all in the same motion when he leaned his body almost onto hers.

“Now, see, I know you’re seducing me again.” Ellen smiled.

“Gonna try.” Dean winked, slipped his hand under the pillow to bring Ellen to him, held on to her bringing her with him as he rolled onto his back. Just as he started kissing her he heard the knock at the front door. Removing his lips from hers, he peered away to hear better. “Was that a knock.”

The doorbell rang.

Ellen slid from Dean. “I wonder who it is.”

The muffled voice from outside, complaining, ‘why is this fuckin front door locked’ answered Ellen’s question.

Ellen’s eyes closed and it took everything she had not to scream when she heard the knock on the window.

“Dean.” Frank whispered loud and knocked again. “You sleeping?”

“Not anymore.” Dean replied as he slipped out of bed and grabbed for his jeans.

“What? Did you say something?” Frank asked.

Pulling up his pants and a bit perturbed, Dean went to the bedroom window and peeked through the blind. “Go around front.”

Frank nodded.

Shaking his head, Dean stepped from the window. He stopped when he saw Ellen still in bed. “You aren’t getting dressed.”

“No. Tell him I’m sleeping.”

“What?” Dean picked his shirt up from the floor.

"I can't deal with it right now. Not Frank. I don't want to be forced to tell him anything about the situation. I don't want to put him in the middle anymore than he already is."

"I see." he threw his shirt over his head. "I understand. I'll tell him. But you really should talk to him." Leaving the bedroom, Dean pulled the door closed almost all the way. He walked down the hall and to the front door and opened it.

"Took you long enough." Frank spoke slow.

"I had to get dressed." As soon as Frank past him, Dean smelled it. "Frank? Have you been drinking?"

"Yep. Very much."

"Aw, Frank." Dean closed the door.

"What would you do, Dean?" Frank pulled out a chair at the table and sat down. "Huh? What would you do? This is so fucked up."

"I wish to God I knew what to tell you." Dean joined him at the table.

"Is El sleeping?"

"Um, yeah, Frank she is. I'm sorry."

"Can you . . . Can you wake her?" Frank asked.

"No." Dean stated. "She had a lot happen to her too. I think I want to let her sleep."

Frank nodded and folded his hands. "I needed to apologize to her."

"I understand. About the Anthium thing."

"No. She doesn't know this, but I do." He slowly shook his head. "See, not that I don't believe her, but . . . but I implied it. Almost." He lifted his hand. "Hal stopped me. I was arguing with him. And you know me and my mouth. Anyhow, I started to say it, fuckin Hal stopped me." Frank closed his mouth tight. "Threaten me, you know. Threatened me." His voice trailed. "But, Dean, between you and me. I didn't act it, I didn't show it. But . . . if he would have hit me. I would have let him. I would have let him beat the fuck out of me for even . . . even implying anything about her. But don't tell him. He has a big enough head as it is."

"I won't say anything."

"I need a drink." Frank started to get up.

"No, you don't." Dean pulled him back down. "How about coffee. I have some left. It's old. I can make you fresh stuff."

"Nah, I'll take the old stuff."

Dean stood up, speaking as he went into the kitchen. "I heard you and him got into it pretty bad on the street."

"How do you like that? I fought with my brother. How the fuck he learned how to fight is beyond me."

"Held his own with you, huh?" Dean set down a cup of coffee.

"Unfortunately. I kind of knew he would. Check this out." Frank pulled his bottom lip and folded down for Dean. It separated.

"Christ, Frank." Dean looked closer. "That needs stitched."

"It'll be fine." He took the coffee.

"How about you, Frank? Will you be fine?"

"Nope." He shook his head. "I love my son. I love Ellen. As a father, Dean, please answer this." Frank hesitated. "What do I do?"

"Why are you asking me this, Frank?"

"Because you're my friend. I need a friend right now."

"To be honest . . ." Dean exhaled. "It's tough call. Your child is denying guilty actions he committed against the woman you love most. See if I got this right, if this is what you're thinking . . . it's not so much a matter of who to believe, as who are you gonna end up turning your back on."

Dramatically Frank's head nodded, then it lowered. "Where and when do you divide loyalties? I've been doing a lot of thinking since I left holding a while ago. You know, no one in the community is buying this." Frank played with the side of his cup. "They're all thinking Hal was duped by John Matoose. I couldn't walk down the street, enter the social hall, couldn't do anything, without being stopped every five seconds by someone telling me, 'Hal is wrong. Hal is wrong'. Without someone saying, 'Not Johnny. He'll get out of this.'" Frank sighed.

"I am very sorry you are going through this, Frank. I am."

"And I'm sorry Dean . . ." Frank leaned to him. "I'm sorry for what my kid did to Ellen."

"Frank?"

With a painful look, Frank turned his head. "I know what everyone is saying. I hear them. I hear . . . I hear my son crying. I hear him. And the father in me wants to protect him. Deny everything. But the man in me . . . the man in me has known and trusted Ellen for twenty-some years. I know her Dean. I tried to come up with other reasons why she would name Johnny. Scared. Blackmailed. But the truth is, there is no other reason but the truth to name Johnny. She hates me now."

"She doesn't hate you. Frank."

"Then why won't she talk to me, huh?"

"I told you she's sleeping."

"Bullshit." Frank shook his head. "I know Ellen. And I know her well enough to know, she's not sleeping. She standing in that fuckin hall listening to every word I am saying and she won't come out because she hates me."

Ellen stepped from the hall.

"See?" Frank pointed.

"I don't hate you, Frank." Ellen walked to him. "I just didn't want to argue with you. I didn't want to have to force you into some big debate. This is hard enough as it is for you."

"It's breaking my heart."

