

THE PURSUIT OF CREED

by

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## CHAPTER ONE

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The eerie sounding four notes played on a guitar, rang out a split second before a black bird squawked and ejected itself in the air from the swinging metal fence.

Frank Slagel, wincing some in annoyance, turned slowly to look back at the truck. "Hal, cut it out."

"Sorry." Hal Slagel set down the guitar. "I couldn't resist."

"This is so fucked up." Frank slammed his boot to the ground causing an upward spray of dust. "Why are we heading back home?"

"You know why, Frank." Hal stood slowly and walked to his brother. "It's the only way."

Almost in pain, Frank closed his eyes. "We should have just kept going."

"And what?" Hal asked. "We'd run out of supplies, we'd run . . . out of energy. Big brother." Hal's voice dropped some. "I am in no shape to do battle with you. We fought hard this past week. I took some shots. Literally. I want to end this with you. But I need some rest."

"I could do this alone." Frank said softly.

"No, you can't. You don't know what you're up against."

"I know."

"So I am to assume you've started to pick up some psychic vibes."

Frank only looked.

"I didn't think so. We're too far away." Hal explained. "We need to head back, rest up, regroup, pack up and then head on back. With strength and information we can only get from Christopher Columbus."

"Fuckin mutant."

"Well, yes, be that as it may . . ." Hal cleared his throat. "He is the . . . *fuckin* mutant that can help us out. We know they're safe Frank. We know by the note they don't want to hurt them only worship them."

The corner of Frank's mouth raised some in a smile. "Oh, my God."

"Yes, they want to worship our little brother and Ellen." Hal tried to remain serious. "And going by what Christopher said, they can be thousands . . ."

"No." Frank halted him. "You can't really go by what Christopher said. He counts worse than me."

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“True.” Hal bobbed his head. “But can we take that chance. You and I. One hot headed ill informed brother, and one injured brother rushing in, without enough protection, to steal from them their new found Gods.”

Frank nodded in thought. “OK. You have a point. But . . . I’m not injured.”

“I never said you were.”

“Yeah, you did. You said one hot-headed ill-informed brother, one injured. I’m not injured.”

“I’m injured Frank.”

“So are you saying that I’m ill informed.”

“Pretty much so, yes.” Hal said.

“Oh. Ok.” Frank shrugged. “Well, we better go. Since we did set up that meeting point with Beginnings.” He started to move toward the truck. “Hal.” Frank turned back around. “We’ll get them back, right.”

“Oh, absolutely.” Hal answered with certainty. “We’ll be nothing less than prepared. We’ll find them and get them. And, Frank, think about it, to do so . . .” Hal spoke passionately. “We will have to build a team. Devise a strategy. Travel thousands of miles to battle with a large civilization of underground . . .” Hal raised an eyebrow with a quirky smile. “Mutants.”

Frank smiled. “Kind of Apocalyptically cool.”

“Very Chuck Heston like.”

“And you know he is the original apocalypse movie hero.” Frank moved more upbeat to the truck.

“And you are the true apocalyptic hero.”

“I am.” Frank opened the truck door. “And you know, Chuck made chest hair famous.”

“You resemble him in a darker way.” Hal said as he got in.

“I do.” Frank got in the truck and checked his reflection in the rear view mirror. “Hey, Hal, you think I should start making people call me Charlton.”

“Absolutely not, Frank. No.” Hal tapped on the dash board. “Let’s head home.”

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Beginnings, Montana

*'Let me come home, Pap. I just want to come home.'* Johnny's desperate voice played over and over in Joe's mind.

*'Come home? My God, after all that happened, how can you even ask that.'*

*"I don't remember. I don't know how I did it."*

*"Does it matter? What's done is done. I'm sorry, Johnny."*

Why? Why did Johnny have to repeat how much he loved Joe and miss him? It only broke Joe's heart even more. Even more painful that Johnny's declaration of love was the vow he made to get back home and win back their trust.

How hard that would be to do, if not impossible.

Dean Hayes walked into the small office expecting to be blasted by Joe for making him wait, instead, he saw the far off look in Joe's eyes. "Still thinking about Johnny?"

"How can I not. I hope that Elliott got the message through to Jess so he can use this escape to buy us time from the society, until we deal with the current situation."

Almost as if he took a moment of homage, Dean's head lowered. "I can't even deal with thinking about that."

"It doesn't help that Frank's out of radio range. Hopefully we'll hear something soon. As for now . . ." Joe exhaled. "What do you have for me?"

"Good. Change of subject, that's what I need." Deal pulled forth a little stool and sat in front of Joe. "I sat down with Jason and here's what we came up with. Remember how we power blasted Elliott with the treatments?"

"Yes." Joe nodded.

"That's the first step in what we want to do with you. Now it will disable you for about four days."

Joe cringed. "Right now, I can't be disabled. Will it hurt if we put a delay . . ." Joe slowed down. "Scratch that. We're at the bottom of the ninth, huh?"

"I wouldn't go that far." Dean winked. "But we do need a healthy mind as much as a healthy body. Until this situation with Robbie

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and Ellen is mentally resolved some, we will hold off.”

“Good.”

“And we’re going to do something that, in the old world, would be considered somewhat unethical. I want, after the power boost, to try something. You can thank Jason on this one. See, Elliott’s condition is in the blood. Therefore that is why we had success with Elliott. By going intravenously, we are in fact, hitting the source.” Dean explained. “So that’s why we want to do with you. Hit the source, if you’re up to it.”

“Inject the infected area?” Joe asked.

“Actually, bath it as a therapy. If we had a viable means for radiation treatment, I’d go with that. But I’m gonna try something else. Using ultrasound, and a technique similar to laparoscopy, I will go to each infected area and baste, so to speak, the lesions.”

“No cutting me open?” Joe asked.

“Minor.” Dean answered. “I want as little air to hit the organs as possible. This will be after you’ve regained strength from the power blast. And who knows . . .” Dean shrugged. “Maybe will see shrinkage and won’t have to take the other route.”

A partial smile hit Joe. “Is that optimism, What switch from before, huh?”

“Yep.” Dean nodded. “I will be optimistic and I promise you, Joe I will be nothing less. After all it’s Beginnings, and pretty much anything is possible. Of course, with all that’s happened, all the bizarre happenings around here . . .” Dean chuckled “I’m starting to think, Beginnings is running out of weird moments..”

Joe immediately looked up when Elliott Ryder stood in the door way. “You have something.” Joe stood.

With a dropping heart, Dean spun around. “Please have something.”

Slowly Elliott nodded. “Out of the way first because if don’t tell you this, you’ll fail to hear it later. I got in touch with Jess. He’ll use the Johnny phone call to buy us time.”

“And Frank?” Joe asked.

Again, Elliott nodded slow. “We heard. They drove into radio range. I have a truck meeting them, they should be home in twelve hours.”

Dean had to ask. “Robbie and Ellen.”

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“Good news and bad news.” Elliott answered. “Bad news is, they don’t have them. Robbie and Ellen . . . were gone.”

Dean’s hands ejected up in the air. “What good news can there possibly be then.”

“Frank stated very strongly that he is pretty certain they are safe and fine. We just, you know, have to find them.” Elliott winced some.

Joe’s frustration coupled with confusion was written all over his face. “Have to find them? How in God’s name then can Frank be sure they’re fine?”

“By his level of annoyance and message, I’d say he found proof.” Elliott said. “But his coming home to prepare for the search tells me a lot. Come on, Mr. Slagel, if he felt Ellen and Robbie were in danger, would he or the captain head back?”

Joe exhaled. “No. OK, so what did my son say.”

“Because I don’t want to be misconstrued, I’ll give you his exact words.” Elliott pulled out a small tablet. “Have Christopher fuckin Columbus detained.” Elliott cleared his throat. “We need info.” He continued to read. “Robbie and Ellen weren’t kidnaped. They were taken as token idols to be worshiped by some . . . Sick, fucked up mutant, underground religious fuckin . . . fanatics.” Elliott gave a so there nod and closed the notepad. “In Frank words.”

Joe only turned his head slowly to look at Dean. “And you were just saying *what* about nothing weirder happening?”

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It took some manipulation, and maneuvering of figures, but the reprogramming of coordinates in the computer looked legit. Jess Boyens was pleased with his job. He knew he had to do everything in his power to keep the society looking for Johnny and away from the other side of the country.

“South.” Jess handed Stewart Lange the readout. “Johnny placed a call to Beginnings montana, and we traced the call from a southern vicinity. West Virginia.”

“I knew he went south.” Stewart shook his head. “And you think this plan is the best.”

“Absolutely.” Jess stated. “In my opinion Johnny has amnesia.

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He's just lost right now. If George finds out what he did, George will kill him. Trust me, it would look to the people as if he killed his own son. We can't have that. The news of Johnny escaping can not get out."

"I know." Stewart exhaled. "All right. The truth stays between us. You hear?"

"Yes, sir." Jess said. "I already started covering tracks so-to-speak."

"Good. I'll get together a small private search party and set them on the trail of the phone call. You . . . you handle George."

"I can do that."

"But the question is Boyens . . . will he buy the new story?" Stewart asked.

Jess' head turned to the ringing phone. "We're about to find out." He reached for the receiver.

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Bertha Callahan, George Hadly's right hand man in a large woman's body, watched her leader on the phone. She felt his distress as his head dropped. She knew the news wasn't good. George was distressed when they left the compound to head back. Distressed about losing the game. But his spirits lifted when she and he got into a high speed conversation about what they would do with the city of Lodi Ohio. A small town barricaded in on the wrong side of the country.

They chuckled over how they would annihilate the small town of rebels if Lodi didn't pack up its own freedom stance, and move off the Society side.

A bright spot turned glum when George picked up the phone to check in back at Quantico. Bertha didn't know what was being said, but she knew she felt compelled to wrap her twenty-one inch biceps around the president, pull him close to her breasts and give him a big hug.

George hung up. His heavy sigh followed him as he turned around.

"What's happened?" Bertha asked.

"Forget Lodi for a while. We have bigger problems."

"Bigger? Beginnings."

"Nope. Seems . . . we had a new group of defectors within our

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ranks. They . . . they took my son, Callahan.”

“Oh my God.” Bertha said with shock.

“Johnny fought. He took out about eight of them but they got him. Boyens and Lange had a search party out now. Following what they said was . . . a blood trail.”

“Sir.” Bertha said with her masculine compassion. “I’m sorry. We’ll find him.”

“I hope. I hope.” He nodded. “Johnny’s all I have. He was lost within himself to begin with. Now . . . now he’s at the mercy of these new rebels and lost within his home somewhere. I’ll tell ya . . .” George spoke heavily. “Nothing else matters. Nothing. Not Beginnings nor Lodi. Nothing . . . until I get Johnny back.”

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## Lodi, Ohio

Johnny stood in the cold facing the manmade iron walls that barricaded Lodi. He was told by the guard it wasn’t an easy thing to be face to face with ‘the man’ Chief Mick Owens. When the iron gate opened, and Mick stepped forth, Johnny saw even more than with his father, standing face to face with Mick was a difficult task.

Mick Owens didn’t just stand tall, he was tall. Brawny as well. Blonde hair pulled into a pony tail, jeans and a tee shirt, Mick made Johnny reevaluate the thought that his father was big.

“Yes?” Mick asked. “I’m being told you seek political asylum from the society.”

“Yes, sir, I do.” Johnny answered.

“You’re pretty young. What’s the story?”

“I wanted out. You can check my things. I really don’t have much. I have a lot to offer. Yeah, I’m young, but I have been trained in the medical field since I was sixteen. Your medical people can test me. I can be an asset. Examination, simple surgeries, experiments, and lab tests. I was trained . . . I was trained by the best.”

“In the society?” Mick questioned.

“No, sir . . . Beginnings.”

Mick’s attention was caught. “Beginnings. Why in God’s name

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are ya' standing here?"

"I had a falling out." Johnny explained. "I was misled. I left Beginnings. My error. To be honest with you I want to go back home. Home to my family. Home . . . to Beginnings."

"But they won't let you."

Johnny shook his head. "I'll prove it to them, though. I'll earn their trust back. Work my way there. I just got to start somewhere."

"And you figured here was the place to start."

"Yes, sir."

"What's your name?"

"Stewart Redman."

"Stew?" Mick had a chuckle. "Originally from East Texas?"

"Huh?" Johnny questioned.

"East Texas. Plague. The Stand?" Mick saw the lost look on Johnny's face. "All right. You were probably too young when the world ended to know that. Come on in, Stew." Mick stepped back and further opened the iron gate. "Welcome to Lodi."

Johnny stepped inside his safety. It wasn't Beginnings but it wasn't the society. Yes it was, in Johnny's mind, his first step to getting home, but what he didn't realize was how close the city of Lodi was to taking that step to Beginnings as well.

## CHAPTER TWO

What was supposed to be a welcoming, a joyous occasion, an end to a missing, ended up being for Joe totally annoying.

Joe grumbled a few times, looked at his watch then up as he stood at the back gate. "Christ, Henry, get up."

Henry's calves and knees were flush to the ground as his face was lowered to the dirt before Joe in some sort of praising mode.

Hands on hips, Joe shook his head. "I told you, get up."

"I'm home Joe, I'm home." Henry stated.

Joe opened his mouth to speak again, then looked over his shoulder to the jeep when he heard Elliott laughing. "You think this is funny."

Arms crossed leaning against the front of the jeep, Elliott wiped the smile from his face. "No, Mr. Slagel."

"Joe." Henry spoke in awe as he stood. "Joe." He wisped out, gave a closed mouth pucker look and then arms extended grabbed on to a reluctant Joe. "Joe." Head against Joe's shoulder, Henry hugged.

"Yes. There." Joe gave a pat to Henry's back.. "Nice to see you too."

"Joe."

"Henry, this . . ."

"Joe." Henry stepped back and sighed out. "Elliott. Hello."

With a smirk, Elliott lifted a wave. "Hello."

Almost too dramatic, Henry laid his hand on his own chest. "I didn't think I'd get out of there alive. It's good to be home."

"Henry, you act like they tortured you."

"They did, Joe. Oh my God, they did." Henry picked up his bag. "They made me eat this brown substance. I lost weight. I had to hang out with George."

"You poor thing." Tired of standing there, Joe led Henry to the jeep. "Let's head down to my office. I want to get this debriefing meeting over and done with."

"Oh, me too, Joe." Henry embarked in the jeep. "I have so much to tell you."

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“Good. I have a lot to tell you too.” Joe said.

“About?” Henry asked.

“Beginnings, Frank, Robbie, Ellen, Hal, and . . . other personal things that have to deal with you.”

“Like?”

“Well . . .” Joe hem hawed some. “Pretty much Henry your personal life is inadvertently in a tailspin.”

“I don’t have a personal life.” Henry stated, then looked quickly at Elliott who laughed. “Do I?”

“Put it this way . . .” Joe said. “If you had a personal life you wanted to keep personal. It’s not personal anymore.” Joe gave a raise of his eyebrow.

Henry looked lost. It took a second or two, and then a horrified look hit him. “No.” He graveled.

“Yep.” Joe nodded. “Hector is trying to sort through the aftermath.”

“The aftermath?” Henry was confused. “What happened.”

“One word.” Joe said. “Misha.”

“How?” Henry asked. “How did she . . .”

Elliott interjected. “We still aren’t certain. We do know Ben from fabrics had a lot to say.”

“Bastard.”

“Yes.” Elliott nodded. “Why she went to Ben for answers is still a mystery. But he gave her answers.”

“So the aftermath is Misha finding out, and Hector being distraught.” Henry asked, thinking he was being the perceptive guy.

“And some.” Joe responded. “Seems the entire community now thinks Frank and Dean are gay lovers.”

“Ben started that?” Henry questioned.

With a snicker, Elliott answered. “No, Dean did. Not on purpose. He was trying to defend you and, well, things happened, Misha then talked.”

“So that’s the aftermath?” Henry asked.

“Maybe. Maybe not.” Joe answered. “See, it’s like in the old world when the stock market took a nose dive. You have to wait until the smoke clears to see the true after effect. That’s what stage of the game we’re in now. The smoke was the Misha-Ben-Hector-you-Hector beats

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up Dean. Dean-Frank-lover thing. We're waiting on the aftermath. And my gut is telling me it's gonna get out of control. Just a hunch."

Henry had to chuckle. "Really, Joe. Don't you think you might be overreacting. Out of control? Isn't it already out of control. I mean . . . How out of control can it really get?"

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It wasn't a forceful pounding of a gavel, but it conveyed enough to add silence to his courtroom. Jason Godrichson, exhaled the smoke, placed his cigarette in the ashtray and leaned back in his high leather chair. "Now." He spoke to the courtroom of all women. "This is my court. I set the rules, and my rules are, peaceful or not, you can not demonstrate in here. Put down the 'unfair to Misha', signs please." He waited until he saw the signs lower. "Now . . . I keep things moving here. I solve domestic situations with . . . ease." He smirked. "One of you. One." He lifted his finger. "May speak."

Jenny Matoose stepped forward.

Jason smiled sarcastically. "Figures. Yes, Jenny?"

"Well, your honor, we feel that Misha has been . . ." She stopped talking when Jason held up his hand. "What?"

"Treated unfair?" Jason asked. "I read your signs. Tell me something I don't know."

Jenny huffed. "Every one of us has made an attempt to get a job at the clinic with Dean. He won't hire us."

Jason shrugged. "I see no sign in Beginnings stating equal opportunity employer. Anything else. Thank you for . . ."

"No!" Jenny barked. "This is so . . . so typically Beginnings male. We feel so outnumbered."

"You are."

Face nearly red, Jenny was going to do what she planned on doing. Being the spokesperson for the women, and she'd do a good job. "Look," She folded her arms. "Nothing has been done to handle this sexual harassment situation." Her lip curled when Jason snickered. "No. You may not buy it, but it's true. And we want action. Legal action. Joe ignored it. Dean. It is now, time for you to handle it. According to the laws our dear Judge Grace . . ." With a sigh, Jenny and all woman

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lowered their heads for a moment. "Set forth."

"Then fine." Jason rocked some in his chair. "Following her rules. Dean is innocent until proven guilty. You have to do so. In order to begin you will have to set a trial date. But before that, according to Grace's rules, I want a petition of suit presented before this court. I want damages stated, actions needed to be taken, and copies so parties involved may be served. Until then . . ." Just as Jason was about to lift his gavel he watched Jenny approached the bench.

Jenny had a smug smile upon her face. She laid papers before Jason. "Done. And we went official too. On the best Ben from Fabrics stationary. They even smell pretty. Set our court date."

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Regimented testing every third day, without fail, for over a year and a half made Dean pretty certain he knew Hap and Josephine's urine well. He knew their output, color, consistency, results. Perhaps had there been a few more samples for Dean to run that morning, his suspicions wouldn't of risen. But there were only three. The typical Hap and Josephine samples, and a Beginnings woman. And when The healthy Beginnings woman had sugar, Josephine had white blood cells, and Hap tested pregnant, Dean knew something was up.

In fact he was positive what it was.

Not too much hesitation went into his leaving of the lab. His lab coat flapping behind him in his steady fast pace and determination. When he made it to the part of the clinic he knew he had to be, Dean didn't knock.

"Misha." He spoke her name, dropping the folders on the table where she worked on bed sheets.

"I am busy." She looked the other day.

"Well, I know you were pretty busy this morning. You had to be. Of course how long would it take you to switch labels, lids and reqs on three urine samples."

Misha finally looked up. "I don't know what you are talking about."

"Bullshit."

Calmly, and smug, Misha reached into her lab coat, puled out a

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notepad and wrote something down.

Dean saw. "What are you doing." He reached out and snatched the pad, reading it. "Dean used vulgarity at me?" Chuckling, he tossed it on the table. "Please."

Hurriedly, Misha took the pad back, but not without writing in it again. "I wish for you to leave, Dr. Hayes."

"I wish for you to leave my lab, and my things alone."

"I said, I do not know . . ."

"No." Dean sharply cut her off. "You know. I was the only one in and out of my lab this morning. You know where everything is. Did you think I was stupid? Did you think I wouldn't notice. I'm not you."

Gasping, Misha pulled out her notepad.

Dean continued. "It was a childish immature thing to do and you're screwing around with people's health. Let me catch you doing something again, you'll be out of this clinic and back at the house of lesbians where you belong."

Misha wrote diligently.

"Go on write." Dean said. "And write down that I called you a little bitch too for crossing the line. You're making this into a war."

"It is a war."

"Well let me tell you something little girl . . ." Dean took a step into her. "If this is the best you can do, you'll lose." Saying no more, Dean turned and walked out.

Mouth closed, a smile of arrogance on her face, Misha released a short laugh and shut her notebook.

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Phil, one of the agriculture workers, walked backwards, then forwards, in his leading pace with Hector. "I'm telling you. Something is amiss in Coop three. It doesn't sound good."

"Never sounds good." Hector said with some aggravation. "It's the biggest coop. When does it ever sound good when you have hundreds of chickens together."

"No, Hector, it sounds . . . weird."

"Weird?" Hector asked. "Did a rooster get in?"

"I don't know."

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“Why isn’t Matt dealing with this. This is he thing.”

“Matt is sick. It’s cold and flu season, you know.”

“It’s always cold and flu season in Beginnings. You people are a bunch of . . .” Hector slowed down as they neared the huge barn-like coop. “Babies.”

“See?”

Hector heard it, an off key, steady squaw of hundred of chickens. But that wasn’t what caught his attention, the site of the wooden hen house did. “Phil, is it me or are those wall . . .”

“Moving.” Phil finished the sentence. “Yes. Buckling to be more precise.”

Hector rushed to the hen house. “It can’t be a killer baby, it would be quiet then.”

“I wouldn’t unlock that if I were you.”

“Nonsense. They’re chickens.” Hector undid the padlock. As the locked clanked open the chicken noise stopped. “What the hell?” Holding the lock he slowly opened the door.

The silence lasted only a second. In the opening of where Hector stood, a blur of feathers and a single eerie squawk raged by him, but not before it reamed him in the head, sending Hector back a foot.

“Whoa.” Phil reached for him, “You OK?”

Hector touched the top of his forehead. He was bleeding. “Fuck. Was that a chicken?” Fingers still to his injured head, Hector stepped into the coop. “I was beginning to think it was a sea gull like in that movie, *The Birds*.”

Phil chuckled. “Reminded me of it.” He looked around. “Where are the lights?”

“Must be burned out.” Reaching for his flashlight, Hector’s eyes lifted when he heard it. “Shit.”

It seemed at that instant that every chicken in that coop screamed out, loud, long and continuously.

Phil took a step back. “Maybe we should go.”

“Nonsense they’re in cages.” Hector’s eyes widened. “Maybe not.”

Immediately, mixing with the squawking came the sounds of flapping. Hard, heavy flapping of wings seemed to convey closeness and speed. The entire coop filled with the thunder of it.

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Phil looked at Hector. "Run?"

"Run." Hector spun, and right behind Phil they dodged out of the coop. Hurrying, he turned, reached for the door, but before he could close it, like an eruption, fast and furiously, the chickens all flew out.

On the ground, heads covered from the low level flight of the edible amphibians, Hector and Phil waited until there was quiet.

Up from his protective position, Phil gazed, saw nothing and stood. "Oh my God." He walked into the coop, then stepped back out. "Hector, we just lost over three hundred chickens."

Hector could only say 'fuck' as his head dropped back to the ground.

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Joe's eyes lifted to the ceiling if his office when he heard the slight thump. He shook his head. "Go on, Henry, what were you saying?"

Elliott and Jason, both groaned slightly and sunk further into their chairs.

Henry ignored them. "She was big, Joe. Huge. Looked alike a she-man body builder. She's George's right hand shim."

"Henry." Joe rubbed his eyes. "I sat here listening to food stories. Dart stories. Bertha threatening to put your head between her legs stories. Is there anything vital about the trip you learned?"

"Well, yes, I overheard something. It might not be important." Henry said. "In east Ohio, there's a city of rebels. Big too. They are holding ground against the society. George is pissed. Wants to wipe them out."

"East Ohio?" Joe asked, then his eyes looked at Elliott. Immediately he knew Elliott and him were on the same wave length, the phone all from Johnny came from East Ohio. "Henry, do you know the name of this place?"

"No. Not off hand. I told myself to remember it, but I lost a lot when George put that gun to my head. I'm sure I'll remember it when I look at a map."

"You do that." Joe said. "We need to get on this city. Get in touch with them. Now . . ." Joe looked to the odd sound of a few taps on the roof. "Must be hail. Jason, what's going on."

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“A bit of a problem.” Jason said. “My reason for being late.” He laid three sheets of stationary on Joe’s desk.

Joe shook his head. “What are these?”

“Briefs. Legal briefs.” Jason answered.

“On Ben From fabric stationary?” Joe questioned.

“Oh, yes, and doused with the bit of perfume.”

Joe lifted the papers and sniffed. “Christ. Jenny.”

Jason nodded. “Trial dates are set. I had to, according to the law we set forth. So I will hear these cases without a jury.”

“What are . . .” Joe looked up to the growing sound of tapping on the ceiling. “Must *really* be hailing out there. Anyhow, what are these about. Why did you give them to me?”

“I thought you’d want to see them before the other parties involved are served.”

“It’s your jurisdiction.” Joe told him.

“But it’s a Beginnings problem.” Jason said. “Case one is Misha versus Dean in a sexual harassment case.”

“Christ.” Joe close his eyes.

“Wait. Gets better.” Jason smirked. “Second is Ben from fabrics, versus Dean in a sexual abuse case.”

Elliott laughed.

Henry gasped. “That Dean is such a dog. He has a big mouth, sexually harassed Misha and sexually abused Ben.”

“Henry.” Joe winced.

Jason smiled. “Still it gets better.”

“The last one?” Joe questioned, then picked it up. “Oh my god.”

“Yep.” Jason nodded. “Filed by the women on behalf of your son. It’s Frank Slagel versus Dean in a sexual slander case.”

“What the hell else will we have to deal with next?” Joe tossed his hands up.

“Excuse me, Mr Slagel.” Elliott spoke. “Perhaps that.” He pointed up. “It just doesn’t sound like hail to me.”

“You’re right.” Joe stood up. “Actually, it’s pretty damn loud.” He walked around his desk and Jason, Henry and Elliott stood as well. “What is going on out there.” Joe opened his door, peered out. Nothing.

“What is it?” Jason asked.

Joe stepped out side. “I don’t . . .”

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Hearing the sudden stop of Joe's sentence, Elliott leading the pack walked out. "Mr. Slagel?"

"Holy mother of God." Joe stared out. "I didn't realize we had that many chickens in Beginnings."

"What?" Confused, Elliott turned back to look at the building. Not a speck of roof could be seen. Chickens pecked and seemed to fight for a space to peck at the metal roof. "Oh shit."

Jason looked, then after an inhale, nodded. "Chickens pecking at a metal roof. There's a first."

Henry screamed when he saw them. Which wasn't a good thing. It set off a chain reaction.

A single 'bawk' seemed to be the charge call of it all, and upon that chicken's vocal sound, the entire brigade of poultry pelted down with speed from the roof, like a tidal wave, at the four men.

"What . . ." Joe's arms, swung about. "In . . . ow,." He looked down to the chicken that pecked at his leg. "Get off." He shucked it, only to be attacked by another. "Christ Almighty."

Round and round Elliott went fighting off the chickens that dove at him in droves. "Where are they . . . shit." he shook his arm when a chicken took a peck out of him.

"Fire extinguisher." Jason stated. "Inside." He rushed for the door, his arms waving about as well. He dove inside.

"I'm with him." Joe pointed, kicking about his legs, trying to move through the slush of feathery friends. "My damn . . . ankles . . . shit."

"Mr. Slagel where is . . ." Elliott was about to say the name, 'Henry'; but didn't have to. The horrid screams made both he and Joe spin to see Henry laying on the ground face forward. Henry covered his head and kicked his feet while the chickens galore landed upon him.

"Jason!" Joe called out. "Hurry with that . . ." He growled and kicked away another chicken in his route to help Henry. "Hurry with that extinguisher. Henry! Get up, they're only chickens for crying out loud!"

Batting his arms, Elliott raced with Joe to Henry. "This is bizarre."

"Yeah, well," Joe unsuccessfully reached for Henry, and gave a twitch of his head when a chicken poked for him. "This is Beginnings. Where else in the goddamn world can you get attacked by rabid

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chickens.” After another ‘ow’, Joe touched his own cheek to feel for blood. He growled. “Beginnings.”

## CHAPTER THREE

Elliott recalled the moment in his life when he was called in to assist in the dismantling of a nuclear warhead that could only be dismantled by hand. There was also the time when an old elevator was stuck in between floors, weakened cable, and Elliott had to climb down the shaft into the car. Or even the time in his life when the submarine he was on lost power for three days in the sea.

Moments. A ton of moments were in Elliott's life that challenged him. There were even moments ahead that would make him wonder. But none could or would ever hold a torch to the one he currently faced.

The chickens in Beginnings.

Elliott didn't know whether to laugh or to worry about it at all. There was something so comical yet frightening about the wave of warriors chickens that took it upon themselves to recreate the Alfred Hitchcock classic.

People in Beginnings were in a state of panic. The chickens attacked in waves. Out of the blue. No rhyme or reason. Blood thirsty chickens and Elliott hadn't a clue how to handle the dilemma.

It was as obscure as obscure could be. Demented and sick. And to Elliott it would take an obscure demented, sick thinker to solve the problem. And with that thought came another to Elliott.

What would Frank do?

With that train of thinking came another, and Elliott looked at his watch. It was a possibility that Frank and the Captain had met up with the Beginnings escort, so he picked up the phone and dialed.

"Yes, Carl." Elliott spoke. "This is Sgt. Ryder. By chance have you reached the Captain and Frank?" Elliott smiled. "Good. Perfect timing then. Can I speak to Frank?" He nodded. "I understand they aren't in the truck yet, but please. Thank you." Elliott tapped his fingers on the desk waiting. "Frank?" He winced. "Nice to speak to you as well. Frank, listen, we have a problem in Beginnings, that I believe only you can solve."

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“How many?” Joe asked Dean with shock in the clinic.

“Well . . .” Dean scratched his head. “I stopped counting at seventy-five.”

“Seventy-five!”

“Yes, Henry was . . .” Dean cleared his throat. “Pecked seventy five times . . . at least.”

“How bad is he injured?” Joe questioned.

“Not bad at all. They’re pretty much scratches. I can’t stitch them, but he is traumatized and in pain.”

“Christ. Sedate him.”

“Already done.” Dean smiled. “How about you. How are your ankles.”

Joe grumbled. “Can you goddamn believe this? I’m fine, can’t believe I was attacked by three hundred chickens. Any clue why this is happening?”

Hand behind his head, Dean lifted his shoulder, and tilted his head with a lost look. “Haven’t a clue.”

“Well, give it some thought.” Joe peered by Dean. “There’s Dan from security. Excuse me.” He made his way to Dan. “What’s the situation.”

“People understand, and have been told to stay indoors and not to leave unless absolutely necessary.” Dan explained as he walked. “But they’re scared Joe.”

“Understandable.”

“Sgt. Ryder is working on a solution, at least one to divert the attacks.”

“Good. Good.” Joe nodded. “Any more injuries.”

“No. Only report is the one that got stuck in Josephine’s hair. She’s fine though. Chicken’s not.”

“Self defense.”

“Joe.” Dan slowed down. “You don’t think that impending meteor has anything to do with this, do you?”

“What?” Joe asked surprised.

“Yeah, like how animals go crazy before an earthquake. Maybe this is from the meteor. Or maybe it’s sending radiation . . .”

“Dan. No meteor is causing this.”

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“What about an act of nature. A freak act of nature.”

Joe just wanted to whine.

“Oh my God.” Dan froze. “You don’t think they’re gonna get large, do you?”

“What in God’s name are you talking about?” Joe asked.

“Large. Oversized. Giant.” Dan explained. “Like in Food of the Gods. The chickens ate this feed that was specially enhanced and . . .”

“Stop.” Joe lifted his hand and nodded. “You got it. That’s it.”

“Food of the Gods?”

“No. Food of the goddamn mad scientist of Beginnings. Haven’t a clue, my ass. Excuse me.” Joe turned back around. “I have a wiry little man to speak to.”

^^^^

How many hours had Johnny spent in that single, small room. Too many to count. He slept most of them on the old sofa. Nearly all of his day had been in Lodi and Johnny still had failed to see anything but the four walls of that room.

What was taking them so long? Was the chief calling Beginnings? Or even the society? Johnny was uncertain, and he jumped a little in surprise when Mick unlocked the door and walked in.

“Hey, Stew.” Mick said. “I see you’re awake. I came in a while ago and you were sleeping.”

“Why didn’t you wake me?” Johnny asked.

“I don’t know. You must of been tired so I let you go. Anyhow, found nothing in your stuff. You passed our weapons screening.”

“What now, a containment process?”

“Excuse me?” Mick asked.

“In Beginnings we have containment. Where anyone that wants to live in Beginnings has to stay there to prove they can still be and act humor.”

Mick chuckled. “No shit? Beginnings does that? No, we don’t do that. We screen people but we don’t call in containment we call it Buzz.”

“Buzz?”

“Yep, you’ll find out shortly.”

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“Chief. I want to thank you for letting me in.” Johnny said.

“We pretty much let everyone in, Stew. Letting you stay is the trick. But if you really got them skills you boast, we’ll use you.”

“And I know it has to bother you with all that I said about leaving Beginnings and such.”

“Yeah. Ain’t gonna lie.” Mick replied. “But we’ll watch you. We’ll see if you can be trusted. But make no mistake, you fuck up. You turn out to be a spy. I’ll put a bullet n your head myself.”

“I understand.” Johnny nodded.

“Good.” Mick smiled, then looked up when he heard the knock on the door. “Yeah.”

The door opened and a stocky, and burly man entered. “Hey, Chief.” He said. “Got Richter to allow the stranger to bunk with him until we situate him with a place of his own.”

“Excellent. Might as well meet the stranger. This is Stew Redman.”

“Stew?” The man chuckled. “Well, how are ya’, Stew. My name is Larry Underwood.” He extended his hand to Johnny.

“Larry.” Johnny shook his head.

Mick winced. “Knock it off Buzz. Stew, his name isn’t Larry. It’s Buzz. And Buzz, Stew here doesn’t have a clue about that. He was too young when everything went to shit.”

Buzz laughed. “Sorry. Anyhow, I’ll take you to your new home, Stew.”

Mick gave a nudge to Buzz. “Did you see Lars?” Mick turned to Johnny so as to explain. “Lars is our town doctor and scientist.”

Buzz nodded. “Yep. I saw him, talked to him, and he said no. He said he’s on his day off and the stranger is gonna have to wait until tomorrow.”

“All right, Then that’ll have to do.” Mick laid his hand on Johnny’s back. “This way, Stew,. We’ll take you to your temporary new home.”

Johnny followed. And temporary home was a truer statement than Mick had even known. Lodi was temporary, but Johnny was grateful to be there. Lodi was one step closer to the peacefulness of Beginnings.



The main corridor of the clinic looked like a MASH unit, and sounded like one as well. People cried, cots lined up the walls. Beginnings residents huddled in there for medical care and for a safety feeling. It was like awaiting the dropping of the bombs. No one knew when the next chicken attack would occur.

“Give this man a half a cc of Lerot sedative.” Andrea ordered as she moved to the next victim, Melissa following behind for orders. “Clean these wounds and move him to exam room one. Sweet Jesus, where is Dean.”

“He’s working on something for Joe.” Melissa answered.

“Doesn’t he know we have a medical crisis. If cold and flu season doesn’t beat us down enough.” She shook her head and moved down to the next cot. “This one looks minor. Maybe . . . twenty peck wounds. Give a mild pain killer and put him in the waiting room.” Andrea with exasperation took a breath. “When will the madness end.”

“My eyes! My eyes!” A woman cried out from the far end of the corridor.

Panicked Andrea raced.

“My eyes. I can’t see,” She screamed while thrashing about on the cot.

“No-no, baby. Hold on.” Andrea approached.

“My eyes. The chickens got me eyes.”

“No-no. It’s just feathers. They’re kind of . . .” Andrea pulled. “Stuck.”

The woman screamed.

“With blood.” Andrea continued. “All better. See.”

She exhaled. “Thank you.”

Andrea took a second to calm herself. She turned to Melissa. “We need every available hand to get through this pandemonium. I just hope the Dear Lord is gentle the next attack. Whenever that will be.”

Down the hall, at the main glass doors, Joe stood with Dan from security. A few others from Beginnings stood behind them peering out

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the glass onto the main street that seemed taken over by chickens. The moved slow, staying in masses as they marked their territory.

“They’re waiting.” Dan said. “For someone. Anyone.”

“Thank God, people were told to stay in . . .” Joe’s voice dropped. “No. Hap. What is he doing?”

Dan’s hand rammed flush to the glass as he saw Hap walk onto main street and slow down at the sight of the chickens. “Joe, he worked a night shift. He doesn’t know. He was sleeping.”

“Dear God.” Joe stated. “Doesn’t the man know something is wrong with all the damn chickens running around.”

Hap took another step.

Dan pounded on the glass. “Hap! Go back!”

Hap heard the pounding and looked up.

“Hap!” Dan banged. “Get cover.”

Hap pointed to his own ear shaking his head.

“Go back!” Dan pounded.

Soon everyone started to bang on the glass in warning to Hap.

Finally hap tossed his hands in the air and yelled out a loud, ‘what!’

Everyone cringed when the chickens rose up and flocked for him.

“Son of a bitch.” Joe pushed open the doors. Just as he charged in a heroic rescue, the screech of the jeep cut him off.

Chickens covering Hap, Elliott jumped from the jeep with a cage. He set it down, opened it and out ran a rooster toward the hundreds of chickens.

One cock-a-doodle-doo, from the rooster and every single chicken stopped their attack and seemingly in a panic, they hurried away.

Hap lifted to his feet. “Goddamn goofy chickens.” He brushed himself off.

Joe was amazed and he walked to Elliott. “How did you know to do that?”

Elliott exhaled. “Frank. I called him. They had just picked up him and the Captain, and I asked Frank’s opinion. I figured since this was off the wall . . .”

Joe finished the sentence. “Why not ask an off the wall person.”

“Exactly.” Elliott nodded. “He said send a rooster after them to

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stop the attacks until whatever Dean did to them wears off.”

“Frank thinks this is all Dean?” Joe asked.

“Doesn’t everybody?” Elliott questioned.

“Everybody but our little mad scientist who has yet to give me an answer. Well that . . .” Joe headed back to the clinic. “Is gonna change.”

Joe knew as soon as he started to get the ‘Elvis’ run around from everyone, that Dean was guilty as charged. Forging through the ‘I think I saw him there’ and ‘he was just here’ situations, Joe located Dean in the scrub area of operating room two.

“Busted.” Joe said as he walked in.

“Joe, I’m very busy. I have surgery.” Dean defended.

“Surgery my ass.” Joe barked. “These people were pecked Dean, they weren’t gouged.” He stepped toward Dean. “Now I asked you for answers, I know you have answers, give them to me.”

Dean exhaled.

Joe could feel it, the heat as it rose up his chest and to his face via his neck. Thinking Dean was responsible was one thing, knowing it was another. “You . . . you *did* do this.”

Dean nodded slow. “I guess.”

“You guess?”

“Joe, the protein I mix manipulates the feed . . .”

Joe screamed in shock.

“What?” Dean asked.

“You manipulate protein for the chicken feed.”

“Joe, it has to be that way to get maximum . . .”

“It’s nature for crying out loud!” Joe yelled. “Why in God’s name are you manipulating nature.”

Dean tried to remain reasonable. “We need to get maximum results out of all of our food.”

“Well I hope you’re goddamn satisfied, Dean, we’re getting maximum results from our food now, aren’t we? We have a bunch of carnivorous chickens running around Beginnings.”

Dean snickered. “Joe, they aren’t carnivorous.”

“Are you making fun of me.”

“No. I’m just saying they aren’t eating people, they’re just

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attacking them out of . . . fear.”

Calmly Joe nodded. “Fear.”

“Yeah, the overdose of protein DE-5, causes a bit of psychosis.”

“Let me get this straight.” Joe lifted his hand. “We have a bunch of psychotic chickens running around in Beginnings.”

“Only for the next eight to ten hours.”

“Eight to ten hours!” Joe screamed. “You are the exact reason they had laws in the old world, to stop shit like this from happening. I give an inch with you and we have mutilated chickens, rabbits, frozen children, killer babies . . .”

“They.” Dean said strong. “Are not my doing.”

“Well, I’m sure as shit pretty certain somewhere down the line in the chain of creation of them you played a role. “

”Joe, if you would let me explain how I don’t think this is my fault, then . . .”

“Not your fault.” Joe was nearly out of control. “You manipulated nature for Christ’s sake. You fuck around with shit like you always do. Let me tell you something, Dean . . .” Joe’s finger waved about. “One more thing. One more screwed up, whacked out, panic causing thing to occur in Beginnings, one more thing . . .” Joe’s hand cut through the air. “And father to my grandchildren, brilliant scientist, husband to my daughter, or not . . . I will pack your bags myself and kick you the hell out of here.” Joe turned, speaking hard as he moved out. “Send your little ass to the society. Reek a little havoc on them, will ya’, so we can have an advantage for once.” With a hard swing of the operating room door, Joe stormed out.

Hand tapping on the edge of the sink, Dean looked up to the ceiling in thought. Though he highly doubted Joe would really kick him out of Beginnings, Dean took comfort in the fact that he was safe from anything else happening, at that moment, in Beginnings.

^^^^

“Where did you say you heard the banging?” Dan asked Mark as they walked down the cryo tunnels.

“The lab.” Mark answered.

Dan stopped. “Are you sure?”

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“Yep. Listen.” Mark pointed to the traveling sound.

“Fuck.” Dan nearly stomped then started to walk. “What the hell is it.”

“We’re talking Hayes Land, who the hell knows.”

The steady, loud banging ran out through the tunnel. And as Mark had said, it came from the cryo lab. That was evident when they stopped before the metal door and heard it.

Dan looked at the door. “Whatever it is wants out.”

“Maybe . . .” Mark said brightly. “Remember those paddle ball things. Where you’d have the paddle and the ball attached to the rubber band, and you kind of play a game of hitting the ball.”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe Dean invented a large one and the ball is hitting against the door right . . . ow.” Mark rubbed his arm when Dan punched him. “What?”

“Fuckin stupid.” He shook his head. “All right. We have to find out what this is.”

“I’ve been in there. I don’t want to know.”

“Just stand back.” Dan waited until Mark was clearly on the other side of the door, then he himself fixed on the opposite side, punched in the code to the cryo door.

Buzz.

Bang.

“Shit.” Taking a deep breath, Dan reached, still staying clear, and open the door.

With a ‘whoosh’ and a slight growl, it shot with high speed straight out of the cryo lab door, banging straight into the wall. After landing, shaking hits head, and gaining its orientation, the killer baby sped forth down the tunnels.

“Fuck.” Dan whined. “What else.”

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From the counter in his clinic lab, Dean looked up to the two hard bangs on his door. “Yeah.”

Joe walked in, he spoke very rational. “Let’s go. You’re out. I have a security escort.”

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“What? You can’t be . . .” Dean spun around. “Serious . . .” He saw four security guards. “You are.”

“Oh, absolutely. Until Ellen returns, I’ll have the kids, you are moving to New Bowman. Get the hell out of Beginnings.”

Dean was speechless, then he laughed. “You have to be joking.”

“No I’m not Dean. I have pandemonium in this town already over the chickens. Now, thank you very much, after escaping from your lab, I have a killer baby amuck in town as well.”

“My lab?” Dean asked.

Joe nodded.

A clear cut smirk moved across Dean’s face. “Can I explain things now. After my theory . . .” Dean smiled. “I don’t think I’ll be the one you’ll kick out.”

^^^^

“OK, keep my posted.” Joe hung up his office phone, then stared across his desk at Dean who looked like he was waiting in the principal’s office.

“Anything?” Dean asked.

“Still on the loose. But people are definitely staying inside. Which is good.”

“Hey, at last we shouldn’t have any more chicken attacks.”

Joe only glared. His views turned to the door when he heard the knock. “Come in.”

Elliott poked his head in. “I’m back.”

“Good just . . .” Joe slowly sat back. “What in Gods name happened to your face.”

Elliott touched the scratch on his cheek then ran his fingers to where a black eye was beginning. “Attacked.”

“Chickens?” Joe asked.

“No, women. At the house of lesbians.”

“They attacked you?” Joe questioned.

“Yes, when I went and to retrieve Misha. They pelted me with . . . with shoes.”

A snort escaped Dean and then he laughed. He quickly stopped when Joe snapped a view his way.

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“Oh, yeah, this is funny.” Joe said angry. “Are you happy. Elliott, bring her in.”

“Let’s go.” Elliott stepped into the office, bringing with hi a sniffling Misha. He closed the door and stood there.

“Have a seat.” Joe pointed to a chair next to Dean.

Almost fearful, Misha moved to the chair. She inched it further from Dean then sat down. “Mr. Slagel, I don’t understand what it is I did.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “Oh knock it off.”

“Dean.” Joe warned. “Misha, we had some instances, I’d like to bring to your attention.”

“Yes,. Sir?” Misha asked.

“Dean had lab samples tampered with . . .”

“No. No.” Misha shook her head. “I did not do that.”

“Let me finish.” Joe held up his hand. “Protein made by Dean was found in the chicken’s water.”

Dean interjected. “An overdose of it.”

“Hence.” Joe continued. “Our chicken dilemma. A killer baby was released from its cage and is running amuck in Beginnings right now. Do you know anything about this?”

“No.” Misha shook her head.

“You’re lying.”

Misha gasped.

Dean smiled.

Folding his hands, Joe leaned into the desk. “Misha, do you know what I did for twenty years before this world ended.”

Misha shook her head.

“I’ll tell you.” Joe said,. “I worked for Central Intelligence. Which, incase you are too young, is the biggest investigative arm of the Untied States government. Now I investigated then, just like I investigated today. Fingerprints. No one has the same as anyone else. Your fingerprints, were not only found on the urine sample cups, they were found on the barn door, and they were found on the lock on the killer baby cage.”

Misha’s eyes widened.

“Now, I will tell you this one time.” Joe lifted his finger,. “You better pray to God that those are old fingerprints, Because if I find out

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differently, if I find out you were screwing around in this community, with my people's health, with my people's welfare, you're out."

Misha took on a defensive tone. "But the Captain is in charge . . ."

"Of Bowman." Joe cut her off. "I am not only the leader of the three provinces, I am his father, so I rule all the way around. Is that clear? I don't give a rat's ass what he says, I'll blindfold ya, take you out and drop you off in the middle of the wilderness. And let me let you in on a little secret . . ." Joe dropped his voice to a whisper. "My son is pretty fed up with you women, so I don't think I'll get an argument from him." Joe sat back. "Sgt. Ryder. Take her back."

"Yes, sir." Elliott walked to Misha, taking hold of her arm. "This way." He led her to the door.

"Oh, and Elliott." Joe spoke up. "Let it be known to the house of Lesbians, I won't stand for their antics. If they ever attack you or anyone else again for no reason . . . they'll become mothers for a fine flock of children in the killer baby region."

Elliott smiled. "I'll pass that along." He took Misha from the office.

Dean waited for the door to close, and then he stood up. "Thanks, Joe."

"You still aren't off the hook." Joe pointed a pencil at Dean.

"But it was Misha. You said you found . . ."

"I lied." Joe replied. "When do I have time to do fingerprints. She doesn't know. And neither do we for sure. And I'll be on edge until the chickens calm down and we catch that killer baby."

"Just about right now, we can really use Frank." Dean spoke soft.

"You aren't kidding." Joe exhaled. "Oh brother could we use Frank."

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Hal sounded as tired as he looked. Fighting to keep his eyes open, and his wits about him through the fever that had set in, he lifted his head with a smile. "Oh, yeah?" He said to Frank. "Killer chickens. Sorry I missed it."

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“Knowing the length of Dean shit. It’s done.” Frank exhaled. “Almost home. Another minute.”

“Hey, Frank? You’ll not gonna leave to look for Ellen and our brother will you. You’ll wait for me.”

“I’ll wait. I’ll get things ready. But . . .” Frank nodded. “You’d better get well fast, cause I’m not fuckin waiting forever.”

“It’s a deal. I’m just gonna close my eyes.”

Frank watched Hal seemingly fall right to sleep with the shutting of his eyes. He reached up to the front seat, tapping Paul the driver. “There’s gonna be someone waiting for Hal, right? They know at the clinic he’s sick.”

“I told them. Your father and Sgt. Ryder are waiting right now for you. Three in the morning, and they’re waiting. Almost home, Frank.”

Home.

Frank sank back into the seat with that one word.

How good it felt to be back, but it would be short lived. He had to rest up, pack up, and go back out. His exhaustion might of been the cause the thoughts he was having as he neared the back gate, but Frank doubted it. He knew it was reality.

Even though he was glad his father was there waiting, a part of Frank wished that his father was home in bed. It was still dark, and knowing his estimated arrival time, Frank held high hopes that when he made it back, he would have to see anyone. Not yet. To him it would take some courage to face his father, children, and even Dean. Face them with the fact, that he wasn’t coming home, like promised, with Ellen.

“Down the gate.” Elliott spoke into the headset. “They’re here.” he smiled.

Joe perked up. He didn’t even notice the cold as he anxiously awaited the arrival of his sons. A jeep waited to bring Hal directly to the clinic to be treated for infection. Joe watched the truck seem to approach too slow. His face grew tense, waiting. His heart pounded. He needed to see his sons and it just was taking too long.

Finally the truck stopped, and the back doors both opened.

With a single clap of his hands, Joe rushed to the truck. “Son of

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bitch, you're back."

Frank stepped out with a bit of a tired slump. He gave an exhausted smile to his father, and reached out with an embrace.

"My, God, it's good to see you." Joe stepped back and laid his hand on Frank's cheek. "How are you."

Frank shrugged. "Fine. Dad . . ."

"Where's Hal?" Joe asked.

"Right behind you." Hal spoke.

Letting out a small laugh of joy, Joe turned and bragged onto Hal. "I'm proud of you guys." he kissed Hal on the cheek. "But we need to get you to the clinic."

"Yes, I have resolved myself to that." Hal, armed draped across his waist, looked around. "Where is my right hand man."

Elliott stepped forward with a smile. "Captain." He gave a salute, then extended his hand. "Good to have you back."

"Not for long. Please, just tell me, in my absence you've not single handedly dismantled the UWA."

"Nah." Elliott winked. "I had some help." He laid a hand on Hal's back. "The jeep's this way."

Joe gave a tug to Frank's arm. "Let's go. We need to talk."

"Dad." Frank stopped. "I'm sorry. I am very sorry I don't have Robbie or Ellen."

"Don't apologize." Joe told him. "This is not your fault. You said you feel they are fine?"

Frank nodded.

"You have a good gut instinct Frank. Plus, you're psychic." Joe smiled. "And we need to call upon your fine intellect right now. Hating to interrupt your homecoming, and rest, we have a problem."

"Killer chickens" Frank asked with seriousness.

Elliott interjected as he stepped to the pair. "No, killer baby. One. Loose in Beginnings."

"What?" Frank asked shocked, then started to walk. "How?"

Joe shrugged. "Not sure of the how, but his cage was left open in the cryo lab."

"So it's a Dean killer baby." Frank said. "Which baby? Marv or Elliott."

Elliott quickly looked. "A killer baby is named, Elliott? Please

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don't tell me it is named after me."

"Uh . . . yeah." Frank responded sarcastically. "Elliott. Elliott. Sounds the same. Besides Dean named him after you because he fuckin hates you. Anyhow, which one?"

Both Joe and Elliott looked at each other.

"How about this. Any casualties yet." Frank quizzed.

"One goat." Joe answered.

"Makes sense. Must be Elliott." Frank started to walk. "He's pretty trained to not attack people. Just savages and animals. You can't find him?"

"Nope." Elliott answered. "We've searched the entire community and he hasn't showed signs of escape either."

"Have you tried Journey?"

Elliott nodded. "Several times."

"REO Speedwagon?"

"Without a doubt."

"Barry Manilow." Frank suggested.

"That too."

"When is the last time you checked his cage back in the cryo lab." Frank asked.

Slowly Elliott blinked. "We didn't."