Dean slowly stood up from the table. "I'm gonna, let you two . . . all right?" He gave a motion of his head and walked from the room.

"It's breaking my heart, El." Frank repeated with drowning sadness.

“Frank.” Ellen whispered out and walked to him, as she was close, Frank grabbed her and pulled her to him.

“It’s tearing me apart to even think that all of this is true.” Frank buried his words with his lips to her face. “Tell me what to do, El. Tell me. I can’t turn my back on you. I can’t. But my kid, guilty or not, he’s my kid. I can’t walk away from him. He needs me. So who do I hurt here?”

“You’re gonna only end up hurting yourself, Frank. If you keep going back and forth.” Ellen pulled back from the embrace slightly. “Look at me.”

Slowly Frank brought his eyes to meet hers.

Ellen saw behind them. She reached up running her hand down the his hard face. Across the lines that seemed to deepen. “I won’t ask you to chose between me and your son. I won’t. I never said anything because of you, Frank. Because of this moment. And I won’t say anything now. It is our right, privilege and duty, to protect our kids. No matter what they did, how old they get, they are still our children and they will need us. If you believe Johnny needs you. Then you stand by your son.”

“What about if I think . . .”

“Doesn’t.” Her hand reached up stopped him., “Doesn’t matter what you think. It doesn’t. Frank, my God, you’ve got the best guide book in the world.”

“What do you mean?”

“Joe.” Ellen said softly. “He is a great father. What would Joe do if it was one of you. Would he hate you, would he not look or speak to you? What is Joe doing right now over this? Huh? How about over you and Hal. No matter who he thinks is right or wrong, he won’t say it. Bet me Joe stays strong, silent and a symbolization of support. That’s what he needs to be. That’s what you need to be. Understand?”

“What about you?” Frank asked.

“I’m not your son.”

“No, What about you?” Frank asked again. “I can’t turn my back on you.”

“Are you really gonna do that?” Ellen questioned.

“I could never do that.”

“And I know that.” She tipped toed up and kissed him. “I know that.”

“What about when this is all said and done. When the situation is over.”

“No matter the outcome, you will need me then. And I will still be here. Just know I understand what you as a father has to do. I won’t hate you over it. I won’t be mad. I understand.”

“Promise.”

“If you promise me one thing in return.” Ellen said. “When it’s over. Completely over. You will not hate Hal. You will work this through with your brother. No matter the outcome.”

Frank huffed out. He looked elsewhere. “I’ll . . . I’ll try.”

Partially smiling, Ellen moved to him and embraced him. “Thank you.”

“No, El. Thank you for ending some of this for me tonight.”

Ellen only squeezed tighter in the embrace. She didn’t want to say. But the word ‘end’ hadn’t even a place in the situation. Because for Frank, Ellen truly feared it was far from the end. In the crusade of hurt, Frank was only at the starting point.

^^^

The watch alarm. *Beep-beep-beep. Beep-beep-beep.*

Johnny tested it, then set it. December sixth. How long would it take him to get to Circle, Montana? It all depended. Was he on foot? Was he driving. Johnny knew there wasn’t any place he could be where transportation wasn’t close enough to steal. He was grateful he had that chance to look at the map. Study it. Learn all different ways to the town. Because Johnny didn’t know if he would be sneaking out or running.

The only thing that would inhibit Johnny’s escape was if he was still stuck behind the walls of holding. And that he started working on all ready. The tears flowed, the begging to his father to do all he could to move any procedures they would do up to immediately. Proclaiming that his innocence would be his defense lawyer. Gloating with gratefulness inside that his father was such an idiot to believe anything he said. That would work in his favor, and he knew somehow Frank would pull though.

Looking at his watch again, Johnny double checked the ‘alarm’ time. He knew the second that went off, no matter where he was, if he was within an inch of freedom he was going to steal it. And he would do so, at any cost.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

December 6<sup>th</sup>

“D-day.” George told Steward. “Did you hear anything from our men in Bismark?”

“Just spoke to the leader.” Steward informed. “Chopper is ready and waiting to lift off.”

“Lift it off now.” George ordered.

“Excuse me? We told Johnny noon.”

“And what happens if he has to get there early. Have the bird there. I don’t believe anyone from Beginnings is going to be near Circle. I want nothing to go wrong. I want them home, Stew.” George said. “And today is the day we get them here.”

^^^

Robbie wanted to but he had a hard time looking at Jess. “Why didn’t you tell me.”

“And what?” Jess asked. “What? Would you believe me? Would you believe my intentions were not with the society?”

“I would have believed it then.”

“As opposed to now?” Jess asked as he lay in his bed. “Robbie. Come on, I love Beginnings. This is my home. I wanted out of the society. I took the out they gave me.”

“And did you stop to wonder what was going to happen to you if all this was found out.”

“I hoped . . .” Jess spoke sad. “I hoped that I would be able to explain my self out of it.”

“Maybe before Jess.” Robbie explained. “Not anymore. Andrea went down. Eight people were executed. My nephew is about to go down. So much shit has happened. So much hatred has been built against the society. That when it comes to insiders, New Bowman . . . Beginnings, everyone . . . Including myself. Trust me . . .” Robbie moved to the door. “We’re out for blood.”

^^^

When Ellen awoke, she totally forgot she wasn’t home. She couldn’t be, at least in Beginnings. She showered and dressed, preparing to face a day she dreaded.

“Morning.” Elliott spoke to her as she came down the stairs. “Did you sleep well.”



"Yeah." Ellen nodded. "My stomach is going crazy though." She let out a breath. "What are you doing here? I thought you'd be working."

"And I thought maybe you needed me." Elliott stated. "I made breakfast. But if you're not feeling well . . ."

"No. I'll eat." Ellen smiled. "Thanks."

"Good then I'll just get it on . . ." Elliott stopped in his moving from the livingroom when there was a knock on the door. "I'll get that."

*Who could it be?* Ellen wondered. She hoped it wasn't someone who was prepared to vocally blast her for destroying Johnny. That was why she was in New Bowman.

"Jenny." Elliott said, opening the door. "What can I do for you?"

"I know Ellen is here. Can I speak to her?"

Elliott looked behind him and received a nod from Ellen. He opened the door wider. "Come in."

"Thank you." Jenny stepped inside.

"Ellen and I were about to have breakfast. Will you join us?" Elliott asked.

"No. Thank you. John and I enjoyed a lovely meal at the mess hall this morning. I'll only be a minute."

Elliott nodded and excused himself from the room.

Jenny smiled nervously. "How was hiding?"

"Better than being home." Ellen stated.

"Tell me about it. We did stay at Danny's Hoi-tell. But, you know, it's not home. Then again, we're thinking of making New Bowman home."

"Really?" Ellen asked.

"John's joining the UWA. Hal said he'd love to have him."

"You don't seem happy about that."

"I am but . . . Ellen." Jenny walked to her. "I'm standing by my husband. We all but got thrown out of Beginnings yesterday. We couldn't take it. They're accusing him of being the one who is working for the society. They keep saying it. Over and over. Ellen, please, you're the only one. Am I justified. Is my husband finally an innocent in this."

Ellen stared for a second. "No, Jenny."

Jenny's eyes closed.

"Your husband is a hero in all this."

Her puckering lips turned into a smile and Jenny let out a little sob. "Thank you." She rushed to Ellen and embraced her.

"You don't want to stay?"

"No." Jenny stepped back. "I'm gonna go shopping. I think that will help take my mind off of things. Would you like to come?"

"No. I'm gonna stay in hiding for a little bit more."

Jenny walked to the door. "It'll be over soon, Ellen. Don't worry. This whole entire Johnny thing. The hearing thing. It'll all be over in a few hours." After a reassuring look, Jenny walked out.

Watching the door close, Ellen thought about what Jenny had said. And she was right. It would be over in a few hours. But the question was, with the decision of guilt in the hands of a community that loved Johnny, would it be over the way it needed to be?

^^^

Johnny stepped through first when Frank opened the door to his house. "Dad. Thanks."

Frank just nodded and closed the door.

"This means a lot being able to come home and shower."

"We don't have much time. You'd better hurry." Frank said with little enthusiasm.

"O.K." Johnny moved to the steps. "Hey, Dad? Wasn't it great the way everyone kept stopping us to give support. We are gonna kick ass at that proceeding today."

A forced smile was what Frank gave to Johnny as he watched him go upstairs. He stood there in debate for a couple of seconds, staring up the steps. He heard Johnny go into the bedroom, open drawers and then Frank went upstairs. He felt guilty for the lack of trust, but he justified it. Johnny was intrusted in his supervision, and Frank wanted to take no chances.

"Dad." Johnny was startled when he came from the bedroom with a stack of clothes. "What's up."

"I'm gonna . . . I'm gonna wait up here."

"O.K." Johnny shrugged.

Frank looked at the bathroom and where Johnny was headed, no window, no means of escape. Why it was going through Frank's mind he didn't know. But the bathroom was safe enough to allow Johnny privacy.

"I'll be right out." Johnny slipped in the bathroom and closed the door. He set his clothes on the back of the commode and looking at the door, Johnny smiled snidely. With arrogance and a smirk, he lifted the folded shirt enjoying the view of the small revolver he had hidden there.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Alone.

Tap . . . tap . . . tap. The end of the cigarette hit against the table. Joe stared out into the empty chambers of the courtroom. The biggest courtroom in the building. Size was needed for the event that would transpire.

At the table, long, three chairs were set up. Joe sat in the center where one of three men would sit. Danny Hoi, Elliott Ryder, and Joshua Owens. Grace would sit to their right. And to her right. On a stand was where Johnny would remain for the entire proceedings.

Looking at where Johnny would be, barely could Joe see. He supposed seeing Johnny didn't matter to Elliott, Danny or Joshua. They weren't the ones deciding Johnny's fate. They were merely there to ask questions if needed. Questions of evidence presented. As if some sort of Supreme Court.

The people, those who arrived timely enough, would be the ones to vote.

The courtroom held over a hundred, and Joe guessed it would be packed. By the door was a stack of ballots. The top of the ballot read 'guilty', the bottom, 'not'. They would tear off their choice and place it in a box after all the evidence was presented.

Tap . . . tap . . . tap. Once more Joe packed his cigarette before lighting it. He wanted to be alone before it all began.

It wasn't even twenty-four hours earlier that Joe sat in that courtroom with Frank, Hal and Judge Grace. Joe was far from the cool calm he presented. He raged inside. He knew Judge Grace meant well, but her words spoken made Joe want to cringe.

*A travesty.*

*A circus of errors.*

Were they the terms she used to describe the downfall of Johnny?

She scolded Hal, telling him he'd better have a leg to stand on when he presented his evidence. Her terminology of, '*An outcry of injustice is being served by the enraged people of Beginnings*' Blazed through Joe.

And though Joe wanted to, for the first time, stand up, interrupt and say, 'fuck the people of Beginnings.' He didn't.

He just listened and stayed calm. Listened as she described how she was bombarded with pleas to end the maltreatment of Johnny. The people of Beginnings rallied. And to Joe, he truly believe, in the case of Johnny, grandson or not, the people of Beginnings were being morons.