"He's there." Frank moved faster to the jeep. "One casualty. He's pretty full. Not responding to my music, Dean's or Ellen's. They instinctively head back to their habitat, his habitat is the cryo." Frank embarked in the jeep. "Check it out. Bet me he's sound asleep."

"I'll . . . I'll do that." Elliott slowly tried to get back in the jeep.

Joe halted him. "Six hours." He whispered. "Six hours we've been chasing this baby and there's a chance he just want back . . . home."

Elliott was at a loss for a proper answer. "I wouldn't have thought."

"Six hours of worrying." Joe's voice started to raise. "Of locking the people of this community in their homes. Six goddamn hours and you didn't think to look back in the cryo lab."

"Pardon me, but . . ." Elliott dropped his voice. "None of us thought about that. It's too obscure of a deduction."

Joe closed his eyes and nodded. "You're right. Obscure deduction. Killer babies. Frank." Joe pointed and slipped into the jeep.

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“He is their God.” Elliott responded.

In a near groggy state, eyes half staring out, Frank mumbled out his stock response. “I am.”

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Dean felt like some teenage girl from the old world waiting on a chance to get a glimpse of her rock star idol. He knew he had Hal to work on, but Dean, had to admit, he couldn’t wait to see Frank. For as bad as things left off, the truth was, he missed Frank. He needed to see he was all right and hear from Frank’s mouth what he could about Ellen.

So Dean waited. As soon as he received the call that Frank and Hal arrived and were en-route to the clinic, Dean waited by the door. The jeep pulled up with Joe and Hal.

No Frank.

It made sense to Dean that Frank would immediately slip into hero mode, and head of security, doing his job like no one else would do, ending a situation in Beginnings so there could be an end to a chaotic day. It also was understandable to Dean that Frank would want to see the kids, and after all was done, he would return to the clinic.

So Dean waited there.

Even though he was finished with what he had to do with Hal, Dean didn’t want to take a chance on missing Frank on his way home. There were things to do in the clinic lab, and that’s where he hung out.

“Dr. Hayes.” Elliott spoke as h stepped into the lab.

From the counter, Dean turned. “Oh, hey, Sgt. Ryder. Is Frank with you?” Dean asked taking a step and peering around Elliott as he did.

“No, he should be here soon. He went to see the children.”

“Oh.” Dean began to turn away.

“After we handled the . . . Elliott . . . situation.”

Dean stopped. He hid the cringe that crept upon him. Then placing on a smile, he turned around. “The Elliott situation?”

“Yes, seems to me that a killer baby. A cryo lab killer baby, inherited the name Elliott.”

Dean chuckled. “Well, imagine that. How odd, that’s your name.”

“Yes it is.” Elliott spoke calm.

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“And the odder thing is, he was named Elliott before we even met you. Wonder what that means?” Dean shrugged and turned around.

“It means you are not being honest now. Dr. Hayes . . .” Elliott walked to him. “A killer baby? What is the symbolization behind that? I mean, what did I ever do to you to warrant such a thing as to name a killer baby after me. I really feel bad.”

“Sgt. Ryder.” Dean shook his head. “Don’t you think you’re making a bit too much out of this?” he turned around. “I named . . . fuck.” Dean’s eyes widened. “Shit. He walked by.”

“Who?”

“Frank.” Dean hurried passed Elliott. “Excuse me.” he raced to the lab door and looked down the hall. “Shit. Fuck.” A bit of frustrated anger hit Dean. Spinning, he faced Elliott with a point. “I swear if I miss him every single mutated lab creation is getting a derivative of your name.” Out of the Lab Dean flew.

Elliott tossed his hands in the air. “It’s a vendetta.”

It was thick, strong smelling, and it was going to be Frank’s first cup of coffee in two days. Even the scent of it helped his caffeine insufficient headache. It was going to taste good. Slowly, after a blow, he brought the cup to his lips.

“Frank.” Dean stated his name with almost relief.

Startled a little bit of coffee jumped up. “Fuck.” Frank wiped off his chin and turned.

“Frank.” Dean nodded and stepped to him extending his hand. “Good to have you back.”

Frank turned from him.

“I can’t believe after this week, you’re still mad at me. Come on . . .” Dean whispered. “We’re friends.”

“Were.”

“Are.”

“Dean . . .”

“Frank, stop this. We have a common interest. A common concern,” Dean stepped closer to him. “Ellen. And you . . .”

“Failed.” Frank set his cup down hard, turning completely from Dean and laying his hands on the edge of the counter. “And I failed.”

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“What are you talking about?”

“Dean, where is she? Huh? Where?” Frank turned back around. “Not here. Not home. Not as promised. I . . . failed.”

“Oh my God.” Dean shook his head in disbelief. “How can you even say that? How can you make that claim. Failed? No, Frank, you didn’t fail at all. Do you realize I couldn’t wait to see you? Do you? My God, if you had any inkling of how much I hold you in high regard, you’d be embarrassed to even tell me you failed.”

With a short chuckle, Frank closed his eyes and shook his head.

“Listen to me. Ellen and Robbie, they didn’t stand a chance out there. And I firmly believe, even if you were alone out there, no one but you could have saved her life from over six hundred society soldiers. No one but you would go out on a limb for another person in the flair that you do. Every night when I went to sleep, I thanked God it was you out there. Distances, Frank, you go distances. You leaped off a cliff and stole a helicopter, for crying out loud.”

Quickly Frank looked up. “How did you know that?”

“No one told you?” Dean smiled. “We ended up picking you guys up on your radios that last few days. It was like listening to a sports station. The society.”

“We picked them up too. I couldn’t understand them. They brought Africans in, you know.”

“You’ll have that. Then, again, I interrupted what they were saying and it made it worse for me. I was on needles and pins. Even the final attack, we heard. Down to the second Robbie and Ellen went down.”

Frank swallowed. “And they were gone when we got there.”

“But you’ll find them. I know you will. How can you not? We have the perfect roadmap right here in Beginnings. The perfect information person.”

“Christopher.”

“Absolutely.” Dean nodded. “And we can pick his brain tomorrow, all day, if you like.”

“Probably won’t be too hard.” Frank snickered. “Since you can almost see it.”

“True.” Dean took a deep breath, “I missed you, Frank.” He extended his hand. “I’m very proud of you, and I thank you for what you

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did for Ellen. Shake my hand.”

After a hesitation, Frank gripped Dean’s hand and shook it.

“Friends again?” Dean asked.

Frank bobbed his head side by side. “I guess.”

Dean smiled and chuckled. After a tug to Frank’s hand, he stepped closer and, head to Frank’s chest, he gave him a huge hug. “Good to have you back, Frank.”

“Sweet Jesus,” Andrea walked in, covered her eyes and turned. “Sorry to interrupt. We have a repercussion of a chicken, incident, Dr. Hayes, we could use your knowledge.” She stared to leave. “Oh and Frank.” she paused. “Please, don’t let him try to influence your decision to fight for justice. Stand firm. Don’t weaken.”

Confused, Frank shook his head. “What the fuck is she talking about.”

Dean lifted his hands and stepped back. “Who knows. It’s Beginnings.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

January 24<sup>th</sup>

It felt to Joe like the perfect live band playing. Perfect tempo, tight, in synch, and without any bad notes.

The tone of Beginnings.

He rocked back and forth with some ease in his office during a routine council meeting. “Do you feel that, Jason?” Joe asked. “All even keyed.”

“Oddly enough.” Jason replied. “Yes.”

“However . . .” Elliott interjected. “The question should be . . . will it stay.”

“Don’t care.” Joe shrugged. “After yesterday, I’m enjoying the feel of this day.”

Danny Hoi snickered. “Yeah, but Joe, it will be short lived, especially if the reason for it all is . . .”

“I don’t care.” Joe repeated. “It will all be on the shoulders of who I put in charge while I leave.”

All three men sat up with attention and an unison, ‘what?’

“Oh, yeah, I’m leaving. Whether my sons like it or not, I’m going with them to get Robbie and Ellen. I have to. It’s my family. And when Frank and Hal go back out there. Again that means all of my kids are out there, and this time, so will I be.”

“It will be the three of you?” Jason asked.

Joe nodded. “And . . .” he pointed at Elliott.

“Oh my God.” Danny gasped. “You’re leaving, Hal’s leaving, Frank’s leaving, and Frank’s mini me is leaving too. What the hell Joe? What’s gonna happen to Beginnings?”

“Beginnings will be fine.” Joe dropped his voice to a mumble. “I think. And I’ll figure out fill in positions and responsibilities. I have a few more days to do so and I’ll have a meeting regarding who will do what. But for now . . .” Again, Joe leaned back in his chair. “I have enough to worry about personally. So, let’s enjoy the peacefulness of this day. No matter what the odd reason for it.”

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Still a little in shock after the sudden announcement, Danny shook his head. "Do you really think Frank is the reason for everything returning to normal?"

"Oh, absolutely." Joe hurriedly looked at Elliott and Jason who laughed. "No, I'm not kidding. Look at yesterday, Frank comes back. Killer baby found, chickens calm down immediately. It took an oddball to correct an oddball day. Yep . . ." He nodded. "Things are normal, Frank is back."

The 'bang' of the office door as it opened and hit into the file cabinet, caused Joe to nearly topple from his chair, and Jason, Elliott and Danny to look immediately at Joe.

"Fuck." Frank barged in and slammed the door. It bounced back, he tried it again, it bounced back once more. "Fuck. Danny, fuckin fix this. Fuck."

"Frank?" Joe asked calmly. "What is wrong?"

"Where's the fuckin mutant?"

"Who are you talking about?" Joe questioned.

"How many fuckin mutants do we have in town?"

Jason inhaled slowly, "Seeing how we are in Beginnings, and you, Frank, are part Jackrabbit, do you really want an answer."

"To?" Frank asked.

Joe's hand slammed on the desk. "He was being facetious, you moron."

"About?"

Joe growled.

Jason snickered.

Joe shook his head. "Never mind. Anyhow, by the mutant question, I will take it you are looking for Christopher Columbus."

"Bingo." Frank snapped his finger. "He's the fuckin explorer, so why am I looking for him. Where is he?"

Joe shrugged. "I haven't seen him."

Frank paused for a second. "Ever?"

"What?" Joe asked shocked.

"Ever. Meaning, you never seen him ever. Which, wait, you have I think. Did you?"

"Oh my God." Danny tried not to laugh.

"Frank." Joe really tried not to lose it. "I meant, I haven't seen

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him today. In fact I usually don't see him at all."

Frank wisped out in surprise. "He's invisible now?"

Elliott tried, he gave it his all not to laugh, but it escaped him and he slipped into a cover up cough. "Sorry."

"Frank . . ." Joe tried to talk to him.

"It would stand to figure." Frank spoke. "I mean his skin is . . ."

"Frank. . . ."

"Fuckin half way gone as it is. The rest of him would . . ."

"Frank!" Joe yelled. "Christopher is not invisible!"

"You said."

"No, that's not what I said. I said I don't see him. See him Frank. See. See. See."

"Exactly!"

Joe growled.

Jason looked at him with a titled head. "You are playing right into this."

"Excuse me." Elliott, as if he were a teenage girl, stood up hiding his snicker.

"Sit your ass back down!" Joe blasted as he too stood up. "Stay and suffer with the rest of us."

Biting his bottom lip, Elliott sat back down, another giggle escaped him.

Looking down to him, Frank shook his head. "You're silly."

It was a task he wasn't going to fail, so changing his whole demeanor to the father one, Joe sat back down. "Frank." He spoke pacifying. "I didn't mean Christopher was invisible, I meant, that usually, during the course of the day, I don't see, speak, or run into him . . ." Joe saw Frank's mouth open and he held up his hand. "Let me finish. I don't usually do those things because he's on one end of the community and I am on the other."

"Why didn't you say that in the first place?"

Slowly Joe shook his head. "My error."

"Ok. Now do any of you know where he is?" Frank asked.

Everyone shook their head.

"Maybe he's . . . fuck!" Frank cringed with aggravation.

"What? What now?" Joe asked.

"What if the killer baby ate him? Shit."

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“Frank, I don’t think . . .”

“Fuck,” Frank flew to the door. “Ryder, this is all your fault.”

“How is it my fault?” Elliot defended.

“The killer baby is named after you!” Frank yelled. “You inspired him!” He flung open the door. “And if the killer baby ate him we’ll never find him. Thank you very much. There’d be no remains because he’s invisible. Fuck!”

With the slamming of the door, so went Joe’s head to his desk top.

Jason, in an enjoying mode, sat back in his chair with European crossed legs. “I believe you were saying normalcy occurred in Beginnings since Frank returned.” Jason looked at the door. “I’d say you’re right.”

^^^^

“You seem better today.” Henry said as he walked with Hector on the main street of town

“I am better today. I’m glad you’re back.”

“Thanks. So, I helped your spirits then.”

“Um, no.” Hector stated. “I’m just better. Things are getting brighter.”

“With Misha?”

Hector scoffed. “Yeah, right. That’s over and done with. I’ve resolved myself to the fact that the Lord giveth and Dean taketh away.”

“And isn’t that so true, he does. It’s his God complex. So how are things getting brighter.”

“God on his throne is about to start tumbling.”

“I’m confused.”

Hector pointed to the clinic. “I’m going to see God himself.”

“Dean? Are you going to fight.”

“Nope, better.” Hector walked up the steps to the clinic. “I’m going to take great pleasure in watching him receive one of the trips in his fall.” He opened the door. “Things are slipping for Dean. What goes around comes around.” Hector walked down the hall. “The chickens. Killer baby. Ellen going back with Frank. Frank having the understanding with Elliott.”

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“Really?”

“Oh, yeah. That’s what I heard especially since Frank stopped their little tryst because of Dean’s big mouth.”

“Hector I don’t believe that about them two. As much as I would like to believe Dean is gay, he’s not. Neither is Frank.”

“Neither am I.” Hector said. “Nor you. But , . . .”

“Point taken.”

“See.” Hector knocked on the clinic lab door. “Dean.”

After slightly rolling his eyes, Dean looked pleasant. “Look who it is. Yes?”

“Just take a minute of your time.” Hector leaned to the counter and laid down a sheet of paper. “You have been served.”

“What!”

“Oh yeah, being brought to trial.” Hector stepped back, snapped his finger. “And . . .” he laid down another sheet of paper. “You have been served . . . again. Different one. Can’t get off that easy.”

Dean lifted both sheets of papers. “What is going on?”

“Whoops. Forgot.” Hector laid one more on the counter. “You’ve been served . . . again.” He smiled. “Have a good day.” Turning, Henry next to him, Hector walked out.

Dean began to read the heading on the suits. The first one made sense. The second one bred an ‘oh my God’, and the third, though he really had no one to blame but himself, he felt confident in the fact that the last one would never happen. At least he hoped.

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Johnny had to wonder ‘what was it’ about men with long hair in Lodi. Was there a single man in Lodi who didn’t sport long hair or a ponytail. Johnny was pretty certain, his father would complain about what appeared to be the apocalyptic biker town.

Even the town doctor, or rather so called brilliant scientist, Lars Rayburn sported hair. Long and blonde his hair was, thin and straggly with a receding hair line that went far back. The gray in his hair gave his age away but not as much as the wrinkles on his face. In fact, had Lars not been tall, he would have looked like Dean in fifteen years.

Lars seemed perturbed, or rather annoyed that he had to deal

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with the situation of meeting a new guy.

Mick remained rational. Somehow Johnny didn't want to see the chief ever lose his cool. And in the middle of their discussion in Lars work lab, all Johnny could do is listen.

"Lars, come on." Mick beckoned.

"Stew Redman? Stew Redman?" Lars asked. "Oh yes, Mick, his name is stew and he's a doctor."

"He said he trained."

"He's a child." Lars argued. "How much could he know."

"I give everyone the benefit of the doubt Lars, you know it. Mick argued. "Now all I ask is that you prepared to quiz him. Did you."

"Yes."

"Then what's the problem?"

"It's a waste of my time. He'll never pass it, even if I made it simple."

"Why don't you find out."

"Fine. But wait here, this won't take long." Lars stated then walked toward Johnny. He spoke with sarcasm. "Stew. Have a seat."

Johnny pulled a stool up to the counter.

"I'm going to quiz you."

"Yes, sir."

"Here's a pencil." Lars laid a pencil before Johnny then moved to another counter, he returned with a huge stack. It dropped heavy before Johnny. "Here's your test. Good luck."

Johnny's eyes widened.

Arrogantly, Lars looked at Mick and lifted a hand while mouthing the words, 'five minutes.'

^^^

There was a smell to the air, neither foul nor pleasant that lingered from reality into Ellen's dream pulling her slowly to an awake state.

She couldn't place the smell, plastic maybe, she wasn't sure, but it definitely smelled sterile. She felt chilled. In fact a cool breeze kept seeping over her. Just as she was about to see what was going on, and why she didn't smell Frank making coffee, Ellen, in the mist of a dream

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of an old world wrestler, remembered.

Kidnaped.

Or so she thought.

She wasn't sure. All she remembered was seeing the massive group of them, all wearing black, approach. Then after one released puff of steam before her face, Ellen was out like a light. She dreamt of weird things. Things from the old world. She also dreamt of traveling, and there as a lot of religious overtones to her dream as well.

Stirring more into reality, Ellen felt he stomach rumble. How long was she sleeping, how long had it been since sh had eaten. Then a tense, soreness hit her body. The after effects of the helicopter crash.

Helicopter.

Crash.

Robbie.

"Shit." she whispered out and opened her eyes.

'Pillows?' Ellen's one open eye saw the huge pillows, multitudes of them that surrounded her. Her hand reached down and she felt the smoothness of silk sheets. *'What is going on'*

More focused she became and when she did she saw the reason for the chill. At first she wanted to scream thinking it was some sort of large bird flapping its wings above her, then she noticed they were fans. Who fanned her, she couldn't see.

"Hello?" She called out.

The fanning stopped and then they lowered.

"Oh, shit." Ellen's eyes widened. Four women stood above her bed. Immediately they lowered their heads when Ellen sat up. They all wore thin, beautiful white dresses, and on their heads were bands. But despite how beautiful they were dressed, they still couldn't hide the fact that they looked like four female versions of Christopher Columbus.

"She awakes." The one said.

Another turned her head quickly to the sound of footsteps. "He comes."

"He comes." Another repeated,.

The fourth looked at Ellen. 'He comes.'

"Who.?" Ellen asked, but before receiving an answer all four women darted out of the room.

Alone, she sat up in the bed and looked around. It was a large

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very large chamber style bedroom. Little furniture. A chair, the bed, a dresser and table. Across the room was a wall of curtains, thick and black.

The footsteps drew closer and closer and Ellen pinpointed where they came from. A set of double doors at the far end of the room.

She zoomed in when the steps ceased, and watched the latch knobs turn. Slowly the door opened.

At first she thought it was an optical illusion. Her distance made him look that tall, but when the man walked in, Ellen knew it was no optical illusion.

Well aware of how tall Frank was, she knew the man that approached her had to be at least seven feet tall if not more. And he looked different. Not like the women that were in the room. Not like Christopher Columbus.

He had skin. Tanned as well. His long wavy dark blonde hair, fell just past his shoulders, with the bangs draping almost in a sexy manner across the corner of his right eye. He walked with poised posture closer to the bed. A slight amount of chest hair poked from the long white robe he wore. His goatee was trimmed, and as he sat on the bed, he smiled, flashing what Ellen believed to be the most dazzling green eyes.

She scooted back some. "Oh, my God."

Again, he smiled. "Exactly."

## CHAPTER FIVE

“Then you know . . .” Dean carried the coffee pot over to the cryo lab counter and poured some in Frank’s mug. “After you and I had the little spat, and you hit me . . .” Dean set down the pot and then pulled a stool forth. “You not only knocked me over, you knocked sense into me.”

“That night you didn’t see it.” Frank said then lifted his coffee.

“No, but I tried the next day. Remember? I tried to talk to you and you walked away.”

After sipping, Frank thought about it. “Yeah, you’re right. You did. And you tried to talk to me before I left.”

“I know.”

“I have to tell you something, Dean.” Frank said. “I heard you.”

“Oh yeah?” Dean smiled. “I heard you too.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

Dean fluttered his lips. “You don’t think. Two days before the game ended, when Hal got hurt, you and Robbie were testing the radios. We heard everything.”

Frank nodded. “So you heard I hate you.”

Snickering, Dean shook his head. “No, I heard you couldn’t do it. You wanted to ruin things between Ellen and me, and you just couldn’t. As usual, you went over the edge in Frank style.”

“That because, you know . . .” Frank sniffed. “I have her.”

“Yes. And, I heard something else, but I’ll save that for another time. Back to my problem.”

Frank laughed. “It’s funny.”

“No, it’s not. I fired her, Frank. That was it. Now this thing is out of control. The women won’t talk to me, which isn’t a bad thing. Ben is trying to get a third of my Danny dollar hours because I stuck him to hard with a needle in his backside. I’ll tell you . . .” Dean shook his head. “Hey, at least I don’t have to worry about the third sexual suit, do I.”

Frank turned his head and whistled.

“Frank?”

“Yes.” Frank cleared his throat.

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“You are telling the women to drop this aren’t you?”

“Dean, they went through all that trouble typing up the . . .”

“Frank!” Dean stood up and yelled. “You can’t possible press charges against me for sexual slander.”

“Dean, it would be fun.”

“Fun?” Dean screamed. “Frank.”

“But you told everyone I was your gay lover.”

“No. No.” Dean stated strongly. “I told Misha, she told everyone.”

With revelation, Frank looked out. “Yeah. She did.”

“In fact . . . it’s her you should blame. Not me.” Dean sat back down.

“I should.”

“Drop the charges against me, place them against her.”

“You should do it too.” Frank said. “I mean she slandered us both, right.”

“Spread it around like this.” Dean snapped.

“Dean.” Frank looked serious. “Why don’t you type up the thing we need and I’ll give it to Jason tomorrow.”

Dean grinned. “Oh, what payback it would be.”

“It would.”

“Should we?”

“We should.”

Dean hand happily slammed on the counter. “The we’ll do it.”

“Excellent.” Frank stood up, downed the rest of his coffee and grabbed his radio. “I’ll see ya.”

“Whoa. Wait. Why are you leaving?”

“We’re done.”

“No, we aren’t. You’re waiting on Christopher Columbus, remember”

“Oh, that’s right.” Frank returned to sitting down. “You don’t think I missed him do you?”

“What? No. He wasn’t here.”

“Are you sure?” Frank asked.

“Frank, don’t you think you would have seen him?”

“Can I?”

“Can you what?” Dean questioned.

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“See him.”

“Why wouldn’t you.”

“He’s invisible.” Frank stated.

Dean laughed. “Chris is not invisible.”

“Was he? Because my Dad said, or was it Elliott. I’m not sure, one of them did. Was he?”

“Invisible?” Dean hesitated “Um, yeah, for a short period of time, but I gave him a reappearing drug and now he isn’t.”

“Oh.” Frank nodded. “That makes me feel better. I need t talk to him.”

“Speaking of that.” Dean softened his voice. “I have to ask you. I know you are going back out there to get her and Robbie. I know you came home and that tells me something. But I have to hear it from you. You, Frank, have this uncanny connection with Ellen. You can sense her miles away. What . . . what are you getting? Is she safe? Is she all right? Tell me. Because I will trust whatever you say.”

“I’m off.” Frank claimed.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m off. To be honest. I’m not working.” Frank tossed his hands. “I think my psychic connection to her has been terminated or at least disconnected for the time being.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because, I feel she is safe, but the other thing I’m getting is too weird.”

“Well, tell, me.” Dean inched in closer. “Maybe it’s not so weird.”

Frank blew out. “Oh, yeah, it’s weird.”

“What is it.”

Frank looked around.

“Frank.” Dean snapped. “No one is here but us.”

“Just making sure Columbus didn’t walk in. He’s invisible.”

“He’s not here. What is it?”

“Ok.” Frank started to whisper. “Like I said, it’s weird. I really feel she’s safe, but when I think of her, all I see is Cleopatra.”

“Cleopatra?” Dean asked.

“Yeah. Cleopatra.”

With a thinking ‘hmm’ Dean inched back.

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“What do you think?”

“It’s weird.” Dean said puzzled, “Why in the world would you be getting . . . Cleopatra?”

^ ^ ^ ^

“My queen.” His deep voice resonated as he pulled a chair forth for Ellen to sit by the table. “That is what I am searching for.”

“Who . . . who are you.” Ellen reluctantly sat down.

“I am called by many names.” The tall man walked to the drapes and opened them. “You need sun. Please sit down. Enjoy it. Can I get you food. You must be starving.”

“That can wait. Who are you.”

“Around here they call me . . .”

“God.” Ellen answered.

“Exactly.”

“Ok, God, before we go any further. Where is Robbie?”

“Robbie?” He asked.

“I was with him. Where is he?” Ellen asked with passion. “He’s tall, blonde . . .”

“One arm.”

“That’s him.”

“He had an injury en route.”

Panic hit Ellen immediately and she flew for the door.

“You don’t even know where you’re going.” He grabbed hold of her arm. “Slow down little woman.”

“Listen *big guy*. I need to know about Robbie.”

“He’s fine. Probably resting. The injury wasn’t bad. The drunes in their sedation overdosed him. It will have an effect for the next three or four days.”

“So he’ll be sleeping?”

“No, he’ll be awake. Just suffering from after effects. When he is awake, like you, they will come for me. Please . . . sit.” He motioned his hand to the table.

“Are you sure he’s fine.”

“Positive. The Drunes would not hurt one they think is a God.”

“It’s not them I’m worried about.” Ellen sat down at the table. “Do you have coffee? I know that is a bit much to . . .”

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“Yes, it is on its way.” He joined her at the table. “You said it’s not the Drones you worry about. Who is it then.”

“You.”

“I’m not one to fear.”

Sarcastically Ellen snickered. “Why? Because you are God.”

“No, because I’m nice.” He shrugged. “Creed.” He extended his hand. “You are.”

“Not your queen.”

“Yet.” he smiled.

“Ever. Trust me, Frank won’t allow it.”

“And Frank is?”

“Everything.” Ellen finally took hold of his hand. “Ellen.”

“And you are from Utopia.”

“Some call it that. I call it home. Beginnings.” Her head turned to the knock on the door.

“One moment.” Creed called out, then with an extension of his arm, closed the drapes. “Come in.”

Another female version of Christopher Columbus walked in. She carried a tray. Delicately she set it on the table, bowed her head in a subservient manner, then backed out, not turning around until she reached the door.

“Drones?” Ellen asked.

“She didn’t seem to surprise you.” Creed stated.

“Appearance wise.” Ellen shook her head. “I’ve seen Christopher Columbus.”

Creed’s eyes took on a surprise look, then he smiled. “He is alive?”

“Yes, very much so, and from what I gather, living in Beginnings.”

“Good.”

This shocked Ellen. “He made it seem as if you didn’t want him to leave. It’s a sin.”

Creed laughed. “These people, I fear for them. Exposed to the elements, they will die. A simple common cold to them is like pneumonia. They have limited immunities, Their WBC count is low. They exhibit the same traits as Lupus.”

“You *are* a doctor.” Ellen said.

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“Was. Am. I guess.” He shrugged.

“So tell me why . . .” She shut up when he held up his finger. “What?”

“You are going to ask questions.” He stated.

“Of course.”

“And I expect as much, but I’d rather not answer them twice. I assume Robbie will have questions as well. I will answer them all when he wakes. As for now . . .” Creed lifted the lid from the tray. “Breakfast and coffee. And . . .” He stood and opened the curtains. “A bright California sun.”

Ellen checked out the pot of coffee and plate of eggs before her. She was hungry, and the sun felt really warm. She had a lot of questions, the first being what was she doing in California. But she knew the answers had to wait. So for the time being, she enjoyed the royal treatment.

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Four hours. Four hours it took that ‘Stew’ fella to complete the test Lars had given him, and Mick kept checking back the entire time. He felt like the kid in the back seat going on vacation, but instead of ‘are we there yet?’ Mick kept on asking, ‘is he done yet?’

Then Lars, of course, acted like the annoyed parent. Even resorting to telling Mick that if he asked one more time, he was taking off his belt and hitting Mick. Then again, Mick attributed Lars’ irritation to the fact that the prediction that the stranger would bail out of the test in five minutes was some three hours plus . . . wrong.

The Mick knew he was in luck, arriving just moments after the completion of the test. Figuring, how long would it take Lars, Mick decided to wait.

Bad move.

Another hour had passed.

Mick even debated on leaving, but chose not to because he was damned if he was going to miss the ending of it all.

The results.

Lars looked pretty disgusted when he returned from the back room and dropped the test on the counter before Johnny. “Seventy five different blood tests. Basic lab equipment history and definition. Disease

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and illness symptoms and diagnosis. All that and . . . and every single answer was . . .”

Mick peered up, waiting for Lars to get over the dramatic pause.

Lars did, with an exhale. “Correct.”

Johnny jumped up, “Yes. See, I told you.”

“Correct?” Mick asked. “He got every answer right?”

Lars nodded. “Correct.”

“Holy shit.” Mick shook Johnny’s hand. “Stew. Very good. I have to admit, I doubted you. Lars . . .” Mick turned to Lars. “Does this prove he know this shit?”

“Gee Mick I don’t know what do you think.” Lars asked with sarcasm. “Yes, it does. Someone taught you well.”

“I would hope so.” Johnny responded. “I studied every day, twelve hours a day, on the spot. Hands on.”

“He must really know his business.” Lars commented.

“The best.” Johnny added.

Mick quickly looked at Lars, knowing that the labeling of someone else being ‘the best’ wouldn’t sit well.

Lars nodded with a slight hum, “I’m sure. Who trained you?”

“Dean Hayes.” Johnny answered.

Loudly Mick cleared his throat to hold back a choke.

“Dean Hayes?” Lars asked. “Dean Hayes.”

“Yes.” Johnny nodded.

Mick quickly closed his eyes with a cringe.

“Let’s get this straight.” Lars lifted a hand. “Short, little man, younger. Dean Hayes. In the military prior to the world’s ending?”

All Mick could do was wish the answer to Lars’ question was no.

“Yes.” Johnny answered then hurried looked at Mick when he heard a groan. Snicking, he returned to Lars. “Do you know Dean.”

“Know him?” Lars asked with edge. “Know him? I hate the little fucker.”

After a cough, Johnny laughed in shock. “You hate him?”

Mick stepped forward. “Please, tell me he’s dead.”

“No.” Johnny shook his head. “Alive and well I guess.”

Lars growled. “It figures. It fucking figures I hate him. Dean Hayes is alive and well and living in Beginnings. Well, Mick you know

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where I'm going."

"No, you aren't. Not yet." Mick stated.

Johnny was confused. "What is going on?"

"Lars here, doesn't like him much."

Lars released a scoff. "That is an understatement. I hate him. Let me tell you something, Stew."

With a groan, Mick's head went back. "Here we go again."

After flipping off Mick, Lars continued. "I was considered top in my field as well. I was the World Heath Organizations top guy. A strong reputation. Not too mention I wrote romance novels. Anyhow, at a viral convention in D.C., I had the pleasure of meeting the little shit. He was getting all this hoopla and I wanted to see who they were talking about. Keep in mind Dr. Hayes had to be twenty-four. Well, knowing I was well respected and many of young hopefuls looked up to me . . ." He paused when Johnny snickered. "What is so funny."

"Reputation or not." Johnny answered. "Dean has to look up to you." Johnny turned his head to Mick. "Dean's not much over five feet tall."

Lars smiled brightly. "I like that, Cute. So anyway, I approach Dr. Hayes, I introduce myself as Lars Rayburn, and you know what he says? Do you. He says . . . hello. Excuse me. And walks away."

"How rude." Johnny stated.

"Exactly."

Wincing, Mick shook his head "Don't encourage this."

"And . . ." Lars continued, "I am bound and determined to prove once and for all that he had something to do with the virus that ended this world. Maybe not the terrorist attack, but the virus itself. I know it, he had to. My theory. That's why he survived."

"He's immune." Johnny replied. "Like the rest of us. We all have this mutated strand of DNA, some stronger than others, but it's there. Dean spent years working on finding the common immunity factor."

"Why?" Mick asked. "The world was over."

"He's anal." Lars answered. "And did you view his mutated DNA, Stew."

"To be very honest, through the computer program I read the sequence."

Lars wave out his hand. "Could have been somebody else. He

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didn't die because he gave himself the antidote." He saw Johnny shake his head. "Why?"

"Dean worked really hard to find a cure for the virus. He did. I was there with him when the world ended. I was just a kid, but I remember he would have died before he let Ellen's daughter die." Johnny's voice softened. "But Taylor did die. And he vowed from that day forward that she would never lose another child to the virus, because it's still in the air. And some babies being born are not immune. And they were dying. So Dean cured the virus. Took him years to do so, but he did."

"Who's Ellen?" Mick asked.

"His wife. They got married after the plague. They have . . . ." He bopped his head back and forth counting. "His actual amount of children, or the ones my . . . the ones Frank fathered behind Dean's back, is a count still up in the air."

Knowingly Lars gave a nod to Mick. "Inadequate, some man named Frank fathered his children."

"Frank?" Mick asked. "Deep voice, flies for Beginnings, security, has a brother named Hal and one named Robbie?"

"That's him." Johnny stated. "How do you . . ."

"We monitor Beginnings radio. What's Frank like?" Mick questioned.

"Hey." Lars interjected. "This my moment to learn about the little shit."

"Sorry." Mick apologized. "Later, on that Stew."

Johnny looked at Lars. "If you hate Dean, now, you're gonna hate him even more when you find out he's pretty much responsible for the society."

With a 'what?' both Mick and Lars turned to Johnny with full attention.

Johnny was trying not to laugh, but it was too good of a story not to tell. "I guess in a sense Beginnings lived up to its name. See, the society was planned ages ago. They were the ones that actually planned the release of the virus to lower population. It got out of control. So preparing for it's release, they have multitudes cryogenically frozen prior to the onset of the plague. Dean defrosted the main batch, cured them of the virus, they stole the antiserum, left, and defrosted all of their bodies.

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Hence, the society as we know.”

Mick breathed out heavily. “I’m killing him myself.”

“Let’s go.” Lars said. “Right now.”

Mick just shook his head.

“Stew?” Lars questioned, “you don’t by chance have any pictures of Dr. Hayes, do you.”

“No, why?” Johnny chuckled.

“Ours are getting ratty. In my obsession to prove his responsibility in the world’s end I clipped his picture from newspapers, and we use them as dart entertainment every once and a while here in Lodi.”

Chuckling, Johnny’s head went from Mick to Lars. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope.” Mick pointed to a closet. “Show him Lars.”

Across the room Lars walked to a wooden door. He opened it and exposed the inside of the door covered with Dean pictures. Some had small dart holes, and some had mustaches, black eyes and scars drawn over Dean’s face.

To Johnny it was hysterical, and at that second, all he could think about was how much Frank was going to love Lars Rayburn.

## CHAPTER SIX

Her clothes were laundered and Ellen was grateful for that. Her jeans and shirt felt a lot more comfortable than the robe style garment Creed had given her to wear. Plus, she wanted to wear the shoes. And with all the pacing Ellen did she was sure she'd wear them out.

"He's on his way up." Creed told her.

"What is taking so long. I want to see Robbie."

"And you will." Creed said. "Momentarily."

Ellen couldn't wait, passed Creed to the door she ran, flinging it open and bolting into the hall. She needed to see Robbie, and know that he was all right even though she was certain he was being treated just as well as her.

Until she saw him.

"Robbie." She screamed in horror running down the hall just as Creed reached for her. But Ellen was fast. She sped toward Robbie who was being escorted by four Drones. Escorted in shackles and chains. He wore only a pair of pants. "Robbie." She screamed his name as she approached him. "Back off of him!" She blasted just before she pelted her body into Robbie in an exuberant embrace.

Robbie's eyes closed and his arm reached as best as it could to grip onto Ellen.

Neither of them even noticed that the moment that their two bodies collided, every drone in the hall screamed out, scattered back and dropped to the floor covering their heads in fear screaming, 'the Gods collide, the gods collide.'

"Oh, my God. Oh, my God." Ellen kissed Robbie frantically, then slid down and back. "Creed." She growled his name and turned, "You will let him go."

"I will do no such thing."

Robbie looked, finally, to the voice that spoke. There should have been fear of the huge man, but there wasn't. No words, Robbie with Slagel instinct and anger, sprang himself forth.

"Grab him!" Creed ordered, and immediately Robbie was accosted by four Drone men.

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“Let him go!” Ellen cried out, then spun again to Creed. “You said they wouldn’t hurt him. You said.”

“They won’t.” Creed responded.

“Then why is he like this?” Ellen pointed.

“I said they wouldn’t hurt him, I never said they’d treat him fair.”

“You fuck.” Ellen open handed revved back for a slap to Creed.

His hand shot up, grasping onto her wrist and Creed smiled with arrogance at his halting of her.

Enraged, Ellen didn’t struggle to free her wrist. Without hesitation, she reamed back and kicked her booted foot straight into his shin. The second he released her with an ‘ow’ and bent down in reaction, Ellen, as hard as she could . . . decked him.

The gasps of the Drones filled the halls as Creed’s face turned to the side from the impact.

Shaking her hand, and backing up, Ellen watched as Creed slowly looked back at her with a hard glare in his eyes. “Fuck” She whispered, and hurried back.

Growling in frustration and anger, Creed reached out, grabbed hold of Ellen, snatched her up in a hold. Quickly, despite her fighting, he lifted her and all but tucked her under his arm against his hip. “Bring the defective god. Follow me.” He commanded to the Drones and in a storming manner, toting a kicking Ellen like a sack of potatoes, Creed moved back down the hall.

“Enough!” Creed yelled, setting Ellen down harshly and slamming the door.

Ellen immediately hurried to Robbie’s side, standing with him in a protective mode. “I want him unchained.”

“You will make no such request.”

“I thought you said you were nice.” Ellen said.

“I am.” Creed replied.

Ellen scoffed a laugh. “This is nice. What you are doing to him, is nice?”

“I am nice to you. You will be the queen I have been searching for.”

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“I highly doubt that.”

“In time.” Creed said confidently. “As for him, I have no use for him.”

“I want him unchained and cleaned up.” Ellen demanded.

“And I said . . .” Creed’s voice was strong. “You will make no such request! He is fine. And as far as being cleaned up.” Creed shrugged, “He was hosed down earlier. How do you think we woke him up.”

“Oh my God.” Ellen turned to Robbie and laid her hand on his face. “Are you OK? Are you hurt.”

Robbie opened his mouth.

“Robbie?” Ellen questioned.

Again, Robbie opened his mouth, and tried to speak. Mouthing the words, ‘I can’t’ Robbie shook his head.

“They took away your voice?” Ellen turned with a vengeance to Creed. “What have you done to him.”

“I’ve done nothing. The loss of his voice is merely a repercussion of the drug. His voice will return. But for time being.” Creed smiled sadistically. “He has no complaints about his accommodations. Isn’t that right . . .” he raised his eyebrows. “Bright eyes.”

“Asshole!” Ellen charged forth for Creed.

“Hey!” He held out his hand moving her back. “Do not hit me again! You hear me!”

Ellen stepped closer to him peering up. “I don’t fear you.”

“Fear or no fear, where do you get the idea that somehow your little female body can . . . take me.”

“I can.” Ellen said smug.

“How?”

“One word.” She crossed her arms. “Frank.”

Creed laughed. “Frank? This is the second time you said his name. Frank is not here, and I don’t fear Frank.”

“Oh you should. Frank is his brother and the love of my life.” Ellen said smug. “And when he gets here, he will kick your big sorry ass. Make no bones about it. Limb from limb he will tear you apart. Fear Frank? Probably not, because he’ll be finished with you before you have time to fear him.”

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With a snide smirk, Creed rolled his eyes. "You're talking nonsense. Your point is moot. Frank will never find you. He'll never show up."

"You don't think?" Ellen asked. "Don't test his ability in finding me. Don't. And don't underestimate the power of Beginnings. Frank and our people will find us. They'll be here before you know it. We have one of your people. We have direction."

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"M-O-O-N. That spells home." Christopher Columbus said as he stood in Hal's hospital room, Frank, Elliott and Dean also in attendance. "Near the body of water where God's tears flow. M-O-O-N, that spells the name of our city."

Hal nodded with a 'hmm', while rubbing his chin. "Thank you Christopher for that valuable information."

"You are welcome God of the effeminately dressed." Christopher moved toward the door. "If you need anything more . . ." He stopped. "I could tell you the old street name that entrance is located."

Frank looked up. "Would that be spelled M-O-O-N, as well?"

Christopher smiled, "yes."

Frank nodded. "Thanks."

After Christopher walked out, Hal looked at Frank who sat in the chair. "That was productive. However, it must be very heart warming for you Frank, finally finding someone with whom you can relate."

"Shut the fuck up, Hal." Frank stood up. "We look nothing alike." Frank started to pace. "Be grateful. We have a direction."

Did he miss something? Elliott had to wonder. "Frank?" He asked "direction."

"Um, yeah." Frank said sarcastically. "Direction in finding Robbie and Ellen."

Hal's mouth opened and he closed it, he wasn't going to ask. In fact he was hoping the lot of them would be spared, however Elliott had to prod.

"I must not have paid attention for a moment." Elliott said. "Direction to find Robbie and Ellen in with Christopher said."

"Ok, well, he didn't give a direction." Frank stated. "But come

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on . . .” He looked about the faces in the room. “Really. We’ll just check our maps. How hard is it going to be to find a city named Moon.”

“Dear God.” Hal said calmly. “You really are special.”

Eyes half closed, Dean slowly turned his head to Hal. “You’re making sarcastic comments, but what if the city really is named Moon.”

Hal stared at Dean for a second, then he gave a single nod. “Yes. What if. And, what was it again you said your IQ was?”

Dean growled and stood up. “There has to be a way to figure it out other than just figuring they are out west somewhere.”

Elliott snapped his finger. “I got it. Ellen, she did that assessment or you. I distinctively remember he saying she was going to try to piece together in theory where she thought Chris came from.”

“The assessment. Yes.” Dean nodded. “I have to go through it. It might be in there.”

“You’ve never read it?” Elliott asked.

“No.” Dean shook his head.

“Can I ask why?” Elliott questioned further.

After looking at Frank, Dean answered. “I was wrapped . . . wrapped up so-to-speak, in teaching Misha to do assessments, that I didn’t use Ellen’s.”

“Begging your pardon Dr. Hayes.” Elliott spoke rationally. “But you dick.”

Frank laughed.

“Dick?” Dean repeated. “Did you just call me a dick.”

Frank interjected. “I believe he did.”

“Gentlemen.” Hal stopped any ensuing arguments. “Can we refrain from the name calling. Dean, just review that assessment that you failed to review after my sister put her hard working time into.”

After rolling his eyes, Dean nodded.

Hal continued, “if we can get a viable direction and city, all we would need to do is start checking the underground areas. How long Dean until you give the OK for me to go.”

“Two days.” Dean said. “Your fever has broke. Two days.”

Hal turned to Frank. “Can you wait.”

“Yeah.” Frank answered. “I’ll use the time to map out, pack up, come up with a strategy. Possibly get Danny Hoi on digging in the computer shit to find out in depth information about Moon City. Ryder,

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you and I will sit down ASAP and draw up what we need and come up with a viable and capable security team to take over for us.”

“Us?” Hal asked. “Sgt. Ryder is going as well?” He questioned. “New Bowman . . .”

“Will be in good hands.” Elliott assured. “Sgt. Owens can handle it. We will not be gone all that long. Your father has requested me to go with you three.”

Again, Hal was confused. “Us three.”

Frank growled. “Hal. What the fuck. Pay attention. Don’t you know anything.”

“Since I was out of sorts since yesterday when we returned.” Hal said. “No. Us three.”

“Four.” Frank answered. “Ryder, you, me and Dad.”

“Dad wants to go?” Hal asked.

“Yeah. And I think it will be good.” Frank smiled. “Actually, What a kick ass fuckin team to go against the mutants. Ryder, you me, Dad. Robbie when we join up. It’ll be a blast.”

“And dangerous.” Hal whispered. “It might be dangerous for Dad.”

Dean laughed. “Dangerous for Joe? Hal, come on. Your father is tough as nails. He is afraid of nothing and don’t underestimate his ability. He taught you guys a lot.”

“My father’s ability is not what concerns me, Dean, and you know it.” Hal said seriously. “*Can* my father go?”

More than anything Dean wanted to say, ‘Your father should go Hal. He needs to go, he should do this.’ But Dean refrained from giving any answer that would indicate a furthering problem with Joe. “Yes, he can go.” Dean gave his reply. “He’s strong. He’ll hold up probably better than you and Frank. Nothing will interfere with his treatments.”

“Good.” Hal nodded. “But I do have a concern. A big one. My father goes, I go, Frank goes, and Elliott who is the back up for both Frank and I, is going. What the hell is going to happen to Beginnings in our absence.”

With a flutter of his lips, Frank laughed. “Hal, please. Beginnings is gonna be fine.”

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“Beginnings is going to be . . .” Over Joe’s desk, Jason ashed his cigarette into the dish. “For lack of a better word . . . fucked.”

“Nah.” Joe waved out his hand. “You’re nuts.” He rocked some in his chair. “Owens will handle Bowman. Jordan has their own leader. Doyle will handle security and protection between those two cities. I have deeply considered Frank’s recommendation, and I am bringing John Matoose in tomorrow to talk to him about heading up Beginnings security with Dan. Hating to do so, I’m gonna go with Frank’s gut and mind reader capabilities here, and also the fact that John has experience doing it.”

“So security wise we’ll be fine?”

“Absolutely.” Joe said with certainty. “Got word from Jess that George is so caught up in the Johnny situation we aren’t even a concern right now. So we have no threats with the society. Savages, well, we have the killer babies for that. And as far as an overall run of things. I know you have your hands full with the Dean trials coming up, but still. You, Dean and Danny Hoi will oversee things here just fine.”

“Hmm.” Jason nodded. “Repeating my earlier sentiment. Beginnings is going to be fucked.”

“I still disagree. Everything will work out. Really, what all can happen, it’s not that long.”

“We’re speaking of Beginnings. A lot can happen.”

“And I have to believe it won’t. I can’t worry about it. Right now my mind and heart are elsewhere, And my number one concern is leaving here, getting my kids and bringing them home. Where they belong.” Joe’s voice softened. “I want my family back Jason. I want them home.”

~~~~~

“Impressively, you were correct.” Creed told Ellen. “I found it very difficult to hide the fact that you, how can I say, nailed the situation.”

Sitting next to Robbie, incredibly close to him, Ellen gave attitude. “So you admit, you are a sadistic pig.”

Creed lifted his hand up in confusion. “Where is this coming

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from. I helped these people. They were dying.”

Robbie opened his mouth.

Ellen spoke, “Helped them? Yeah, you saved their life and made them think you were God.”

“That was their doing. They were delirious. And I look like Jesus is depicted.”

Ellen fluttered her lisp. “An over sized Jesus.”

Again, Robbie opened his mouth, and again, Ellen talked.

“You could have told them the truth.” Ellen said ignoring Robbie’s nudging of her leg.

Robbie had to wonder, didn’t Ellen see he wanted to talk. Why could she just convey a question he wanted. He nudged her once more.

“I’m asking Robbie, I’m asking.” Ellen assured him. “Why didn’t you tell them the truth.”

*“That’s not the question, El”* Robbie thought.

“Why would I?” Creed responded to Ellen’s question.

“Slavery is against the law, You made them into slaves.” Ellen argued.

“What law?”

Robbie tapped Ellen’s leg. Didn’t she have anything of value to ask? Such as what about his and her lives?

Ellen rambled. “The law of humanity. Moses freed the slaves, aren’t you the big biblical guy.”

“Yes, I am. And like Moses I freed them.”

“Listen to you, so full of your self and . . . ow.” Ellen jumped. “Hey.” She looked at Robbie. “You pinched me. I’m defending you here, and you’re being abusive. I’m telling Frank.”

Robbie tossed his hand in the air.

Creed chuckled. “You speak of Frank often. Frank is not here.”

“Frank will be here. In fact, he’s here now. Here, there, everywhere. Like . . . God.” Ellen snickered. “He’s the shit too. Let me tell you. There is nothing, I mean nothing he can’t do. Aside from being extremely mean when it comes to those who hurt me, Frank can do any feat. Trust me, I’ve seen him do so.”

“And you are certain that he will bring me down.”

“Without a doubt. Frank’s a strong man, big too.”

Creed had to laugh. “He can’t be bigger than me. I’m seven one.

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How big is Frank?"

Smug Ellen answered, "Seven two. So there."

Robbie exhaled.

Creed caught the look. "You're lying little woman."

"Ok, maybe I'm exaggerating. But to me, Frank is a giant of a man, and you are a midget."

"Why are you being like this?" Creed asked. "Before you were being very bubbly, upbeat and nice."

"That was when you fed me, clothed, me and led me to believe that you were nice. And look what you did to Robbie. I love Robbie. I won't stand for him being treated like this."

"Then you have a choice." Creed stated. "Robbie can stay the way he is, the Drones will view him as something less, and not mind his death. Or . . ." Creed lifted a finger. "You can agree to be my queen. Robbie is free to live here as a God, and that in fact assures his well being. Your choice."

Robbie liked the idea, especially when he heard the word 'free', if he was free, he could get him and Ellen out of the place they were held captive. He tried to send messages,. Tapping her on her leg, trying to convey. 'Take the deal, El, Take the deal.'

Ellen gave a wink to Robbie. "I got you." She looked back at Creed. "Your queen? No way. No deal. In fact . . ."

Robbie groaned, no sound came out.

Ellen continued, "I want no parts of you if I have to make a deal with you."

"I can make you change your mind. In fact, I believe you will change your mind."

"Nope." Ellen was smug. "Where Robbie goes. I go."

A simple smile hit Creeds face, "As you wish."

In the doorway of their new home, Creed stood. "This is above what your boy deserves, but less than you deserve. Water and food will be brought in for you." he spoke to Ellen. "It is up to you how you wish to handle that. I will speak to you when you change your mind." out of the door, Creed stepped and the thick metal door slammed.

Ellen took a shivering and breath around the room lit only by the

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sun that peeked through the boards covering the window. A window that obviously was already partially underground. A basement room of a building. Probably one that was the work room of a maintenance man or something. The dirty room had an overturned empty shelf. A few cans of paint spattered about, a single dirty cot was in the far corner of the room. A rusted utility sink was not far from the cot, and a wooden divider wall that barely blocked the view of a toilet so disgustingly dirty.

Robbie even though his hand was still bound--with little give to--by a chain to his ankles, tried the door.

Nothing.

His head rested against it. Not only was he still in chains and locked behind a metal door, he was powerless. He lifted his head slowly when he heard the strike of a match. Turning he saw Ellen lighting a candle.

"Light," she smiled.

Shuffling over the few feet. Robbie blew out the candle, shook his head and pointed to the window.

"Oh, yeah. I guess you're right. Save the light."

Robbie nodded.

"I guess we're stuck. In this room. In this world of skinless people." Ellen stated. 'Hey, at least it's better than giving into him, huh?'

Thinking, 'No El, it's not. Give in, I'll get us out, I promise,' Robbie closed his eyes.

"Hey." Ellen walked to him. "I know you feel bad. Don't. This is not your fault."

Robbie opened his eyes. *His fault?* That thought hadn't even crossed his mind. He shook his head.

"No, Robbie. It isn't."

Robbie wanted to growl. His made his face show that intention.

"Are you in pain?" Ellen asked.

Robbie shook his head.

"Angry huh?"

Robbie nodded.

"Don't be. I made the decision. I'm fine with it." She moved across the room.

*I'm glad you are, El."*

"But I don't think it will be too long. Frank will be here. I know

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it. And I'm gonna stay strong." She walked to the window. "I will not give in. No matter what."

Thinking, 'Swell we're really stuck,' Robbie hurriedly looked when Ellen scream. He made his way to her as fast as he could.

Into his chest, Ellen turned, shuddering in disgust. "Oh-my-god-oh-my-god, a cockroach. Kill it Robbie."

Robbie smiled, perhaps they wouldn't be there that long after all.