Outcry? Injustice? Where was their outcry and screams for justice when Andrea was on the stand? Where was the concern. How quick the people of Beginnings were to judge and find guilty a woman who only dedicated her heart and soul to them. And how quick the people of Beginnings were to

dismiss an insider that made sense. Dismiss him only because he drank with them, worked with them. How convenient it all fell into Johnny's lap. All the medical coincidences that were blamed on Andrea, no one really thought Johnny because he was such the novice. . How much trust was placed in Johnny. So much so that he had free reign. It made sense. The only thing that Joe couldn't figure out was, why? Why would Johnny turn his back on his home. What, like Frank had questioned, was the gain. The motive. And unless Johnny himself came right out and said it, Joe supposed he never would know.

~~~~~

In a small back room at the courthouse, Ellen and Hal standing around waiting, Robbie peered out the first floor window. He peered to the crowd of Beginnings people who gathered waiting to get in. "Do you know what sucks?" He turned to look at Hal. "He's our nephew, our family and we're the only ones who believe he's guilty."

"I know. He's the Golden boy and I'm the enemy of the state right now." Hal said. "That will change Robbie. Trust me. That will change."

"How?" Robbie asked. "What do you have. Please tell me you have something."

"I do. I have witnesses. Documentation we've collected."

"That won't do it, Hal." Robbie argued. "It won't. They'll vote him innocent. In order to find him guilty, they are going to need slapped in the face."

Hal tilted his head. "They will be."

Ellen's eyes grew wide. "No."

Hal quickly looked at Ellen. "No what?"

"Don't you use it." Ellen stated. "I am begging you. Don't use it."

Curious, Robbie turned to Hal. "Use what?"

"My ace in the hole." Hal replied. "Ellen. You do know that is the clincher."

"At what cost?" Ellen argued. "To kill your father. Kill Frank. If they hear that, it will. They don't need to hear that."

"Hear what!" Robbie asked loudly.

"A tape." Hal kept his eyes on Ellen. "A tape of Ellen and Johnny arguing. And on this tape you can clearly hear Johnny strike her."

"Let me hear it." Robbie requested strong.

"No." Ellen said. "No, Hal."

"Hal." Robbie stepped to him. "If there is something that big, why are we wasting time on this hearing. Let me hear this."

After a look to Ellen, Hal laid the tape player on the small table and pressed 'play'.

Ellen turned her back, arms folded tight as she listened painfully.

Robbie shut off the tape and spun with glaring eyes to Ellen.

"See?" Ellen looked at him. "See why I didn't want Frank to hear that."

"Too late." Frank spoke soft in the door of the small room. Dean was beside him.

Hal stepped forward. "Frank."

Frank held up his hand. "I just . . . I just need a minute. Just leave me alone."

When Frank walked away, Dean stepped in, blocking anyone from following Frank. "Let him go. He's having a really hard time today." Immediately he put his arms around Ellen. "How are you? Are you ready for this?"

"As much as I can be. When did you get here?"

"Frank and I just arrived." Dean replied.

"Is Johnny here?" Hal asked.

"Not yet." Dean answered "Danny Hoi and two guards are bringing him. Frank wanted to ride with me."

With an exhale and a glance up from his watch, Hal smiled. "Well. That was a minute. Let's go Robbie. Let's find our brother." He walked to the door.

After a 'see you inside' to Dean and Ellen, Robbie followed Hal out. "Where do you think he is?" Robbie asked.

"Courtroom?" Hal guessed and walked down the hall. He peered into the large room and only saw Joe. "He's not . . ." Hal's eyes lifted. "Elliott."

Elliott winced. "Don't do this to me. Not here. Not now. I'm not allowed to talk to you." Elliott tried to get in the courtroom.

"No-no." Hal shook his head. "No more bribes. I need to know, have you seen Frank."

"I saw him go into the stairwell."

"Thanks," Hal gave a tug to Robbie's arm and moved to the stair well. They walked through the door.

"Which floor?" Robbie asked.

"Well there are six. Might as well start at the top and work our way down." Hal suggested.

"You mean the roof?" Robbie joked, but only for a second. He lost his smile and at the same time, he and Hal raced up the steps at full speed.

^^^

The metal door made a loud 'boom' as it banged against the wall when Hal flung it open in his barge through.

"Aw!" Hal whined. "Jesus Christ, Frank. What are you doing. I knew it."

"Frank." Robbie caught his breath. "Come on."

Crouched down, on one knee, eyes peering above the ledge of the roof, Frank held his revolver out and steady. "Go back down." He spoke calm.

"I'm waiting for him."

"What are you gonna do, Frank?" Hal walked to him and squatted beside him. "Execute your own child?"

After shifting his eyes to Robbie still at a distance, Frank dropped his voice to a whisper. "I killed my brother once for less."

Robbie let out a small panicked shriek. "I heard that!"

"Fuck." Frank grumbled.

"Oh, my God." Robbie rushed forward. "You lied to me. You told me that Miguel killed me."

Frank, still aiming and staring, raised his eyebrows.

"You killed me?"

"Sorry." Frank said.

"You killed our little brother?" Hal questioned. "My God, how could you do that."

"Shut the fuck up, Hal. I felt guilty enough. Why do you think I brought him back." Frank hurriedly wiped the sweat from his brow. "And in comparison, Robbie did less. Robbie was executed for causing a rebellion. For kidnaping five kids. Kidnaping and beating up Dean. Killing Denny."

Robbie's eyes grew wide, "I killed Denny?"

"My Denny?" Hal questioned. "In the UWA?"

Robbie exhaled hard. "Oh I feel really bad."

"And you shot me." Frank added. "And now is not the time to be discussing this gentlemen. If Johnny has been a part of this from the start, look at all he's been a part of. Dad and the salicain. Andrea. Dean's blindness. The new Plague. The explosion. Jason's death. So much. So much." His eyes stayed out onto the crowd. "And if I put a gun to my brother's head . . ."

Frank paused when Robbie released a peep of a shriek. "It is my obligation to take out my own."

Hal's hand laid over the gun, "No, it is not Frank. This is wrong. Wrong."

"No." Frank flinched when he watched the jeep pull up with Johnny, the people who waited outside rallied. "That is wrong. They're treating him as if he is Jesus Christ. He needs to go down."

Hal watched Frank's finger twitch upon the trigger. "Yes he does. But he needs to go down by his peers. By all of them. Not . . . Not by the hands of his father. Let's do this right, Frank. Let's do this right." Hal felt the slight tension release on the revolver and in that split second he took it from Frank's hands.

Frank dropped down, his head lowering against the roof of that building. "Oh. God. How did this end up happening, Hal? How did it end up being my kid? Why him. Why . . . him?"

Hal, feeling so much for his brother, wrapped his arms around him and leaned into him. Robbie, first to one knee, then to both, joined them. And in that quiet, emotional moment on the roof, the brothers, together, huddled.

^^^

“Bailiffs. Lock those doors.” Judge Grace instructed.

Two UWA soliders at the same time, closed the double doors to the courtroom, the latching of the lock rang out.

Every square inch of the room was packed. There wasn’t a seat empty. Not a spot to stand.

“There will be no disruptions in this courtroom.” Grace instructed looking out to the audience. “Those who are here, are those who will cast the vote.” Grace looked to her right to Johnny. “Do you understand these proceedings.”

Johnny looked as if he were lit by a spotlight, the large window to his right cast the sun upon him. Staring at his father, grandfather who sat in the first row with Dean and Ellen, Johnny nodded. “Yes, I do.”

“You may interject at anytime to ask questions. We’ll begin. Captain Slagel?”

From the end seat in the first row, Hal stood up.

Grace nodded. “These peers are your jury. We are your panel. Begin.”

Hal stepped forward to a podium that set at the top of the aisle. “Thank you. I began to suspect my nephew a while ago. It started when I found this key in Johnny’s possession.” Hal lifted the small key. “This belonged to my father. It unlocked the only useable phone in Beginnings.”

Grace had to question. “If you found the key on Johnny, why didn’t you bring it to the attention of your father.”

“I didn’t want to alarm him. It could have been innocent.”

“Yet you suspected it amiss?”

“Yes.” Hal answered.

Grace looked to Johnny. “Have you ever seen that key before.”

“Only when my Uncle Hal showed it to me. But I don’t know how he found that.” Johnny spoke innocently.

Grace gave a nod to Hal to continue.

“Getting back.” Hal placed down the key. “To my opening comments. The key set me off. A chain of well covered events, including an attempt on my life began to occur. My suspicions were not founded or supported by any viable means of evidence . . . at first. My encounters with Johnny grew intense. His words against my family hard. I, even to my failure, tried to set him up. I took one of my own bandanas, collaborated with Dr. Hayes, doused it with a tube of Bev’s blood and Elliott gave it to Johnny.”

Grace looked to her left to the far end of the table where Elliott sat. “Is that true, Sgt. Ryder?”

Elliott leaned into the table to view Grace. “Yes. I then gave it to Johnny. He tested it and told me it wasn’t Bev’s blood.”

Hal continued. “But it was, and that bandana ended up on my father’s

desk.”

Grace turned to Johnny. “Is any of this true?”

“Yes.” Johnny answered. “Elliott gave me the bandana. I tested it. I was scared for Uncle Hal so I lied to Elliott. I just, and I know it was wrong, but he was my uncle, I wanted to protect him. So I hid the bandana. I started feeling guilty and that’s when I turned it over.”

With snide curiosity, Hal spoke. “Why not throw it away if you wanted to protect me.”

“I don’t know.” Johnny shook his head. “For the same reason I turned it in. Guilt.”

“Guilt?” Hal laughed. “Johnny, you threatened that bandana against me numerous times.”

“No, I did not. I never let you know I had it.” Johnny defended.

“You’re lying.” Hal stated. “You used . . .” He was silenced by the slam of Grace’s gavel.

“I will allow back and forth between the two of you. But Capt. Slagel, keep it to questions and answers, no personal comments.”

“Yes.” Hal nodded.

Grace turned to the panel. “Gentlemen. Any questions on this?”

Danny lifted his hand. “I have one. Johnny? Why did you wait until the night before the punishment was read?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t even think about timing it.” Johnny lowered his head. “I only wanted to do what was right.”

Hal rolled his eyes. “I’d like, your honor to bring a few people forward. Since this isn’t a normal trial proceedings, I’d like to be able to question them all intermittent with Johnny.”

“That’s fine with me.” Grace answered.

Hal motioned his hand to the table next to the podium. “Dr. Ellen Hayes and John Matoose.”

After squeezing Dean’s hand, Ellen stood up. She stepped into the aisle at the same time as John Matoose and they both sat at the table.

“Johnny?” Hal questioned. “How long have you known these two people.”

“I’ve known Ellen all my life, and John about eight years.”

“Just wanted to establish that.” Hal faced the table. “John, when did you first find out Johnny was part of the society.”

“October.” John Matoose spoke. “I never knew. I suspected Bev, but had no reasons for my suspicions. I even put her on the insider suspect list for Joe, hoping he could find out. But no. I found out one day after I was shot. Johnny came into my room and hit me with some sort of drug. From then on I couldn’t speak, move, anything. He also would make regular visits to taunt me. Threaten my wife and so forth.”