~~~~~

Mick never likened himself to be a person hard to figure out. He was a 'what you see is what you get' sort of guy, had been long since before the world was pushed to extinction. Easy going until he had to buckle down, strong and honest. He even smiled once or twice during the day. So why was it the stranger, Stew, didn't get him. At least that was what Mick thought. Stew looked upon Mick as if he were trying to learn him, or else afraid. Yes, Mick was a big man, but he didn't push himself as intimidating. There was a lot to learn about Stew. Perhaps the fact that Lodi and Lars were a bit overwhelming and the newness was there, but Mick felt there was more to learn about the stranger. His vibes were staying Stew was holding back—big time. And since Mick never thought of himself as much of a psychic, instead of pondering about it, he would go right to the source.

Lodi buckled down for the night, nice and tight, Mick headed off to the strangers new home.

~~~~~

And yet another large man in Lodi.

Johnny wondered if it was something they put in the food, or else maybe Mick had a 'biker survivor' line together and like his grandfather's contingency plan, when the world ended, the bikers met up.

Richter, Johnny's temporary roommate wasn't so much large physically, in fact, aside from that mid section pouch of weight, Richter was of average height. But his presence was large. He seemed to be the air, and energy of the room when he stood there. So much so that when

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Richter left for a night shift of guard duty, the small apartment felt empty.

Out of the window to the third story unit that looked down to the main street, Johnny stood and looked out.

The street lights didn't work, gas lamps were placed about for lighting, and the moon aided in more of a 'whiteness' to the illumination.

Lodi went to sleep early, for the most part. Lars invited Johnny for a game of pool and Dean darts, but Johnny was exhausted and wanted to pass. He found a certain comfort staring out that window onto the street and watching people pass by. He waited to see one woman, just one, but that didn't happen. Johnny would save the question about females for a later time.

There was something so very familiar about the street setting that Johnny felt at ease. He couldn't put his finger on it until he saw Mick walk down the street. Then it hit him. It physically and mentally hit him with a blast of a flash back. A flashback so vivid, Johnny was there.

A grin. Arrogance.

A bright smile that raised more on one side.

A hearty laugh.

The shake of a head, and a thin long blonde strand of hair that dangled for a second before it was swept back into place in the neatly pulled back hair it came from.

*'My God, do you look like your father.'* The voice echoed some, then came another laugh. Before he continued to speak, *'Although, I don't recall your father being so . . . smart, at your age. I'm getting another drink, did you want something . . .'*

Johnny heard his own voice answer, 'nothing' right now' and then the close face backed up, stood up and walked across an apartment.

He wore a uniform.

Hal.

Why would the vision of Mick snap Johnny into that flashback, he wondered. The knock on the door brought him out, and from that window, still semi dazed Johnny walked.

As soon as he opened the front door and saw Mick, he realized why Mick brought about that memory. A little rougher, not quite as proper or 'pretty', But Mick was a near spitting image for his Uncle Hal.

"Evening." Mick smiled.

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Johnny lost every ounce of air at that second, and his body trembled. He couldn't respond, he could only turn away from that door, leaving it open for Mick to walk in.

"Stew?"

Back to Mick, Johnny closed his eyes. He was flooded at that moment by flashes of Hal. A mature Hal, not the one that he recalled as a child, and then Johnny was pelted with an abundance of something he didn't expect. Hurt and guilt.

"Stew?" Mick called again.

It built in him, gurgling in his stomach. Deeper and deeper with each flash of Hal he took in. Each word that Hal had spoken to him. The hard delivered punch that Hal gave him on the streets of the Beginnings was suddenly remembered and Johnny felt it all over again.

In a stumble, he grabbed onto the back of the couch,

"Stew." Mick laid a hand on Johnny's shoulder.

Johnny jolted a bit and spun around.

Mick's face was right there.

*'Hurt my family. Hurt my brother . . . ' Hal's voice said. "I'll kill you myself.'*

Johnny swallowed hard and stepped back.

*"How could you do this?"*

Noise, noise of commotion swarmed Johnny's head.

*'Everything I did, I did because I hate you.'* Johnny heard his own voice. *'You aren't my father! You've never been a father to me.'*

*"Sit! Johnny!"* A female voice screamed out.

"Stew. Hey."

*"Fuck you."*

Bang-bang! Johnny brought his hands to his ear and closed his eyes when all he saw was his father fly back, his grandfather fall down and an enraged Hal start to charge forward at him, but turned away.

"Stew." Mick snapped his finger. "Are you all right?"

Johnny's entire being shook, he stumbled back further and brought his hand to his face. "No." He spoke emotionally. "What did I do. Oh, God. What did I do?"

"Amnesia?" Mick asked Johnny handing him a glass of some

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sort of alcohol.

“Retrograde” Johnny took the glass. “Thanks.”

Mick took a seat on the couch. “Explain.”

“Retrograde amnesia is when you are missing all or part of a past block of memory. For example a two year time period may be gone. It may completely be gone, or some parts of just missing. Like puzzle pieces.”

“This is what you had?” Mick questioned.

“Still do to an extent.” Johnny shrugged. “See, things are missing. Not as much as before.”

“Before?” Mick asked.

“The society knew of my amnesia. I led on that I couldn’t remember more than I actually did.”

“You lied. Why?” Mick asked.

“Because I needed to figure out whether it was the amnesia or if I really was that filled with remorse.”

“And is it remorse.”

“Oh, god, chief.” Johnny stood up. “If there was a word which meant deeper than remorse, I’m feeling it. And it hurts.”

“What the hell did you do, Stew.”

Johnny took a calming breath then walked back toward Mick. “I’m from Beginnings, as you know. I was in Beginnings from day one. I was what they called an original.. It was my home. I grew up there. But there’s something you don’t know. The leader of the society. Former president George Hadly? He, too, was in Beginnings from day one.”

“You’re shitting me?”

“Nope.” Johnny sat back down. “George was like a father to me. Helped me, watched me grow. Gave me advice. I had loyalty to him, you know. I loved him. I also believed him when he told me his society plan was for the good of all, and that Beginnings plan was only for the good of Beginnings. That is where I was misled.”

“And that is why you left Beginnings.”

“Yes.”

“To be with Hadly.” Mick’s eyes widened. “Holy shit, that means Hadly is going to be looking for you.”

“If you want me out of here, I understand.”

“Where you gonna go?” Mick asked.

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“I wanna go home. I can’t yet. I’m here to prove that I am not society born an bred, That the society isn’t in my blood. That I can be trusted, and that I love my home and want to be there. I called, you know, asked Beginnings if I could come back. I got an ‘I’m sorry’.”

“Joe?” Mick asked.

Johnny’s mouth did a slight pucker. “Yeah. He’s a great leader, crass, strong, I love him. He has sons that live in Beginnings.”

“Frank. Robbie, and Hal.” Mick said. “See, I only monitor the radio and that’s only when we get clear signals. So I don’t know much.”

“Wanna know about them.” Johnny asked.

“Yes, I would.”

“I told you about Joe. Robbie, man he’s funny. He’s talented and has such a good heart. Would never hurt anyone.”

“Hal.”

Johnny chuckled. “He’s still kind of fuzzy for me, he’s in that portion of the memory that is till kind of shattered. But Hal is typical Slagel.”

“Slagel? Is that the last name?”

“Yep. Joe, Hal, Robbie and ,. . .” Johnny swallowed. “Frank Slagel.”

“That’s the one I want to know about. I hear his name everywhere on the radio.”

“He is everywhere. He’s a big guy. Mean, cold, heartless, but that is really only when it comes to protecting his home and his family. There’s not a soul out there he wouldn’t die for. He does these things that are normal men can’t do. Saves lives, goes out on a limb. Astronomical.” Johnny shook his head and spoke with a sense of awe. “Many say he is the definition of hero. And you know what? I agree with that. It’s taken me some thought and reflection, but I Agree with that. More than I ever thought, he is what I want to be.”

“Holy shit.” Mick had a chuckle to his voice. “You hold this guy in high regard.”

“I didn’t for a while. George had me misled on that. I didn’t see the man he was, only the man that was told. I guess we all do that. But now, after thinking back, I know better.”

“So you realize now that you really like him.”

Johnny snickered. “Like him. Nah, Mick, I love him. I love him

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with everything I am. And I want to prove that to him, Joe, Robbie and Hal.”

“Why?” Mick asked. “Because they are the top people on Beginnings.”

“No . . . because . . .” Johnny stood up. “Because they’re my family. My name isn’t Stew. It’s Johnny. Johnny Slagel. You wanted to know what Frank looks like, you’re looking at him. Frank is my father..”

^^^^

Joe expected Frank not to stay in his seat following the deliverance of the news. He had his son pegged. In the quiet of the house, Frank would exhale, stand up, pace around, then return back to the table. And Joe wasn’t disappointed in his son’s reaction. Frank did as predicted.

“Why am I just hearing this now?” Frank asked as he sat back down at the table.

“You’ve been busy.” Joe explained. “You just got back, you had a lot on your mind. This was not something you needed to hear. Not right away.”

“I disagree. My . . . Johnny leaving the society is something I very much needed to hear.”

“He called.”

Frank slowly looked up.

Joe continued, “he asked if he could return. I turned him down.”

“Did you trace the call?” Frank asked.

“Eastern Ohio.” Joe responded. “In fact, we pretty much are certain we know where Johnny went. There is a rebel town in Ohio, standing ground against the society. We think he’s there in Lodi.”

“Lodi? Like the song?”

“Um, yeah.” Joe answered.

“Ok.” Frank nodded. “That’s what I needed to hear. Not the song, but the fact that we know where he is.”

“You seem fine.” Joe stated.

“Oh I am. I am very focused on Robbie and Ellen and getting this rescue trip together. But after that, after I get back, I am leaving all over again. I’m going to Lodi and I’m killing Johnny.”

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Joe would have thought for a second Frank was using a figment of speech, until he saw the serious look in Frank's eyes. "Killing him."

"Oh, yeah." Frank said, "I will explain to whoever runs the place, who Johnny is, what Johnny did, and who they let in their gates. Then I will claim what was once mine and destroy."

"Dear God." Joe said near gasp. "You can't do that."

"Yes, I can. He hurt my brother, you, me, Hal, Ellen, you name it. This community. He has to go down."

"You can not kill your own son. Yeah, it's easy to sit there bitter and talk the talk, but this is your flesh and blood. It won't be that easy. You won't be able to do it."

"Why not?" Frank shrugged. "You did."

"What?" Joe blasted him in shock. "What in God's name are you talking about."

"Killing your own son."

"You've lost me."

Speaking nonchalantly, Frank tilted his head. "You don't know. But if you want, I have proof." He saw the confused look on his father's face. "The ripple me, Dean and Henry caused. We have the original disks for you to look at if you want."

"What was the ripple Frank?"

"Robbie."

"You told me that."

"Not all." Frank shrugged. "Robbie was bad, Dad. Really bad. He came in the community, killed two men in here, at least. Tried to rape Ellen. When he was ousted he built an army of men to bring us down. You know Moses and his crew. They weren't in here, they were out. Robbie used them. Kidnaped Dean. Killed Denny. And when we got Robbie within our walls, You, Dad, wanted your own son dead. So I shot him."

"Oh my God. Robbie?"

"Yep. And you saw the need for what had to be done. And you put out the order." Frank whistled. "It was tough. You and I, we had a hard time with it. Why else do you think I brought him back. Because I knew my little brother wasn't bad from within. I knew my brother was made bad by this world, and I just wanted to take that all back. I did. And look at him. I was right. Robbie is untainted. But Johnny . . ." Frank

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waved about a finger. “Johnny is a different story. He is a bad seed. End of story. A kid who lived behind protective walls. Beginnings. The world didn’t make him bad, Johnny did it to himself. Worst of all, I did it to him.”

“You can’t say that.” Joe said. “And you have to let it go. He’s no longer with the society. He’s not with us. Let it go.”

“I can’t.”

“Yeah, you can, Frank.” Joe was insistent.

“No, Dad, I can’t. I can’t explain it to you, but it has to be done. Ended. I created him. I somehow cause what he became. And if it’s the last thing I do. . . .” Frank spoke eerily calm. “I will fix that error.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

January 25<sup>th</sup>

The sun hadn't even began its rise, yet Robbie knew Morning wasn't that far off. The chirping birds outside of this prison window foretold of the changing day. He was starting to get hungry again, that and being cold kept him from sleeping. He finished off his piece of bread and glass of water, they had given him from the night before. It wasn't much, but sort of teased his stomach. He made a vow though, chivalry be damned, from that moment on, if Ellen again offered to him some of the 'real' food they gave her, Robbie as going to take it.

On the floor Ellen entangled herself in a blanket and snuggled closed to him for heat safety and protection from the bugs that seemed to crawl about everywhere.

But being the sense of warmth, a pseudo bed, and bug exterminator really wasn't what Robbie wanted to be. He wanted to be what he was raised, taught and trained to be, some one strong. And Robbie knew well he could pull through. Unchained, and free from the room in which they were locked, Robbie would plan and implement an escape for them both. However the word 'free' was the key word. He had to be free in order to do so. To be successful in their escape hinged on one thing, Ellen changing her mind about being a queen. Never in a million years would Robbie had thought Ellen to be so headstrong about something. Of all the times in her life for Ellen to choose 'righteous' over 'status', the time at hand, right there in that dirty room, was not the right time.

Not being able to talk didn't aid at all. Not a sound emerged from Robbie and that made him frustrated. Especially when Ellen failed to not only read his lips correctly, but his facial reactions as well. After fruitless attempts to communicate, Robbie gave up and started writing an entire 'bitch at Ellen' speech in his head. One he would deliver as soon as his voice returned.

One thing was for certain, the first words Robbie would say to Ellen as soon as he could talk. If they were still imprisoned in that dirty

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sess pool, Robbie most definitely would say to Ellen, ‘be the fuckin queen El’. Robbie needed Ellen to do that so he could get them out.

Resting back against the wall, Robbie hoped to catch a little nap before something else awakened him. Getting ready to shut his eyes, he watched a roach crawl upon Ellen’s leg. With a nudge of his foot, he flicked the creature from her. He kept track of how many bugs he removed from her, and fully intended on giving Ellen the count when she woke up. Even if it meant her screaming and squirming, and getting weirded out. To Robbie it was worth it, anything that shot Ellen closer to the royalty edge was an ‘anything’ Robbie had to do.

^^^^

“A man who turns his back on his family . . .” Mick said to Johnny as they walked. “Is a man that can not be trusted. Period.”

Stopping, Johnny nodded. “I kind of got the idea you felt that way after you just nodded and left.”

“I didn’t think there was much to say, not after you told me what you did.”

“So you want me to leave.”

Mick paused. “Listen to what I am saying. I will repeat it. A man who turns his back on his family is a man who can not be trusted. I am not convinced, intelligent or not, that I would consider you a man. Not yet. You’re a kid. Nineteen, still scared, a kid. And because in my eyes you are a kid, I will not ask you to leave Lodi. But . . . don’t think for one second, you won’t be watched. I’m not gonna tell people who you are. I’m not. But you’ll be watched.”

“I understand.”

“Good. Now. This is where we part. Lars has work for you to do . . . Stew.” Mick gave a pat to Johnny’s back and walked in another direction.

Johnny took a second before moving on. It was weird what he felt. But he took a second to feel it . . . gratefulness.

^^^^

“And finally . . .” Joe shuffled to the next page as he sat in his

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office with Elliott and Danny Hoi. "I'm going to move up distribution check off sheets and do a short week. That way they are done and out of the way for you Danny."

"Got it." Danny nodded.

"I want to meet tomorrow, again, regarding replacements, delegation of power and so forth. Frank says we're leaving day after that." Joe said. "And I want to make sure you, as acting leader, have it down. Possibly even a quiz." Joe gathered up his things.

Danny chuckled. "You're kidding right?"

"No. Not at all." Joe stated. "This is the first time I ever left Beginnings for longer than a few hours. I'm neurotic. And speaking of neurotic . . . ' Joe leaned back in his chair. "The meeting went impressively fast and well. There's a reason for that. Frank. He's not here. Elliott, do you know where Frank is?"

"Most likely with a dozen or so Beginnings men in New Bowman." Elliot answered.

"New Bowman?" Joe asked. "Is there a problem."

"It depends on whose perspective you view this from." Elliott stated. "You see they're all in . . . court."

"Court?" Joe asked with a bit of shock. "What in God's name could my son being doing in court."

^^^^

It was something dementedly enjoyable, and it caused a stirring twinge in Jason. A urge to laugh out loud in that semi silent way that he did. But he kept a straight face, nodding very seriously every few seconds. There was plenty of uprising that made no sense, gasping that was over the edge, and heavily dramatics that the former Academy Award board would ridicule. And though highly out of procedure the for the simple 'request for trial' it was supposed to be, Jason allowed it. It was too much fun not to.

The shocked 'bastard' that rang out from Ben From Fabrics, caused Jason to pound his gavel once, then turn his chair back to the witness stand. "Continue, Frank."

Frank took a shivering breath. "Thank you. As I was saying, I felt small. Minuscule, unmanly, I felt like Ben from Fabrics"

"Bastard." Ben cried out again as he stood.

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Jason hit his gavel. "Continue, Frank, but please do so with out repeating that sentence again. I've heard it six times so far."

"Oh, sorry. Just . . ." Frank shivered. "Emotional." He squeezed the corners of his eyes. "I go out to do what I believe was a heroic task. I come home to find my reputation is tarnished. Men . . . men they look at me different. Three homosexuals . . ." Frank closed his eyes tight. "Made offers and one even." He swallowed predominantly. "Touched my rear."

Unison shocked gasps rang out from the men while the women in the courtroom babbled together loudly.

"Enough." Jason hit the gavel. "Frank, you believe Misha the cause for this."

"Yes." Frank answered.

"But didn't Dean say that you two were gay lovers?"

Jenny stood up, "That's right Jason, Badger him. Corner him."

"Enough." Jason grumbled. "Dean?"

Dean stood up. "I made no such reference."

"Liar!" Jenny raged. "Liar, Liar pants on . . ." She stopped when Jason glared at her.

Dean continued, "I said no such thing. I distinctively recall my words as being Frank and I hash it out." Dean shrugged. "We always talk and hash things out. Sgt. Ryder's statement as a witness to the conversation secures that."

Jason shuffled papers. "You're right. Sgt. Ryder says you use the phrase hash out." He turned to Frank. "So you want to bring trial against Misha in search of what?"

"Justice." Frank answered.

"Other than that. What damages do you seek?" Jason asked.

"Whatever the court finds. I just know that the mental stress is . . . un . . . un . . ." Frank brought his hand to his face. "Un . . ." His hand a little away from his face, closing one eye.

"Frank?" Jason questioned after waiting.

Frank lowered his head. "Give me a minute, this is tough."

Dan from Security looked at Dean. "Goddamn shame what these women have done to Frank. I hope they pay."

Dean nodded, then beckoned Frank in his mind.

Frank snapped his finger. "Unequivocal, thanks Dean." he winked and showed his palm. "The word smeared."

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Dean slouched down in his seat.

Jason turned his chair and faced the court. "I've heard enough. The case of Frank Slagel and Dean Hayes versus Misha in a sexual slander case will be heard in two weeks."

The women were outraged and stood up. Jenny spoke for them, "You can do this. This is unfair!"

"Be that as it may. And as ridiculous as this all is, if you women can do it." Jason smiled. "So can they." He slammed his gavel. "Court is adjourned."

Jenny, jaw clenching waited until Jason stood and walked away and still in anger mode after witnessing the gloating and high fives given to each other by the men, she faced the group of women. "This is war. Oh boy is this war."

^^^^

Slash marks? Robbie looked at the wall. Ellen was scratching slash marks in the wall. For what reason? To keep track of how many days there were imprisoned? Robbie thought maybe hours would work, and probably would have only been an hour had he held true to the promise he made himself to tell Ellen about the bugs. However, in making that vow to himself, Robbie forgot one important thing. He still hadn't regained the use of his voice. And drawing pictures, or attempting to write words on the dusty floor didn't work either. Ellen, like in some sort of beat the clock, game, kept guessing what he was writing or drawing, and assuming she was correct when Robbie tried to start over.

Frustrating was an understatement. Communicating was futile, of course with a normal minded person it may work. It dawned on Robbie why Dean was so wiry at times, he was jumpy because Ellen was so impatient. Robbie knew his frustration would be short lived, that was if his voice did return as promised. Then again, things would be a lot easier, he could get his plan of escape across, if Ellen were telepathic. No sooner did he have that thought and he had another.

Telepathic.

Frank.

It was a long shot. Actually a really long shot, but one worth taking. But he would need concentration, and how to do without Ellen

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interrupting and asking if everything was all right, was the question.

Robbie had to break down. He had to try to convey to Ellen what he had in mind.

Ellen stood by the boarded up window where she made her slash marks and Robbie walked to her.

“Hey.” Ellen smiled. “See.” She pointed to her wall.

Nine? Robbie counted. Nine slash mark. Holding up nine fingers he titled his head with question.

“Yes,” Ellen answered. “I have nine. Thanks. I want to show a record of our pain for the next tormented prisoners.” She sighed out. “Hopefully I won’t have to put that many up here, before Frank arrives. If he ever finds us.”

Robbie snapped his finger.

“Frank. Yes.” She said. “That’s what I said.”

Holding up his index finger he placed it to her lips to silence her then pointed to the floor.

“I’m not tired.” Ellen said.

Robbie shook his head then crouched to the floor.

“Are you tired?”

Again, Robbie shook his head, and with a wave, beckoned her to the floor.

“What?” Ellen asked.

Robbie drew some dirt into a pile, then showing his finger again, pointed to the dirt.

“Oh, you’re gonna write something. Cool. Go on.”

Smiling, Robbie started to write.

M-E-D . . .

“Medicine?” Ellen asked. “Do you need medicine? I don’t have any.”

Shaking his head ‘no’ Robbie continued to write, only he took the word as far as the dirt would allow.

“Meditate?”

Robbie nodded.

“Ok, I’ll think about this one. Go on.”

Growling silently, Robbie smeared the dirt to make a new slate. He wrote the next word.

M-E-S-S-A-G-E

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“Massage?” You want a massage?”

Shaking his head violently, Robbie pointed

“Oh! Message.” Ellen giggled. “Go on. I’m thinking about the message.”

Under the word ‘message’ Robbie wrote the number ‘two.’

“Two? Two what.”

Hard pointing Robbie hit the ground with his finger.

“Message to. Message to.” Ellen said excited. “To who?”

Fast Robbie swiped the dirt and only got the first letter written.

“Frank!” Ellen grinned. “You want to get a message to Frank.”

Excitedly Robbie nodded.

“How?”

Smoothing the dirt Robbie quickly wrote. ‘Meditate’ then pointed to his temple.

“Oh my God. Oh my god.” Ellen said enthused. “Excellent idea.”

Robbie had to admit, he waited. It wasn’t a safe assumption to believe Ellen understood what he meant.

“Frank reads minds. We concentrate really hard on him and calling his name, maybe we can at least let him know we’re fine.”

A genuine grin hit Robbie.

“Lets do this.” Ellen made herself comfortable on the floor.

Doing his only way of showing good job, Robbie gave a squeeze to Ellen shoulder and sat across from her. He felt the calm and closed his eyes.

“Wait.”

Robbie wanted to whine a cry. He mouthed the word ‘what?’

“Let’s think our thoughts in Synch.” Ellen said then saw Robbie’s curious look. “If we don’t, Frank might get confused.”

With a tilted head look, Robbie agreed. He had to. Ellen had a valid point.

^^^^

War games. There was nothing Frank enjoyed more. If it couldn’t be real combat, the game portion worked well too. He was designing a new game, and even though he would have to leave again, he

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wanted to take a few minute out of the routine meteor strategy meeting to discuss his idea. Actually Frank stole it from the recent outing her had with his brothers and Ellen.

Before a team of his security guys, in his office Frank stood before a map of Beginnings.

“Definitely,” Frank said. “There has to be time limits.” he explained.

Dan from security raised his hand. “This token, will it be a person that we have to get. Or an inanimate object.”

“As much as I would like the thrill of having a real life on the hinges, can we take that chance?”

The lot of men looked at each other in debate.

“Let me think on that one.” Frank pointed to his own temple. “All right, back to the map.” He turned his back to the group. “Sector thirty will belong . . .”

*“Frank.”*

“Yeah.” He turned around.

Silence.

Frank looked at the men, shook his head and went back to the map. “As I was saying, sectors thirty will belong to group . . .”

*“Frank.”*

“Yeah?” He looked over his shoulder.

Again, nothing.

Shrugging, he returned to his task. “Sector thirty goes to group seven. Dan’s men, the reason I . . . Yeah?” Again, over his shoulder he looked.

Dan was curious. “What’s up.”

“Who’s calling my name.”

Around the men Dan looked. “I didn’t hear anything.”

“Oh.” Frank scratched his head then went back to the map. “Dan’s men have to take this . . .” Frank growled, then blasted as he spun around. “Fuckin what!”

Shocked everyone looked wondering what the outburst was all about.

“Who’s calling my name?” Frank asked. “No one wants to own up to . . .” His eyes widened. “Yeah?” Finger to his ear, Frank rubbed, then snapped. “Got it.” He reached around his neck for his headset radio.

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It wasn't there. He saw Dan pointing to his desk. "Oh thanks." Frank grabbed his radio and smiled to the men. "My hearing must be getting better. It's the jackrabbit in me." Bringing the radio to his mouth he pressed in the button. "Yeah, Mark what's up."

"Not much." Mark answered. "What's up with you?"

"You calling me?" Frank questioned.

"No." Mark replied.

"Is anyone calling me over the radio?"

"Not that I know off."

"Thanks." Frank set down the radio. "What the fuck is . . ." his head sprung up. "He looked left to right. "What?"

Dan started to slowly stand. "Frank are you all right?"

"I'm fine but . . .oh!" His face lit up. "Oh shit!" he grinned. "Oh shit, it's Robbie."

Everyone immediately turned from the chair and looked at the door.

"Not there." Frank said. "Here." He pointed to his head. "He's calling me he saying . . ."

*"Frank."*

"There it is again."

*"Frank, we're in L.A. "*

"Yes!" Frank clenched his fist and hurried to the door. "Dan, take over, I'll be back." Grabbing his radio, Frank placed it on and called for his father in his charge out the door.

Dan stood completely when the door shut. He scratched his head. "Haven't a clue so . . ." He moved to the door. "Let's just make it up."

~~~~~

Joe was the last one to enter Hal's hospital room where Elliott, Frank and Dean all waited.

Toting a small stack of folders, Joe was out of breath when he finally stopped. "All right, Frank, what's the big rush."

"Yes," Hal interjected. "We would like to know as well."

"He didn't tell you yet" Joe asked.

Dean shook his head. "No, we've been waiting for you."

"Well, I'm here. Spill it." Joe told Frank.

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“Wait until you hear this,.” Frank nodding looked around pleased. “I heard from Robbie.”

A loud ‘what’ erupted from Hal, Joe and Elliott.

Joe lifted his free hand to silence the crew. “Frank, you heard from Robbie? When?”

“Ten minutes ago.” Frank replied. “He called.”

“Oh my god.” Joe gasped out. “He called. On the phone.”

“No. Here.” Frank pointed to his own temple.

Joe groaned at the same time as Hal. It had an eerie doubling effect that made Frank twitch his head and tug his ear.

Dean halted at verbal execution of Frank. “No, Joe, wait. This is possible. I believe him.”

“So do I.” Elliott said. “Frank what did he say.”

“He said they are fine. And . . .” So proud Frank spoke, “I got a location.”

“Yes.” Joe made a fist. “Where?”

“La.” Frank answered. “They are in a place called la.”

Silence.

From his sitting position on his bed, Hal peered up curiously, “La?”

“Yeah, la.” Frank nodded. “You know, like the singing thing. La-la-la-la-la. Or what you were in when they put you out. La-la land.”

Hal scratched his head. “La.”

With an even more lost look, Elliott glanced around in thought. “La.”

Dean’s, hand shot to his mouth, as he too contemplated. “La.” Joe grumbled and his voice raised just a little with edge. “La, Frank?”

“Yeah. La.”

Joe exhaled with a slight huff. “La.” His voice grew a little louder. “La? You mean, L.A.!”

“That’s what I said. La. L.A., spell it say it, same thing.”

“No, Frank it isn’t.” Joe said amongst the groan. “L.A., Los Angeles.”

So serious Frank shook his head. “No, Dad, he didn’t say Los Angeles, he said . . .”

“L.A.” Joe completed the sentence.

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“Yeah.”

“Father.” Hal interrupted. “If may . . .”

“No, you may not, Hal.” Joe snapped.

“Fine.” Hal shrugged. “It’s your stroke.”

“La.” Joe nodded with the speaking of the word, then after getting yet another agreement from Frank, calmly Joe approached him. Then, both hands on the stack of folders that he held, Joe lifted high, and not only hit Frank in the head with the stack, he hit him over and over with every hard, yelling syllable he released. “La! L.A.! You goddamn stupid, son of a bitch bastard!”

“Hey!” Frank defended himself against the pelting folders.

Elliott laughed, while Hal derived some sort of sick pleasure.

Dean, on the other hand, acted as if he didn’t even notice. Eyes glued to his own notes, he walked up to Joe and blindly reached out, stopping him. “Frank’s right.”

Mid strike, Joe looked. “What? You’re a scientist, you’re gonna say this is a place called la.”

“No. It’s L.A.” Dean lifted a piece of paper, “Ellen guessed that, well, Hollywood. We have a location. We really do. If we can get some pictures of . . .” He looked at Frank. “La. Then we can show them to Christopher and maybe he can tell us where the entrances are.”

Joe nodded pleased,. “You’re right. Let’s me and you find Danny Hoi, and see what Mr. Resourceful can come up with. Elliott, you find Chris.”

“Got it, Mr. Slagel, right away.” walking out, Elliot chuckled once more with a mumbling of ‘la.’ before he left.

“What about me?” Frank asked.

“Stay here and bother Hal.” Joe stated. “Let’s go, Dean.” starting to leave, Joe paused, walked back and hit Frank just one more time before he and Dean walked out.

“Ow.” Frank rubbed his head then looked at Hal. “What?”

“La.” Hal shook his head. “Good God, you’re brilliant.”

“Thanks.” Frank smiled. “And don’t forget telepathic. Call me the long distance mind reader.”

Barring all the lame, ‘la’ comments, and hating to do so, Hal had to give to Frank on that one.



Lars nodded with an interested ‘hmm’, but other than that he lacked the plethora of enthusiasm he had shown earlier in the conversation with Johnny.

“That’s all well and fine, Stew.” Lars said. “The micro chip soldier stuff is stunning, and I really don’t care to hear any further about how ego maniac super scientist Dean Hayes is now the bionic man. But . . . but, I do want to go back to how the little shit is manipulating DNA with experiments.”

“Lars, as much as you hate Dean, you have to give it to him. He’s doing brilliant work.”

Lars rolled his eyes. “Creating monsters is brilliant work? He is creating cannibalistic hybrids.”

“They don’t always mean to be cannibals. And . . .” Johnny said brightly. “The society has Dean beat on cannibal killer DNA manipulated beings.”

“How?”

“Genetically enhance embryos.”

“OK.” Lars said in a ‘big deal’ sarcastic way.

“Seriously, you have embryos that are supposed to grow faster, be smarter, and one that are created to withstand the elements. However, in the same instance that the society failed, they also succeeded.”

“You’re losing me.”

“All right, the society farms women. Impregnates them with these embryos.”

“You’re joking.”

“Nope.” Johnny shook his head. “Only problem is, they lost their top genetic scientist so the entire batch that went awry couldn’t be fixed, and when the enhanced babies were born, the society saw the product of their creation and immediately wanted to kill the babies, and abort the plan until someone could fix the problem.”

“And did they?”

“Nope. The brilliancy of George saw what they created. And not only did they ship the batch to the area surrounding Beginnings, they created more. And to the best of my knowledge are still creating them. The indestructible army. Withstand the elements. Grow at six times the

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normal human growth rate. They're human, don't look it. Very deadly. Beginnings calls them killer babies."

Lars laughed. "Killer babies."

"Not kidding Lars. In infancy they can run up to fifty five miles per hour. Lord knows how fast when they reach adult hood. They dart in unseen, tear you to shreds, and leave nothing. Imagine what an army of them can do. It's scary, Beginnings battles them constantly." Johnny saw the immediate seriousness n Lars' face. "Now you believe me don't you."

"Killer babies." Lars spoke with a whisper, then turned his head to look at Johnny. He pulled a sheet of paper forward. "Stew, again, give me what you told me, and more. I want to know everything you can recall about these . . . killer babies."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Joe was certain somewhere in the continuous, hard, circular rubbing motion he applied to his temples, he would break through the skin, hit the brain and kill himself.

"Joe, you aren't listening." Jenny, arms folded stood before his desk.

Elbows digging hard into his desk surface, Joe only peered up as he continued to rub, "How can I not listen, Jenny, you're right here."

"Then respond."

"What do you want me to do?"

"He's your son." Jenny griped. "He made a complete mockery out of our fine judicial system you have struggled to establish, and made a mockery out of the rules our dear grace . . ." Jenny lowered her head for as second, "wrote."

"He's a grown man."

"Who acted like an asshole. He faked cried Joe."

"Jenny." Finally Joe stopped rubbing, and he sat back. "I will say it again, what do you want me to do."

"Anything. Ground him."

"Ground him?"

"Oh, don't pretend you haven't done that before."

"He's forty for God's sake. Yes, I grounded him when he was a kid."

"You've grounded Robbie since we're in Beginnings." Jenny said smug.

"That's Robbie. We're talking about Frank. He does what he wants."

"Can't you beat him."

"As much as I'd like to. No."

"Punish him."

"Jenny . . ."

"Do something, Joe." Jenny urged. "I implore you as the leader of this community to stop the madness. Stop your son."

"I can't tell Frank what to do. I can't." Joe lifted his hands.

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“Is that your answer.”

“Um . . .” Joe took a dramatic pause. “Yes.”

Jenny huffed. “I have over a dozen women standing outside waiting for an answer, and that’s the best you can do? What am I suppose to go out and tell them.”

“Try this.” Joe said. “Tell them, they started this whole goddamn mess, and tough, now they have to deal with the repercussions of their overreacting whining.”

“Oh.” Jenny growled. “Fine. Just fine. Thank you very much Mr. Chauvinist Slagel. I should have known.” Arms crossed tighter to her body, Jenny moved to the door, flung it open and stormed out.

On the step of Joe’s office she lifted a hand to the women so she could speak. “It’s useless. Joe, too, has the typical male mentality ladies. We gave it our best shot, no one can say we didn’t hit every option so . . .” Snide she sniffed. “As I said, this is war. The men will pay. But . . . we gonna have to start out small for now and go full force whenever Joe leaves because he won’t stand for it. So . . . let’s go plan our war. Follow me ladies, I have wonderful finger food refreshments waiting at my home.” Leading the troop, Jenny moved on.

From inside his office, on the other side of the door, Joe tilted his head with a curious look. “War?”

^^^^

“Killer babies?” Mick tied not to laugh at the prospect was presented to him. Perhaps it would have helped had Lars stated the reason why he approached Mick and said, ‘Mick I have your answer . . . Killer babies.’

“Yes.” Lars nodded . “Killer babies.”

“What is this, a movie?” Mick asked.

“No, your solution.” Lars stated.

“To what? Boredom? Killer babies? What the fuck, Lars? Be a little more clear, solution to what.”

“The bizarre deaths that occurred in the field beyond the river.”

“And we believe this to be killer babies?” mick asked.

“Yes.”

“Lars.” Very seriously Mick looked upon him. “Now I won’t get

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mad, but are you um, creating your own version of cocain again.”

“Kiss my boney ass, Mick.” Lars told him then looked at Johnny. “One time. One time many years ago, I experimented.”

Mick cut him off. “Yeah, and two dozen of the men in this town burned their nostrils.”

“No one forced them to try.”

Mick grumbled.

“Mick.” Lars walked closer. “This is a viable answer to those deaths.”

“No, savages are a viable answer. Killer babies? Lars. Say it with me. Killer babies. That would be an interesting approach to tell my men. Yes, we have . . . killer babies that are taking out our people.”

Frustrated, Lars nearly gave up. “Stew. Tell him.”

“Chief, this is true. OK, perhaps their real name isn’t killer babies. That’s a Frank term. But . . . the society created a batch of genetically enhanced embryos that was not only grotesquely mutated physically, but habitually as well.” Johnny explained. “Just about the point the society was ready to abort the entire project they saw what the killer babies can do, and they dumped a batch near Beginnings. They’re still dumping near Beginnings.”

Lars add, “and I believe they dropped some here as well. They attack fast, no one sees them coming.”

Mick lifted his hand as he half way stood. “Even if I believe you, how can babies tack so fast no one sees them coming.”

Johnny answered, “they move fifty-five miles an hour.”

“Six rows of teeth.” Lars continued. “They are like a tree shudder, gnawing to the bone, death occurs in a matter of seconds. What young Stew here has told me is so consistent with the postmortem exam I did on the last three victims, it’s frightening.”

Slowly Mick lowered back down to sit. “Killer babies, mutated, that move fifty five miles per hour.”

“And have an insatiable taste for flesh.” Lars said.

“Christ.” Mick ran his hand across his face. “If this is true, what do we do?”

“You can mark off the area.” Johnny explained. “They are territorial, they tend to not roam except for food. So, basically, you can keep them fed and they’ll be happy.” He shrugged. “Or go after them.”

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Mick's eyes lifted to Lars. "He suggests we feed them."

"I'm thinking get a few and train them." Lars said.

"Can be done." Johnny added. "We have. We have Marcus who is very domesticated. Of course, he was born within Beginnings to one of our women. Long story. But Frank and Robbie used shock therapy to train some."

"Are you familiar with this training program?" Mick asked.

"Oh, yeah. Very. I worked with them in the lab." Johnny answered.

"Still not convinced . . ." Mick exhaled. "But I'm willing to check it out. So tomorrow morning, we go out to that area and find . . ." He swallowed then winced. "Killer babies."

^^^^

Post apocalyptic world or not, one thing remained, children had bedtimes, and that was definitely a rule in the Hayes home. Of course some of the kids under Dean' roof went to bed without being told, actually Joey usually fell asleep somewhere during the evening. Frank called it 'Robbie Syndrom', like with Robbie, that immediate 'light out' conveniently occurred before a bath could be had.

Then Alexandra was never a problem. After her initial 'bitch and gripe' session about her brothers, she would go to her room, slam the door, and eventually go to sleep. Josh went from being a student, to the ace number one tracking monitor. And he was never home in the evening anymore.

Billy. Billy argued. Every night he fought the bedtime factor. Feeling he was too old to be given a bedtime, and that he had a dire need to fulfill his adult conversation void. It was an argument, but Dean likened it to a weird bonding time between them.

Up went the covers over Billy and Dean tucked them in extra tight.

"This is abuse." Billy stated as he squirmed.

"No, it's bedtime."

"Mom would never do this to me."

Dean paused, he actually gave a visual pause when he thought of Ellen.

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“You miss her.” Billy said. “I miss her too.”  
“Soon, Bill, soon she’ll be home.”  
“Can I go with Uncle Frank to pick her up at that town?”  
“No, you can’t.”  
“Why?” Billy questioned. “I’m really running my course here in Beginnings. Think I am ready for the UWA or something better . . .”  
“Bill . . .”  
“No dad, the kids are dumb.”  
“They’re kids.”  
“So.” Billy shrugged. “And Jenny . . .”  
“Can we not talk bad about Jenny. There’s enough shit going on.”  
“You mean with that harassment case.”  
Dean waved a finger. “You know too much.”  
“I don’t know enough.”  
“Goodnight.” Dean started to leave  
“Is my mother dead?”  
Dean froze and turned back around. “What? No. She’s with Robbie. Why . . . why would you even say that.”  
“Because I’m smart and something is not right.”  
“She’s not dead, Billy.”  
“Then something is wrong. I can tell. You guys are holding back.”  
“What makes you say that?”  
“Uncle Frank.” Billy answered.  
“What do you mean?”  
“Uncle Frank is a dead giveaway.’ Billy exhaled. “Tonight, while he was reading that kids book to Alex and Joey, ‘Are you my Mother’, he cried, had to stop.”  
“Billy . . .”  
“A grown man of his size and stature . . . broke.” Billy shook his head.  
“Uncle Frank . . . he has issues. Don’t worry about it.” Dean kissed his son. “Mom is not dead. And neither is Uncle Robbie just in case you are wondering about that. They’ll be back. Soon. I promise. And speaking of which . . .” he pointed to the door. “I’m going to check on her escort now. See if Frank needs help for the trip.”

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“OK, Night.”

“Night.” Dean hit the light switch and pulled the door closed.

No sooner did the room go black, and Billy was out of bed, light on, and be pulled out a book.

It was pretty quite and nearly dark when Dean returned into the livingroom. Frank was in plain view, sitting at the diningroom table, with maps and papers all sprawled out before him. Cigarette burning in one hand, pencil in the other, the hover over the documents was so typically Slagel stature, all Frank needed was a pair of glasses and he could be Joe.

“Hey.” Dean called out softly. “How’s it going.”

“Good. Good. Billy out?” Frank looked up. “Never mind, I know the answer to that one.”

“So was Chris any help?” Dean asked.

“Pretty much so. Some. We’ll do good when we leave day after tomorrow. Of course, speaking of tomorrow, it will be hectic.”

Dean walked closer to the table. “I bet. Aside from finalizing the packing, and meetings you have to . . .” Dean slowed down. “Frank?”

“Yeah.”

“This map isn’t of L.A., this is of . . .”

“Lodi Ohio.”

“I’m lost.”

“You’re in Beginnings.” Frank sated.

“No, I mean, why Lodi.”

“Johnny’s there. Well, at least that’s what my Dad thinks. I was just sort of planning ahead for my trip there.”

“You’re really going there?” Dean asked. “Why?”

“It’s my kid, Dean. Bad or good I have to resolve this.” Frank said almost saddened. “You know what sucks. I screwed up with him. My flesh and blood. I screwed up. I lost my son, along with my daughters. Then you know, I thought I’d get another chance to make up for my life a while ago.”

“You are Frank.” Dean said certain. “You’re a great father. Don’t let the Johnny thing discourage you.”

“How can I not, Dean. Huh?” Frank asked. “Sometimes I feel like I have nothing that’s mine. Three sons in my life. One betrays me, one thinks you’re his dad, and Brian . . .” Frank sighed. “Brian he . . .

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there's nothing I can do about Brian."

Mumbling, 'but I can'. Dean backed up.

"What was that?" Frank questioned.

"Um, nothing. Frank? Do you mind staying here, I have to run to the cryo lob. I forgot something."

"Sure."

"Thanks." Dean grabbed his coat and opened the door. He stopped. "Frank, just know one thing. A lot of us, we not only appreciate what you do, we care, and would do anything in return."

Oddly, Frank turned and peered over his shoulder. "Um, thanks."

"Sure. See ya later." Upbeat and in a hurry, Dean left.

Not really putting too much into Dean's sudden switch of demeanor, Frank shrugged and returned to work.

^^^^

Robbie saw it. Actually several times, Where did it go? It surely would be the thing to send Ellen right over the edge, but she had to see it. The twenty-four hour mark they had surpassed. Not even Robbie in his wildest imagination would of believed Ellen would have surpassed the twenty-four mark. Never did he know her to be so headstrong in such a dirty situation. That wasn't Ellen. He supposed being out on the run during the game had a lot to do with it.

Several times he tried to speak, but he couldn't. He didn't however hear the slightest of sound, so that was encouraging to him. Soon. Really soon. But first, he had to get out of that cell room. And for that, he needed . . . it.

Where was it?

"So anyhow . . ." Ellen continued in her rambling. "Are you listening?"

Robbie nodded.

"It's just that you're looking around. Oh, never mind, it's the dirt, huh? Oh!" she snapped out.

Robbie jumped.

"Do you remember, speaking of dirt, do you remember, maybe you won't."

'What?' Robbie mouthed the words.

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Ellen started laughing. “Do you remember Ash Wednesday, and Frank and me came up from schools and we all went to get ashes on our heads. But I had never done that, right? So Joe was bitching at me because I didn’t want to get that big black mark on my head.”

Robbie vaguely remembered, his eyes shifted looking for it.

“And I argued with Joe that since I wasn’t Catholic I didn’t have to. And Joe said that it was religious law that since I was visiting a Catholic home I had to do the ashes bit or I’d burn in hell. Yo remember?”

Robbie nodded, then shifted his eyes. Again. There it was.

Ellen continued, “And I was horrified when I watched all those people with the big black spot o their head. I didn’t want that. And Joe got so mad at me because when I went to the priest and it was my turn I asked if he could take it easy with the black stuff because I wasn’t catholic.”

Robbie chuckled btu more so he wanted to draw Ellen’s attention to . . . it.

“Man, that priest nailed me, didn’t he? Ashes were falling in my face. Joe actually had to pull me away from him. Probably because I was screaming.” She shrugged. “What? What is it. What are you looking at.”

Hiding his smile, Robbie pointed.

Nonchalantly Ellen peered. The noise and bodily reaction she released indicated Ellen couldn’t determine whether she wanted to scream or shudder. Upon accomplishing the loud task of doing both she flew into Robbie, being squeamish and twitching her body, all while hiding any view she had of the hideous small creature. “It’s a Christopher Colombus rat.” she peered over her shoulder to the hairless, rodent then shuddered again.

Robbie held her tight in a comforting manner. Burying the smile he had all while wondering if the site of the mutant rodent would throw her over the edge like he so much hoped.

It did.

“I’m sorry.” Ellen apologized to Robbie again.

Robbie only shook his head mouthing, ‘it’s all right’.

Another deep breath and Ellen face the male Drune that stood in

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the open doorway. "OK, basically . . ." she aid to him. "I need you to find out from God what all it entails this being Queen stuff."

Robbie smiled. Not only did he smell the dirty stench of their captive room, he was beginning to smell freedom.

^^^^

Folders lined up on the center counter in the cryo lab as if they were some new type of counter covering. Every light was on, and equipment ran, giving it a busy daylight feel instead of the middle of the night as it was.

Dean had everything ready, and basically he was waiting. He smiled with enthusiasm when the cryo lab door buzzed and Jason walked in.

"Hey, Jason I . . ." Inquisitively, he looked. "You're in your pajamas."

"Usually, Dean, this is the proper attire for the middle of the night. I received you urgent message . . ." Jason walked closer. "I go to the clinic to find out your urgency is here. Is this urgent Dean."

"I believe so."

"Hmm." Jason looked around. "I see no sick animals or experiments gone wild. This is your domain, I don't understand why I'm here."

"This may be my domain, but I have a problem."

"And what would that be?" Jason asked.

"I need to accomplish something. I fear errors. You can help. In fact You are probably the only person in the world that can help with an odd purchase."

"Purchase?" Jason scratched his head. He actually debated on lighting a cigarette just to annoy Dean. "Purchase. What do you want to purchase?"

"Time."

"Excuse me?"

"Time is your baby. Like it applied to mine. Or rather, Frank's. Depending on how you look at it." Dean spoke soft and serious. "I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important. I need your help Jason. I need to buy . . . time."

## CHAPTER NINE

January 26<sup>th</sup>

Way before the sun had even risen, Elliott woke up. He thought he had heard a noise in his house, then realizing the preposterous notion of it, he just stayed awake. It was going to be a long day, his last one in Bowman for at least a few days. So he thought he'd take advantage of the extra hours to prepare for his absence. Knowing the mess Hal wasn't even open, Elliott made some Hoi Herbal Tea. He would of made coffee but he was out. Water boiled, bag in the cup, Elliott fixed his tea,, opened the kitchen drawer, reached inside and stopped.

Peering in, Elliot scratched his head. "Odd."

^^^^

Danny Hoi knew a lot had to be done in Mechanics, and he wanted to get there early. His time would be limited there when he took over the leadership responsibilities the next day. He had in his mind an easy plan to help make mechanics run smoother, and not get behind in the Danny Dollar pay system. But first was coffee.

Computers booted up, requisitions lined up early, Danny heard the last of the gurgle from the brewing coffee and hurried over a if time was of an essence and the coffee was a life saving medication. Taking a whiff of the strong aroma, then grabbing a cup, Danny poured. He dropped two lumps of sugar, and reached for his spoon.

His hand slowed down. "What the hell?"

^^^^

"Henry." Hector said his name with a chuckle to it as he tried to change Nick's diaper.

"Hector, I am very serious." Henry stood behind Hector. "And you're making the diaper to tight."

"Do not . . ." Hector finished. "Proceed to tell me how to change a diaper. Not you. Not of all people."

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“What is that supposed to mean.”

“It means you suck at anything like this.” Hector lifted Nick.

“That is not nice. But I’m not going to argue with you because we have a problem.”

“It’s not a problem.” Hector argued.

“Yes, it is. Follow me.” Henry moved toward the kitchen. “We need to get a hold of a priest, a scientist, someone, because we have a spirit, a nasty spirit running around this house. I’m scared, Hector. Very scared of ghosts.”

Hector, holding Nick, could only laugh. “Henry, please. Once incident does not a poltergeist make.”

“You don’t think.” With the sarcastic come back, before Hector’s view, Henry flung open the silverware drawer.

^^^^

“Oh, this is weird, this is really weird.” Dan from security said almost amazed as he walked with Mark.

“Three reports so far, and I have a feeling it’s only the beginning.” Mark replied.

“Can it be anymore stranger?” Dan questioned.

“Don’t ask that. We’re in Beginnings.”

“True. OK.” Dan stopped walking. “Let me think.”

“Should we bother Frank with this.”

“Um, not yet. Let’s do some more investigating.” Dan stated. “That way when we present him the problem, perhaps somehow, someway . . .” He exhaled dramatically. “We can come up with a solution.”

^^^^

Elliott had to admit since forging with Beginnings he had been baffled probably more in the short period of time, than he ever had in his entire life. But the current problem, like with the chickens,. Had him puzzled.

Why? What? How? When? Were the main questions in his mind, and though it seemed rather minuscule it was something he felt

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compelled to present to the Captain.

After discovering he wasn't at his drugstore apartment, Elliott sought out the Captain where he knew he would be. The mess hall.

And he was right. Hal sat alone in the center of the mess hall, enjoying his coffee and breakfast when Elliott walked in.

"Captain." Elliott called his name.

"Good Lord, Elliot you look confused." Hal peered up from his meal.

"I am. The strangest thing occurred." Elliott stated. "I woke up, made tea, only to discover every single . . ."

"Spoon was bent." Hal held up a bent spoon.

"Oh my God."

Hal nodded. "Here too."

"What do we do?"

Serious and long Hal stared at Elliott. "Here's my out take on it. Direct any and all inquiries concerning this matter to . . . Beginnings. It's a weird one, let the weird people handle it."

~~~~~

"How do you think he handle it?" Dan raised his hand before Frank's security door.

"Don't know." Mark shrugged. "Knock. He has to know."

Dan did.

"Yeah." Frank called out from inside the office.

"Frank." Dan stepped inside. "We have a slight dilemma in Beginnings."

"What's that." Frank set down hi clipboard and stood up.

"Twenty-two reports came in already. And a few from Bowman. I was trying to weed through it, but . . . ." Dan took a breath. "It's getting a head of me. I didn't want to bother you with it. But we're hoping you can help." He handed Frank a bent spoon, the handle of which was nearly bent all the way to the spoon portion.

Frank lifted it. "This is fucked up."

"Yes, it is." Dan stated.

Mark interjected. "What do we do? Can you help?"

"Absolutely." Frank looked again at the spoon, grabbed the

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handle, straightened and handed it back. "There."

Dan tried to explain, "No, Frank see . . ."

Mark stooped him and pointed to the spoon. "He gave the solution. It's that easy. Just . . . ow." He rubbed his head when dan hit him with it. "Why you do that?"

"Yes, we an bend them back. But that's not why we're here." He laid the spoon on Frank's desk. "Frank, we need to know why this is happening. Why every spoon is turning up bent. That's the problem."

"I see." Frank grabbed the corrected spoon. "I'll tell you what. You gentlemen take care of your day and I will personally look into this."

Dan nodded. "Thanks, Frank."

"Yeah, Thanks." Mark said as well.

"Have a good day." Frank, still holding that spoon waited until Dan and Mark had left and when the door closed, he opened his drawer, tossed it inside and grabbing his clipboard he went back to work.

~~~~~

Beyond redundant? Was all that armory needed for a confrontation—if there really was going to be one—with children? Supposedly vicious children, but ones barely passed the infant stage. Mick wondered, truly, if the 'killer babies' existed, they were just that . . . babies. Maybe one of the reasons they were able to take out eight lives was because the men that were killed tried to give safety, comfort and love to them.

Mick literally winced and twitched his head to rid himself of the wayward, obscure thoughts he was having while watching Johnny prepare for their journey into the field areas beyond the river bank. Some of the things were tough to find, and Johnny did say he would make do without them, but for some sort of distorted amusement, Mick sought the items out. He was even able to find that electronic calf roper. He understood, in a sense why Johnny needed that, after all he was going to try to secure one for Lars. Then again, Mick wondered how Johnny was going to snatch up the baby if indeed it moved fifty five miles an hour. Perhaps that was where the cattle prod came in. Mick still believed the double barreled sawed off shot gun was the solution to the killed things.

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But when he showed Johnny how he was armed, Johnny chuckled and shook his head.

*"You don't think it will work?"* Mick recalled himself asking Johnny.

*"Um, maybe," Johnny answered, "if nothing else, it will send them flying, and possibly knock them out."*

*"Wait a second . . . this shotgun won't kill them? Get the fuck out of here."*

*Johnny only shrugged, "we'll see. Even if it can . . . we'll still see."*

Mick wondered what the 'we'll see' comment was about. He supposed, he would see. But what he pondered more on was why Johnny insisted on looking like some sort of home improvement guy versus a warrior. A thick brown tool belt graced Johnny's waist loaded with different types of weapons. And Johnny still looked around, hand on hip, appearing as if in thought or forgetting something. He was indeed in his own world, and had Mick even had a chance to meet Frank, Mick would see that Johnny was, at that moment, a spitting image, in actions and mannerisms, of his father.

*"Why are you still looking for more . . . stuff?"* Mick asked Johnny.

*"Protection."* Johnny answered.

*"I'm there, Bill's coming."*

Johnny made a slight nose that signified his uncertainty.

*"What?"* Mick tossed up his hands in aggravation.

*"My instinct is saying, 'more, more, more'."*

*"Yeah, well mine is saying, move, move, move."*

Johnny chuckled.

*"And he laughs."* Mick shook his head.

*"Chief, just call it a hunch."*

*"Of?"* Mick asked.

*"We'll see."* Johnny returned to thinking mode.

*"We'll see."* Mick only nodded in disbelief. "O.K."

^^^

Lavender? Ellen sniffed her arm again. It was Lavender, and her

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skin felt impressively smooth. The bath felt wonderful. Even though she had taken one the night before when God's men brought her to her quarters, Ellen felt she needed another. She was able to relax in the bath, because her gut told her that Creed's promise that Robbie would be treated like a god, was being held up. Of course, Ellen would find out shortly, at least she thought. At least that was what she assumed when Elizabeth, Ellen's head chamber maid drune told her they were bringing up the God of testicular fortitude to join her for breakfast.

How would Robbie be dressed. How in the world did he get away with using that godly title? Would he smell as good as her? Were all thoughts Ellen has as she waited patiently, and with a little nervousness for Robbie.

The truth would be learned if she made the right decision. Breakfast was waiting, and then the door opened.

Ellen turned from the window quickly, and shrieked in excitement when Robbie walked in.

Robbie was not only doing his Slagel strut, he was grinning widely in arrogance. The first thought that came to Ellen was he must of really enjoyed his bath as well. Hurrying to him, Ellen threw her arms around Robbie, who was wearing white cloth, drawstring pants and a longer shirt.

"You look like a throw back from the sixties." Ellen giggled and kissed. "You smell good. They're treating you good, right?"

Robbie nodded, kissed her on the cheek, and stepped back. It was barely heard, but there. "Yes."

Ellen screamed.

Robbie closed off one ear.

"You talk."

"Getting there."

"So, what do you think." she grabbed his hand. "Let's eat." To the table she led him. "I don't know what all entails with this queen stuff. But the clothes, food and bath aren't all that bad. And . . ."

The door to the bedroom opened, "My queen." Creed walked in.

Ellen gave a twitch of her head. "Neither is that." She lifted her hand and Creed kissed it.

"I just wanted to make sure you were happy." Creed said.

"Oh, very. Thanks. Robbie looks great."

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“Good. I’ll leave you be. I have our night tonight to prepare for. My Queen. Bright eyes.” he tapped Robbie on the shoulder.

“Oh . . . Creed.” Ellen called out. “Robbie can . . .” She stopped when she felt her leg being kicked. “Talk . . .” Again her leg was kicked and she saw the glaring stare Robbie gave her. “Soon, can’t he?”

“Soon I hope. I’ll be back.” Creed stepped out.

“What’s up with not letting him know you can talk?” Ellen asked Robbie after Creed had left.

“Not yet.” Robbie spoke.

“I’ll be quiet.”

“El.” Robbie laid his hand on her’s. “All this. Keep in mind. We’re still prisoners.”

“Oh, I know. But we’re treated well.”

“We have to escape.”

“Why? We should wait for Frank.”

“You don’t know what he means by his plans for tonight. He called it ‘our night’.”

“The three of us are doing something.” Ellen said and saw Robbie shake his head. “We aren’t.”

“You and him.”

“Really. I wonder what that could be.” She shrugged. “I’ll worry about it later. I hope he doesn’t want sex.”

Robbie just widened his eyes.

“Oh, shit.”

“No, I’ll get you out of it. Whatever it is, just keep in mind, I will get you out of it.”

“How?”

“By escaping. I’ll get us out of here, tonight.”

“Good.” Ellen said. “But . . . can you?”

Robbie only rolled his eyes.

^^^^

Pace. Stop. Laugh. Shake his head. That was the progression that Dean did in his lab. And from the doorway, Frank watched him, too. For a good five minutes, at least.

“Man.” Frank shook his head. “He was singing partridge Family

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songs this morning. You really think it's a chemical change?"

Billy nodded. "That or, he really could of just snapped."

"True." Frank nodded the turned his head when he heard the close sound of Andrea's 'ah'.

"Sweet." She smiled and peeked in. "He is so happy today. I too find myself glancing in the door." She spoke smooth and calm. "Taking in a visual whiff of his happiness. That is . . ." She exhaled. "Before I remind myself he's a dick." She turned, stopped, and looked back. "Penis, sorry Billy."

Billy lifted his hand in a 'not a problem' fashion.

"This has to be the answer, Bill. It has to be."

"Makes sense to me." Billy said. "I mean, when did his mood change?"

"Last night."

"Exactly. And he started acting weird this morning, right?" Billy asked. "And when did the incidents start to show up?"

Frank exhaled in discovery. "This morning."

Billy pointed in the blab. "Though it is a mental breakdown that is causing it, and he is my father, there is your culprit."

"Let's go tell Pap." Hand on Billy's head Frank turned him and they started to walk from the clinic. "Glad you're helping out on this. This could have been a mystery for years to come. Pap will be happy."

^^^^

Joe wanted to scream. Crowded was an understatement to describe his office. At least twenty men were crammed in there, all loudly voicing their concerns. Elbows on his desk, thumbs to his chin while his fingers rubbed his temple, Joe wished it over. He shifted his eyes to Jason who sat calmly in a chair, legs crossed smoking a cigarette.

"It's getting out of hand, Joe." Dan from security griped. "Really out of hand."

Joe looked up to the knock on the door. "Go away, there's no more room."

The door opened.

Joe grumbled.

Scott from Mechanics stepped in. "Joe, we . . ." He made his

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way though. "Busy?"

"Looks that way." Joe said sarcastic.

"We have a problem, Joe." Scott said.

"Don't tell me." Joe lifted a hand. "Your spoons were bent."

"Yes." Scott nodded. "How did you . . ." He stopped when he saw Joe pointing around. "Them too?"

"All of us." Dan spoke up. "Something has to be done, Joe."

"Yes." Joe argued. "Bend them back. End of problem."

"No." Henry spoke up. "That doesn't work."

Mark added. "They don't look the same. They will never regain their shape."

"Our silverware is ruined." Another man shouted.

Joe had enough. "Listen to you, assholes. You're men for Christ sake. You're bitching about silverware!"

Dan interjected, "but if we let this go Joe, where does it end? Huh? What's next? Our knives? Our forks? What?"

"Oh my God." Joe covered his eyes.

"We want justice." A man shouted out.

Frank's voice topped them all. "I found our spoon culprit."

Silence.

After a roll of his eyes, Joe whined. "No, Frank, I'm trying to resolve this issue. Forget bout it."

"No, Dad. I figured it out." Frank moved to the desk, and from under his arm, he set Billy down. "Tell him Bill. Tell Pap."

"Frank . . ." Joe tried to interrupt. "I don't want to . . ."

"My dad. We think it's my dad." Billy told him.

"Christ." Joe mumbled.

Immediately, the entire office was in an uproar and with shouts of, 'Dead did it?', 'Damn, Dean.' and 'let's get him', like a scene from a warrior movie every man fled from the office.

Shaking his head, Joe stood up and moved to his still open office door. "Thank you Frank." he snapped sarcastically. "Thank you very much." Bitching a 'goddamn it', Joe stormed out.

"You're welcome." Frank yelled then with a grin turned to Billy with a high five. "Man, we're cool."

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They stopped and parked the truck at the end of the river road, about ten yards before the edge of the field began.

“You don’t want to get closer?” Mick asked Johnny.

“No, you need a running distance.” Johnny answered.

Mick raised his eyes to the rear view mirror and gave a shrugging look to Bill. “Then let’s do this.” Mick said as he opened his truck door.

Johnny stepped, out, then Lars. On the other side of the truck Bill followed Mick to the bed and watched Johnny retrieve a small box.

“Now.” Mick said. “Tell me again, why we needed a half a dozen rabbits duct taped?”

“Draw them out.” Johnny carried the box with him and looked to Lars. “This way?” He asked with a point.

“Yes.” Lars followed Johnny. “Most of our victims were found not too far into that region.”

In a whispering singing tone, Mick pulled forth his shotgun and spoke to Bill, ‘savages.’

Bill nodded his agreement and, he too, went into weapons ready mode.

“Are we leaving a trap?” Mick asked Johnny.

“Nope.” Johnny set down the box. “Drawing them out.” Pulling forth his cattle prod, Johnny started looking about the snow-covered white field. “There.” He indicated to Lars.

“You see something?” Lars questioned.

“Check out the snow out there. It’s broken and tracked.” Johnny replied.

Mick rolled his eyes. “Savages.”

Reaching into the box, Johnny pulled out a rabbit. It’s arms and legs were duct taped to prohibit mobility. “Hey guy.” Johnny spoke sweetly. “Wanna take a trip.”

Mick cleared his throat, crossed his arms and watched as Johnny, with all his strength tossed the rabbit with an impressive throw out into the field. “Oh, yes.” Mick clapped. “Bravo. What does that prove.”

Lars turned around with snap. “Didn’t you hear?”

“Hear what?” Mick said.

“Exactly.” Lars nodded. “Nothing. The rabbit never hit the

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ground.”

“No shit.” Mick said. “He hit the snow.”

Grumbling Lars grabbed another rabbit. “Try it again Stew, and Mick, this time. Quiet.”

Mick shrugged. “Go on.”

Johnny tossed the rabbit far.

No sound.

“Snow.” Mick stated.

“Chief.” Bill leaned into him. “I got a weird feeling.”

“Well, you should, Bill. We’re tossing goddamn bound bunnies into the fuckin snow for no reason.” Mick argued. “I for one . . .” Mick grunted when Lars shoved a squirming rabbit into his chest.

“You toss.” Lars sad hard. “Put those mighty Mick Owens arms to test and give it a good throw. Go on.”

Mick fumbled with the wiry creature. “This is wrong.”

“According to you Mick,” Lars said smug. “We’re only tossing them in the snow. We’ll go retrieve them later. Throw.”

“Fine.” Thinking ‘OK, what the hell’ and ‘Thank God the animal activists are dead’, Mick gave a hurling throw of the rabbit.

Into its descend and almost at the tips of the overgrown field a distant gurgle rang out and the rabbit, seemingly disappeared.

“What the fuck.” Bill pumped his shotgun.

“Easy. Easy.” Mick lifted his hand. “Give me another rabbit.”

Johnny handed him one.

With a strategy in mind, Mick tossed the rabbit, only he tossed it high in the air, not just far.

The crunch of the snow were heard, just before another gurgle and with a blurry flash of flesh colored moved the rabbit not only didn’t make it to the ground, it seemingly burst like a water balloon of blood.

Lars smiled smug at Mick. “See.”

Mick’s eyes were wide. “No. You guys rigged that.”

“For crying out loud law.” Lars barked. “I know you have a lot of hair on that head, but is your skull that thick.”

“What the hell is that.” Bill, shot gun held out, walked toward the field.

“Bill.” Mick called out. “Stop.”

“No, Chief. I wanna see what killed Lester.” Bill trudged out a

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few feet. "I won't get too close. Toss another rabbit." A few more feet he walked.

Mick aimed out. "You guys toss, I'm covering."

"He's not safe out there." Johnny warned. "But . . ." He lifted a rabbit and threw it.

The rabbit sailed out and landed.

Bill shook his head. "Nothing." He peered over his shoulder back to Mick. "Nothing is . . ." A very short whizzing sound came right before the hard, wet whap to the side of Bill's head, sent him back a foot. "What the fuck?" He lifted his hand to his face, pulled down his finger tips and looked. Blood. It wasn't his, and as he gazed down to the ground, he saw the mangled and bloodied rabbit remains. "Oh, shit, it threw it . . ." Bill never got a chance to finish his sentence. The loud growl accompanied the hard force that pelted into him, and flew him back to the ground.

Mick charged forth when he heard Bill's blood curdling screams emerge from the field.

Johnny and Lars followed right behind.

"Oh fuck. Fuck." Mick raised his shot gun when he arrived at Bill, only to see that Johnny spoke the truth. It looked like a baby. Only the baby perched itself upon Bill's chest gnawing fast and ferociously.

"Shoot it." Lars ordered.

Mick aimed but all he saw was an infant.

Baseball bat in his right hand, cattle prod in left, Johnny lunged forward. Without hesitation, he zapped the small predator from Bill. With a squeal the killer baby ejected up high, and on its way down, Johnny swung out, batting the killer baby a good fifty feet.

"Get hin to the truck!" Johnny yelled.

Lars reached down to help Mick. "Stew watch out!"

Another gurgle. Another baby. Both hands on the bat, Johnny focused and swung.

Crack.

Hustling, Lars and Mick grabbed a hold of a bleeding and in shock Bill and carried him toward the truck.

From the left shot another baby, and no sooner did Johnny finish swinging that one away, another came for his right. He connected with that small predator as well. Deciding to return to make his catch, getting ready to turn and run, Johnny saw it. Another. Only this one wasn't a

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infant, or in baby form. It resembled a larger toddler.

“Oh, shit.” Johnny said with a hint of a chuckle just before the killer toddler shot his way. The baseball bat was an unlikely defense but it was one Johnny had to try. Mid swing, the predator caught the bat with his teeth, “shit.” Johnny struggled moving the bat left to right, but his enemy would not let go. So Johnny did. With the force of the tug of war, the distorted child shot back a few feet, quickly regained his foot and soared Johnny’s way.

In a swing out of his left hand, Johnny zapped the attacker. The mutated child froze, with his scream his body jolted violently, and in that, Johnny took advantage,

Swiftly he brought down the electric roper and secured the Killer child around the neck. Then while he had him, just for assurance Johnny held the prod to him again, zapping it into a unconscious state.

Quiet.

Holding the metal end of the rope, Johnny nudged it with his foot. It breathed a gurgle but didn’t move. Grinning ear to ear, he turned and quickly headed back, dragging the thing behind him. “I got one!”

Out of breath, Securing Bill in the back of the truck Mick peered up. “Swell. Is he smiling?”

“I believe so.”

Shaking his head, Mick looked at Lars. “Bet me it’s genetic.”

## CHAPTER TEN

The twelve women laughed and cheered, a victory celebration would be had as soon as they prepared refreshments.

“Ladies.” Jenny held up her hands to silence them, “OK, I know this little battle ended sooner than we anticipated, but it went well. We rattled them like they have done so many times to us. Now, we should have known Joe would have ended it, and Frank, he’s just too smart. Well, scratch that, he can be intuitive.” she glanced down to her watch. “I have to hurry back to class. Please pass on to the other ladies, that we will meet at the house of Lesbians tonight for more planning.” Giving a goodbye smile, Jenny left the library.

Marma was a huskier woman, almost made masculine by the world gone bad. Short cropped brown hair, a wider body with larger breasts that blended in their sagging with her thicker gut. She turned in her chair from the single computer, and ejected the disk from the drive. Handing it to another woman from New Bowman, Carol, Marma caught glimpse of Misha just leaning against the table, deep in thought.

“The minutes?” Carol asked, seeing Marma’s attention elsewhere.

“Yes. Keep them hidden. What’s wrong with Misha?”

Carol shrugged. “Ungrateful. I mean, we’re doing this all for her. You don’t think she’s changing her mind do you.”

“I don’t know. Why would she, we’re really not hurting anything, just stirring up. Let’s go ask her.” Marma moved to Misha. “What’s wrong.”

“Oh.” Misha closed her eyes and shook her head.

“You aren’t changing your mind, are you?” Marma asked.

“No. I feel like justice isn’t being served by playing these games.”

“To be honest, hon.” Marma spoke in a husky way. “You can’t do much more than play games. You really don’t want to hurt anyone. Just disrupt.”

“Yes, but will they learn to treat us with respect. Will they really pay. Or better yet, will . . .” Misha stopped talking and lowered her voice

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when two women walked by her, in a secretive manner she leaned into Marma. “Will *he* pay and learn.”

Marma nodded with an ‘ah’.

Excited, Carol made her way over. “Ladies. Good news. Misha you’ll love this. Guess who just got blamed for the spoons.” She grinned. “Dean.”

Marma gave a nudge to Misha. “There. See. Justice.”

Misha rolled her eyes. “Justice. Dean? He is what a lot of men even call a dick.”

Marma and Carol gasped.

“I’m very serious.” Misha continued. “You think he will care. He will not even see the message. He never sees his wrongs. All of this will not effect him at all.”

Carol gave a shrug. “Well, isn’t it to bad then that we couldn’t just get into his mind and make him see the error of his ways.”

Misha almost blew off what Carol said, and then, the words registered. With a smile, bright and thinking, Misha raised her head. “There might be.”

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After taking a momentary stare in thought, Joe rubbed his chin breathed out and closed the door to his office.. “You can’t blame it on genetics, Dean.” Joe headed back to his desk, he passed Dean with a comforting hand. “I did the best I could. Look at me. Robbie. Hal . . .well, even Hal. It didn’t come from me. Must have been something his mother ate.”

“I was mobbed, Joe.” Dean dabbed the wet cloth to his lip. “It took everything I had to get out of there. And Andrea . . . she stopped, looked and left.”

“I know.”

“Joe. I was in a good mood. I can’t even tell you how many hits with bent spoons I took. Are they insane.”

“Pretty much so. And misled. I can do something about this, Dean.”

“No.” Dean tossed the rag. “They apologized..”

“Good. That’s very big of . . . come in.” Joe called out.

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Dean looked up. "No one knocked."

"He will."

A knock on the door rang out.

Dean turned in his chair and looked back to Joe. "How did you know?"

"The asshole was peeking in the window first."

The door opened and Frank walked in. "Hey, dad. Am I early for the meeting?"

"No. Hal's running late." Joe answered. "Have a seat."

"Hal's running late? That's odd.. Are you sure I'm not early."

"No, Frank, you're on time."

"Because my watch could be fast."

"Frank. Your watch isn't fast, Hal's just running late."

"Are you sure, because . . ."

"Frank!" Joe yelled.

"All right!"

"Christ Almighty, how in God's name am I gonna take you for four days out there?"

"That's why we're having the meeting remember?" Frank sat down and pointed to his own temple. "So we can figure out how we can all go without being missed too much. Oh, hey, Dean, didn't see you there."

"Frank." Dean grumbled.

"Fuck. What happened to your lip?" Frank asked.

Joe answered. "He was mobbed Frank?"

"By the women?" Frank questioned.

"No. Why would you say that." Joe stated.

"The women hate him."

"The women didn't do it. The men did."

Frank shook his head amazed. "The men hate him too?"

Joe grumbled. "Not anymore Frank."

"So they beat him and got it out of their system."

Joe growled loudly. "No, Frank! The mobbed him and then apologized!"

"That was big of you Dean." Frank said. "So it's over?"

Exhaling Joe sat back. "I hope. Now, don't you want to know why the men mobbed Dean."

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“No, I don’t need to. I know.” Frank stated. “They hate him.”

“No.” Joe barked. “They mobbed him because of you!”

“Oh fuck.” Frank gasped out. “They hate me and mobbed Dean? Man, Dean, you took a beating for me?”

“Frank . . .” Joe tried to intervene.

Frank continued, “Is that what you meant by . . .”

“Frank!” Joe screamed. “Enough! They went after Dean because they thought he bent the spoons.”

“Well if he bent the spoons how is it my fault.”

With a whine, Joe’s head dropped to the desk. “No, no, no.” calming himself, he lifted his head. “You told the men Dean bent the spoons.”

“No I did not.” Frank defended.

“Frank.” Joe snapped. “I was standing right here. You told them.”

“You lie.”

“What!”

“Either that or you’re just getting old.” Frank tilted his head.

“Either way . . .” He looked at Dean. “I didn’t tell the men that.”

Confused Dean looked at Joe.

Frank spoke, “Billy did.”

With fluttering eyes, Joe tried not to lose it again. “Frank, why . . .”

“He did. Stood right there.” Frank pointed. “You know it dad. Billy said it. He hates you Dean, what can I say.” Frank shrugged.

After a single knock, with a gliding move inside, Hal walked in the office. He stopped looked at the faces, took in the silence and the feel of the room, then with a smutty grin, he turned to Elliott. “See, Elliott. What did I tell you. Be a little late and we save ourselves the Frank antic rumblings.”

“All well, and fine, Captain, but . . .” Elliott said soft. “What do we do when we’re out there with him.”

Hal glared. “I hate you.” Ridding that look, Hal replaced it with a cordial grin and entered the meeting.

^^^

Being told that Ellen was having dinner with God was not a

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problem with Robbie. He was fed. Also being told he could speak to Ellen later was not a problem either. But when it was added by the head drune guard that 'later' constituted the next morning, then the problem began.

There was no way Robbie was going to leave Ellen alone all night with Creed. Aside from the act that he felt his responsibility to protect her, he had made the promise to her that he would get her out of the situation and them out of the weird imprisonment they were in.

And it was a weird imprisonment. Robbie was absolutely, without a doubt free to roam around the city. And by old things left about, Robbie had a pretty good grip on where they were in Los Angeles. Somewhere in the vicinity of Wilshire Boulevard.

A single guard had stopped Robbie when he approached the third floor apartment of Creed. An entire third floor gutted out to make a place apartment of sorts. Getting passed that guard and to Ellen was not going to be difficult at all, Robbie knew. It was what he would do with Ellen and where they would go that his difficulty laid.

What was sub-level basements and parking garage, were transformed into living sections and businesses. Homes were ingeniously designed and constructed using old car bodies as wall. Actually, to Robbie a typical home was pretty impressive. They worked, lived, learned and played in their city, the drunes did.

Blocks upon city blocks, recognizable years before as empty space, was to Robbie a maze with no way in or out. He couldn't find an inkling of where an exit ramp once was.

He figured he had time until his gut told him he'd soon interfere in Ellen's evening, and he planned on using that time to silently walk around and search an exit. But there were difficulties in that. Robbie, to the drunes, was a god. People stared, watched then bowed as he passed. But more so than respect, Robbie bred curiosity from the young and children. Like the piper they followed Robbie around, seemingly picking up more and more followers as the minutes and hours moved on.

Robbie searched with a pack behind him, massive in numbers. He made it appear as if he were taking a curious stroll. No one asked him any questions because they were aware he couldn't speak. That was until Robbie saw the Drune style dog, and when he jumped out at him, he made a peep of a scream. Not only had Robbie's voice returned, it had

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returned, without warning, to its fullest extent.

The questions entailed.

They literally rushed him. They children, teens and young adults, pounded him with questions about heaven, being a God and the devil's wasteland.. Their youthful over-innocence and naivety annoyed Robbie until he realized that they could actually help him. They seemed eager. But the obvious action of asking where the exit was a vain attempt. They literally seemed appalled when Robbie asked them, 'hey, how do I get out of here and to the street above'.

Seeing how that wasn't going to work, Robbie decided to use their innocence and play them. Be that friend and godly figure they so much wanted.

They sat in a large circle, almost in amphitheater style, with Robbie the center of attention. Gain their trust, and their adoration, and move in for the 'kill' or rather information that he sought.

"And Utopia." A young boy, Robbie guessed about sixteen, spoke. "It is sunny, yet it is not the devil's land."

"No." Robbie answered. "Zeus, the head God of gods, A.K.A. Joe Slagel, is far too powerful."

"Is . . ." The child paused to pronounced the name. "Jaslagal more powerful than our God?"

Robbie fluttered his lips. "Fuck yeah. Fear him. Fear him big time." He enjoyed the gasps he heard. "He's my father."

At that instance another teenager, moved to Robbie."Then may I touch you?"

"Sure." Robbie held out his hand.

"How did it happen, God of T.F.?" A boy asked. "How did the devil end up with the land?"

"What did God tell you?" Robbie quizzed.

"God say the great book tells that the devil tossed his fire into the sky and when it joined the sun, it burned out the land."

Another spoke, "But I hear, the land is not fried."

A female scolded. "Mind your tongue Jeremiah. The Gods with crush you for doubt. You know there is nothing left up there."

"But I've not seen it." Jeremiah spoke. "Others have." He looked

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at Robbie. "Others have."

Robbie looked quickly when he watched the female nudge Jeremiah hard. "Why did you hit him?"

"He speaks what he does not know." She gave a hard look to Jeremiah. "No one leaves the city. If they venture out, that can not be told, or God will get angry. You speak this to a God."

"He's not going to get angry." Jeremiah defended. "He is different." He returned to speaking to Robbie. "You are different God of T.F. I do not fear you will strike me down. Why is that?"

Robbie shrugged. "I'm cool."

A boy reached up and touched him. "Your flesh is warm."

"No." Robbie chuckled. "I'm cool. That means I'm nice, I laugh a lot, I can be a friend, and . . . I don't tell on people. So secrets are safe with me. I'm a god, so I speak the truth."

"Then can you tell us the truth." Jeremiah requested. "Is the world burned out up there. Is what I hear from others true or false."

"In some places . . ." Robbie explained. "It is burned out. But for the most part, the land above is beautiful, green, growing, and . . . almost free." Robbie winked.

"The devil did not toss fire into the sky?" Jeremiah asked. "did our God lie?"

Robbie thought about it for a second. "no." He shook his head. "He didn't lie . . . per say." He nodded. "He told the truth in a way. Metaphorically speaking, I suppose. If you want to say. I mean, if you want to label the bad men as the devil, then his story is true. Yes, the devil in the form of many men called the society, with the head honcho devil George Hadly, tossed something into the air. And they've destroyed the land. There are still many devils running about. Some in uniforms, some in loin cloths. You guys are pretty safe down here. Protected."

"We will perish out there." Jeremiah stated. "God says so. Why? How did it come to be."

Again, Robbie thought. "Well . . ." He looked about the many faces. "They all died. With in a few months. Eight years ago. Every dog and cat in the world. It was like a plague. The disease that killed them was a mysterious virus, brought back from outer space by one of the astronauts "

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“Didn’t the disease effect humans?”

“No, no we were immune . . . and so it was discovered . . . were simians. Even the smallest ones. that’s how it began. Humans wanting little household pets to replace the ones they had lost. Then when people realized how quick they were to learn . . . how easy to train. The pets became larger and larger until now . . .”

Jeremiah gasped. “It’s Monstrous . . .”

“Now you understand why God kept you away.” There was a long silence and a girl raised her hand. “Yes?” Robbie pointed to her.

“What are simians?” She asked.

“Apes.”

Taking a second, she deducted the story. “People had apes as pets?”

“Yes, and the apes are what really aided in destroying the world.”

“What happened to the apes?” she questioned.

“Still there. Many of them.” Robbie dramatically sighed when the children vocally reacted in shock. “Yep, millions, running about. Led by a man named doctor . . . something or other. Not sure. Damn filthy apes. Now . . .” Robbie slapped his hand to his leg. “Joe Slagel, god of all gods has a favor of me. I have daily work, and earth cleansing to perform, I have yet to do this today. I must secretly do this ritual. If anyone knows . . .it could be deadly. So none of you are to speak of this.” He waited for their zealous agreement. “However, in order to do so, I must go to the street above. Where and how would I do that.”

“Being a God.” Jeremiah said. “Don’t you know.”

Refraining from saying, ‘you know, you have a lot of questions for a subdued little skinless main,’ Robbie shook his head. “Joe Slagel, is testing you. He wants to see who would be the one to help him out. He who does that will shine favorably, possibly even become an adopted son. So knowing that . . .do I have any volunteers?”

Brightly Robbie smiled when he saw every hand go up.

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Concrete perhaps, was the first solution that Mick thought of when he peered into the old jail cell. He believed that eventually, they

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would have to build some sort of concrete construction by the bars, because viewing the way that killer baby slash child banged with passion against the metal. And the speed and strength in which he did so, it would only be a matter of time before those bars were no good.

And to Mick. God help the person in the child's way.

He was about two feet tall. The height of an average toddler. However his weight was more than the norm. And by far he didn't look anything like a normal child. The sharp teeth, or rather rows of, were just one aspect. The other thing that set him apart was the act that his grotesque, large and muscular body was covered with a leathery, almost scaled type of skin.

His slobbered when he paused at his attempt of escape. Saliva seeped froth from his open mouth as the child stared at Mick as if some sort of dinner item.

"Raphael." Lars said as he approached the cell.

"Excuse me?" Mick asked.

"Raphael. That is his name."

"You name this."

"Him. I think. His genitals are not really formed, that I can see. But while subdued I was able to detect testicles in my examination."

"That's good to hear." Mick said with a slight roll of his eyes. "But why did you name him."

"Can't be calling him the killer child all the time Would be a bit much, don't you think." Lars looked at Raphael. "Here, killer child. Here."

Raphael slammed into the bars.

"See?" Lars pointed. "Even he doesn't like the name. So Raphael it is. And I'll need to name him something since we'll be friends soon."

"Friends? You mean this thing, I mean, kid, whatever is gonna stay alive."

"And well if I can help it." Lars said. "I want to train him."

"Train him?" Mick nodded. "He'll kill you first. How do you suppose you can train."

"The way Beginnings did. Shock therapy."

Mick snapped quick look at Lars. "You want to shock therapy this child."

"Low voltage. Won't hurt"

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“I’m not concerned about that.” Mick said. “I’m more concern in whether or not it will really work.”

“Stew says it will. I have to go by what he says. He’s been right on a lot of things.” Lars commented.

Mick took another look at Raphael. “Man.” He shook his head. “What the fuck. Killer cannibal children? How does Beginnings handle it.”

“Well, I think they’re used to it. Bet me anything that there’s a lot more odd things that Beginnings has seen, that we wouldn’t even begin to be able to comprehend.”

Mick had a sense of ‘doubt’ to his voice. “Oh, I don’t know.” H glanced at Raphael. “We have a killer baby right here Lars. What else could there be?”

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If it wasn’t for the fact that skinless people were so easily fooled, Robbie probably wouldn’t have had such an easy time making it to ‘heaven’, or rather, the hotel where Creed lived. That was one place in the entire city that Robbie wasn’t free to roam.

But he made it in. In fact, to Robbie, it would be labeled a piece of cake, and a chuckling moment he would reflect back on in his old age. The six skinless guards that blocked the under ground staircase, held their post firm—with sticks—and with diligence. There was no way, god or not, that Robbie was making it through them.

So Robbie told them he would vanish, but since the bright light that made him disappear was so bright, it would blind them, Robbie informed the drunes that they had to cover their heads and huddle to the ground.

They agreed, not wanting to be blinded by the light of the god. And when they huddled, eyes closed, Robbie walked by them.

Six door guards, and six guards protected the ramp that led outside. There were other exits, hidden, that the young drunes had shown him. But the path of quickest ‘out’ was definitely the parking lot ramp in the garage under the hotel. If that failed, *then* Robbie would try the other routes.

But first . . . to Ellen’s room. The question, ‘I’ve been

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summoned to the queen's quarters to do a blessing, which way do I go?' worked brilliantly with the servant drunes. And Robbie knew it was the right place to be, when Elizabeth the chamber maid drune told him, that he had to hurry with the blessing because 'god' gave strict instructions that when he and his queen returned to those quarters, no one was to be around.

That worked in Robbie's favor, and so did the line, 'I will disappear when I am finished', Elizabeth bought it hook, line and sinker, and didn't even search the room when Robbie hid in there. It wasn't the best hiding spot, but Robbie had no plans to stay hidden all night. He just had to be out of sight until he could make his move and steal Ellen from Creed. He had a plan, in a sense, and all Robbie had to do was wait for the opportunity. He knew that opportunity wasn't far away when he heard the door to the bedroom open.

"Well, thank you very much for the wonderful meal." Ellen tried to close the door, but Creed's hand, flush against the surface stopped it. "Yes?" She questioned innocently.

"I would like to come in." Creed said.

Ellen yawned. "I'd love that but really I'm . . ." She stepped back when the door opened wider. "Tired. Hello. I'm tired."

"It is my hope to revitalize you."

"Really, unless you plan on pumping me with about two hundred and fifty milligrams of caffeine I don't think that's possible."

Creed smiled and stepped to her. "Why do you fear me?"

"Isn't that what we're suppose to do. Fear God?"

"I think it's more."

Ellen took a step back away from him. "No. Actually, I'm quite comfortable with you." She said with some nervousness.

"Good." he reached out his hand and laid it on her face. "The it will make things all the better."

"Excuse me?"

"Better. Easier." Creed said as they stood center of the bedroom. "I believe my Queen, that you know what I want."

"I'm . . . I'm a little fizzy on that."

"I want to consummate the relationship."

"Hmm." Folding her arms, Ellen nodded. "As much as I'd like to say yes, I'm afraid I can't. Sorry."

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Creed shook his head. "You must."

"I can't."

"You have to."

"I won't."

"But you agreed to be my queen."

"See. I know." Ellen lifted a finger. "But you didn't say what all that entailed."

"Surely, you knew." Creed stated. "I mean, it has been a long time since I have been around a woman who . . . who . . ."

"Has real skin."

Creed chuckled. "Exactly." He inched to her.

"Creed."

"I've gone out of the way to make sure everything is perfect. Is it not to our liking?"

"That's not it." Ellen said.

Robbie, in his hiding spot, grew antsy. He needed a moment to seize and with the way Ellen not only danced around her words but kept Creed moving back and forth, Robbie wasn't getting the opportunity. He need Ellen to occupy him. Didn't she know he would be there. He would stop it. Obviously she didn't.

"What is it then?" Creed asked. "Is it me? Have I not been nice?"

"Oh you've been real nice since you let me out of that hell whole and didn't kill me or Robbie."

"Oh, I don't kill. I mane."

"I . . . see." Ellen took a breath.

"Then if you understand, what is your reason?"

"Well, OK, you're really tall and your size scares me." Ellen stepped back.

"I'll be gentle."

"Still. I'm not convinced. Not . . . not that I don't think you're attractive. You are. And maybe if you were more reality based, it wouldn't be a problem either. But you give the terminology 'God complex'; new meaning, and I have a problem with that."

*Stop arguing with the guy, El.* Robbie thought, then deducted, he had to find a way to let him know she was there.

"You're stalling." Creed sated.

"I am."

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“You are my wife.”

“Now, see, Frank’s not gonna like that much.”

“Frank is not here.”

“He will be.”

“I doubt that.” Creed argued.

“No, I know Frank, and I . . .” Ellen’s eyes shifted. “I . . .”

“You what.”

Biting his bottom lip and giving a scolding look, Robbie poked out from behind the curtain, lifted the baseball bat he held, and pointed it at Creed.

“I . . .” Ellen tried to catch the message Robbie was giving.

“You?” Creed waited.

Again, a shift of her eyes and Ellen watched Robbie motion his head at Creed, and give another twitching scolding look. “Oh!” Ellen sad brightly.

“Oh . . .” Creed started to turn.

“Stop.” Her hands smacked immediately to his cheeks and Ellen turned him to face her. “Look at me again.”

“Ok.”

“No. Really look at me intensely. Just stare at me.”

*Oh my God. Can she be anymore obvious. He is not buying this.*  
*No way.* Robbie mind bitched.

“Like this.” Creed stared more.

Robbie grin, *He is.*

“Oh, yeah.” Ellen nodded. “Wow, you have great eyes.”

*She got him, Yes.*” Robbie stepped from the curtain.

Ellen continued, “Did any one ever . . .” Her words were not only silenced, but muffled by the kiss that Creed delivered to her.

*‘Fuck!’* Robbie stepped back.

Ellen pulled back. “You took me by surprise.”

“A good surprise, I hope.”

“Oh, it was a great surprise.”

“Excellent.”

Opportunity. They were standing there. Robbie stepped out. *‘Fuck!’* he screamed again in his mind when he watched Creed lift Ellen and carry her to the bed.

Down to the mattress Ellen was laid and as she lifted up some,

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Creed was there, leaning to her. "Stop." she said.

"Stop?"

"Yes. This is moving too fast and . . . and . . ." Ellen watched Robbie step out from the curtain. "And could you rub my calf?"

"Your calf?"

"I have this thing about getting my calf rubbed." Ellen spoke fast. "Strange, I know. But to me it's better than foreplay."

"Your calf." Creed nodded. "Absolutely." sitting up he reached down to her leg and began to rub. "Like this."

"Oh, yeah. That's great." Ellen moaned. "That's awesome."

Creed massaged.

"Actually . . . that feels kind of nice.."

WHAM!

With the breaking of the baseball bat, Creed lifted his head, his eyes rolled and then he fell straight down to the bed.

"Yes." Ellen jumped rom the bed. "Robbie, you are so cool."

"And you make things impossible." Robbie grabbed her hand.

"What do you mean? I thought we worked well on that you and I?"

"You think?"

Ellen reached down and touched Creed. "He's out."

"I hope." Robbie tugged at her.

"Hey, your voice is back."

"Let's go" Robbie pulled her to the door.

"Are you getting us out?"

A grumble, roll of his eyes, and slight pause came from Robbie, just before he said nothing, opened the door and hurried Ellen out.

Creed's state of unconsciousness lasted not long at all. Groaning, he reached to grab the back of his head as he lifted up some.

"God, God, are you all right." A drune reached for him.

In his standing, Creed stood up, swatting the drune from him, his anger emerged in the form of a growl.

"It wasn't me. It wasn't me." The drune stepped back. "It was the one armed god."

Biting his tongue, Creed snapped in annoyance. "I know that." He shook his head and moved to the door. "They will try the nearest exit.

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Send my special team there to retrieve them.”

“Yes, God.”

Creed opened the door. “If I don’t get them myself, first.” After walking into the hall, Creed stormed into the first room.

“Wait. Wait. My shoe. My Shoe.” Ellen stopped on the staircase and fixed her shoe.

“El, Please. Robbie said.

“What?”

After taking a step, Robbie stopped. “Look.” He faced her. “If we get caught. I kidnaped you, all right.”

“We’re escaping.”

“No, El, listen. I am kidnapping you. Got that, that is the story. OK?”

“Oh, OK.” She followed Robbie as he moved down the steps. “What happens then. Won’t the try to stop you from kidnapping me again?”

“Most likely. And if that’s the case, I’ll find another way.”

“Until Frank gets here.”

“Um, yeah. Until Frank gets here.” At the bottom of the staircase, Robbie stopped before the door. “Our first obstacle. A few guards. Just play along. Please just play along.”

“I got it.”

Nodding with the thought that he hoped so, Robbie opened the door.

“They made it passed the stair guards.” A drune soldier informed Creeds they stepped off an elevator.

Creed fastened thick black leather gloves over his hands. “Ad they are making it across the lot?”

“Toward the ramp.”

“Just as I thought.” He fastened the snap on the glove and smiled. “I’ll get them there.”

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Up in front of Robbie the drune guard held his stick. "You don't want me to you the stick on you, now do you?"

"No." Robbie shook his head. "I don't want that. This isn't about violence. It's about the moon."

"The . . . moon."

"Yes, it is in the sky now and we need to worship it." Robbie nodded and grabbed Ellen's hand. "We'll only be a second."

"All right then."

"Thanks." Robbie replied.

"But you may want me to . . ."

"No, I got it." Robbie spoke as he walked backwards, then after nodding an acknowledgment wave, he turned and walked up the ramp with Ellen.

"Wow. That was easier than I thought."

"Me, too," Robbie smiled.

"Good thing he didn't use that . . ." Ellen giggled. "Stick on you."

"El, don't make fun. Come on, they really don't know better." Robbie said serious, then burst into laughter. "Ah, freedom, He pointed the opening of the ramp. "Once we get outside we'll try to find a way to contact . . ." Robbie stopped speaking when he heard the barking of a dog.

"Robbie?"

"Wait a second." No more than an inch did Robbie move when the loud rampant barking pack of skinless dogs came barreling around the bed down the ramp.

There was nothing else to do, Ellen screamed and ran the to her way.

Robbie followed in pursuit.

"Get her." Creed ordered as soon as Ellen emerged from the ramp.

She didn't have a chance. Four drunes grabbed hold of her and puled her aside.

"Now him." Creed pointed to Robbie.

"Fuck you." At the end of the ramp Robbie leaped outward, flinging his body on the over seven foot tall body of Creed. His weight sent the big man back and in his stumbling, Robbie clocked him. Down

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and back went Creed but in his doing so, he ejected Robbie backwards.

Robbie felt the throw coming, and went with the toss. In a controlled roll, Robbie, quickly grabbed his stand.

Clenched fists, Creed extended his arms out and growled loudly causing the drune guards to scurry.

“What the . . .” Robbie watched the guards run, then he looked at Creed. “Shit.” If Robbie hadn’t seen strange things in his life, he would of thought it was his imagination,

Creed seemed to expand. His already toned body rippled and what looked like an under-the-skin bubbling, brewed up his neck as his face began to change colors.

Ellen’s scream caused Robbie, in error, to snap a look at her, when he returned his views to Creed, and prepared to charge, he watched as Creed, seeming revved back like a baseball player. Robbie saw nothing in his hand. But not wanting to take a chance he started to run at Creed.

Only a step was all Robbie made it went a blue ball of light, the size a baseball, sizzled through the air and struck Robbie in the chest. The power of the hit, flew Robbie back five feet, and his entire body jolted ion his some electric shock as he hit the ground.

“Robbie!” Breaking from the drunes, Ellen rushed to him.

“Don’t touch him.” Creed reached out snatching her back. “Don’t touch him.”

Hysterical, Ellen fought. “Robbie.”

“He’s fine. Just paralyzed momentarily. Do not touch him. Guards.” Creed pulled her away.

“You . . . you . . .” Ellen looked up to him. “Your normal again.”

“I will explain that later. But now . . . are you all right, my queen. Did he hurt you at all.”

“What are you . . .” Her eyes shifted to Robbie as the drunes, in gloves, lifted him causing sparks. “You . . .” With exasperation and dramatics, Ellen remembering what Robbie said, lowered her head. “No. No. He didn’t hurt me. I’m . . . traumatized. Just . . .” she shivered. “Don’t hurt him. He knows not what he does. He has . . . borderline personality.”

“He’ll be forgive? Just this once. At your request.” Creed led her away. “But now, we must take care of you.”

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“Please, this whole ordeal has made me exhausted I can barely . . .” Buckling her knees Ellen started to fall. “Stand.”

“I’ll help you.”

“Please.” Ellen took Creed’s help, then watched him press the button to the elevator. Over her shoulder she looked as the drunes carted Robbie away and in her mind she said another please. A please that Robbie would be ‘OK’.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Really?” Danny Hoi asked brightly staring out onto his porch to Carol. “Let me grab my coat. Come on in.” He opened the screen door wider and Carol stepped inside.

From around the corner of the last house, Marma peered and backed up. “She’s in.” she said to Misha.

“Good. Are you sure you can do this?”

“Just because Captain Slagel deemed it unlawful for us women to be forced work, doesn’t mean I forgot what I did before the world ended. Besides, didn’t Danny add me to his programmers. So trust me.”

“Good.” Misha nodded.

“But I need to ask, are you sure.”

“Oh, very much. It’s there. My Hector told me.”

“Well, if it’s there I can get it.” Marma said. “Whether or not I can manipulate it would be the question.”

“You will try?”

“Am I here.” Marma peeked around the corner. “And . . . they’re out.” She watched Carol and Danny walk down the street. “Let’s go.” Grabbing on to Misha’s hand, Marma tugged her down the few houses.

Out of breath more from enthusiasm, Misha closed the door to Danny’s house with her body. “I believe his computer is in the diningroom” Misha told Marma.

Marma walked to the diningroom. “There are three of them.” She took a breath. “We should have time, as long as Carol keeps him out.” She sat before the first computer.

“I have this feeling of joy right now.” Misha said. “It is making me want to giggle and I can’t help it.”

“Excitement.” Marma replied. “It’s the excitement of getting caught.”

“Yes. Yes.” Misha smiled and moved into the diningroom. “Like when we used to sneak into Corporal Owens home while he was out and you would put on his uniform.”

“Just like that.” Marma smiled.

“Oh, how handsome you looked in his uniform.” Misha stepped

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closer to Marma and laid her hand on her shoulder. "You would make me happy back then."

"I was more of a teacher then. But times . . ." Marma exhaled. "Times have changed."

"You were a wonderful teacher Marma."

"A good student always makes teaching . . ." "She cleared her throat. "Wonderful."

"You understood me. I miss those moments." Misha spoke soft.

Marma reached up laying her thick hand over Misha's. "I do too. But . . ." She slid her hand down and completely faced the computer. "This first."

There was a slight tingle that occurred in her hand, one that shot straight to Misha's stomach. In a minute of daze, Misha pulled her hand closer to her body, then she cupped the other one, to her chest she brought them, and after deeply breathing, and closing her eyes reminiscently, she returned to watching Marma work.

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Arms cross close to his waist, Frank stood in the hall way of Dean's home, watching into the livingroom, as Dean hung up the phone. There was a look on Dean's face. Exhaustion, concern, puzzlement and really Frank could understand why.

"Hey." Frank called out.

Still in his stare, Dean snapped out of it and with a sniff, raised his eyes. "Hey."

"You're Ok, with me staying here tonight right?"

"Oh, yeah, absolutely. I need you to. How's Billy?"

"Calm finally." Frank replied and walked further into the livingroom. "He's not a dumb kid, Dean. He's got this figured out. He's worried."

Through his breath,, Dean spoke, "he's not the only one."

"It'll be fine. Tonight, tomorrow, how ever, it will be fine. I'll bring her home Dean."

"I know you will Frank." Seemingly out of energy, Dean pulled out a chair and sat down. "It's all just hitting me."

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“Tell me about it. Right now . . . I need a fuckin drink.” Frank reached for a chair.

Dean looked up.

“Not that I’ll have one. But I need one.”

“I know that.”

“Dean? What did Hal want to know all that stuff for?” Frank asked.

“I don’t know. He said it had something to do with a dream. Worry I guess.” Dean shrugged.

“It just that it doesn’t have anything to do with what we’re doing.”

“We hope.” Dean took another breath. “I mean, Frank, just think about it for a second. Look what he wanted to know, then take a look at who’s all going.”

A muddled, ‘Oh my God,’ escaped Frank.

“Exactly.”

Over his face, Frank ran his hand. “I didn’t think that.”

“Neither did I until right now. Right at this very moment.” Dean’s hand clenched in an emotional fist, and upon releasing it his fingers played with the edging of the placemat.

“My father . . . he’ll be able to do this right?” Frank asked.

“I think . . . I think your father needs to do this. For many reasons. For his kids. For himself. For completion.”

“Of his life.” Frank whispered out.

“But . . . I somehow don’t think your father will ever see that.”

“Completion? Nah.” Frank shook his head. “Things will never, ever be complete for the Slagels. Never.” Low Frank’s voice dropped. “Not without Jimmy.”

“I think, in my opinion Frank, that you, of all the Slagels have the least completion.”

Frank only raised his eyebrows. “Jimmy. Johnny. Ellen. Brian.” his voice cracked on the final name.

“There still Frank may be completion on Brian.”

Frank let out a chuckle of disbelief. “You said yourself that in the future you learned Brian doesn’t make it.”

“Thorough errors on my part, he didn’t make it. Perhaps those errors can and have, maybe, been corrected.”

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Quickly Frank looked up.

“Don’t give up on me.” Dean said. “Not yet. Not on that.”

Softly, Frank spoke. “OK.”

“And one other thing . . . .” Dean slowly stood up. “Man, I can’t believe I’m gonna say this.” Through is parted lips, Dean breathed out slowly and ran his hand over the top of his head. “There is nothing I can do about Jimmy, or Johnny. But there is something that I can do about something else.” He paused. “Ellen. I love her Frank. With every ounce of my soul, being, and heart I love her.”

“I know that feeling, Dean. So do I. I’ve felt that way for an entire lifetime.”

“I know this. I . . . know this.” Dean faced Frank. “Her and I have this remarkable relationship. Not that you two don’t, you do, but her an I, we worked together, we have a very comfortable, take for granted lifestyle. Unlike with you, it’s pretty much a given that I will see her everyday. That her and I will find time together.”

“Um . . . Dean? If you’re trying to make me feel bad . . .”

“No, I’m trying to make you feel better.”

“Really.” Frank asked.

“Just listen . . . El and I may have that. I may live her as much as you. And . . . I may say I would do it, but you Frank *have* done it.” Dean spoke with soft passion. “You are literally going to the ends of the earth for her. You have done anything, gone to any extreme, saved her life more times than anyone can count, and you have . . . you have died for her. That is love. And that is remarkable. I don’t think there’s a single instance in any history between two people that can top that. And when I look at it, it’s unfair. I have her and I have her because of you. Your drive for her saves her and I get her.”

“Dean. Fuck. Thanks. Now, if you . . .”

“No, let me finish. While you were out, again, saving her, I overheard a little piece of radio talk. Where you said, it was your fantasy that one day I would say . . .”

“Dean. I know where you’re going.” Frank stood up. “I was speaking . . .”

“What you wanted.” Dean completed the sentence. “The truth be known Frank, whether she’s your wife, my wife, our wife, whatever, I will still get time with her. I just think, that maybe, the time now . . . Is

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your time to be number one.”

“Dean,” Frank spoke in near shock. “Are you saying you’re giving her up?”

“No. I’m saying that I am stepping down from the number one slot for a while. We can make this work between us Frank. We can. It’s just time for you to be primary now.”

“You can’t be serious. How do you think El will handle this.”

Dean chuckled softly. “Come on. You’re being the hero again. How do *you* think El will handle it. I’ll tell yo. Just fine. She’ll be just fine with it, as long as we’re just fine with it.”

“You really mean this. Dean, you don’t have to do this.”

“No, I don’t.”

Frank shook his head. “No. I can’t let you do this. She’s your wife.”

“And she’s your life. As I said before, I wouldn’t have her if it wasn’t for you.”

“Dean . . .”

“No, Frank.” Dean lifted his hand and looked upon Frank with seriousness. “Do this. Bring her home, Frank. Bring her home to me, to our kids, do your thing. OK? And I swear by my soul, *I* will do . . . the right thing.” He extend his hand to Frank.

Frank hesitated, then after gripping Dean’s hand he pulled him in to an embrace. One of assurance. Stepping back, Frank laid his hands on Dean’s shoulders. “Just know, I don’t need a reason, or a cause, or even a deal. I just . . . want her home.”

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“*Thank you, Officer.*” Joe spoke with a calm aggravation many, many, years before at that amusement park. “*I assure you they were playing around, and are brothers.*”

Waiting until the officer walked from the both in that particular section of the park, Joe turned to his four sons. After a nod of his head, he reached out and gave a light ‘whack’ to the back of Frank’s head.

“Hey.” Frank rubbed his head.

“What the hell is the matter with you?” Joe barked. “Trying to drown Hal.”

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“Jimmy was involved.” Frank pointed. “Hit him too.”

“You’re an adult now, it’s legal to abuse you in public.”

Hal exhaled dramatically loud. “And I did nothing father to provoke him. It was . . .”

“Yeah. Yeah. My ass.” Joe snapped.

“Dad.” Jimmy spoke up. “We were playing around.”