“Why didn’t you come forward sooner?” Hal asked.

“Who would believe me?” John lifted his hands. “Just like people aren’t



believing me now. I needed proof. I followed Johnny. When he wanted me to blackmail Jess into doing his duty for the society. I used that against Johnny. Jess and I were both gonna bring him down as soon as we had proof.”

“Ellen.” Hal looked at her. “How about you? When did you learn of Johnny’s connection.”

“A few weeks ago. I was up at Joe’s office in the little examining room looking for extra sutures. I heard the beeping of the phone, as if someone were dialing. Then I heard Johnny’s voice. He was talking to George. I stopped the call. Johnny claimed it was innocent. And I bought it. I bought it because I’ve known him so long. And Frank is his father. But . . .” Ellen exhaled. “He started getting violent. Worried. It was an ongoing thing. He even tried to kill me by rigging the light switch in the cryo lab. He admitted that to me.”

Hal walked back to his seat and grabbed the switch box. “This.” He approached Judge Grace. “Is the switch box. Danny Hoi, upon examining it, can see that it was rigged.”

Danny reached out his hand and took the box. He whistled. “I didn’t see it before. But yeah. It was.”

Grace folded her hands. “Could it have been rigged after the incident.”

“No.” Danny set the box forward. “The wires are burned. No.”

Johnny shook his head. “They’re both lying. John Matoose is lying because he’s just trying find someone to blame for his own association with the society. I happened to be the pawn. And El . . . El, how can you do this to me? Huh? How? I only wanted to help you with your drug problem. You say I got violent? How many people can attest to you attacking me on the street. Or trying to stab me.” Sad, Johnny looked at Grace. “I only wanted to help her.”

“Bullshit.” Ellen snapped.

Grace slammed her gavel.

“No.” Ellen shook her head. “I don’t have a drug problem. You conveniently made it look that way. Convincing Dean, knocking me out and dropping me off places. You were sneaking into Containment at six in the morning. I have check in sheets my guards used. Were you there?”

“Yes.” Johnny nodded. “Out of concern. I was counting the pills trying to keep track of what you were taking. You confessed to me, El. I didn’t come to you. Why are you doing this? If you didn’t have a drug problem, then why did Dr. Dean find Anthium in your blood stream.”

Grace slammed her gavel. “Dr. Hayes, Dr. Dean Hayes. Was Anthium found in your wife’s blood stream.”

Calm and cool, Dean shook his head. “No. I haven’t a clue what tests Johnny is talking about.”

“He’s lying!” Johnny pointed ignoring Grace’s gavel warning. “Check his lab. Check it. He’s lying to protect his wife. She’s lying for some reason to get to me, And John. We all know what’s up with him.”

Hal spoke up. "Then what is Richie's motive?"

Johnny swung a confused look Hal's way. "What?"

"Richie Martin." Hal repeated. "What would be his motive for going after you?"

"I don't know what you mean."

Hal turned and faced the audience. "Richie. Can you come up now please?"

From the back, seated unnoticed, Richie stood up. He wore a UWA uniform and walked toward the front of the courtroom.

Grace shook her head. "I know this young man. Is this a joke?"

"Not at all." Hal said arrogantly.

Before the table Richie stood.

"Tell them Richie."

A light wave of moans swept over the courtroom.

Grace hit her gavel. "Do not make a mockery of this man."

"Richie?" Hal nodded.

Richie took a breath. "Johnny Slagel hit me three times with some sort of drug while I was in containment." He spoke normally.

Amongst the gasps, Ellen shrieked and stood up. "Oh my God., you're back."

"Yeah." Richie smiled, "And I'm not going back to containment."

"Mr. Martin." Grace said. "You are not the young man I remember meeting."

"No." Richie shook his head. "I started coming back, remembering things fully about a week ago, You can say Frank knocked something loose when he hit me on my head with the bowling ball. But I remember distinctively what Johnny did to me. How many times he came into containment to tease me because he knew I couldn't respond correctly. I tried. But the words wouldn't come out."

For the first time, with seriousness, Grace turned a view to Johnny. "Your response to this?"

"I don't know why he would say it. Siding with his sister maybe."

So perturbed Hal looked as he faced Johnny. "Come on you can do better than that. Siding with Ellen? That's the reason Richie would lie?"

"Captain Slagel I told you." Grace spoke.

Hal ignored her. "Dean will concur Richie was hit with that drug. Who else would have done it?"

"Bev. She was George's daughter."

"Bev didn't have the knowledge to do that to Richie." Hal snapped.

"Then maybe Andrea." Johnny stayed clam. "Not me."

"So it wasn't you who drugged John Matoose?" Hal asked.

"Nope."

"He remembers you going in his room."

"He's lying."

Grace hit her gavel.

"Then who?" Hal questioned.

"Bev. Andrea."

Another slam of the gavel. "Captain Slagel back off on intensity." Grace warned.

"What about the explosion at the warehouse?" Hal questioned hard.

"Jess. John Matoose."

"John Matoose was comatose during the Bev paternity incident. Who helped her?"

"Andrea."

*Slam.* "Captain Slagel."

"And are you going to blame Andrea on the circuit box too?"

"Don't be ridiculous." Johnny pushed to stay clam. "It had to be John."

"You have answer for everything. How convenient." Hal snapped. "Bev did this. John did that. Andrea was responsible for this."

"Captain Slagel!" Grace slammed the gavel.

Hal continued. "And back to Bev. You weren't sleeping with her?"

"No."

*Slam.*

"You weren't the least bit upset when you found out Henry was the baby's father."

"No!"

"It didn't irk you, burn you . . ."

"Captain Slagel!" Graces screamed.