“The goddamn cops were called in.”

Frank’s loud ‘oh’ drew attention. “That’s not fair. He was here anyhow. They didn’t call him.”

“He was not Frank.” Joe argued. “The officer told me that he was called to observe the situation because there was a hint that there’d be trouble. That he was told ahead of time . . .” Joe’s vice slowed down. “That some thing . . . might.” He winced. “Goddamn it Hal.”

“What?” Hal asked innocently. “I was being pre-cautious.”

Joe grumbled.

Robbie swallowed hard and looked up. “Am I in trouble too.”

Jimmy rolled his eyes. “You’re never in trouble, why would you even ask that.”

“I was here.” Robbie said. “You know Dad’s saying. Birds of a feather flock together.”

Joe shook his head. “Yeah, but that doesn’t count. You have to flock with your brothers. And no. You aren’t in trouble.”

“Oh!” Frank griped loudly. “That’s unfair.”

“No it’s not Frank. Robbie can’t even reach Hal. You tow were drowning him.”

Frank pouted. “We wouldn’t have let him die. It was just payback because he’s such a shit.”

Hal gasped. “I am not. I resent that. You are just a sore loser.”

“You cheat!” Frank pointed.

Jimmy added, “That’s true, Dad, Hal . . .”

Joe’s loud whistled, short and sweet silence them. “Cheat? Cheat? How in the hell can he goddamn cheat? There is not cheating here! And! I have just a few final words to say on the subject.” He swung out a point to each of the boys going down the line. “Nineteen, seventeen, fourteen and twelve. Your ages. What in Christ’s name were you four doing at the ‘go fish’ both anyhow! Huh!”

Jimmy shrugged. “Easy win.”

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Hal nodded. "True."

"I got lots." Robbie stated. "Hal won the bonus fish."

"Which he cheated." Jimmy said.

Joe heard it. Nothing. He looked at Frank who was counting on his fingers "Frank? What are you doing?"

"You said a few. Few meaning three or four. You said more than a few final . . ." He stopped when he saw Joe's glare. As Joe turned away Frank mumbled. "Twenty-three."

Joe hurried and looked back.

Frank shrugged. "That's how many words you said."

Jimmy gave Frank a nudge. "Good job. College is paying off."

Smug Frank smiled.

"No more trouble." Joe waned. "And speaking of trouble. Where is she? She was just here."

After a tug to Joe's sleeve Robbie pointed. "There."

Joe groaned when he turned to see Ellen giggling and laughing at another booth. "Christ, can we not take her anywhere without her flirting."

"With a 'huh?' Frank turned and looked. "Oh that's not right."

Jimmy looked at Frank with a tilted head. "If you were doing something right Frank, that would be happening. You only have yourself to blame."

Joe looked at Jimmy. "Do you mind?"

Frank heaved out. "Why would he mind? I'm the one that minds. Ellen is flirting."

Wincing, Joe stayed calm. "Just . . . Just go get her. Snatch her away from that bozo and bring her back here."

"Got it." Frank gave a nod and darted off.

"Um, Dad." Hal said.

"What, Hal? What?" Joe yelled.

Hal pointed. "You asked."

Joe didn't have to look. Ellen's scream gave it away. Turning with a hunch, Joe exploded. "Goddamn it, Frank. Put her down!"

Andrea giggled and handed the photo back to Joe. "That was wonderful, Joe. Thank you for sharing."

Joe took one more look at the picture taken in a photo booth. "It

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was aggravating then, but times have changed . . . no, wait, times haven't changed. But it was fun."

"Frank is still Frank. Hal is still Hal. Robbie is still Robbie." Andrea paused only briefly. "And I'm sure, wherever the good lord has Jimmy, he's still Jimmy."

"I'm sure." Joe rummage through the cigar box for another picture. "I cannot believe Hal kept all these."

"Oh, I can? We're talking about Hal. Hal is like you, Joe. He loves his family very much."

"We're a tight family. Did I telly you what I started?" Joe asked.

"No. What?"

"A journal. I started it a while ago when I found out . . . well, when I found out. And, I started keeping track of all the memories I recalled from the boys. Every single one. From my memory you know. I start the journal out with Frank's birth ad I am going in order. Haven't made it much into Jimmy. Because my God, do I have the memories. I find myself, recalling something that I don't want to forget to include, and I jot it down on a lose piece of paper and stuff it in the back."

"I'm curious Slagel how many loose pieces of paper you have in the back of that notebook now."

"Too many to count." Joe winked. "And I fully intend on including this little jaunt as well."

"It may take up a lot of paper." Andrea smiled.

"This may sound odd, but . . . I'm looking forward to the return trip. ME, the boys, Ellen. Of course Elliott will be there, but we can ignore him."

"Kind of rekindling those family vacations?"

"Absolutely. I want to. I . . . I need to, Andrea. I need to do this. I feel that, even though I have ranting here, I need to go back to who I was before this crummy world ended. I need to show my boys, one more time, that I can be strong."

"Oh, Joe." Andrea spoke soft. "They see that every single day."

"But I need them to see I will go out on a limb for them. I want to fight side by side with them. And I need my family to see that I would do anything to bring them all back together. Even if it's just so I felt I showed them."

"And you'll do it, Joe. You'll have your family back, safe and

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sound, by his time ext week.”

“I feel that too.” Joe reached over and gave a squeeze to Andrea’s hand.

“Now . . .” She reached for the cigar box. “While we’re relaxing, relieving tension, and getting that mind set for the trip. How about a few more of the Slagel family memories.”

“I’d like that.” Joe looked through the pile, and with a smile pulled out a photograph. “Ah, here’s one.” He chuckled in reflection as he handed Andrea the picture. “This is the fishing trip when Frank drove the car into the lake. He was . . . thirteen.”

“And . . . you enjoyed these trips?” Andrea asked with sarcasm.

“Oh yeah.” Joe smiled peacefully. “Every single one.”

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To anyone else it was probably a really lame reason for the late night phone call, but to Hal it bred fear. A dream that was overall pleasant turned into a wakened reality.

It wasn’t much. A dream in which Hal was young again. Thirteen perhaps, at a time when they all lived at home. He recalled recognizing the fact that he was in his younger self again. His mind even found amusement in the fact that he still wore something on his head. From the backwards baseball cap, to the bandana he wore faithfully. There was an eeriness when Hal peered up to his father in his dream and saw himself. He knew they resembled each other he just never knew how much until he had that dream.

But what was it about the dream? It wasn’t much. A typical day at his home. He himself doing something creative, Robbie playing, jimmy studying and Frank pretty much not doing much but sitting there staring out.

Nothing much. A pretty boring dream. And Hal supposed int hat dream boredom was the reason that one by one that started leaving the room. Jimmy first. Then his father stood and walked out, then Robbie. And the moment Hal turned to Frank in that dream and said, ‘They all left. We’re alone you and me’, Hal snapped awake in a panic.

He calmed himself first before calling Dean. He sounded irrational, but Dean handled the questioning well. Hal never put much

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stock into Dean and Ellen ‘trip to the so called future’, but he did after that dream. And alone with his thoughts and information, Hal did one other thing. He called Elliott. If he was going to be awake ad fighting off neuroticism, so was his right hand man and best friend.

Surely Elliott, of all people would not only be understanding, he would immediately be on the same wave length as Hal as soon as he looked at the future information. Or so Hal thought.

“I’m not clear on why you are having me read this, Captain?” Elliott referred to the notes Hal had taken of his conversation with Dean.

“It doesn’t strike you.”

Slow, Elliott shook his head.

“Give me that.” Hal snatched up the paper.

“Captain, don’t get defensive . . .”

In a whine, Hal mocked, ‘don’t get defensive.’ he took a breath, “Good God, Elliott one would think you would know.”

“Maybe if you tell me why I have to read it, it would snap to me.”

“Ok.” Not wanting to, and not feeling he had to Hal, figuring Elliott was just groggy, explained. “I had a dream that I was thirteen and I was sitting in my old livingroom with all my brothers and my father. Then everyone, one by one, got up and left. Everyone except me and Frank. It was just us. Just him and I, Elliott. *Now* what do you make of that.”

“Your youthfulness manifested itself into form in a dream . . .” Elliott paused with a calm blink when Hal smacked him lightly with the notebook. “What . . . Was that for?”

“I’m not wanting your interpretation Mr. Wanna-be psychic . . .”

“You asked.” Elliott said. “And if you let me finish I was merely stating that basically, when you were young your family was together. And you are leaving in a few short hours to get your youngest brother. You’re bringing the family together And the dream just signified that your longing to do so is bit by the reality that . . . That . . .” Elliot’s words slowed.

Arrogant, Hal nodded. “That?”

“One by one they’ll . . .” With an exhale, Elliott sat back, “Leave.”

“Hence . . .” Hal dropped his notes to the table. “Our future

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scenario. You aren't there, Elliott. neither is my father, or Robbie."

"This is twenty years in the future. Your father and I are both ill, Captain . . ."

"Robbie." Hal interrupted. "Robbie isn't. It's too ironic Elliott, that in the future it is just me and Frank. None of you are there. And it's also too ironic that we are going on this mission . . . all of us."

"I understand your concern." Elliott spoke. "You have us four, it could actually get dangerous, therefore, it could actually be the reason, not the illness, that cause us not to be in the future."

"And this is suppose to make me feel better?" Hal asked.

"No, but this should." Elliott folded his hands. "When Dean and Ellen were pulled into the future, they were pulled in because Frank and Billy wanted to divert the tragedy that too their lives. The same tragedy that took my life, Robbie's life . . . get it?"

"Tragedy was diverted."

"Yes." Elliott smiled. "The accident that was suppose to take our life . . . Didn't. And your father's passing in the future has to deal with his illness. Not the coincidence that we are all leaving together."

Hal smiled in relief. "Thank you, Elliott I feel . . ."

"Unless." Elliott lifted a finger.

Hal whined.

"Unless you go by the theory, you may change the road but you can't change the destination. Meaning, one way or another we were all suppose to die in a certain time frame, and the diverting of the accident only delayed the deaths, and let's face it. Had Ellen not lived through that explosion, we would not be gong to LA to get her and Robbie. Ellen killed Bev, in that original path of time, she in a sense was the reason for the explosion, so in a sense, the reason for all our deaths. And, now, of course, she is kidnaped, so in a sense, we are going after her so, fulfilling the destiny, she again, could be the reason for a deaths."

Hal just stared.

"Just a theory."

"I hate you." Hal stood up.

"Captain please. It is my feeling you are making way too much out of this. If by chance it is suppose to happen, we have proved time and time again, things can be changed and you'll be on top of things, correct."

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"I guess so. Yes, I will." Hal nodded.

"And another thing." Elliott stood as well. "It was a dream. A simple dream. You are not psychic, intuitive, or anything like that. It was just a dream."

"You've made a valid point."

"So don't worry."

"I won't." Hal chuckled. "You're right. And, I will take relief in the fact that I am not . . ." Hal made quotes of his fingers. "*Gifted* brother."

Elliott winked. "That would be Frank."

"That would be Frank. And as long as Frank has no weird prophetic dream . . ." Hal exhaled. "I'm not going to worry."

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The 'squawk' of the crow was so loud, Frank would of swore that it blasted its call right next to his ear. It awakened him, or so he thought. He sat up, but instead of on the couch where he had laid on, Frank found himself surrounded by corn stalks.

"Whoa." Frank commented as he stood up in the middle of the field. It was night, but a green hue hung over everything with an eeriness. Thinking he had become one heck of a sleep walker to wander out into the fields of beginnings, Frank heard it.

A guitar.

The strumming was bad, the chording was sloppy, yet, Frank, against what he wanted to do, followed the music. He started to get a little aggravated as he separated the stalks to make his own path. The old voice singing irritated him even more, and to Frank it was bad enough he made it to the cornfields, but did he have to end up there while Josephine was in a drunken binge out there as well.

He approached the end of the field and saw the old farm house. Just as he started to wonder why he never noticed that farm house there before, Frank wondered something else. Who was the old black woman.

The guitar playing stopped, and the extremely old black woman put down her guitar. She rocked some in her rocking chair and waved to Frank. "Welcome, welcome, all are welcome."

"All?" Frank looked behind him. He was alone.

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“Come closer.”

“OK.” Frank said apprehensively and walked. “I have a feeling I’m not in Beginnings anymore. Wait . . .” Frank snapped his finger. “This is a dream.” He pinched himself. “Ow. IS it.” He peered around. It is. No. Yeah. Has to be. We don’t have any old black women in Beginnings.” He moved closer to the porch. “I’ll go with it.”

“How are ya’ Frank.” She asked.

“Hey, you know my name.”

“Of course I do.” She spoke sweetly.

“Do I know you?”

“Perhaps yes, perhaps no.”

“Perhaps yes, perhaps no what?”

“Do you know me.” She said.

“I asked you.”

“And I answered you.” She said.

“No, you didn’t.”

“Yes, I did. I said perhaps yes, perhaps no.”

“Perhaps yes perhaps no what?”

She shook her head. “Forget that. I need to talk to you about this trip you are taking tomorrow.”

“You mean the rescue mission against the mutant underground religious fanatics.”

“Yes, and your upcoming fight with God.”

“I have no beef with God.”

“Not the God you worship.”

“What other God is there?” Frank asked.

“The one you’ll fight.”

“God?”

“Yes.”

“I said I don’t have a problem with God. Why would I fight him.”

“Because you . . .”

“That would be pretty stupid.” Frank snickered. “I mea, he’s God. He flooded the fuckin world. I’m good I’m not that good to beat God. Or can I?”

“No.”

“So why am I fighting him?”

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“Just . . .” Remarkably, she remained calm. “Let me explain.”

“OK. shoot.”

“I just need to give you instructions.”

“On how to beat God?”

“No.” She rattled some. “On your mission.”

Frank laughed.

“What?” She asked.

“Uh, you’re gonna give me instructions.” He snickered again.

“OK, go on. I’m listening. This ought to be good.”

“You are to lead them, Frank.” She said in a whisper. “You are to go west.”

“Hey, you’re pretty good. We are.”

“Yes. And you are to take no food, no water. You are to leave this very day in the clothes you stand up in. I don’t know who, but one of you will fall by the wayside. The rest will be taken before this man Creed. Though mighty together, it will take the mind and wit of the innocent one you bring to lead the way for one of you four to face him.”

“Whoa. Wait.” Frank held up his hand. “One of us four will face him, but it take the innocent we bring to come up with it.”

“Yes.”

“I’m no mathematician, but four plus one equals . . .”

“Five.”

“Yeah. There is only four of us going.”

“May I finish.”

“Go on. You have me confused, anyhow.” Frank said.

“It is God’s will that you face him. I am not in the way of knowing if you will defeat him. I am not in the way of knowing if you will even make it back to beginnings. But I know, you will not falter, and with God’s help, together . . . you will stand.”

“Together we will stand. Whoa. Wait.” Frank scratched his head. “I think I heard that before. Did I?”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

January 27<sup>th</sup>

“You’re an idiot, Frank.” Hal slammed the back of the truck in the early morning preparations.

“Hal, I’m telling you.” Frank followed him. “Look I took notes when I woke up.”

“Frank.” Hal stopped at the driver’s door. “I don’t care. We aren’t to take food? Water?”

“Yeah.”

“And how shall we eat.”

Seriously, Frank lifted his head. “God will provide.”

“God has provided. Several units of food for us to take with us.” From the top of the truck Hal reached and grabbed his cup of coffee.

Frank sniffed. “Hey that smells good.”

“Would you like some?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, you can’t have any.” Hal took a sip. “God will provide for you.”

“No, the old black woman said nothing about not bringing coffee.”

“Listen to you.” Hal griped. “An old black woman sits on a porch by a cornfield. She plays a guitar.”

“Not well.”

“Oh, of course. And, she tells you we are to go west. Take no food or water. Fight this man. One will fall . . .”

“By the wayside.” Frank nodded.

“Yes, I can see that happening.” Hal partially rolled his eyes. “Then she said . . . what was that powerful line you delivered?”

“Together . . . we will stand.”

“A-huh. And none of this sounds vaguely familiar to you?”

“Well, yeah, I just heard it last night.” Frank replied.

“No, Frank, I mean before that.” Hal said.

“Before what?”

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“Before last night.”

“What about it.”

Hal growled. “Again, I will say you’re an idiot.”

“What?”

“Never mind. I have to go get our father and Elliott, they’re waiting so we can go do this.”

“You mean . . . Stand.”

Withholding all outburst of frustration, Hal only glared then turned.

“Hal, wait.” Frank followed. “Come on.” He trailed behind as Hal moved faster. “Do you think this is the way to . . . Stand.”

With a spin back to Frank and a snapping whisper, ‘I hate you’, Hal hurried even faster away.

^^^^

The streets of New Bowman were still dark, and across the dusting, holding her coat tight to her body, Misha darted by the night guard, and slipped into Ben from fabric’s store.

The bell didn’t ding, and Misha was grateful for that. Quietly she closed the door, and followed the illumination of clue to the back room. “Hello.” She whispered with a tiny knock.

Marma looked up. “I was hoping that was you.”

“Ben will not return until morning, and he will not say anything. He hates Dean.”

Marma only nodded.

“How is it going?” Misha asked and walked into the room standing beside Marma.

“I cracked it. I have an understanding. He saved the sabotage program, and quite frankly I can see why it went so bad. Too much. Too fast. Could have been deadly.” Marma shook her head.

“So you know how to make it work?” Misha asked.

“Yes, I do but . . .” Marma tapped her fingers on the desk, “Misha, I’m not real sure about this. I don’t want anyone hurt. I don’t.”

“But Marma, you are brilliant.” She reached down and grabbed Marma’s hand. “I am sure you will find a way to make it work without hurting anyone.”

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“If it was just going to be almost like a joke . . .”

“Then do that.” Misha said bright. “Come up with a way where it is not hurtful, and it is funny. Yet, it gets the message across.”

Marma breathed out. “I don’t know.”

“Perhaps you are tired. You have been at this for hours.”

Marma nodded. “I have.”

“What about a break. Some rest. Maybe your bed calls you.” Misha gripped Marma’s hand tighter.

“Misha. I can’t. The more I think of this I can’t dot his to him. I like the female Dr. Hayes.”

“Marma please.” Misha tugged harder on Marma’s hand when Marma tried to turn away.

Marma needed her hand back. It was grasped between the two tiny ones of Misha. She didn’t want to get forceful, but she needed to shut things down. “Misha I . . .”

“My heart is broken. Feel my pain.” Misha placed Marma’s hand center of her chest.

Slowly Marma turned around. She gazed up the arch of her raised arm to see her hand and its placement. She allowed the palm of her hand to feel the up rising of Misha’s breath.

“Do you feel it?” Misha asked. “Feel it.” Misha slid Marma’s hand over to the left.

Soft. Marma swallowed then noticed Misha close her eyes. “What is it?” she asked Misha.

“Your hand has caused an ache in me.” Misha stepped into Marma. “An ache I have not felt in so long. We work so well together Marma.” she dropped her voice to a whisper. “Let us not end our work now.”

Marma pulled her hand outward and stood up. She debated. Her eyes went from the computer, to Misha, then back to the computer. Her hovering hand fell again, only this time instead of feeling the cloth of Misha’s nightgown, she felt the flesh of her bare chest. From the computer, Marma shifted her eyes.

Misha held open the top of her nightgown. “Work with me. Do this for me.” Into Marma Misha stepped. “Teach . . . me.”

No more convincing. Decision made. The reaction and action were quick and fervent. Marma’s hand plunged to Misha’s breast while

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her other hand swept around, and almost in a slam, braced Misha to her. Locked they were, consumed instantaneously, body to body, mouth to mouth, in a passionate kissing embrace, right there in Ben from Fabric's Unique Boutique.

^^^^

"You're an idiot, Frank." Joe snapped while walking toward the truck near the back gate.

"But, Dad." Frank said. "We're supposed to . . ."

"Stand. Yes, I know." He rolled his eyes then looked quickly to Hal who snickered.

"Sorry." Hal raised his hand. "I told him to share it with you."

Frank nodded arrogantly. "Laugh. Go on. At least Elliott believes me."

"Speaking of which . . ." Joe said. "Where is he?"

Frank pointed.

Hal's mouth dropped open. "Good God."

"See." Frank smiled.

Guitar, strapped to his back, Elliott approached the stopped pair. "Sorry. I took so long."

"A guitar?" Hal asked. "You had to do that didn't you. Let's encourage the small minded man."

Elliott smiled. "I just thought how symbolic after hearing what Frank said."

"See." Frank grinned.

"Shut up." Hal snapped. "Well, I have you know, Elliott. You've just marked yourself."

"How so?" Elliott asked.

"You have the guitar. That means you'll have to face him. Good thing I'll be with you." Hal said.

"How do you figure?" Elliott questioned.

Hal explained. "The black woman. Guitar. Two at the end. Me and you."

"Wait." Frank interjected. "How do you know it's not me and Elliott."

"Because just knowing . . ." Hal said smug. "Elliott has the

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guitar, so he's a given to last. Dad is the oldest so he's stands a chance of getting shot, one will all by the wayside, that will not be me."

"Won't e me." Frank argued.

"It won't be me." Hal rebutted.

"Hal, I'm telling you it won't . . ."

"Hey!" Joe yelled. "Knock I the hell off. No one is falling by the wayside. No one is getting shot."

Frank tilted his head. "Elliott's not. He has the guitar. Maybe we should all get a guitar."

Joe gave a pausing stare. "Maybe, Frank. Now let's just go. It's pushing four in the morning I want to be n the road. Let's get in boys."

Hal moved to the driver's side, while Elliott got in the back.

"Hey!" Frank yelled. "How come he gets to drive."

"Because you suck." Hal smiled and got in the truck.

"Fuck." Frank shook his head. "I have to ride in the back with Elliott."

Joe gave a pat to Frank's arm. "I'll ride with Elliott. Give the truck a once more over and get in."

"I just checked the truck before I came for you."

"Check it again, it's been sitting there a half hour."

"Dad, I don't think . . ."

"Just check it again for Crying out loud!" Joe yelled.

"Fine." Frank marched to the back of the truck and lifted the tarp. He peered in. "I'm checking. I'm looking. It . . . It."

From around the side of the truck, Joe peeked. "It what?" he saw Frank just staring. "What's wrong."

"Nothing." Frank dropped the tarp. "Everything's good."

"You sure?"

"Yep."

"All right let's go."

"Let's do this." Frank took a step and stopped. He back tracked, lifted the tarp and peeked back into the truck. Hearing the yell of his name, napped him fro his semi-puzzled state. After shrugging it off, and dropping the tarp, Frank joined the others.

They were underway.

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It had been too long since he stood before his bedroom mirror, and too long since John Matoose wore that uniform. A crisp white tee shirt, green military pants, hair combed neat, John fastened his revolver in his belt, then grabbed the long sleeve shirt. He took one more look in the mirror at his appearance, it felt good, really good and he liked being back.

The coffee aroma hit him as he reached the bottom of the staircase, and the scent of breakfast made him feel bad. Jenny was cooking and John didn't have to time to eat. He lifted his brown leather jacket and placed it on figuring the visual of him in his coat would be the prelude to the verbalization that he had to go.

"I'm ahead of you." Jenny stepped from the kitchen. "Travel mug." she handed it to John. "And . . . a breakfast sandwich."

"Jenny thanks." He kissed her on the cheek.

"I know you have a full day. Will I get to see you?"

"Later, maybe. I have rounds, then I have to meet with Sgt. Doyle for maneuvers that Hal set up. I have a short meeting with Sgt. Owens in New Bowman, then one with Danny late morning. Lunch maybe?"

"That sounds great." Jenny walked with him to the door. "John, I am very proud of you."

John nodded. "It's good to be back home. And Jenny . . ." There was some reluctance, but John turned around. "Jenny, I had a debriefing with Joe and Frank last night. Joe seems to think the women are starting some sort of mild uprising. He wants me to keep an eye on it in his absence. You . . . you are very strong with the women. This is my chance, Jen. I have been waiting to gain Joe's trust again for quite some time. Please, I'm not asking if you are involved, I'm just asking, if you know anything about it, could you just steer clear. At least while I'm in charge. I don't want anything to interfere with my homecoming."

"Of course, John. You don't have to worry about it."

"Thank you." After another kiss to her cheek, John walked out.

Jenny slowly closed the door behind him. It was the first night in what seemed forever, that she had her husband home with her. John was all she had in the world, and not only would she do what he asked, she would do her part to try to dismantle a situation, that she pretty much

began.

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Robbie had stopped sparking many hours before hand, and Ellen had to wait for the opportunity to speak to him free and clear.

He wasn't locked behind bars, nor kept under guard. Robbie pretty much was placed in a room, a nice one at that.

From his stare out the window, Robbie turned around when the door opened. El." He said her name in relief. "I tried to see you earlier, they wouldn't let me."

"I slept in." Ellen walked to him and embraced him. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah. Fine." Robbie blew out. "I woke up pretty quickly last night but everything I touched I zapped." He looked curiously at her when she snickered. "What?"

"Kind of like when Frank got electrocuted."

"Yeah. Man, what ever he hit me with . . ."

"Lightening bolts." Ellen answered.

"What?"

"Not real ones. He created these gloves that generate balls of electricity. Tangible balls you can throw. The more you generate the current in the glove, the more potent the bolts."

Inquisitively Robbie glanced at her. "How did you know?"

"I asked. He told me."

"Lightening bolts?"

"It was a god like weapon."

Robbie whistled. "A cool weapon. Man, Frank would love those." Robbie smiled then lost it. "El, last night. Nothing happened between you and . . ."

"No. No." She shook her head.

"Good. I wouldn't forgive myself."

"No, last night was fine. He thinks you tried to kidnap me. I played distraught, then I played the injured woman. I told him I wasn't ready for the physical step yet. I wanted something special especially after being abused in this world for so long."

"And he bought it."

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“Yeah. He did. We ended up having a nice talk.”

“Did you get out what he wants from you?” Robbie asked.

“Me. He wants a companion in this world. A normal looking companion, and Robbie, he will stop at nothing to keep me. You on the other hand, are a disposable god. I really don’t think he cares if you live or die, stay or go.”

“I don’t think so either. And that’s what makes me . . . that’s what makes me want to go. I’m obviously not getting you out from here. I’m gonna leave and try to get you by coming from outside.”

“Can you?” Ellen asked.

“I’ll try. I will come up with some sort of plan. Watch this building from a distance, see what I can figure out. If after a day or two, I can’t, I’m gonna try to make it back home. Or get close enough to contact them. Is that all right with you?”

“I think it’s the only way. If they catch you trying to kidnap me again, he’ll kill you Robbie. Ad did you see what happens to him when he gets mad.”

“Yeah. What the fuck was that.”

“Gamma rays.” Ellen answered.

Quickly Robbie looked up. He was surprised she even had an answer. “Gamma rays.”

“Yeah, like the incredible hulk, emotionally activated, only he doesn’t turn green.” Ellen said nonchalantly.

“El, come on.” Robbie laughed.

“No, I’m serious. He told me.”

“He’s a scientist. He did something to himself.”

“I argue.” Ellen stated. “Look at the drunes. These are people genetically mutated from exposure to radiation. The entire Napa Valley was contaminated with a leak when the core melted down from the nuclear power plant. Creed was exposed as well, but in a quick manner. It affected him differently.”

“This is fucked up.” Robbie scratched the top of his head. “OK, sometime tonight, I have to make my escape.”

“Robbie, I’m worried about you out there.”

“I can take care of myself. My main concern is to get us out of here.” Robbie said. “And like we should be . . . get us back home where we belong.”



“What is this?” Marma held the piece of pink paper and looked questionably to Carol.

“Jenny Matoose sent that. She wants us women to reconsider our stance against the men, and possible negotiate a peace agreement.”

Marma nodded. “Sounds good.”

“No.” Misha charged. “Do not tell me you are considering that.”

“Who wants to fight?” Marma asked. “Not me. Things will get settled.”

“And what about our work?” Misha questioned. “You’ll do that, right?”

“Misha.” Marma nearly whined. “Do you think it’s wise to do that?”

“Yes. Yes.” Misha nodded. “You said you would if you came up with something that wouldn’t hurt, think of something like that. But don’t back out.”

Carol looked curious. “Did you figure out the Dean program.”

Marma nodded. “Yes, I did. It was pretty much user friendly the program Danny Hoi invented, And he had already broke down the Society program that Bev tried to feed Dean. So my part was easy. I just did a few manipulations. See the society idea was excellent, but too powerful. A little bit of commonsense would have gotten them their results. But they were wanting to destroy Dr. Hayes. I don’t want that. None of us do.”

“I just want him to have a lesson learned.” Misha stated.

“Can you do that?” Carol asked.

Marma exhaled. “I’ll tell you what, *if* I can figure out a way to teach him a lesson, without hurting him, without it going over the edge. If it can be viewed in retrospect as something funny, then, and only then will I do it. But . . .” she glanced to the two women. “I will do it only once. Understood.”

Misha nodded. She did understand. To her one time was better than none, if she had anything to do with it, that one time would be all worth it.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Hal turned off the windshield wipers, then turned down the heat in the truck as he peered over the steering wheel. "Roads are looking better."

Joe spoke from the back seat. "Snow could have been worse. It is January."

"I think we're making good progress." Elliott looked at his watch. "I thought the weather would slow us down at least in the beginning."

"Pee break." Frank sat up.

"What?" Hal looked quickly to Frank in the passenger seat. "Pee break."

"Yeah, it's when you stop to pee." Frank said.

"I know that." Hal snapped. "We just stopped a couple hours ago. I don't have to go. Dad?"

"Nope. I'm good." Joe answered.

Elliott shrugged. "I don't have to go either, but I could use the opportunity to stretch my legs."

"Oh who asked you." Hal barked. "Frank, none of us have to go. So you have to hold it."

"Oh, I don't have to go." Frank stated.

"Then why are we stopping?" Hal asked.

"Because we have to." Frank said strong. "I just feel that we have to. I don't know why. Just stop the truck."

"No." Hal argued.

"Stop the truck, Hal."

"Nope. We're moving."

"Hal!" Frank yelled. "Stop the fuckin truck!"

"Both of you!" Joe interjected loudly. "Knock it off. Hal! Stop!"

"HA!" Frank laughed in taunt. "Dad listens to me."

In a whine, Hal mocked. "Dad listens to me. Fine." He looked at Frank. "Fine. We'll pull over the goddamn truck."

Elliott closed one eye and blocked off his ear. "There's something detrimental to ones hearing when you are in a closed in space with three Slagels." He winced again when in unison, Frank and Hal

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barked, 'shut up.'

"Pull over here." Frank pointed.

"I'm pulling over." Hal tuned the wheel, that snapped a quick look at Frank when he laughed. "What now?"

"You used your turn signal."

Hal glared and shut off the truck. "Asshole."

"Me?" Frank snickered. "I'm not the one using a turn signal in a dead world."

Hal looked over his shoulder at Joe. "Can we shoot him. Please. Just let me shoot him."

"He can't be shot Hal." Joe raised his hands. "Many have tried. It just doesn't work."

Laughing, Frank opened his truck door.

Hal peered at him. "I thought you didn't have to go."

"As long as we're stopping." Frank shrugged and stepped out.

Elliott reached for his door. "Might as well take advantage of it." He stepped out.

Joe reached up and gave a pat to Hal's shoulder. "I am completely sympathetic. Just think of it as a little payback to you for all the times you had to 'go' when we took family road trips." Joe opened his car door and stepped out.

"Swell." Hal tapped his hand on the steering wheel. "I'm living that parent curse." He spoke to himself. "And Frank is my nightmare child. Good . . ." A small noise, almost a shuffling one caught Hal's attention. Slowly he looked to where the noise came from. He zoomed in on the silence. Ready to shrug it off he heard it again. "What is that?" He asked of the shifting noise that seemed to grow faster. A part of him thought it came from the cab of the truck. Opening his door, Hal stepped out, and went to the back door. Just as he opened that one and leaned in, he heard the noise again. He leaned into the back seat closer, peered behind that seat, then placed his head against the back metal of the cab. "There." The noise sounded as if it came from the back.

Retracting out of the cab, where the cab of the truck met the bed, Hal stood. He lifted the tarp covering and peered inside.. The noise was louder. Bingo. He found it. Against the back of the bed, behind the supplies, Hal watched slight movement under neath another tarp covering. Figuring an animal of some sort had gotten into the truck, he

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pulled out his revolver. Mid reach to shift the chamber, his eyes caught glimpse of the color of it. Blue and yellow cartoon animals. Unless Frank had decided to bring that cartoon sleeping bag, Hal knew that particular sleeping bag had no place there. Knowing that, Hal reached for the small tarp and whipped it off.

“Shit.” He exhaled, and replaced his revolver. “Oh . . . Dad?” he called out. “We have a problem.”

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Who in the world keeps on calling? Was Dean ‘s irritated thought as he looked again to his phone that sat on the cryo lab counter. The first time it rang he ignored it. With very little pause it rang again, and Dean, as if the person heard them, just shouted, ‘I’m working’. But As the phone turned into the forth or fifth cycle, Dean found himself yelling out obscenities such as, assholes, moron ad other things.

To him, didn’t they know if he wasn’t answering he was working. And if it was all that important, someone would have found him. It wasn’t as if he didn’t tell anyone where he was.

Finally, after ten minutes of constant ringing, Dean had enough. Full of fuel, he grabbed phone, clicked it on, and in what he thought was an intimidating voice, he spoke, ‘What? I’m working? It better be good.’

“Dean.” Joe spoke.

“Joe?” Dean laughed. “shit. I’m sorry. Was that you calling all those times.”

“Sort of.” Joe replied. “I called. Then Frank called, and Frank kept on calling until you picked up. Why didn’t you answer?”

“I’m busy. And then, well, it became a torment game. I wasn’t giving in.”

“A-huh, I see.”

“So, what’s up. Why are you calling?”

“Oh . . .” Joe exhaled and sounded a fake pleasant. “Wanted to know how your morning went.”

“Good.” Dean answered. “How’s the trip so far.”

“Oh, good. Have you been working all morning?”

“Well, since I woke everyone up.”

“And you got the kids off to school?”

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Dean snickered. "Yeah. No. Well, Josh did."  
"I see. And where is Billy right now."  
"School." Dean answered.  
"Are you sure?"  
"Do you think he cut again?"  
"It's just that . . ."  
"Joe." Dean snickered. "Really, this is great of you to be concerned, but Billy is in school. I assure you."  
"And your sure?"  
"Positive." Dean answered.  
"OK." Joe nearly sang. "Well, if that's the case. Who is this?"  
"Huh?" Dean asked, then got his answer when another voice got on the line.  
"Hi Dad." Billy said.  
Dean dropped the phone.

~~~~~

"Are you done . . . yet?" Joe, hands in pockets stood behind Billy who faced a hillside.  
"Yeah. No." Billy answered. "Almost . . . yes, I'm done."  
Over Billy's shoulder Frank peered. "I'm impressed. That's a hold for a little guy like you."  
"I really had to go for a while." Billy turned, jumped and zipped up.  
"I bet." Frank said. "I don't even think I could . . ."  
"Frank." Joe interrupted. "Can we leave the urine stream compliment alone."  
"But, dad, did you see how much he . . ."  
"Frank. Enough." Joe winced.  
Mumbling, Frank laid his hand on Billy's back. "It's a lake."  
"Frank." Joe spun around with a hard yell.  
Hal rolled his eyes. "Good lord, the things that amaze him, Elliott."  
Elliott pointed. "Yeah, but did you see . . ." Elliott silenced When Hal glared.  
"All right." Joe led Billy to the truck. "Let's get you inside this

time.”

“Are you mad at me, Pap?” Billy asked.

“Yes, Bill, I’m mad.” Joe answered. “You shouldn’t be out here with us.”

“I just wanted to go help my mom.” Billy said.

“I know you did, but this world right now, is no place for a kid.” Joe explained.

“See, I wouldn’t know that because New Bowman is the only time I ever left Beginnings.”

“He’s got a point.” Frank interjected.

“Frank.” Joe winced then returned to Billy. “Was that sarcastic. Because I don’t want any lip . . .”

“No, Pap.” Billy shook his head. “I was being serious. I don’t know what’s out here. No one really tells me what it looks like now. They tell me what it looks like then. And . . . I’ll tell you from what I peeked at. It’s pretty neat.”

Frank winked. “An entire history lesson right here. Better than school.”

Joe turned hard to Frank. “Will you stop.”

“This is absurd.” Hal stated. “Why are we even arguing out here. Let’s get in the truck.”

“Pap.” Billy continued. “I’m sorry. I just wanted to help. I also figured since my dad couldn’t go, you’d want me.”

“He’s got a point.” Frank said.

“Will you knock it off!” Joe yelled.

“What?” Frank lifted his and. “He does have a point. He’s smart. Smarter than me.”

“Good lord.” Hal shook his head. “Everyone is smarter than you.”

“Enough.” Joe barked. “Frank, did you know he was in the back of the truck? Because when we checked it one more time you did a triple take.”

“That’s because I saw the cartoon sleeping bag.” Frank stated.

“And you didn’t say anything?” Joe asked.

“I didn’t want to embarrass Elliott if he brought it.”

“It didn’t dawn on you that perhaps it was Billy?” Joe questioned.

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“No. It was a sleeping bag.”

“I mean . . .”

“Father.” Hal exhaled. “Why are you . . .”

“Hal.” Joe shut him up. “Stay out.” He turned hard to Frank. “Stop laughing.”

“I’m not.” Frank defended.

“You either.” Joe pointed at Elliott.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” Elliott responded.

“Now.” Joe sighed out. “Let’s just . . .”

“Dad.” Frank interrupted. “Why are you even worrying about why he’s here. Let’s just deal with it. It’s not like we’re taking him back.”

“It’s not like he’s staying.” Joe said.

“It’s not like he’s going back.”

“Like hell he isn’t.” Joe basted. “He goes.”

“No. He stays.” Frank was adamant. “Tough.”

“Tough? Tough?” Joe stepped to Frank.

Hal smirked and whispered to Elliott. “I love when this happens.”

“Tough?” Joe repeated.

“Yeah.” Frank tugged his own ear. “That’s what I said. He stays. We already put in six hours. If we go back, that’s another six hours wasted, to reach this point again, another six. That’s . . .” Frank paused.

Everyone, including Billy called out the answer. “Eighteen.”

“Is it? Yeah. Thanks.” Frank nodded. “And that’s almost an entire day wasted.”

“Frank, I understand what you are saying.” Joe tried to argue.

“No, you don’t.” Frank said calm. “I don’t want to waste anymore time. He’s here. He might as well stay. And he smart, Dad. He’s really smart. We all know that. Dean uses him in the fuckin lab, that’s how smart he is. How do you know we won’t use that brain.”

“He’s a kid.” Hal interjected.

“So what.” Frank shrugged. “He’s still smart. And . . . the old black woman said the innocent one would figure it out. Huh? What about that, Hal? Huh? Bet me he’s the innocent one she meant. What do you say now?”

“I still say . . .” Hal stepped to him. “You’re an idiot. However .

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.. Dad, he's an idiot with a point. We can't waste time."

"I don't care." Joe said. "He's a child. My grandchild. This world is screwed up. I can't take a chance on anything happening to him."

Frank stepped forward and turned Joe to face him. "And neither can I. I swear and I promise with my life . . ." He spoke seriously. "With my life nothing will happen to Billy."

Joe took a long moment to stare at Frank. He believed Frank's words, and trusted them. "All right. He goes. Let's get moving."

"Yes!" Frank spun round and gave a high five to Billy. "You go. See?" He lifted Billy up. "Let's get you in the truck. Man, will we have a blast irritating Hal."

Through his nostrils, Hal inhaled then took on an uppity look after watching Frank get in the truck. "Thank you for that, father."

Joe tilted his head. "You argued the case. Plus, you know, the black woman said." Joe walked away.

Hal stood mouth open staring until he felt the swat to his back.

Elliott grinned, "The black woman said. Oh man." Shaking his head and laughing, he embarked to the truck.

"But of course . . ." Hal tossed up his hands. "The black woman said."

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Fourth row on the right, third until. Frank's house. The place Frank after he had returned from the society. The thought, though sad, make Dean chuckled. In order for everyone to believe Frank was dead, they had to clear out the house he had since he moved to Beginnings. All while that went on, Dean got his modular home. There were a lot of things in life that were like that with Frank and Dean. Dean got the huge home, Frank got the little townhouse. Frank was taken by the society, Dean . . . married Ellen I his absence. Even Brian in a way was taken from Frank by Dean, because Dean actually fathered Brian. Perhaps those thought were what brought Dean to Frank's house that early afternoon. That and the need to get away from everything.

Dean had a lot on his mind, not only was his wife beyond the wall, but his son as well. Both of which had their lives in Franks hands. At least that was how Dean viewed it.

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The ‘bring Ellen home’ arrangement Dean had made with Frank suddenly, without effort was sweetened when Billy stepped into the picture.

Thought perhaps. Silence. A bit of Frank. Whatever the reason Dean found himself in Frank’s bedroom. Why he was doping it, he didn’t know, but he was seemingly assessing how much stuff Frank had. There wasn’t much. An easy move if Frank wanted to move back in the house. In fact, Dean even contemplated doing the move for Frank. A gift of sorts. But would it work. Yes, Dean could handle having Frank be the primary, but could he handle having Frank be in control of *everything* in the house. On that, Dean still had to think.

He was turning to leave, after seeing that Frank’s wardrobe petty much consisted of the same color and type of clothing, and he saw it. He recalled it from a long time ago, seeing it in the house where Frank and Ellen lived. A photograph, in a frame. A phot of Frank and Ellen no more than eighteen years old.

‘My God’, was the thought that raced through Dean’s mind as he picked up the picture and looked at it, really looked at it. How young they were, innocent, and happy. How did it come to be, Dean wondered, that two people, that young, that long ago, and that happy, never in all of history ended up together.

That photograph, in his hand, made Dean think even more about choices.

^^^^

“I’ve give it thought.” Marma, seated before computer, looked up to Misha and Carol. “If the test is successful, I’ll do it.”

Excited and near doing a stand still dance, Misha smiled.

“But,” Marma continued, “It won’t be drastic, in fact, it will be pretty funny. However it will only last until Danny Hoi gives Dean his monthly tune up, then he’ll be back to normal.”

“What are you gonna do?” Carol asked.

“Well, it works like this. The society program tried to alter dr. Hayes’ behavior. They had a good theory. Their method of deliverance was pretty good. But like I said, it was too much, too fast. The behavioral program was data info, we’re going to modify him the good old fashioned way. Harmless way. Hypnotic suggestion.”

Misha looked confused. "How will you get Dean to be hypnotized?"

"The chip." Marma answered. "I took the suggestive program from the society. Via a phone line from this computer to Dean's phone, I will feed that suggestive signal. It will give us an open doorway of forty-five seconds to one minute to make a strong suggestion. I believe, really, this will work. Dean answers the phone, gets the signal, we pop him with the suggestion. No data overload to fear. When he gets tuned up, the chip will erase the hypnotic suggestion. And he will be left wonder how in the world he could act like that. That, Misha, is your payback."

"What will you suggest?" Misha asked.

"Let's just wait to see if the test works first." Marma peered up when the bell in the Unique Boutique rang.

Ben raced in and shut the door. "Confirmed. Dean is at Franks house. Alone."

"Good." Marma turned to the computer. "No one is with him to make a suggestion. That's what we need. Let's test the phone line." She began to pull up her program."

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"Knock. Knock." Jenny, pleasantly, taped on the archway of the bedroom.

"Jenny." Dean said startled. "What are you doing here?"

"I heard you came in here. I also heard about Billy." She walked into the bedroom. "I thought maybe you were trying to get a Frank fix and get some reassurance of sorts that all will be fine."

"I guess I am." Dean glanced at the picture. "You know a lot of things will change when he comes back. I told Frank before he left, if he brings Ellen home safely that he can have the primary position with Ellen."

"And while making this choice, did you consider Ellen?"

"Yes, I did." Dean answered. "He won't mind."

"You don't think?" Jenny asked. "That's a hell of a choice to make without her?"

"It's a fair choice and about time." Dean said. "Don't you think? Don't you think, after all Frank does it's time that he gets what he fights

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for and . . . Dies for.”

Jenny just stared.

“What?”

“This . . . Decision. This choice. It is coming awfully fast?”

“I thought about it.” Dean said.

“Not for long. Or has this been on the back of your mind?”

“What are you getting at. You’re coming off awfully offended.”

“I am. I am offended. Who do you think you’re fooling?”

Dean, puzzled, looked. “I’m not fooling anyone.”

“Yourself perhaps.”

“What?”

“This chivalrous act. And that’s what you’re making it out to be a chivilrous act. Are we trying to be a Hal Slagel. Mr. Chivalry . . .” Jenny stopped when Dean’s phone rang. She folded her arms.

Dean lifted the phone to his ear. “Hello.”

Tapping her fingers on her arms, Jenny watched Dean hang up and stare out. “As I was saying.” Jenny continued. “That’s not you. You wouldn’t want to be Hal. You hate Hal. In some demented corner of your mind, you really think you can top him. Beat him. Aside from that . . .” She rattled fast. “This let Frank have Ellen thing doesn’t fool ,me. You’re doing this for yourself. You’ve ben thinking about this for some time, haven’t you.”

Dean slowly looked at Jenny.

“That’s right. Leave Ellen. Make it look like your being the hero, and shine instead of looking like a heel. All so you can get your freedom. No more aggravation. Work all the time. Let Frank take over the whole deal. You don’t want to be a husband anymore. You want to be free again. In fact, I’m surprised you are contemplating having the whole thing done while Ellen’s away. Oh! Dean” Jenny said sarcastic and snippy. “Why don’t you do that. Set it all up. How convenient. Why don’t you move all of your stuff here, move all of Frank’s stuff to your house and then it’s a done deal when they return. How easy it is for you. This isn’t an unselfish act, this is all for you. You know that.” Jenny saw Dean just stare. “Dean? Did you hear me.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Is it making any sense at all to you?” She asked. “Are you seeing my perception.”

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“Yes, I am.” Dean nodded. “I really am. And you know what?” He smiled. “You’re right.” He set down the photo. “You’re absolutely right about everything. Thanks.” With a quick pat to Jenny’s arm, Dean stepped to the door. With a snap of his finger he turned around. “Oh, one more thing. If you have any boxes, can you get them to me. I’m gonna need them. Thanks” he darted out.

“Well.” Jenny blinked in surprise after Dean had left. “That was the easiest argument I ever won.” Standing up straight, Jenny gave a proud inhale, looked at the Frank and Ellen photo, giggled with a ‘cute’ and walked out as well.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Uncle Hal.” Billy leaned between the two front seats.

“Yes, Billy?” Hal asked with little enthusiasm.

“OK.” with a wrinkling sound, Billy pulled forth a folded map.

Hal did a double take at Billy, then shaking his head, he glared at a snickering Frank and continued to drive.

Billy continued, ‘I know that you have been driving for a good part of your life. Over half, and basically two and a half times longer than I have been alive. So I am in complete understanding if you don’t want to listen to me.’

“Put away the map, Billy.” Hal instructed.

“Hal.” Frank spoke. “How come you don’t want to listen to him.”

“Because I don’t, that’s why.” Hal snapped.

Smug, Billy glanced at Joe. “Someone gets immature when they are tired.”

“What do you got, Bill?” Frank asked.

“Well. It just seems to me, that somewhere in the longevity of his driving and navigational skills, Uncle Hal forgot the basic premises of Geometry, that the shortest distance . . .”

Hal finished the sentence, ‘between two points is a straight line. I know this. I mapped out the perfect route.’

“But did you?” Billy asked. “Have you been to this side of the country.”

“Yes.” Hal said smug. “We canvas all the time in the UWA.”

“So you are pretty much aware of the natural erosion process that takes place.”

All four men set their eyes on Billy.

“What?” Billy asked. “None of you heard this, or are all of you looking at me because you are so well aware of it that you think I am speaking to you like idiots.”

“Natural erosion process?” Frank asked.

“Then you don’t know.” Billy said. “Well, this side of the country has a long history of a natural erosion process. Hence the grand

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canyon, Yellowstone park. All that neat stuff. With weather changes, storm occurrences, plate shifting . . .”

“Billy.” Hal spoke with a hint of a snicker. “We are all ver much impressed with your knowledge. But really, what does that have to do with our mapped out route.”

“Well, I would think that you would take into consideration the geographically vulnerable locations for erosion when planning out the route. Hence finding a path of least resistance.”

“Man.” Frank shook his head once. “Listen to him talk. Way to talk Bill.”

“Thanks, Uncle Frank.” Billy smiled.

“Path of least resistance?” Hal asked.

“Yes.” Billy replied. “The area, like I said, least vulnerable.”

“Billy, really.” Hal said, “Is it going to make that big of a difference.”

“Oh, yes. Because with natural erosion, which there will be. And with out proper road maintenance, which there has been you can get . . .”

Hal screeched the truck to a halt.

Billy pointed. “That.”

“Fuck.” Hal hit his hand on the steering wheel.

“See.” Nilly smiled.

“Fuck.” Hal opened the truck door. “The fuckin road is gone.”

With a nearly excited, ‘oh shit’ Elliott hurried from the truck. “Oh, shit.” EH spoke out loud looking across a newly formed canyon where a road once was.

“Holy God.” Joe spoke in awe. “What happened.”

Frank answered. “Natural erosion,. Right Bill.”

“Yep. Overflow of that river, caused a shift.” Billy pointed.

Hal walked to the edge. “I don’t believe this.”

“Or this.” Frank spoke upbeat. Check out the name of the river.” He showed the map to Hal. “Here we are right. Look at the river name.”

Hal whined.

“What?” Joe asked. “What is it.”

Frank showed him.

Elliot was curious as well. “What’s the name?”

“Wayside.” Frank answered.

Elliott shook his head. “I don’t get it.”

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“It means.” Hal spoke up irritated. “My feeble minded brother is referring to his dream when . . .” Turning to face everyone, the piece of ground which Hal thought was sturdy, gave in, and with a crack of concrete, Hal plunged. He slid rapidly down the hillside, catching himself, on an old branch.

“Hal!” Joe charged forward. “Are you all right?”

Aggravated, Hal answered. “Yes.”

“Hal fell by the wayside.” Frank spoke in awe. “Oh my God. Hey Hal.” Frank leaned over the canyon and extended his hand to Hal. “Guess what you did?”

“Don’t say it Frank.” With a grunt, Hal lifted onto the level area.

“But you . . .”

“Don’t” Hal brushed himself off.

“Fell by the wayside.” Frank snickered.

“I told you not to say it. Asshole.”

“But you did.” Frank followed as Hal marched to the truck. “You fell by the wayside.”

“Frank!” Hal spun around yelling. “Enough!”

“Who’s the coolest psychic dreamer. Me.” Frank nodded.

“All right. All right.” Joe interjected. “All irritating aside. What are we gonna do now. Hal?”

Pausing in his motion to get in the truck, Hal stormed back to Frank, snatched the map from his hand, then in his stride, grabbed onto Billy.

~~~~~

“Sorry, I’m late.” Carol hurried into the back room at Ben from Fabrics store. “I didn’t miss it. Did I?”

“Nope.” Marma answered. “Just waiting for that particular phone call that all is ready.”

“Good. I thought Judge Jason would never stop creating laws for joint council to pass.”

“He’s creating new laws.”

“Oh, yeah, and they are kind of funny.” Carol chuckled. “I kind of think it’ll make court cases easier in the domestic area.”

“What kind of laws.”

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“For example, the divorce law.”

“There’s divorce?” Marma asked.

“Well, there’s been one. Female Dr. Hayes. He wants to abolish the waiting period of a month on female filed only. Which makes sense. I mean, he’s asking the woman to wait a month before finality. But, if the male files, the new law states, if the man is stupid enough to ant to divorce and separate from a precious commodity, divorce if final, no questions asked, the moment the woman signs.”

“That makes sense, it really . . .” Marma paused to answer the ringing phone. “Unique Boutique. Good. Thanks.” She hung up. “Things are in order.”

“We’re ready?”

“Absolutely.” Marma turned to the computer,

“You seem better about doing this.”

“I do. That’s because it’s nothing bad. It’s actually very funny. And the likelihood of it working is slim, plus we know it won’t last. Right?”

“Right. What are you doing to him?”