"Hush woman." Hal waved her off then blew off the continuous pounding of the gavel. "It didn't kill you to find out that Henry was the dad? You didn't rant and rave and rage when you discovered it!"

"No!"

"I heard you were in love with her."

Grace's warning screamed out over Hal's badgering. "Captain Slagel if you don't stop this harassment . . ."

"You loved her! This is where the deadly revenge came in!" Hal pointed. "How it had to kill you the way she was. Such the slut."

*Slam! Slam!*

"Blow job here. Blow job there. What would have happened Johnny if they found out you were the baby's father!"

*Slam.*

*Beep-beep-beep. Beep-beep-beep.*

"Who would you have blamed?" Hal asked hard. "Andrea!"

Johnny shut off his watch. He exhaled. "You know what? Probably."

An immediate quiet took over the courtroom, it was followed by the gavel that fell from Grace's hand. Even Hal was speechless.

"Yeah, probably." Johnny spoke smug. "We blamed everything on her."

Shocked, Grace looked at him. "Johnny, do you know what you're

saying”

“Oh, absolutely.” Johnny nodded. “He asked if I would blame it on Andrea. I answered. Yes.”

Slow, Joe stood up. “Why? Why in God’s name would you do that?”

“Mr. Slagel sit down.” Grace ordered.

“Nothing personal against Andrea.” Johnny shrugged. “She was nice and all. But she was easy.”

There was something that caught Elliott’s eye. A fidgeting Johnny did. But his view was blocked. He stood up.

“Sgt. Ryder Sit.” Grace pointed.

Johnny continued. “Too easy. Too bad you guys killed her. What was up with that confession.” He shook his head.

“You little son of a bitch.” Joe charged ahead..

“Mr. Slagel!” All Grace wanted to do was maintain order that was leaving fast. “Captain control your father.”

Hal reached back his hand to Joe who was grabbed by Robbie. “I will control my father, then you must allow me to remove him from that stand.”

Johnny stood up slightly. “You want to remove me. Fine! You got me! Let me state my peace first. Because I know with the execution happy fuckin family I have . . .”

“Sit down!” Grace slammed her gavel.

Elliott stood back up. “Captain.” He gave a warning look.

“I’ll never get a chance to speak again!” Johnny screamed. “Yeah. All you say I did. I did!”

Grace was losing control. “Johnny down. Sgt. Ryder. Sit.” Left to right her head went.

“And you want to know why! Not you Pap, not you Uncle Robbie. Not even Beginnings.” Johnny pointed. “Him! You dad!”

Like others, Frank stood. “What?”

“Yeah. You. Everything I did, I did because I hate you. My father? You aren’t my father. You’ve never been a father to me. Your idea of being a father was to fuck around on my mother, never pay attention to your kids, and pretended to be the grieving asshole when your daughters died!”

A growl of emotions came from Frank and he rushed forward only to be grabbed by Joe and Hal.

Elliott tried to get Hal’s attention, but Hal was consumed with his family. “Captain.” He took a step to Johnny.

It took everything Hal had to hold Frank back. Frank’s entire body arched forward and his face screamed with his rage and hurt.

“Sit!” Grace screamed. “Johnny!”

“Fuck you!” Johnny blasted

Bang!

Hal’s fingers released the grip on Frank at the same time blood rained out from the close head shot Johnny unloaded into Judge Grace. Frank took

one lunging step when Johnny fired again . . . Then again.

Down went Frank and then . . . down went Joe.

Screams entailed in the courtroom along with the eruption of bodies rushing.

Elliot kept his focus. He quickly pulled out his revolver as Johnny jumped to the rail of the witness stand. Steady Elliott held his aim and then he fired hitting Johnny at the same time he leaped, arms covering his head, through the huge window right by him.

The bellowing crash of glass was buried beneath the hysteria of the courtroom. Elliott rushed from the front to get out. The crowd inhibited him, gathering, joining, mobbing around where Joe and Frank laid. He couldn't get through no matter how hard he tried. Seeing it was useless, but not giving up, Elliot decided to take the same route as Johnny. Full speed, he raced for that window and jumped out.

"Dean!" Hal screamed out gut wrenching. So lost he turned left to right looking for help through the bodies that gathered around. "Move back!" He blasted at everyone as he held Frank against him on the floor. Blood flowed fast from Frank's chest and Hal held his hand over it to try to stop it. "Dean." Hal saw Robbie. Was he helping their dad? What happened to their Dad. Then Hal's head dropped in relief when he heard Joe's voice.

"I'm OK, I'm OK, it's not bad. Someone help Frank." Joe yelled out.

It took all of their strength and emotions to break their small bodies through. The moment Dean and Ellen made it to Frank, they both dropped to the floor by him.

"Someone clear these people out!" Dean screamed watching the seeping blood come from Frank. He looked and saw Robbie. "Robbie. Run to the clinic here. Have Blue set up an OR, we'll stabilize Frank before we move him to Beginnings. Run!"

From behind Hal, Robbie stood up.

On the other side of Frank, Ellen knelt. "Dean?"

Dean remained calm. "It's all right. It's O.K. Frank's tough." He took off his shirt and laid it on Frank's chest. "You're tough Frank Right? Don't you stop fighting. You hear me."

Blurry. Everything through Frank's partially open eyes was blurry and distorted. He felt the shivering of his body but didn't feel any pain. The voices were distant as in a tunnel. *El?* Frank saw her as she looked over him.

Deep and slow her words were. "Hold . . . on . . . Frank."

*El?* Frank thought he spoke. He didn't. *What's happening?*

Fading. Fading.

Darkness.

"I lost his pulse."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Heavy.

Every ounce of Dean's soul felt heavy as he peered down to the patient chart before him. He sat in Andrea's office, reading, reviewing, trying to figure out what he was going to do. His body should of been exhausted after the long day. But he wasn't. He had too much to concern himself with.