“First I’ll call and send the signal, then I will call back and make a suggestion. My suggestion . . .” Marma paused to laugh. “Since Dr. Hayes has a underlying hatred toward women, I want to suggest he falls madly in love. Madly, dancing in the street in love.”

Carol felt her heart sink. “No, I like the female Dr. Ayes. You cant’ do that to her.”

“I’m not doing anything to her” Marma said. “Trust me, the target woman won’t go for it, it will be funny, and Ellen has no competition. In fact, I’d better get moving, our target of Dr. Hayes’ affection is waiting outside of the clinic lab.”

“Who’s the target.”

Marma smiled. “Josephine.”

^^^^

“Council meeting. Council meeting.” Dean muttered to himself in the clinic lab. He gathered up his clinic work, a pseudo clean up, until he returned. He really didn’t need anything to take to the meeting. In fact, Dean couldn’t figure out why he had to be there. But since he didn’t

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want to be tracked down by Danny Hoi—who said he would—he prepared to go.

His phone rang

“Hello.” Dean answered. He stood for a second and hung up.

The phone rang again.

“Hello.”

“You will not remember this call.” The voice said. “But the next woman you lay eyes on, you will fall madly in love with. Gleeefully happy. You’ll want to dance in the street at the site of her. Overwhelmed by the feeling of love.”

Click.

With a beep Dean hung up his phone.

In the hall, Misha held back Josephine. She heard the end beeping of the second call.

“What?” Josephine snapped. “What are we waiting for. He wanted to see me.”

“Yes, I know. You have to go in there . . .” Misha held out her hands to Josephine. “But let me . . . let me go first.” Smug, Misha turned and with arrogance walked into the lab. Dean was facing the back wall. “Dean.” She called out. “I would like to speak to you.”

Dean turned around.

“Yeah, me too Skippy.” Josephine hiccupped after she spoke. “What the hell do you want?”

Horrified, Misha peered over her shoulder to see Josephine behind her, then with another turn, she glanced at Dean who just stared.

~~~~~

It was something so simple as a glance that spoke more than any words to Ellen. A message perhaps from Robbie in that peaceful smile he gave her as she walked from the room just after breakfast.

A few minutes was all she planned on being gone. She wanted to go change her clothes and double check that she was able to hang out with Robbie. She walked out that door, glanced back at him, and smiled. That was it.

Prepared to go back to Robbie’s room, Ellen heard the knock on

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her door.

Creed stepped inside with two words that frightened Ellen more than anything.

Robbie's gone.

Every bit of Ellen shook. In that few moments, Robbie took advantage and slipped away. He was serious when he had said to her that he would try to make it on his own, and he did it, he made it out. Ellen felt alone, and frightened for Robbie. What would he face out there, alone.

A fanfare about his escape was not made, except for the act that Creed assured her he would make sure security was heightened to protect her. Creed didn't seem to care much whether Robbie stayed or went. But Ellen did.

By the window in her room, Ellen stood, staring out into the barren streets of what once was Los Angeles. She could see the streets where cars still remained. The pavement cracked and weeds began to grown. There wasn't much green outside her window, everything looked dead. More Dean than any place Ellen had ever seen.

But more so then looking for signs of flourishing foliage, Ellen learned her view. She wanted to know and recognize instantly if there was the slightest change. A car moved. A clearing made. A drapery drawn. Anything. The smallest change outside her window would tell her one thing.

Robbie was out there.

Ellen was certain Robbie would make it to her. Without a doubt she knew that. It was just a matter of when.

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"About a hundred and society strong." Mick explained in his walk with Johnny. "We don't train our Lodi army like the military, and it is strictly volunteer. No regiment, most men are a apart, like the old time militia. But I would like you to join."

"Absolutely." Johnny nodded.

"Good. Because I saw some skill in you I haven't seen before."

"My father has been training me since twelve."

Mick smiled. "I have a feeling Frank trained you very well."

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“Chief!” The call of Mick’s name carried down the street.

Mick turned around. “Buzz, what’s wrong?” He knew by the look on his face, and tone to his voice, a problem was at hand.

“Need your decision.” Buzz said. “Radio monitoring picked up some old Morse Code. A distress signal. SOS of sorts. Basically the message said. Community under attack. Twenty miles due east Davenport. In hiding. Send help.”

“Your shitting me?” Mick asked. “That’s on society side. No mention who’s attacking?”

“Nope. My guess. Savages.” Buzz answered.

“We can make it there in an hour. Let’s load the chopper with a six man gun team and see if we can aid,.” Mick saw Buzz hake his head. “No? Why?”

“Panatella was operated on last night for appendicitis. He’s our only pilot.”

“Aw.” Mick winced. “Son of a bitch.”

Johnny tapped Mick on the shoulder. “I’ll fly the chopper.”

Mick slowly turned to Johnny. “You?”

“Yeah. Been handling choppers since I was sixteen. I’m pretty good. Though Henry said I make some wild turns.”

“You . . . fly as well. What are you superman?” Mick asked.

“I try.” Johnny said with a smile. “But I can do this. Let me.”

Mick gave it a few moments of thought. “All right. Let’s go.” He gave a leading tug to Johnny.

“Chief, I can take him.” Buzz suggested.

“Nope.” Mick spoke as he walked backwards. “You’re in charge of Lodi. I’m going out on this one.”

Buzz nodded as he watched Mick and Johnny walk away. “Cool. Wait.” He blinked. “I’m in charge of Lodi?”

^^^^

Seemingly self adjusted to Joe’s backside, Danny had to shuffle some in Joe’s office chair to get comfortable. He did hold that look of irritation like Joe when the door opened and Dean walked in. “Well, Dean. Nice of you to finally join us.”

“I’m sorry.” Den said closing the door. He looked at Danny

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Henry, Jason and Sgt. Owens. "I kind of lost track of time."

Jason noticed all eyes shifted to him. "No, don't look at me. I'm not responsible." He gave a half smirk.

"No, I'm really serious." Dean said as he sat down. "I lost time." He scratched his head. "I think I may have dozed off in the lab. I don't know. One minute I'm standing there, the next . . ." He shrugged. "Ten minutes had passed."

"How are you feeling?" Danny asked.

"Good." Dean said. "Amazingly refreshed or some reason."

Henry rolled his eyes slightly. "He napped. You know you do that Dean, sleep on your counter."

"Yeah." Dean agreed. "So did I miss anything."

"No." Danny answered. "We were waiting on you. We actually were discussing the dart game tonight."

"Oh." Dean winced. "Henry, speaking of which. I can't take Nick tonight."

"What do you mean you can't take Nick. You always take Nick on dart night." Henry argued.

"I can get Andrea to watch him if you want."

Henry huffed. "This is so weekend father like of you Dean. Taking the kid only to pass him off as to the grandparents."

"Henry." Danny tried not to laugh.

"Don't worry." Dean assured. "It won't be long. I just have some boxes to pack, and move. You know, time is short. Frank will be back and I want to get the housing resituated before him and Ellen return."

"Housing resituated?" Danny asked.

"Yes." Dean spoke nonchalantly. "I'm moving Frank into the house, and I'm taking his hose. I'm breaking up with Ellen."

"What?" Henry blasted. "What brought this on?"

Danny was just as shocked. "You're breaking up with Ellen? It sounds like your just . . . I don't know giving her to Frank."

Still speaking as if nothing was even odd, Dean continued. "Oh really, I am. Just need space for myself. Some freedom. In fact, I'm thinking of giving Ellen a divorce as a present." He looked at Jason. "I'd like to discuss that with you."

"No problem." Jason nodded. "It will be a good time to test my new divorce ordinance."

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“Good.” Dean smiled, then noticed the silent faces of danny and henry just staring. “What? What’s wrong.”

Danny shook his head. “Just a little surprised that’s all. Let’s . . . let’s just get on with the meeting. First order of business. The women . . .”

“Speaking of women.” Dean flipped open his notebook. “Has anyone noticed how attractive Josephine has been looking lately.”

Silence.

Dean shrugged. “Maybe it’s me.”

“Yeah, Dean.” Henry said. “It is. You weirdo.”

“OK, no name calling. “Danny spoke. “The . . . women, not including Josephine.” He cringed when Dean smiled. “They want to go on strike. Not work. I convinced them that they couldn’t fairly strike unless the negotiated in good faith. So . . . Anyone object to me setting up the arbitration to occur in say . . . one week.” He saw he didn’t get a disagreement. “Good. Let’s let Joe and Hal handled that.”

Dean huffed.

Danny looked up. “What?”

“Hal.” Dean shook his head.

“Problem with Hal?” Danny asked.

“I hate him. He’s so arrogant.” Dean said.

Sgt. Owens, who was quiet, finally spoke up. “You hate Captain Slagel.”

“Yes.” Dean answered. “In fact I can see him and me going at it.”

Henry snickered. “I would love to see him and you go at it.”

“You hate Hal?” danny asked.

Before Dean could respond, a single knock happened upon the officer door and John Matoose walked in.

“Danny, I hate to interrupt.” John said on his entrance. “But monitoring picked up a radio signal. In fact, old Morse Code call for help.”

Immediately Danny peered “Joe?”

“No.” John shook his head. “It’s coming from near Davenport. A community under attack.”

Jason interjected. “Must be savage attack. The society would make a move like that right now.”

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John agreed. "My thoughts too. Danny, I'd like to load a bird with eight good men and fly there. I can be there in an hour, we can assist. I'd also like to get Sgt. Doyle to fly a second chopper to pick up any injured so we can get them here faster."

Danny shook his head. "John, I don't think. That's a lot of fuel, and you and Sgt. Doyle. Right now, we're vulnerable as it is . . ."

"Danny." John interrupted. "This is a community under attack."

"And I have beginnings to worry about. What if it is society diversion."

Henry disagreed. "I don't think so. George is too wrapped up in finding Johnny. This is real." Henry saw the debate on Danny's face. "You're in charge."

Danny looked at Jason.

Jason gave a tilt of his shoulder. "I say . . . give the order."

Danny nodded. "OK, John go ahead. Check in with me before you lift off."

"Got it, thanks. And I'll check in during as well." Grabbing his radio, John hurried to leave, immediately barking out orders as he did so.

Danny still stared at the close door. He shook his head in awe. "Wow. Was I authoritarian or what? Man, I felt like Joe." He chuckled. "OK, where were we?"

Dean lifted his pencil as a signal. "I hate Hal."

Calmly, like Joe would do, Danny nodded in acknowledgment, smiled then continued on to the next subject.

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Robbie pretty much knew he wasn't in Beginnings anymore. And though he wasn't the expert on Los Angeles, he guessed he wasn't anywhere near Wilshire Boulevard.

The escape route, the sneak away tunnel the kids used, or at least one of them, took Robbie on a long journey through an old subway--where the means of going topside were blocked off, to a maintenance tunnel, until finally a sewer system.

Having walked many of beats in Beginnings Robbie estimated his distance traveled to be close to five miles. Not that he had walked the entire distance. The teens that routinely escaped had quite the barbaric

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set up. One that got him out freely without problems.

Jeremiah led him most of the way, then left him off about a mile from the point of origin. Robbie continuously played the directions in his head.

“When ever you come to any turn, look for a small red circle with an arrow in it.” Jeremiah’s instructions were.

And they were there. Right where Jeremiah said they would be.

A small opening, hard for Robbie to squeeze through, led him to a set of subway tracks where—just like Jeremiah said—was a hand activated ‘push cart’ that road the rails until the door to the maintenance tunnel. The Maintenance tunnel was easy, and so was the sewer system.

The beam of light that came from the sun peeking through the manhole without a cover was Robbie was Robbie’s final guiding light. He followed it, he climbed the ladder, and made it to the street.

Initially, without a doubt, Robbie was blind when he emerged. Pain hit him with the bright sun, and when the ability to see returned, Robbie was hit with the realization, he was lost.

He had never been to Los Angeles, and he admitted to himself, that he was glad he was able to see the apocalyptic version. To him, it was pretty cool. Far better than any movie ever depicted it to look in a post downfall world.

Wherever he was, prior to the plague, the street was a main drag. And obviously, the drune teens frequented there. That was certain by the clearing circle made not too far from the manhole opening.

The paved streets cracked some, not as much as Robbie had seen all over the country. He guessed because growth seemed so limited in Los Angeles. There was little green, if any, around. The magnitude and the speed in which the plague hit was reiterated by the scene Robbie witnessed.

Like all over, signs of rioting and looting were minimal. Cars weren’t left abandoned, they actually were still parked in their spots. The paint of their bodies faded from the weather and the sun. Papers blew about the streets. Robbie found himself on a section of a street that seemed to be plagued with restaurants. Fast food. Thai. The warm breeze that hit him carried an eerie silence.

No noise.

Robbie gave a shudder, then a smile. He had seen it before in a

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movie and he had to do exactly like his hero, Robert Neville did.

Stepping out further into the street, Robbie yelled out his loudest. "There is no phone ringing!"

He listened to his voice echo just a tad, then pretty pleased, Robbie grinned again. "Cool."

With a look left to right, Robbie sought out the nearest corner. There had to be a street sign somewhere. And there was, he saw it, and when he recognized the name, it made sense. Hollywood Boulevard. In actuality, the street name helped. Robbie knew from the view of Ellen's room, that the building near Wilshire Blvd was by a park. With a starting point and a destination, Robbie needed two other things, a gun and a map.

Surely, with all the businesses about, Robbie would be able to find something. Turning again, to begin his search, one store at a time, he saw it. The vision of the building made Robbie slow down in awe. It called to him and screamed 'follow me' to Robbie's inner curiosity.

It was something Robbie didn't want to walk away from, not at all, not while it was still light out. And perhaps the place wouldn't provide a map, but he stood a good chance of finding some sort of weapon in there.

With a purpose to go inside, Robbie moved in the direction of the House of death Wax Museum.

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There was a stare of thought that graced Joe's face in the after moments of the phone call he had just ended.

"Well?" Frank asked.

"We sent two choppers." Joe answered. "Danny said last contact with John Matoose they were nearing the coordinates."

"So we should here something again soon."

"Hopefully." Joe put the phone in his pocket and started to head back in the direction of the truck with Frank. "And hopefully as well, that will ease our mind for when we stop to get some sleep."

"Since I'm driving now, when do you want to stop."

"Closer to California. I'd like to make the last leg a short one. Especially since we aren't stopping for all that long."

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“Sounds good.”

“Frank.” Joe stopped walking. “What’s wrong with your brother?”

Frank peered over to where Hal stood with Elliott. “Whining. He’s having a problem with authority right now.”

Curiously, Joe looked at him. “Authority?”

“Captain.” Elliott spoke calm, yet a bit of his voice held the tone of a hiding laughter.

“No, Elliott, I’m serious.” Hal tossed out his hand. “Look, I know I am probably making a big deal out of this. Do you think I am.”

“Yes.”

“Who asked you.” Hal continued, “But it irks me. He irks me. I didn’t think it was possible, but he’s doing it. He’s trying to take over, giving me orders, undermining my authority. You name it.”

“Captain, taking the risk of you chewing me another asshole, I . . .” Elliott stopped when he saw Hal lift a finger. “What, Captain.”

Hal’s lips formed a circle as slowly produced t words. “Chewing? Me chewing you another . . . asshole, as you said. Hmm. Hating to disappoint you Elliott, I don’t believe that I would chew you another asshole.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Speak it.”

“Fine.” Elliott stated. “You’re over reacting.”

“I am not.” Hal defended. “You see him with me. You hear him . . .”

“But, Captain . . .”

“What are you deaf. Good God Elliott, it surprises me at times that you actually are my right hand man.”

“See, Captain . . .”

“And you interrupt as well.”

Elliott huffed. “All right then. You’re right. You have reason to feel this way.”

“Thank you.” Hal smiled. “Now, to just figure out what to do about it.”

“Just keep telling yourself it is short lived.”

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“I could do that. However, I am still stuck on the fact that this is actually occurring. That I, Hal Slagel, am being shaken, my nerves unrattled. Do you think he does it on purpose.”

“No.” Elliott answered. “Not at all.”

“No? You don’t think he does it on purpose.”

“Actually, Captain. I believe he does it on . . .” Elliott pointed to Billy. “Frank’s request.”

Hal, hands behind his back, looked over to where Frank stood with Billy. “I never thought I’d see the day where my brother had mental retaliatory ammunition over me. And he does, in the form of a very small child. Odd.” Hal shrugged. “I hope this isn’t a sign of things to come for me and Billy. I’d like to like my nephew.”

“I’m sure it won’t last any longer than this trip. I mean, Frank is encouraging this now. But when we get back, Dean is in control again.”

“That’s true.” Hal smiled. “And Dean wouldn’t encourage it, because, unlike me and Frank, Dean and I actually have no problem with each other.”

~~~~~

“Hal Slagel is an arrogant Asshole who I really think I am beginning to hate.” Dean said. In such a discussing style he sat, hands folded in a chair perched center of his clinic lab. “What do you think?”

“About?” Josephine swayed some as she sat across from him. “And why . . . why are you asking me Skippy?”

“Because I needed someone to talk to. You strike me as a very understanding woman.”

Her head tilted to the side and she gave Dean a quirky look. “I’m not. Never have been.”

“And, well, you know . . .” Dean shrugged “Looking very attractive lately.”

“Well, that I am.” Josephine nodded. “Now what are you asking me about?”

“Your opinion of Hal Slagel.”

“Who?”

“Hal Slagel.”

Josephine took a deep breath, and stared up. “Hal Slagel. Hal Slagel.” She shook her head. “Nah, don’t know him. Name sound

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familiar. I don't him."

"Sure you do."

"Skippy." Josephine barked "Didn't I just tell you I don't? Why you asking for my opinion if you are gonna argue with me."

"I'm not arguing, it's just that you do know him. Hal slagel. Joe slagel's son."

"Who?"

"Joe slagel. Our leader of this community."

"Oh." Josephine nodded in discovery. "Joey. Yeah."

"It's his son, I'm talking about."

"You mean the mean drunk." Josephine said.

"No, that's Frank. The other son."

"Armless?"

"Um, no that's Robbie. I'm talking about Hal."

"I don't know Hal."

"He runs the other town. Wears a red bandana, civil war uniform."

Josephine snapped her finger. "Yeah. I know him. He looks like a younger Joey."

"That's Because he's Joe's son."

"Christ Almighty another slagel running around. It's a goddamn take over. How long's he been here."

"Six months."

"Where the hell have I been?"

Dean shrugged. "Busy. And speaking of busy. Tonight. Ar you . . ."

"Dean?" Misha's voice carried softly into the lab.

Slowly, almost mesmerized Dean gazed up. From his lips, softly, a whisper uncontrolled flowed. "She's so beautiful."

"Who?" Josephine spun hard to look and nearly fell off her chair. "Her. The foreigner. Christ. What are you blind? Wait. You were sorry."

Dean, still focused stood up. "I have to be near her. I believe she can make me dance in the street."

"Well so can a few good shots of bourbon." Josephine stood up and noticed the way Dean stared. "Hey." She snapped her finger in front of him. "Knock it off. You're married. I'm telling."

Dean smiled and turned to Josephine. "Please. Please do. Tell

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everyone.” He boasted. “Excuse me.” with a hurry, Dean moved to Misha.

“Tell?” Josephine shrugged then, with a slight wobble walked by Dean. “All right. If that’s what you want. I’ll tell.” She moved to the door, stopped and gave a once over to Misha. “She ain’t all that. Nothing compared to what I was in my hey day. And I wouldn’t kiss that mouth of hers skippy.” Josephine waved her finger. “Ya don’t know where its been.”

Really not getting what Josephine implied, Dean faced Misha with a smile. “Now, what can I do for you?”

Misha just smiled. To her, little did Dean know, he was already doing it.

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A short distanced, split second recognizance was what Sgt. Doyle flew in the first chopper. The lighter bird, empty all but for himself. He was able to maneuver, view, use the radar and divert if he saw any signs of what was feared to be a set up.

About forty seconds behind him was John Matoose.

“Smoke ahead.” Sgt. Doyle spoke over the radio. “Thick, this has to be it.”

“Anything in your view?” John asked. “I’m seeing the tail of the smoke now.”

“Moving in.” Sgt. Doyle maneuvered. “Proceeding to drop in altitude and hopefully . . .” His attention was caught. “We have movement.”

“Repeat.” John requested. “Movement where?”

“Straight ahead.”

“Straight ahead?” John asked.

“Twenty miles. Airborne. Attitude . . .”

“Airborne?” John requested. “Someone’s in the air? Are they in your scope? Can you identify them?”

“That’s a negative.” Sgt. Doyle replied. “Smoke is too thick. I advice Longhorn, to pull back until I give the ‘all clear’.”

“Roger that, Scout, Longhorn pulling back.”

The smoke was like a wall, black and thick. Nothing below him

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could be seen. Ready to drop in altitude, the speed of the blades whipped the smoke and as Sgt. Doyle prepared to turn, the smoke parted like a curtain exposing in a sudden manner the oncoming site of another helicopter.

“Shit.” Up and to the left, Sgt. Doyle soared the chopper.

John Matoose saw the sudden movement of Sgt. Doyle’s helicopter on his radar. “Scout this is Longhorn, come in. What just happened?”

“Who the hell was that?” Mick asked Johnny. “Someone else is here? Who the fuck else is here?”

Johnny hook his head. “I’ll turn around again.”

“Did you get a good look.” Mick looked over his shoulder to his men. “Did anyone get a good look. Was that society.”

Johnny only shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Mick gave an upward motion of his head. “Prepare to engage.”

Johnny lifted his hand.

Mick adjusted the radio. “I’ll try to see if we can get anything on here.” Just as he said that a voice, Sgt. Doyle’s emerged.

It broke up some at first. “. . . chopper. We have you on our radar.”

Mick looked at Johnny, “Radar? They have radar?”

“Please identify yourself.” Sgt, Doyle continued. “Do you copy, identify yourself.”

“We were about to ask you the same thing.” Mick spoke.

“We are in response to a distress signal. What is you position here?” Sgt. Doyle sounded official.

Mick gave a quirky look. “Same. Are you Society?”

“That’s a negative. This is Sgt. Doyle, United western Alliance, Beginnings Division Army.”

Johnny hurried a look at Mick. “Beginnings is here.”

Mick nodded. “I’m chief Michael Owens of Lodi.”

Silence.

A background voice from John Matoose’s chopper flowed through. “Lodi? Did that guy say Lodi? What the fuck is Lodi?”

Sgt. Doyle let out a chuckle. “Oh, shit, hey Mick is that you?”

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“Tim?” Mick asked in shock. “Fuck, I didn’t put two and two together with the Doyle part. I see you made it to Beginnings.”

“Absolutely. I take it then we’re heading in together on this one.”

“Absolutely.” Mick responded. “What do you got.”

“Getting a visual now . . . hold . . . savages.” Sgt. Doyle stated. “Definitely savages. I don’t see any civilian movement at ll.”

“The distress said they were hiding.”

“Let’s hope.”

Johnny looked at Mick. “Inform we are turning about in coming in northeast.”

“Tim, we are changing course and coming in northeast.”

“Roger that, Mick. Beginnings will make a air sweep, then prepare to engage in ground involvement.”

“Copy that, Beginnings, we’re right with you.” Mick exhaled then motioned to his men. “Prepare.” He himself grabbed his rifle and started to embark to the back. He laid his hand on Johnny’s shoulder as he passed. “Do your thing.”

Johnny veered the bird and planted his thoughts and mind set only on the battle ahead. Fears about a confrontation or what would take place when he faced—unexpectedly—the men from his home would pelt him soon enough and in full force when he landed that chopper.

It didn’t take long. The engagement ensued.

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Sgt. Doyle landed his chopper about a half of a mile from the small town in which they embarked on a rescue. He kept the chopper in a ready mode. Ready to take off and aid by air if needed. And despite his orders that he was not to get involved, he kept himself in a ready mode to run in and help out in fighting off the meaning savages that didn’t get take out by the air assault.

In a way Sgt. Doyle envied those who got to fight. Things had been kind of dull for him as far as any action went.

The smoke in a literal sense would take some time to clear, btu the smoke from the action in a metaphoric sense, didn’t take to long at all.

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The popping of gunfire slowed down, and the call o the radio from John Matoose that the town was clear and a search for survivors was underway, let sgt. Doyle know it was finished.

He did find it peculiar that Lodi landed their chopped on the other side of town. Seemingly some distance from Beginnings as if they didn't even want to get in contact. Sgt. Doyle actually began to think that in some weird way Mick was going to finish up his ground job ad sneak off like bandits in the night. His confirmation of that came when Mick radioed Doyle and told him the job was finished they were packing up and heading out.

However Mick's move was quickly thwarted when Beginnings found the survivors in their hiding spot. Survivors a plenty. Some of which injured, and Lodi's air mobility was needed.

It had been a while since Tim Doyle had spoke to Mick, a man he actually liked, and he wanted to at least say 'hello'. Tired of waiting, and knowing things were safe, Tim embarked toward the small town.

Just as he arrived he could see through the smoke movement. Some people straggled out into the street from what once was an old bank building. Savage bodies laid about, bullet spewed and motionless.

Spotting John Matoose, Tim lifted his rifle in the air as a signal.

John hurried to him. "Couldn't follow orders, huh." he joked.

"Nah. Not me. What's the situation."

"Approximately seventy survivors. Have about twenty injured that need immediate medical attention. Lodi has to take a few. Weights a factor. The rest will pack up and head to Beginnings."

"Where's the Lodi team now?" Tim asked.

"Taking their injured." John pointed to the Beginnings men that escorted those who couldn't walk. "Like us."

"Did you get to meet them."

"Not really."

"Come on." Tim grabbed a hold of John's arm and turned him. "You have to meet Mick."

"How do you know him?"

"Mick? I met him through his town. Lodi is a small Ohio town that literally built an iron wall of protection from the society. But, come on, John, we know the society. Iron wall or not, would that have worked? No. I knew Mick, his resistance." he spoke as they walked. "As head of

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the society military I was able to keep them hid and buried. Mick housed and helped some of my defectors when they needed it. That's how he acquired some men. Good man. And speaking of which." Tim pointed.

John smiled, he was anxious to meet this Mick. He saw him. "Big guy."

"Huge."

Ready to be introduced, a grin of greeting on his face, John's whole expression changed and dropped when Mick stepped aside and he saw . . . Johnny. "No." John growled in a soft whispered.

"What." Tim asked. "Shit." He saw him too.

Johnny, in his step from the chopper door, saw them, and knew . . . game over.

"Tim." Mick said brightly with an extended hand. "Good to see . . ." he slowed when John Matoose brushed right by him. "You." He watched a determined and focused John rush straight to Johnny. "Shit."

"You little son of a bitch!" John barreled at Johnny. "I thought you were dead." Shoulder first, entire body weight blasting, John's force of hit threw Johnny straight back and with a slam into the side of the helicopter.

With a hard shove, Johnny pushed John from him.

John stumbled back, but didn't lose his footing. Without missing a beat, his right arm swept around, grabbed hold of the revolver and in an upward motion of the gun, John shifted the chamber and aimed.

"Hold it!" Mick's hand slammed down on the gun. "Hold it!"

Johns eyes stayed focused, he didn't take them from Johnny. Not at all.

Johnny didn't move. "John.." He swallowed. "Look . . ."

"I don't want to hear it!" John blasted. "You should have died! Elliott should have killed you!"

An encircling of men accrued in a curiosity of the emotional words that rang out.

"Put the gun down!" Mick ordered.

John ignored him.

"John." Johnny tried to peak. "Things have changed. I . . ."

"Bullshit!" John raged. "Don't even go there, Johnny. Don't I won't buy it. These people can. But I won't. Yeah, things changed. You are the cause. Do you even know how much you changed loves! How

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much you hurt people! Have you any clue how much you've changed your families life?"

"Take it easy!" Mick blasted.

"I will not take it easy!"

"And I will not let you shoot this man!" Mick shouted.

Tim, in a calm, manner, intervened. "Mick." He walked closer to Mick. "This kid . . . t his kid is the epitome of a traitor. This kid turned his back on his home."

Mick spun to Tim. "And this kid sought political asylum in Lodi. I granted it. You know my rules, Tim. You know them. My law is whatever this kid did prior to stepping through my gate doesn't have a bearing on how he is treated by me. I determine that now. No one else. He's one of my men. And I will allow no one, not the society nor Beginnings to put a bullet in him. Is that clear."

John Matoose lowered his weapon. "He's right." he put the revolver away. "Let's reserve that honor for his father." He turned and began to walk away. "See at the bird. Chief Owens." He gave a nod and walked off.

"OK, show's over!" Mick called out. "Let's wrap this up!" He faced Johnny and motioned his head. "Go ahead, get things moving."

Johnny stepped to Mick and mouthed the words, 'thank you.'

Mick acknowledged that and returned to Tim. He exhaled with almost a whistle. "Well."

"Is he the reason you wanted to slip out unseen?" Tim asked.

"Yeah." Mick answered. "I knew someone would recognize him."

"You know, it will only be a matter of time before Beginnings confronts you with this. No, wait, they won't."

Curiously Mick looked up. "They won't."

"No. I know Joe, he'll not even want to be bothered. Written off. New Bowman is run by another Slagel with the same attitude. Beginnings won't bother . . . Frank will."

"His father." Mick nodded. "But, Tim, he's a kid."

"I know. But Mick, my man, you have no idea what this kid did. None."

"I have an inkling. But don't you think things can change. Don't you think regrets, guilt . . . missing . . . don't you think that can change

someone.”

Tim looked over at Johnny. “I really doubt that with him.”

“I don’t. I listen to him. I . . . feel his words. I have a good judge of character, Tim, you know that. People don’t get over on me.” Mick said. “He, unlike most of this world has a family out here in this fucked up world. A family he wants.”

Tim laughed. “Why do I get this feeling you are gonna try to be the emotional hero here.”

“Maybe in a way I am. Maybe in a way, if I can keep him out of the way for a while, maybe his family will view him differently. He might not be welcome back in Beginnings . . .” Mick shrugged. “That’s fine. But maybe he can at least be welcome back to his family . . . his . . . his father.”

Tim gave a look of doubt.

“No, Tim, call it a hunch. Call it a gut feeling. Call it being a father myself.” Mick spoke with passion. “I just know. I have a son. And I’ll tell you, it wouldn’t matter what he did. I would always love my son. And that’s what I am banking on with Johnny. That somehow . . .” Mick gave a quick glance to Johnny who looked scared. “No matter what . . . his father still loves him.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

'I Love LA' was the wording spewed forth on the handful of tee shirts Robbie had picked up from the souvenir shop. Still in plastic bags they were in great shape. He stuffed them in the duffle bag he grabbed. They squeezed in nicely and added very little weight to the rest of the trinkets Robbie picked up in his search for a weapon and a map. The gun was easy, actually Robbie located that in the first non-franchised store he ran across. The gun shop had been emptied out. He found other necessities as well, a blanket and lantern. But the trinkets were the bonus. Trinkets that included a few porno tapes, a Chinese thumb torture, some much CD's, and two cans of refried beans with the Taco Bell label still on them, for Frank. Courtesy of the Taco Bell that stood on Hollywood Boulevard.

The map, something that seemed so easy to find was actually the hardest item to locate. Robbie was on a scavenger hunt and the map was the last thing to get. At first, he tried to convince himself that he didn't need a map. The place where Ellen was sat near a park. Park meant lots of trees, how hard would a large patch of trees be to spot in LA? So climbing to the highest point he could find, Robbie looked. Pockets of overgrowth were plenty and Robbie couldn't see beyond the growth.

Three hours and two miles later, Robbie found one. Underneath the front desk of a cheap motel, the map was more than he bargained for. He also found a hotel directory there, *that* was what ended up giving him his direction.

*Park Plaza Hotel, located by beautiful MacArthur Park.* The brochure read, and it gave the location. The moment Robbie saw Wilshire Boulevard, he felt it in his gut that was where he had to be.

Packed up, map in hand, Robbie headed there. He wasn't too far, seven miles perhaps. He would be there by sundown he was certain, and he hoped, out of L.A. with Ellen by nightfall.

^^^^

Joe contemplated, he really did, on whether he should deliver the entire news to Frank about the Iowa rescue. He knew his debate was

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obvious, but knowing it was Frank, Joe also knew he could be slow in giving a response and Frank wouldn't notice.

"Well?" Frank asked.

*'Should I or shouldn't I?'* Joe stared at the phone.

"Dad? What happened."

*I want him to stay focused, would he stay focused. Maybe I should wait.*

"No, don't." Frank said. "Tell me now."

"Goddamn it, Frank, quit reading my mind." Joe snapped.

"Everything went fine with the rescue."

"Well what is it you don' want to tell me?" Frank asked as he drove.

"Dan . . . Dan from security . . . well, he was bending your spoons back to normal and he broke three of them."

"Asshole." Frank shook his head. "Are you sure that's it."

"Positive. And quit reading my mind."

"I can't help it."

"Try." Joe ordered. "Because you never know, you might here something you don't want to hear."

"You're right o that one." Frank peered into her rearview mirror.

"I read Hal's thoughts earlier."

From the back seat Hal looked up. "Oh, you did not."

"Yes, I did." Frank insisted. "And, no Hal, we can not pull over so you can masturbate."

"Christ Frank." Joe winced. "Have some tact, there's a kid present."

"He's the one that wants to do it." Frank stated. "OK, more tact. No Hal, we can not pull over so you can relieve that pent up frustration."

Hal glared at him. "I swear there is something wrong with you."

Frank laughed.

Hal returned to what he was doing. "So go on Elliott."

"I was just thinking, going by Ellen's notes." Elliott reviewed the paper. "I'm getting that if we hit near Wilshire, we might have a good chance. Christopher stated that there are several entrances and one was near a park."

"Aren't there many parks?" Hal asked.

"Yeah, but This one is near a huge hotel. Old. Like Chris

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described.”

“How can you do that?” Hal questioned.

“Do what?” Elliott responded.

“Read while we drive and not get sick. I would be vomiting.”

“Actually . . .” Billy interceded. “It isn’t one’s ability not to get sick, it’s the individual’s ability to stay focused without allowing anything to enter their peripheral vision.”

Hal swung a view Billy’s way. “Oh who asked you.”

“Hey.” Frank barked from the front. “Leave my kid alone.”

“Dean’s kid.” Hal corrected. “Obviously, listen to the way he talks.”

“Well, after being all mine he’ll be like me.”

“Swell.” Hal rolled his eyes. “Just what we need. And why would he be all yours.”

“Dean’s giving him to me.”

“What?” Hal laughed.

“Yeah, I’m serious. He’s giving me his family.” Frank said. “OK, well, Ellen. He’s giving me Ellen when we get back. She’s my prize.”

Hal scoffed. “Sure, Frank.”

“I’m telling you, Hal. Dean said. And . . . he’s probably living me the house too. Bet me he’s divorcing El.”

“Wishful thinking Frank.” Hal argued.

“You’ll see. House, El, kids, all mine. Probably because he’s in love with Misha.”

Again, in a ridicule manner, Hal laughed. “Frank. Listen to you. You live in your own world. Trust me. Dean is not giving you the kids, not giving you Ellen, he isn’t moving you right in his house, nor filing for a divorce. And he certainly . . . certainly is not in love with Misha.”

^^^^

“Dean’s what?” Henry asked, standing with Hector outside of the social hall.

Josephine, lifted her flask, took a swig, gasped, then shuddered. “In love with that foreign girl, Misha.” She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

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“Oh he is not.” Henry scoffed. “You’re lying.”

“Swear.” Josephine raised her hand. “I am not lying.”

“Then you’re drunk.”

“Ok.” She hiccupped. “I’ll give you that. But . . . he’s in love with her. Told me to tell everyone. I am thought I’d start with you two queers first since you to had some weird thing going.” She took another swig. “Now . . . if you’ll excuse me, like Skipppy said, I should shout it from the highest building top. I’m going there now.” In her turn to leave, she bumped into Henry then kept walking. Not straight, but walking.

“Should . . .” Hector pointed. “Should she be doing that.”

“Forget her.” Henry waved his hand out in thought.

“Henry she said she’s going to the highest building . . .”

“Hector, please, do you really think she will shout it. And if she does, what the big deal about her shouting that.”

“I’m not speaking about her shouting, I’m talking about her going to the highest roof top.”

“We’re in Beginnings. How high can she go.” Henry shrugged. “Anyhow . . . what do you make of this.”

“Dean in love with Misha?”

“Yeah. Has to be a Josephine tale.”

“Does she tell tales.” Hector asked.

“She exaggerates.”

“One way to find out.” Hector gave a motion of his head to the clinic. “Let’s go to the source.”

“Sounds good.” Henry started walking with Hector. “You do know, it would make sense if it was. This whole thing a set up to get her.”

“And I would be apt to believe that he was the one that told her about us.”

“Dean can be an asshole sometime. You know he wants to take on Hal.”

Hector paused, but only to laugh. With a shake of his head he continued walking.

Both men kept a stride directly for the clinic. There was some commotion when they entered and that was to be expected, especially with the injured from Iowa arriving shortly. They spotted Misha at the far end of the hall, and as they made their way to the clinic, Dean was

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walking out.

“Dean.” Henry called.

Dean turned, he looked down the other end of the corridor, then approached Henry and Hector. “Hey have you two seen Misha?”

Henry glanced at Hector then back to Dean. “No. I . . .”

“Shit.” Dean shook his head.

“What?” Henry asked.

“I miss her.”

“What!” hector blasted. “What the fuck, Dean, so it’s true.”

“Is what true?” Dean asked.

Distant, but clear, right then and there, Josephine’s voice rang out from outside. “Dean’s in love with Misha.

“That.” Hector said.

Dean inhaled. “Is it my imagination, or is Josephine’s voice extra soothing today?”

Henry gave a quirky look. “You’re fucked up.”

“Dean’s in love with Misha!”

Dean smiled. “Isn’t that nice of her.”

“Dean’s in love with Misha!”

Hector began to get angry. “How long? How long have you . . . been in love with her.”

“Happened suddenly.” Dean shrugged.

“Dean’s in love . . .”

Silence.

It was weird the way the sentence just ended, and no sooner did Henry, Hector and Dean sway a look to the front main doors, Mark from Security burst in.

“Dean.” Mark rushed. “Glad you’re here. We need some help. Josephine fell off the bakery building. She’s OK, but no one wants to touch her.”

Understanding that, Henry and hector hesitated. However Dean, didn’t waste a second, he flew from the clinic.

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There was a certain ring of silence that hung over Johnny’s head everywhere he went from the moment he arrived back in Lodi. Was it his

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imagination, or were the men purposely not saying anything to him. Definitely something was different, Johnny could feel it. He was viewed differently, and that had to all stem from the confrontation with John Matoose.

Why did it have to be John Matoose? Of all people. Where was his father? Robbie? Anyone else. In fact, Johnny was hoping when he heard that it was Beginnings, he would see his Uncle Robbie. Although, Johnny wasn't all that certain Robbie would want to see him.

Mick was unbelievable about everything. Johnny fully expected Mick to pull him aside when they returned and say, 'OK, spill it. What all did you do?' But Mick didn't. He didn't act any differently, nor did he say anything about the Beginnings confrontation. He did tell Johnny on thing, one small piece of advice. It was pretty simple.

'Sometimes starting over is actually moving forward. You just gotta see it.'

And Johnny was starting over. He didn't view it as a move ahead, more so he looked upon the alias in Lodi as a step back. But was it. Away from the society, in any way, shape or form was a giant step in the right direction. The only question on Johnny's mind was, could he keep moving forward in the right direction all the way back home. Not only to Beginnings, but to his family . . . his father.

^^^^

*'Forgive me Dad.'*

Frank's head snapped upward suddenly from his view of the map.

"Frank?" Joe questioned. "What is it?"

Frank shook his head. "Heard something. It was nothing." He rolled up the map. "I guess we're done for the night."

"So we want to stick with Elliott's calculation?" Joe questioned.

"Yeah, that will work. I just want to get going."

"Well, we're stopped for a few hours. Why don't you get some sleep?" Joe asked.

"I will. I want to sit by the fire, have a cigarette wind down and bug Hal."

Joe shrugged. "Sounds good." He gave a pat to Frank's back as

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they walked to the fire.

Frank paused and slowed down to look at Billy all curled up close by in the cartoon sleeping bag. He bent down and kissed him.

“Don’t wake him.” Hal whispered. “Please.”

“Why don’t you like him?” Frank asked as he stood then made his way to sit around the fire.

“Oh, I love him. He just . . . he just drives me a bit insane at times.” Hal stated. “His intelligence baffles me.”

“That’s because he’s so smart.” Frank nodded. “It baffles me too.”

“Yes. Hmm.” Hal spoke snide. “A lot does.”

“What’s that suppose to mean?” Frank asked.

“What do you think.”

“I asked you first.”

“Boys.” Joe silenced them. “Let’s just relax. Tomorrow’s a big day.”

“You’re right.” Frank agreed. “I get Ellen and Robbie away from God.”

“You?” Hal laughed. “Why does it have to be you?”

“Why not?”

“What about me? Elliott.”

Frank laughed.

“Go on, make fun, but you make it out to sound as if you’ll be solely responsible for their rescue.”

“I will.”

“You will not.”

“Bet me.”

“You’re on.” Hal extended his hand. “To be determined later.”

“Can we just . . . please.” Joe lifted his hand, he glanced at Elliott who just seemed so laid back. “Elliott, how do you do it? How do you just not let them rattle you.”

“Oh, Frank does.” Elliott said. “But not right now. I have a very keen ability to block things out. Family trait you can call it.”

“How do you know?” Frank questioned him.

“Excuse me?” Elliott was confused.

“How do you know it is a family trait.” Frank furthered the question.

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“My father had the same ability.”

“You know your father?”

Elliott laughed. “Of course I know my father. Why wouldn’t I?”

Frank shrugged. “Dean said you’re adopted.”

‘Frank.’ Joe warned.

“Dean said.”

Hal mocked. “Dean said. Dean’s a moron. Why in God’s name would he say Elliott’s adopted, when clearly Elliott says he’s not.”

Frank shrugged. “Maybe because he’s genes say he’s Hispanic, but Elliott says he’s German and Irish.”

“I am.” Elliott said.

“But look at you.” Frank pointed.

“Frank.” Elliott stayed calm. “Even if I were adopted. What difference would it make? I wouldn’t love my parents any less. I wouldn’t be angry.”

“I would.” Frank said. “I mean, to find out you weren’t your parent’s kid after all those years of thinking you were. I mean, that’s a hell of a lie to tell your kid. Not telling them when they are young, I can see, but when they get old enough to understand, then you tell them.”

Elliott looked curiously at Frank. “Why are you thinking so deeply about his?”

Hal answered. “Joey. You know Joey is Frank’s son. Joey doesn’t know that.”

Elliott chuckled. “I don’t think Joey will have any doubt as soon as he gets old enough to look in the mirror and question.”

“Did you?” Frank asked.

“No. Why would I.” Elliott answered. “I know I looked different, but that didn’t mean anything. Did you?”

“Me?” Frank asked.

Joe looked up.

“Why would I question?” Frank laughed.

“Because you don’t look like your father or your brothers.”

“I got my mother’s genes.”

“Why didn’t your brothers.”

“All right.” Joe interceded. “Enough of this. Can we just move on to something else. Hal start a new conversation.”

“Can I talk about myself?” Hal asked. “Praise myself and boost.”

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“Yes.” Joe nodded, then rubbed his hands together. “Boast away.”

Frank whined. “Aw, man.” His head flung back. “Why do we have to . . .” Frank froze, in a snap of a motion, all ‘funny’ expression dropped from Frank’s face and was replaced with a cold look when he flung a hard look at Joe.

Quiet took over.

“What?” Joe asked confused. “What’s wrong.”

Hal noticed the stare Frank gave their father, and it filled Hal with an uncomformableness. “Frank, what is it?”

Elliott shook his head. “Am I missing something.”

Frank answered. “No.” still looking at his father he stood up. “Let’s just hope that was some sort of joke. Good night.” Demeanor changed, and saying no more, Frank moved from the fire.

“Dad?” Hal questioned. “Do you know what that’s all about?”

Joe released a slow breath. “I hope not.”

“Again.” Elliott interjected. “What did I miss? Unless, Frank was doing his mind reading thing again.”

Hal saw his father immediately glance up. “Dad? Is that the case? Did Frank read your mind. What were you thinking?”

“Let’s just say . . .” Joe peered over his shoulder at Frank who was settling next to Billy. “Let’s just say something I shouldn’t have been.”

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It didn’t take much to distract the wild dogs that blocked the one entrance to the ramp that led to the underground garage. Actually, the dogs were trained more to get anyone going out. Robbie snuck in with ease. About mid way down, the pack hurled around the bend. Robbie had no choice but to grab the first drune he saw and toss them the dogs’ way.

They enjoyed the quick snack, but Robbie didn’t make it too far before he saw another line of guard head his way. This pack wore gloves similar to the one that Creed wore. And the second Robbie saw the first blue ball of electricity fly his way, he dove watched it hit the wall, then Robbie gained his footing and headed back out of the tunnel.

That particular entrance was the only one that Robbie knew from the outside. He even tried to get into the former hotel where Ellen was

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kept, but it seemed that every entrance was barricaded shut. Concrete walls, old cars, made for it impossible for Robbie to use a door.

He hoped that the nightfall his reason for drawing a blank on getting in that the rise of the next day's sun would give him the answer he sought. Possibly Creed was waiting for Robbie to try something at night and would be more lax in the morning.

Whatever the case, Robbie would try several other buildings. If not luck was had there, he would try and try again. It was only a building he had to topple. And though Robbie was only one person, so was Ellen, and that was his only concern, getting her free from there. Robbie would, it was just a matter of how long it would take.

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In front of the window Ellen felt more alone than she had ever felt. It was there in that room the realization had hit her how far away from her home and family she was. And how long it had been since she had seen them. Each hour alone seemed like a eternity, but a part of Ellen felt as if an end was nearing. She parted the curtains only slightly since Creed had told her he had special forces outside the building. Ellen only hoped Robbie knew that, that the Slagel instinct he had kicked in an he knew he had to be careful.

There was no way for Ellen to know where exactly Robbie was. But she knew he was close,. There was a sense about that. A sense that gave her solace and an instinctual feeling that it all would be over soon. But Robbie being out there wasn't what gave Ellen the most relief. Something else did. She didn't know what bred it, what brought it on, but it was there. It barreled her over like a tidal wave, all of the sudden and out of the blue. A feel of 'good' and 'safety' that could only come from one source. And knowing the feelings she experienced, Ellen took comfort in the fact that it could only mean one thing. Not only was he on his way, but Frank . . . was near.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

January 28<sup>th</sup>

Johnny was still sound asleep on Mick's couch when he left first thing in the morning. The cause of the deep sleep, exhaustion, depression and alcohol. Mick couldn't help it. No matter how hard he tried to view Johnny as a scientist, a traitor, anything that dictated an adult status, all Mick saw was a child. A mere child. And he didn't know why.

A small and silent uproar had begun in Lodi over Johnny. Everyone knew Mick's rules, abided by them, but it didn't stop nor could it stop gossip and the aftermath of such for happening.

A few days only into his residency at Lodi and already Johnny was becoming an outcast. He had done nothing to warrant it, not on Lodi soil, but the outburst of the Beginnings man was a wild fire message that spread to Mick's men and by the end of the day, no one wanted anything to do with Johnny.

They didn't say why, to Mick they were cowards for not being honest. But he guessed their reasoning was Mick would let them have it if they openly admitted the reason for shunning Johnny had to do with what he supposedly did in Beginnings.

In Mick's book it didn't count. And Mick would let them have it, especially Richter who used 'needing some space and alone time' as his excuse for wanting Johnny to no longer be his roommate. More than anything Mick wanted to remind Richter that yes, he was a upstanding Lodi citizen, but prior to that, he was running around in a loin cloth, eating flesh and killing for no reason. Richter was a rehabilitated savage. He of all people had no room to judge.

So Johnny stayed with Mick. Johnny knew and felt what was happening but didn't say much. Mick's advice was to hold on, wait it out, they'd come around. The last thing Mick wanted was for Johnny to leave Lodi. Not only would it be tragic, but it would be a waste of a valuable asset Lodi could have in him.

Mick spoke to Johnny of his own son, Tigger, who would return from a fuel run. Tigger was young, still a teenager, but a value in fuel and supply runs because of his keen ability to get into places no one else could. Johnny would soon find out why that was, and Mick encouraged

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Johnny to stay at his home because he would be the only person in Lodi remotely close to Tigger's own age. Perhaps the youth in Tigger would spark the youth long lost in Johnny and that in return would spark an innocence Beginnings needed to see.

Why Mick felt bad and compelled to Johnny he didn't know. He had more reasons to ignore him than to lure him into his fatherly protection. An inner part of Mick screamed out to help Johnny, that something was missing, that the guilt and regrets Johnny felt were too sincere and too overwhelming to be projected by someone so callous.

Something was amiss about the whole situation, and in time, Mick was sure he'd find out.

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Finally, a moment alone. Joe heard Frank awakening before everyone else, and wanted to seize the opportunity to speak with him. He poured himself a cup of coffee from the pot Frank brewed on the fire, then walked the short distance to where Frank sat on a fallen tree, enjoying morning solitude.

"Up kind of early." Joe said.

"Went to sleep early." Frank scooted over to make room for Joe.

"Couple more hours, Frank. Will be there."

"And this will be over. I'll have Ellen back, my life, everything."

"You certainly are pretty sure that Dean is giving Ellen to you."

"Oh I'm positive. In fact . . ." Frank put his cigarette in his mouth and reached into his chest pocket. "This doesn't leave me. Not for one second. Call it . . ." he winked as he handed the paper to Joe. "Incentive."

"Incentive, huh?" Joe unfolded the paper. "I'll be goddamned." He read the note. "When Frank gets home with Ellen safe and sound I will relinquish my primary relationship position to Frank. And he signed it." Joe handed the note back.

"Oh, yeah. I wasn't taking a chance he was changing his mind."

"What about Ellen?"

"What about her. I will make one point very clear to her."

"And what's that?" Joe asked.

"Ease."

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“Excuse me?”

“Ease. Dean did this with ease. I would never give her up with so much ease. The ease tells me . . . he’s not in it a hundred percent. And you know what? He isn’t getting her back.” Frank nodded.

“You’re not having an understanding with him.”

“Oh, I’ll do that. He’s just not gonna be primary again. I won’t make a mistake this time, Dad. I won’t.”

“Good. Now, when we . . .”

“Am I adopted?” Frank asked with seriousness.

“What?”

“I heard your thoughts, I know what they implied. Am I adopted. I want the truth.”

“Frank, I told you about reading minds.”

“Oh, yeah, I know And you said I might hear something I don’t want to hear. I’m not as dumb as everyone makes me out to be. I have looked in the mirror. I see the difference between me, you, and my brothers. So . . . truth. Am I adopted.”

“No, Frank.” Joe shook his head. “I didn’t adopt you. You are a blood born Slagel and that is no lie.”

“Good. That’s all I want to know.” Frank said then watched Joe light a cigarette. “hey, should you be smoking?”

“To be honest . . . I’m in debate right now on whether or not it makes a difference.”

“But the treatment . . .”

“Didn’t work.” Joe sated.

“What?” Frank nearly lost his breath. “You didn’t say anything before.”

Joe shrugged. “Why? I’m telling you now and you better not open your goddamn mouth.”

“Dad,” such sadness seeped from Frank’s mouth.

“No. We’ll beat this.” Joe laid a hand on Frank’s knee. “I’m certain. Positive attitude.”

“So, what happens now.”

“Well, now, we have our coffee and cigarette together, then we wake the others . . .”

“No. You know what I mean.”

“Now . . .” Joe exhaled. “We try again. But . . . after that first try

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again, and when I have my family back, I'd like to do something. Remember when you guys were teenagers and we'd all pack up and go somewhere."

"Yeah."

"I want to do that. I want to take a vacation. Me, you, Robbie, Hal and Ellen."

"You mean like to Disney Land, because we're gonna be in L.A."

Joe chuckled. "Sort of, but after we get back. A little camping trip before spring happens fully and shit starts to brew with the society."

"I almost forgot about the society. Funny huh? It's been calm."

"Calm before the storm."

"Ell me about it. well . . ." Frank tossed his cigarette. "I'll get everyone up and about." he stood up. "Oh, hey, Dad?" Frank waited until Joe looked up. "I'm glad you're my father."

Joe smiled as Frank walked away, safely thinking, 'yeah, Frank, me too. Me too.'