How many times did they lose Frank on the table? Too many to count. The bullet lodged deep between the heart and the pulmonary sac. Hours it took to get it out. Stopping the operation. Stabilizing Frank. Starting all over again.

But he made it. And he was going to make it. Even though he was far from out of the woods. And for once, Salicain was going to come in handy. Used for good instead of bad. They would completely immobilize Frank, giving him the rest his body so much needed.

"Dean?" Ellen whispered into the office.

"Oh, hey." Dean closed the folder. "Hi," He stood up, tucking it under his arms. "Did you get the kids to bed?"

"Yeah. Glad you're back. Is Frank situated?" Ellen asked.

"Yep. "

Ellen kissed him on the cheek. "Good job today. No, great job."

"I had help." Dean winked. "Why don't you go check on him. I want to catch Joe when he gets back."

"Everything all right?"

"Oh . . . yeah." Dean nodded.

"There isn't something about Frank you're not telling me is there?"

"No. He'll be fine. He may not like it when we start the Salicain. But he'll be fine. Go on. I'll meet you there."

"All right." Giving Dean another kiss, Ellen walked away.

Letting out a heavy breath that was a true reflection of how he felt, Dean went back into the office.

^^^

Ellen could hear the steady beeping of Frank's monitor before she stepped into the room. She also heard the slight humming of something Christian. Walking in the room, she saw Robbie at the foot of the bed. "How's he doing?" She asked, laying her hand on his back.

"Out. But stable." He looked up. "Right? That's what you said."

From the intravenous she was checking, Andrea turned. "That's I what I said, sweetheart. He'll be just fine. This man is tough."

Ellen smiled and stepped closer, she kissed Frank first then embraced

Andrea. "I didn't get a chance today to tell you thank you. You and Dean did great on him."

"You helped too." Andrea grinned.

"And another thing I wanted to thank you for." Ellen said. "When Joe brought me to your house. Thanks for believing me about everything."

"Sweet Jesus Ellen, when you told me that. I knew. I knew it wouldn't belong before the charade was up."

"And it is." Ellen grabbed her hand. "It's so good to have you back."

"No Ellen." Andrea spoke peacefully glancing at Ellen, Frank then Robbie. "It is so great to be back in Beginnings."

^^^

"What the hell can be taking him so long?" Joe bitched as he walked into the clinic with Hal. His arm in a sling from the shoulder hit he took.

"I'm sure he'll be back "

"What if he's dead?" Joe asked.

"Good God, father, can we be any more pessimistic . . . here." Hal spoke in relief. "Here he is now."

Joe turned to the doors when Elliott walked in. Bloody and tired he looked. Joe grumbled. "News isn't good, is it?"

"We panned out." Elliott spoke. "I found the trail not long after Johnny stole the jeep. And then I found . . . the jeep. I hit him. There was a lot of blood in the jeep. But, no Johnny."

Hal was confused. "Where the hell did he go?"

"A circle of dust had formed around not far from here we found the jeep." Elliott explained.

"They lifted him." Joe said. "The call he made. It had to be for his escape. Well, we'll start putting this back together tomorrow. Right now, I have the rest of my family to concentrate on." He, Hal and Elliott began to walk down the hall.

"Joe." Dean stepped from the office. "Can I . . . Can I speak to you, please?"

"Why? What's wrong?" Joe asked.

"It's really important. Can I?" Dean showed his hand to the office.

"You guys go on." Joe instructed. "I'll be right there." He followed Dean into the office and watched in oddity as Dean closed the door. "Something's up."

"Have a seat." Dean pointed to the chair.

"I'd rather stand."

"Joe . . . please."

"Dean. What the hell is going on?" Joe snapped. "Is something wrong with Frank?"

"No."

"A community problem?"

"No." Dean shook his head.

"Ellen? The kids? You?"

"No . . . ." Dean swallowed. "You."

"Me?" Joe chuckled. "Well save it. I'm busy."

"Joe." Dean stopped him. "This is very important. I need to speak to you as your doctor."

"Didn't you get the bullet out?" Joe asked. "Christ I knew it still felt sore. Goddamn it, why did you let my daughter operate. All right. When did you want to go in again?"

"No . . . It's not the shoulder." Dean ran his fingers through his hair as he took advantage of what little space there was in the office and paced. "Can we sit down?"

"No. Spill it."

"Joe. This isn't easy. All right? It isn't. And it isn't simple." Dean spoke frazzled. "Please." Almost desperate, he looked at Joe.

"What is it?" Joe lost all irritation when he saw Dean's face.

"We have to start right away. This can't be ignored. Not for another second." So hard it was for Dean to talk. "We . . . we took the x-ray of the chest cavity to make sure there wasn't any fragments that remained. I . . . I found . . ." Dean brought his hand to his eyes.

"Dean." Calm, Joe spoke. "What? I don't have time for this. I would like very much to go see my son and my wife. What . . . is it?"

Biting his bottom lip, Dean raised his eyes looking as if the world dropped out from under him. "I found several lesions on the left lung. Several, big. I need to biopsy to see the extent of . . ."

"Cancer?" Joe's voice wisped out with an edge of shock. "Are you . . . are you telling me I have cancer?"

Dean clenched his jaw and swallowed. "Yes."

"I see." Joe's eyes shifted about in a blank search.

"Joe, I . . ."

"Dean." Joe just looked at him for the longest time. Staring into Dean's green eyes that held so much hurt. Then Joe shook his head slow as if to tell Dean, 'please don't say anymore.' And with a lift of his hand, a deep nostril breath, a few shocked nods, Joe turned, and without needing to say anything, walked from the office.

^^^^^

**NEXT: ON DIVIDED BLOOD**