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"ETA two hours and fifteen minutes." Danny informed as they sat in the communications room. "Last contact with Joe they were on the road. They know that God's Castle . . ." He smirked. "According to Christopher is in some sort of hotel and park. Generally by what they gathered. So, they are going to start with MacArthur Park."

Henry shook his head. "I hate that song."

"What song?" Danny asked.

"MacArthur park. Someone a long time ago sang that."

John Matoose headed to the conversation stirring his coffee as he walked. "Olivia Newton John?"

"Nah." Henry shook his head. "The woman was Black. Olivia is far from black. Who sang that?"

Danny lifted his hands lost. "I don't remember the song."

"Sure you do." Henry said. "MacArthur Park is melting in the dark. Then it goes on to talk about someone leaving a cake out in the rain."

"Oh." Danny nodded. "Yeah. Disco age. Donna Summer."

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Henry snapped his finger. "Thanks. That's her. I hated that song. Bet me they can't get it out of their heads. Speaking of heads . . ."

"Dean?" Danny asked.

John laughed. "I am so glad Jenny and I aren't the only ones wondering what's going on in his head. You should have seen him with Josephine. I could barely pull him away from her to treat the people from Iowa. Whom by the way, are doing good. Andrea says half can be moved to recuperate in Containmentment."

Danny gave an odd look. "Do we want to do that? I mean, containmentment anymore is . . ."

"A nut house." Henry finished. "You're right. What about moving them to a special facility in New Bowman."

"Sounds good. I'll make a note of that." Danny jotted down. "See what Sgt. Owens can do. Maybe Hal has something."

"Dean hates Hal now." Henry said. "Loves Misha, is hot over Josephine, hates Hal and is moving Frank into his house. And he's our top mind. Speaking of minds again."

Danny shook his head. "Nothing. I ran a diagnostic on his chip. As soon as I noticed his odd behavior I ran it. Nothing. It came up fine."

"Did you tune it up?" Henry asked.

"I wanted to, but he just had a tune up last week. If we hit it to much with the refresher we could damage the chip and Jason doesn't want to go back in and put in another."

"Mid life crisis." John Matoose suggested.

Henry spun his chair to John. "That is a good guess."

"Think about it." John said. "Age is right. Length of marriage is right. He wants a new house. New found freedom. Chases after Misha for youth, Josephine for sex." He paused so all could cringe. "Hopefully that won't happen. Mark my words. My Dad had gone through the same thing. One month. He'll be begging Ellen for forgiveness and shuddering that he even behaved like he did. Question is, will she forgive him."

"Absolutely." Henry said. "I think she'll be a fool enough to. She'll forgive him based on the fact that she screwed up too."

John shook his head. "But she's a woman, old world, this world, screw ups don't count when you're a woman."

Danny smile. "How true. Now that we had our morning gossip session. Let's get back to the daily meeting."

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Henry sipped his coffee. "I'd rather bash Dean some more."

"Me too." John said. "At least for a little while until we're settled."

"Ok, it's unanimous." Danny shrugged. "Let's talk about Dean."

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"Sweet Jesus, Dean, we need to talk about this." Andrea followed him around the clinic lab.

"Andrea, can't you see . . . Hold on." Changing his demeanor, Dean hurried over to where Misha stood. "Is everything OK, do you need any help?"

"No, Dean, thank you."

After a smile, Dean returned to Andrea. He noticed the look of disgust on her face. "What?"

"This." She pointed. "This whole entire situation. I thought you had dismissed Misha. And Misha, I thought you were harassed by Dean."

Politely, Misha smiled. "Where ever did you get that. We have reconciled."

Dean added, "And I just have discovered things about Misha that . . ." He exhaled dreamily. "Well, just leave it a that."

"It is the innocence of our love." Misha whispered.

"Sweet Jesus. What about Ellen?" Andrea asked.

"Ellen will be thrilled." Dean said. "She'll be very happy that I am happy."

"Please do not tell me you are sleeping this woman while you are wed to my daughter!" Andrea blasted.

So offended Misha looked. "Not until we've wed."

"Isn't she special." Dean grinned.

Andrea made a look of disgust. "Do not think this behavior is acceptable. Not in my clinic. And I hope when Frank comes back he beats the crap out of you."

Dean chuckled. "Frank will wish me luck."

"You think?" Andrea asked.

"Andrea." Misha spoke politely. "It's not in your hands now. And should you not be praising an end to a hostile situation instead of creating hostility in a peaceful one."

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“No.” Andrea shook his head.

Into the lab, Jenny walked. “Dean, O need to speak t you.”

“Sure, Jenny.” Dean replied.

“Good morning Jenny.” Misha said

Jenny growled at her, “Dean, your daughter Alex is upset. She said you told her this morning that you are not living in the house.”

“You know this.” Dean told Jenny,

“Yes, but there is a deliverance of tact that goes along with informing your children you aren’t being with their mother. Telling your daughter, I love Misha and I’m giving mom to uncle Frank because I want my freedom is not . . . Tact!” Jenny screamed. “She’s upset, Dean, you asshole!”

Andrea closed her eyes. “Amen.”

“I’ll deal with this.” Dean informed then turned to Misha.”Would you mind?”

“Not at all.” On ti[ toes, Misha leaned into Dean and kissed him on the cheek. “I’ll go speak to Alexandra.” she walked across the alb. “Ladies.”

“I have rounds. I’ll talk to you both later.” Dean walked out.

It took a few seconds for Jenny’s shocked mouth to close, then after a snarl she tightened her folded arms. “Stop me now, Andrea, stop me now from killing one of them.”

“Let’s just hope Frank does the honors.” andrea said. “Something is wrong.”

“Hello?” Jason popped his head in the lab. “Where’s Dean?”

“Who cares.” Jenny scoffed.

“I do.” Jason walked I further. “I have those divorce papers he needs to sign. I’ll leave them here.”

“Divorce?” Andrea questioned shock. “Sweet Jesus, Joe goes away for a day and all hell breaks lose. Jason, you have to check out that man, Something is wrong. His behavior is just not right. Could his chip be causing it again.”

“Nope.” Jason shook his head. “We already thought of that. Danny checked it. All is fine. Dean’s jut . . . a dick.” With a grin, Jason laid down the divorce papers and walked out.

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"They said you weren't eating." Creed spoke when he walked into Ellen's room.

"I'm not hungry." Ellen said with little enthusiasm and energy.

"You didn't sleep, you don't eat."

"What does that tell you." Ellen looked up at him. "You have me in this room."

"Your protection while I work in my lab."

"I want to go home, Creed." Ellen stood up-. "Do you hear me? I have children."

"We can go and get them."

"No, I have a home." Ellen moved to him. "I am not yours to keep."

"You are now."

"I haven't been home in a month. Do you understand this?" Ellen asked. "I was ousted by my home for a period . . ." She stopped talking when he lifted a silencing finger. "What?" She questioned.

"Your own people removed you from your home. Whether it forever or a short period of time, that is wrong. You are welcome here. If it is your children you miss, we will find a way . . ."

"No. No, it isn't right. If it is a woman you want, why can't I find a way to get you one." Closer she moved to him. "Creed. I miss my family. I am worried about Robbie."

"Robbie is responsible for nine deaths. How good is this man."

Ellen stared. "He is part of my soul. Robbie is very good. Things can be worked out. They can. You could come to Beginnings . . ."

"That is impossible and you know it. These people can not live outdoors. They can not live exposed to the elements. I am their leader."

"Then imagine as their leader if we had one of your people."

"You do."

"I mea against their will."

"Then you've lied to me." Creed spoke with shock.

"I lied to save my life. Now I am concerned about Robbie's. Please, let me go home."

Inhaling deeply, Creed turned from her. "Many years I have sought companionship. I need companionship. I will make you a deal . . ." Creed turned. "IF Robbie make s a peaceful entrance and asks for you

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back, I will hand you over and you will find a way to find me a companion.”

“Deal.”

“However . . . if there is one more attempt at a hostile invasion, not only will he be killed but you are mine forever. Deal now?”

Ellen hesitated. “Deal.”

“Good, now I must return to my lab.” Creed began to leave.

“Creed. Just . . . just out of curiosity.” Ellen followed him. “Not that I know it would happen, but just on the chance that it’s Frank that shows up, what then.”

Creed smiled ornery at the door. “If this Frank shows up, then it’s a whole other ball game.”

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“It’s true.” Dean rushed into the clinic room where Josephine laid on the hospital bed. “You are.” He shook his head in such disgust at Andrea who stood bedside. “You’re stealing my patient.”

“Sweet Jesus.” Andrea rubbed her hand on her brow. “I am releasing this woman.”

“She fell from a building.”

“She didn’t get hurt.”

“How do you know. Where you there?” Dean hurried to Josephine’s bedside and pulled up a chair.

“Dr. Hayes.” Andrea scolded. “I’ll have you know, I am a very highly trained professional. Besides, it doesn’t take an MD to figure out when this woman got up and walked away, that she was fine. We need the space. I think. More than that we need her out of here.”

Dean grabbed Josephine’s hand. “How do you feel about going home. Will you be all right. I am really concerned.”

“I need a drink.” Josephine said. “Im pretty much close to being sober,. Don’t like it.”

With compassion, Dean looked at her. “Well, you do know, that alcohol is not good for you. And you of all people are some . . . some . . .”

“Dean?” Andrea questioned.

“Skippy.”

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“OK.” Dean slid the chair back. “Stop.”

“Stop?” Andrea was curious.

“Just . . . just stop. Stop everything.” Dean held up his hands.

“Dean, what are you doing?” Andrea asked.

“I’m stopping this. Right now. Just for a second.” Dean said.

“Because I want to talk to the reader.”

“What?” Andrea was really lost.

“Skippy, what the piss.”

“Bare with me.” Dean lifted his hand. “I need to speak t the reader. Yes, you, the person reading this book. Come on, if you are this far into the series then you know my character. Is this pushing the limits or what? Can you believe what she is doing to me now? Can you? I’m in love with . . . Josephine? What’s next. I mean, let’s look back.”

“Why are you complaining?” Josephine interrupted. “At least you’re a star, not some aging, drunken slut.”

“Or . . .” Andrea interjected. “An over reacting, bible pushing, holier than thou menopausal woman. Be grateful and let this poor person reading, go.”

“No.” Dean argued. “No. I mean go back. Go way back. First I pine after Ellen even though she cheats on me, has a child to someone else, no wait that’s after the ripple. I get kidnaped, bet up, killed. Let’s not forget killed, brought back, blinded, screw up missing the cure to the new plague. Get blamed for having an affair with Bev and nearly fathering her child. Mis-diagnose my wife as a drug addict. Now this. I’m under some post hypnotic suggestion. Please. I just need to make my peace. This series is winding down, and she plans on using us in another. Oh, yeah, didn’t know that, did you. Us versus the alines. I can’t wait to see what she does to me then.”

“Dean! Enough.” Andrea griped. “Good Lord, let this person go, I am sure they want to get to the Frank rescue scene. There are not that many pages left in the book.”

“You’re right. You’re right.” Dean moved the chair closer to the bed, as he did, Josephine got out of bed. “Where are you going.”

“I’m done. I’m going to get drunk.” she left the room.

“But it’s not . . .” Dean started to turn and saw Andrea leaving. “Andrea?”

“You took all the fun out of it.” Andrea walked out with

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Josephine.

“Oh, Well.” Dean shrugged. “Sorry.”

^^^^

Not only did every entrance into the underground world seem to be heavily guarded, but it seemed to breed another accidental death or two of an innocent Drune. Exactly how innocent they were, Robbie didn't know. But really, to him they weren't a challenge. A simple stick no longer than three feet was their only weapon, and all Robbie had to do was shoot them. After thinking about it, it wasn't very fair. To Robbie there had to be another way in, another way rather than facing off with a few men who toted sticks while he had a gun. Another way to get in and get out and he truly thought he had that figured out.

It would take him some time, a few hour maybe to put it together, but it would work. After all, he was an explosives expert. Robbie was going to use his expertise to his advantage, literally he would blast his way in and blast his way out.

Four straggly men and one woman, wanderers as Beginnings would call them stopped Robbie near the empty Los Angeles river. Amazingly they had traveled from Arizona where they left a home of several years. The natural rain forests of Mexico was where they were headed and they invited Robbie to join them. They were following the footsteps of many who they had lived with.

It was flattering, and they were pretty nice, Robbie tried to talk them into aiding him in his endeavors, a few extra men wouldn't hurt. But they declined as he declined their offer. Their reason had nothing to do with not wanting to help Robbie, it had everything to do with the haunted city of Los Angeles. Their pass through would be fast they informed Robbie. Their intentions were not even to stay long in L.A., they didn't want to take a chance on the rumor being true. The rumor of such that once someone goes into Los Angels anymore, they never return.

Robbie actually saw some truth in that statement, and at the rate he was striking out he was beginning to wonder if him and Ellen would be part of those statistics as well.

He hung out with them for about an hour and they all parted

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ways. He had a few more items to gather and then he would slip into MacArthur Park and begin to build.

Pretty much Robbie ran through the city, trying to stay in the sun as much as he could. But staying in the sun wasn't an option when he was trying to cut distance.

Last building, darting through, duffle bag packed and on his back, Robbie stopped. He heard it. It carried in from the broken double glass doors. He couldn't see from where he was, but Robbie was certain and without a doubt, he had just heard a truck.

Slow, so as not to be heard or seen in case it was the society, Robbie side stepped his way toward the light of day. When he did, he smiled. "Oh, shit."

Hal, so perturbed, opened up the passenger's door of the truck. "Can you just . . . stop, Frank. Just stop singing bad L.A. songs."

"I can't help it." Frank disembarked from the truck.

Joe took a deep whiff of air when he stepped out just upon the entrance of MacArthur Park. "Smell that air. Ocean air."

"Can I go see the ocean pap?" Billy asked. "I would love to see the ocean."

Joe's smiled, he turned and looked back at Bill about the same time as Frank, Hal and Elliott did. "You know what, Bill. Yeah. Yeah. Let's make a detour and go see the ocean."

Frank clenched his fist, "Yes!"

Elliott chuckled. "This is great! I also think Frank should sing some more."

Hal snapped a glare at Elliott. "Why are you encouraging him. Since last night you've done nothing but encourage . . . oh, I get it."

"Get what?"

"You're pining." Hal said. "You want to try to get that understanding position in case Frank tosses out Dean."

Elliott grinned.

"Got one." Frank snapped his finger.

"An idea of what to do?" Joe asked.

"No." Frank responded. "Another L.A. song. Look where we're

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at.”

Hal winced. “No. Don’t.”

Frank began to sing as they all, in group, slowly walked.  
“MacArthur park is melting . . .”

Everyone winced.

“All the sweet cream icing something down.” Frank continued.

“Flowing.” Elliott corrected.

“Thanks.”

“Frank.” Joe barked “enough.

“Someone left a cake out in the rain . . .” Frank sang. “I don’t think that I can take it.”

“Neither can I!” Hal yelled. “For the love of God stop.”

Fast and in a mumble, Frank spewed forth the words quickly. “It took so long to bake it, And I’ll never find that recipe . . .”

“Frank!” Joe yelled.

Frank smiled. “Again.”

Hal snarled. “I hate you.”

Elliott spoke up. “There’s one that you haven’t sang.”

“Good God, Elliott.” Hal spun to him. “This insidious ass kissing is making me ill.”

Elliott lifted a finger with a smile and jotted back to the truck.

Hal looked at his father. “And you invited him?”

Frank gave a nod. “He’s not being bad. I kind of like him now.”

“You would.” Hal barked then heard the ringing of picked notes and he slowly turned around.

Elliott stopped playing his guitar.

“Oh! Cool!” Frank blasted.

One chord played, and then Elliott walked to the group singing.  
“All the leaves are brown.”

Frank echoed. “the leaves are brown.”

“And the sky is gray.”

“And the sky is grey.” Frank sang as well.

Elliott continued. “I’ve been for a walk.”

With his voice, Frank smiled when he heard Hal join, not enthusiastic, but joined. “Been for a walk.”

“On a winter’s day.

“On a winter’s day.”

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Joe rolled his eyes, he just wanted to keep moving. He grabbed Billy's hand.

Louder Elliott played and sang, "I'd be safe and warm."

"Be safe and warm." Frank and Hal did the back ups.

"If I was in L.A."

"If I was in . . ."

"Enough!" Joe halted the group. "We have work to do. Christ almighty."

Another step, and they heard it, close but not right there, the male voice sang, "California Dreaming."

The whole group froze.

Joe felt his heart sink and he grinned.

Left to right Frank peered around. "Someone's singing with us?"

"Where?" Joe whispered with a smile then he spotted him. He stepped into view, then leaned very relaxed against a tree. "Robbie." When the last time Joe let out a shirk of excitement, he didn't know, but it barreled from him in gratefulness as he charged to his youngest son. He made it to Robbie first, Embracing him with a parental enthusiasm that couldn't be matched by anyone. In fact, he nearly lifted Robbie from the ground. "Son of a bitch!"

Over one month it had been since he had seen Robbie, and Joe didn't want to let him go.

"Dad." Frank tapped him on the shoulder "Share him."

"You seen him a week ago Frank. ME and Billy haven't." Joe stepped back.

Robbie blinked in surprise when he looked down."Billy? What . . ."

"I stowed away." Billy shrugged. "Not that I'm not grateful to see you, but . . . where's my mom?"

Robbie exhaled as he looked about the faces awaiting an answer. "Where do I even begin."

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“They have her.” Robbie explained softly and embedded from the hotel’s view. “I’ve made nine attempts since yesterday to get in there. No luck. The reason I’m out by myself is because I had a hard time getting her out. They granted me freedom, I left. Now, they aren’t treating her bad, In fact,. This guy Creed, he calls Ellen his queen. The pamper her, massage her, bath her in oils.”

“Hold it.” Joe interrupted. “Do you think that somehow, just bar with me, do you think that maybe the reason you’re failing at a rescue attempt is because Ellen is inhibiting her own rescue.”

Elliott was offended. “I can’t believe you, her father would ask that. Frank?”

Frank shrugged. “Knowing El, it’s a viable question.”

Hal agreed. “It is viable.”

“I was with her. It’s viable.” Robbie said. “But not the case. I don’t what the problem is, yeah I do. Dedication, the drunes, or skinless underground mutant people as you call them, have dedication to Creed or rather A.K.A. God. And guys, this man is huge. Over seven feet tall and that’s not when he morphs.”

“Morphs?” Joe asked.

“He’s a scientist, some sort of radiation effect. When he gets emotional he gets bigger.”

Knowing, Frank nodded. “Like the Incredible Hulk.”

Over the groans, Robbie spoke. “Yes.”

“What!” Hal blasted. “You’re shitting me.”

“I shit you not.” Robbie said. “Plus, he has this really cool weapon. Gloves that generate these electricity balls. Them more friction you work up the bigger the blast of shock. And then he tosses them like baseballs”

“Whoa.” Frank spoke in awe. “Cool. I want those.”

“Beat God and you get them.” Robbie said.

“What about his forces?” Joe questioned.

“OK, from what I got only a few of them have the same weapon as Creed. Only a few. The rest of his guards, well, they guard with . . .

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With sticks.”

Hal took a long blink. “Sticks? As in sticks and stones.”

“No, Hal.” Frank corrected. “He said nothing about stones. Only sticks.”

“Sticks?” Joe questioned. “Just sticks.”

“No stones.” Frank added.

“Yeah.” Joe said sarcastically, “we know that.”

“Sticks.” Hal said. “Are they big sticks?”

“No.” Robbie shrugged. “I just feel bad shooting men who only have sticks as a defense. It’s not right.”

Joe nodded. “You have a point. What about a peaceful approach.” He heard the scoffs and saw everyone looking at him. “What?”

“Father.” Hal chuckled. “They have one of our people. How peaceful should we approach them.”

“May I?” Elliott interjected. “If the guard only have sticks, why are you having such a hard time getting in?”

Robbie answered, “Every entrance I try has these dogs, and then the guards with sticks, if I make it through then comes the guards with the electric balls. Right now I’m setting up just literally blasting my way in.”

Hal liked that and facially showed it. “Not bad. What do you got?”

“Wait.” Frank lifted his hand. “Do you know where she is?”

“Yes.” Robbie answered. “That building there.” He pointed. “Third floor, third window from the right.”

Frank looked. “That building right there?”

“Yeah.”

Frank stood up. “Get by the truck, give me five minutes, I’m getting Ellen.”

Hal stood as well when he saw Frank move to the truck. “And what do you propose to do? Climb up the side of the building like Batman or spider man.”

Into the back of the truck Frank reached and he pulled out a rope with a grin.

Joe knew he was in trouble not only when he watched Frank do

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his typical strut toward the plaza hotel, but as he witnessed Robbie embrace and kiss the M-16 Hal gave him.

“Oh, Brother.” Joe mumbled to Billy, then hands in pockets walked up behind Hal, Elliott and Robbie who laid Belly down in a cover mode, weapons ready. “Boys.” Joe said tot hem. “You know, my gut is screaming that we’re taking the wrong approach here. I just . . . what in the hell is he doing?” Joe asked seeing Frank.

“Good lord, Frank.” Hal whispered.

Robbie tilted his head “He did take two ropes. Makes sense.”

“He does have bunny speed.” Elliott added.

“Why?” Hal asked. “Is he on the fifth floor? I knew he couldn’t count, but this is a rescue attempt, I thought he became intelligent in hero mode.”

“He does.” Robbie grinned I know exactly what he’s doing.”

“Christ.” Joe grumbled. “His aim better be good.”

Elliott watched Frank give a thumbs up from the fifth floor window where he braced himself. “Is he doing what I think he’s doing?”

“Yep.” Hal answered. “As usual, my brother plans on making an entrance.”

Thump.

Ellen, face resting on her hand, glanced up to the ceiling, then after a shrug moved her bishop across the chessboard, then looked to the male drune guard who played her. “Your turn.”

His hand extended then retracted in thought.

Thump.

Oddly Ellen looked again. “Did you hear that?”

“It’s from outside.” The drune rose.

Ellen did too.

Just as they both turned to face the window the loud ‘crash’ brought with it not only flying glass, but perfectly, at a solid speed, still holding a rope came . . . Frank.

Ellen screamed and Frank landed on his feet after a small slide. He dropped the rope, grabbed his revolver extended it out and aimed at the drune. “Drop the stick.” Frank ordered.

Stick high, the drune did as requested.

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“Step away from it.” Frank told him. “Back up.” After he watched the drune move away, Frank shifted his eyes to Ellen and grinned. “Ready to go home.”

She could have cried, that was how excited Ellen was. Biting her bottom lip she charged to Frank smacking herself into him. Her hand reached to his face and on tip toes, Ellen raised herself to kiss him.

Eyes still on the drune Frank, gripping Ellen, kissed her quickly and backed up with her to the window. “It’s a drop, El, but we’ll be fine.”

“Only you, Frank. Take me home.”

“You got it. Stay back.” Frank moved her from the window, cleared some glass with his foot then opened the remaining drape. He lifted his hand to signal Hal, and pulled the other robe from his waste. No sooner had Frank done that, when a sizzling, electrical sound rang out.

He heard the call of his name in warning from Robbie, and when he looked up, he looked up only in enough time to see four sailing blue lights right before him.

“Fuck.”

Zap. Zap. Zap-zap.

With a shriek from Ellen, Frank felt the blasting hits into his being, the force of which flew him backwards into the room.

“They got him.” Hal pounded his hand on the ground and rose in a fast motion almost to charge.

“Wait.” Robbie called out. “We’ll take the second entrance. Gas the dogs hit them that way.”

“You know where to go from there.?” Hal asked.

Robbie nodded.

“Elliott.”

“Ready, Captain.”

“Wait a goddamn second.” Joe stormed to the trio. “You three, against all of those thousands? Are you out of your goddamn mind!”

“What do you expect us to do?” Hal questioned. “They hit Frank. They have him.”

“Listen for a second.” Joe raised his hand. “Their weapons don’t seem to be deadly, they may not kill. You can’t do this.”

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Robbie stepped forward. "Dad, what do you expect us to do, just walk up and ask them to let us in."

"Yes!" Joe nodded. "Call it gut instinct, whatever. That's the approach."

"I'm sorry." Hal said, "That's insane. Robbie? Lead the way." Hal turned and moved backwards. "If you hear nothing in fifteen minutes, then come in. Otherwise, wait here. And we will be careful when facing their . . . sticks."

Frustrated, Joe nodded.

Pausing at the truck, Elliott grabbed his and Hal's swords, and carried them as he caught up to Hal and moved on with them.

Joe looked at his watch, then shook his head. "Morons."

Ellen was hysterical, she fought, kicked and screamed to free herself from the drunes that held her back from Frank.

"Silence!" Creed ordered as he barged emotionally into the room. His breaths were heavy and he glared down to Frank. "This has to be him." turning he looked at Ellen. "Is this him?"

Ellen hyperventilated.

"Is it!" Creed screamed, and waited, he received no answer. "It has to be. She's protecting him, and only this Frank would crash through a window. Remove him."

"God!" A drune raced into the room. "There are three more coming in the Wilshire ramp."

"This must end." Creed marched to the door. "Remove this man and take him to another section, I will help deal with our newest intruders." he stopped at the door and spun around. "Move my queen elsewhere as well."

The dogs went out pretty fast and it only took twenty seconds to clear the gassed area. The plan was simple, storm in. Glass their way in past the dogs, fight off the guards with sticks, dodge the flying blue balls of electricity and make it to the third floor.

Same speed, same charge, weapons ready, Hal, Robbie and Elliott finished coming down the ramp.

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“We have to veer right.” Robbie said stopping them at the end, “Make it across the lot into the stairwell. It’s on the other side of that wall. She’s in the hotel.”

Hal nodded. “First one with her, head on out. Got that, Gentlemen?” Hal waited for his agreement. “Let’s do this.”

They turned the bend.

“Captain.” Elliott gave an upward motion of his head. ‘Look Forces.’”

Hal smirked. “With sticks, too, Elliott.”

“I’ll fed them off while you and Robbie head to the third floor.”

“How chivalrous it is of you to take on men with sticks.” Hal winked. “Don’t hurt them. Robbie, let’s go.”

They neared Elliott and he drew his sword. A few of the pack of drunes backed off when they saw it, and Elliott knew since there were many that his chance of being pelted here and there by the near bamboo shoots was great but it was a chance he had to take.

Confident, Elliott was ready. The first brave drune, struck out, and with ease and quickness Elliott blocked the ensuing strike.

The connection made . . .froze Elliott.

With a powerful surge, Elliott began to jolt.

Hal skid to a stop and his eyes widened as he watched Elliott fly back. “Oh my God. You said they were sticks.”

“I thought they *were* sticks.”

“They’re electric prods you , asshole.”

“I was never hit with one, how would I know.”

Hal debated, he really debated, and in his decision making moment he knew he couldn’t leave Elliott. “Go on.” He started to make a run for Elliott.

“Hal, no, he’ll be fine.” Robbie beckoned waving out his hand as he ran backwards. “Let’s go.”

“Robbie I can’t let my right . . .”

“Fuck.” Robbie exclaimed.

“What?” Hal asked as he looked back. “Back up!”

Robbie tried to step bak from the men who looked as if they held Bazookas. He figured diving would work and when he tried to do that the click of the weapon released a whipping sound that shot fast and

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furiously a web like substance.

It not only shot Robbie back against the wall but seemingly glued him there as well.

“Hal.” Robbie struggled unable to even move, plastered and stuck. “Get . . . her.”

“This is a fuckin walking talking comic book.” Hal, after taking a look at Elliott who was being lifted by the drunes, took one more glance at Robbie and took off for where the stairwell was located.

The click and whip sounds were warning to Hal, and following a quick look he dove out of the way just in time to miss the webbing. He rolled himself into a stand and widened his run so as not to be taken by surprise when he rounded the bend to the stairwell.

Bull speed and focused, Hal saw his goal and then he saw something else that made him completely stop. His arms went out as if trying to wave himself to a halt, when he saw Creed.

“Oh, fuck me.” Hal murmured.

Creed growled. His twitched his head from left to right, his body hitting the height of eight feet as every muscled he had seemed to bubble and bulge. Alone Creed stood and really Hal knew he didn’t need any backup.

A few sniffs of confidence and Hal projected that much. “OK, come on big guy.” Thinking, what the fuck, Hal raged forward.

Speared!

Creed wasn’t expecting the shoulder blasting hit that slammed him back into the concrete wall. Hal revved back and slammed his tight fist, with everything he had into the gut of Creed.

Creed’s huge hand came down with a grip to Hal. It engulfed Hal’s entire head. Feeling himself begin to lift from the ground, Hal used Creed’s height to his own advantage.

Up went Hal’s knee straight between Creed’s leg. As he made his painful connection, instead of reaching for the fingers that held his head, Hal grabbed on to the back of Creed’s thighs and pulled the large man forward, sending him, in his weakened moment down, rear first to the ground..

No time to waste, and Hal spun hard to the left, Elbow pointed, slamming downward into the side of Creed’s face a split second before Creed, kicked out hi leg into Hal’s side, sailing him back.

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Yelling a single, ;'fuck' as he flew, Hal, expecting the landing, tucked hi body, bringing himself into backwards somersault. Out of it he rolled, ready to fight again, but only to be greet by a surprising flash of blue light..

A single moment of painful shock was all Hal experienced then everything turned black.

~~~~~

"Times up." Joe took a deep breath.

"Pap, do you think they're all right?"

"I think so, Billy." Joe took hold of Billy hand.

"And we're just gonna walk right in?"

"Yep. Worth a shot, now isn't it. We can't stand out here any longer." With Billy, and his gun concealed beneath his tan over shirt, Joe headed to the main ramp that Robbie had avoided.

Down hey walked very peacefully, slowing even more when they saw the dogs just sitting there.

"Pap?" Billy stared at the hairless creatures.

"Keep moving. Don't act afraid and don't make any sudden movements."

The dogs, whose heads were perked with attention, laid back down when Joe and Billy walked by them.

End of the ramp, a drune holding a stick high stepped forward. "Halt." He stood before four other drune guards.

"We're halting." Joe lifted his hand.

"What is that you want?" The drune asked.

"I want to see your leader." Joe said.

"God."

"Whatever." Joe winced. "He has my kids and I want them back."

"We can not let you in."

"You *will* let me in." Joe spoke demandingly. "Do what you need to do. Tell . . . God, that I am Joe Slagel from Begin . . ." Sentence not even complete and Joe knew some progress had been made when all five drune guards, dropped to their knees and bowed their heads to the

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floor before him.

Joe glanced down to Billy with a smile and a wink. He whispered. "We're in."

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“He’s big.” Billy whispered up to Joe as they stood at the end of a long hallway somewhere in the hotel.

Joe looked. Was Creed walking down that hallway with excitement or was it Joe’s imagination. Fast Creed moved and the nearer he drew, Joe saw it. A smile?

“Father.” Creed extended out his hand to Joe.

“Father?” After a hesitation, and a look down to Billy, Joe shook his head. “Joe Slagel.”

“Yes, Yes, I know. The leader of Utopia.” Creed smiled. “This is wonderful. What an honor.” He lowered his head.

“You have my daughter.”

“You mean my queen.” Creed asked.

“No, we mean my mother.” Billy spoke.

A crooked smile hit Creed as the corner of his mouth raised. He lowered on to one knee to be directly before Billy. His eyes stared at the blue eyes of the young boy. “Look at you.”

“Yes. Look.” Billy said. “You really aren’t that impressive. Where’s my mom?”

Creed laughed a little and stood back up. “He’s charming.” With an exhale, Creed stepped back. “How wonderful this is going to make your mother feel. This way. I’ll take you to her.” Creed began to lead the way.

Before following, Joe gave a nod down to Billy. “See? What I tell you.” He shook his head at the thought of Robbie, Frank, Hal and Elliott. “Morons.”

The walk wasn’t too long, Joe kept track, knowing that they were still on the third floor.

Creed pointed to the door where two guards were in front. As soon as Creed approached them, the lowered their heads. “Have respect, you are in the presence of the God of utopia, my Queen’s father.”

Immediately, the guards dropped.

“Pap.” Bill whispered and tugged on Joe’s pant leg. “We can

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really use this to our advantage.”

“This room.” Creed knocked once and opened the door. “My queen.” he stepped inside. “You have a visitor.”

From a chair by the window, head clumped, Ellen gazed up. She couldn’t even speak when she saw Joe. Billy was still semi hidden behind the body of Creed.

“Joe.” The word seeped out as she raced to him.

Joe made it to her first. “Dear God.” he grabbed on to her. “You’re all right. You’re all right.”

“Don’t let me go. Please don’t let me go.” Ellen held tighter.

“Gonna have to if you wanna give this one a hug.”

Ellen’s head raised and with step back of curiosity, she saw. Her eyes widened.

“Hey, mom.” Billy waved.

Ellen screamed and with a swing down of her arms, lifted Billy. “How . . . how . . . how . . .” She buried him other while plastering him with kisses. “One, how . . .”

“We kind of didn’t have a choice.” Joe closed one eye with nod.

“I stowed.” Billy confessed.

Turning, holding Billy, Ellen looked at Creed. “Do not even tell me you took my father hostage.”

“Your father is not a hostage.” Creed explained. “He is free to go as he pleases.”

“Then we can leave?” Ellen asked.

“No.” Creed shook his head. “You can not.”

“He walked in peacefully.”

“But the others did not.” Creed argued. “You are my queen and the will be killed.”

“Whoa. Wait a second, pal.” Joe lifted his hand “I don’t give a rats ass who you are. You have my daughter my sons and another one of my men. I want them back.”

“They infiltrated with hostility.”

“They are my people.” Joe demanded.

“And I am God.”

“Well, yeah, I’m Joe Slagel, now give my back my kids. Right now. You hear. Don’t piss around with me.”

“I apologize.” Creed stated. “But they have broken my law.

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Now, as much as it pains e, I can honor the request for your daughter, but that is as far as I can go.”

“Where are they?” Joe asked.

“They are being held comfortably.”

“Take me to them.”

“I wanna go too Joe.” Ellen grabbed Joe’s arm. “I have to see that they’re OK.”

Creed nodded. “Very well.” He motioned his head to the guard at the door. “Take My Queen and her father to see the four prisoners. Five minutes only.”

Ellen began to walk and Creed extended his hand stopping her.

“They child stays here.” Creed said. “My assurance that you won’t try to escape with my prisoners.”

Ellen held onto Billy. “Go on, Joe, I’m not leaving Billy.”

“Mom, I’m fine. And you can put me down, I am eight.”

Ellen slowly set Billy to the floor.

“I’m fine.” Billy assured. “Go see Uncle Frank.”

Hesitantly Ellen moved from him.

“Your child will not be harmed.” Creed said. “We are going to talk.”

Billy rolled his eyes. “Swell.”

Joe grabbed hold of Ellen’s hand and together, they left the room with the drune.

“This shit is never getting out of my hair.” Robbie puled the webbing as he sat down. “Fuck.”

“At least I stopped shocking things.” Elliott clenched his fist.

“I’m glad for you. If I’m still zapping.” Hal pointed to the bed where Frank still lay unconscious. “How bad will he be when he wakes up.” Hal groaned. “What the hell is the matter with us. Huh? Three of us get volted and one gets webbed. Where did we go wrong?”

“You stormed in.” Joe stated as he walked in the room with Ellen. “You should have walked in.”

“Ellen.” Hal wisped out her name, but jumped ahead of her when she hurried to he bed. “Don’t touch him. He could be lethal right now.” Hal shrugged. “He’s still sparking.” He jumped back when he saw her

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reach for him. "Me too."

"I'm not." Robbie said, "But I'm sticky. I was webbed,"

Joe close his eyes. "Do you see what you did?"

"Elliott?" Ellen saw him and spoke with such shock. "Elliott?"

"You can . . . you can touch me." Elliott smiled and before he was even finished Ellen was in his arms.

"Frank." Hal called out his name. "Frank. Elliott is molesting Ellen. Frank wake up."

"This sucks!" Robbie stood up. "What now?"

"I told you all. All of you." Joe scolded. "But no, not one of you would listen. Now look at the lot of you."

Hal scoffed. "Well, seems to me you're in the same rut."

"No I'm not." Joe said. "Me and Ellen are free to go. It's you four assholes that are scheduled to die."

Robbie, growling, made an attempt to run his fingers through his hair and they only became stuck. "Shit." He grunted.

"Dad?" Hal walked to Joe. "Frank is out. We need to . . ." He looked over his shoulder at Elliott who still held on to Ellen. "Will you let my sister alone please. She is a married woman."

Robbie shrugged. "Not for long. According to Frank."

Hal gave a fling wave of his hand. "Anyhow. What now? We need an answer. And where is Billy."

"That . . ." Joe lifted his finger. "Is what I am hoping ends up being our answer."

"What?" Hal asked confused.

"Billy you asked where he is. Well . . ." Joe said. "Let's see if Frank's prophetic dream was really that, prophetic. Because if it was, then Billy could very well be doing what Frank said. He's with Creed right now." Joe paused. "The innocent one who finds the way."

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"So," Hands folded Billy gave an upward motion of his head to Creed. "Uncle Robbie tells me you go monster."

"If you want to call it that. It's more of a metamorphosis. My DNA was effected when I was exposed to a high dose of gamma rays."

"Have you tried an inhibitor?" Billy asked.

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“Excuse me?”

“An inhibitor to block this problem. It has to be charged by secretions in the brain, if you device an inhibitor that stops your brain from recognizing these excretion you may be able to keep this thing in check.”

“You’re brilliant.”

“Yes, I am.” Billy said. “I take after my father.”

“Frank?”

Billy laughed. “No, my biological father.”

“Your mother is my queen, I will be your father, you are my new son.”

A chuckle escaped Billy. “Yes.” He nodded and spoke without emotion. “That should work. You’re God and my pap calls me, Christ Billy.”

It bred a laugh from Creed. “And you are only eight?”

“It’s a state of age. Not mind.”

“I can see why they brought you here.” Creed said. “It was a wise choice.”

“Frank’s choice.”

“Frank is not that bright.” Creed said.

“Well, doesn’t it depend on the situation?” Billy asked.

“The situation was dealt out. None of those who tried to break in are that bright.”

Billy gave a debating look.

“I expected greater things from Frank. Your mother spoke so strong of him I expected him nearly invincible.”

“He is.”

“He went down as easy as any man.”

“Oh, sure, but even you would go down if pelted with those electric things. Which by the way . . . brilliant invention.”

“Thanks.”

“But, an easy way to take out your opponent. Like guns, I always say a battle isn’t a battle unless it is a battle of wits or strength. Then you find out who the real victor is.”

“Valid point.” Creed raised a finger.

“Then again, if you want to consider yourself a victor by using those blast balls, and killing four men who are already your prisoners

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that's entirely up to you."

"Little man." Creed spoke. "You are trying to manipulate me, why?"

"You're claiming victory over Frank."

"I am the victor over Frank. Where is he now."

Billy shrugged. "Don't know. But . . . I don't know, maybe it's just me, but I am sensing it's an ego thing with you."

"Your mother sees him unbeatable, I am showing him that it isn't so."

"You think?" Billy asked. "I have news for you. In my mother's eyes. You haven't defeated Frank."

"He went down."

"With those blast balls." Billy shrugged. "You didn't take him down, did you?"

Slowly Creed stood up. "I didn't."

"Not that I saw. And come on, you're a big man, you go monster. Where was the challenge, the skill. In my mother's eyes, and to tell you the truth, my eyes as well, Frank out skills you."

"How can you say that?"

"You blindly took him out."

"You are right." Creed folded his arms. "But I still am stronger than Frank."

"Most likely, probably, but who will ever know." Billy tapped his fingers on the table. "So when do you plan on killing him?"

"Soon."

"How?"

"Execution."

Billy snickered. "Sorry."

"What?"

"And that's going to do it? That will show you're stronger."

"It will eliminate Frank."

"But not the war." Billy sated. "You think it will stop there. You think if we don't return, if Frank doesn't return the UWA will stand for that. Do you think it will make any difference to my real father when he seeks justice. When he delivers a virus he created and wipes you out. One, we of the UWA are immune."

"He wouldn't."

“try.”

“He can not be that brilliant. He didn’t cure the plague that ended the world.”

“You don’t think?” Billy raised an eyebrow. “How many babies born here have you lost to the plague.”

Creed hesitated. “Many.”

Billy lifted a finger. “We lost one. One. My father beat the plague. Cured it. Now try again saying he isn’t brilliant. You called me brilliant, I’m no where near as smart as him.”

“What are you suggesting.”

“Set us free. All of us.”

Creed shook his head. “You, your grandfather and mother are free. It is the intruders that aren’t.”

“Frank. You’re intimidated by him, that’s why this is so personal to you.”

“I never said that.”

“You act it.”

“You’re right.” Creed nodded. “You are right. You have something in mind. What is it?”

“How about this?” Billy stood up. “A Challenge. Some sort of challenge. Prove to yourself, your people and my mother who is the better man.”

“You mean a challenge against Frank?”

“If that’s the one you choose. Though I trust the skill of my Uncle Robbie, he’s short handed. Excuse the pun.”

“No, it should be Frank. Perhaps give him a chance to prove what he has and who he is.”

“Wow. That sounds fair.” Billy said. “And if he defeats you, all of us walk.”

“And what if I defeat him?” Creed asked.

“Continue with the original plan. With . . . the exception of this. I can’t speak for my pap, but I can for me and my mother. You beat Frank. Her and I stay. So what kind of challenge. I say chess.”

“No.” Creed shook his head. “Not one of intellect.”

“Strength?”

“Yes. Physical. A battle.”

No emotions, almost snide, Billy spoke. “Oh no. don’t fight

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Uncle Frank. Please.”

“The deal is made little man. Tomorrow morning, Frank faces . . .”

“God?” Billy asked.

Creed smiled. “Yes.”

“A-huh.” Billy nodded. “Frank versus God. Well, I do have to say, this is a new one.”

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“This is a new one.” Hal walked from the table where a meal had been placed for him, Robbie, and Elliott. “Frank versus God.”

Joe gave a tilt of his head. “That’s what the guy said. H will challenge Frank.”

“Physically?” Hal asked. “They man has been laying on his back for over an hour, he can’t fight anyone.”

“They said he’ll be awake soon.” Joe stated.

“Captain, why do you seem worried?” Elliot asked.

“Yeah, Hal.” Robbie added “It’s Frank. Think of it this way, tomorrow we’ll be out of here.”

“Little brother,” Hal dropped his voice to a whisper. “We know what he is up against.”

Robbie shrugged. “Frank doesn’t. And again, it’s Frank.”

“It will also be the biggest ego trip he has even been on if he secures victory.” Hal said. “We’ll never live this down. My god . . .” He spoke in near revelation. “He’s literally going to be fighting for our lives.” Slowly Hal turned and walked to the bed. He was glad that his father, brother and friend were confident in Frank, and Hal was too, to an extent. But like he had said to Robbie, they were aware of what Frank had to face.

By the bedside, Hal bent down to his brother and whispered. “Please do not think I lack confidence in you. I do not. Though I argue with you on your ability, you boast and brag of the hero that you are. Well, tomorrow big brother, you get to prove it. And it will be one time in my life I will be happy to eat my words.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

The house had an odd smell to it, one Alexandra didn't like. Not that it was stinky, actually it was sweet. But the smell wasn't one that was around when her mother was home. Alex began to feel territorial, only she didn't recognize that at all in her youth.

Disgust caused her lip to curl as she watched her father set a box on the table.

"Hungry yet, Alex?" Dean asked. "Misha made this wonderful . . ."

"No." Alex just stood there in the livingroom.

"What's wrong?" Dean asked. "Are you sick?"

"I'm surprised you have time to be a doctor."

"Excuse me?"

Misha stepped out from the kitchen. "Alex, why are you speaking to your . . ."

"Shut up." Alexandra snapped.

"Alex." Dean said shocked. "Stop that. This isn't you."

"And this isn't her home." Alex rebutted, "Why is he acting like it is."

"You never said anything before." Dean spoke.

"You were never acting like this before. What are you doing? Why are you moving out?"

"Alex." Dean softened his voice and crouched before her. "Sometimes grownups they make choices. Sometimes we don't know why we change the way we feel, or why we get motivated to do things. I wish I could explain. But you have to understand. You'll be seeing a lot of Misha. A lot more."

"What's my mother gonna say about that?"

"You're other will be fine."

Alex rolled her eyes.

"Sweetheart." Dean laid his hands on her arms. "Trust me, Mommy will be happy for me. And speaking of Mommies. You may want to practice and get used to calling Misha mom."

Immediately Alex looked up. "Ok. All white. I'll do that, and

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also at the same time, I'll practice and get used to calling *you* . . . dick." Abruptly, Alex spun and raced from Dean.

Shocked, Dean stood up.

"Would you like me to speak to her?" Misha asked.

"No. I will. Excuse me." Dean walked from the room, down the hall and to Alexandra's door. "Alex.: He knocked.

"Go away. I'm busy."

"Alex."

"I'm getting a mother fix. I miss my mother."

"Alex, look." Dean opened the door. "What you said back . . ."

"I am busy." Alexa sat before a television.

"I really need to . . ."

Cut off, not by Alex, but by Ellen's voice. "No, Dean." Ellen said. "What are you doing." Ellen then laughed.

Fast Dean spun his views to the television, "oh my God." he whispered out. "Ellen." Almost memorized he walked to the television.

"See. Mommy." Alexandra pointed. "Remember her."

"Oh, Alex." Dean whispered and stared to crouch before the set. The camera angle was on Ellen's face.

"Why don't you love her, Daddy?"

"Huh?" Dean asked almost as if Alex asked an absurd question. His eyes transfixed on the set and he reached his hand to the screen.

"Dean." Misha called his name.

Dean retracted his hand, and turned to see Misha standing in the door. "Misha." Dean stood up.

"Alex." Misha walked into the bedroom. "Time to sleep."

"Yeah. Yeah, right sure." Alexandra waved her off.

"Why don't we . . ." Dean led Misha to the door. "Just let her go,."

"But, Dean . . ."

"Let her go." Nearly moving Misha from the room, Dean stepped out as well. However, not understanding why he did, and totally confused on his feeling a compulsion for it, Dean had to take another moment to peek inside that room and see the image of Ellen on that television set.

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"I have to do what?" Frank questioned Hal, Elliott and Robbie.  
Hal lifted a finger. He nodded a pause, than continued. "Beat God."

"God."

"God." Hal reiterated.

"Creed." Robbie corrected.

"Oh." Frank nodded, "You had me scared for a second. When is this suppose to take place?"

"Tomorrow morning." Hal answered. "First thing."

"And we're fighting." Frank tried for clarity. "Fist fighting, gun fighting, what?"

"Fist. I guess." Hal shrugged.

Frank fluttered his lips. "No problem them."

"Hmm." Hal nodded. "Yes." another nod and he turned away.

"What?" Frank laughed the looked at Robbie. That was it, something was up, Robbie looked too nervous. What was going on. "Robbie?"

"Yeah, Frank?" Robbie still picked things out of his hair.

"Is there a problem ro worry about me fighting God?"

"No. No." Robbie shook his head gain.

Frank looked at the. "Quit blocking your thoughts. All of you. What's going on. What don't I know. You mean about this guy being the incredible hulk. Come on, he can't be that much."

There was a silence that Elliott didn't like and knew could be detrimental "You want the truth Frank?" Elliott asked.

"Yes. Please. Seems my brother are lacking confidence ion me."

"They're pissed." Elliott responded.

Hal and Robbie immediately turned around.

"Pissed?" Frank questioned.

"Pissed. Pissed that you are the one that got chosen. You are the one that got picked to ave us all."

Robbie's face lit up brightly. "Yeah, Frank, it's all for one, what the fuck."

"You were the first one down." Hal pointed. "I tangled with the man. I did very well."

"Kicked ass." Robbie stated. Until they blasted him."

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“He was not all that.”

Robbie snapped his finger. “Bet me Hal they picked Frank because he went down first.”

“Great. Just great.” Hal tossed his hands in the air. “Frank fights the pansy and get alt he credit. Why is that? Why is that. Bet me Frank can’t do as good as job as me.”

“Or me.” Robbie said.

“Hey!” Frank interjected. “Maybe there’s a reason you guys can’t fight him. Like I’m the only one who can beat him.”

Hal laughed. “Frank, please, he’s just a man.”

All expression dropped from Frank’s face. “Who thought that?”

“Thought what?” Robbie asked.

“I heard it.” Frank spoke. “After Hal said, ‘he’s just a man’. Someone thought, ‘who grows eight feet tall and gets wide.’”

“Me.” Elliott confessed. “But that’s not what I thought. My thoughts were, he’s just a man who throws great heat balls and yet cries.”

“Oh, Ok.” Frank accepted that than tugged on his ear. “So.” He clapped his hand together. “Anyone nervous about this?”

Hal shook his head. “No.”

“Not me.” Robbie shrugged.

“Why would we?” Elliott asked. “You’re Frank.”

“I am.”

Hal rolled his eyes.

“O.K.” Frank said. “So we have time to should we practice, fight a little, get into shape.”

Blocking out thoughts of ‘ho can you practice for God’, Hal shook his head. “No need.”

“What do we do then?” Frank asked. “Just hangout.”

Elliott grinned. “How about this.” A guitar brought for him was in the corner of the room and Elliott walked to it and picked it up. “Open that window, Frank.” When Frank did, Elliott looked at the curious faces of Hal and Robbie. “This fits the occasion. Plus, we never finished.”

“If you are going to play, play.” Hal said. “I not . . .”

Elliott struck a chord.

Frank, released an excited ‘oh, yeah.’

Robbie laughed,.

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Hal shrugged with a why not, then nodded.  
Elliott began to sing, "Stopped into a church. I passed along the way . . . I got down on my knees."  
"Got down on my knees." The brothers sang.  
"And began to pray . . ."  
"And began to pray . . ."

Ellen chuckled with a point to the window when she heard them blast into the chorus of California dreamin' "How fitting, Joe."

"I think the message is something else." Joe stated as me moved to stand by the window with Ellen.

"What's that?"

"We are so outnumbered. Thousands to one. Literally." Joe explained. "Tomorrow Frank is to face a man who, we don't know what he's capable. Their lives hang in the balance, and to be honest, win or lose, all of our lives could hang in the balance. So . . . what does my three goofy sons and Elliott do?"

"Sing bad seventies songs?"

Joe smiled. "Absolutely. And those songs say something totally different than the words. They say . . . hey, we aren't afraid. Not one bit."

"Should they be, Joe?"

"Absolutely not." Joe said firm. "Absolutely not. This time tomorrow, Ellen, you'll almost be home."

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"I'm going home." Johnny said as he threw the last of his things in a bag. "They kill me, they kill me. I have to try."

Lars raised his eyebrows. "See, Mick, what did I tell you?"

Mic exhaled. "Johnny, after what happened yesterday. It's not a good idea. Can't you see they aren't ready for you."

"Will they ever be?" Johnny asked. "I don't think Mick. And it isn't like I'm gonna go straight to the gate and ask in. I'll wait. I just can't wait it out here."

"Why?" Mick asked.

Johnny only glanced up.

"Look." Mick laid his hand on Johnny's bag. You think you're

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the only one in Lodi with a past? You think you're the first to do something wrong? And do you think you're the first to be judged and treated differently because of it? No. You aren't. Almost half of my men were in the same position as you. Half wanted to leave because others judged them, ignored them. Well, those others have no room to talk. We have murders, society soldier, former savages, you name it. All rehabilitated and living again. They changed. So you can you.'

"See that's what I don't get." Johnny said with sadness. "Change? I am who I was. I want to know when the fuck I changed into some monster that did that to his family. And Mick, I look back, and can't believe I did the things I did. And when I think of when I did them, I did them without thought . . . "Johnny spoke,. "Callous. That's mt me. I swear. What happened to make me do that? huh? What?" In a frustration sweep of his hand, Johnny knocked his bag from his bed.

"Maybe . . ." Lars interjected. "You need to let some of this stuff off of your chest. You're burying it Johnny. That won't help. Release it. Release the guilt."

"That'll never happen, because it makes no sense. It isn't logical why I behave that way. It's like a dream, a bad dream. And the things I did . . . " Johnny breathed out. "They'll never forgive me, no matter how much remorse or guilt I have. They won't forgive me because I can't forgive myself."

"We'll forgive you at least." Mick said. "Why don't you tell us why you can't go home."

"Aside from being a traitor?" Johnny questioned. "No way, you'll kick me out."

"Try me." Mick rebutted. "Both of us. Johnny, there is nothing you can say that will make me want to change my mind or kick you out."

"I shot my father." Johnny stated as he sat with Lars and Mick att he table. "Twice."

Lars looked at Mick. "Twice he says."

"Well . . ." Johnny held up his hand. "Technically only once. The second time I sabotaged a gun to fire a real bullet at him during a war game. Hit his throat. He couldn't talk for a while. Then . . . I shot my pap, which was an accident, I was aiming for Uncle Hal. Uncle Hal, now

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... I didn't remember him at all for awhile until I got here and saw you Mick. You look like Uncle Hal."

Lars whispered to Mick. "Run. If he shot his father imagine what he did to Uncle Hal."

"Shh." Mick waved Lars away. "Go on."

"I try to kill Uncle Hal three times."

Quickly Mick looked at Lars when he snickered.

"Sorry." Lars held up his hand. "Go on, Johnny."

Johnny continued, "Three times, yeah. Then I tried to set him up for a murder, which didn't work. He did beat the hell out of me though, I'll give him that. Scared me. I remember being scared of Hal but I wouldn't show it."

"Of course not." Lars shook his head.

Mick slammed his hand on the table. "Will you knock it off. Sorry Johnny."

"And well, judge Grace, shot her." Johnny rambled. "I set up my step mother to look like she was insane,. But meanwhile I drugged her. I drugged her long lost brother Richie too with this drug that made him mentally challenged. And Uncle Robbie, I blew him up. Well, just his arm was blown off. And then . . ."

"Stop." Mick held up his hand.

"You're kicking me out." Johnny said.

"No," Mick shook his head. "I just don't need to hear anymore to know . . . sorry son. I don't believe you are never getting back home." He turned to Lars. "Go on, Lars, say something sarcastic."

"Johnny? How long were you connected to George?" Lars asked.

Mick hurried a view Lars way. "How's that sarcastic?"

"It's not. Answer the question." Lars stated.

"Since the plague. Eight years. He was like a father to me."

"How long did he try to get you to work for him."

"Since I was sixteen." Johnny replied.

"You're a big kid, when did your father and pap start utilizing that size and strength."

"Sam age. Why?"

"Did you ever turn George down to do something unethical."

"Oh, sure. Lots, early on." Johnny answered. "I didn't want to hurt my family. See, that's where I am confused. What changed?"

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“That’s what I’m getting at. One more question, when did doing the vial acts start being something natural and something you’d do without thought and with ease.”

“Everything I did bad Lars, I did within a year or so, no longer.”

Lars nodded. “Thanks, Johnny.” He stood up. “Oh, can you just hold off running away. There’s something I need to do.” He walked to the door. “Mick, Johnny. Goodnight.”

“Just like that?” Mick asked then before he knew it, Lars was gone. “Lars?” He hurried to race out and catch up. “Lars.” He called down the walk.

Lars stopped.

Mick trotted to him. “That was weird, you just up and left.”

“I’m sorry, when my thought get going I have to follow them. Apologize to Mr. Slagel for me ad tell him I won’t need him at the clinic in the morning. In fact Mick, I would like you to work that by hard all day. Get his adrenalin pumping. Work a sweat. Don’t tell him that was my orders, just send him to me when finished.”

Mick scratched his head. “I’m lost. Why?”

“Don’t worry about the why. I still have some things to hash through. But do this for me, Mick. That boy says he doesn’t know what happened, I think, I think might.” Lars said brightly. “And it is my hope to prove you wrong.”

“Wrong?” Mick scoffed. “About what?”

“You said he’s never going home. If I am correct . . .” Lars raised an eyebrow. “He’s actually carrying his own ticket to Beginnings front door.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY

January 29<sup>th</sup>

The one door opened, then down the hall, like a man on a mission, Billy ran. His feet pattered with every little fast step he took. He lifted his hand in a wave to the two drune guards that stood before Creeds door.

Roger, the one, looked at the other drune, Craig. "Cute kid."

"Been running all morning."

"Must be nice." Roger smiled.

Down the stairwell, non stop Billy ran some more. He waved to the two guards he passed, then darted between the two that watched Joe and Ellen's room. "Hey." He announced as he ran in and closed the door.

"Catch your breath." Joe told him then crouched before Billy.

Hands on knees, bent over some, Billy took a few deep breaths. "Caught."

"Go on." Joe said. "What do you got."

"No one touched any food this morning. Plates still full outside the door."

"Good. They took no chances of food tampering."

Ellen walked to the pair. "Joe, I can't believe you're using my son as your spy."

"Ellen, please. He's the only one trusted. Go on, Bill, what else."

"There's a charge to kill order on Uncle Hal and Robbie, and also Elliott if they do anything to interfere during the fight. I heard Creed, let them feel freedom, enough rope to hang themselves sort of thing."

"Makes sense." Joe nodded.

"And he's definitely got something up his sleeve, Pap. He didn't say, but he does. Why else would he have the order on Uncle Hal, Robbie and Elliott."

"They wouldn't interfere unless they saw something not fair."

"Joe," Ellen spoke with concern. "If Creed has something planned, we have to help Frank."

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“Yeah, we do.” Joe stood up rubbing his chin. “But we have to find out exactly what it is. And once we have that, then we can try to figure out how we’ll help Frank.”

“Any ideas on how to find out?” Ellen asked.

“Short of asking . . .” Joe’s eyes shifted back down to Billy.

Roger and Craig looked up to the bang of the stairwell door.

Chuckling, Roger shook his head. “Here he comes again.”

“Cute.”

Running, Billy stopped in front of the pair. “Hey, can I see my new Dad?”

Roger shrugged, “I don’t know. Hold on.” He knocked on the door. “God?”

“Yes?” Creed called from the other side.

“Your son would like to speak to you.”

“Please send him in.”

Billy grinned, “Cool, thanks.” without waiting he slipped between the pair, opened the door and raced in. “Whoa.” He looked about the huge room. “Your room is cool.”

“Thank you.” Creed said.

“This whole place is cool.” Billy jumped on the bed. “I’ve been running around.”

“I heard.”

“So, like any chance you can talk my mom into staying.”

Pleased was the look on Creed’s face and he moved to Billy. “You want to stay.”

“Oh yeah. Hey! Maybe I can even stay if she doesn’t. I hate Beginnings, they give me no respect. I can’t use my talents there at all.”

“What a waste.”

“Tell me about it.”

“No need to worry little man.” Creed laid his hand on Billy’s head. “You are going no where.”

“But you told my mom she could go.”

“The deal was if Frank beats me.”

“Um, yeah, so we’re going.”

Creed looked disappointed. “Frank will not beat me.”

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“Frank’s Frank.” Billy shrugged. “You may have DNA problems, but, so does he.”

“I know this.”

“And you’re still confident.”

“Absolutely.”

“I’m not.” Billy said. “And it makes me sad, because I think you’d be the cool big Dad. My bio dad is only five foot six. He claims five seven, but I know better.”

“Little man.” Creed lowered down to the bed to kneel before Billy. “Do not lose faith.”

“He’s Frank.”

“I’m God.”

“He’s still Frank.” Billy stated.

“But I am certain,” Creed winked. “Have no fear, I will win.”

Pat-pat-pat-pat. Billy raced up the steps and down the hall. “Hey” He waved to the guards and darted into Joe and Ellen’s room again.

Joe walked up to him. “Catch your breath.”

Body totally moving with every single breath he took, Billy sniffed deeply through his nose and raised his head. “Caught.”

“Give it to me,”

“We need a block. Something. A small shield of sorts.” Billy was still hyperventilating. “He’s planning on disabling Frank before the fight even begins.”

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“Thanks.” Frank took the small bottle handed to him by the drune. He wore no shoes, no shirt, and only a pair of draw string baggy pants.

“Oil?” Hal asked.

“Well, gotta look the part.” Frank smiled. “Look how they have me dressed.”

“Very . . .” Hal closed one eye. “Mortal combat like.”

“That’s what it is, isn’t it Hal?”

“Mortal combat?” Hal laughed. “Why would you say that.”

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“In the movie Mortal Combat, if the main guy loses, then the world ends, right. Well, if I lose, then my world ends.”

“You won’t lose, Frank. I have all the faith in you in the world. And I must go. They only gave me a guarded . . .” He motioned his head to the guard by the door. “minute with you.” Hal started to leave the dressing room and stopped. “Frank? In a weird sort of way, this is like a dream match for you. A fantasy come true.”

“Me against God?”

“No, you before thousands of people in an arena.”

The corner of Frank’s mouth raised. “You’re right.”

Hal winked. “I am.” He grabbed for the door. “We’re out there, Frank. Me, Robbie, Elliott, Dad, Billy and Ellen. We may be your only fans . . . but we’re out there with you.”

“I know.”

“Good luck.” Hal opened the door. He didn’t want to leave Frank, not at all, but knew he had to. He slowed down again looking back at Frank just one more time before joining the guard that awaited him.

^^^^

“It’s got to be something.” Danny spoke with a rush of urgency. He walked fast with Henry down the cryo tunnels toward the communications room.

“Danny, I’m telling you, no, it isn’t.” Henry argued.

“No. We missed something.” Danny lifted his hand to punch in the security code.

From the hall Jason called out, “Danny.”

“Hey, Jason.” Danny finished the code and when it buzzed he opened the door. “Where’s Dean?”

“Minor surgery.” Jason answered. “What’s going on?”

Henry stepped in. “Danny’s concerned. He’s thinking there is a break in communications somewhere.”

“Why?” Jason asked.

“I haven’t heard from Joe since yesterday.” Danny said. “Mark?” He called out. “Anything?”

“Danny. Phone lines are up.” Mark replied.

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“Has to be distance then. We have to be losing the connection at distance.” Danny suggested.

“We all ready tried . . .”

“Try again.” Danny stated, then turned with concern. Arm crossed waiting, he peered up to see Sgt. Doyle walk in.

“You sent for me.” Tim said.

Danny lifted his finger.

Henry tried to talk to him. “I know what you’re doing. Look, if you wait . . .”

“I can’t.” Danny replied. “If I wait, then move, that is wasted time. I’d rather be ready and when the wait is over, there is no more wasted time.”

“Just do it now, danny.” Jason suggested.

Danny shook his head and looked at Mark. “Anything?”

“Joe’s phone’s ringing. No answer.” Mark answered. “But, Danny it’s not the line. Our beginnings man escort picked up in Iowa.”

Danny nodded his understanding. “All right. Tim, here’s what I need. I haven’t heard from Joe since he was going in to get Frank, Hal, Robbie and Elliott. In three hours it will be a twenty-four hour mark. I want you to get together the man power needed to move a force across to California, as quickly and as powerfully as we can. If I don’t hear from Joe, I will assume something has happened to them.”

“And if something has?” Tim asked. “What will our order be.”

“Joe’s our leader.” Danny said calmly. “Something happens to him. Take them out. Speak to Dean, he may have an easier way.” Danny began to leave.

Henry grabbed hold of his arm. “What are you nuts? What the hell Danny? Is this some sort of power trip?”

“No. It’s the order.” Danny responded.

“So, you think because you’re appointed leader you can make this decision. This is a huge decision It’s an act of war. Joe . . .”

“Joe called it.” Danny stated firm. “He called dit. He was making a peaceful approach and said if I did not hear from him by this time, to make arrangements. I’m doing just that. I won’t question Joe. Sorry. Excuse me.” Saying no more, and keeping a cool-calm, Danny walked out.



“Stop it.” Joe scolded Ellen as they sat in the front row seats of the arena. “Think of the cause.”

Ellen gagged. “It’s eight year old bubble gum” She chomped. “Stale, hard, and nasty tasting.”

Joe grumbled and removed his wad of gum from his mouth. “Here.” He handed it to Billy.

“Mom? Is yours worked.” Billy held out his hand.

“Here.” Ellen gave it to him.

Billy made a look of disgust and wiped his hand off. “You could have at least removed the excess saliva like Pap.”

“Sorry.” Ellen said.

Joe gave a pat to Billy’s backside. “Go do your thing.”

“Ok.” Holding the gum, Billy smiled to the guard. “Hey.” he waved with his free hand and ran up the stairs to the next level where Hal, Robbie, and Elliott sat. “Hey.” He said to the guard. “I’m back. Excuse me.” He slipped through them into the box.

“The innocent one.” Hal whispered with an upward motion of his head.

Elliott looked. “How is he getting away with this.”

“He’s a child. An innocent.” Hal responded. “They figure, even if they tell him, what can he do?”

Robbie laughed. “They don’t know him.” He pulled the gum from his mouth. “Here, Bill, and you owe me for using my stash.”

“Uncle Frank owes you. Let’s hope this works.” He held his hand to Hal and Elliott. “Have yours?”

Hal handed him his wad, and then did Elliott. “Good luck, Bill.”

“I’m cool. It’s under control. See ya’.” Billy started to go, then stopped. He dropped his voice. “Guys, this may not work, not completely, OK? Whatever you do, please don’t jump in. Please?”

Hal gave a reassuring look. “It will work. You’re the innocent one that leads the way.”

Billy gave a single shake of his head. “Who would of thought Uncle Frank’s dream would come true. Wait . . .” Billy grinned. “If it’s all come true, then we know, the rest will. He will not falter. He won’t.” More confident, Billy turned and darted from the section, with an

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‘excuse me’ to the guards.

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Alone. For the first time, since taken, Frank was alone. No guards around, the sounds of the crowd carried to him in the tunnel where he was to wait before entering the arena.

He juggled foot to foot, like a boxer, trying to release his pent up energy. Concentrating, because he knew he could not assume anything, not even victory, over his opponent.

It was odd the sound, so much so that it broke his concentration. The sound of small feet running echoed down the tunnel, Frank turned around to see Billy.

“Oh, shit.” Frank said surprised. “Bill, what are you doing here.”

Billy stopped before Frank and smiled. “You’re so cool.”

“Thanks.”

“OK, check this out. I have free reign. They just let me run around her like a little kid Can you believe that?”

Frank shrugged. “Well, yeah.”

“Remember your dream uncle Frank? The innocent one finds the way.”

“Yeah.”

“I found a way. Give me your right hand.”

Frank held out his right hand.

“Creed has a plan.” Billy laid the wad of gum in Frank’s hand, he then proceed to shape it about. “He is going to use a single zap on you during the initial handshake. A zap that will knock you out. But . . .” Billy fiddled with the gum. “The bell for the fight will go off mid handshake, he starts to pulverize you, it looks like you just can’t take the beating. No one will know he hit you with a charge.”

Frank stared down to his hand in awe. “Bill . . .”

“This will absorb a lot of the charge. I don’t know how much. I don’t want you to lose consciousness. But you might get weak for a while. Try to fight it Uncle Frank. Try.”

“I will. How did you find this out.”

Billy shrugged. “I asked. He told. He sees me as a kid. And . . . since I am the only one they don’t weapons check . . .” Billy reached into

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the front pocket of his jeans. "Here. This is mine. It isn't much. But you may need it."

Frank looked at the tiny pocket knife. "I gave this to you."

"And I want it back." Billy pointed.

"Without a doubt."

"Good luck. And I better head back."

"Bill." Frank stopped him. "Thank you."

"You think I want anything to happen to you. Who would torment my dad?" Billy smiled.

"I love you."

"I love you too, Uncle Frank." Billy backed up and raised a fist. "Kick ass."

Frank watched Billy run up the hall and turn the bend. He stood there listening to his footsteps. Then as he peered down to his hand to stare at the shaped wad of gum he heard the shift and clank.

Frank turned, the sounds of the crowd grew louder as the huge door before him opened. After taking a deep breath and blessing himself with the sign of the cross, Frank walked through the door.

Complete and utter silence, in a wave of a hush took over the arena.

Frank kept walking to where it looked like a referee stood. Across the floor of the arena thick with soft dirt. Stepping out into the crowd's vies, Frank hear it break the silence. He would recognize the sound anywhere. The loud, shirking whistle his father made.

"Get him Frank!" Joe yelled.

"Frank!" Rang out Ellen's call.

Then the three of them. Loud, in unison, and enough for him, Hal, Robbie and Elliott chanted his name.

The corner of Frank's mouth raised and he snickered as he moved to the spot indicated by the official. He had to wait, standing there center. Wait to see a man who called himself God, and it would be the first time Frank had laid eyes on him. He had a picture of him in his mind, but for verification, Frank would have to wait.

Head going side by side to work out the kinks, the sound so his small fan club were suddenly drowned out by the eruption of cheers.

Frank looked up.

He stopped moving, and he actually blinked in surprise. 'Fuck'

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wanted to slip from his mouth, but it didn't. Instead the only thing that popped into his mind was, 'Fuckin Sgt. Ryder. He is eight feet tall.'

Was Creed for real? Frank had never seen another human being so big. And the truth in Creed's size and bulk became even more evident the nearer he drew to Frank.

Hal's eyes closed briefly when he watched his brother stand toe to toe with Creed. From where Hal sat, it looked as if Frank didn't accentuate the height difference, Frank's head didn't lift much, more so it was his eyes. Slowly Hal turned his head when he heard Robbie's whisper, 'you can do this Frank.' and Hal knew Frank could, as long as things were fair. That was a big question.

"Shake hands." The official shouted.

Creed extended his hand.

Frank knew, he heard it in Creed's mind and it was a reiteration of all Billy's said, thinking, 'let's hope this works.'

Reaching to Creed, Frank's hand made the connection. He felt the blast of the electric surge at the same time he heard the bell of the fight. It was fast, the immediate hard jolt Frank received from the charge. A jolt that left him conscious, but took every ounce of his strength. And before Frank could even evaluate what had happened.

Smash.

A hard blow delivered to the side of Frank's face set him spinning and down to the ground.

Billy's head lowered. "It didn't work. Mommy . . ."

Joe reached over and grabbed Billy's hand. "Wait. Just . . . wait." Joe knew it and felt it, and he had to look over his shoulder at Robbie and Hal to give a warning to them to stay put.

The heel of Creed's barefoot connected hard into Frank, turning him from a face down position onto his back, and with a swing down, Creed's hand gripped onto Frank's neck and he lifted him from the ground.

Complete paralysis. He could feel a tingling in his whole body, but Frank couldn't control an inch of his being.

*'Move legs, move, arms, something. Fuck.'*

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Further from the ground Frank felt himself lifted.

“How far, how fast?” Hal asked Robbie.

“Fifty feet. Dive, it’s the only way.” Robbie answered.

“No!” Elliott ordered. “Stay put. I will not let you do this.” He snatched on to Hal’s wrist.

“What? And let my brother die!” Hal blasted.

“Give him a chance!” Elliott raged. “Both of you . . . give him . . . A chance.”

To eye level in a choke grip, Frank was raised. He had control of his facial expression and he saw the smile on Creed’s face just before Creed nailed him again, then tossed him down like a rag doll.

Like ball a child would foot around, Creed kicked Frank, moving him about the dirt, over and over. Each blow uplifted Frank body and spun it.

Ellen whimpered. “Joe, Joe, do something. He’s going to get killed.” She glanced over to Joe, wanting to scream at him. How could he remain so calm? Then Joe looked at her. His jaws tensed, and eyes were cold.

“My son will not die. Get ready to run with Billy.” Joe stated in a low voice as his hand reached down. “I’m only going to get one shot. It’ll be good. But it will be the last one I take, I promise you that.”

Ellen’s eyes shifted to see what Joe was doing. His left leg crossed semi over his right, and Joe reached for the edge of his pant leg. As he did, Ellen saw it, the revolver strapped to his leg. Joe’s hand was steady and waiting, and almost in reach.

The dirt billowed into Frank’s mouth, mixing with his own blood to cause a bitter tasting mud. He coughed in reaction as he hit face first to the earth. And it was the first time since the entire fight, that Frank felt the effects to the body. Instead of aching, it made him smile.

But he needed strength. More strength. He tried. Nothing.

From behind Creed hovered, bracing a stick across the front of Frank’s neck.

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A slight choke caused more of a fight for Frank. Still nothing.

Creed's voice was low and deep as he taunted Frank. "I could kill you now. But I'd rather beat you to completion in front of your family. In front of your father."

Frank's eyes shifted, in a struggle he saw him . . . Joe.

*Your father.* Creed's word repeated in Frank's mind.

Strength. Frank innerly fought. He felt it build, a strain within his gut.

*Your father.*

That was it. It began as a growl and escaped in the form of the words, 'fuck you'. And with Frank's rejection of defeat, he sprang back his head cracking with a mighty force into the face of Creed.

They were the only ones, but upon seeing Creed spring back from the hit, Hal, Robbie and Elliot stood and screamed. Ellen closed her eyes in gratefulness, Billy went nuts. And Joe, Joe replaced back with a peaceful smile.

Quickly Frank flipped his body, brought up his legs and kicked Creed from him. Taking a second to wipe the blood from his mouth, Frank rolled over, brought himself up, then, hand to the earth, stare intent on Creed, Frank held a runner's stance.

He waited for Creed to get his footing then Frank charged. He could have barreled into Creed, sailed him back, and taken advantage of his startled state, but Frank didn't. He skid to a sideways stop just before Creed, and paused.

He allowed for Creed to catch his bearings, then with a wide arrogant grin, and a fat sweep forward of his left hand, Frank pelted him with a handful of dirt that he had grabbed in his run, then followed through with a hard right hit.

Creed's face jolted and Frank hit him again, then again. Seeing it coming, Frank ducked the wide right swing that Creed threw. A second duck from Frank preluded his uprising with a hard upper cut that sent Creed teetering back. But it wasn't time for the giant to fall.

With such high speed Frank attacked, a pivot right, then an elbow shot to Creed's gut. In Creed's slight bend over, Frank swept out his leg behind Creed blasting into the bog man's knees, buckling him. As he began to fall, Frank grabbed hold of Creed's hair, and careened him down hard, face first, to his lifted knee.

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Creed literally bounced back up and when he did, like a well rehearsed ballet, Frank jumped with a turn of his body, hooked his arm around Creed's neck from behind, and with the force of his own body weight, Frank brought them both down to the ground.

He released Creed as they hit, allowing for Creed to spring from his back to his stomach. Before Creed could move, rest, or twitch, Frank was in a hover he had taken many times before with other opponents.

Frank locked it.

Right knee dug hard to Creed's back, Frank hooked his left onto Creed's arm, pinning him as swept around his arm in a brace to his head. Before arching Creed's neck for a free audience view, Frank reached into his drawstring pants and pulled out the pocket knife.

Breath heavy, voice raspy, Frank smiled as he spoke to Creed, "I could break your neck, or slice your throat you chose. Either way. It's over. You lost."

Creed couldn't move.

"Choose." Frank bellowed out. "Or say it."

Creed said nothing. The quiet in the arena aided to the moment.

"Pick!" Frank screamed adding more of a drastic arch to Creed's neck.

Creed closed his eyes. "You win! Do what you want."

Frank smiled. "I'm better than this." with a final push of Creed's face to the dirt, Frank stood up and started to walk.

"Wait." Creed called out, he lifted himself.

Frank stopped and turned around.

He wiped the blood from his face, then Creed removed his hair from his eyes as he stepped to Frank. "You didn't kill me." slow he walked to Frank with an extended hand.

Frank stared at the hand.

"It's clean. I extend it to you." Creed said. "You are the better man."

A smirk, hard to hide hit Frank's face and he swing out his hand in a shake to Creed. With a wink, Frank leaned into him. "I know." With Creed's laugh, Frank released his hand and headed to his family.

Joe, Ellen and Billy made their way from the spectator box, as Frank walked to them with a focused stride.

He didn't get there without hassle. Out from the stands, with

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bellowing screams leaped Robbie and Hal, pelting Frank with their bodies.

“Fuckin great Frank” Robbie screamed with a jumping embrace.

“Man, you had me scared, big brother.” Hal grabbed on to him.

“I eat my words. Even though, you know, I could have toppled him.”

“No doubt.” Frank said.

“Frank.” Elliott gave a single, impressed shake of his head.

“Awesome.”

“Do you three morons mind?” Joe called out, breaking up the gathering. “Ellen would like to see Frank.”

They parted from him, giving Frank full view of Ellen, then extending his arms, he took a step and lifted up Billy.

“Hey.” Ellen blinked in surprise.

Frank shrieked excitedly as he hugged Billy. “You saved me. You hear that. You are the reason. I owe you.” Frank kissed him.

“OK. OK.” Billy winced. “Everyone’s watching.”

“I don’t care.” Frank kept Billy in his arms, then smiling, leaned to Ellen and kissed her quick, “Hey, El. Oh, yeah, remind me to tell you how we’re gonna be married when we get home.”

“Huh?” Ellen asked then looked at Hal.

Hal groaned. “Here we go again.”

Joe slipped in giving a father ‘proud’ kiss to Frank’s cheek. “Hell of a job.”

“You rule, Uncle Frank.” Billy smiled. “You’re the coolest.”

“Nah.” Frank shook his head. “Not the coolest. Not yet. There’s something I need first.”

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Hal let out tiny female sounding peeps of shrieks as he jumped, banging into the truck. “Knock it off, Frank!” He brushed off his chest and shivered.

Frank laughed and looked down to the black glove he wore. “Man, *now* I’m the coolest.” he walked over to where Joe stood with Creed. “Hey, Creed. Thanks.” He held up his gloved hand.

“No, Problem, Frank. Enjoy them. Remember to charge them

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every night or you'll lose juice when you need them. Also . . ." Creed explained, "When you work up the surge, the longer you work it the more potent."

Joe had to ask, "One more time in front of me, what is the potency limit?"

"Anymore than thirty seconds work up will kill the average size man." Creed said. "A snap of your finger will work up enough to be annoying."

Frank smiled. "Thanks." He started to leave.

"And you heard the man, Frank." Joe said. "Don't be hitting your brothers with more than thirty seconds just to test it."

"They're above average size." Frank said. "Hey, Elliott." He waited for Elliott to turn around, Frank snapped then threw.

Elliott shrieked when the tiny ball hit him. "Stop it!"

"Hal!" Frank called.

"No." Hal shook his head. "Don't . . . ow!" he grunted. "Asshole."

Joe shook his head. "Anyway, as I was saying. I let me people know I will be out of communication until hit radio range, but don't be surprised if they call."

"I understand." Creed said.

"Keep charging that phone. Don't forget." Joe told him. "We need communications open."

"I'll work on getting more wireless phones working. It may take some time, I do not have the technical man power. But . . . I do have the man power to get the railroad tracks in order. I will begin on that immediately."

"Good. Good." Joe nodded. "We want a quicker means of access here. Opening the railways will open that up. We aren't gonna be able to hold back the society for long, and we will need every resource we can get."

"We're at your disposal." Creed said.

"And we, your's." Joe extended his hand. "Good luck, we'll be in touch."

"I look forward to it. Good journey." Creed shook his hand with Joe just as he heard Hal shriek again. Creed chuckled. "I will say it

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should be in interesting trip home.”

“Yeah, it should be.” Joe smiled. “Home.”

^^^^

Out of breath and sweaty, Johnny knocked on Lars’ office door at the hospital.

Lars peered up with a smile. “Afternoon.”

“Hey, Lars.” Johnny stepped incised. “Mick said you wanted to see me.”

“You look tired, are you?”

“No. Just worked up.” Johnny shook his head. “I carried all kinds of ammunition from the warehouse to another, then Mick tells me I have to take it back, he changed his mind. But of course that was after he had me run three miles so he could time me.”

“Did he?” Lars asked.

“No, he forgot.”

“Good. And he made you run again?”

“M, yeah.” Johnny caught his breath. “Is this a torture thing.”

“No.” Lars chuckled.

“Are you firing me from the clinic?”

“Good heavens, no.” Lars shook his head. “I need you. But right now, I need you for something else.”

“What’s that?” Johnny asked.

“Give me twenty four hours, Johnny. You want to go home, my boy. Back to your family, back to their graces.” Lars spoke with a soft smile. “I think, if I am correct, I can very much hand that to you.”

Johnny didn’t even need to know how or why, at that moment it wasn’t important. If Lars thought he had a way to get Johnny back to Beginnings, then Lars could have him for as long as he wanted.

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It was a rush of sound and feel, Joe hadn’t had in so long, and it filled him more in a different way. Watching Billy.

How much Joe never really thought about sand.. But he did as eh watched Billy try to move in it, and dart to the edge of the ocean, get a

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little frightened then rush back.

“Got another shell, Pap!” Billy held up a shell. “This is so cool!”

‘Yeah, it was,’ Joe thought, and he lowered himself to sit on the beach and watch.

“I’m telling you, Elliott.” Hal walked as he spoke. “You didn’t notice.”

“No, explain.” Elliott said.

“The sand, should have been virgin. Now granted there is a lot more growth on the beach as opposed to one that was maintained, however . . . who made the footsteps.”

“Maybe those people that Robbie ran into.”

“You have an answer for everything, don’t you?” Hal snapped.

“No.” Elliott spoke seriously. “No I don’t. Because if I did, I would have an answer as to why, even with the world ended, why life can not be . . .” He motioned his hand out. “This simple.”

Hal stared for a second, then nodded slowly. “That is a deep question. And big too. I have you answer.”

Elliott sense it, and with a look of debate, he chuckled. “Go on.”

“Life can not be this simple because it would be . . . boring, Elliott. Life would be boring.” Hal shook his head “Good God, get out of the clouds. Who in God’s name wants to tromp on a beach all day . . . boring.”

It figured to Elliott that the Captain would have a response like that. After all he was a Slagel, and any day without some sort of action, is a boring day to them.

“And I’m telling you, El.” Frank held his hand to her to help her climb over a rock.

“Frank.” She laughed his name. “Your ridiculous.”

Frank huffed in a dramatic sense. “Me? Please. Dean said.”

“Dean did not say.”

“He did.” Frank stood firm.

“And I’m getting home and he is just giving you to me.”

“Yes.”

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“Right.” Ellen shook her head and continued walking.

Frank grabbed hold of her arm. “Would it be that bad?” He asked seriously as he turned her to face him. “If Dean gave you up. If he let me be primary, would it be that bad.”

Ellen stared at him. “No, Frank, it wouldn’t be.”

“You would do it?” Frank questioned. “You’d go ahead with it.”

“Frank,” Ellen laughed. “It’s a pointless question, Dean will not do that. You make it sound as if he’s giving up everything and just handing it to you on a silver platter.”

“He wants to be with Misha.”

“No he does not. Did he tell you this?”

“I sense it.” Frank pointed to his temple.

“You’re off because of that shock wave you hit. I’m sorry.” Ellen shrugged. “I don’t buy it.”

“You’ll see.” Frank reached down and grabbed her hand. “What if you’re wrong.”

“I’m not wrong.”

“What if.”

“Then I’m wrong. I’m not.”

“Bet.”

Another hearty laugh came from Ellen and she faced him. “Bet? What is this? OK, I’ll bet, what do you want to bet?”

“If you’re right, and I’m wrong, I will . . . I will, aside from sexually service you when needed.” Frank winked. “I will come over every night for a month and bath the kids. You hate that.”

“I do. But you do it anyhow, try something else.”

“I’ll help be a lab experiment how’s that.”

Ellen smiled. “For any samples?”

“Yes.”

“Urine, blood . . . Sperm.”

Frank cringed. “Yes.”

“OK, then but what about you?”

“All right. If I’m right, and I am . . .” Frank paused for a moment. “Marry me.”

“What?”

“You marry me. OK? Give us as a married couple another chance, keep the promise you made before the society took me. Take

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back the only name that should be your's. Slagel. Marry me as soon as possible. Will you?"

Ellen hesitated, giving a look of debate, then she smiled. "Deal." She extended her hand.

Frank grabbed it, kissed it, then turned to face every. "Hey! We're getting married!"

Hal whimpered, "Father. Can you not help get him out the fantasy world he has built."

"It's disturbing, I know." Joe said.

Elliott showed his disbelief. "I can't believe you two. How do you know? How do you know he's not right?"

"He isn't." Joe stated.

"Elliott." Pacifying, Hal spoke. "Listen, I know it is wishful thinking on your part, because somewhere in that mind of yours you hold out hope that my brother will give you an understanding. After all, you have painfully taken steps to be a Frank mini me. However . . . he, like you, live in a delusional world. He's as insane as . . ." Hal held out his hand in a point and gave a 'there' look. "Robbie. Only an insane person would swim in the ocean at these temperatures. Cold?" He asked snidely to Robbie.

"Free-free-freezing." Robbie shivered.

Joe handed him a blanket. "Go change before you catch cold."

Robbie smiled. "Thanks, Dad."

"Insane." Hal pointed as Robbie walked away. "Soaking wet, fifty degrees. Insane." He then pointed to Elliott. "You too."

"Maybe you're the one disillusioned." Elliott said.

"Hardly." Hal argued.

"What if Frank's right."

"He's not."

"What if."

"Elliott . . ." Hal sang the name. "I will bet you anything . . ."

"Ranking."

Hal was taken aback. "What was that."

"You up my ranking. I'm tired of being a sergeant."

"Really, Elliot you have to get over that."

"A captain. Make me a captain."

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“No fuckin way, I’m the only captain. But I will up your ranking past sergeant . . . and, I am so confident that Dean is not giving up ellen, that I will even allow fro you to be leader of New bowman, I answer to you, for one week.”

“You’re on.” Elliott held out his hand.

“Bt if I’m right,” Hal raised an eyebrow. “Never ask for a promotion again.”

“You’re on.” Elliott was certain.

“Ah, look El.” Frank’s voice interceded. “They’re holding hands like us.”

“Asshole.” Hal glared.

“You ready?” Joe asked. “I want to get going, and get Robbie warmed up.”

“No.” Ellen answered. “I love it here. Joe, can’t we move Beginnings, can’t we build some sort of walls out here. This is so beautiful.”

“I wouldn’t want to.” Joe replied. “Cage it in? No, ellen, you picture this isn your mind. You keep this peacefulness. You make it a dream to be able to walk on the beach at anytime, because I truly believe that dream will become a reality. If we build a wall around it, we cage in that dream. And if we do that . . .” Joe winked at Hal. “The what the hell is my son fighting so hard for.” He put his arm around her. “Let’s go home.”

Hal smiled and with in that smile was a gloating look hard to hide. “Notice, how my father picked me as the focal point for building dreams.” He raised his eyebrows. “What’s that tell you, Elliott.”

Frank, hands on hips, hesitated, before following. “Now that isn’t fair. Dad! That’s not fair. I’m fighting hard too. I beat God!”

They kept walking.

Frank looked down to Billy who just stood there. “Is that fair.”

“No, Uncle Frank. They give you no credit. Like me. That’s why we get a long so well, now.”

“True.”

“Yep.” Billy exhaled. “Think of it this way. We’re two men who stand alone.”

“We are.”

“Are individuals.”

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“Man, are you nailing us.” Frank said.

“We need no praise.”

“That is so true.” Frank agreed.

“Let’s hold our head up, Uncle Frank. We need no help from anyone.”

“We don’t. Ready to go?”

“Yes,. But . . .” Billy looked up. “Can you carry me, this sand stuff is getting on my nerves.”

Frank laughed, “Absolutely,” With a sweep of Billy up into his arms, Frank kissed him, then tucked him like a football and took off running.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

January 30<sup>th</sup>

Hal had reached his point of tolerance in listening to Frank say, “I told you so’ and Elliott whispering, “would that be Lieutenant Ryder.’

Where were they getting it from Hal wondered. Why were they making such conclusions. To Hal it was prematurely, they just pulled into back gate. Then again, Ellen had been gone for over a month. Where was Dean. No one was there to greet them. Hal took stock in the fact that Robbie was gone for a while too, and no one was there to meet them. Perhaps Mark didn’t convey the radio message that they were ten minutes from home.

“I’m sure there’s a logical explanation.” Joe laid his hand on Ellen’s shoulder as they stood before the truck.

“Um, no.” Billy said. “There is no explanation for my father’s absence at this moment. None. This is his wife. Hello?”

Joe rolled his eyes. “I’m trying to make her feel better.” He looked and saw Frank grinning.”Knock that off.”

Frank swiped the smile from his face. “Sorry. I’m just thinking of the nuptials.”

Robbie, stepped forward. “Well, what about me? I’ve been out of Beginnings just as long.”

“Who would come to greet you?” Joe asked. “Your family? We’re here.”

“I have friends.” Robbie said. “No! Wait! Andrea! She’s my mom!” He said brightly. “El.” He turned her around. “Andrea would be here, trust me. I know exactly what’s going on.” He snatched up Ellen’s hand. “Come on.”

After watching Robbie led Ellen to the truck, Hal glanced so teacher like and smug at Elliott and Frank. “Don’t gloat quite yet, gentlemen,” Hal walked by them.

“Why not.” Frank shrugged. “We should. It’s three in the afternoon in Beginnings. Where the fuck is everyone?”



“Surprise!”

The welcoming scream rang out in the packed social where a banner that read, ‘Welcome back Ellen and Robbie’ hung in plain view.

However the cheers of the return couldn’t drown out the excited screams of Alexandra and Joey as they pummeled Ellen first.

It was mass hysteria and confusion, Ellen and Robbie were crowded by the front door with Frank, Joe , Hal and Elliott behind them.

Dean would get his greeting chance he knew it, but Ellen for the moment was consumed with her children. He locked eyes on her then Frank.

“Frank.” Dean held out his hand. “You did it. You son of a bitch.” Dean grinned with the firmest of handshakes to Frank. “I will not forget this.”

“I hope. I had to beat God for this, so don’t forget our deal.” Frank watched Dean turned to Ellen. “Dean.” He tapped him. “Don’t forget our deal.”

All he saw was Ellen, all he knew was Ellen and at that second, Dean didn’t know how to react. “El.” He stepped to her. “Oh my God.” his hands went immediately to her face as he pulled her to him. “I can’t believe I’m touching you again.”

“I missed you.” Ellen whispered out.

“Oh my God did I miss you.” His fingers ran about the contour of her face. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Dean” Frank tapped him on the shoulder. “Our deal.”

“You could kiss me.” Ellen suggested.

Dean grinned. “Oh, yeah. I could.” Biting his bottom lip he pulled Ellen to him and lowered his lips. Just as he did, his partially opened eyes caught glimpse of Misha and his head sprang up.

“Dean?” Ellen questioned.

“Welcome back, El.” He pecked a kiss on her lips, stepped back and shook her hand. He turned around to Frank.

“Our deal?” Frank asked.

Dean winked.

“Yes.”

Ellen’s mouth formed the words of curiosity but couldn’t make a

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sound.

“Welcome Dr. Hayes.” Misha greeted.

“Thanks, Misha.” Just as Ellen turned back to Dean but he has slipped away with the kids. “Hey.” she tilted her head.

Frank stepped to her with an arrogant look. “Can you say, Mrs. Slagel?”

Ellen wanted to respond, but she couldn’t. Totally confused, she just watched as Misha joined Dean.

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Marma slammed the front door to the house of Lesbians and pretty much stormed into the livingroom. Carol was the only one there, and she set down her Hoi Times newspaper and stood up.

“Robbie and Ellen should be back by now.” Carol showed the paper.

“I know. Where do you think Misha is?” Marma stated.

“You’re not telling me she was invited to the welcome back party, was she?”

“According to Misha Dean invited her.”

Carol started to laugh.

“Why is this funny?” Marma asked. “It’s not, it was supposed to be funny but ceased having humor when Misha thwarted the original plan. She fucked with this on purpose, and I don’t know what the game is.”

“I’m laughing about what Ellen is going to do when the Misha Dean thing is discovered.” Carol said then saw the look on Marma’s face. “What? You just thought of something what?”

“I’m curious as to what Dean is going to do.”

“Excuse me?”

“Dean loves Ellen. That should over ride the suggestion when he sees her.”

Theoretically, wouldn’t Misha rekindle that.”

“Shit. You’re right. But come on, this is so ridiculous, someone has to figure out something is wrong, right? They would have to know . . .” Marma thought. “OR wouldn’t they?”



“Is it me . . .” Frank brought his glass to his lips as he stood with Elliott at the bar. “Or are you gonna be a lieutenant and me a married man again.”

“It’s not you, Frank.” Elliott said. “But we could logically deduct that he isn’t really hanging out with Misha. She does seemed to be more tagging along then *him* tagging along.”

“True.”

“What are you drinking?” Elliott asked.

“Whiskey.”

“Why?” Elliott received the cold stare. “I’m not harping on you, but why drink?”

“You’re right.” Frank put down the glass. “Thanks.” He slid it from reach.

“So, did you think about it?” Elliott asked.

“Fuck, Ryder, I don’t even like you.” Frank said.

“Yes, you do.”

“Not enough to share my wife.”

“I totally understand and respect that, But in all honesty, Frank, I believe Ellen will pursuit a relationship of sorts with me. I’d rather have your blessing, than not. And, I would oblige by any rules you set.”

“What if I made you split the fuckin stupid weekly reports with me.”

“Not a problem.”

Frank nodded. “That’s enticing, I’ll let you know.” H said then felt a hand lay on his shoulder. “Frank looked. “Danny.”

“Hurry Frank, come on” Danny motioned his head to the cart before him. “You’ll want to see the gift we have for Robbie. But we have to hurry, it may go bad.” Danny and Henry rolled the cart toward the crowded floor before the band.

“Bad?” Frank asked. “He got Robbie meat?”

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Robbie's head flung back with a laugh as the Starters played the last chord of the song. He shook his head at himself, but smiled at the applause. "I need a drink." He said to Paul, "Play without me for a few."

"Good to have you back, Robbie." Paul smiled.

"It is, isn't it." Chuckling, Robbie stepped off of stage and noticed the empty spot that Danny soon filled with the cart. "What's going on?" Robbie asked.

"Welcome back." Danny said as he presented the cart with a huge box. "A present from me, Henry, and Dean." He glanced at Ellen who stood there. "We would have one for you, but Dean says he has a surprise for you at home."

Ellen grinned. "I know, I can't wait."

Danny let out a 'hmm', then motioned his head for Robbie to lift the lid on the box. "Go on."

Like a kid, Robbie excitedly reached. He looked to his brothers, then father, and with a ornery bite to his bottom lip, he lifted that lid. "Oh wow." He spoke in awe.

Gasps of shock escaped the crowd.

"It's my arm." Robbie smiled. "Oh, shit, look how real. Can I touch it?"

"Sure." Danny said. "But be careful, it's hooked up to a temporary circulatory system, I have to get it back down to the lab."

"Oh, shit." Robbie reached and lifted it, "Heavy."

Dean stepped forward. "We have it all worked out. Get ready for that brain surgery."

"Cool." Robbie grinned.

Robbie just stared at the arm then laid it back in the box. Not only did it match skin color, but had hair and everything.

"This is fuckin' awesome" Frank peeked over Robbie's shoulder.

"It's a work of art." Hal added.

Danny pointed to Dean. "The detail was all him."

"Look." Frank indicated on the arm. "He even left the scars were that chimp bit you when you were in second grade."

"A forever reminder . . ." Hal added. "When a sign says do not stick your fingers in the cage, you aren't supposed to."

Robbie honestly didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "Dean. This is really great. Henry, Danny. I don't know what to say."

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Danny smiled. ‘You can say you won’t lose this one.’

Robbie laughed.

Ellen was amazed. “Dean, this is really . . . really awesome.”

“Thanks El.” Dean pinched her cheek. “Excuse me.”

Ellen whimpered out. “Excuse me?”

Frank tapped her on the shoulder. “Can you say Mrs . . .”

“Will you stop!” Ellen snapped as she spun around.

Frank lifted his hands. “I’m just saying what I know. I mean, El, how much time has he spent with you?”

“Well, Frank . . .”

“I have barely left your side. If I hadn’t seen you for a month I wouldn’t walk away from you.”

Smug, Ellen spoke, ‘that’s because he doesn’t want to hog me.’

“A-huh.”

“It’s true. Plus, plus, he knows he’ll have me all to himself later . . . and . . . he has a surprise for me waiting at the house. So there.”

“So there.” Frank smiled then turned Ellen to see Dean standing with Misha. “Mrs. Slagel.” He smacked her backside as he walked away. “So there.”

“You’re kidding me.” Hal said in a low voice, with shock to his father. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

Joe shook his head. “It wasn’t the time. We had other things to worry about.”

Hal peered to John Matoose. “You saw him?”

“I almost killed him. But the chief of that town, stopped me.” John stated.

“Dad.” Hal said. “We can’t let this happen.”

“Hal, what do you want me to do?” Joe lifted his hands. “Lodi is not my town. It’s not my business. If the leader of that town wants him, he can keep him. We have no right to interfere in that decision. And as far as I’m concerned . . .” Joe shrugged. “Johnny’s their problem. And the end of ours.”

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“You wanted me?” Mick asked, peeking his head into Lars’ laboratory.

“Yes, Mick, come in. Have a seat.” Lars pointed to a stool by a counter.

“What’s going on?” Mick sat down.

Lars dropped a huge folder before Mick. “I wanted to ask you, when is the last time you saw a grown man. A scientist none the less, dance a jig in a post apocalyptic world.”

“Can’t say that I have.”

“Good. You’re about to see a first.” After a serious deep breath, Lars kicked his foot about the ground and danced a little dance.

Mick laughed. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Dancing a jig. I’m excited. I am smarter than Dean Hayes.” Lars said smug. “I did it. I did it. I found something that arrogant, smart ass twit didn’t.”

“What . . .”

“Johnny Slagel.” Lars pointed to the folder, then excitedly pulled a stool up to Mick. “He doesn’t know, you’re the first.”

“For?” Mick asked.

“Yesterday I pumped him up. Had his blood really working. Then I hit him with a battery of tests. I had a theory, but I had to confirm. You know, Mick, what makes me grin is the fact that, how did the holier than thou, Dean Hayes miss it. If I had known Johnny since he was a child, I certainly would have thought of it right away. How did any of them miss it? You wanna know what I think. I think they don’t like him and they needed an excuse.”

“Lars.” Mick laughed.

“OK, maybe not. But they dismissed too soon. No, wait, how can they dismiss something that never crossed their minds.”

“You’re talking in circles and not making sense.”

“What tipped me off is the guilt.” Lars saw Mick’s curiosity. “Johnny has genuine guilt. If someone were such a bad seed, would they feel that. No. Plus, his behavior patterns changed to drastically. He did all that horrific stuff in a span of a year?” Lars shook his head. “He didn’t have a clue why, and still doesn’t know why he felt nothing when he did them. Surely if he were demented enough to shoot his father . . . twice mind you, he would have done something a lot sooner.”

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“Lars, what are . . .”

“Brain tumor.” Lars grinned widely. “Johnny has a brain tumor near the Modula oblongata. It’s about the size of a golf ball now, my guess it has been growing for several years. The scan doesn’t show a malignancy, but we won’t know until it’s removed. Because of its location, Mick, the tumor adds pressure to the modula oblongata, which controls behavior, there fore the pressure effects behavior. The bigger the tumor, the worse he will act.. Mr. Slagels recent health episode caused not only a loss of blood but an infection that warranted a steroid therapy of such.”

Revelation hit Mick. “The steroids shrank the tumor.”

“Exactly, and when the pressure was relieved . . .”

“Johnny’s normal behavior returned.”

“Yes. Isn’t this exciting.” Lars nodded. “However, my guess is also that this shrinkage won’t be for long. With in six months the tumor will start to grow again. This time eve faster. His behavior patterns will go bad . . . again, until finally and inevitably, the tumor gets so large, it crushed the brain and most likely within a year, Johnny . . . Johnny will die.”

“So it wasn’t him.”

“No, not at all.” Lars said. “I can pretty much bet all that I am on this tumor. That this tumor cause him to shoot his own father . . . twice mind you. Not a dementia or power trip. Any doctor who knows anything will concur this tumor as effecting his behavior. And once the tumor is gone, with proper monitoring, Johnny should never again see that evil side.”

“Do you realize Lars, this can actually catapult the forgiveness he needs from his family.”

“Without a doubt.:

Mick smiled. “That’s good. But . . . The tumor, it has to be removed.”

“Oh most certainly. The sooner the better.”

“I see.” Mick nodded. “You’ll take it out?”

“Who me. Absolutely not.” Lars said.

“What?”

“Mick, I’m good, but I am not good enough to perform brain surgery. However . . . Dr. Dean Hayes is. And if our new found friend,

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Johnny, wants to live to see twenty-one . . .” Lars tilted his head. “He has to get home to Beginnings.”

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Ellen found it curious and deducted there probably was a good reason Misha followed, her, Dean and Frank back to the house. Even more so when Misha insisted on waiting on the porch when the three of them stepped inside.

Dean had a tone of excitement to his voice as he shut the door. “I have been waiting all day for this.”

“Me too.” Ellen smiled.

“Yeah, me too,” Frank said.

“This way.” Dean walked by them to the Hal. “To the bedroom.”

“Man, I hope he’s not up to anything kinky.” Frank said then grunted as Ellen backhanded him. “What? Like you didn’t think of it.”

“Dean?” Ellen followed. “Are you sure you want Frank back here?”

“Oh, yeah, El.” Dean stood center of the bedroom and waited for Frank and Ellen. “Surprise one.”

Ellen looked round. “OK. You . . . you cleaned?”

“Cute.” Dean smiled. “No, look at the dresser.”

Ellen did.

“My picture.” Frank pointed to the frame with the college picture of him and Ellen. “Wait . . . All my pictures.” he walked to the dresser.

“Check the drawers.” Dean instructed.

Frank did. “My clothes?”

Happily and almost proud, Dean nodded. “All your stuff, Frank. Including night stand stuff. Everything from your house is here.”

Frank clenched his fist. “Yes, you’re keeping the deal.” He nudged Ellen. “See.”

Ellen was so shocked she nearly fell from the nudge. She couldn’t even speak.

“Gets better.” Dean said and handed Ellen an envelope. “Another present. Actually it’s for you both. Go on. Open it.”

Slowly, and hesitantly Ellen did.

Frank’s knees bent with an even more excited rumbling ‘yes’.

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“Divorce papers.”

“Dean.” Ellen whispered ‘What . . . what . . . what . . .’

“Divorce papers.” Frank told her.

“I know.” Ellen spoke between clenched teeth. “Dean, are you OK, are you feeling all right? When’s the last time Danny checked your chip.”

“Yesterday. I’m fine.” Dean patted Ellen on the cheek. “I just want you two to be as happy as I am. Now, I’ll let you get settled.” He walked by them and down the hall.

“Dean.” Ellen tossed the papers and hurriedly followed him. She caught up to him in the livingroom. “Where . . . where are you going.”

“Yeah, Dean.” Frank repeated. “Where you living.”

“In your old house, of course.”

Closed mouth, Frank nodded. “Of course.”

“With Misha.” Dean added.

Frank’s hand shot to Ellen’s back to stop her from falling over when she tipped back in shock of the news. “Really.” Frank said. “Misha.”

“Yes.” Dean gushed. “I’m in love with her. And . . . she’s waiting. El, have a good night. Frank . . .” He held out his hand. “You understand, right?” Dean asked.

“Oh yeah, absolutely. ”Frank spoke almost pacifying. “Good luck to you.” He shook Dean’s hand firm.

“Thanks, Frank.” Dean smiled. “El.” He turned, opened the door and walked out.

Door closed.

Silence.

Frank watched Ellen.

Slowly, from her stare of the just closed door, Ellen turned to Frank.

“Are you OK?” Frank asked.

“Yes.” Ellen said calmly. “May I have your gun?”

“Oh, sure.” Frank pulled it from his harness. “Here.”

“Thanks.” Ellen took it. “I’ll be right back.” Revolver in hand, eerily calm, Ellen walked to the door and opened it.

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Joe was exhausted, but he really didn't want to waste too much time. Even Andrea's humming as she prepare a meal in the kitchen wouldn't stop Joe from falling fast asleep, And a short little nap on the sofa was what he planned to take.

Body in a laying position, Joe leaned back. Just as his head touched the pillow.

Bang.

He sprung up.

Bang. Bang.

*Gunshots?* Joe jumped from the couch. "What the hell is going on?"

Nonchalantly Andrea peered out her kitchen window. "Oh, Joe, don't worry about it. Lay back down. It's just Ellen shooting Dean."

"Ellen shooting Dean!" Joe blasted, flew to the door, flung it open and skid to a stunned stop. "Ellen! What in God's name . . ."

"Joe." Andrea called out. "Close the door, you're letting in a draft."

With total aggravation and a grumble, Joe reached back for the hand. "Goddamn it, Frank! You're just standing there?" he slammed the door. "Son of a bitch!"

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NEXT: BLESSED IRONY